

# THE FREETHINKER

Founded 1881

Editor: CHAPMAN COHEN

Vol. LXVII.—No. 31

[REGISTERED AT THE GENERAL  
POST OFFICE AS A NEWSPAPER]

Price Threepence

## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

(Continued from p. 266)

### Roger Bacon and the Awakening of Europe

BACON'S first term of imprisonment endured until 1267—a period of ten years. During his confinement the malice of his enemies indirectly led to the writing of the books by virtue of which he still lives. Reports having reached the ears of Pope Urban IV. concerning the heretical nature of Bacon's work and writings, one of his chaplains, Gui Fulcodi, afterwards Clement IV., was commissioned to inquire into the matter. Whether Fulcodi was favourable to the poor imprisoned scholar is uncertain. Several writers are of that opinion, but Professor Adamson dismisses such an opinion as a "pure conjecture." Whatever be the true motive of Clement's interference, it is certain that, immediately after his election as Pope, he commanded Bacon to supply him with a "fair copy" of all his writings. The making of such an order was easier than its execution. The materials required would cost about £60. The Pope presented nothing, and Bacon was penniless. From people in his position he could get nothing. The Franciscans were too powerful to be crossed. "How often," he laments, "was I looked upon as a shameless beggar! How often was I repulsed! Distressed above all that can be imagined, I compelled my friends, even those who were in necessary circumstances, to contribute what they had, to raise money at interest, to sell much of their property, to pawn their land." It was by such struggles as these that Bacon was able to comply with the Pope's demand, and in the extraordinary short time of eighteen months he wrote three treatises, the *Opus Majus*, *Opus Minus*, and *Opus Tertium*, which mark him as the first Englishman to point the proper course for a scientific study of nature. These three essays are, as Green says, wonderful alike in plan and detail. With many of the scientific idiosyncrasies of his age Bacon had not quite parted company. He accepts alchemy and astrology, and even appears to have speculated on the discovery of the Philosopher's Stone and the elixir of life. But in nearly all other respects he belongs to the seventeenth century rather than to the thirteenth. At a time when the introduction of mathematics into physics was being protested against by Albertus Magnus, the "Ape of Aristotle," Bacon wrote: "Physic ought to know that their science is powerless unless they apply to it the power of mathematics, without which observation languishes and is incapable of certitude." And, again, he complains that the neglect of this instrument of research has paralysed all efforts: "For he who knows not mathematics cannot know any other science; and, what is more, he cannot discover his own ignorance, or find its proper remedies." While Thomas Aquinas and his school were spinning metaphysical subtleties,

and discussing questions that fully realised the child's definition of a parable as "A heavenly story with no earthly meaning," Bacon was striving to introduce a new method into philosophy, insisting upon the uselessness of speculation unless brought into line with experience, warning his contemporaries that "The shortness of life requires that we should choose for our study the most useful objects, and exhibit knowledge with all clearness and certitude." At a time when to question the authority of the Church meant imprisonment or death, he could declare that "Authority is valueless unless its warranty is shown; it does not explain, it only forces us to believe. And, as far as reason is concerned, we cannot distinguish between sophism and proof unless we verify the conclusion by experience and practice."

A theoretical musician, geometrician, and geographer, Bacon stumbled upon many truths, the full value of which was not seen till centuries later. Whether he discovered gunpowder as the result of his own researches, or simply gained a knowledge of its manufacture from the Mohammedans, is uncertain, but his writings show him to have been acquainted with it. He also describes a substance (phosphorus) that "glows in the dark like a full moon." He suggested the possibility of reaching the Indies by sailing to the west—a suggestion which reaches Columbus through the medium of a Spanish writer, Pedro de Alliaco. He suggested a reform of the calendar that was not carried out until 1582. If he did not construct a telescope, he at least laid down the lines on which one might be built, 200 years before Galileo. It is after having dealt with the laws of light, and corrected many of the erroneous opinions then current, that he finishes by saying: "It is easy to conclude from the rules established above that the largest things can appear very small and *vice versa*, for very distant objects can appear very near and *vice versa*, for we can cut glasses in such sort and dispose them in such a manner in relation to our sight and external objects that the rays are broken and refracted in the direction which we wish. So that we shall see an object near or remote under whatever angle we wish, and thus at the most incredible distance read the most minute letters or count the grains of sand. In this way we may also make the sun, the moon, and the stars descend by bringing their figures nearer the earth."

Bacon is never tired of pointing out that withal he is only at the beginning of the possibilities of science. "Nothing in human inventions is final and perfect," he says, quoting Seneca approvingly. "The most recent ages are always the most enlightened"; therefore, "Let not man boast or extol his knowledge. What he knows is little to what he takes on credit, less to that of which he is ignorant. He is mad who thinks highly of his wisdom; most mad who vaunts it as a wonder." Yet he predicts great things from the advance of scientific knowledge, and

looks forward to a time when "There shall be rowing without oars and sailing without sails; carriages which shall roll along with unimagined speed with no cattle to drag them; instruments to fly with, with which a man shall, by a spring, move artificial wings, beating the air like the wings of birds; a little mechanism three fingers long, which shall raise or lower enormous weights, a machine to enable a man to walk on the bottom of the sea and over the surface of waves without danger, and bridges over rivers which shall rest neither on piles nor columns." So dreams the imprisoned monk in his cell—a dream based upon the possession of much knowledge, much insight into the nature of things; a dream that after ages saw partly realised in fact.

A study of Roger Bacon irresistibly suggests his Elizabethan namesake, Francis Bacon; and the suggestion is accentuated by the close likeness of much of their writings, although the comparison is not always favourable to the later of the two. What Roger lacked in epigrammatic force he more than atoned for by the greater inventiveness of his mind and the greater originality of his genius. One can hardly imagine Roger Bacon in the place of Francis rejecting the Copernican astronomy, or looking with disfavour upon the use of instruments or mathematics in science. But in actual teaching the monk often antedates his namesake. Francis Bacon's "four species of idols which beset the human mind" are anticipated by Roger with four stumbling blocks to truth—the influence of authority, of custom, of undisciplined sense, and of the concealment of ignorance by a pretence of wisdom. Francis's epigram, "The old age is the youth of the world," is forestalled by Roger with, "No doubt the ancients are worthy of all respect and gratitude for having opened the way to us. But, after all, the ancients were men, and have often been mistaken; indeed, they have committed all the more errors just because they are ancients, for in matters of learning the youngest are really the oldest." A good lengthy list of parallelisms between the two has been compiled by Forster in his *Mohammedanism Unveiled*, where he charges Francis with having borrowed largely from his predecessor. Hallam says the resemblance between the two is "most remarkable"; and Lewes declares that, "had there been on external grounds the shadow of a probability, there would have been on internal grounds the strongest evidence of Francis Bacon's plagiarism." I think one may reasonably assume some connection between the two writers. Roger Bacon's works, although not printed, circulated in MS., and there is nothing new in one writer borrowing from another without confessing his obligation.

To return to the man. Whether Clement interfered to cut short Bacon's imprisonment is unknown, but he was released in 1267. For ten years Bacon managed to elude his enemies. But the Franciscans were good haters, and had long memories. In 1278 Jerome of Ascoli, General of the Order, held a chapter at Paris for the purpose of considering the various heresies that were troubling the Church. Bacon was cited to appear on the general charge of holding and teaching suspected doctrines. Once more he passed into a long imprisonment, the precise duration of which is unknown. He was at liberty fourteen years afterwards, 1292, and engaged in a great work, interrupted by death, and of which there remained only fragments. He died, most probably, in 1294, and was buried in the Grey Friars Church, Oxford.

The Church buried both the man and his writings. For centuries his writings were only known to a learned few in the form of manuscripts. To the mass of the people his name lingered on in popular legends as an old-time wonder-worker—half real, half mythical. It was not until nearly 450 years after his death that his *Opus Majus* was translated into English by Dr. Samuel Jebb; not for a hundred years later (1859) did the *Opus Minus* appear in an English dress.

In the whole history of Christianity there is nothing more disgraceful than its treatment of this thirteenth-century scholar. One-fourth of his life spent in prison, prohibited by his Order from writing under penalty of "many days' fasting on bread and water," his instruments seized, manuscripts destroyed—no man ever worked under more discouraging conditions than he. We can well understand his plaintive cry, that "It is on account of the ignorance of those with whom I have had to deal that I have not been able to accomplish more." After forty years of labour and self-sacrifice, beggared by his studies, Bacon found himself "unheard, forgotten, buried," and died with the trouble-laden lament, "I repent that I have given myself so much trouble for the good of mankind." The name of Roger Bacon should bring a blush to the face of every Christian, and serve as a new inspiration to the mind of every Freethinker.

One is led to think of what might have been—to dream of what the world might now have been like had the Church smoothed the way for the struggling thinker, instead of weighting his limbs with chains and clogging his mind with care. To what height of civilisation might the race have climbed had the centuries of energy expended in fighting an ignorant and tyrannical Church been devoted to the acquisition of light-spreading, life-giving knowledge! The Church pursued a different policy. It strove to crush knowledge with a stake; to check civilisation by the murder of those who aimed to promote its growth. Happily, it met with but partial success. It did crush many; it embittered the lives of many more. Withal, the tide of civilisation flowed on; knowledge grew "from more to more," and this wider, freer knowledge has enabled us to rescue the name of Roger Bacon from the neglect of centuries and the obloquy of the Church, and place it first on the lips of those who strove to bring about the dawn of a new day.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

## THE BIBLE IN THE SCHOOLS OF WALES

THE provision in the Education Act of 1944 for making religious instruction compulsory in the schools was not exactly popular in Wales. The middle-aged and the elderly people remembered the campaign (at last successful) for the Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church of England in Wales—some of them had taken part in that struggle. These felt distinctly uncomfortable when they were told: "You fought for Disestablishment in the name of religious freedom, and here you are now agreeing—to put it mildly—to the establishing of a system of religious compulsion so far as the school children are concerned."

Under the said Act it was necessary that an agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction should be adopted by Local Education Authorities. Such a Syllabus was prepared by the Literary Committee of the "Welsh Society of the Institute of Christian Education." The Chairman of the Editorial Board is Principal G. A. Edwards, of the United Theological College, Aberystwyth.

Principal Edwards wrote an "Introduction" (comprising 16 pages) to the Syllabus; and it is to that "Introduction" that I wish to draw attention. It is interesting as it seeks to show what should be the present views of the average minister and school-teacher about the Bible and its contents.

Referring to education as such, Dr. Edwards says that "we need to stress the fact that no true education can be merely secular, utilitarian, or materialist; it must be religious in the broad sense." Then he states: "There is a sense in which every subject in the school curriculum can be taught in this broadly religious way (e.g., Mathematics, Botany, Literature, History)," and then he adds, rather wistfully, and perhaps with a certain apprehension, "and there is also a sense in which even 'religious instruction' can be given in a most irreligious way." Here are Dr. Edwards' reasons for making religious instruction obligatory in schools: "And in a sentence we would add that instruction in Christianity is desirable in view of widespread ignorance about it and in view of the prevailing secularization of life and of the dangers of a civilisation divorced from moral and religious sanctions."

"Widespread ignorance about it." And that notwithstanding the efforts of the armies of priests and ministers who have been engaged for centuries in preaching "the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark xvi, 15).

As regards Biblical inspiration all that Dr. Edwards says is: "Of the real and abiding inspiration of the Bible there is not the slightest doubt, though it is unnecessary in this 'Introduction' to discuss it at length." Later in the same paragraph he states, "it is clear that not only is God's Word enshrined in a supreme degree in Holy Scripture but also that it is the authentic Word of God for men to-day and for all time."

To the word "enshrined"; he does not claim inerrancy for Holy Scripture," in fact he does not mention that term, for good and sufficient reasons, as some of the following quotations will show.

After remarking that the Bible has been "most carefully examined, defended, and attacked," Dr. Edwards declares: "In this connection we owe an incalculable debt to devout and accomplished scholars in our own and other lands who have devoted themselves to the study and elucidation of the literature, history and religion of the Bible. Their work is often referred to as Biblical Criticism, a most unfortunate term in many respects with its sinister suggestion that their delight is in the work of a destructive and iconoclastic nature. Nothing could be further from the truth, because their labour is that of men who value the Bible above all other books and who believe that it deserves the closest possible study and that it ought to be interpreted in the light of all available knowledge. It is true that from time to time extreme views have occasionally been put forward, but on further examination they have been shown to be untenable and accordingly they have been discarded. . . . It is, therefore, most important and desirable that some of the main assured results of this careful and reverent study of the Bible should be known to all teachers, and a few of them can be briefly mentioned at this point." What a typical specimen of special pleading the above quotation is! And note the careful wording of the last sentence: it is "important and desirable that some of the main assured results. . . should be known to all teachers," etc. The "Introduction" is, of course, intended, in the main, for the guidance of teachers.

Among the "assured results" of Biblical criticism, according to Dr. Edwards, are the following:—

(1) "One of the most certain conclusions in this field is that Biblical literature has developed naturally from very simple forms at the start to more elaborate and complete ones later on. In a word, it developed in exactly the same way as the literature of Greece and Rome did before the time of Christ and the literature of England and Wales at a later period. First of all in the Old Testament we have folk-lore and traditions which existed for centuries orally before they were committed

to writing: then a beginning is made with the writing of history in the exact sense, in the form of brief chronicles and accounts of stirring events; and this is followed by fuller and more detailed records later on; and finally comes the maturer work of historians, legislators, prophets, poets and thinkers, evangelists, missionaries and theologians. Just as in English and Welsh literature, centuries had to elapse before the work of Chaucer and Shakespeare or that of Dafydd ap Gwilym and Ellis Wynne was possible, so many a century passed in Hebrew history before the Psalms or the Book of Job appeared."

(2) Dr. Edwards quotes, with approval, the following sentences from "The Old Testament and After," by C. G. Montefiore: "We are not to read into Old Testament utterances what is certainly not to be found in them, or even what is actually opposed or contrary to their meaning. Nor must we attempt to bring up all Old Testament teaching to the level of the highest and best. We must not try to make the Old Testament speak with a single voice, or ignore its inconsistencies, its varieties of grade, its gaps, its ragged edges." Then he adds the following sentence: "With the literature and message of the Scriptures, the great principle still holds good—first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the year." In a word, our old friend "Progressive Revelation" in a new guise.

(3) As to the books of the Bible, Dr. Edwards writes: "In some respects the most illuminating result of Biblical Criticism has been the discovery of the composite origin of many of the books of the Bible, and in most cases (especially is this true of the Old Testament) it is much more correct to speak of the compilers or editors than of the authors of particular books. In fact, most of the books of the Bible are really anonymous. . . . What the 'author' (who was really a compiler or editor) did was to bring these materials together and edit them so as to form one account rather than write an original book of his own." "Why," asks Dr. Edwards, "are there two accounts of the Creation or of the Flood in the book of Genesis, or two accounts of the conquest of Canaan in the books of Joshua and Judges, or of the establishment of the monarchy in the books of Samuel?" and he answers: "The explanation is perfectly simple and adequate. What has happened is that 'the author' of the book in the form in which we possess it has used different sources without fully reconciling them." The explanation may be "simple," but will the faithful consider it "adequate"? "Without fully reconciling them"! What a dexterous side-stepper!

(To be continued)

THOS. OWEN.

### CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

We do not know the domestic privacies of the ancient Pagans as we know those of the countries where Auricular Confession is practised, and therefore we cannot tell whether marriage was so brutally dishonoured among the Pagans as it is among the Christians. But at least it is probable that the infidels did not surpass in this respect many persons who believe all the doctrines of the Gospel. Those for whom the book of Sanchez\* is writ are such as go to Confession, and submit to the penances enjoined them by their confessors. They therefore believe what scripture teaches us of heaven and hell; they believe purgatory and the other doctrines of the Roman Communion, and yet you see them plunged into abominable impurities not fit to be named. I observe this against those who persuade themselves that the corruption of manners proceeds from men's doubting or being ignorant that there is another life after this.

Bayle's Historical and Critical Dictionary,

London, 1710.

\* *Art. Sanchez.* This man was a famous Jesuit who composed from facts disclosed in the Confessional, a lengthy work minutely describing abuses of the sexual instinct.

## ACID DROPS

We take it for granted that the speeches of the Princess Elizabeth are carefully examined before they reach the public. But in any case her advice that "the youth of Britain should become the leaders of the Church," was neither graceful nor praiseworthy. If and when she becomes Queen of England it would be well to remember that half the population of this country will not be Christians at all. But we suppose that the phrase comes from "advisers" who handle these speeches. Otherwise the speech might have been differently worded.

Once upon a time it was quite common to hear from the pulpit and from the street, that there was no such thing as an Atheist. Bishop Mellon, of Galway, is of different opinion. He shares the fear that other priests have shown over the now rapid decline of religion. But his intellectual quality is illustrated by his advice to his followers that if Atheists "talk" loud, you talk louder. You are always right, they are always wrong. Such rubbish may be taken as evidence that the Roman Church is feeling the pinch. Generally speaking, men of the calibre of Bishop Mellon would have been kept in the background. Now anything seems to serve. We have always agreed with Bradlaugh that the final battle will be between Atheism and the Catholic Church. But if the Roman Church is driven to permit preachers like Bishop Mellon to talk at large, it must be falling short of effective material.

It appears that Catholic scientists will be well represented at the first post-war meeting of the British Association. We may depend upon it that the presence of these men will be well advertised and the Catholic press will be parading every Catholic who reads an interesting essay on a scientific subject. But we should like to know what is the connection between a scientific address and the Roman Catholic creed? What we should also like to see would be a speech given explaining how, and when, the sun, to please a congregation of believers, "began to whirl round just like a wheel of fire, and then stood still for four minutes." This was followed by the "infant Jesus carried in the arms of Joseph."

We do not know very much concerning the work or value of Lord Darwen, but we know that he was the former J. P. Davies, and now sits in the House of Lords. But if his mentality is really of the kind published in the "Church of England Newspaper," the sober-minded ones in the House of Commons may well feel pleased that J. P. Davies has become Lord Darwen, and sitteth among the great. But what does he really mean by saying "A man is acting as a Christian when he tries to improve the lot of his fellows"? Why a Christian act? Men helped one another when they were hardly distinguishable from an animal. Decency in life, a readiness to help one another in trouble has no right to be called "Christian." One might as well say that decency and kindness belong to the King of England. Is it impudence or ignorance that causes Lord Darwen to talk as he does? Of course, when a mere man becomes a "Lord" he ought to do something very striking. But Lord Darwen might say something that is at least sensible.

The Dean of Exeter, also the Saturday parson for the "Daily Telegraph," say that Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God." Now that is a very remarkable personage. God is invisible, so no one may see him. Jesus also resembles God because no one can see him. Nothing can resemble anything, so long as it resembles nothing. Further, Jesus could not have been like his Father while he was someone, and could, theologically, only be something by becoming nothing. One could write more about the matter, but we think that is enough. But an image of something that is invisible must be a very interesting object.

Stands Scotland where it did? Well, from the information in the "Glasgow Herald," we should say it does not; for it is announced by the Alloa Ministers that there will be in the churches on Sundays, from 8 to 10, songs and music, and people may come and go when they please. Most emphatically Sunday does not stand where it did!

Impudence is the great stock in trade of professional parsons. Thus, a bereaved woman writes:—

"I am the mother of four children, and I have just lost their father after a short illness. It's hard to understand why he had to die."

And this reply comes from that newspaper preacher, the Rev. W. H. Elliott:—

"Your husband is not gone. He has only become unseen. Don't think that he had to die. Illness comes from all sorts of causes, so don't blame God."

That is about the most glaring piece of religious brutality and foolishness that we have ever heard. Even a parson might have remained silent in that situation. What comfort can anyone feel when one's loved ones have gone? And the "don't blame God" is supreme in its brutality. It is the preacher who says everything is in God's hand. It is the poor woman who has to suffer. We congratulate the Rev. W. H. Elliott for his skillful way of giving his dose of brutality. But the mother need not cry for that. She will find her consolation in the love of her children and the comfort that she will get from her memories of "him." As to the parson, she may be kind enough to remember that he just exists.

York's action in regard to Sunday shows had a Poll vote that gave two to one in favour of entertainments. Now there is a trial by voting, and this means more time and money to permit people to see on Sunday what can be seen any week-day. We wonder when this petty tyranny of religion will be stopped.

The Rev. H. Edwards, of Notts., is very much disturbed by the influence exercised in Nottingham by the N.S.S. with regard to a free Sunday. Mr. Edwards says that to the mind reflecting the pamphlet seems unanswerable. We may wipe out the "unreflecting" readers of the pamphlet; we venture to say that it is unanswerable, and it is this that upsets Mr. Edwards and his brother preacher. He also flatters our editors by saying that it is dangerously misleading. We note that even clergymen on the war-path cannot evade letting out some truth.

Religious people meet with remarkable things, as one might expect. But here is something that is printed in the "Christian." It happened in Hyde Park. There was a "well-known" Secularist there trying to convert a Christian. But the young Christian, presumably with the help of God called to the Secularist, "Can you give any direct proof of the non-existence of God?" And that settled the Secularist. We are surprised. It is exactly the stuff that good, sound Christians thrive on. We feel inclined to strengthen it. So—"How can you prove that something that is like nothing is exactly to that no one can see?" We think that would settle 'em.

Gods are born and gods die. That is the one thing about which we are certain. But we must remember that a vision, in its place, is as real as an apple tree. Each of them is real in its quality. Gods claim to be greater than men, which is not true, for man is more important and his like may live for ever, but all gods are sooner or later, dropped out of reality. Gods, it is true, are found all over the world, but their being sinks to nothing, while that lives on so long as man exists. We remark that it is quite an untrue statement that the Atheist does not believe in the existence of gods. He does. He knows where they are born and how certainly they pass away, labelled "delusions".

But it seems that we unbelievers are wrong about the story of Jesus Christ. We thought he belonged to the class of angels and ghosts. But we see from the Catholic "Universe" that Jesus was a real god. The evidence was given in Lisbon by a doctor, who explained very simply how the death on the Cross occurred. It appears that Jesus died from shock. Also, that in the historic execution the nails used on the Cross did not penetrate the hands of Jesus, but only his nails. There is a great deal of detail of the same quality. Really the "Universe" gives its readers plenty for their money. It is Christian truth—there is nothing else like it.

# "THE FREETHINKER"

Telephone No.: Holborn 2601.

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London, W.C. 1.

## TO CORRESPONDENTS

H. HENRY.—We are afraid there is no immediate prospect of reprinting Mr. Cohen's "Religion and Sex." It went quickly out of print and it was accepted in many quarters. Thanks for suggestion that we might reprint some of the chapters for the benefit of the general reader. We may adopt the suggestion without turning the writing into a repetition.

(L.D.).—Many thanks for your good wishes and appreciation of work done. Of course, Freethought is not precisely what it was, there would be no cause for feeling pleased were it otherwise. Christians are saying too what would have roused a hundred years ago. And in the political world there would not be many of those who are holding high positions in the world had not Freethought cleared the way to useful social labours.

R. MORGAN.—For "The Freethinker," 15s.

G.T.—Mr. Cohen is not at the "Freethinker" offices every day, but he could be present if proper notice is given.

GENERAL FUND N.S.S.—The General Secretary N.S.S. gratefully acknowledges a donation of 1s. 6d. from Mrs. K. to the Benevolent Fund of the Society.

Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C. 1, and not to the Editor.

THE FREETHINKER will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates (Home and Abroad): One year, 17s.; half-year, 8s. 6d.; three months, 4s. 4d.

Lecture notices must reach 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C. 1, by the first post on Monday, or they will not be inserted.

## SUGAR PLUMS

While some of our Christian leaders and pious scribblers are busy trying to prevent the breaking up of the Christian Sabbath the Archbishop of York is trying to create some kind of arrangement between Church and cinema. He says that the "Changed Sunday is not for the worse," and he warns ardent Christians that they cannot today go back to the Jewish days of the Sabbath. He also adds a warning that the real issue is to get the people back to the Church. Our Archbishop is feeling the draught, and he recognises that the "old Sunday" is dead and cannot be brought back to life.

But it is the height of foolishness to imagine that coming to an agreement with Sunday "shows" will prevent the churches losing their standing. "Pictures" are not the cause of the decay of the historic Christian religion, it is rather the decay of religion as a whole that has brought about the ending of Christianity before the world. The Archbishop, and others, are talking as though the fight is concerned only over a question of whether this or that form of religion shall be allowed to survive. The real point at issue is whether any kind of religion can survive. And throughout the civilised world the answer is "No."

The truth is that with all peoples, with any pretension to culture and culture, religion is a dying thing. More than just we can note in Churches and chapels, in the dress of the priest, in the special forms of language that are used in the services, the praying for fine or wet weather, the appealing to God located in heaven, with all the appearance of a ticket of nobility, the incarnation of a king which, theoretically, causes the poor King of England to be an incarnate God, the forms of Church-building—these and hundreds of similar things prove that when a Church door opens for the people of today it is to open them with the dead.

According to a passage in the "Church Times" the Home Secretary is "gravely disturbed" over the money spent on the Sunday shows. As put, that is just nonsense. A row between people in England, and the money spent on this or that does not seriously affect the well-being of the nation, although it may affect parties here and there. So long as the Government can control the money in this country, it may change hands in any form, so long as our dealing with foreign countries is not affected.

But if the Home Secretary dislikes, or is "alarmed" over, the Sunday show business, there seems to be a very simple way of ending it. We agree that the bulk of the producers of "shows" care but little for superior art. What they want is big business, and profitable returns. The mass of the people are not seriously concerned with art. Why should we expect otherwise? It is only yesterday that the "people" appeared upon the scene, although we are not sure that the "common people," taken as a whole, have not as good a notion of real art as the "superior"—that is, the wealthy—people have. Personally, we have found as much real "culture" and consideration for others among the "common" crowd as among "superior" folk. At present the "people" desire to see things, and they are determined to have that appetite satisfied; they have our best blessing.

Further, if the Home Secretary is alarmed—the right word here should be "ashamed"—at this fight over the most primitive of primitive superstitions, there is a simple method of setting things straight. Let the Home Secretary introduce a Bill which would keep theatrical and other forms of enjoyment at the service of the people, but which ignored "sacred days." After all, the "movies" do not compel actors and actresses to work seven days a week. No one has suggested that everyone must attend a "movie" show, and it is not likely that anyone will compel the intimates of God to go to the "pictures." The picture of our Government shaking and shivering over this Sunday enjoyment business is really an attack on common sense.

The N.S.S. leaflet on "Sunday Cinemas" distributed in Nottingham during the campaign for Sunday opening, tempted the Rev. H. Edwards to a criticism in the local press. Our friend, T. M. Mosley, quickly countered with a clear-cut and pointed reply, whilst another correspondent, "R. G. S.," described the leaflet as "manswerable." There was a majority of 16,109 in favour of Sunday opening. Birkenhead made a similar decision with a 7,468 majority, and there also a good supply of the leaflets were distributed by our friends.

The Bradford Branch of the National Secular Society is keeping the Freethought flag flying in Bradford. Mr. H. Day reports good meetings in the Car Park, and would be pleased to welcome all Freethinkers in that area. Further particulars in the Lecture Notices column.

## THE ORACLE OF FLEET STREET

DESPITE his eccentricities, perversities and prejudices, Samuel Johnson was one of the most eminent personalities of the eighteenth century. The story of his career has been inimitably told by another extraordinary character, James Boswell, the definitive edition of whose biography is that of Birkbeck Hill.

Still, a critical reconsideration of Dr. Johnson and his circle is welcome, and this has been brilliantly supplied by the distinguished writer, Mr. C. E. Vulliamy, with his "Ursa Major: A Study of Dr. Johnson and his Friends" (Michael Joseph, 1947, 15s.).

While the 18th century constituted a golden age for the affluent, the mass of the population, especially in London and other large cities, was addicted to drunkenness. For at a time when the population of England and Wales was about seven millions, there were 17,000 gin dens in London alone. Moreover, as our author avers: "In spite of the ferocity of our penal code, more savage here than in any other European country, the prevalence of crime was infinitely disturbing. It

was a capital offence to steal a few shillings. For such offences, men, women and children were hanged. Up till 1783, persons convicted in London were taken in open carts to the gallows at Tyburn: that is, from Newgate to what is now, approximately, the site of the Marble Arch. Dr. Dodd, the clergyman forger, was exhibited in the prison at a shilling a head before he was executed."

Gibbon, Adam Smith, and other observers, testify that the discipline and instruction customary in the Universities were scandalously poor, while the Church historians, Abbey and Overton, mournfully admit that the Anglican Establishment disclosed "a dark scene of melancholy failure." Pluralities and non-residence abounded, and patronage was shamefully abused. No need to wonder that popular religion declined, while the better educated classes were profoundly impressed by the sceptical philosophy of Hume and the historical revelations of Gibbon.

Dr. Johnson was born in the reign of Anne, at Lichfield, in 1709, and penury dogged his footsteps during the greater part of his career. As we learn from Boswell, he was afflicted with defective vision and his manners were markedly uncouth. At the age of 25 he married a widow of 46. Of their early married life next to nothing is known, as Boswell's efforts to obtain information proved abortive. That they lived in abject poverty seems certain.

Vulliamy ascribes Johnson's slow rise to recognition as a man of letters to his unprepossessing personality much more than his penurious circumstances: "The appearance of Johnson, his clothes and odour, his manners and his moods were not ingratiating. Indeed, they were such as to inspire terror, disgust, ribaldry and offence. He was a tall man with powerful limbs and a massive body, but his movements were only partly under his control; for Johnson, all his life, was one of that unhappy order of beings who, in his day, were known as convulsionaries."

Several of Johnson's intimates testify as to his uncouth conduct and these include Mrs. Thrale and Fanny Burney. Again, his soiled and evil smelling garments and unclean shirts aroused resentment and disgust. But he strove in vain to overcome his untidy and unsoaped habits, while his normal eccentricities were intensified by his innate tendency towards melancholia. Again it is recorded that: "Deep down in his mind, unconquerable, was the fear of madness. And there were other fears too (more frequent in later life): the fear of death and the fear of hell. For him, solitude was frightful; and it is easy to see why he so petulantly rejected, whether he understood it or not, every form of metaphysical speculation."

Johnson's restrictive religiosity is adumbrated even in his monumental "Dictionary," where he omits all mention of any author whose theological conclusions were doubtful. This lexicon seems to have been the earliest, really interesting and entertaining dictionary ever composed. But, although it made its author famous, its sales scarcely sufficed to release him from literary drudgery. He prepared a number of essays entitled, "The Idler," and rapidly wrote "Rasselas" to defray the costs of his mother's funeral and to redeem her debts.

Johnson appealed for subscriptions for a projected edition of Shakespeare and, in 1763, Charles Churchill, the satirist, accused Johnson of obtaining money for a publication of which nothing at that time had been heard. Unfortunately, Churchill seems justified in his aspersion by the fact that in 1762 Johnson's monetary troubles were ended by the granting of a State pension of £300 per annum, a sum equal to about £1,000 of our present currency. This windfall endeared the old Jacobite—for such Johnson was—to the House of Hanover, while a meeting with George III in 1767 made him a king's man for life.

Relieved from penury, and now a prominent figure in the literary world, he should henceforth have been fairly content. But he was constantly dreading an impending mental collapse

and this obsession assumed agonising forms in sleepless hours of the night. As Vulliamy pathetically notes: "Nor was his religion of the sort that was likely to bring peace and light into the gloom and tumult of his tormented soul. It was the extremely formal and intolerant religion of the middle classes of his day. He was fearful of being among the damned; and when the gentle Dr. Adams asked him what he meant by damned, he roared out: 'Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.'"

Thus, the influences of Christian theology upon the mind of Johnson, as on that of the sensitive poet, Cowper, proved disastrous, and average happiness rendered impossible. Still, in Johnson's case, supernatural terrors were somewhat alleviated by the companionship of Henry Thrale, the opulent brewer and his remarkable wife, at whose residences he was for years an inmate.

Apart from his masterpiece, the celebrated "Dictionary," Johnson's fame has been perpetuated by Boswell's immortal biography, for most of his own writings have fallen into oblivion. But in Boswell's pages he survives as a dictatorial controversialist, and the protagonist of the Literary Club founded by the painter, Reynolds, and himself in 1764, of which Edmund Burke and Oliver Goldsmith were original members. At the meetings of this Club and his friends' houses, Johnson laid down the law. His wit was ponderous and his assertions too frequently both prejudiced and incorrect. Many of his opinions were already out of date. Yet his rhetoric was so overpowering and his general knowledge of letters so extensive, that he retained his reputation as the outstanding talker of his century.

By middle life the Doctor had become a virtual abstainer from alcohol, while he grew exceedingly intemperate in the use of tea and opium. Vulliamy cites Hawkins as saying from personal experience that: "He was a lover of tea to an excess hardly credible; whenever it appeared he was almost raving, and by his impatience to be served, his incessant calls for those ingredients which make that liquor palatable, and the haste with which he swallowed it down, he seldom failed to make it a fatigue for everyone else, which was intended for general refreshment." So exhilarated did he in his later years become by the reckless use of opium, that he appeared completely drunk.

The death of Thrale and the desertion and remarriage of his widow, embittered Johnson's declining days, already darkened by the loss of so many earlier friends. He lingered to the age of 75, when he expired in Bolt Court in 1784. Apparently, the then contemporary world regarded him less as a man of letters of eminence, than as an outstanding personality, beset with lads and crotchets.

Vulliamy decides that Johnson is not the mere possession of Boswell, but was strong enough as a writer to stand on his own merits, and that to the patient student of the Doctor's own compositions, that Great Bear still stands revealed as the truly distinguished man of letters so many have admired.

T. F. PALMER.

## LUCRETIVUS

### II

NOW that the evolutionary view has practically supplanted the creationist theory in biological science, the account given by Lucretius in the fifth book of the origin and development of the human race is generally regarded as eminently rational for the age in which it was written. But forty years ago, and indeed much more recently, it was a common thing, even for men styled "erudite," to refer sneeringly to the Darwinian hypothesis as the "slime-theory." It is interesting in this connection to read the following from a review of the second edition of Murray's

Lucretius, contributed to the "Contemporary" for June, 1867, by the Rev. Henry Hayman, B.D. :—

"But most astounding among the Lucretian 'facts' of nature, which the poet asserts as with the assurance of an eye-witness, is that of the origin of the human race, in v. 805-20. The redundancy of warmth and moisture, according to him, produced in favourable localities certain *uteri*, catching hold of the earth by roots. These interesting zoophytes open under the influence of warmth, and the earth, then young, we must suppose, and juicy, began at once to exude milk for the infant contained within. The poet, like Topsy, 'speaks we growed.' Something like a pumpkin must, according to him, have been the primordial type of humanity . . . To such absurdities are men driven in order to avoid a creation in the proper sense of the word."

The reverend reviewer is also careful to call attention to those parts of the poem which are quite unscientific and which contain arguments "singularly inconclusive," such as Lucretius' views of the size of the sun and planets, of "images" striking the eye and thus causing sights, etc. But, as Tyndall pointed out in the Belfast Address, the Rev. Henry Hayman, B.D., quite fails to perceive the "sound and subtle observations on which the reasoning of Lucretius, though erroneous, sometimes rests." Readers may judge for themselves how far the poet's views on human evolution are really "astounding" :—

"Just as feathers and hairs and bristles are the first things that appear on the limbs of quadrupeds and on the bodies of birds, so grasses and shrubs were the first things that appeared on the young earth, which afterwards brought forth many different species of living creatures. For none of these ever fell suddenly from the sky, nor did the animals that belong to the land come out of the briny ocean. Not undeservedly, therefore, has our earth received the name of mother, since she it is that has produced all living things. Even at present we see the rain and the heat of the sun bring forth many creatures upon the earth. But when the earth and the atmosphere enveloping it were young and vigorous, the forms of life were larger and more varied, as was to be expected. First of all came birds. These hatched in the spring, used to leave eggs behind them, just as now the cicadae in summer shed their smooth shell and then go in quest of sustenance for themselves. After that human beings first appeared. Heat and moisture were in the fields, and a kind of uterine cavity grew in favoured spots. These cavities were rooted in the earth, and when the infant, as it developed in the course of time, had forced them open, it sought to avoid the dank earth and gain the upper air. Then Nature directed the pores of the earth to these places, and a milk-like liquid came forth and yielded nourishment to the infant race" (v. 788-813).

However crude the last few lines of this quotation may appear to some students of twentieth century science, Lucretius' account, taking it all through, is more in accordance both with the spirit of honest investigation and with the probable facts than are most ancient theorisings on this question.

A. D. McLAREN.

(To be concluded)

## NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

### Report of Executive Meeting held July 24, 1947

The President, Mr. Chapman Cohen, in the Chair.

Also present: Messrs. Rosetti (A. C.), Seibert, Bryant, Griffiths, Ebury, Lupton, Woodley, Page, Morris, Barker, Mrs. Grant, Mrs. Quinton, Mrs. Venton, and the Secretary.

Minutes of previous meeting read and accepted. Financial statement presented. New members were admitted to Kingston-on-Thames, Newcastle, West London, and to the Parent Society.

The position to date on the Bradford summons was given, and the promised help for Glasgow winter syllabus confirmed. A quarterly report from Manchester Branch was before the meeting. A grant was made towards the expenses of delegates from the London Committee of the World Union of Freethinkers to the conference to be held in Amsterdam in September next.

The General Secretary reported that the Executive's Annual Report for 1947 had been despatched to all branches and to all members of the Parent Society.

The next meeting of the Executive was fixed for September 25, and the proceedings closed.

R. H. ROSETTI, General Secretary.

## SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

### LONDON—OUTDOOR

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

West London Branch (Hyde Park).—Sunday, 6 p.m.: Messrs. F. PAGE, JAMES HART (Mythology), C. E. WOOD, E. C. SAPHIN. Thursday, 7 p.m.: Messrs. F. PAGE, JAMES HART (Mythology), C. E. WOOD, E. C. SAPHIN.

### COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Accrington Market.—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Car Park, Broadway).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. H. DAY.

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (The Mound).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. A. REILLY.

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

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Platt Fields).—3 p.m. A lecture: Messrs. KAY, TAYLOR and McCALL.

Merseyside Branch N.S.S. (Blitzed Site, Ranelagh Street, Liverpool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: A lecture.

Nelson (Chapel Street).—Wednesday, Aug. 6, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Nottingham (Old Market Square).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. T. M. MOSLEY.

Rawtenstall (Rossendale).—Friday, August 1, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Scoutbottom (Rossendale).—Monday, August 4, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Barkers Pool).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: Messrs. G. L. GRAVES, A. SAMMS.

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THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS. By W. A. Campbell. With a Preface by the Rt. Hon. J. M. Robertson. Price 2s.; postage 2d.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE MYTHICAL CHRIST. By Gerald Massey. What Christianity owes to Ancient Egypt. Price 9d.; postage 1d.

## STRANGE INTERVIEW

AN old man with hoary hair and snowy beard to his waist came slowly along the street. Although queerly attired in a voluminous white robe he attracted little attention, no more than did his behaviour. At every great building he stopped and peered in at the door; of Town Hall, Council House, Library, Art Gallery, Bank, Stores, Insurance and other offices, then walked on to the next. When he arrived at the corner by me he stood and gazed with lustreless eyes at the flowing streams of motor traffic and pedestrians.

The old fellow appeared so forlorn that out of pity, I asked him "Can I direct you anywhere?"

"No," he replied. "I'm seeking shelter."

As the negative seemed to contradict the statement, I was puzzled, pondering whether to guide him to hotel or hostel, and of what class and cost.

"Hm" I murmured reflectively to gain time and decide where to send him.

His next words were startling: "I'm entitled to enter any of those places; used to be welcome to abide in most of them. Now I'm ignored."

This was said in an angry voice, with a fierce look in the heavy-lidded eyes as the old man glanced back along the street and waved one arm in a sweeping gesture toward the big buildings.

Doubtful of his sanity, I felt I must humour him, as no constable was in sight. Having only elementary knowledge of psychiatry I tried the opening suitable for a lost child. "What's your name?"

"God" he answered simply.

Involuntarily I exclaimed "Almighty!"

"Yes," he responded with a momentary haughty gleam in his eyes.

Then mournfully, "I was almighty; not now."

There was so little of the majestic or awful about this individual standing to talk familiarly with me that I ventured to criticise: "You're not my conception of God."

"I'm not anybody's" was the woeful answer. "All that people want is not a person; at most an abstraction."

As I hesitated what to say to this, he asked anxiously, almost appealingly: "What's your conception of God?"

"None of my own" I conceded diffidently. "Only what preachers and poets and artists taught me in my younger days: a reigning kind, a stern judge, a being of immeasurably superior size and strength."

"I was" said Jehovah drawing himself up. "But I've shrunk."

"Shrunk!"

"Yes. All gods do. Most of them have faded away to nothing. Many gods are only memories. More are not that. With me the process of attenuation is accelerating."

"Can't you stop it?"

"No. Only my worshippers can do that."

"You still have many."

"They're lessening; have become a minority in numerous countries."

"Large numbers of those still worship you fervently."

"Not enough to restore my former prestige, majesty and power."

"I'm surprised."

"You wouldn't be if you knew how the same thing happened to other and previous gods. With too many of my worshippers it's merely lip service. Their worship's not wholehearted enough to do me benefit or influence others. Instead of being built up and extended I'm reducing, diminishing, dwindling."

I suppose I must have looked perplexed, for the erstwhile Almighty, speaking sadly, said: "I'll explain. More and more

I'm being excluded from life, becoming less and less a reality to people, lapsing into a tradition, a lay figure, something kept for special places and occasions, but not regarded as central, vital, urgent, intrinsic to the conduct of life."

"Oh!"

"You may understand better if I give concrete and particular instances. Centuries ago all law came from my Church, based on my Bible."

"You still have the oath."

"Little more than a formality, like prayers at opening of Parliament and Councils, Mayors' Sundays, chaplains and other official religious ceremonies. The actual business is secular: law, government and administration, are all carried on by laymen, not by priests."

"True enough we modern people think churches and priests should keep out of affairs."

"So I suffer diminution. Sunday's increasingly a day of pleasure. Architects no longer build houses for me any more than artists decorate them or music is composed to use in them. Literature has deserted me. To mention God's the stigma of a minor poet. Prose writers are mainly antagonistic, contemptuous or critical."

"How about war? You always were a God of war."

For a moment the deity's eyes kindled, but gloomed again as he replied surlily: "Not mechanised war. Men fighting hand to hand fought with belief in me, shouting my name, but how can they using machinery? That's one of my greatest enemies. Engineers have no need for me. Not even farmers have, though dependent on weather, but they don't attribute its vagaries to me, neither thanking me nor blaming me, still less praising or praying to me. They consult experts, as everyone does. Medicine's no longer magic, and science—"

God shivered, and I believe shrank several inches as he resumed in lugubrious accents.

"Scientists have chased me out of my preserves. Astronomers banish me from the skies, physicists from the earth, chemists fail to discover me in the acutest analysis of matter. The electron is now creator. Psychologists do not find me necessary to human mentality."

Jehovah sighed deeply.

"Come," I said encouragingly. "Thinking men are interested in morals."

God regarded me with aversion, saying: "I'm not. I've nothing to do with morality, never had. Now man's finding rebasing his ethical systems on social relationships, as the scientists do the mutations of life on natural causes."

Sighing again, God appeared to sink into dejected meditation. To rouse and cheer him I reminded him: "Education includes a large amount of devotion to your names."

He shook his head, saying: "No burning enthusiasm, and the interests of the pupil's future welfare and progress secular subjects swamp my worship, as does the time spent on them increasingly so. Also to hand me over to children is a sure sign of the end. It happens in many departments of life; you see it strongly in literature. Men outgrow an art or fashion, a style or mode. For a time women keep it up, then it passes on to amuse children, so losing reality and permanence. Therefore I'm relegated to the gallery of Mother Goose, Aladdin, Sinbad, Jack, Cinderella, Brer Rabbit, Mowgli—"

The roar of an approaching bus drowned his last words. I sprang aboard, then, wondering what he thought of our modern version of the chariot, looked back for him, but God had disappeared.

A. R. WILLIAMS.

ROME OR REASON? A Question for To-day. By Colonel R. G. Ingersoll. Price 4d.; postage 1d.