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IEWS AND OPINIONS

Why ridicule Religion?

WHY not? Ridicule is not of necessity empty of reasoning, and it often brings truth to the front quickly and convincingly. Ridicule, not clowning, has brought many a truth to the front and exposed with a few words age-long superstitions and well placed social rascalities. Moreover, preachers are not at all backward with wit; and of first rate qualities. It is the dull-dogs who shrink from an exposure that comes from the mouth of a wit. Mark, I say from the mouth of a wit, not the comicalities which the B.B.C. gives us. Real wit may serve to understand character. Clowning serves to hide it.

Why, then, should one be bothered by letters objecting to "make fun" of what is very sacred to many men and women? I do not deny for a moment that religion is to some people a sacred thing. To them God and religion are living facts. Of course they are. But I have watched a little girl hugging a doll as though it were a living thing, and gradually give way to an understanding of realities. I can understand in Christianity and other religions much that is interesting and valuable, and I am certain that I know the realities of Christianity far better than a Christian priest does—that is assuming that he is an honest priest. What I am mainly laughing at is the absurdity of a civilised people priding themselves on their cultured and progressive character and yet professing to regulate their lives by a collection of doctrines which we know are simply untrue.

But if Christianity has a ridiculous side, the responsibility lies with those who fashioned it, and next with those who continue to believe in it. If, on the contrary, Christianity has not a ridiculous side, then it is I who make myself a laughing stock in trying to give it one. In either case I do not see that exception can be reasonably taken to prevent anyone ridiculing religion. I can find no stronger reason for preventing one laughing at, say, the King of England, than one can smile at the alleged existence of all that is, but who cannot remember *what* it is. I may note in passing that the Freethinker attacks Christianity by the method of making fun of it. There is plenty of scientific and sociological material against Christianity. It might truly be said that the Freethinker laughs at the absurdity of Christianity to prevent his crying at the stubborn absurdity of Christian apologists. I think it was rightly put by the great Doctor Arnold, a very staunch Christian and a Head of one of our public schools. He said:

"To tax anyone with want of reverence because he pays no respect to what we venerate is either *irrelevant*, or is a mere confusion. The fact, so far as it is true, is no reproach, but an honour; because to reverence all persons and all things is absolutely wrong; reverence shown to that which does not deserve it is no virtue;

no, not even an amiable weakness, but a plain folly and sin. But if it be meant that he is wanting in proper reverence, not respecting what is to be really respected, that is assuming the whole question at issue, because what we call divine he calls an idol; and as, supposing we are in the right that we are bound to fall down and worship, so, supposing him to be in the right, he is no less bound to pull it to the ground and destroy it."

To ask, therefore, that we who do not believe in the pretensions, or truthfulness, or usefulness of Christianity shall treat it with the same solemnity and reverence as believers are in the habit of doing is to ask us to blot out all distinction between truth and falsehood, or between what is plausible and what is absurd.

Although it may be replied that two wrongs do not make a right, still it is worth while noting that Christians themselves are by no means slow to ridicule the religious or non-religious beliefs of other people—a practice in which the Bible sets them a fairly good example. I have never heard of Christians reprobating the conduct of Elijah in ridiculing the prophets of Baal, although I have read a description of his language as expressing "sublime scorn"; Protestants delight in ridiculing the Roman Catholic ceremonials, Catholics are equally ready to laugh at the absurdities of Protestant pretensions, and both join in treating with contempt the religious beliefs of non-Christian peoples. Ridiculing religion is only wrong when it is the Christian religion that is the object of irreverence.

It is curious, too, that Christians seldom or never ask themselves why it is that their religion lends itself so readily to ridicule. Surely, when one can so easily ridicule Christianity, and when Christians themselves are so annoyed at the performance, there must arise the suspicion that there is something inherently absurd about the creed. Surely some part of the fault, if fault there be, must rest with the creed that invites ridicule from nearly all who dissent from it. Indeed, it has always passed my comprehension how anyone who is not already narcotised by the creed he is criticising, or in fear of the "respectabilities" he is outraging, can discuss such subjects as the Biblical miracles, the virgin birth, the resurrection, or similar tales, and still retain his gravity. There are, after all, as many muscles drawing our mouth up as draw it down, and if it be sinful to laugh at religion the fault must lie with the deity who endowed man with a sense of the ridiculous.

But it is not without reason that Christians protest against the use of ridicule, and insist on religion being discussed with a "fitting sense of reverence." For ridicule is the deadliest, because the only effective, weapon one can bring against a venerable imposture. There is a stage in the history of every belief and of every institution when common sense is powerless against it, and then the only remedy is to laugh it out of existence. It was the laughter

of Lucian that helped to shake down the tottering pagan worship, as the laughter of Cervantes cleared off the decrepit chivalry of his day, and as the ridicule of Voltaire covered the Church with infamy in the 18th century. I know it is the fashion nowadays, by timid writers who hasten to avert unpleasant consequences from their own heresy by reprobating that of more robust thinkers, to say that Voltaire's method is no longer applicable, the day for ridiculing Christianity has passed. Yet, in my opinion, it is as true today as ever that "men will not cease to be persecutors until they have ceased to be absurd," and they never cease to be ridiculous until they themselves have grown strong enough to laugh at the absurdities that ere-while enchained them. That religion today has become a subject for ridicule is only the price it pays for its former greatness. When a monarch is dethroned his pedestal becomes a pillory, and the greatness of his former estate is the exact measure of his present degradation.

Moreover, the question might well suggest itself to Freethinkers: "Are we likely to convince the Christian world of the absurd and untruthful nature of many of its beliefs by approaching their consideration with an air of solemn profundity, or protestations of extreme veneration?" Are we not likely in many cases, and by such methods, to rather impress Christians with the transcendent value and importance of their beliefs? To my mind, it admits of little question that the spectacle of Mr. Gladstone and Professor Huxley discussing the miracle of the Gadarene swine with portentous gravity does as much good to Christianity as harm. The important point in such a discussion—namely, the fitness of the subject for grave controversy at the hands of a political leader and a great scientific authority at the close of the nineteenth century—is conceded. The believer looks on satisfied, whatever be the issue. You are showing him that his beliefs, the absurdity of which was gradually dawning on his mind, are of a serious and important character, deserving the most solemn and respectful treatment, and that is enough. He does not mind being thought wrong on a matter of such a grave nature; it is being ridiculous he dreads; hence his protests against satire or sarcasm; it seems to me tolerably certain that, so long as we agree to treat religion with a long face and ridiculous protestations of respect, we are doing our best to excite feelings of attachment towards beliefs that we are desirous people should despise.

It is absurd to expect that religious people will ever regard their beliefs in their true character so long as our own writings or speeches are full of expressions of reverence towards the beliefs we are attacking. Such expressions are entirely out of place. Reverence may be defined as a compound feeling made up of fear, wonder, and respect; and of these three qualities the first is absolutely inimical to accurate reasoning, the second is disturbing, and the third should follow examination, not precede it. A mind dominated by fear can reason neither coherently nor logically, and it is one of the principal objections to Christianity that, by its threatened penalties of an after life, backed up by actual persecution, it has partly paralysed the mind's operation, and thus prevented people forming correct conclusions concerning its teachings. Even wonder must be counted as a disturbing element in the formation of sound opinion; and clearly, until we have examined, we cannot tell whether the subject under examination is worthy of respect or not. Thus respect or reverence for a

belief, as a belief, is altogether out of place, and must create an initial bias that can only serve to vitiate the value of conclusions afterwards reached.

Why should a question of religion be approached with greater respect than other questions? To say that it involves greater issues is a simple begging of the question. So far as we can see, the manner in which a man votes is of far greater consequence than the church he attends; while correct ideas as to the function of governments are of infinitely greater importance than beliefs concerning the constitution of heaven. The fact that a man sincerely holds a belief to be true in no sense entitles it to our respect.

It is a common thing to find worthy men cherishing unworthy beliefs, and intelligent men entertaining stupid ones. All that can reasonably be demanded is that, so long as we are convinced that beliefs are held honestly and sincerely, those holding them shall be treated with consideration and respect. This no Freethinker would deny. What we challenge is the absurd position that the religious opinions of people are entitled to a special measure of respect, or should be treated differently to their opinions on social subjects or the structure of the social system. I do not deny the right of any man to hold and promulgate any belief, no matter how absurd; I would even assert it; but I do deny his right to demand that I shall treat his opinions with the same gravity that he does himself.

I am not arguing that there is no place for the serious discussion of religious beliefs, or that we should never meet the religious man in a serious and friendly manner. All that I aim at showing is that ridicule has its proper and legitimate place in all controversy in general, and in religious controversy in particular. And I am convinced that, so long as we discuss religious questions on bended knees and with bated breath, we not only divest our examination of a large part of its value, but tacitly concede the truthfulness and usefulness of the system we are attacking. Let us study religions in their origin and development, their place in the history of civilisation, and their significance in the development of the human mind—let us study them in these directions, seriously if you will. Laughter or ridicule would be out of place here. But when we find these belated survivals of savage times gravely offered as meat and drink for the matured life of today, then ridicule is the most potent weapon that can be used to awaken people to the absurd nature of the proposal and the impossibility of its realisation.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

THE ARAB EMPIRE AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO OUR MODERN CIVILISATION

IV

CHINA, lemons and oranges, strawberries, asparagus and dinner plates to eat on and a host of other articles which we now take as a matter of course, we owe to the Moslems. No doubt we should have discovered and imported these things and ideas for ourselves in course of time, but our present state of civilised comfort would certainly have been deferred to a period 300, 600, or perhaps even a thousand years hence without the mental and physical enterprises and love of knowledge of these remarkable peoples.

Their primitive scientists were called alchemists, and their passion for experiment and discovery even penetrated into

Christendom, in spite of ceaseless and merciless persecution by the Church. That great thinker, philosopher, mathematician and seeker after truth, Roger Bacon, who spent a large portion of his adult life buried in ecclesiastical dungeons, was perhaps the most outstanding scientist-martyr of the period, and thanks to men like him, slowly a way was groped into many of nature's secrets, and many discoveries made, such as new alloys, dyes, chemicals, and processes for distilling out essences and tinctures, and a way of producing optical glass. This last discovery made the microscope possible, though actually, it was not till a thousand years later that Leeuwenhoek invented his primitive instrument, and so discovered to an astounded and incredulous, and even hostile world the whole vast realm of microscopic life, the cause of the diseases of animals and vegetables which up to that time (1700) had been believed—on Bible authority—to be caused by "devils."

Mohammed was, I believe, the first great religious teacher to forbid the use of intoxicating drink, which, as we know, is actually recommended in our Bible.

I, personally, can bless these wicked heathen for introducing chess, which many people competent to give an opinion maintain is the finest game ever invented. Many people have been, and are yet to be, entertained by the world-famous "Arabian Nights," suitably censored, of course, so as not to shock the prudish Christian sensibilities.

Well, while half of the Kalif Walid's armies, under the Moor general, Tarik, was occupying Spain, he himself, a man of much culture, set himself to show the world what could be done to re-inspire the languishing art of what he was probably the first man to describe as "petrified music." The Christian church at Damascus, upon which Roman emperors had lavished their gold and treasure in the hopes of ensuring for themselves a heavenly reward (the only motive for good deeds mentioned in Holy Scripture) was pulled down, and on the site a mosque was built in which, by combining what he considered best in Greek and Persian architecture, he laid the foundations of what was to become the Saracenic type of architecture, and in which it is believed many of the ideas of our mysteriously named "Gothic" style originated. The word "arabesques" is so familiar that one uses it without realising its association with the Moors.

In the writer's opinion, there is little, if anything, in Spain or Portugal of any interest except the architectural remains and taste inherited from the great Mahomedan civilisation, with here and there a contribution from ancient Rome. In the beautiful Spanish architecture of the Americas we meet once more the Moorish influence.

The early Mohammedan government of Spain was remarkable for its broad-minded tolerance, justice and popularity, practically none of the local institutions or customs being interfered with more than was considered absolutely necessary for the general good of the country, as judged by the considerably higher civilisation of the conquerors. The only things absolutely insisted upon were the regular payment of their taxes and the undertaking not to blaspheme the Prophet, this latter offence being punishable with death, even as the Christians themselves punished blasphemy against their own divinities. One calls to mind how Socrates was liquidated for blaspheming the Sun and Moon gods. There seems to be no end to the colossal follies of homo sapiens.

Cordova, the Arab capital of Spain, was, in the tenth century probably even more famous and more magnificent than Baghdad or Byzantium at their height. Students, doctors, artists, lawyers, philosophers, poets, botanists, theologians, mathematicians, astronomers, architects, engineers, and even cooks from all corners of the earth collected at Cordova in their thousands, and went away to spread its culture far and wide.

While our illiterate Saxon ancestors, and most of Europe, were content to live in rude wooden huts, a primitive hand-to-mouth existence, relying on the "next life" to compensate them for their squalor, ignorance, dirt and general discomfort in this, the inhabitants of Cordova lived in 180,000 well-designed stone houses,

all the larger of which had running water laid on, drove and rode on fine paved streets, went daily to one or other of the 900 magnificent public baths, and studied in the numerous public libraries.

In the Christian world, only at Constantinople and parts of Italy were there any traces of culture and refinement, the remnants of Roman influence, to be found. A contemporary historian writes that the people of Cordova were famous for their education, courteous manners and refined speech, their exquisite taste in meals, dress and general domestic arrangements. While the Arab upper classes of this great town ate their meals daintily off china plates, Christian Europe had not even progressed as far as using wooden platters. Even in princely houses, the guests wrestled with their food laid direct on the boards, the bones and scraps being left scattered about the table and floor. (Read Margaret Lane's "History in Dinner Plates".) Even as late as Pepys' time, pewter plates were only just beginning to appear, china only being used occasionally, by royalty!

The present day remnants of this once mighty city convey no notion of its pristine magnificence. It was no less than ten miles across, its main streets flanked by marble palaces and spacious public buildings in whose courts fountains played continually. Public gardens occupied many hundreds of acres, where rare, beautiful or useful trees, shrubs, and flowers, brought from every corner of the vast empire were tended by thousands of trained gardeners, every corner being irrigated by miles of leaden pipe-lines constructed regardless of expense. The pomegranates now found all over Spain were imported from Damascus, and botanists were employed hunting from Gibraltar to China for new flowers and medical herbs.

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

LET THERE BE LIGHT !

IT was recorded in the daily press recently that about £28 was stolen from lockers and handbags while the Bishop of Chelmsford was preaching at St. Monica's School, Clacton. It is to be hoped that the good bishop was not exhorting his listeners to put their trust in the Lord who never fails to watch over those who believe in him because it is very obvious that had they not been gathered together to hear his lordship's address they most certainly would not have lost their money and other possessions.

We have often heard it lamented that God has no sense of humour, but it seems to us that he must possess a very dry, if a trifle warped, sense of the ridiculous when he deliberately fools one of his bishops in this outrageous manner. No doubt the light-fingered gentry who made good at the pupil's expense appreciated the divine joke—if no one else did! Anyway, we sincerely hope that in future his chosen representatives will make quite certain that he is not going to misbehave himself before exhorting their poor dupes to praise his loving goodness.

Unfortunately, the religious mind being what it is—unfathomable, we can be quite sure that the unhappy victims will have no difficulty whatsoever in believing that the good Lord intentionally played this little prank on them as a punishment for their sins, and they could not possibly be expected to wonder why God allows a burglar to benefit by his evil deeds while true believers are penalised for listening to the holy Word.

It is all too utterly childish and senseless, but so long as the Church is allowed to stultify the mind and forbid common sense reasoning, this sort of thing must continue and black will always be white. Anyone but a Christian would be able to see through such nonsense with half an eye and so the clergy see to it that their followers are kept in darkness, blind and ignorant; for the moment the light of reason enters in, the fog and gloom of religious belief must vanish for ever.

W. H. WOOD.

ACID DROPS

Last week we made some comments on the defence of the Faith put forward by Mr. Priestley. Here is another of the same kind, and quality. With the ability of a worn-out clergyman, he says:—

"The human soul rebels very soon against a narrow materialistic and too rational view of life. And this rebellion if it does not lead to a genuine religious revival, takes the rather degrading form of superstition."

That is excellent; we like it immensely. The words are so impressive, and yet they defy understanding. As they stand, no one can prove Mr. Priestley wrong, because no one can give us their meaning, not even Mr. Priestley himself. It does not come under the heading of science or philosophy. He may defy contradiction because there is really nothing to contradict. The journal from which we took the words mentioned above, shows Mr. Priestley lying back on a comfortable armchair with a cigar in his hand. What is on the floor out of sight we cannot say. That might help us to understand at least why we get such deliveries.

Seriously, we may note that Mr. Priestley talks of a "narrow materialism." Why narrow? Does he think that "materialism" is something that can be cut, or have it wide in one sense or position and narrow in another place or sense? Very gently we whisper to him that scientific materialism is one of the many assumptions that is made by science to provide a jumping-off place in order to understand the fundamental character of nature. It has nothing to do with morals, it has nothing at all to do with all the thousand and one things that help to make up the life of man. If he would condescend to read "Materialism Restated," he might be on the road of understanding. Mark, we say "understanding," not "agreement." That is another thing. The first and most important thing is understanding.

There was gloom in the recent Methodist Conference, but so far there was honesty in declaring, not for the first time, that the people have "forgotten God." What they mean is that the number of people who believe in gods is steadily getting smaller and smaller. They have not forgotten God, they are merely beginning to understand the gods, and understanding is the cause of the death of hundreds of gods. History is just repeating itself.

In the Edinburgh "Evening Dispatch" one of its readers says:

"From the age of about 20 to the age of 39 I was a convinced agnostic. At the same time I had enough common-sense and sufficient honesty of outlook to see that many true believers were also very kindly people, and I never scoffed at the Church, although I thought it was founded on a myth.

For myself, I think a child is none the worse off being taught the truths contained in the New Testament, but I admit the difficulty of deciding precisely to what extent 'doctrine' is to direct the teaching. After all, although I am now a convinced believer in the divinity of Christ, some of my fellow-members of the Church of Scotland would probably be shocked by the fact that I do not accept the doctrine of the Virgin Birth."

That is a very common case and a very bad one. To say that the child is none the worse for being taught truths contained in the New Testament is unfair to the child, for what it gets is misleading from the start. It is not given any notion as to the real character of the "sacred" books, and has to learn later how much it has been deluded. Moreover, the child loses that independence of mind and character which it should have. No child can be the worse for having an understanding of what is going on around it.

The Bishop of London says that the first aim of the Church should be the support of the home. So put, that sounds as if "The Home should support the Church," for part of the plan was that Church charity was recognised as keeping on good terms with the preacher. Charity, when honest, was a method of getting people content with God whatever the state in which

people existed. In the early part of the nineteenth century this rule was expressed by the Church:—

"My duty is to honour the King, and all that are put in authority under him. To submit myself to all my governors, teachers, and masters; and to do my duty in whatever the state it shall please God to call me."

And that very famous Christian lady, Hannah More, in a time when want of food was common, advised the people that "Providence," poverty and suffering were sent by God "to show the poor . . . they are dependent upon the rich." We cannot call to mind any general instance in which the very godly in high places had any other teaching. We suggest that those who wish to know more might go to the British Museum and read the series of books on the "London Poor," published in 1851. God was still there, so were the priests and the poor.

The chaplain of a metropolitan hospital gives some interesting details about the religion of many of its patients. It appears only "a tiny percentage" profess no religion. This is given first place, but later he says that most of them anyway show an "alarming ignorance" of the whereabouts of the local church, or its name or the name of its incumbent. Almost all who never attend a church put themselves down as of the Church of England, and if they call themselves "Protestant" it is because they are either Nonconformists or non-practising Anglicans. The most significant admission is, however, the nearly complete ignorance many patients show of any details in connection with their religion. One example: one lady thought she had been confirmed when she joined the *Band of Hope*. Still, very few confess to no religion.

It is very hard to believe it but we have the word of a priest—speaking, of course, as divinely inspired—that the Irish here in Britain are not practising their religion. An English Catholic here and there may feel that intelligence is insulted when faced with Fatima and Lourdes—but an Irish Catholic! God help the Church if Irishmen cease to be sheep, for, as Fr. Hilary points out, they could do so much to "bring Britain back to the Faith." Perhaps when Irish and English Catholics meet and compare notes they start laughing, and when once you laugh at a religion, it's as good as dead.

We note that Mr. de Valera has sent a message to Pandit Nehru in which he asked for "the blessings of God and the Virgin Mary on the Indian people." We are not insisting that the present massacres between Indian Moslems and Hindus are an answer to his prayer, but we wish Mr. Nehru would reply by sending the best wishes of Krishna and his Virgin Mamma to Ireland, and follow this up with a few Fakir and Yogi missionaries to convert the Irish people. What would Mr. De Valera say?

At last you can get "The Shorter Prayer Book"—a sort of abridged version of the "Book of Common Prayer," re-edited and rearranged with the approval of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. We think that it will not be long before a still shorter version will be wanted, for people these days have no time for most of those long-winded prayers so beloved of parsons and which bore modern congregations almost as much as the parsonic voice trying to "get over" a wholly incompetent sermon. We still think that a good Buddhist praying wheel installed in every church and chapel is far superior in action to a mere prayer or two, even if spoken with a true reverent drawl. Besides, a shorter Prayer Book would not then be required.

Fifty undergraduates are working to get a good punch on the nose—at least, they deserve it. They say that they are intending an "extensive" mission to attend the cottages and the men on the fields. The impudence of these half-baked individuals to talk to men and women as though they are all actual or potential criminals. When it comes to dealing with the common duties of life, and the consideration that all should show to their fellows, we have no doubt they can give these green and impudent undergraduates all they deserve. We have met some of these newly developed school boys, and their "talks" are enough to make some people wonder whether the universities have done them much real good. But we suspect the better students remain where they are.

"THE FREETHINKER"

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

C. S. (New Zealand), Mrs. BEHR (South Africa).—Thanks for news cuttings; always useful.

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

When the services of the National Secular Society in connexion with Secular Burial Services are required, all communications should be addressed to the Secretary, R. H. Rosetti, giving as long notice as possible.

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SUGAR PLUMS

We print an item of news that reaches us through the "Daily Express." It centres round the coloured people. The attitude of a very large body of Americans is well known. But the same thing is in our possessions—in spite of the arranged processions at the recent royal tour. The crime of being coloured exists, and the opposition to this among the natives is growing. It would be well if more attention was paid to it. The American item runs thus:—

"Six young white men who believe in 'living as Christ would live' took up residence with a Negro in Columbia, North Carolina, while they worked out a plan to settle Negroes on smallholding farms.

"Their neighbours, all believers in the Southern creed that black must be separated from white, did not approve. So 300 marched to the Negro's house and ordered the young men to leave town in 24 hours.

"Said Sheriff Ray Cohoon afterwards: 'It's a good thing they went. There might have been violence which could not have been stopped.'

"I don't know of any law which prevents white folk from living with Negroes. But people here don't like it.'"

We were pleased to see the following from the pen of Mr. Frederick Laws, in the "News Chronicle" for September 5:—

"Do you remember those daring Governors of the B.B.C. speaking about that they were going to grant us a little freedom of speech about religion on the air? And have you noticed them keeping their faint promises?"

The answer is simple. The speakers were fooled. We shall deal with the whole subject soon.

Catholics just hate arguing with an Atheist—they say so quite openly, but pretend that they do not mind arguing with a believer in God. Actually, they hate arguing at all, they prefer whoever who follow dumbly and always say yes to a priest. The other day, Mgr. Knox addressed Catholic members of the British Association, and, knowing perfectly well that quite a number of the eminent members of the British Association are as Atheistic as we are, felt obliged to add: "Our Lord never argues with the Atheist. He always assumes that the people he is talking to believe in the existence of God." If that be true, then "our Lord" was not without knowing which was the easier way. But there is nothing new in Christian leaders declining to discuss religion with Atheists. The method of Knox is very much safer. It is cowardly, but it is safe.

With what we regard as carefulness, not to say wisdom, Mgr. concerned himself with the worship of the State. But which party will worship what Church, and which leaders of the State will be content to follow this particular preacher?

Our solemn contemporary, "The Universe," pins its faith on the reality of the Crucifixion on what is called the "Holy Shroud." This is, of course, quite as big a fake as the Church's other holy relics, but it is interesting to find a priest, writing to the journal, claiming that "the use of modern scientific means of examination has proved beyond doubt that the Shroud is a genuine relic of Our Lord." The modern scientific means referred to here are the investigations of fully believing Catholics who would have been sacked if their results had proved anything else. All this priest thinks it necessary to say is that the relic is genuine "beyond all possible doubt." We have heard this assurance before. "The Universe" seems to think repetition is equal to proof. Still there are plenty of fools born every morning.

The Bradford Branch N.S.S. opens its indoor season to-day when Mr. J. Clayton will lecture in the Mechanics' Institute, Town Hall Square, Bradford, on "Freethought and the Occult." An attractive syllabus has been arranged and copies may be had at any of the meetings, or from the Branch Secretary, Mr. W. Baldie, 2, Kingsley Crescent, Baildon, Shipley, Yorks., to whom all branch communications should be addressed. The meetings will be held every Sunday evening at 6-30 p.m., and it is hoped the local saints will make sure of a good send-off to-day. The Branch President, Mr. Harold Day, will be in the chair.

Freethinkers in the Chesterfield district are informed that a Freethought meeting is to be held there in the open air to-day at 11 a.m. Mr. Samms, of Sheffield, and Mr. T. M. Mosley, of Nottingham, will make the journey as speakers and hope to make contact with local friends and sympathisers with our Movement. Both speakers are very keen workers in the cause and we wish them the success they deserve in their new venture.

REVERENT RATIONALISM

IV

WHATEVER else the average Christian may boast about when discussing the teachings of Jesus (and in this he is nearly always followed closely by the Reverent Rationalist) it is the tremendous superiority of Christianity over Judaism. One point is particularly stressed, and that is that while Judaism (or the Old Testament) teaches an eye for an eye, Jesus invariably taught to return good for evil, to give the other cheek or, to put it bluntly, if a man gives you one black eye, rather than hit back, you should let him give you another black eye.

It is naturally regretted that Christians do not often follow this advice; in fact, as the late Mr. Chesterton used triumphantly to point out, Christianity has never been tried—meaning that even such all-believing Christians like himself found themselves quite unable to give the other cheek. Still there it was in the Gospels, and even if Christians and Reverent Rationalists cannot always follow the Teachings of the Master, that does not really invalidate what Jesus urged.

In their book "The Philosophy of Jesus," Lord Horder and Dr. Roberts give you chunks from the Gospels which we should follow to the letter—it is all so easy and simple. For example, Jesus said (it is quoted by Lord Horder) "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured again." Now, is this a specimen of the Philosophy of Jesus which inculcates the give-the-other-cheek teaching? Is it not clearly an eye for an eye? Is it not a case of God help you if you judge harshly, for you'll be judged harshly yourself?

Moreover, did Jesus himself ever turn the other cheek? Did he give us a shining example of this marvellous philosophy when he chased the money changers out of the temple?

Lord Horder gives us the two "great commandments" of Jesus—the first "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength"; and the second, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

Some of us would dearly like to know whether the two doctors really love the Lord God with all their hearts and souls. I am never sure how far Reverent Rationalists go in the small matter of belief in a deity, for even with them there are degrees of belief; but it does feel rather strange to find Lord Horder and Dr. Roberts, while refusing to discuss the "divinity" of Jesus, asking us to take special note of such a great commandment as loving God.

The second great commandment was a commonplace in Judaism and no more belongs to Christianity than do the Ten Commandments. The Old Testament was "pinched" by the early Christians some of whom were Jews, but it is quite amusing to find the Christian sects throwing overboard just whatever they like in this part of God's revelation to man, and claiming any other part as Christian. "Love thy neighbour as thyself" is found in Leviticus—though in fairness it should be added that this commandment, whether pinched by Jesus or not, is just nonsense. Why should I love my neighbour if he is a child or animal torturer, a determined Nazi or Fascist? With these people I believe in an eye for an eye—and I have not seen much turning the other cheek towards such criminals as the beasts of Belsen.

Then Lord Horder tells us that Jesus said "I came not to send peace, but a sword." Just throw this bomb among a number of Christian pacifists—those people who yell that they will never, never go to war and who are always appealing to our Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace. I think there is nothing in any discussion quite so interesting and so informative as the way in which they will dispute this very simple piece of the philosophy of Jesus, giving it an interpretation totally at variance with its simple meaning. When a Christian pacifist appeals to "our Lord," you know that plain English words generally mean the very opposite from what you take them to mean.

Lord Horder—following Jesus—wants us not to be anxious for the morrow but seek first "the kingdom of God." It seems to an ordinary Freethinker like myself that if we had not been more than anxious for the morrow, we could have dispensed with nearly all our social services, particularly those for which we have to pay out something every week. Why do people get insured? Most people get insured because they do think of the morrow, and they are even anxious about it; and while I agree that one should not worry oneself to death, so to speak, about what is going to happen, it is only right that we should look, even anxiously, to the future for ourselves and not expect a paternal government to look after it too much instead. One reason for the late war was that the average German left everything to Hitler—the Fuehrer knew what he was doing better than his followers, and everything was bound to be all right. In any case, Jesus only asked you not to be too anxious for the morrow because you ought first to seek the Kingdom of God: everything then would beautifully follow. When one analyses this "philosophy" it is seen to be just balderdash.

Lord Horder gives us—for our guidance, be it remembered—the well known parable about Lazarus and the rich man. Lazarus, because he was fed with crumbs from the rich man's table, was immediately taken to Heaven when he died. The rich man, actually only because he was rich, and had given the beggar some crumbs, went straight to Hell when he died. As Hell was a real place for Jesus (he was God Almighty and he knew), the rich man suffered the torments of the damned, and begged for a drop of water; and Abraham, who naturally was in Heaven, told him that he could not let Lazarus help him "as there was a great gulf fixed" between them. I think, even in the complete Bible, it would be difficult to find more unmitigated bilge than this parable—yet it is solemnly reprinted by two eminent medical men as part of the philosophy of Jesus necessary for our guidance. Exactly why any rich man who fared sumptuously should go to Hell when he died, and a poor man, because the rich man gave him crumbs from his table, should go straight to Heaven and repose in Abraham's bosom—as if that

were a reward worth having, anyway—Lord Horder does not tell us. But Reverent Rationalism has come to a sorry pass if this is the kind of drivel we are given to follow. The very fact that Jesus spoke thus about "Heaven" and "Hell," ought to make any intelligent man with a spark of humour roar with laughter.

The quotations taken from the Gospel of John are if anything sillier, for there he was talking "symbolism"—as if the rude peasants who heard him could make head or tail of any of it. Does Lord Horder or even Dr. Roberts know what Jesus meant when he said he was "the bread of life"? Is that one of those grand pieces of philosophy which is at once so simple, so perfect, and so necessary for our daily lives? Do they believe that "He that believeth hath everlasting life"? Has "everlasting life" any meaning except that death in this world does not prevent life from going on, not our individual life which so many Christians—and possibly Reverent Rationalists—believe, but life in general. Yet part of the success of Christianity was due to the insistence that you, as an individual you, will live for eternity "in Jesus" if only you believe; the "immortality of the soul" is still taught by Christians and no doubt they believe it, but to find eminent doctors insist upon it also, comes quite as a shock unless one realises that anything is possible with Reverent Rationalists.

H. CUTNER.

NEWS FROM THE LEOPARD FRONT

THE young botanist opened his medicine chest. He looked at the three bottles labelled "Spots." The first said, "Spots," the second, "If Spots Do Not Yield To Treatment," and the third, "If Spots Persist." The botanist had been so proud when he had given the black giant some tablets from the first bottle. The black man's daughter was sick, and the young botanist had thought he saw an opportunity to make a useful friend.

And now the tablets from the first and second bottles had failed to cure the rash. And the young botanist waited to hear if the contents of the third bottle had proved better magic.

If the third bottle failed . . . if the baby died . . . There were whispered stories of what an angered black might do, might still do in this jungle kingdom. . .

The young botanist waited, and he pictured the snakes slithering in the mud. He thought, "If all the snakes in the swamp stood on their tails this place would look like an asparagus bed." He was trembling, but there was nothing in his own medicine chest for this fear. . .

When the black father came, the young botanist saw at a glance that it was no good. The native said slowly, "Your medicine has failed. Now will you try praying to your God?"

The young botanist flinched. He was a scientist. People believed in him, had paid for the expedition. A scientist is a man who does not renounce the truth for expediency. There is a great tradition. . .

"No," said the boy, "I can't pray." His voice faltered. "You see, I don't believe in God."

The black giant looked down at the young botanist as if he felt sorry for the things he would have to do to him. "Then," he said, "you must understand . . . then you cannot possibly be offended if I call in our local witch-doctor."—(Reprinted from "Priests, Peters and Pussens," by OSWELL BLAKESTON; a new book of short stories which has just been published by The Fortune Press, 21, Belgrave Road, London, S.W.1; 7s. 6d.).

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MORALITY AND RELIGION

(Concluded from page 328)

THE development of mystical methods of auto-suggestion is largely historical, and can be traced through Plotinus and Dionysius, and medieval and 16th century mystics. With the magnetic analogy of Paracelsus came the animal magnetism cult. There is a change in theory but the practice of mesmerism led to the study of hypnotism. The application of hypnotism and suggestion in abnormal psychology by Charcot and Janet led to the study of the borderland of madness by Breuer and Freud. Psycho-analysis, dream psychology and psychopathology in everyday life show that the difference between the normal and abnormal is one of degree. The eccentricities of the mystic are accentuations of normal practice. But we note also, how the characteristic of mystery clings to our psychology; in the metaphysical assumptions, Ids, Libidos, Egos and Super-egos; and the mystical language shows the characteristic inversion. Instead of saying plainly that our actions are habitual and customary, and that we are unconscious of any cause, reason or consequence; the saying is that our motives are deep down in the unconscious; using the negative term as a positive; as if there were a pre-constituted, carefully formulated unconscious motive behind our behaviour. And so the soul is still the mystery.

It is said that Schopenhauer's ideas were derived from a study of the Vedanta, as with Nietzsche, from the Avesta. Sartre's far side of despair in some ways recalls the Man of Sorrows. We seem to be faced with the same old problems. The events of the past ten years might be given as showing that we have advanced little in two thousand years. We seem to act according to the barbarous Christian idea that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. But spare the rod and spoil the child is more practical than either Honi soit qui mal y pense or the idea that virtue is its own reward. Instead of arguing about egotism or altruism, or whether solipism or pragmatism is permissible, we might realise that we have practical problems. In our search for "higher motives" and trying to get to the "bottom" of things, the Challenge of Our Time lies in understanding the old and not finding a new, morality. Such phrases as "the right of conscience," "loyalty to an ideal," or "to thine own self be true," are sheer rhetoric; if they express a desire for freedom they are a revolt against accepted rules of conduct. To elevate personal opinion or feeling to the status of moral law is as much projection as that of divinity. It is equally absurd for psychologists to talk about the "old Adam"; that is the psychology of the jungle. But, in spite of the mystical theorising, modern psychology is practical. And one thing stands out crystal clear, a moral conscience is repression and inhibition, with its complexes and fixations, schizophrenia and paranoia. Character and conduct are related to conditioning circumstances. Our actions may be expressions of desire, but there is also the question whether their consequences are desirable.

Whereas the accumulation of knowledge is social, involving the interplay of ideas; feelings are personal, and sentiments are handed on only as conditioned behaviour. Customary behaviour is also social and respect for personal feeling is not enough. Personal response to customary usage has its social consequences. The appeal to personal feeling involves ignorance; it is potent but liable to be dangerous with insufficient knowledge. But the accumulation of knowledge applies in both sociology and psychology. With increase in potentiality in social and psychological science, morality becomes vacuous. Axiomatic assumptions are no substitute for knowledge gained from experience. Morality is pre-scientific sociology, as religion is primitive psychology.

H. H. PREECE.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Report of Executive Meeting held September 11, 1947

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

Also present: Messrs. Rosetti (A.C.), Seibert, Bryant, Griffiths, Lupton, Woodley, 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 Birmingham, Blackburn, Kingston, West London Branches, and to the Parent Society. Following applications, the Executive promised help to Bradford, Halifax, Blackburn, Glasgow, Merseyside, and Newcastle Branches.

Manchester Branch to be informed that the Executive cannot give full details of everything that takes place at Headquarters. All Branches are represented on the Executive and have the opportunity of contacting their representatives.

A letter from West Ham was referred back to the Branch for further information.

Motions remitted from the Conference were dealt with. The Executive were already doing the work suggested by North London and Merseyside motions. Manchester Branch resolution, "That expenses incurred in attending Executive meetings be met by the Society" could not be accepted on the grounds that the Executive cannot sanction the use of the Society's funds for that purpose.

Kingston Branch reported a very successful outdoor season.

The next meeting of the Executive was fixed for Thursday, October 23, and the meeting closed.

R. H. ROSETTI, General Secretary.

LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

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

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

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Modern History, 1815-1914," Mr. ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON, M.A.

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

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

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

Enfield.—Saturday, September 20, 6-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. E. T. BRYANT.

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

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

Oswaldtwistle.—Friday, September 19, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Padham.—Sunday, 2-45 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Market Square, Chesterfield).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: Messrs. T. M. MOSLEY and A. SAMMS. (Barker's Pool Sheffield).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Messrs. G. L. GREAVES and A. SAMMS.

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (38, John Bright Street, Room 13).—Saturday, September 20, 7 p.m.: "Jack London's Life," Mr. H. LENNARD.

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "Freethought and the Occult," Mr. J. CLAYTON (Burnley).

Merseyside Branch N.S.S. (Stork Hotel, Queen Square, Liverpool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Members and Supporters Meeting. All welcome.

JESUS AND MITHRA

AMONG the most ancient and the most honoured gods of Roman Paganism was the Persian Mithra. He came to the Empire out of a more remote oriental antiquity than did the great Mother of the Gods. . . In the beginning of the Christian centuries the domain of Mithra extended from the Indus in the east to the Euxine on the north. In the plateau countries of Asia Minor he was strongly entrenched. . . The mysteries of Mithra, like the other private cults, were strictly secret and the liturgy, which for the faithful was such an important part of their religion, has all but completely disappeared. Scarcely a trace is left of either hymn or prayer, and only scattered hints may be gathered here and there as to the character of the ceremonies included in the Mithraic rites. Mithraic monuments, however, are comparatively abundant, and from these one may derive indirect suggestions concerning the cult ritual. At least it is possible to gather from the remains of *Mithraea* a general impression of the effectiveness of the Mithraic rites.

The sanctuaries of Mithra were caves in the mountains or underground crypts. . . these chapels were always small, and when the brotherhood grew beyond a convenient size—a hundred members at the maximum—other *Mithraea* were established. In small shrines such as these, the impressions made on the mind of the neophyte were bound to be intimate and personal. . . Various ceremonies figured in the Mithraic liturgy, which were calculated to induce the process of spiritual renewal. Among the most important were the ablutions which from the earliest times were prominent in the cult of Mithra. The ceremony consisted either of sprinkling as with Holy water, or of complete immersions as in Isiac practice. In the grotto of the Persian God, water was always at hand, and in certain instances, at Ostia, for example, vaults have been found which may have served the purpose of immersion. Mithraic baptisms, like the later Christian rite, promised purification from guilt and the washing away of sins. The Christian Fathers noted the similarity and were quick to charge the Devil with plagiarism at this point. Tertullian declared:—

The Devil, whose business is to pervert the truth, mimics the exact circumstances of the divine sacraments in the mysteries of idols. He baptizes some, that is to say, his believers and followers, he promises forgiveness of sins in the sacred fount and thus initiates them into the religion of Mithra.

Again, and this time for the sake of rebuttal, the Christian lawyer stated the case for pagan baptism in the following words: "Well, but the nations, who are strangers to all understanding of spiritual powers ascribe to their idols the imbuing of waters with the self-same efficacy (as Christian baptism)." Then he countered with the argument, "but they cheat with waters that are widowed. For washing is the channel through which they are initiated into the sacred rites of some notorious Isis or Mithra." From Tertullian's *ex parte* statement of the case, even, it is clear that the neophyte came out of the baptism of Mithra with his conscience lightened from the weight of previous guilt. The waters of baptism were believed to wash away the defilement of the old life, and to induce a spiritual renewal.

Provision was also made in the Mithraic ritual for nourishing the new spiritual life in a realistic manner. At initiation, honey was applied to the hands and tongue of the candidate. According to Porphyry, this was done in both the Lion and the Persian grades of initiation. As Porphyry said explicitly, honey was supposed to be a powerful preservative; hence it would serve to keep the initiate from the blemish of sin. In the Mithraic liturgy, however, it was believed to have a positive efficacy also, as its application to the tongue of the candidate suggests. . . So in Mithraism the spiritually new-born were fed

with honey. So later, in primitive Christianity and among the Marcionites, the baptized were given a drink of milk mixed with honey. . . The communion included bread as well as wine. In the famous bas-relief from Konjica, Bosnia, there is a most interesting representation of a Mithraic communion. Before two reclining communicants stands a tripod supporting tiny loaves of bread, each distinctly marked with a cross. One of the standing figures in the group, easily identified as a Persian, presents the communicants with a drinking-cup. . . This bas-relief shows in an unusually circumstantial manner that the Persian mystery religion, like the Christian, had its sacramental communion with its bread and wine.

The likeness between the two rites did not fail to impress the Christian apologists who once more accused the demons of thievery. Justin Martyr, in speaking of the Christ and Eucharist asserted "the wicked demons have imitated this in the mysteries of Mithra, commanding the same thing to be done. For that bread and a cup of water are placed before the initiates with certain incantations in the mysteries, you either know or can learn." The similarities between the two communions, Mithraic and Christian, are indeed striking. . . Both were memorial services, celebrated in remembrance of the divine hero of the cult; for Mithra at the close of his redemptive career and just before his ascension to heaven, partook of a last supper with Helias and other companions of his labours. On the back of the great pivoted bas-relief at Hedderheim this original last supper was depicted. Whenever the initiates participated in the Mithraic communion, they recalled the mythical love-feast.

But it meant more to them than this. From their communion they gained assurance for the future. Supernatural effects were expected from the assimilation of the consecrated elements. From the bread and wine they gained not only vigour of body and wisdom of mind, but also the power to combat evil spirits and a divine substance that assured them of the boon of immortality. . . At different points in the ritual . . . spiritual genesis is specifically contrasted with natural birth. "Though I was born a mortal from a mortal mother . . . having been sanctified by sacred ceremonies, I am about to gaze with immortal eyes on the immortal æon." Again, the contrast between the natural birth and the spiritual rebirth is even more clearly brought out in the words addressed to the supreme god. "I, a man . . . begotten in mortal womb by human seed, and to-day begotten again by thee; a man, who has been called from so many thousands to immortality according to the plan of a god wonderful in his goodness, strives and longs to adore thee according to his human ability." The concluding words of the liturgy mark a high point of ecstatic expression, and form a fitting conclusion for a Mithraic ritual. "O Lord, having been born again, I pass away, being exalted the while. Having been exalted, I die. Coming into being by life-begetting birth and freed unto death, go the way as thou has ordered, as thou hast established the law and ordained the sacrament." . . .

Certain characteristics of the Mithraic ideal stand out with clarity. Primarily it was an ideal of perfect purity. The ritual prescribed repeated ablutions and purifications, and these were intended to wash away the stains of sin. The very conformity of ritual practice at this point showed a sensitiveness to moral turpitude. The Mithraic life was also one of steady self-control and of asceticism even. Rigorous fasts and abstinences were enjoined, and continence was encouraged as a special virtue. More broadly, the resistance of all sensuality was a mark of the Mithraist. Chiefly, however, the Mithraic life was characterised by militant virtue. The goodwill of this religion dwelt in action, and a premium was played on the energetic virtues rather than on gentler qualities. . . In the largest terms, life for the Mithraist was a prolonged struggle, a part of the great cosmic warfare of good against evil, right against wrong.—"Pagan Regeneration: A Study of Mystery Initiations in the Græco-Roman World" (1929), by H. R. WILLOUGHBY, pp. 143-166.