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VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Why We Laugh

THE other day I was asked why we Freethinkers took a delight in laughing at the religious beliefs of other people. As a matter of fact, I was not at the time laughing at religion or anything else, but simply arguing that religion was untrue, and pointing out, by the way, the absurd character of some of the beliefs in question. But I replied, offhand, that as I hadn't any religion of my own to laugh at I was compelled, if I wished to laugh at religion at all, to do so at the expense of other people. To this my questioner retorted, "But why laugh at religion at all?" and that I countered with the return, "Why not?" And the questioner gave it up as hopeless. He probably felt that with such a person as myself further argument was useless. Evidently he had been accustomed to people treating religion as something too solemn to be spoken about in the ordinary way, and in ordinary tones. And it was quite obvious that, so far as he was concerned, the removal of the conviction that religion was to be dealt with quite differently to the way in which we deal with other subjects, was essential to a rational consideration of the subject.

And this conviction was really at the bottom of my reply. It was not hasty, but deliberate. It is far too often taken for granted that one must not discuss questions of religion as one talks about politics, or science, or literature. Of course, this is all very well so far as the religionist himself is concerned. It is part of his mental outfit. His fear of religion is traditional, and even though that fear be modified by modern influences, there still remain the dregs of the feeling. But why should he expect those who do not share his beliefs to manifest the same mental inclinations? On the face of it, the Freethinker, because he is a Freethinker, does not consider religion to be either useful or truthful. To him it is something that began in falsehood, and has been perpetuated by methods more or less blame-worthy, and which he is convinced, rightly or wrongly, is still responsible for a deal of evil in the world. Why should he, then, be asked to deal with religion in a way that all honest men and women reserve for that which they really respect? Actually the religionist is asking the Freethinker to treat religion as though he believed it were true, or might be true. He is to sacrifice his convictions in order to gratify the irrational demands of other people.

What is there about a belief in religion that should protect it from ridicule? In primitive times there does exist a *prima-facie* case for such a demand. The gods are then believed to be without discrimination in the giving of benefits or the infliction of punishments. It is the tribe that benefits by God's pleasure, or suffers from his anger. If one person offends he may punish all. Under these

conditions, and while this belief is actual, the rest of the community is so far entitled to demand that no single member shall act so as to injure all the rest. All being collectively responsible, each must act with a view to this collective responsibility. But we no longer have this belief. We do not believe, that is, religious people do not believe that God will punish the whole of the nation because one person does wrong. Each is, as far as God is concerned, responsible for his own actions. My laughing at religion, my ignoring God, or speaking disrespectfully of God, is entirely a matter between myself and him. Anybody may be justified in pointing out to me the error of my ways, but no one is warranted in taking it as a personal affront because my ways are not his ways.

As a matter of fact, we all of us laugh at one another's beliefs, and in many directions it is considered quite legitimate that we should do so. I once knew a man who carried a potato about in his trousers pocket as a cure for rheumatism. I laughed at his belief in the virtue of the potato; he knew I laughed at it, and never questioned my right to be amused. There are plenty of people who will not sit down with thirteen at table. To them it is no idle fancy, but a matter of life or death. Yet they are laughed at, and there exists a club somewhere in London that sets itself deliberately to break down this and similar superstitions by holding a periodical dinner at which these things are ridiculed. The diners walk into the room under a ladder, they cross their knives, they upset salt, they "outrage the feelings" of believers in every possible way. Yet no one ever blames them for their tactics; on the contrary, many who resent the Freethinker laughing at religion think they are doing a useful and much-needed work. And there exists, in addition, a whole host of superstitions—which really form the raw material of religion—at which the world generally laughs, and no one complains.

When one comes to think of it there are few beliefs at which some people do not laugh, and without their right to laugh being challenged. It is only in connection with religion that the right to laugh is seriously questioned. And even then it is a question of geography. We may all, in this country, laugh at Mohammedanism, or Hinduism, or the religious beliefs of primitive people. In other countries we might just as freely laugh at Christianity. The Christian forgets that the Freethinker is exercising a privilege of which he freely avails himself. I fully admit that people take their religious beliefs seriously. But so did my friend with the potato cure for rheumatism take his belief seriously. To say that we must not laugh at religious beliefs because other people take them very seriously is really stating the cause of laughter, not furnishing a reason for gravity. If they did not take them seriously there would be no occasion for laughter. It is not the belief itself, but its setting that causes mirth. A potato is a good thing in its way, and not at all a subject for mirth. Rheumatism is a reality by no

means to be despised by those who are favoured with its presence. There is no cause for mirth there. It is the conjunction of the two in the mind of a professedly civilised man that makes one smile. And this is equally true of religious doctrines. We do not smile at the doctrines but at people believing them. Oliver Wendell Holmes said that many people were saved from insanity by their stupidity, and therefore one ought to go mad once in a way to prove one's intelligence. So one might say of religious beliefs. Not to be able to laugh when one finds them taken seriously shows a lack of humour perfectly reprehensible in a civilised community. One *ought* to laugh at them—at least occasionally, to prove that one is free from thralldom. It would really be a much saner policy to lock a man up who could not laugh at religion than to imprison him for holding it up to ridicule.

It is very suggestive that we only laugh at what are called "living" religions. Dead ones are quite safe. No one wishes to laugh at them, and people would be astonished if one were to. The religious stories of the Egyptians, or the Greeks, or the Romans may be recited or read without causing any amusement. Nay, we even forget that they are religious stories, once believed in as fervently as any current Christian doctrine, and become interested in them as material for psychologic study, as poetry, or as yielding a lesson for moral guidance. We read all these ancient legends and none of us laughs. We hear the Christian legends preached and many of us cannot forbear smiling. Why this distinction? Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Christian legends all belong to the same class. Well, the answer is that we do not really laugh at the legends, but at those who believe in them. We do not laugh at the story of Jesus walking on the water or casting devils out of lunatics, or at the story of his ascension to heaven; we laugh at people believing these to be historical events. There is really nothing in the stories, as stories, to cause laughter. It is the Christian who is ridiculous, and he is never more ridiculous than when he is engaged in pointing out that other people must discuss him and his beliefs with a gravity that neither of them deserves. If the Christian were only out of the way, we could treat the Biblical legends exactly as we treat the legends of other people. It is the believer who blocks the way. He is the only obstacle to intelligent people getting out of the Christian legends all the interest and instruction that they might be made to yield.

Suppose the legends of the Greek gods and goddesses were believed in by twentieth-century men and women? In that case, there would be the same cause and the same need for laughing at them that there now exists for laughing at Christian doctrines. Nay, we know that when these stories were believed, people did laugh at them, and we also know that these laughers are now recognised as the liberators of their day. Turn back to Aristophanes, and you will find him driving people into Rationalism by a thousand and one digs at popular beliefs. Or, better still, read Lucian, and you will find him pouring ridicule upon the religious doctrines of Paganism. And Lucian knew perfectly well what he was about. He knew that the only way to cure people of a ridiculous belief is to make it appear ridiculous. When a belief is no longer capable of serious intellectual defence it is impervious to serious intellectual attack. And then the only weapon left, and the only weapon it dreads, is ridicule. That is why Christianity nowadays, through the

mouths of parsons and judges, says, "By all means argue solemnly with us, if you will; but do not laugh, lest we die."

I remember a long, long time ago standing side by side with the then famous newspaper man, W. T. Stead. He was a sincere religionist, and we got on well together. He had come to the meeting to maintain the right of every man to "blaspheme" whenever he pleased to do so. He was a genuine believer, and was content to leave the matter between the individual and God—who are the only parties really concerned. We, likewise, uphold the right of man to laugh at anything he pleases. If he is laughing at anything good, the world will soon be laughing at him, not *with* him. A good thing will outlive laughter, a bad thing will succumb sooner or later. Laughter is the great cure for fools—and the fools know it. There is nothing healthier than laughter. Physically, it aids health. Mentally, it makes for sanity. It is the world's great purifier, not only in religion, but in social and political matters likewise. So long as a people cannot laugh at an absurd practice or a ridiculous belief, they are never out of danger. They are like Madame de Stael, who had given up the belief in ghosts without ceasing to be afraid of them. The world has had many different sorts of religions, but it has never had one that taught its votaries to laugh. To have taught laughter would have been to encourage suicide. And they who understand the nature of religion among a civilised people will not lightly forgo the use of a weapon that can be wielded with such deadly effect.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

THE CENTENARY OF ANNIE BESANT

I

WHATEVER else may be said about Annie Besant, the centenary of whose birth occurs this month, no one can deny that she was one of the most colourful personalities British womanhood has ever produced, and that during her long working career of over sixty years, the limelight of publicity rarely lifted its beam. No more sincere woman ever trod a public platform, and if only she had had a leaven of humour and was not always so deadly—and monotonously—serious, her influence might have been much greater. For Freethinkers the record of her life has many lessons, and I want briefly to dwell on her achievement in the two phases of her activity to which she devoted so many years of ungrudging and often thankless labour.

She had a more or less happy childhood, and was married to the Rev. Frank Besant (a brother of Sir Walter Besant) at the age of twenty. But a parson's wife in the country in mid-Victorian days must have had a pretty drab time—and even the birth of her two children appears to have done but little to alleviate her utter boredom. She wrote stories for the "Family Herald," discovered that she could both write and "orate," and after finding herself very dissatisfied with her husband's Christianity—reading some of his theological books only increased her doubts the more—she discovered that her scepticism was strengthened through reading books like Greg's "Creed of Christendom" and Matthew Arnold's "Literature and Dogma." She came up to London and heard the Rev. Charles Voysey, the Theist, preach, and eventually became convinced that Jesus Christ was not God Almighty.

Actually, Mrs. Besant had a hard struggle not to give up her faith, but neither a long interview with Dr. Pusey, nor further intensive study of the Christian religion, made any impression on her; it was meeting Thomas Scott which really

decided her to give up even her home if necessary, to be free in thought and action.

Thomas Scott was a remarkable man who had had a very adventurous career, hunting, and fishing, all over the world, and sharing the hardships of native life. When he finally settled down in Ramsgate and married, he began to issue extremely heretical pamphlets written mostly by scholars, the some of culture and polish. Many of these pamphlets, even at this day, can be read with profit for they dealt with fundamental issues—but, like the best pamphlets in general, they are not easy to obtain. It was Scott who suggested that Mrs. Besant should write an essay for his series and she responded with one that became very well known, on the "Deity of Jesus of Nazareth." From then onwards she came to see the absurdities inherent in the Christian creed, and eventually acknowledged herself an Atheist. By then, of course, she had to leave her husband—a step not at all easy either for herself or for the Rev. F. Besant seventy years ago.

It did not take Mrs. Besant long to find her way to Moncreaf Conway and then to Charles Bradlaugh. "He is," Mrs. Conway told her, "the finest speaker of Saxon English that I have ever heard except, perhaps, John Bright, and his power over a crowd is something marvellous." Mrs. Besant had a "vague idea" that Bradlaugh was rough and common, but she decided to find out for herself, and on August 2, 1874, made her first appearance at the Hall of Science.

"I remember well (she subsequently wrote) my sensations as I looked at Charles Bradlaugh for the first time. The grave, quiet, *strong* look, as he sat facing the crowd, impressed me strangely, and most of all was I surprised at the breadth of forehead, the massive head, of the man I had heard described as a mere ignorant demagogue. . . his language was splendid. I had never before heard eloquence, sarcasm, fire, and passion brought to bear on the Christian superstition, nor had I ever before felt the sway of the orator, nor the power that dwells in spoken words."

The meeting with Bradlaugh brought her a place on the staff of the "National Reformer," for which she thenceforth wrote under the name of "Ajax" so that she could still write for Thomas Scott. Soon she was also lecturing for the National Secular Society, and it should not be difficult for modern members to understand the enthusiasm this accomplished young woman, endowed with grace and beauty, aroused as they heard her fresh silvery voice in the more or less drab surroundings of the Secularism of her day.

She was ever at Bradlaugh's side helping him in every way—and valuable help it was in his electioneering campaigns. The famous "Elements of Social Science" from parts of which she dissented, showed her the problem of population with regard to economics—a problem scoffed at mostly by people who know nothing about it but who are at last beginning to learn by bitter experience that Malthus was right. She became convinced of this as was Bradlaugh, and so in 1877, when she was thirty, she was in some measure prepared for the trial which coupled her name more than ever with that of Bradlaugh and made hers known throughout the length and breadth of the land.

This was the prosecution of the publisher—Charles Watts—of Dr. Charles Knowlton's "Fruits of Philosophy," in some ways one of the most significant pamphlets ever written. If Malthus was right when he said population tended to increase faster than the means of subsistence, some method of birth control was absolutely necessary. Malthus advised late marriage, but Francis Place and Richard Carlile long before Knowlton gave definite instructions in contraception and were in consequence regarded with horror by all good Christians. All the same, the Knowlton pamphlet as well as one by Robert Dale Owen were freely circulated for about 40 years, when the "authorities" suddenly woke up and decided on a prosecution

of both. Poor old Truelove, who was responsible for Owen's "Moral Physiology," got four months, but Bradlaugh (taking over from Watts) decided to fight with all the power at his command—not because he agreed altogether with Knowlton, but on the principle of the right of free thought and publication. In this he could have had no better supporter than Mrs. Besant. There is no space to deal fully with this trial here, but it certainly caused as much sensation as the celebrated Tichborne case a few years previously. It was one thing for such a "blatant" Atheist as Charles Bradlaugh defending artificial contraception—but, a member of the female sex! The placid—more or less—Victorian mind with its definite ideas as to what a "female" should do or say, got the shock of the century but the case put Mrs. Besant definitely on the map. Her eloquence impressed everybody, and I doubt whether again in her most passionate advocacy she managed to reach such heights as when defending the right to speak freely even on sex and birth control. Nowadays most people would laugh at the solemn lawyers, judges and jury who looked almost with fright upon the defendants whose acquittal, after a technical hitch (as the B.B.C. would say), filled them with even more horror and fright.

The result of the case was that hundreds of thousands of copies of the "Fruits of Philosophy" were sold and later perhaps the same number of Mrs. Besant's pamphlet which she wrote to supersede Knowlton—but which I personally think was not half so good.

Mrs. Besant, however, did not stop at such an unpopular cause as Malthusianism—it was not long before she became a Socialist in spite of the fact that Bradlaugh always opposed Socialism. She became a Socialist because, as she says, she believed in Evolution, because of the poverty of the workers which appalled her, and because of the failure of what she termed the present civilisation. She held debates with both Foote and Bradlaugh—the spoken one with Foote can still be read with advantage. She opposed cruelty and injustice, and marched with such badly paid workers as the girls employed in match-making.

Needless to say she was allowed by Bradlaugh the freest expression of opinion though she was wise enough to realise that her Socialism should properly be expressed outside the pages of the "National Reformer"; and so she began her own journal, "Our Corner"—in which, in addition to her own essays, will be found the first publication of the early novels of George Bernard Shaw. Mrs. Besant found in Socialism everything for human happiness—freedom of thought, of work, and of opportunity, and she put into its propaganda exactly the same enthusiasm she had hitherto put for Atheism.

It was the publication of Mme. Blavatsky's "Secret Doctrine" which really marked the turning point of Mrs. Besant's career—but that deserves another article.

H. CUTNER.

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ACID DROPS

The Bishop of Whithy is distressed. It seems there is only one priest to 53,000 people. That is probably bad—for the priest, but it may be a stroke of luck for the people. The Bishop says "It is our duty to see that the matter has necessary attention." We note that it is not the people that are complaining.

The amount of stealing and cheating throughout the nation continues. It is on a very large scale, but large or little, whether a war is "inevitable" or not, war always means the sacrifice of the better aspects of life. If that could be driven into the minds of people of all countries it would do more to secure peace than any of the meetings that are now—apparently—concerned with which one can get the better of the others. The leaders of every country are complaining that this or that country is only concerned to steal a march on the others. We agree, but it is a very, very old tale.

From all quarters the leading Christ dealers are mourning and fearing the future of their positions. Some write and speak as if it was time to throw over their professed beliefs and try to put something in the place of historic Christianity. For example, there is the Bishop of Southwell, Dr. Russell Barry, who, in his Diocesan Magazine, is proclaiming that "it would not take much to push us into apathy and defeatism." That surely is black enough, but is only expressing the truth, and it is not far to search to find that what he has quoted is really true. It may be that some of these things are overdone, but in substance it is the truth. But it is the plain truth. Everywhere the Churches are losing ground. Leaders have tried all sorts of tricks to hide the truth. We are witnessing the death of the gods.

As things stand there is nothing like the Roman Church for fishing in cloudy waters. Only yesterday the message was given out that Atheistic Russia was the home of all that is vile, too vile for good Roman believers. Now we find Cardinal Schuster saying that good friendliness with the people in Russia will be the ruling figure soon. Russia and the Roman Church will soon be friendly. That may be true, with certain qualifications. But the certain thing is that no existing religious body is likely to go farther than for believers and unbelievers to walk side by side—as citizens. But that is a very great difference from Rome making concessions in religious matters. "The great lying Church" will not go farther.

But if Rome expects to perform the miracle of capturing Russia by the mouth of its priests, they have given up capturing England. For we have Fr. Ripley saying that "secularism in Britain has become the philosophy of the day and Christianity is a back number." Well, we of the open Freethinking body have done our best to put Christianity well in the background, where certain developments were needed, and Christian preachers are looking very grim. But we must not imagine that this will, or should, weaken our energies. Ancient Rome and Greece were two of the great countries, both of which were, in spite of troubles, moving for a greater state. But then came the Christian cloud and civilisation sank lower and lower till, for centuries, the world of the East and the West became the "Dark Ages," a title given by Christian historians.

Fr. Ripley became more nonsensical as he proceeded with his "yarn." He says that with the *going* Christian Church there went "The Christian family, the Christian State, Christian Justice and Christian outlook." A more greater outburst of sheer nonsense no one could imagine. The Church had its chance. It had more power than any other body of men and women. The Roman Church could make monarchs bow before it, and the deeper the power of the Church the deeper the degradation of human life. The only thing in which the most ancient Church showed itself supreme was for its cruelty, its forced ignorance and brutality. The literature that proved this is great and authoritative. We are not surprised that the Roman Church puts so many bans on its followers reading the truth.

Our clergy seem to be ready to do anything and to go anywhere, also to say anything or reject anything, if only there is plenty of room for the Church. We have already the "try-on" as between the Roman Church and Russia. Now the Archbishop of York says: "Materialistic Marxism, Communism, logically interpreted is opposed to Christianity, but it is untrue to say that within a Communist state there is no room for Christianity." Oh, dear! It is only yesterday that our spiritual leaders were—with few exceptions—proclaiming that in no way could friendship exist between Christ and Atheism. That was proclaimed by the Churches, with one or two exceptions, and even Churchill, then in power, gave large sums of English money to help Russians who were fighting the new Russian world. Now our chief religious friends of God have discovered that there is plenty of room in Russia for English Christianity. We daresay that is the case. There have been in this country leading Christians who have faced death rather than play false to their religion. But Christian leaders now are of different make. Their chief consideration is to find the side that is strongest. It really looks, in some quarters, as though we may soon have another "true" Jesus whose main desire was a universal Atheism.

Thirty years after the Supreme event, the "Universe" has managed to get interviews with the relatives of the children who are responsible for the imbecility known as "Fatima." Its "staff reporter" tells us that one of them remembered "the October miracle through which Our Lady proved to 70,000 people that her three chosen confidants spoke the truth when they said that they had seen the Queen of Heaven." We all know what that October miracle was—"the sun turned and turned and then seemed to drop," and this was followed by a thousand other marvels which the passage of time and the ease with which the reporter believed managed properly to embellish. The idea of checking this balderdash appears to have been the last thing a staff reporter was required to do. However, this pilgrimage brought no miracles—not even a teeny one for the readers of the "Universe."

An army chaplain writing to the "Church Times" points out that few padres "hear much of the other side"—the side which wanted to abolish Church parades. He claims he had plenty of opportunity of hearing the opinion of the men, and he is convinced that "the most seriously-minded men hate being marched to Church . . . for every soldier who has a nostalgia for Church parades there are dozens whose respect for the Church has been destroyed by this forced worship." That puts the matter in a nut-shell, but there will always remain many army Christians who feel that every man, just because he is in the army, must be compelled to worship, and they are bitterly disappointed that such compulsion has been now denied them. They look like being even far more disappointed when they get back to civilian life and find the almost complete indifference to God's word confronting them everywhere.

A German correspondent informs us that Cologne Cathedral, badly bombed during the war, is being repaired. The excuse, no doubt, will be that it is an historic monument. We are wondering what excuse will be found for the repairing of the Catholic Priests Seminary nearby. The Seminary is standing amidst acres of devastated houses and heaps of rubble. We would suggest that the repairing of this priests' training school before ordinary dwelling houses is not calculated to help in the rehabilitation of Cologne.

We are curious why not more protests were forthcoming, particularly from homeless people, or from people still living in ramshackle sheds, cellars and bombed houses, when we realised that Western Germany is predominantly Roman Catholic, who will, of course, consider it more important that God's house be repaired rather than their own. After all, this life is but a "vale of tears." It will be better in the after life, where the Lord's house of many mansions does not get bombed, and, up to date, no overcrowding.

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SUGAR PLUMS

We have but little space to report the gathering of representatives and friends from branches of the N.S.S. at Newcastle. The proceedings began with a Dinner at the Douglas Hotel; there was a good gathering of old and young, and the future looks well for Freethought. Music and song helped, and we are sure that those present will not easily forget the meetings. On Sunday, despite counter attractions, Mr. J. T. Brighton was as wise and as witty as usual, and the gentleness with which he strangles his adversaries is worth noting. Mr. G. L. Colebrook showed that he can fight as well as he sings. The meeting ended with an historical picture of Christianity by Chapman Cohen that was deadly enough to make an Archbishop shiver and a militant Atheist sleep easily.

The following was taken from the South African "Sunday Express":—

A MODERN HERO?

It is a tragedy of our times that the Rev. G. C. Uys, of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission at Calvinia, will be spoken of by many as a hero and a man of praiseworthy courage.

This servant of God was found guilty of arming himself with a sjambok, providing himself with associates, and thrashing a Coloured teacher with whose views he happened to disagree—and, moreover, thrashing this leader of the Coloured community while he was being held down.

It is a shocking crime when performed by any ordinary person, but when performed by a man of Peace—not in sudden temper, but in cold, calculated anger—then it assumes a much graver significance.

Of the penalty—"ordered to come up for sentence in six months if called upon to do so"—one can only ask:

"What would it have been had the Coloured teacher, disagreeing with the views of the preacher, provided himself with three escorts, gone to his victim's house and assaulted him?"

London Freethinkers should not miss the opportunity of hearing Mr. J. T. Brighton who lectures for the West London Branch N.S.S. to-day (Sunday) in the Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, at 7-15 p.m. Mr. Brighton's home counties are Durham and Northumberland where he is well known for his humorous and instructive addresses.

It is interesting to find the "Bible Handbook" still holding its own as a best-seller. Though in its 9th edition the demand is astonishing—proof of its great value to Freethinkers in their propagandist activities. Those who have not secured a copy are advised to do so at once for even a big edition does not last long. The price is 3s., postage 2½d.

GOD—FACT OR FICTION?

If you can believe you are the son of someone who has never yet been seen, who lives no one knows where and whose existence has never been proved—then you may call yourself a true Christian. But you must also believe that this mysterious Unseen is *three persons in one*, that he possesses a human body although invisible to the human eye, that he is everywhere at the same time, knows all our thoughts, sees all our actions and hears all our requests—even though he may not grant them!

In the primitive past it was not so very difficult for simple, undeveloped minds to believe in such a being if only for the reason that there was so much in this world for which early man could find no satisfactory explanation. Floods, droughts, earthquakes, hurricanes, sickness—all were inexplicable unless they could be ascribed to the wrath of some supernatural deity. Fear, then, was the father of religion, for it was through fear of the unknown that man offered sacrifices and prayers for protection and deliverance.

But, surely, it is not so reasonable for civilised and educated men of to-day to act and believe exactly as their early ancestors did. Science has taught us much and we now know the true causes of almost all natural phenomena. Biological and chemical research has shown us the causes of disease. Meteorology explains the winds and the rains, and we now know that thunder is *not* the angry Voice of God. And yet we still continue to call such natural disturbances as earthquakes, floods and droughts, *Acts of God*. We still pray for the rains to fall or to cease just as the savages did, and we are quite convinced that God sits up above with his hand on a celestial water tap!

Surely, such a belief cannot be satisfying to any man who uses his brains honestly and who is not forbidden by his Church to think for himself. Alas, how very reluctant we are to deprive an Unknown, Unseen and *Unproved* God of his cruel and vengeful habits. After all, why should a God who is supposed to be all-kind and all-loving wish to destroy our crops, wreck our labours and inflict want, pain and suffering on people who have done him no harm? And what is the purpose of his remaining so invisible and so unknowable?

If the Church really wants to obtain converts and to fill its empty pews it should produce some definite proof of the existence of this omnipotent Author of All Things. The Atheist is not an Atheist because he hates God or because he has any quarrel or grievance against God, but because he is a reasonable and thinking person who cannot honestly believe in the myths and superstitions of his ignorant forbears. If the existence of God could be *proved* then every Atheist would be ready and willing to acknowledge such a God.

Not so very long ago it was generally believed that the earth was the centre of the universe, that it was *flat* and that the sun travelled across it from East to West; but now we know it is but one of the smallest and most insignificant specks in the universe, that it is practically spheroid and that it travels round the sun. And so the old belief was cast aside for the new—although the Church was not slow to persecute men for their conversion. Unfortunately our religious leaders have never been in the forefront in encouraging new ideas based on the results of scientific research and discovery. We owe all we have learned, not to the Church, but to the so-called heretics who defied its teaching rather than be dishonest and conceal the truth.

In the light of modern knowledge the Church has been proved wrong in its teaching, again and again, while its paid apologists have a full-time job of trying to square the Bible with the evidence of scientific research. Why, then, should we continue to believe blindly anything it chooses to tell us? The scientist provides his proofs before asking us to believe his statements and conclusions, but the Church does nothing of the kind. It not only demands that we accept all its doctrines without question, but threatens us with eternal damnation if we don't!

What Atheists ask is reasonable enough—substantiation of the claims and conclusive evidence of the facts upon which Christianity is founded. After all, religion is a very costly matter apart from numerous other considerations. It should therefore be called upon to justify the millions it obtains and spends because, if Christianity is based on a fallacy, then those millions are being obtained under false pretences and could more profitably be used in other directions. And think of the wasted manpower—thousands of men kept busily employed in the perpetuation of a myth!

We are not little children, neither are we simple savages, but intelligent men and women with developed minds and with the power to reason. What is known as common sense guides us in all our doings. Indeed, what sort of a world would it be if we were to apply the Christian teaching of blind faith to everyday affairs? We would not ask nor require any proof of the soundness of commercial enterprises; we would entrust our money to anyone without security, and we would not even require the evidence of our eyes or ears in judging values or assessing truth. We should accept any and every statement made as authentic and correct without a single doubt or inquiry. The result would be chaos—and yet this is exactly what we are asked and expected to do where religion is concerned. We are told by the Church that to question is sinful and that we must not use our reasoning powers nor trust in our intelligence where Holy Writ is concerned. Such a demand, of course, the Atheist is quite unable to accept.

Those who preach the virtue of blind faith and who put ignorance and superstition before intellect and reason should at least show us that they themselves do possess that blind faith and do put it into practice—or they are not worth following. If the Archbishop of Canterbury honestly believes that God is All-powerful, then why doesn't he demonstrate his belief in God's power and in God's ability to keep us from all harm? Acts speak louder than words—but words are so much easier and safer. God's chosen Leader of the Church need only climb to the top of St. Paul's in order to prove God's existence and power once and for all. He could then cast himself forth and trust in God to save him. If God *does* exist and *is* all-powerful, surely he would not allow such a high dignitary to be dashed to pieces before the multitude, but rather would he cause the breezes to blow and billow out the Archbishop's costly raiment so that he would float gently and gracefully to earth absolutely unharmed.

Then—and not before—should intelligent people be asked to accept God's existence as Fact and not as Fiction.

W. H. WOOD.

WHAT HAS PRESBYTERIANISM DONE FOR SCOTLAND?

II

DID you ever stop to think of the vast army of priests and parsons, all of them posing as their brothers' keepers, and seeking to foster an ignorance upon the people which they as students of scripture must know to be false? Each one of them derives a salary for "explaining" to his congregation the true meaning of what the Bible teaches. For ages this explaining has been going on, and is still today. Everything depends upon keeping alive "The Mystery of Godliness," in order to maintain their position. Are you so dumb that you cannot do some "explaining" of your own? Your indifference to do so has helped to build one of the biggest rackets in the world today.

As a boy I was induced to go to Sunday school, I never could become reconciled to its teachings. My brother led the singing there in such hymns as: "There is a fountain filled with blood," at which I hung my head in shame. I much preferred to start off on a Sunday morning to roam the hills, admiring nature in all her grandeur, returning home tired and hungry, but happier than if I had spent the time in Sunday school listening to a story of hell and damnation, and of a man having been nailed

to a cross, the shedding of whose blood was to save me from the wrath of an angry God. This fantastic story never appealed to me as a boy, nor in after years as a man.

The boys of Scotland in those days had to submit to a continuous flow of "Thou shalt not's." There is nothing astonishing in the fact that so many of them left the country at the earliest opportunity in order to find a freer scope to their talents. Barrie went to London as a play writer; he would have found this impossible in Scotland in competition with the church. Even Harry Lauder had to go there to receive recognition. Andrew Carnegie, Robert Dollar, Graham Bell, John Muir, and many others might never have been heard of, only for their leaving Scotland. Some years ago I recall a dozen Scots around the Bay of San Francisco, all men of prominence in business affairs, who had left Scotland as poor boys when seeing but little hope for advancement amidst the fogs of Presbyterianism. Even to cross the border into England seemed to afford some relief; at least a person could whistle there on Sunday and meet with fewer frowns of disapproval than in Scotland.

There is considerable truth in the Englishman's complaint that there is a beaten path between Scotland and England.

Said indeed that the budding genius of the Scottish youth should find it necessary to leave the land of their birth in order to find a better opportunity to develop their talents away from the stultifying atmosphere of the Kirk, where the tendency is to stifle everything of a liberty loving nature in youth. Presbyterianism has always given a cold and icy reception to everything which came in competition with it for Sunday favours.

The Scot improves faster in other parts of the world where he comes in contact with other beliefs more liberal than those of his own. He is quick to learn, and soon acquires a habit of being at the top of the class, once he is free to think for himself.

The whole system of Presbyterianism in Scotland tends towards stagnation and decay, instead of progress. The one who devotes so much attention to the affairs of another world generally knows the least about the practical ones of this: "One world at a time." Those who keep their feet upon this earth without attempting to soar too far away from its many problems make by far the better citizens. Presbyterianism warps the intellect by seeking to divert the attention to an imaginary world and dulls man's perception to the practical affairs of the here and now. The beauties of this world have been missed by groping after shadows of an imaginary next. Fortunately the ravings of The Sermon on the Mount are ignored, and thus prison and insane asylums are missed.

I recall the solemnity of the Scottish "Sabbath"; the bath had to be taken on the Saturday night, the shoes cleaned, and other things done to lessen the work on Sunday, even to cooking. We must not talk in a loud tone of voice, and the sound of laughter must not be heard in the land. I was as much an American as I am today when in May, 1882, I landed in Minneapolis—a subject for the "melting pot." I was like a bird let out of a cage, the following day was Sunday, when I saw great throngs going off on picnics. Bands were playing, flags were flying, everyone well-behaved and happiness depicted in every face; liberty seemed in the air I breathed. What a contrast to gloomy Scotland on such a day; when Christians consider it a sin to be happy by playing golf, tennis or lawn bowling. These are healthful exercises with nothing of a boisterous nature attached to them. The golf player might walk over the course with a stick in his hand and little would be thought of it, but because he reverses the stick and hits a little ball around he is considered a Sabbath-breaker.

In America Scotsmen play football on Sunday, and men and women play tennis and lawn bowling, and no one here thinks of their moral character as having degenerated by their doing so; neither can the people of Scotland discover any defects in their behaviour should these same people pay a friendly visit during the summer. On the contrary, they may have become broader minded and less of the "I am holier than thou" in their manner.

Here in California in defiance of the religionists of our lawn bowling club, I started a second club for Sunday bowling, and from this beginning Sunday bowling has spread all over California—why not?
ROBERT HOWDEN.

(To be continued)

CORRESPONDENCE

AN APPEAL

Sir.—Could any of your readers offer, or give recommendation of, a bed-sitting room (preferably in London, but not necessarily) for a gentleman of 62, lame from rheumatism, but otherwise healthy? He needs no attention beyond meals and such ordinary matters as required by boarders. He would spend his time reading and writing quietly, as he is an author and journalist. At present, owing to existing stringencies of housing and also to personal complications, he is in considerable distress for want of a suitable lodging. He would be a cheerful boarder. Any inquiries could be addressed to me.—Yours, etc.,
J. W. POYNTER.

99, Grosvenor Avenue, Highbury, London, N. 5.

OBITUARY

ALEXANDER DUNCAN McLAREN

Freethinkers all over the country will learn with deep regret of the death of Alexander Duncan McLaren. During the recent heat wave he collapsed in the street, was taken to St. Charles Hospital, Ladbroke Grove, and later to Hammersmith Hospital, where he died on October 1, in his 80th year. Independent, scholarly, warm-hearted and modest, he was an attractive personality. As a librarian in Australia he knew books from the inside, as a teacher in Germany he came into direct contact with youth, as a promising lawyer he saw the seamy side of life, and in the university of world travel he added further to his knowledge, experience and usefulness to humanity.

His scholarly lectures from the National Secular Society's platform were always appreciated, as were his frequent contributions to "The Freethinker." He served the N.S.S. loyally and well under the Presidency of G. W. Foote and Chapman Cohen, was a member of the Executive until other calls upon his time made it impossible, but he remained a Director of the Secular Society Limited until his death. Besides his writings in the cause of Freethought, he was also the writer of other books. He had an intense love of humanity and toiled ceaselessly, for the sheer love of it, to lift mankind and civilisation to a higher level of culture and self respect.

The final scene at the St. Marylebone Crematorium, Finchley, London, on October 8, was quiet and in every way fitting the wish and character of the man. One life-long friend, Dr. Gompertz, travelled from South Shields to be present. The Executive of the National Secular Society and the Secular Society Limited were represented, and a Secular Service was read by the General Secretary, N.S.S.
R. H. R.

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (38, John Bright Street, Room 13).—Saturday, October 18, 7 p.m.: "The Secular Basis of Progress and Philosophy," Mr. C. SMITH (Hon. Secretary, Birmingham Branch).

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanic's Institute).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "China—Its Culture and Philosophy," Miss MARJORIE SMITH (Bingley).

Glasgow Secular Society (McLellan Galleries, 270, Sauchiehall Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: "Marxism and Freethought," Mr. JACK QUINN.

Halifax Branch N.S.S. (7, St. James Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: A lecture.

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: MARJORIE NICHOLSON, of the Fabian Colonial Bureau.

World Union of Freethinkers
PUBLIC CONFERENCE
BIRMINGHAM, October 24-26

HUMAN PROGRESS AND VATICAN REACTION

Friday, October 24, 7-30 p.m.

Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (69a, New Street).—Reception of Delegates and Friends.

Saturday, October 25, 3 p.m.

Medical Theatre (The University, Edmund Street).—"The Secular Basis of Morality."

Chairman: P. SARGANT FLORENCE.

Speaker: ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON.

Saturday, October 25, 7 p.m.

Medical Theatre.—"The World Policy of the Church of Rome."

Chairman: CHAPMAN COHEN.

Speakers: AVRO MANHATTAN, CHARLES DUFF.

Sunday, October 26, 10.30 a.m.

Society of Artists Gallery.—"Where Rome Rules."

Chairman: To be announced.

Speakers: ILSA BAREA, AVRO MANHATTAN.

Sunday, October 26, 3 p.m.

Society of Artists Gallery. — "The Humanist Contribution to Civilisation."

Chairman: To be announced.

Speaker: JOHN KATZ.

All sessions of the Conference are open to the public on payment of the Conference fee, 7s. 6d., including refreshments on Friday evening. Admission to single sessions, 1s. 6d., from Conference Secretary, 4a, Inverness Place, London, W.2, or Gerald Bunn, 136, Middleton Hall Road, Kings Norton, Birmingham 30.

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.

LONDON—INDOOR

Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square).—Tuesday, October 21, 7 p.m.: "The Claims of the Church of England." Rev. F. H. AMPLETT MICKLEWRIGHT, M.A., F.R.Hist.S.

Rationalist Press Association (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square).—Wednesday, October 22, 7 p.m.: "Aspects of Evolution": 3rd Lecture—"The Evidence of Embryology," Dr. W. E. SWINTON, Ph.D., F.R.S.E.

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Feeling and Behaving," Prof. J. C. FLUGEL, D.Sc.

West London Branch N.S.S. (The Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, W.).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: "Women, Worship and Woe," Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: A lecture.

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

Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Barker's Pool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Messrs. G. L. GREAVES, A. SAMMIS.

(Continued in previous column)

NEW GUINEA ODDMENTS

LET me jot them down before time treads on my memory. The incidents occurred between 1921 and 1933, during my service in the Territory of New Guinea. More than that I cannot remember.

A Lutheran clergyman fell in love with a New Guinea woman. This proves that love is blind, for the girl was completely covered with *Tinea imbricata*, a tropical ringworm which is difficult to eradicate. The clergyman's wife, when her husband and his new love set up housekeeping at the headwaters of a river, in terrain more perpendicular than horizontal, reported to the District Officer that her husband had become insane. After breathless days of climbing, the D.O. apprehended the clergyman and took him before a medical officer for "certifying." The examination ended, the M.O., a veteran of two wars after service as a London police surgeon, came from his surgery. "Insane, doctor?" the D.O. asked. "Bah!" replied the M.O. "He's only sinful."

Katogen was inherited from the German Government by the Australian Administration as a mortuary attendant. He was from Buka, in the Solomons, of people whose skins are the darkest on earth, very nearly pure black. He was addicted to betel-nut chewing, dribbling red saliva constantly. His working dress consisted of tan boots, a surgeon's gown and thick red rubber gloves. He had once been a cannibal, and a well-trained cannibal. He opened an abdomen or a skull like the expert he was. The job finished, he always sprang to attention. He loved his work. A white Catholic set about converting Katogen to the one true faith, using pidgin-English as the linguistic vehicle for the Roman Catholic Church's message. Katogen learned all about Holy Mary and the rest; then he set up as a teacher himself. One evening I came upon Katogen and his pupils. He was having difficulty in describing the mockery of Christ. Suddenly he loosed a waterfall of filthy language, then said (translated): "Now you know what the multitude said to Jesus."

A Catholic lay brother fell in love with a South Sea belle and thereby ruined his career and was compelled to become a trader. To all who asked the reason for his fall he gave this reply (translated): "I went to bed a brother and found in the morning that I was a father. The bishop did not approve of my quick promotion, so here I am, a trader."

In Rabaul I adjudicated in an assault case. A native youth charged a native Catholic catechist with assault. The catechist pleaded justification, claiming that the youth had committed blasphemy in saying (translated): "God is my genital." I probed and found that the youth was the victim of the Catholic Church's teaching that at the Mass a communicant actually eats Jesus, who, to the Catholic Church, is also God. The youth believed that by eating the wafer he carried Jesus in all parts of his body.

It was in Rabaul that I heard an Irishman solemnly assert that the Banshee once stopped the Dublin express. Whoosh!

The south coast of New Britain has rough seas and very heavy rain during the south-east monsoon. Once I sheltered just inside the mouth of the Pulia River, tired of the buffeting that the little schooner had received out on the ocean. I did not know until long afterwards that one of my native constables had flogged all scorers for miles in the hope that his action would smooth the tempest a little.

While lolling on the schooner, anchored peacefully in the Pulia, I noticed that whenever the sun shone a crocodile climbed from the muddy waters and sunned himself on a log which had become a snag. I shot the crocodile, the bullet lodging in its spine, severing the spinal cord. The saurian was cut up and cooked. A local native asked for the bullet and it was given to him. He explained that he would give it to his dog

so that it would become a mighty hunter of pigs. After several attempts, the dog swallowed the bullet which had been concealed in a piece of boiled sweet potato. The dog wailed all night, at times contorting himself into S-shape, and by the morning the bullet had completed its journey through the digestive tract. If it did not become a mighty hunter of pigs, that heroic dog did not get its deserts.

BERTRAM CALCUTT.

New South Wales.

GLORIOUS NEWS

A RECENT announcement in the 9 p.m. B.B.C. news bulletin put me into a thinking mood. The announcement concerned the anniversary of a century old custom in Nice in which a fountain in the old town plays for twenty-four hours. There is nothing outstanding or thought provoking in that, but this year instead of water wine is to flow from the fountain, and costumed girls were to fill jugs with the wine and hand them to all who wished to attend. Police were to be on duty to remove those who had had enough. Now here is a brilliant idea for filling the churches. The God business continues to decline, and the clergy are poor at window dressing. Concessions to Sunday hikers, cyclists, and sportsmen to attend a short church service in their respective outfits is just cheap showmanship, uncomplimentary to God, displeasing the regulars, and definitely not Biblical. Jesus was never a sportsman and didn't attract sportsmen. A man of sorrows who often wept but never laughed would spoil any sporting event. On the other hand Jesus did dabble in wine, wine has a Biblical tradition and Jehovah was very fond of his drop and could tell a good vintage. No common communion wine for him, for in the Bible we read, "in the holy place shalt thou cause the strong wine to be poured unto the Lord for a drink offering." (Numbers, xxviii, 7). And the quantity demanded was not a small bottle but rather more than a gallon, and strong at that. Gods are very expensive in their tastes. Wine also has a place in church rites, but the quality is too poor and the quantities too small to attract frothblowers. The B.B.C. announcement might easily be adopted as a remedy for empty pews, and a very effective remedy. Imagine a fountain in every church from which wine flows at each Sunday service. With holy nipples in spiritual costume filling jugs and passing them round, free and ad lib. What glorious news for the Colonel Chinstraps and Rob Wiltons, religion without tears at the holy bar, sanctified by the officiating cleric chanting the passage from Ecclesiastes ix, 7, "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works." Care would have to be exercised in one direction at least: any attempt to remove the fountain worshippers before the end of the service time limit might be troublesome and would surely be resisted and fail. Those inside would band together and in a full throated chorus give the advice from a famous old song, "don't let 'em in till it's all mopped up."

My suggestion to the clergy is quite serious. It is only by providing some sort of show or attraction other than religious that they can hope to fill the churches. Christianity is only a museum piece to-day, one of humanity's primitive relics. Only a universal softening of the human brain could reconsider it as being useful. It is dated by its make-up and its age should be apparent to any fairly read and educated adult, whilst even to the less read and less educated the tricks of the clergy to gather congregations should tell a story easy to understand. Churches filled by some popular form of showmanship does not add to the strength of Christianity, it helps to shorten its life by exposing to all sufficiently intelligent to see, that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are no longer ecclesiastic Box Office attractions, but merely the shadow of stars of long ago now rapidly approaching extinction.

R. H. ROSETTI.