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## VIEWES AND OPINIONS

### The Environment of Ideas

A GREAT many new words have been added to the popular vocabulary since the doctrine of evolution began its triumphant career. Among these, "environment" is perhaps the most widely used, and of late certainly the most prevalent. It is good, of course, that new words should be added to our vocabulary, and good also that they should become popular. An increase in the range of language means new tools with which to beat out ideas and clarify conceptions. But, unfortunately, it is the fate of many words, good in themselves, to become in time either mere narrow expressions of the Mesopotamian order, or else to be narrowed down in a quite unjustifiable manner. In this way they obstruct thought instead of aiding it. Both fates have overtaken "environment." By some it is used as a comprehensive phrase that does duty for definite thinking. By others it is narrowed down in a way that robs it of a great deal of its value. And by perhaps a larger group still it is habitually used as though all that it connotes is external physical surroundings. This meaning of the word is responsible for much of the loose thinking and speaking of those who point to the environment of certain people as being wholly responsible for whatever evil they may commit, and also of those who point to the fact of other people being without these vices as conclusive evidence that man can rise superior to the conditions amid which he is placed. Both statements contain a truth, and both suggest a falsehood, or one-sided view of the case. Exactly what that truth and falsity is, it is the object of the present article to determine.

It may be noted at the outset that any view of the case that leaves the organism out of sight, or treats it as only a passive factor in the result, is bound to lead to confusion. There is no need to enter into a disquisition on the metaphysics of sensation; it is enough to point out that if it be true that the surroundings affect the organism, the organism also has its part in determining the character of the environment. Our knowledge of the world being ultimately a consciousness of mental states, the capacity of the organism for receiving impressions, together with the required experience, must largely determine the quality of the environment in relation to each. The same surroundings, for instance, will present marked differences to an artist and to one deficient in artistic susceptibilities. An environment that is positively dangerous to one subject to alcoholic cravings will be perfectly innocuous to others differently constituted. Obviously, then, one has to consider not only the operation of the environment on the organism, but also the reciprocal and transforming influence of the latter on the former.

A very casual examination is also sufficient to show that the present—unless we use the word as a summary of the

past—does not account for all that is properly connoted by "environment." For man's relations and associations are not with the present only, but with his remotest past, including the whole line of animal descent. Rome was not built in a day, nor was present human nature elaborated in a generation. Its organic connections run through the whole history of the race, and can only be properly appreciated by a study of this none too legible record. It is impossible, for instance, to understand a number of existing institutions forming part of the environment to which human nature must adapt itself without a preliminary study of the historical and sociological conditions from which they spring. Our existing aristocracy, with its symbols and ceremonies, point us back to a time when the social structure was profoundly different to what it was at present. Our "Sabbath" leads us back to the ancient Chaldeans, and thence through the social, political, and religious transformations of the succeeding centuries. In these and in numerous other matters, our environment includes the human nature of thousands of years ago.

This is not only a fact, but an important fact, since it is this that makes progress possible. A people that with each generation had to commence afresh would be incapable of development.

There seems, for example, every reason for concluding that the superiority of the present to the past does not lie so much in the possession of superior brain power as in the possession of superior tools, as represented in various inventions, elaborated institutions, and, above all, accumulated knowledge. It is not, for instance, that our present generation of seamen are as individuals more courageous or more resourceful than the Phœnicians that they are their superiors, but that each sailor has at his command today an amount of knowledge which represents the labours of all the generations between them and us. But it is to be observed that these inventions, with the stock of accumulated knowledge, call for adaptation quite as much as do variations in climatic or other physical conditions. Natural Selection will operate—through social channels—by favouring the survival of such as vary in the direction of greater adaptability with what may be called the inherited environment; and thus by degrees a type of mind once prevalent becomes atavistic in character. In this way alone the past not only tends to become, but does become, an increasingly powerful factor in the environment of the present.

But again, a great deal of the past comes to us in the shape of ideas. Even institutions may with a little latitude be ranged under this head, for ultimately, institutions are dependent upon ideas for their continued existence. In this way the struggle for existence may become a struggle between ideas as well as a struggle between organisms; the latter becoming of greater or lesser social value in accordance with purely mental variations. But while ideas and beliefs operate in this

way, social selection again operates, within limits, in relation to ideas. The idea of celibacy, for instance, is one on which social selection sets an obvious and very peremptory check. The death punishment for heresy, so largely prevalent in savage communities, as well as among those of a later date, can also only be persistently inflicted so long as it does not threaten the more fundamental instincts of the race. Still, within these limits, ideas that are subversive of a fuller development do create an environment that operates selectively. The idea of heresy has played, and still plays, its part in favouring the survival of a comparatively orthodox type; just as other ideas—monarchy, or caste, or class play their part. On the other hand, it is easy to see how the existence and prevalence of ideas of a more advanced or beneficent order may serve to bring about a better condition of things. One need only instance such a thing as slavery. Born into an environment in which slavery is an accepted fact, it is taken as an unquestionable social phenomenon. In a later stage the idea of slavery is so repugnant that one who believes in it as an institution finds himself practically excluded from political life and social honour. All the time, then, there is being elaborated a psychical environment that reacts on the physical environment and determines the character of the survival.

At this point, however, one is reminded of the warning that ideas at variance with the environment cannot effect a lodgement, or if they succeed in this cannot survive. The warning undoubtedly conveys a truth, and this truth might be easily illustrated by pointing out how over and over again ideas have been crushed out because the environment was unsuitable to their survival. But it ignores the idealistic element in human nature; and overlooks the fact that the mere enunciation of ideas and teachings may alone effect a sufficient modification in the environment to ensure their continued existence. It has been said, and with truth, that before an institution can be altered, people must look upon it as conceivably alterable, and in this way teaching may have a considerable effect on the general social structure. Moreover, the idealistic element is in itself a factor in social evolution. The more value society places on a high sense of truth and justice and the expression of human sympathies, or upon the mere desire for social improvement, the greater becomes the survival value of such individuals as possess these qualities in a marked degree. Indeed, social evolution tends to move in an increasing degree along these lines.

From all points of view, then, careful study shows that ideas are not only real factors in the environment of man, but tend to become more and more important. The story is, in truth, an old one. So long as tools have been fashioned, or traditions handed down, or institutions elaborated, the value of ideas as environmental factors have been steadily increasing. All this time the purely physical environment has been decreasing, and the psychical environment increasing in importance. Of course, the physical factor is always there, only it is held in subjection or transformed by intellectual development. If one may venture on a metaphor, one may say that modern man assimilates his environment as he does his food; and as the one is transformed by chemical means so the other is transformed by psychical means. We live, more and more, in a world of ideas, and in the long run the prize will be with the race

that is most developed in this direction. And if this be so, the lesson of evolution is plain. Natural selection has been the great condition of the development of animal forms; it must also be the condition of the serviceable development of ideas. But variation is the condition of natural selection under whatever form it is found; and if there is to be a serviceable natural selection on the psychic plane, we must have an infinite variation of ideas to begin with, and a social structure that places as few obstacles as may be on the survival of the fittest. It is for this reason that societies that have prevented this have either stagnated or decayed. And for this reason, Freethought, here as elsewhere, striking at all mental fetters, makes for the further development of the human race.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

## “SEVEN AGAINST HEAVEN”

V

### “Jean Meslier”

IN the evolution of the modern secular culture of Europe, which owes its original and distinctive character to its gradual emancipation from the dead hand of the supernatural, we can trace a sequential development. The 16th century marked the Reformation and the first successful breach in the ecclesiastical tradition which stretched back to the fall of the, also secular, classical civilisation of the Ancient World: whilst the 17th witnessed that marvellous scientific revolution which reintroduced the idea of Determinism—that is, of scientific thinking into human thought: the 18th was, par excellence, the era of the successful popularisation of the new knowledge amongst the broad masses of the people; while the 19th was essentially the era of positive scientific discovery. (The 20th, still uncompleted, should witness the final collapse of the supernatural in the social, as always in the scientific sphere.)

The scientific attack on religion, which began with Bruno and appears to have learnt, if not wisdom, at least caution, from the terrible fate of its originator. As Voltaire himself wrote long after: “the thought of the stake is cooling to the blood.” The great thinkers of the 17th century appear to have been influenced by Voltaire’s opinion! For Galileo recanted; Descartes “believed as a Christian and doubted as a philosopher”; whilst even the great Spinoza, the most devastating of all philosophic critics, the anthropomorphic god of theology, attacked theology obliquely rather than directly, using, apparently deliberately for this purpose, a scholastic terminology which made much play with the term, “God”: a discretion imitated by his great English contemporary, Thomas Hobbes.

The glory of having made the first open, undisguised, and absolutely devastating attack on Christianity from an avowed atheistic standpoint, was made from inside the Catholic priesthood by an obscure French cleric of humble origin, Jean Meslier, whose life bridged the era between Spinoza, the greatest philosopher, and Voltaire, the greatest populariser of the scientific outlook. Jean Meslier, thanks partly to his possession of a finished literary style—according to Voltaire, he “wrote like a carthorse”—and, probably still more, to the fact that he combined his atheism with revolutionary social and political views that were far in advance of his age, has attracted but little attention even from liberally minded historians. But as in the case of his similarly neglected 17th century English predecessor, the “Digger,” Gerard Winstanley, whom recent research has rescued from an identical oblivion, we must recognise in this obscure clerical forerunner and earliest prophet of the French Revolution, one of the most daring, profound, and far-seeing thinkers whom the modern age has known. Undoubtedly one of the two most important events that have ever happened in the

history of atheism since its original promulgation by the Ancient Greeks, have been the French and Russian Revolutions, which raised atheism from the isolated status of a persecuted sect to the level of a world-creed. The Abbé Jean Meslier, who, two generations before 1789 first predicted explicitly the French Revolution, and also propounded the atheistic-communistic creed which precipitated the Russian Revolution (1917) two centuries before it transpired, can hardly be regarded as other than a prophet—and a major one at that! Whilst his attack on Christianity was as far superior in depth and erudition to that of Voltaire, as it fell short of the celebrated satirist in wit, liveliness, and, in general, in the arts and graces of literary style.

First, especially, in view of his undeserved obscurity, a word will not be amiss on the history of the life and writings of this extraordinary man. Jean Meslier (or Mellier) was the son of a silk worker and was born in June, 1664. In 1688 he became a priest. From then until his death in 1729 he was curé (vicar) of the villages of Entrepigny and But in the Ardennes. His life was the uneventful life of a country priest, but was broken by a single courageous episode, when the rustic cleric boldly denounced an act of injustice perpetrated against one of his parishioners by a local feudal squire, who was supported by the Archbishop of Rheims, Meslier's ecclesiastical superior, whom Meslier also defied. Apart from which dramatic defiance of Church and State, he did not give any open sign of unbelief until, nearly blind, he was on his death-bed, when he publicly repudiated all belief in Christianity. He died, after thus causing a considerable final scandal, at some unknown date between May 7, 1729, the date of his last known signature, and August 27, the date of his successor's inauguration as parish priest.

Jean Meslier left behind a huge "Testament," which his biographer has described as "one of the most violent and vicious attacks upon religion that has ever been written." The history of this "Testament" is even more extraordinary than that of the clerical atheist who was its author. Some years before the precise date is uncertain—a copy of this magisterial work fell into the hands of Voltaire, and the sequel surely does credit to the great writer. For he made an "Extract" from the "Testament" for his own use; and it was from this source, says a modern French biographer of Meslier, that the Sage of France "drew the greater part of his arguments against the Bible and the Gospels." But Voltaire never published the original "Testament," probably because of the socialist, atheist, and republican views of Meslier, which belong to the 19th rather than to the 18th century, and which were far to the "Left" of Voltaire, who was a Deist, and who believed in a constitutional monarchy on the English model of the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. Hence Voltaire suppressed the atheistic and republican portions of the "Testament." There are "rationalist" superstitions as well as religious ones and the omniscience of Voltaire is one of them. In actual fact, Voltaire, whilst probably the greatest populariser of critical ideas that the world has ever known, was not a very profound thinker, and his ideas were largely second-hand.

To return to the literary fortunes of the "Testament." It did not see light, apart from extracts, until 1864, when an obscure group of Dutch freethinkers published the complete work—three volumes of 350 pages each—edited by Rudolf Charles. At long last the world can now read the first great anti-religious and public work in modern European literature without the aid of intermediaries.

And now a word on the "Testament" itself, which its author stated that he dare not publish in his life-time. It represents 250 pages of passionate, relentless, and ceaseless attack, not only on Christianity, but upon the whole feudal-clerical order of Church and State. As Meslier's biographer has remarked: "The 'Testament' was in point of time the first complete, unflinching attack in France against Christianity."

"From my earliest youth I have observed the crimes and stupidities which have caused the most terrible evils on the earth. . . . I have understood the blindness and stupidity of men. . . . The absurdity of their superstitions and the injustice of their government. I have seen impiety enthroned in high places and justice corrupted to the basest ends. I have seen, and I still see every day an innumerable number of innocent unfortunates persecuted without reason and oppressed without justice, without anyone caring a rap for their misfortunes, and without any generous protector coming forward to assist them." (My translation throughout.—F. A. R.)

An apt enough description of the France of feudal privilege: of "the high justice, the middle and the low" (i.e., the legal right of the feudal seigneurs to kill, imprison, fine). And the terrible indictment continues: in the evil designs of ambitious men is to be found the origin of all human woe. Religion, with its vain and ridiculous ceremonies, is a trap to catch the unwary. The titles of lord, prince, and king, are calculated subterfuges to induce men to regard them as of divine authority. Throne and Altar are merely two sides of the same unholy alliance of oppression and superstition. Who seeks to deal with one must simultaneously deal with the other.

"The ministers of religion, princes, and the other highly-placed persons are the greatest robbers and murderers that there are anywhere on earth." Whilst, as for Christianity, "it is no less absurd and superstitious than is any other creed." With elaborate detail Meslier traces the ceremonies of Catholicism from Paganism; and, two generations before Thomas Paine's "Age of Reason," he subjected both the biblical narratives and the gospel miracles to a ruthless and detailed criticism which left not a shred of credibility in the "sacred" narrative.

But the Church cannot be separated from the feudal State. As they stand together, so they must fall together: "All the princes and nobles deserve to be strangled with the entrails of the priests." In the era of the Jacobin Club this was to become the famous declaration that the world would never know true happiness until "the last King had been strangled with the entrails of the last priest"! And the prophet of the French Revolution concludes with this passionate outburst: "Where are those generous murderers of tyrants whom the past centuries have known? Where are Brutus and Cassius? . . . Why do not these generous slayers of tyrants stab and slay all these detestable monsters and enemies of the human race, to achieve deliverance for the people from their tyrants?" And in a burst of prophetic passion, he addresses the down-trodden people of France: "You alone can save yourselves, your deliverance is in your own hands, if only you know what to do; unite, then, people of France, if you are wise; unite if you have the courage, in order to free yourselves from your common misery. Let all who hold such opinions unite to deliver themselves from the hateful and despicable yoke of the present tyrannical oppression of the kings and lords, as well as of the futile superstitious practices of their false religions."

The French "sansculottes" gave him his answer in 1789. They took him at his word!

Such, in brief and inadequate outline, was the extraordinary book of an extraordinary man. That its message passed unheeded in the generation of the contemptible Louis 15th and Madame de Pompadour is scarcely surprising. The old régime had still seventy years to go. Jean Meslier wrote in the 18th century when only the bourgeoisie was the revolutionary class in Church and State. And it was not until the present, 20th century, that the masses arrive upon the stage of history. He was too far in advance of his own age to be understood by it! He was the "John the Baptist," the prophet of the modern revolutionary era. A more exact biblical analogy: Jean Meslier was the atheistic and republican "Moses," who saw from afar the Promised Land of Social Democracy and Secularism which an unkind Fate forbade him to enter.

F. A. RIDLEY.

## ACID DROPS

There are many different kinds of lies. There is the lie by suggestion, the lie by expression, the lie by suppressing the truth, the lie by exaggeration, the lie direct, the lie of brutality, the lie by kindness, the political lie, and so forth. The man who says he has not used any of these kinds of lies is the biggest liar of them all and he should become a good Prime Minister or an Archbishop.

But there is one kind of lie that now deserves close attention. It deserves it more to-day than it ever did. That is the lie religious. This takes many forms from the gutter to the palace, from being little to those who are great. But the lie we have specially in mind is that connected with a legal marriage in a Church. Once upon a time, the only legal marriage in England was by the Church. Later this monopoly in England led to such evil consequences that marriage by the State was compulsory if they wished to share the protection of the State.

So far so good. But the blunder was made of permitting parsons to serve as servants of the State. But in all cases where marriage was to be the State authority, not the religious one, had to take the matter in hand. More than that the marriage conducted in a Church, for the purpose of the marriage, the religious idea was set aside and the Secular power took charge. By licence the clergyman might officiate by permission and authority as a servant of the Secular State.

But that blunder was a bad one. It led many to regard the parson as an authority, when as a fact, he for the time being was brushed out of existence. So we may sum up the position thus. A marriage may take place in a Church, but not because it is a Church. The parson may function, but not as a parson. He is just a man doing a Secular job. The priest tries to keep the facts covered, but a lie more or less does not disturb the servants of God. They do not tell the people that in England there is no religious marriage.

But with that setting aside the law when the church is concerned is not unusual. There is another case. A man and his wife agree that they shall separate, or the Secular law allows a separation, or declares the marriage no longer valid, and one of the parties, or both, marry again. That is the law; but some of the priests take another stand, as does the Bishop of St. Albans. He says:—

"I will not give my permission for the marriage of a divorced person to be performed in my Church while the divorced partner is still alive; nor do I sanction any blessing of a marriage performed in the Registrar Office. I know that there are people who think this is a very hard rule to observe without exception. But we have our back to the wall, fighting to maintain the sanctity of a Christian marriage."

Now there is a plain statement from a priest who says that he will take a licence giving him the right to register a marriage, who also has to get a licence from a Secular State for the building, and then adds lie upon lie by saying that in certain circumstances he will deny the law. It is a crying scandal. Will some M.P. have the moral courage to raise the matter in Parliament? We have our doubts.

The Rev. F. C. Baker, Chaplain to the Lord Mayor of London, says that England is worse than pagan, for pagans had gods of "some kind." That is a true Christian touch. No matter what lie is being said, so long as it brings something in favour of God and his worshippers. Poor Br. Baker, he is the stuff that real Christians are made of. Yet, if there is a God, he will be constantly asking his angels to protect him from his friends.

There has been in Ealing a Church Week designed to bring the backslider into the fold again, and if possible add a few real "converts." Naturally, Bishops, Deans, Canons, and the more

humble parsons, did their best, and, of course, we were told by the Dean of Westminster, as if it were an unusual discovery, that "the supreme issue before the world to-day was between Christianity and a God-less materialism." Now, surely that should be God's concern; for if the godly see that God fails to see any good resulting from praising the Deity for something that never comes, they will wonder what is the use of praying. Once upon a time, the angels and saints used to do a lot of things. Now they hardly appear. God should reflect that people pray for something, they sing for something, they believe in God because it brings something. Of all the people in the world they have the keenest eye and nose for something in the shape of gifts. If God would continue he must do something.

The papers are beginning to take notice of one who may well be called "One of England's greatest sons." Many notices have been given in the press, and more will be coming. Meanwhile here is something from the "Daily Telegraph" for May 20.

"Five remarkable letters which Gen. Sir Henry Jackson sent to Sotheby's for sale yesterday were a reminder that Thomas Paine, author of "The Rights of Man," was a mechanical inventor of ability. These letters fetched £250 (Driscoll).

They were addressed to the contractor who backed Paine's idea for an iron bridge at Leasing, near Paddington Green, to prove that this material could be employed for bridging. After 'Paine's Bridge' had been set up temporarily at Paddington in 1790 one of his chief backers failed and Paine was arrested for debt.

The iron was used in 1796 for a bridge over the Wear at Sunderland. In one of the letters Paine could not refrain from expressing his strong political views. He wrote: "As to William Pitt, I think he has got himself and the nation into a wobble. He appears to me to be a very ignorant man about everything of foreign politics."

At a recent meeting of the Christian Evidence Society the Bishop of Chelmsford said: "There was room for a complete review of methods of teaching the faith both in matter and manner." We have been saying for many years the same thing. In fact there never was a time when Christianity was not being completely reviewed in the hope of understanding what it meant. The earliest glimpse of Christianity is a row as to what it meant. It is there in the New Testament, and it has continued ever since. It is just about a century since an outstanding Bishop was tried in an Ecclesiastical Court charged with a false interpretation of parts of the Bible. To-day Christian leaders can say almost what they choose, and nothing but an open declaration of Atheism will get them into serious trouble. The cry of numbers of the parsonage is: "You can believe what you please, you can say what you please, only you must believe it religion and come to church occasionally."

After eight years large numbers of pilgrims are going to Lourdes. This in itself would cause no comment from us but unfortunately, numbers of incurables, the blind and the lame, some injured in the blitz, are turning hopefully to the shrine, and if they come back still not cured, their misery will be unbearable. In the early days of Lourdes, miracles were performed to the dozen, for, of course, there was no check on any statement or case. Nowadays, to save their face, even Catholic doctors have to put up some semblance of careful observation.

Once again, we are told what is the greatest danger to our days, to the Church. Not, we are confidently assured, "the worshippers at the shrine of Stalin" but "those who induce spiritual anaemia." It is they "who sap the red blood of your faith," declared Fr. Garvin the other week at a gathering of 1,200 men. He poured scorn on the "vast masses of sheep who blindly follow the State—a graceful way of taking attention off the Roman Catholic sheep who blindly follow the Pope—woe betide them if they don't."

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## THE N.S.S. CONFERENCE

THE conditions under which "The Freethinker" is printed added to the Whitsun holiday make it impossible to give more than a few words concerning the Annual Conference. It will be pleasant news to all that the Conference ended satisfactorily. Fuller particulars will be given in the next issue of "The Freethinker," for the present I desire in the name of all the members to thank Mr. Brighton and his loyal colleagues in providing a warm reception to all who were present. The refreshments provided were good and plentiful, flowers were not forgotten, and there was a fine programme of both music and song. Knowing the North as we do, we were not surprised it was a good example of what a reception should be.

The Sunday evening Public Meeting was also a marked success, the large Cinema was comfortably filled both upstairs and down, the cheers were frequent, the attention was perfect, and there was a good sale of literature; the speeches also were witty without clowning, and profound without being dull. As for ourselves, we have spent so many pleasant years with the "natives" we felt something like a traveller who had just come home after a lengthy absence; we have promised to give them another visit before the year is out.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

## SUGAR PLUMS

That relic of all that is stupid and outworn—"The Lord's Day Observance Society" is still whining and growling because people are not all that the secretary would have them be. His general complaint is that people will insist on enjoying themselves on Sunday. No one is interfering with him, he can be as miserable as he pleases, and we are sure that people far from interfering him would be pleased to know that he has resolved to shut himself up every Saturday evening and remain there until Monday morning. It seems that he cannot be happy unless a number of people are miserable. He is now worrying about the B.B.C. and is agitating a number of Members of Parliament to see what can be done to prevent the B.B.C. making people miserable on Sunday. We agree that the B.B.C.'s humour is rather miserable, but if people find pleasure in it—why try to prevent them?

There has been a very bad riot of nearly a thousand prisoners at a Kansas (U.S.A.) Prison. Some have been killed, some wounded. The cause is a very grave one, the prisoners object to eating with coloured men. After all, Christian sensitiveness should be observed.

## SOME NOTES ON CHRONOLOGY

A FEW months ago, a correspondent to this journal wanted to know how we got our present "Anno Domini," and, of course, the answer was soon forthcoming. It was a monk of the sixth century, Dionysius Exiguus who, in A.D. 532, fixed the present Christian era, giving the date of the birth of Jesus as the year 1; and during the course of centuries his dating was accepted by all civilised peoples. Outside the few scholars who have made chronology a special study, few of us, I take it, ever trouble our heads about Dionysius and his dating—we accept it without question just as we accept football or cricket.

My own scepticism, however, gives me a nasty jolt every now and then, and though I always run the risk of being called a crank—not that I mind—I decided to waste a few idle moments trying to find out who was this Dionysius, and who tells us all about him. What I wanted was *evidence*, and I soon discovered that most of our history books and encyclopedias simply copied from each other. This is quite understandable. It is always so much easier to accept without question, it saves a lot of trouble, and it does not single you out as somehow "different" from your fellows. Just follow the stream—or is it the sheep?—and you won't ruffle anybody, and be recognised as a good boy and quite safe. In these questions of history, the *enfant terrible* is always a darned nuisance.

I do not, of course, pretend for a moment that I have traced the source of the statement that it was Dionysius who "invented" the Christian era, for I believe nobody knows; but as far as I have gone, I have been unable to get any evidence who it was that put the story first into circulation. We are given to understand that Dionysius was a Scythian monk and an abbot of Rome, on the authority of the Benedictines, but how they got the story appears very difficult to find out.

That such a monk or abbot could have lived, and that he did his best to fix a date for the "Incarnation" as it is called, is quite natural; but it is rather strange that we know so little of the circumstances considering how important it was. The date of the "Nativity" had already been given by Irenaeus and Tertullian as the 41st year of Augustus—about 3 B.C. It must have been about that if the story is true (I don't believe a word of it), because Jesus is supposed to have been born before the death of Herod; and this is even admitted by the Catholic Encyclopedia which actually points out that Dionysius "cannot be correct." It is difficult to see how the date given by the Church Fathers could have been thrown over for one which was demonstrably false. At all events, almost all the "biographers" of Jesus now date his birth as 4 B.C. or earlier.

The reader should look at the date on which Dionysius is said to have "invented" the Christian era. It is 532 and if he is interested in the "science" of Numerology he may find it rather curious.

At the back of all systems of chronology must be astronomy, and it need hardly be pointed out that what are called lunar and solar cycles have been in use by many nations. The lunar cycle extends over 19 years, while the solar cycle is of 28 years. If you multiply these two figures you get 532 which may or may not be a coincidence. Moreover, if you add up the figures 5—3—2 you get 10, and if you add up these you get 1—and I have an idea that that is the way it was done. We got the date A.D. 1 for the birth of Christ in this very simple and disingenuous way.

As to whether there ever was a Dionysius—all I can say is that quite a number of authorities I have consulted either copy what someone else says or just say nothing about him. I could find no reference to him in Gibbon, for example.

And this leads me to another point. When I was a boy at school, I just accepted our English history. The idea of questioning any statement whatever would have horrified me. I was ready to accept the actual existence of Amias Leigh in "Westward Ho!" and even of Oliver Twist. But the older I

become, the more I feel how utterly impossible is some of our English "history," particularly when I find statements and events reported one day in our contemporary newspapers as being quite authentic utterly repudiated the next day as being quite untrue. Take the Introduction to the Everyman edition of Green's "Short History of the English People." The writer says, "History has often suffered at the hands of its professed exponents. In a measure, it has been almost falsified." And, after rightly extolling Green, he goes on to add, "Critical scholars may find assertions [in Green's "History"] not verified by the available data . . ." Now if this is true—and it is—where exactly do we stand?

I hunted up what Green had to say on one of the most famous authorities of our early English history—Matthew Paris. He waxes very enthusiastic about him, as thus:—

"Matthew Paris is the greatest, as he is in reality the last, of our monastic historians. . . . In Matthew the breadth and precision of the narrative, the copiousness of his information on topics whether national or European, the general fairness and justice of his comments, are only surpassed by the patriotic fire and enthusiasm of the whole. . . ." And so on.

Now it happens that I have the very detailed and excellent "Comprehensive History of England" (based on that of Charles Knight) published in 1865, an extremely valuable work, and it has something to say about Matthew Paris. It more or less agrees with Green's eulogy, but admits that some people "have endeavoured to prove that no such writer as Matthew Paris ever existed, and that the work which goes under his name is nothing more than an historical romance and the forgery of a later period." That is to say, a good deal of early English history, based on Matthew Paris, and repeated in one school book after another, and in our encyclopedias, and relied upon by such a great historian as John Richard Green may be a tissue of monkish lies. I should add that Paris is mentioned by John Leland, who is said to have made a six years' literary tour of England (from 1533 to 1539) but is not referred to by his rival, Polydore Vergil, who is also one of the "authorities" on English history.

In the Everyman edition of Green are given valuable lists of authorities, and the curious reader will also find in the notes appended by his editor some very interesting comments. Let me give some of them. Commenting on the famous poem of "Piers Ploughman" is, "It has been contended since Green wrote, that the poem of Piers Ploughman was not the work of a single individual, and that Longland or Langland (the reputed author) never existed." For the Hundred Years' War (1336-1431) in England, "The most famous authority is, of course, Froissart. . . . As a history his writings are of no particular value." Of the Conquest of Scotland (1290-1305), we are told, "There is no contemporary Scottish account of this period; the earliest of the later accounts is the Bruce of Barbour. The Jingle of Blind Harry is of no historical value." Of the House of Lancaster (1399-1422): "The chronicles of this period of English history become increasingly defective." Of the Wars of the Roses (1450-1471): "The original authorities are scanty in the extreme. . . . Social life is well illustrated in the Paston Letters but they are of little value for public events." Of the "historian," Geoffrey of Monmouth, Green says: "Myth, legend, tradition, the classical pedantry of the day, the Welsh dreams of future triumph over the Saxon, the memories of the Crusades . . . were mingled together by this daring fabulist." For those who believe in Magna Charter, "The Myth of Magna Carta" by Jenks in the "Independent Review," March, 1904, is recommended—and so it goes on.

Myth, legend, fables, these are the cries of standard historians when they go back to authorities for "history." And remember, their history is *secular*, not religious. They are not giving us the lives and miracles of gods. Yet day after day, in thousands

of pulpits, and from the B.B.C., as well as from countless books and journals, miracles are appealed to as proof of something inherently impossible. And people can be found to believe them. It seems incredible.

H. CUTNER

## A CURIOUS AMERICAN PROBLEM

AS the years pass, and especially when a man enters the seventh decade of his life, ardent controversial feelings tend to get less and ever less, and a more balanced and impartial spirit replaces them. The present writer published much, in the past, of a strong (but, it is hoped, fair) type on polemical matters, so it is perhaps well to say definitely that the present article is not of that nature. It is meant to consider dispassionately, and with an eye to mere objective realities, a somewhat remarkable problem existing in the United States of America but also of general world significance.

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest and, in some respects, the most powerful religious body in the U.S.A. It has a numerous hierarchy of archbishops and bishops, thousands of clergy, monks, nuns, and other "religious orders, stately cathedrals and other churches, numerous schools (including universities), and exerts much political and social power. The rising strength of the South American republics—which are all of Catholic culture—with which it has close affiliations, adds to its potency.

The question then arises: What of the relations of this powerful Church to the radically democratic political ideology of the United States? Can they be reconciled, or must a conflict eventually arise? In the widely-circulated New York Journal monthly, *America*, an article appeared recently (and was reprinted in the *Catholic Digest*—Minnesota, Dublin and Belgium—January, 1947) by John Courtney Murray, S.J., which, under the title "Separation of Church and State," endeavoured to solve this question.

Father Murray frankly admitted that the problem really does have serious implications. Of the "formula" (as he calls it) "separation of church and state," he says: "The confused polemic can, of course, make use of [it] to great effect: 'Catholics support separation of church and state in the U.S.; they oppose it in Spain. You see, then, what unscrupulous power-politicians they are; they act solely on immoral grounds of expediency'."

This put the matter strongly: yet perhaps not strongly enough. We have to consider not merely the real or apparent contrast between the Catholic attitudes in the U.S. and Spain, but also the whole history and canon law of Catholicism in relation to "church and state."

From the days of the old Roman emperor Constantine until now, the Roman Church has always regarded it as a duty of the state, if organised as that Church's ideal inculcates, to support Catholicism and repress heresy. The mediæval canon law was full of enactments to that effect, and whenever and wherever the Roman Church has had or has power that policy has been enforced. In mediæval times heresy was a capital offence and after conviction by a church tribunal, heretics were handed over to the "secular arm" for execution. Civil magistrates refused to carry out the verdicts of the Church in cases of ex-communication. Kings were solemnly crowned by the pope and were expected to uphold the Church and repress its adversaries. In short, the view of the Roman Church was that the State, far from being separate from the Church in any sense compatible with modern liberal ideas, ought to be the ally and defender of the faith. Have modern developments altered that view?

Since the pontificate of Pope Gregory XVI, and his anti-liberalistic Encyclical *Mirari Nos*, about a hundred years ago

the Popes have issued numerous Encyclical Letters on a multitude of subjects, and have not neglected this problem of Church and State. In his long reign (1875-1903), Leo XIII dealt with it in detail, and his declarations have been confirmed by his successors. Encyclicals are not, as such, necessarily included under the terms of "Papal infallibility"—but they express the Church's mind, and are to be received as authoritative. To what, then, does their doctrine, on the subject in which here we are interested, come?

It may be found set forth especially in the Encyclicals *Immortale Dei*, *Arcanum Divine*, *Rerum Novarum*, *Libertas Præstantissimum*, and others of Leo XIII, and can be summarised thus: The Church and the State are independent, each in its own sphere, but with the proviso that State laws agree with those of the Church, and that the State shall defer to the Church in matters of common concern; that the State has a duty to uphold "that religion which alone is true"; that toleration, by the State, of cults opposed to Catholicism is an evil to be acquiesced in only for reasons of expediency and "until happier times"; that unrestricted freedom of Press and propaganda is "unnecessary"—for error cannot have the same rights as truth; that State laws opposed to those of the Church are not binding morally, and it may be a duty to resist them; that while democracy is "an allowable" form of government, it must uphold "the rights of the Church"; that the Church has divine right to control the education of children "in all branches"; and that the Church has a right not merely "to teach," but also "to punish, even by temporal penalties."

How, then, can this teaching (which, it must be realised, is not merely "medieval" but is the present-day Papal doctrine, and, so far as is possible, is enforced in States where Catholicism has power)—how can it be reconciled with radical democratic politics like that of the United States, where all creeds (or no-creeds) are equally free, and where separation of Church and State is taken as a fundamental constitutional principle?

Father Murray's reply is interesting and rather ingenious. He boldly asserts that Catholics "support" the U.S. principle, "not only in practice (as expedient for themselves) but in principle (as sound in itself)." How, we ask in surprise, can they do so in view of the Church's history and canon law? Father Murray's solution is on these lines: The American constitution forbids the enactment of any law establishing a religion or prohibiting the free exercise of any; by that enactment the constitution simply refrains from claiming a right "to play the theologian, and promulgate articles of faith"; in disclaiming such a right, it only disclaims what Catholicism itself denies to the State; therefore, it does not conflict with the Church's doctrine, but, on the contrary, is perfectly sound in a country of mixed beliefs.

Catholics, says Father Murray, "have, it is true, their own theology of religious liberty; so have Protestants. But neither the Catholic nor the Protestant theology is written into the U.S. constitution."

This seems to disclose the weakness of his thesis: for, according to Roman canon law, in a State constituted as that law requires, the Catholic conception ought to be so "written," and its absence is a defect, to be remedied "in better times." It would seem, then, that the Catholic and United States' conceptions remain at variance, and that American Catholics can accept the latter, not as "sound in itself," but only for reasons of practical expediency while it is impossible to alter it.

It may be that, with its patient, age-long power of adaptation, Catholic theology may find a way to meet these problems. As things are, however, there seems a direct ideological contrariety between Catholicism and modern democratic principle. Not only in America but in many other countries also, developments must be imminent and important.

J. W. POYNTER.

## PRACTICAL POLITICS

A nation that gets into trouble,  
Caused by the snow and the rains;  
To clear up the mess and the rubble  
Must utilise He-men with brains.

What is the use of the praying  
Which vanishes into thin air;  
Reminds one of asses when braying,  
And therefore it gets us nowhere.

What we require then is Action  
And not so much trust in the Gods;  
The workers must have satisfaction,  
But—don't let them go to the "dogs."

I don't mean entire Prohibition,  
For that would be asking in vain;  
Let facts supersede Superstition,  
And then we'll get going again.

Don't think that I'm a Dictator,  
I am only stating the facts,  
And, hoping to see you later  
When you won't find me giving out tracts.

E. W. JAMES.

## OBITUARY

### CHARLES ATKINSON HAY

We deeply regret to record the death of Charles Atkinson Hay in his 78th year. A long life well spent, in which Freethought principles prevailed, came to a sudden end by a peaceful falling into the last sleep. Our sympathy is with the surviving members of the family in their loss, their consolation is that he suffered no illness or pain, and nature gave no warning of the end. A large party of relatives and friends assembled at the Golders Green Crematorium on May 22, where a Secular Service was conducted by the General Secretary, N.S.S. R. H. R.

## SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

### LONDON—OUTDOOR

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead).—Sunday, 12 noon, Mr. L. EBURY; (Highbury Corner) Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. L. EBURY.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Marble Arch, Hyde Park).—Sunday, 3 p.m., MESSRS. E. SAPHIN, F. PAGE, JAMES HART.

### LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Sixty Years of International Language," Professor J. C. FLUGEL, M.A. LL.D.

### COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Kingston-on-Thames Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. J. BARKER.

Merseyside Branch N.S.S. (Blitzed site, Ranelagh Street, Liverpool).—Sunday, 7 p.m., a lecture.

Lonely? Join Friendship Circle. Details 6d. Secretary, 34, Honeywell Road, London, S.W. 11.

## PIETY IN PRISON—WHY?

A FEW interesting complications are aroused by a sentence in Mr. Bertram Calcutt's article "Piety in Prison" ("The Freethinker," April 27, 1947). "It may be safely stated," he assures us, "that delinquency is highest amongst people who are the most exposed to intensive religious training." Before considering this statement it is essential that we know the opinion held by the majority of criminal psychologists.

It is agreed that every crime results from the combination of two or more factors of which environment and the predisposition of the individual involved are the chief. That is to say that a person with certain genes placed in a certain environment will be a delinquent while a person with different genes placed in the same environment will remain innocent. In all crimes both of the above factors play a part, but in each crime one of these factors predominates over the other.

Now bearing this in mind we can consider Mr. Calcutt's bold statement. First, if religion is an accomplice to crime what is the reason, and why should a higher percentage of Roman Catholics be involved than any other body?

Mr. Calcutt thinks it probable that the Roman Catholic teaching of a vile world and a sugar-and-spice paradise is the cause but we can dismiss this in view of other theories.

In the statistics provided by Mr. Calcutt showing the religions of people in N.S.W. prisons I noted that while there was a total of 1,598 male recidivists there were only 86 female prisoners. The Roman Catholic figures are, male 527, female 33; and every religion shows a larger number of male criminals over females. This difference can be accounted for by the diversity in temperament between male and female, the former being aggressive and adventurous, the latter being generally more passive. Now it is one of the idiosyncrasies of human nature that when a person is told not to do a certain thing he promptly does it unless some practical reason is given why he should not do it.

Applying this to a Roman Catholic child who is told that he must not steal because God will be annoyed and send the devil to him it becomes obvious that when the child grows to adolescence and no new mature reason is given him against stealing that he promptly steals. If he is caught he is hauled before a court, made to feel degraded and inferior, finally, perhaps, sent to prison for a year; after which he is thrown upon society ignorant of modern affairs, without a job and very little hope of getting one. He therefore steals again. If he is not caught he keeps on stealing until he is, and the disastrous chain of events again takes place. So the childish and crude reasons given to children as maxims of good conduct may lead, as I have shown, to criminality. The modern child when it reaches adolescence is gaining a materialistic and secular outlook and the humbug it was told as a child just will not hold water. The young person, therefore, steals as an adventure to find out exactly what will happen. If it is not caught stealing may become a habit and hey presto we have a delinquent on our hands.

A question might be asked here that when a child reaches adolescence it is old enough to form ideas of its own. I agree, but perhaps this is accounted for by the statistics formed by criminal psychologists in which it is found that the percentage of feeble-mindedness among delinquents is much higher than among the normal population. Such people are incapable of forming new ideas when the old ones are shown to be obsolete.

A very simple and obvious theory for a high percentage of criminality among Roman Catholics is this. A person can commit a crime and then for the payment of a fee have his sin washed away by the priest. This is obviously an incentive to crime if not a crime in itself.

Finally a personal view. I suggest that crime is merely accentuated by religion and not in any way caused by it. The

predisposition of the individual still plays a major part. For example, a certain Roman Catholic in a certain environment would steal; another Roman Catholic in the same environment would not steal although both have received the same religious training. To abolish the Church, although a beneficial act, would not affect delinquency to any great degree. Morals are not formed by the Church but by society itself. Holyoak believed this and so do I, but I believe also that the morals of society are, even today, influenced by the Church through the parents to the child and these first impressions are the most important in the child's life. They must, therefore, be true and frank and secular. We are passing through a phase in the evolution of Man, a phase from religion to secular thought. As the Bible says, "it is good," provided we adopt the humanitarian aspect mixed with a bit of good psychological sense. Give the people practical reasons why they must not steal and they won't steal.

Vindictive and retributory measures will never obliterate crime to any large degree. We must apply psychological and humane treatment. Dr. Healy, the founder of the Child Guidance Centres, has given us a start. In these centres the delinquent and any child who shows anti-social tendencies is treated. But such centres can only do a little. What is needed is a change of view of society. Society is demanding a change of view. The old ideas will not wash and society is gradually forming a new code, an unwritten code, of morals.

One final note. Let it be understood I have considered in this article only one reason for delinquency. There are many more ways in which an individual can become a delinquent. My intention was but to give to Mr. Calcutt a reason why more Roman Catholics flocked N.S.W. prisons than any other religion. Personally, however, as I have stated previously, I do not think religious instruction affects delinquency to any large extent. Man follows the morals of society guided by his own predisposition. The Church would have us believe that its effect upon society is a benevolent one. I submit that in modern times it has very little effect at all.

K. EASTAUGH.

### A WICKED PRIEST

In 1666 the Vicar of Alderminster was charged with a great variety of misdeeds, from desecrating church ornaments and utensils by turning them to domestic purposes, to hunting, smoking, frequenting ale-houses and playing games on Sunday. But the head and front of his offence was that he "boasted of his friendship with Oliver Cromwell."—From "Old Warwickshire Churches" by W. HOBART BIRD, F.R.S.A.

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