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Editor: CHAPMAN COHEN

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IEWS AND OPINIONS

An Old Story

"NOW the birth of Jesus Christ was in this wise. When his mother, Mary, was espoused to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Ghost." Now the birth of the Greek demi-god, Perseus, was in this wise. When Acrisus, King of Argon, was warned that he would be killed by the son of his daughter Danaë, he built a tower of brass, in which she was imprisoned, and so hoped to frustrate the oracle. But the God Jupiter visited the maiden in a shower of gold, and thus was Perseus born. And the birth of the Aztec God, Huizilopochtli, was in this wise. When Catlicus, the serpent-skirted, was in the open a little ball of feathers floated down from the heavens. She caught it and hid it in her bosom. And of this was the god born. The birth of the God Attis was in this wise. From the blood of the murdered Agdestris sprang a pomegranate tree, and some of the fruit thereof the virgin Nana gathered and laid it in her bosom, and thus was the god born. Also the founder of the Manchu dynasty of China was born in this wise. A heavenly maiden was bathing one day when she found on the skirt of her raiment a certain red fruit. She ate, and was delivered of a son. Likewise was Fo-Hi born of a virgin. And the virgin daughter of a king of the Mongols awakened one night and found herself embraced by a great light, and gave birth to three boys, one of whom was the famous Genghis Khan. In Korea, the daughter of the river Ho was fertilised by the rays of the sun, and gave birth to a wonderful boy. Likewise was Christa born of the virgin Devaka; Horus was born of the virgin Isis; Mercury was born of the virgin Maia; and Romulus was born of the virgin Rhesylvia. Many other stories might be related, but of all these there is none true but the first. Millions of Christians say so. For it is in the New Testament, and none of the others are. And to the eye of faith the distinction is of profound importance.

Birth and Death

What is the meaning of it all? Why were all these gods and demi-gods born in this manner? Well, thereby hangs a tale, and its complete unravelment would carry us back a very long way in the history of human nature. The first point to be grasped is, most of the things that to us are commonplaces, are really discoveries that are made only after the passing of many generations. Nothing seems to us, for example, more certain and more natural than death. Yet there exists ample proof that death, as a natural fact, was as much a discovery as is the nature of the moon's phases. Primitive mankind treats death as the result of being bewitched by an enemy, or killed by one of the tribal spirits. Only slowly is the true nature of death recognised. And the same principle holds good of birth. Nothing to us seems

more certain than that birth is the result of the union of two people—a man and a woman. But this, too, is a discovery that mankind has to make, and although the discovery has now been made practically all over the world, there are some exceptions, and the prevalence of certain customs and superstitions is enough to prove that they resemble, in the intellectual world, those rudimentary organs which man carries about with him in his physical structure. They are the surviving indications of a lower state of culture from which the higher and truer have been derived. And a comprehension of the process enables us to understand why "the birth of Jesus Christ was in this wise." Nothing else can.

Birth Legends

In his "Legend of Perseus" and in his "Primitive Paternity," Mr. E. S. Hartland has brought forward a mass of illustrations to prove two things. First, the widespread belief in the supernatural birth of gods and national heroes; and, second, the equally widespread vogue of superstitious and magical practices to obtain children, which are a practical ignoring of the biological laws governing their production. Thus, a tribe of natives in North-Western Australia believe that birth is quite independent of sexual intercourse. The North Queenslanders believe that babies are brought to women by Nature spirits, the function of the husband being apparently to invoke the spirits to do their work. On the Proserpine River, a supernatural being named Kumya inserts the baby in a woman while she is bathing. Some places are held to be the favourite ground for these unincarnated spirits, and women who have no desire for children will, when passing these spots, ape the walk and appearance of extreme age, in order to deceive the waiting spirit. On the Slave Coast of West Africa, it is believed that the child is derived from the ancestral spirits. Other parts of the world furnish similar examples. And as a product of beliefs such as these we have world-wide magical practices in order to obtain children. For these there is no need to travel far. They exist all over Europe, and almost any comprehensive work on comparative folk-lore will give illustrations of the practices current among Christian peoples who believe that by them fecundity is secured. And they all point to the once almost universal belief that the child is not the physiological consequence of the union of the sexes, but is in sober truth a supernatural product.

Oh, the Pity of It!

Now, what has been said is well known to all writers on comparative mythology and anthropology. But these works have an aggravating knack of stopping short at just the point where they begin to be of real importance. For the value, perhaps the whole value, of a comprehension of the religious beliefs of the lower races lies in their relation to

the religious beliefs of the races that are more advanced. But, owing to the widespread fear of vested interests, this is seldom pointed out. The origin of the savage gods is clearly indicated in scores of authoritative works; but there are few, if any, of our first-class men that have the courage to point to the further truth that our modern ideas of God are descended from these primitive and clearly mistaken beliefs, and rest on no other and no better foundations. The consequence is that, when one tries to trace the development of the Christian belief in the Virgin Birth from such savage and primitive beliefs as have been above indicated, one finds oneself on almost virgin soil. But, starting from the fact that the nature of procreation and birth is a genuine discovery made by man in the course of his intellectual development, one may dimly see how belief in the supernatural birth of the scores of gods that have ruled over the minds of men came to be established. At any rate, its persistence only serves to drive home the lesson that all religion, no matter how refined, has its roots in the delusions that have their sway over the mind of mankind in its most primitive stages.

To our mind it is quite clear that in the Christian story of the Virgin Birth, as in the other classical versions of the same legend that have been quoted, we have a survival of the primitive belief that all birth is supernatural. And it is not difficult to conceive that as a better knowledge of procreation—at least of the fact, if not of the process—gained ground, the interference of the spiritual world in the matter of birth would be restricted to the appearance of striking personalities. In this we are only following the ordinary course of the history of the supernatural, where from everything being thought of as being due to the gods, we get their interference only on special occasions—occasions that become more and more rare as human knowledge becomes more and more precise. Thus, in course of time, it is not every man who is born of the tribal spirits or gods, but only the specially favoured individual. Sexual intercourse between human beings and the gods, such as appears in plain form in some of the legends, and in a veiled form in others, thus carries us back far beyond the period of the classical mythologies to the most primitive form of human thought. The mythologies are themselves late survivals, and their ready acceptance may be partly accounted for by the fact that, as popular folk-lore shows, there are still active in all parts of the world beliefs and practices which associate birth with supernatural intervention. Into the course of the development that derived the Gospel story from the belief of the primitive savage we have now neither the time nor the space to enter, but that the one is derived from the other there cannot be reasonable doubt. Later there gathers round the sexual act all sorts of mystical interpretation, but here, as in other cases, it is the savage who provides the true starting-point. And to the informed, the truth of religion is no longer a question of historical or philosophical inquiry, it is the psychology of religion that is of consequence. Not whether men are justified in their belief, but how they came to believe these things to be true is the pertinent inquiry. Anthropology holds within it the secret of divinity. When the missionary sets forth to convert the savage, he is attacking the parent of his religion. For the savage alone can tell him why "the birth of Jesus was in this wise."

CHAPMAN COHEN.

BARKER'S ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON CHARACTER

SOME years since Ernest Barker delivered a course of lectures on national life and character which was subsequently published with the title: "National Character and the Factors of its Formation." (Methuen.) In his survey of national, climatic, territorial and economic aspects of the problem, Barker's approach is distinctly scientific. But when the religious factor and the contributions of the churches are his theme, our author is apt to replace his earlier critical standpoint by an emotional appeal to his readers. Moreover, the alleged benefits of religion in shaping character and conduct are somewhat overstressed, despite the admissions of the faithful's shortcomings he is compelled to make.

That religion has played a powerful part in the career of humanity is of course self-evident and, even in our relatively secular civilisation, its influences remain widespread. The nation and the national faith were equivalent terms. As Barker observes: "Even today, and in a somewhat unhappy form, religion is still the nation in South-Eastern Europe. You make a Bulgarian citizen by enrolling a new recruit in the Church of the Bulgarian patriarch; and bishops will distribute rifles to the guerilla bands for the purpose of a proselytization which is also a process of nationalisation."

Barker claims that Calvinism is the parent of the genius and character of the Scots. No doubt, John Knox and other Reformers exercised an enormous influence in Caledonia, but to what extent the Kirk impressed Hume, Scott and Burns, among others, is not clearly evidenced in any favourable sense.

For a thousand years before the Reformation, Western Europe was dominated by an undivided Latin Church. The clergy, and later the legal profession, were the only literate members of the community. Canon Law, skilfully devised by the ecclesiastical jurists, became an instrument of priestly oppression. Our author justly notes that: "That Canon Law which was administered in mediæval England was perhaps the greatest of the direct influences on national life which proceeded from the Church. It controlled the law of marriage: it affected the disposition of property; it vindicated, to some extent, the rules of morality." Again, the Universities were, and long remained, clerical preserves, from which all known heretics were excluded when they were not imprisoned, tortured or put to death.

But the Papal endeavour to firmly establish a Universal Church which overrode the State was doomed to failure. The Church early lost control over commerce, and wars of aggression grew from more to more between contending States. The ecclesiastical Courts became ever more corrupt and inefficient, and Barker himself allows that, "the Church courts had many abuses, and the confessional, even if it enabled parish priests to give some guidance to their flock, had to contend against facile 'pardoners' and venal salesmen of indulgences."

Barker does his best to make Calvinism appear as the saviour of Scotland from anarchy through the highly organised despotism it established. Yet, he acknowledges that: "It brought in its train a long and bitter struggle. Passionate for the union of a whole people in a single faith under Christ the King, the Calvinistic preachers fought against the monarch at Edinburgh (and, after 1603, in London), and against a self-seeking nobility. According to our author this conflict hardened the Scottish character, although, as Buckle and others have insisted, a passion for independence had, for many previous generations, always distinguished England's northern neighbours.

Even if we admit that the Kirk did something to create order in a turbulent community through its well organised discipline, and through trading on the superstitions of the people, its obscurantism proved appalling. Barker concedes that "intolerance, and even persecution, were fostered by a general spirit of supervision. Lecky has remarked that it was in Scotland, in

1697, that the last execution for heresy on British soil took place, and in Scotland again, in 1727, that the sin of witchcraft was last punished by death by any British authority. It may also be remarked that the more rigorous the prohibition, the greater is the temptation to lawlessness and evasion . . . and the Presbyterian discipline of Scotland, had for its shadow a spirit of anarchy, which could long be traced in the statistics of illegitimacy (though it must be admitted that these statistics raise difficult problems) and in the records of convictions for drunkenness—though here again climatic factors, and the social conditions of an area such as that of the Clyde, must also be taken into account."

That economic pressure was more largely responsible for the Union than religion is self-evident. For it conferred a common commerce and industrial occupations previously absent. As our author notes, the new roads connecting the Scottish Lowlands with the Highlands brought a revolution into the system of land tenure with a greatly improved husbandry, while the blending of the Highlander with the Lowlander promoted the keen intellect, coupled with a shrewdness in business transactions for which the Scots are everywhere distinguished.

Barker opines that the English Reformation was not a spiritual movement like that of Scotland, although it became one. The want of a male heir to the Crown and other matrimonial entanglements were the superficial causes of the change. Yet, the Morning Star of the Reformation was the English Wycliffe whose disciples, however bitterly persecuted, survived in London and elsewhere right down to Tudor times. Also, monastic reforms were carried out by Wolsey before the general dissolution that followed and, as Froude and other historians have shown, public disapproval of Papal exactions and the pretensions of a pestilent priesthood were frequently made manifest in Parliament and elsewhere.

As our author truly remarks, after the Reformation not only was our religion nationalised, but our deity also. Even now, there survives a widespread belief that God always favours his English worshippers. "There is a tradition of God's Englishman, on whom he calls for any work of special difficulty. It is a tradition exemplified in the story which is told by a Tyneside skipper, who, losing the wind to a rival as he was trying to beat up stream into port, exclaimed: 'This beats cockfighting: there's God Almighty gone and given the wind to a . . . Dutchman instead of His ain countryman.' There is nothing, however, in such an attitude which is peculiarly English. . . ."

The emergence of liberty in England from the struggle between Church and Dissent is fairly considered in Dr. Barker's survey, and he notes that while the Puritan fought strenuously for his own freedom he was almost invariably the foe to the extension of toleration to others. "The Puritan demanded freedom," declares Barker, "as passionate minorities always will, because they disliked the opinions of the majority too intensely to be overborne by the weight of numbers. They were no lovers of toleration for its own sake and where they controlled the State, as they showed in New England, they were ready to enforce conformity to their own views and to exact a discipline no less drastic than that of their enemies."

To what degree the Deistic movement was indebted to Christian Nonconformity is not discussed, but Barker ascribes the Benthamite philosophy to a Puritan ancestry. Moreover, that philosophy's successor was that which made the deepest impression on the outside world. "The philosophy of England," he avers, "which travelled abroad was the philosophy of John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer; and both, whatever their religious views, were strongly imbued with the Nonconformist tradition. Spencer, as he writes in his autobiography, sprang from a family 'essentially dissenting'; and his Nonconformist instincts and early training left an abiding mark, which appears in his opposition to any scheme of State education, and in the able and whole argument of *The Man versus the State*."

T. F. PALMER.

HE NOTHING OF RELIGION KNOWS WHO ONLY KNOWS HIS OWN

Some of the older Faiths very briefly examined

IV

ZOROASTRIANISM

ZOROASTER, or Zarathustra, was probably historical, i.e., a man who actually lived, the evidence for this being about on a par with that for the historicity of Jesus, questioned by some scholars. His time is disputed, but might be taken as somewhere around 1000-2000 B.C.

Zoroaster reformed the prehistoric Iranian, Aryan or Persian religion, the general idea of which seems to be very much like that of all religions: i.e., firstly, to placate, by all sorts of peculiar rites and ceremonies, Mazda, the chief spirit, and those other spirits which, between them, inhabited and dominated all Nature; and secondly, to obey and give tribute to the magi, wise men or priests; and, lastly, to practise good, that is to say pro-social deeds—be truthful, honest, kind to others, even your enemies, and think and speak no evil.

All good men, beasts and things were created by Ahura Mazda and all evil ones by the wicked Ahriman (cf. Isaiah xlv. 11: I the Lord create evil), but some day Sosiosh, born of a virgin who comes up out of the sea will fight and overcome the Devil, and all evil men, animals and things will become as lambs together.

No sooner was Zoroaster dead than the usual crop of legends began to spring up round his name, and these stories, at first handed down by word of mouth, eventually became incorporated in the Holy Scriptures or Zend Avesta. These holy books tell us how Zarathustra was conceived by a holy Flame born of a virgin mother, and how, as he came from the virgin's womb, he laughed and all Nature rejoiced and sang for joy. He was visited by three Magi who came with gifts to worship the holy babe. After apparently disappearing for 30 years he is heard of again as being taken up into a high mountain and being tempted by Ahriman whom, however, he drives away. On another mountain the Book of the Law was handed to him by Mazda himself. Later he was pierced with a spear and cast into a fiery furnace. He will rise again, together with all those who have truly believed in the Avesta. All these ideas are obviously borrowings from the older Egyptian and Babylonian religious myths.

Much of the teaching and meaning of Zoroastrianism is still—scientifically speaking—shrouded in mystery, and many inscriptions, bas-reliefs, etc., still extant do not by any means always agree.

M. C. BROTHERTON, COMDR., R.N.

POOR WITCHES

Gateshead-on-Tyne was quite a small village during the days of the Great Rebellion and the Commonwealth, and it can be assumed therefore that the number of witches existing in it could not have been very many.

The local magistrates nevertheless found employment for themselves, as well as their colleagues across the river when these pious and upright men were nicely occupied with the task of burning witches by the score, acting upon sworn information given by a notorious witch-finder from Scotland. For, under a date in the year 1649, the following entry is to be seen in the parish books for the village:—

"Paid at Mrs. Watson's when the justices sate to examine the witches, 3s. 4d.; for a grave for a witch, 6d.; and for burying witches, £1 5s."—E. H. S.

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

THE MOTHER OF GOD. By G. W. Foote. Price 3d.; postage 1d.

ACID DROPS

A great many people strongly object to a dead person not submitting to a quiet and respectable burial. Of course we keep on thinking of the dead that were once alive, but decency forbids more than memory. No one would wish for the ghost of a wife or husband, or a son, or a friend to come walking about a bedroom or jumping over stiles, and what is true in that direction is true in others, particularly with regard to religion. Long after it is doctrinally, theologically and decently dead, its ghost pollutes the air, disturbs thought and generally fouls all with which it contacts. It haunts language, disturbs thought, stereotypes ideas, and worships ancient taboos.

Impudence is never wanting where Christian advertising is about. Thus, we find that at Ilford, one of those self-labelled "Commandoes" applied for permission to visit the schools—in school times—to address the children, which meant giving the young scholars a dose of worn-out religion, the purpose being that of making this intrusion a part of the school teaching. It was a cowardly trick, and we are glad to see that the authorities declined the offer. We are glad the "Commandoes" met with their deserts. Other schools should follow the example set.

It is worth noting that this method of creeping into schools with the intention of misleading the children is being practised all over the country. We suggest that the teachers should take steps to stop this practice of baby-snatching and that others who are so inclined should make it a duty they owe to their children. When grown up, children do not think better of their parents when they find out that they were parties to teaching a religion they do not believe.

The Rev. Maurice Barnett is under no delusion as to the religious outlook. He says plainly that "Mr. John Bull is under no delusions as to the present position concerning religion." He says that "Religion is a mere addendum to life," and he goes on to remark that "Methodism seems incapable of making any lasting impact on men. We don't make any impact on men. We don't get John Bull." Well that is quite frank, and anyone who sticks to truth will agree with him. Mr. Barnett goes over the whole position and concludes that nothing can be done to check the decay of religion. It is good to have one preacher who tries to be honest. Meanwhile the general body of Ministers of religion lie and lie again. But after all you cannot for ever lie and lie again without being found out.

Perhaps the worst feature of human nature is meanness. No one has yet discovered any decent use for it, and no one has ever been the better for exercising it, and to encourage it gives it an air of importance which it does not deserve. Death is not a dreadful thing, it operates and is done. But meanness fattens on its own vile food. No one who has perpetrated an act of meanness has been the better for it. A brute may be forgiven for his brutality; a thief for his robbery, but for meanness there is no adequate apology. The best expression of meanness was expressed by the early Christians when they pictured the "saved" looking from the parapets of heaven and watching the unbeliever burning for ever and for ever, and then singing the greatness and glory of God.

The Vice-Chairman of the "Christian Evidence Society"—noticeable that it has never discovered any evidence—thinks that the B.B.C. is acting unfairly when it does not permit contrary views (concerning religion) and thinks "there should be free and open debate—concerning the facts which underlie the Christian faith." That sounds all right, so far as it goes, but if the discussion does not permit a discussion on Atheism the regret is not enough. Mr. Higginson writes that he is sure that his "Rationalist friends" will observe "the limits of propriety." But that will not do. The B.B.C. might easily agree to discussions on religion, while forbidding a direct Atheistical attack on Christianity. With Atheism forbidden the proper term for the concession would be just "humbug," of which the B.B.C. has always had a stock.

One thing is certain. The more liberal the champions of Christianity appear on paper, the more will they need careful watching and weighing. We must not come to terms with the Christian advocate either on religion and science, or with religion and life. We must force the advocates of Christianity and other creeds with Atheism the only logical conclusion. We owe that degree of honesty to the world.

Here is an example of the way in which Christian writers dodge the truth. It comes from one of our newspapers. Something was said about Shelley and the "harsh treatment" he experienced at Oxford. This was, it is explained, due to the fact that "almost every school contains one or more wild-eyed and long-haired bards, whose lives are one long warfare with dons." That is how it is done to hide the fact that Shelley's offence was that he wrote a pamphlet in "Defence of Atheism." You may tell a good religious lie easily enough.

We should not be surprised to find that Archbishop McGrath is right when he says that "Wales is becoming Catholic." That is probably correct so far as the remaining Christians are concerned. Wales, like all other centres, is moving away, not merely from Protestantism, but also from all forms of religion. But one never expects a preacher of the Catholic Church to tell the truth. The Welsh people are very quick witted, and have a sense of independence that the Roman Church never has had and never will possess. We cannot see the Welsh people entering the Roman Church in a rush.

Fr. Ripley, preaching to the Legion of Mary, discloses a calculation that if every Roman Catholic in this country would convert fifteen non-Catholics, the conversion of England would be assured. Meanwhile, it is to be noted that the English Church is playing the same game—if it can get enough converts, England would be safe for Christianity. We have not the slightest doubt that some converts will be gained—someone said there was a fool born every minute—but the Catholic figures are, as usual, misleading. The Roman Church counts the newcomers, but says nothing of those who no longer believe in Christianity. The rule is once a member of the Catholic Church, always a member. The truth came when Fr. Ripley said "Catholicism is not advancing, but receding before the pagan onslaught." We are rather surprised at the "Catholic Herald" letting the cat out of the bag.

The other day we found a newspaper quoting Ruskin—he is seldom cited now—as a man who praised warfare. Put in that way the statement is not correct. In fact it is very wrong. Ruskin was no war lover. Here is what he said:—

"Whatever virtue or goodness there may be in this game of war rightly played, there is none when you play it with a multitude of pawns. You must not make it the question of which of the combatants has the largest guns, or which has got behind the biggest tree, or which has gunpowder made by the best chemicals, or iron smelted with the best coal. Decide your battle, whether nations or individuals, on these terms, and you have only multiplied confusion and added slaughter to iniquity."

Somehow we find that goes a little better than believing in war.

It may be noted—mainly because our ordinary Press is very careful lest it should offend the Churches and their followers—that no one has said in public that we have an instrument belonging to our Established Church, and is supported by most real Christians, that God sends us rain—among other things. Now he appears to have overdone his powers and his followers have not dared to say anything about it. Whether God has our colossal flooding of the country or whether it has occurred through the agency of the Satan, the other God, remains to be seen; but the fact remains, either God let the flood go or he did nothing to prevent it. In either case the verdict is "Guilty" either of carelessness or of conduct aforesaid.

"THE FREETHINKER"

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

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SUGAR PLUMS

This is a final reminder that the debate between Chapman Cohen and the Rev. Gordon Rupp is taking place on April 16, at Grange Park Congregational Church Hall, Grange Park Road, Leyton about 8 minutes walk from Leyton Town Hall). The discussion begins at 7.30 p.m., and the Chairman is Alderman A. E. Schervaise, M.P. The subject, "Is Christianity a Social Necessity?" is a stimulating topic.

Within a few weeks we hope to have a delivery of the "Bible for All." It is the only book of its kind, and its sale is always constant. We had some very amusing and interesting stories of its use in the recent war. One day we will print some of them.

Another book we are expecting from the printers is Thomas Paine's "Age of Reason." It was the book that Christians hated most heartily. It must have run through many hundreds of issues—perhaps one ought to say thousands—but there are books that have been printed so frequently. The edition we expect to have on hand soon, contains a forty-page introduction. It ran through three very large editions, and judging from enquiries it will go as fast as ever. There are some books that never die.

We are glad to note that the Editor's book on "God and the Universe" is selling well, although it is in a fifth edition. That is both a compliment to the author and to the readers. It indicates the unmistakable growth of Freethought.

We were pleased to see the other day a number of copies of Richard Jefferies' "Story of my Heart." On enquiry we were told it had a steady, but not a great sale. We were both pleased and saddened for the moment, for Jefferies was a fine, if a sad man, and there is little doubt that he was a Freethinker at heart. Here is a passage from his book which was, one might say, written with his life's blood. It was written over half a century ago.

That twelve thousand years should have elapsed, and the human race—able to reason and to think, and easily capable of building immense armies for its own destruction—should still live from hand to mouth like cattle and sheep. . . In twelve thousand written years the world has not yet built itself a house, nor filled a granary, nor organised itself for its own comfort. It is so marvellous I cannot express the wonder with which it fills me. . . Why do people die

of starvation, or lead a miserable existence on the verge of it? Why have millions on millions to toil from morning to evening just to gain a mere crust of bread? Because of absolute lack of organisation by which such labour should produce its effects, the absolute lack of distribution, the absolute lack of even the very idea that such things are possible. Nay, even to mention such things, to say they are possible is criminal with many. Madness could hardly go further."

That is something that is written in the blood of a man, and while there appear to be better things ahead—better than things were—yet the improvement has been bought at a terrible cost.

In the Woolwich Town Hall, Wellington Street, Woolwich, on Thursday, April 17, Mr. R. H. Rosetti will meet a clerical opponent (the gentleman's name is not yet to hand) and discuss the question: "Freethought or Christianity?" The debate will begin at 8 p.m. On Friday, April 18, Mr. Archibald Robertson and the Rev. William Wallace will debate the question: "Has Christianity Failed?" This debate will take place in the Eltham Congregational Church Schools, Eltham, and will begin at 8 p.m. Both are in connection with the Christian Commando Campaign. Eltham is in the London S.E. area.

These are the times when our leaders are begging us to study the value of health. It is stressed, and is being made as simple as possible, and indeed the matter seems to have gone far enough to make health-getting a task that all can manage. It is also clear that the road to health may not be one of hard work and painful achievement. For that reason we call attention to a very interesting quarterly magazine entitled "Common Sense." The magazine is well printed, well illustrated, and has for editor Mr. A. F. Hornibrook, who is already the author of several books of the same order. Generally, dealing with this class of writing is not part of our work. But if "Common Sense" is not a success it will not be the fault of the writers. The magazine is published by "The Press Centre" at Tudor Street, London. The price is one shilling.

From the "Daily Telegraph" for March 28:—

"RITUAL MURDERS"

To the Editor of The Daily Telegraph

Sir—We English are an illogical people. In many homes in this country, and particularly in the nurseries, one may see—or might have seen a few years ago—a picture of Father Abraham with uplifted knife about to commit ritual murder on his own son Isaac, as described in Genesis.

This has always been considered a highly meritorious action on the part of Abraham and was duly impressed as such on my infant mind. But when it comes to West African natives, ritual murder appears to be a horse of quite a different colour.

Yours faithfully,
GEORGE CHAMBERS."

There is no real difference. Another ritual murder, and there is a great heap of them, is the crucifixion of an innocent man to save others. There is a similar story in the New Testament concerning Christians.

"INCREDIBLE DOCTRINES"

IN a very interesting article, "Are You Saved?" ("Christian World," February 6), the well-known "Modernist" Congregational Theologian, Dr. C. J. Cadoux, alluded to some old doctrines which, he thinks, have become "incredible to us" because our minds have expanded so as to exclude them. He did not say that they have been positively disproved, but simply (in effect) that we have grown out of them. The principal one he adduces is that of an eternity of hell-fire.

Is it so certain that, in the minds of everyone, that doctrine has been outgrown? True, the minds of liberal Protestants, of Rationalists, and of very many others, instinctively repel it; but these groups do not include the whole of those people who

are interested in religious matters. The Roman Catholic Church asserts the reality of eternal hell (with "a real material fire") as one of its *de fide* dogmas. According to it, every soul who dies in mortal (as distinct from venial) sin will pass the whole of eternity in that fire, in the loathsome company of devils. This dogma is taught emphatically from Roman Catholic pulpits. Some little time ago it was advocated in an eloquent sermon broadcast by the B.B.C. I myself have heard it preached in thrilling words in pulpits. In a great London Church of the Redemptorist Order, before a crowded congregation, I heard the orator say: "Imagine one drop of water falling once in a million years into an abyss a million times as large as the Pacific Ocean. When by this process the abyss had been filled to the brim, the tortures of a damned soul would be no nearer their end than when they began." The doctrine is believed, without doubt, as being a revealed truth, by all genuine Roman Catholics: otherwise they would hardly go to confession, which is pre-eminently intended to absolve mortal sin. I may add that I have not heard that the Salvation Army has repudiated its belief in the reality of an eternal hell; that the Calvinists hold it not only as a reality, but as one predestined for a selected number of human beings by the mere will of God; and that other religious people also believe it.

For my own part, I would hold with John Henry Newman that (if we believe in the existence of God) "the real mystery is not that evil will never have an end, but that it ever had a beginning." Belief in an eternal hell is repulsive to many humane minds, but others believe it on the alleged ground that its truth has been revealed by God. It is hardly a matter for positive disproof; the question is, is it based on an authority which can rightly claim our allegiance?

The main purpose of this article, however, is not to discuss the merits or demerits of the dogma of hell-fire, or of any other particular doctrines, but to ask, "What is meant by saying any given doctrine is 'incredible to us'?"

In his once-famous book, "Literature and Dogma," Matthew Arnold said "miracles do not occur," and that we disbelieve a miraculous story because our minds have outgrown belief in the miraculous. Its reality had not been so much positively disproved, as "become incredible to us." I doubt whether Dr. Cadoux, a Christian, would subscribe to that opinion; yet certainly it is held by multitudes now as it was in Arnold's days. Their minds simply cannot entertain belief in a miracle, because the whole cast of their thought finds it uncongenial.

Is this not a very dangerous attitude to take? Is it not based rather on emotion than on reason? A man has a general mode of looking at things that makes this or that so distasteful to him that he repudiates it without a conclusive disproof. The difficulty at once arises that the things so cast aside are different in the cases of different people. To take an example from the field of politics: In the Victorian era the belief in "liberal freedom for all" was so ingrained in the minds of a whole school of progressive folk, that its alternative was simply "incredible to them." It seemed self-evident to them that each individual person has a right to do as he or she likes within the mere limits of laws aiming at assuring an equal right to every other individual person. So sure were they of this assumed right that their minds could not entertain the opposite conception, and "liberty for all" was to them an axiom. Yet, at the same time, other minds, differently constituted, held a very different belief. For example, while Mill, Spencer and their school, were advocating such freedom as a right, the Roman Pontiffs (basing themselves on their coherent system of traditional philosophy) were repudiating it as a heresy. They still so condemn it. Their position is that God has revealed a certain body of doctrine as true; that truth has rights which error has not; and that, therefore, heresy has not that claim to freedom which is possessed by Catholic truth. Evidently neither the Victorian liberalistic, nor the Papal conception was, or is, self-evident. Each depends on a system of philosophy which is subject to proof or disproof.

Lecky, in his "History of European Morals," mentions the gradual process by which, in ancient Rome, the belief in "the absolute rights of a father" became superseded. It was not by logical disproof, but by an evolutionary change of point of view. At first it was accepted by all that the right of a father was absolute, even to putting his child to death; but "a profound change of thought," occurring over a long period, culminated at last in a decree of Diocletian abolishing "even!"—to our minds the word sounds ironic) the right of the father to sell his child. What was "incredible" (the rights of children) in one age had become credible and legal later. In modern times a similar process was seen in the case of negro slavery. In the Southern States of the American Union it was not only accepted, but passionately upheld as even a Divinely-established institution. Eminent theologians of the Protestant Evangelical Churches in those districts so defended it: as can be seen in detail in Mrs. Beecher Stowe's "Key to 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'" Yet to other people the slavery of negroes seemed "incredible" as an asserted right. In our times the "colour bar" in South Africa seems just and necessary to the white Afrikaner; but to most of us over here it appears as clearly wrong.

In our times also, amongst humane people the doctrine is (at least, theoretically) taken for granted that "all men are brothers"; but how would it have appeared in old Imperial Rome? Take the treatment of slaves (who formed so immense a proportion of the population). Again to cite Lecky: "Numerous acts of the most odious barbarity were committed. The well known anecdotes of Flaminius ordering a slave to be killed to gratify, by the spectacle, the curiosity of a guest; Vedio Pollio feeding his fish on the flesh of slaves; and Augustus sentencing a slave who had killed and eaten a favourite quail, to crucifixion, are the extreme examples that are recorded. . . . [But] Ovid and Juvenal describe the fierce Roman ladies tearing their servants' faces, and thrusting the long pins of their brooches into their flesh. The master, at the close of the Republic, had full power to sell his slave as a gladiator or a combatant to wild beasts." To "us" it seems "incredible" that a moral (immoral!) code could ever have sanctioned such things—but it did!

A good modern example of contrasted points of view may be cited in the respective attitude of decided Protestants, and of devout Catholics, to the cult of the Blessed Virgin. To the former it appears as a gross derogation from the honour due solely to God; but to the Catholic it seems a logical and necessary part of that honour—since God chose her as the vehicle of the Incarnation. A Roman Catholic hymn has it: "And in the crown of Mary there shines a wondrous gem, as Queen of the angels." Evidently the two conceptions are based on contrasted systems of thought.

To what conclusion does this article arrive? If we accept or reject a belief simply because "it is incredible to us," we shall have no basis of certitude: for what appears incredible to one person may or will seem credible to another. The criterion should be logical proof or disproof. True, in every-day affairs such apodictical tests are impossible because we have not time; but in matters of fundamental moment we should seek it. To reject a belief merely because it does not appeal to us, is mere emotionalism.

Of course, particular single beliefs may not be always capable of absolute proof or the reverse; but they may be parts of a system which is. The doctrine of hell-fire, for example, is opposed to our moral feelings; but it should be accepted if it is of a Divine Revelation which can authenticate itself—while, on the other hand, its seemingly repulsive nature is a further test for testing severely the claimed authenticity of the teacher.

This, however, is to go by reason, not by emotion. Probably, however, Dr. Cadoux and I are not far apart in that conclusion.

J. W. POYNTER

A CENTURY OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY!

AN INCOMPLETE LIST OF BLASPHEMY PROSECUTIONS AND SENTENCES ON FREETHINKERS DURING ONE HUNDRED YEARS IN THIS BOASTED LAND OF FREEDOM.

- 1794—Simmons, for "Age of Reason," two years.
- Crosby, for "Age of Reason," two years.
- 1797—John Davies, for "Scripturian's Creed," one year.
- John Gratton, for "Christian Mysteries," heavy fine.
- Thomas Williams, three years' imprisonment.
- 1812—D. T. Eaton, prosecuted seven times, pillory inflicted, and £2,800 literature destroyed.
- 1813—George Houston, two years and fine £200.
- 1817—William Hone. His political parodies were prosecuted as blasphemous.
- Shelley deprived of his children on account of his infidelity.
- Richard Carlile, nine and a-half years and fines amounting to thousands of pounds.
- 1818—Betchford, six months for report of Carlile's trial.
- 1819—James Williams, six months.
- Joseph Russell, six months.
- James Tucker, six months.
- 1819—John Cahuac, heavy fine for Palmer's "Principles of Nature."
- 1820—Thomas Davison, two years.
- Joseph Swann, four and a-half years.
- Thomas Tyler, three months.
- 1821—Jane Carlile, two years for Sherwin's "Life of Paine."
- Mary Anne Carlile, two years.
- 1822—Mrs. Susan Wright, twenty and a-half months.
- Samuel Waddington, one year for "Principles of Nature."
- Humphrey Boyle, twenty-three months.
- Charles Trust, six months and £20 fine for "Principles of Nature."
- Joseph Rhodes, two years.
- Joseph William Trust, two years.
- William Holmes, two years.
- John Barkley, six months.
- William Rance, one year.
- Charles Sanderson, one year.
- Turner, one year.
- Atkinson, one year.
- 1822—Robert Wedderburn, two years for blasphemous speech.
- James Tunbridge, two years.
- James Watson, one year for "Principles of Nature," and several other prosecutions.
- John Jones, six months for Carlile's "Letter to Wait."
- 1824—William Clark, four months for "Queen Mab."
- William Campion, three years.
- John Clarke, three years.
- William Haley, three years.
- T. R. Perry, three years.
- Richard Hassell, two years.
- T. Jefferies, eighteen months.
- W. Cochrane, six months.
- J. Christopher, six months.
- M. J. O'Connor, six months.
- James Affleck, three months for "Queen Mab."
- 1827-31—Robert Taylor, three years for blasphemous discourses.
- 1840—John Cleave, four months for Haslam's "Letters to Clergy."
- Abel Heywood, committed for trial, but prosecution abandoned.
- 1841—Henry Hetherington, several prosecutions.
- Moxon, the publisher, the last prosecution for "Queen Mab."
- 1842—Charles Southwell, one year and £100 fine for "Oracle of Reason."
- G. J. Holyoake, six months.

- George Adams, one month.
- Mrs. Harriett Adams, one month.
- 1843—H. Robinson, twelve months.
- James Finlay, three months.
- 1844—Matilda Roalfe, two months.
- 1846—Thomas Paterson, fifteen months.
- 1857—Mrs. Emma Martin, six months.
- Thomas Pooley, twenty-one months (five months only served owing to exertions of Buckle, Mill, etc.).
- 1878—Annie Besant, deprived of her child for publishing an atheistical work and associating with an infidel author (Bradlaugh).
- 1882—Henry Seymour, for blasphemous placard.
- 1883—G. W. Foote, one year for "The Freethinker."
- W. J. Ramsey, nine months for "The Freethinker."
- H. A. Kemp, three months for "The Freethinker."

WITHOUT BENEFIT OF CLERGY . . .

Robed for love's conquest, flowers are blind,
They cannot see
The beauty of their heraldry.

Dazed by love's attest, the interwind,
The bee does zoom
Now to blind bride from the blind groom.

OSWELL BLAKESTON.

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

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

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Our Timid Historians," Mr. JOSEPH McCABE.

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Halifax Branch N.S.S. (I.L.P. Lecture Hall, St. James Street).—
Sunday, 7 p.m.: "Mixed Marriages," Mr. F. J. CORINA.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Chorlton Town Hall, All Saints).—
Sunday, 3 p.m.: "Man His Own Master," Mr. ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON (Oxford).

DEBATES

Wednesday, April 16.—Mr. Chapman Cohen and the Rev. Gordon Rupp. Grange Park Congregational Church Hall, Grange Park Road, Leyton, London, E. (8 minutes from Leyton Town Hall). "Is Christianity a Social Necessity?" 7-30 p.m.

Thursday, April 17.—Mr. R. H. Rosetti will debate at Woolwich Town Hall, Wellington Street, Woolwich, on "Freethought or Christianity?" 8 p.m.

Friday, April 18.—Mr. Archibald Robertson and the Rev. William Wallace. Eltham Congregational Church School, Eltham. "Has Christianity Failed?" 8 p.m.

Pamphlets for the People

By CHAPMAN COHEN

What is the Use of Prayer? Did Jesus Christ Exist? Thou shall 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?

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AN AMERICAN LIFE OF THOMAS PAINE

IT is doubtful whether any other famous historical figure has been treated so scurrilously as Thomas Paine. Epicurus has been misrepresented and Machiavelli has been diabolified, but personal vilification was carried further against Paine than with either of these: it was started during his lifetime, and it continues deliberately or unintentionally, in our own day. A good biography is always welcome, therefore, and a good popular one doubly so. It is high time that the general public appreciated Paine at his worth, but they can hardly be expected to read what Mr. Hesketh Pearson called "Moncure Conway's exhaustive (and exhausting) biography." Mr. W. E. Woodward's new study* might serve as a very effective substitute, for it is the result of intensive research and presents a fair picture of Paine in the light of the available evidence.

Unfortunately, Mr. Woodward has perpetuated one habit which, though seemingly harmless, has a distinctly derogatory effect: the contraction of "Thomas" to "Tom" in the chosen title, despite the fact that he frequently uses the full name in the narrative. Nobody thinks of writing about Tom Jefferson (to mention an obvious contemporary example) and there is no reason why Paine should be dealt with less courteously by his admirers. Another criticism of the book concerns its price. With a wide circulation it could do much to popularise Paine today, for it is a very readable volume; but 18s. is more than the average working person can afford to pay, and it is to be hoped that a cheaper edition will be published soon.

Those who do read the book, can hardly fail to admire Thomas Paine. Few men have crowded so much into their lives, and none have done so with less thought of personal aggrandisement. In excitement alone his life would require some equalling, for he had at least three narrow escapes from death: at Dover, from British officials holding a warrant for treason; at Luxembourg prison, from the guillotine; and at New Rochelle, U.S.A., from attempted assassination. Maligned and shabbily-treated as he often was, he remained generous and forgiving, and even refused to press charges against his would-be murderer. Most of his works proved best-sellers, but he generally donated the profits to a worthy cause.

Truly "America's Godfather" and one of the leading figures of the French Revolution, he was the clearest-sighted and most influential writer of his time. Yet Mr. Woodward tells us that: "Histories of the American Revolution that did not contain even a mention of Thomas Paine were actually printed and circulated."

Washington, Jefferson and Franklin, of course knew well the great part Paine had played in the fight for independence, and paid tribute to him. But Washington let him down when he was literally under the shadow of the guillotine, and even Jefferson lacked the full courage of his convictions in connection with the *Rights of Man*, when the Presidency was in the offing. When President, however, Jefferson entertained his friend fittingly despite the pressure of governmental work; while others who emerge honourably from their contact with Paine include James Monroe, American Minister to France who negotiated the release from Luxembourg prison, and William Blake, mystic-poet who advised the flight from England when arrest for treason was imminent.

Evidently Paine must have been an impressive person to meet, for most of his acquaintances, male and female, were attracted towards him. The long list of distinguished friends would include—in addition to those already mentioned—Charles James Fox, Robert Fulton (steamboat builder), William Godwin,

* "Tom Paine: America's Godfather." W. E. Woodward. Printed in U.S.A. English Publishers: Secker & Warburg, 1946. (18s.)

French revolutionaries like Danton, Lafayette, Condorcet, Brissot, Barère, and many others. This, in itself, is sufficient to disprove the stories of his repulsiveness, but there is also plenty of other evidence on this score, and Mr. Woodward rightly condemns the recent novellised-life of Paine by Mr. Howard Fast which portrays him as filthy, ugly and inebriated.

Possibly Mr. Woodward is correct when he suggests that Paine had a trait of masochism in him, but this is a very difficult matter upon which to reach a decision, firstly because we know insufficient about Paine and, secondly, because our understanding of psychology is at present very limited. What we do know definitely is, that judged by the best standards of human conduct, Thomas Paine was an extraordinarily honest, generous, and able literary and mechanical gifts, and was fully justified when he wrote in the *Rights of Man*:—

"With all the inconveniences of early life against me, I am proud to say that, with a perseverance undiminished by difficulties, a disinterestedness that compels respect, I have not only contributed to raise a new empire in the world, founded on a new system of government, but I have arrived at an eminence in political literature, the most difficult of all lines to succeed and excel in, which aristocracy, with all its aids, has not been able to reach or to rival."

Mr. Woodward errs, I think, when he refers to this "intellectual vanity." The plain and simple fact is that Paine recognised his own capabilities and the extent of his achievements. The most enlightened of his contemporaries did likewise and Mr. Woodward affirms that "in sober truth . . . arguments were usually sounder and more vital than those of his opponents." Indeed, our biographer describes the *Rights of Man* as "the most important book on human society and the relation of men to one another, that was produced anywhere in the world during the 18th century," while Sir George Trevelyan wrote of *Common Sense*: "It would be difficult to name any human composition which has had an effect at once so instantaneous and so extended and so lasting. . . ."

It was the astounding success of his writings that motivated the antagonism towards Thomas Paine. As Mr. Woodward says:

"Paine was not a mystic; he did not live in the clouds of fancy, or have daydreams of utopias, nor did he play with ideas for the pleasure of exercising his mind. He was a realist and as practical as a carpenter. It was just his rugged soundness of mind that made him feared and hated by those at the top. They would have ignored a dreamer, visionary who invented ideal civilisations for future generations of mankind. But Paine talked and wrote of Here and Now. His feet were planted firmly on the ground."

The powers that be do not encourage the man whose aim is "to redeem humanity from tyranny, poverty, cruelty and ignorance."

Freethinkers, however, may be relied upon to extend his memory, and to welcome a genuine attempt, like this by Mr. Woodward, to assess his true worth. Someday, perhaps, Thomas Paine will receive the tribute he deserves from the world at large.

C. McCALL

AN ATHEIST'S APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY. A Survey of Positions. By Chapman Cohen Price 1s. 6d. postage 1½d.

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THOMAS PAINE, A Pioneer of Two Worlds. By Chapman Cohen. Price 1s. 4d.; postage 1d.