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VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Relying on God

THE recent congregations of Christian leaders in England and Amsterdam would have given the impression to visitors from another world that religion was flourishing. But the better informed would know that the meetings were made up mainly by professional preachers and the great question with them was by what methods could the decay of religion be stopped. Definitely there is no method.

These professional Christians must know that while they can fool all the people *some* of the time they cannot fool *all* the people all the time. Further, the usefulness of priests and religion to keep people in "order" is no longer workable. The changes have been very rapid, and the French saying that "It is the duty of the poor to protect the rich," no longer applies. The social usefulness of religion is not dead, but it is steadily losing ground.

Some parsons have quite honestly suggested that Christians should think less of the millionaire and more in God.

But why? Why should we put more faith in God than in the millionaire? Millionaires may not be always admirable persons, but at least there is no doubt of their existence. But there is no such certainty in the case of God. We cannot be certain that he exists, we cannot be certain that even if he does exist, that what he does is for the best, or that we can rely upon his assistance. His existence is only a possibility, his benevolence a matter of mere inference. In the case of distress we might approach a wealthy man with a fair amount of certainty that he would render assistance. No one can approach God with the same degree of confidence. Thousands of people are tortured by disease or overwhelmed by disaster, and if we are to trust believers it is God who is behind it all. It is certain that if any man were to act with us little regard for human well-being as God does he would be regarded as an immoral monster.

What encouragement have we that we should rely upon God? Of course the clergy tells us we should, but that—as Heine said on another occasion—it is their trade. Our trust in God is the only warranty for their existence. But what reason does experience furnish for this trust? If experience is to be trusted God does nothing. Civilisation is not the gift of God, but the product of human labour and human wisdom. And civilisation, when one comes to look at it, largely consists in correcting God's handiwork, or directly reversing it. God furnishes poisons and antidotes ready made, but man has slowly to discover the antidotes. God inflicts pain without the slightest regard for merit or demerit, and human society flourishes as it negates this method. We do not willingly punish the innocent for the guilty, or the children for the fault of their parents, but that is precisely God's method—that is, if we are to adopt belief in a God who speaks through

nature. If experience has taught us anything at all, it is that human development depends entirely upon our acquiring the qualities of self dependence and co-operation, and treating God as a quite negligible factor in our lives.

Preachers often enough lament that people ignore God, without apparently realising the significance of the charge. That we do ignore God is true enough, but how comes it that we can do so? Facts are not things that can be ignored for long with impunity. Beliefs that are vital to human well-being cannot be lightly set on one side. A fact is the most stubborn of things. We may ignore its presence for a time, but it remains awaiting, and finally, compelling, recognition. The "Gradgrindian" philosophy did not break down because it insisted on facts, but because it left out of account facts quite as important as those it recognised. It was the neglected facts that ultimately wrecked it, as they will sooner or later wreck all false conceptions of life. How comes it then that we can neglect God? And not only neglect God, but do so without anyone being able to show that we are the worse for our neglect?

It looks as though that we are not losing anything of importance. For after all it is not the man who gets on with the belief in God by which its value is to be tested but the man who gets on without it.

Observe, too, that this neglect of God is not the grace of a people who have not yet arrived at the stage of trusting God. It is the case of a people whose neglect is the expression of experience. Trust in God was once universal. People depended upon God as far as it was possible for them to do so. Historically and individually, trust in God represents a stage that has been outgrown in those who "neglect God." The believer too generally forgets when he lectures the unbeliever that we know all about it. We have been where he is. He has not been where *we* are. We know all his arguments, we have experienced all his feelings. We know what it is to trust in God, and we know what it is to go our own way having put this belief behind. We are really in a position to lecture Him. He is in no position to lecture us.

Of course, the world generally ignores God. How could it be otherwise? Experience may not always be expressed in words or formulated in theory, but it is there in practice. We may express faith in the power of God to heal disease, but we do not refrain from calling in a physician or surgeon. We may profess to believe in the power of faith to move mountains, but we place infinitely greater reliance on engineers. We may pray for a safe voyage overseas, but we all know that a well-built vessel and the skilled navigator is more important. We pray in Parliament that God will direct the decisions of those present, but no single member believes that anything of the kind occurs. We say we believe that God is on the side of the right in warfare, but we certainly place more reliance upon men and armaments. We go on trusting

God in theory and ignoring him in practice, because nature does not mind what theories we hold so long as we do not practise them. It is practice that tells, and sooner or later experience compels us to adopt a practice that is consonant with our welfare, as it compels us to drop practices that make against it.

In sober truth, while conscious Atheism may not be general, practical Atheism—that is the setting on one side of God in the affairs of life—is fairly common amongst civilised people. This is only what one might expect. Practice is before theory, nearly always. In the main, theory only expresses practice. It summarises life rather than directs it. Life precedes theory, and philosophy explains and systematises what is and what has been. And this divorce between theory and practice, this trusting God in theory and ignoring him in practice, only means at bottom, that the forces of life are too insistent, too strong for religious doctrines. In practice, God is ignored because he has failed to justify confidence. All our beliefs, all our institutions are, like forms of life, ultimately amenable to the operation of the survival of the fittest. If they are inimical to welfare they die out sooner or later. If they are useful, they flourish and increase. If they are merely harmless they may persist for an indefinite time.

But religious beliefs have not increased. On the contrary, there is no denying the general decline, it only remains for theory to summarise practice here as elsewhere. Life will then once more represent a consistent whole, while our perception of the nature of the forces involved in human development will make our progress at once more rapid and more secure.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

FREETHOUGHT AND POLITICS

IN the issue of "The Freethinker," September 5, Percy G. Roy chides Anglo-Saxon Freethought with escapism concerning politics. Maybe his own connection with the Anglo-Saxon variety is recent, but since its inception there have been continuous and persistent efforts to intrude politics in the Movement. And I doubt whether his attempt will be the last. There are reasons for a reaffirmation of a non-political approach.

Perhaps Anglo-Saxon Freethought, with a longer experience of industrial revolution, has a more mature judgment. It may also be that this avoidance of politics is only one of the many *other* available forms of "escapism." P.G.R. asserts that a movement cannot be escapist. Apparently he does not realise that a movement *is* a form of escapism. To illustrate; in one of his speeches Robert Ingersoll dwelt upon the fear that many people have of saying what they thought about religion. "You are afraid to speak, but don't trouble, I will say it for you," he said, "I will take the kicks." You see, he was accepting what they were escaping. He was their scapegoat.

Escapism may take many different forms, and we can see the form of P.G.R.'s escapism in his juggling with the question of truth and his "utter scepticism" based upon "lack of personal experience." "We are Truth Seekers," he says, "and the Church claims to possess it." So for him, "truth means nothing in itself." He has no concept of truth, and he fails to see any difference between a claim to possess truth, and an assertion that truth is still to seek. The freethinker challenges the so-called truth because it does not square with his personal experience. It is a matter of opinion as well as of

evidence; and, in matters of opinion, authority counts for nothing. It is a challenge to authority; and the setting up, and acceptance of, authority is a form of escapism.

It will be noticed that the freethought case is based upon personal experience and not a lack of it. Further, it is the authority freethought is sceptical of. P.G.R. on the other hand, though he claims to be a freethinker, bases his utter scepticism on a rejection of evidence, of the Press (Right or Left apparently), as well as lack of personal experience; so that his "sense of balance" is based upon the acceptance of authority. Really, one gets tired of this constant dogmatic assertion of doctrinaire ideology. But as he discredits evidence as press propaganda, on what is his considered opinion based? It is clear that he is trying to escape the "intellectual basis" of a consideration of available evidence; and that his is a form of intellectual escapism. We can see how it works.

It seems he is not, himself, Anglo-Saxon. His remarks "incidentally" about the German delegate is suggestive, but the clearest evidence is his idiom. I do not know if he speaks with a German accent, but he certainly writes with one. The syntax of the German language; joining words together in compound words; appears here as a habit of qualifying terms so as to lose clarity. I am not complaining of an accident of birth; I wish only to point out the mystical confusion. This is also seen in unqualified terms used. He does not refer to a reasoned judgment, but to a mystical "sense of balance." It is intuition, not reason. His rationalism concerns "aims" or "ends." He appeals to authority and not to evidence.

It seems he does not analyse his own articles, or else he is blinded by the exuberance of his own verbosity; for the contradictions are so plain. Our aim is "the emancipation of peoples' minds" yet "man's consciousness" and the "cultural and political aspects" are "determined" by or are "reflections of . . . conditions of material life." One wonders why he writes articles if the "purely intellectual basis" is only a "palliative." He is decrying his own intellectual efforts. If economic conditions determine politics, and the "final causes" are to be found in the "modes of production and exchange," then we should, logically, consider economics and not politics. But P.G.R. seems to have no use for logic.

In his doctrinaire intellectual escapism he appeals to authority. His Marxism leads to the wild assertion that "to change the intellectual outlook we have got to change the world." Like Marx he uses Hegelian dialectic thimble-rigging. And this is further enforced by Kant's categorical imperative. We are categorically told that we "must," we "ought," we "cannot shirk," we "cannot avoid," we "have got to." He not only goes back, echoing the dead, to authorities of a hundred, two hundred years, and further, to Machiavellian means to "ends"; he goes back two thousand years to Aristotle's "final causes," and the metaphysical complication is further confused by a theological obsession of a "root of the evil."

It has often been said that we carry a ghost of a god. But P.G.R. seems tormented by a ghost of the devil: a Manichean conflict with evil; with incarnate demons. Speaking for myself, I smile at such a theological absurdity as a root of evil. I know the world is in a devil of a mess. But I know nothing of any controlling "power" apart from animistic belief in such things. I dislike being told what I must do, ought to do, got to do. I find Hegelian dialectic quite intriguing, but the evasions, tricks and twists are not new. It is often said there are no new jokes, and the same applies here. The different modes of argument are as old as the hills.

I cannot imagine anyone without personal experience. I have no experience of Christian god or devil, but I have experience of statements by those who claim such experience. It is on my personal experience of such evidence that I base my opinion. I have never been to Russia, but that does not mean that I have no personal experience concerning Russia. I have voraciously devoured all evidence that has come my way since 1921 and I should indeed be a dullard if I had not formed an opinion by now. My personal experience in this respect has familiarised me with the tricks of political propaganda. On this also, I have formed an opinion. You can't touch pitch without being defiled.

It is really quite amusing to find a Marxist lacking personal experience of Russia, and discrediting evidence as "press propaganda, with a considered opinion that socialism in Russia must be very far distant." Would it not be more straightforward to say the Russian experiment failed? After all, we had it on the highest authority years ago. There are times when we might accept the voice of authority, for instance, as evidence. In August, 1921, in an article in "Pravda," Stalin gave "the reasons why the Bolshevik Party now finds it expedient to re-introduce a form of capitalism." I have yet to discover any evidence that contradicts the *ipse dixit* of so high an authority. But still the game goes on.

I am not merely sceptical, I am cynical, of all mystic visionaries who want to "change the world." There are two thousand million human beings. We not only need a "sense of balance," but also a sense of proportion.

The "impetus of a movement" is no substitute for commonsense.

H. H. PREECE.

THE WORLD'S WORST SELLER

EVERY little while someone rushes into print informing a gullible public that the Bible is the world's best seller. This, of course, is done to bolster-up the lie that the Bible is the most read book in the world. It is a pity that Christians are so completely lacking in moral sense that they see nothing wrong in misleading the public whenever it serves their ends to do so.

The real reason why more Bibles are sold than any other book is because they are sold at *less than cost price!*

Half a million pounds a year is what the Bible Society actually pays for selling Bibles at a loss. Staggering, isn't it? Obviously, any book could become the world's best seller if a publisher could be found who was stupid enough to spend £500,000 a year selling it at less than the cost of production. It is not a question of public demand as in the case of any other best seller, it is simply a matter of foisting on the public a book it does not want at a fabulous loss to the publishers.

Just where the Bible Society gets its millions from we do not pretend to know, but we do know that when a book cannot be sold on its merits it should be scrapped.

There can be no justification whatever for continuing to throw away large sums of money which could be more usefully employed in other directions. Mr. Norman Bratt, the Bible Society's publishing superintendent, recently made the following amazing statement: "It would help a great deal if America could produce more Bibles. They have the paper and the facilities but they haven't the money."

Well, well! America, the richest country in the world to-day, cannot afford to sell Bibles; but Britain, dependent on America's charity, can afford to sell them at a loss! I suggest the true answer is that America

has enough business sense not to throw away good money on something that obviously is not wanted.

So much, then, for the world's "best seller"!

Just in case anyone may be interested to know why it is that the Bible Society has all the paper it needs for squandering in this extravagant way, when all other publishers have their supplies cut down to a minimum, here is the answer. The Society's quota was based on 1939, which was a peak year, and it also has additional supplies from supplementary quotas made available by the Government.

Why on earth our Government considers it necessary to waste precious paper printing the Bible in every known and unknown language we cannot imagine. However, a very good use for a certain red edition has been discovered by the young ladies of Swahili, who use the colour for painting their lips!

We heartily congratulate them. W. H. WOOD.

THE DANCE OF DEATH

I WAS most interested in the remarks concerning "The Dance of Death" by E. A. McDonald in a recent issue of "The Freethinker." Since this is a byway of Mediaeval life that has been insufficiently explored and documented, I hope you will permit me to make one or two remarks on the subject.

The origin of the "Dance" is obscure, but there is no reason to doubt that it was a subject of extraordinary popularity in the Middle Ages. The series of paintings in the Holy Innocents in Paris was only one of a number of similar pieces of work. There was one at Dijon, several are recorded in Switzerland, and according to John Stow the London chronicler, there was one in Old St. Pauls. Yet another was recorded in the Hungerford Chapel in Salisbury Cathedral, and it is said that there was a similar painting at Minden in Germany. Apart from these recorded paintings, there were many smaller prints dealing with the same subject, usually printed in book form. The best known of these is perhaps Holbein's series of woodcuts, though no less than sixteen different series of "Dance of Death" prints and cuts were published between 1485 and 1501. Of these ten were printed at Paris, five in the rest of France, and one in Germany. References to it in the form of marginal drawings are found in many devotional books of the period.

In the literature of the period, the subject exercised an almost equal fascination. "The Dance of Death" by John Lydgate, being a translation from the French, references are found in the work of such writers as Chaucer, Langland, Villon, Skelton and, of course, in such plays as "Everyman." A curious German work by J. von Tepl, published in 1400 A.D., takes the form of a dialogue between death and a plowman whose wife has just died.

The whole subject has been very little documented by scholars, and remains to a large extent one of the most fascinating and little explored byways in literature. The French antiquary Peignot published his "Recherches sur les Danses des Morts" in 1826 A.D., and Francis Douce the bibliophile produced an edition of Holbein's "Dance of Death," with a long introduction, in 1858. These are the two main sources of information upon the subject, though there are useful mentions and references in works dealing with mythology, belief, and Mediaeval life.

VICTOR E. NEUBERG.

ACID DROPS

Professor Foster who is the bright, breezy, and hearty cleric put up by the B.B.C. to show that all is well with the Church, did not seem quite so certain about it when he talked of the Amsterdam Conference the other day. Of course, the 141 sects there represented equally shared the love of God, or the grace of the Holy Spirit, or whatever it is called, and of course they did not violently quarrel; but as they all interpreted God's Word and His Will rather differently, they were not quite as "united" as the Almighty intended. Moreover, both the Roman and the Greek Churches were not represented officially and the are not likely to agree on anything passed by the 141 sects unless they agreed about it *before* the Conference. The truth is, the Amsterdam, like the Lambeth, Conference was a huge flop, and accomplished nothing whatever—certainly nothing that can save Christianity. And nothing else matters.

A writer to the "Daily Graphic" asks whether it has been noticed that "the rise of Socialism has coincided with the decline of the Church's influence and Christian principles." As Dr. Joad would say, it all depends on what you mean by Socialism, and British Socialism can hardly be considered anti-Christian. Consider some of the latest utterances of Sir Stafford Cripps. We would agree with the writer's suggestion that the early Socialists were anti-religious, but the Church has had time to infiltrate since then and present-day Socialists have forgotten the debt they owe to men like Owen, Place, Blatchford, *et al.*

"The Belfast Telegraph" publishes an article on the swearing of "oaths" in courts and the like. We agree that this mass of "oaths" is just foolishness. Everyone, particularly the religious people in this country, knows that it does not prevent any man or woman telling a good, bouncing lie. If one's statement cannot be accepted by a plain promise to speak the truth, better not speak at all. Religion has given us the most gigantic lies in the past, it is not likely to be of greater truthfulness in the future. The writer of the article says that while in a court he saw both a Quaker and an Atheist declining to take any kind of oath. The judge made no comment, but he seemed to be satisfied.

"The Times" gave publicity to a letter by the Rev. E. C. Pawley the other week containing a suggestion which shows that there are at least some clergymen who realise how far the secularisation of the State is progressing. He pointed out the absurdity of burying people who do not believe in immortality according to the formula in the Book of Common Prayer—a formula for which "there is no decent alternative." Mr. Pawley contends that this is "intolerable," and suggests that the solution should be a purely secular burial service conducted by a State-appointed official—just as in the case of marriage in a registry office. "This would give expression," Mr. Pawley adds, "to the ideal of honesty and liberty of conscience which has for long been the goal of the liberal outlook." We heartily concur, and congratulate this most liberal-minded clergyman on his courage as well as on his excellent suggestion.

In an interesting talk on Flaubert in the Third Programme of the B.B.C., the speaker was not afraid to mention how the great French novelist used to meet his contemporaries in discussions which were often on

religious problems—such as, what was God doing before he created the Universe? The attitude of Flaubert himself, said the lecturer, could be gauged from the way in which he described a document containing the words, "I do not exist," and signed "God." Of course, many of the greatest French litterateurs were confirmed sceptics far beyond Voltaire, and were not afraid of saying so; but whether listeners to the Third Programme on a Sunday like to be told about it is another matter.

Dr. Bernard Heywood, in the "Church Times," complains of "the nuisance of mumbling" sermons—a fault of so many parsons; so that what is said in church is very often not heard by the congregation. But he adds that many of the congregation "are justly aggrieved." Now we wonder whether this is really the case? We should have thought that at least some of the devout members of the Church prefer not hearing the sermon, as a nap in the pew is often most refreshing, and quite impossible if God's will is thundered out in stentorian tones. But even when this is not the case, surely an inaudible sermon has its advantages? Nowadays, with very few exceptions, there are no great preachers, and to listen to the boring nonsense of the average vicar must be most disturbing. No, we plump for as much mumbling as possible, or inaudibility; after all, it might save many clerical reputations.

The Church of England has always kept a severe eye on the Scout and Cadet movements among boys. Whatever else they do or learn, religion must be paramount, and our religious journals never cease imploring scout-masters and cadet leaders to make religious services as compulsory as possible. Woe betide any of the boys' leaders if he dared to suggest that Sunday morning parades were literally useless, or that the Church's attempt to capture these youth movements was pure insolence. A leading article in the "Church Times" recently is typical of this, especially where it insinuates that "parish priests and youth leaders can be of the utmost value to the Service authorities in helping . . . to maintain those standards of religion and conduct which are essential to their morale." There is no evidence whatever to show that a grovelling Christian is any better as a soldier than a fearless Atheist.

Legislators are apt to regard regulations as applying only to others. We hasten, therefore, to congratulate the L.C.C. on its decision not to use loud-speakers in connection with its "Road Safety Week" meetings in Battersea Park (London). An official told the "South London Press" that the rule forbidding loud-speakers being used at meetings is rigorously adhered to, even at the cost of some disadvantage to the L.C.C.

The Rev. D. R. Blackman, of Deptford Parish Church, has obviously learned that the most efficient and easiest way to ensure a future generation of Christian worshippers is to catch 'em young, and train them. Parents are encouraged to bring their children to church, and, reports the "South London Press," there as many as six or seven prams in the aisle during morning service. The Rev. D. R. Blackman seems to have learned the lesson from the R.C.s who realise that by the time a youngster has reached the age of reason, the virus of religion is exceedingly difficult to eradicate.

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SUGAR PLUMS

Readers may remember a report in these columns of the incident at the Whis Stone Pond, Hampstead, where N.S.S. speaker Mr. L. Ebury had to contend with a loud-speaker used at a "British Union" fascist meeting. The use of the loud-speaker was only discontinued after a vigorous protest to the police by Mr. Ebury. There have been many incidents of a like nature in various parts of the country and we advise Branch secretaries and speakers to get the co-operation of other organisations to stop this intolerable nuisance. In the past, bands of Christians would oppose Freethought meetings by attempting to drown the voice of the speaker with stentorian and raucous hymn singing; we also remember on one occasion a complete brass band of indifferent performers was brought up to the attack, but at least the efforts were limited to the lung capacity of the Christians. A loud-speaker never tires.

The Sheffield Branch N.S.S. will open new ground to-day (September 26) at Goldthorpe, where Mr. T. M. Mosley, of Nottingham, will speak at 11 a.m. We understand that the Goldthorpe Urban District Council have stopped its Sunday dancing owing to Sabbatarian interference; that should be an additional inducement for all Freethinkers within range to attend the N.S.S. meeting. In the evening at 7-30, Mr. Mosley will speak at Barker's Pool. The branch secretary, Mr. Samms, and Mr. Mosley, are two of the old school of Freethought enthusiasts and deserve all the support that can be given.

At Wimbledon Hill, Wimbledon Common, Mr. J. W. Barker, of the Kingston Branch N.S.S., will lecture at 3-30 p.m. to-day (September 26). It is new ground and all Freethinkers in the area are asked to give their support by attending, with friends.

At the Annual General Meeting of the Manchester Branch N.S.S., held on September 15, Mr. F. E. Monks was re-elected President. A letter from Mr. Colin McCall (the previous branch secretary) tendering his resignation was read, and Mr. R. Billings, of 181, Culcheth Lane, Newton Heath, Manchester, was elected secretary. All communications re branch matters should in the future be directed to him. Manchester has always had a strong branch, its members keen and enthusiastic, and we have every reason for believing that these characteristics have not died out.

RATS!

"GOD," said the old rodent, "has made all things well.

"He has armed us rats with the most resourceful qualities. He has given us delicate and dexterous hands and feet, teeth as sharp as the leaves of the cactus, unique powers of endurance and persistence, and superlative cunning, the highest attribute of the animal world."

"That," said the adolescent rat, "would be cheerful news if it were believed, but certain persons have told me that our God has bestowed some resourceful qualities upon the human species. Man destroys us by the million. Armidanko, the learned historian of the World Rat Institute, professes to have recorded many varieties of man's murderous methods of slaughtering us, the darling children of God. There are, he states, varnish, paste and powder preparations, most delicious to our rat palate, but lethal to our physical constitution. There are traps to imprison us, others to break our backs and, worst of all in effectiveness, there is gas: one whiff of that and the stoutest of us is a rat no more."

"My child," said the ancient one, "it is true that men are clever, but God, the all-wise, all-powerful and infinitely good person, has, I repeat, done all things well for us rats. There is, indeed, a war between us and many other creatures of his, creatures which have fallen from the high estate he intended for them, and first gave them, which high estate, we, by his grace, have retained. The most virulent of these wars is with man, whom, with God's aid, we destroy in scores of millions."

"How do we do that?" said the little rat.

"We do it with our hoplites," said the elderly rodent.

"Pardon me," said the other. "The hoplites went out centuries ago."

"You are correct, young fellow," rejoined the old rat. "I mean parasites. God, as you know, has bestowed on us most excellent fur, and in it live lice and fleas, and in them live smaller creatures, fashioned by the consummate art of God. Our presence near man ensures the transfer to him of numerous lice and fleas. These valiant little animals bite man, and, through the wounds of the bites, the smaller creatures living in the lice and fleas swim into his blood."

"I love lice and fleas," said the young rodent.

"Man does not," said the other. "At least, not usually, but some tolerate them well, and there is a certain kind of man, whom humans call saintly, that can easily endure them. There was, I have heard, one called Thomas à Becket, and when he was murdered, as the story goes, and his clothes drawn from his body, one garment, which had been near his skin, appeared to bubble over like water boiling in a cauldron, so white was it with swarming lice."

"How lovely," said the young rat, "but you were telling me about the smaller parasites swimming into man's blood."

"Ah," said the older rat. "That makes men ill, and they die, but the struggle goes on, for the battle is eternal. It is between good and evil, between those who obey God and those who don't."

"How is that," said the young one. "Men die, but the struggle is eternal. What is the explanation?"

"You should already know about sex and procreation," said the old rat somewhat testily.

"Yes, yes," rejoined the other. "I understand about sex and babies. I was married at the age of three months, but we are extremely prolific. It has been computed that the possible progeny of a single pair of us.

after ten years, is 49,000,000,000,000,000,000. Even silly humans know that. Men are nearly so prolific."

"Alas," said the old fellow. "The truth is saddening. Our very fecundity hurts us; we are forced to compete among ourselves, for house-room and food. Man often makes the former uncomfortable, and devours the latter. We die of starvation."

"What does man eat?" said the adolescent.

"Anything and everything," replied the other. "He eats vegetables, seeds, garbage, fruit and the carcasses of animals, birds and fishes, even those of elephants, whales and crocodiles. He kills poultry, game, ducks and young rabbits, and devours the eggs of birds. Worst of all, he consumes almost all the grain of the world."

"How horrible," said the young rat, "how can that be good?"

"Good!" said the other, "it is not good; it is bad."

"But," queried the youngster, "did you not say that God made all things well for rats?"

The old rodent paused for a while. Then he said with a trace of haste, "Everything will work out well in the end. We are assured of that. It is a mystery; at the back of everything is mystery."

"Cannot the mystery be explained?" said the other.

"Certainly not," answered the old rat, "or it would not be a mystery. Then at the back of everything there would be nothing, and with nothing at its back everything would become nothing."

"That sounds awful," said the young rat, "but I cannot understand it, and I should be glad if you will tell me what you mean by mystery."

"I live among a lot of young rats of both sexes, and I have heard some of them say that mystery is a word used only by ignorant rats, and that other rats say that there is a problem. It is being said, too, that those who talk of mysteries have been instructed according to the priestly system of education, and that that system is bad."

"Alas," said the old rodent. "There have always been heretics and innovators. Beware! If you dissolve ancient systems of thought you will destroy the pillars of the state."

"I don't want to dissolve anything," interrupted the other. "I want to know only how it is when God loves us so much he lets man do us so much harm. Besides, the state hasn't got any pillars. It is just ratdom united for certain political ends, and it will persist while the conditions of rat community life remains."

Just then a commotion arose, and an agitated messenger arrived to announce that several revered elders of Ratdom had met a cruel and bloody death through the designs of man. They had been torn to pieces by ferrets. He asked the old rat to go with him to meet the members of the Great Council who were requesting his advice.

"This is bad news," said the old rat, "but God has his good purpose even here. If I thought otherwise I would consider life not worth living."

"We are what we are," said the young rat sententiously, "and garbage, old rags and tallow are sweet whether God has a purpose or not."

Then he watched the old rodent go away with the messenger, and when he was sure they were both out of hearing he shouted at the top of his voice, "You're a silly old fool."

J. G. LUPTON.

The mind ought sometimes to be amused, that it may the better return to thought, and to itself.—PLATO.

DEATH AND BURIAL

EVERYBODY born must finish in the same way, with death and burial. It seems rather a waste of time and good material, but nature is in charge and there is nothing we can do about it.

After all death is as natural as life, and in the scheme of nature both are of equal importance and necessity. The pain resulting from a death is suffered by the living and is of our own making and for our own satisfaction. That is all to the good and is a credit to human nature. Pity the poor specimen of humanity whose death brings no regret and draws no tear.

We think and speak kindly of the dead, stress their good points, touch their weak ones lightly on the surface, chiefly because they differ from our weak points, and as a last and affectionate tribute and duty proceed to honour any expressed wish concerning the final scene. Maybe the question of religion intrudes, and the Christian virus gets into action; honourable and affectionate intentions begin to weaken and finally yield, and the expressed wish of the dead one is sacrificed to religion.

Should a Freethinker bury a Christian with a Secular Service? Christians would denounce it as a cowardly and unforgivable betrayal, but when a Freethinker's expressed wish for a Secular Service is ignored and a clergyman engaged to conduct a religious ceremony the Christian feels himself a better Christian for the treachery.

We know positively that the Burial Service in the Book of Common Prayer does not express the opinions of a large number of the dead upon whom it is inflicted. It is safe to say that the large majority would not agree with it in its entirety. To so many people the presence of a clergyman at the funeral is the important thing, what he says does not matter much. And it is safe to say the clergy are not concerned whether the dead would agree with the make up of the service. Their's is not to reason why, but to do a job, do it quickly, gather the fee, and wait for the next funeral.

But now, at last, a clergyman with the courage and character to defend the dead against the "intolerable abuse" of their life conviction on religion has come forward.

In a letter to "The Times" of August 31, the Rector of Elland, Yorkshire, called for an alternative Burial Service for those whose religious or non-religious opinions were not represented in the Book of Common Prayer Service. That is common decency and justice, and we congratulate the Rev. E. C. Pawley on his manly effort, feeling he will be big hearted enough to appreciate our congratulation.

On behalf of the Executive of the N.S.S. a letter was sent to "The Times" pointing out that an alternative service already existed, and that the Society repeatedly arranged for a Secular Service at burials and cremations in which no reference to religion or religious beliefs were made. Some letters in reply to the Rector of Elland have appeared in "The Times," but the N.S.S. letter, which contained definite information, was not inserted.

The probability is that those responsible felt it was a traditionally Christian practice for a clergyman to give a performance of deceit and treachery when burying a Freethinker, and to give any publicity to a purely secular form of service would only help to defeat that tradition.

R. H. ROSETTI.

AGE OF REASON. By Thomas Paine. With 40 page introduction by Chapman Cohen. Price, cloth 3s.; paper 2s.; postage 3d.

CORRESPONDENCE

FATALISM AND DETERMINISM

Sir.—In reply to Mr. Yates, the real question is how we come by our knowledge of causation, *a priori* or empirically.

According to the metaphysical view, which I once accepted, we know by an innate faculty of the mind (prior to all experience) that events form an unalterable causal order. This view is fatalism. It is open to the objection that, if true, it destroys all causes but one. For a cause is something that makes a difference to what follows it. But if fatalism is true, then everything is fixed from eternity, and nothing that happens makes a difference. Therefore there is only one cause—the whole, or fate, or whatever you like to call it.

Now my contention is that this view is groundless. Locke and Hume showed long ago that we have no innate faculty such as it assumes. Our actual notion of cause and effect is built up by trial and error: we find that by striking a match we can make a fire, and so on. But this view contradicts fatalism. For if the fire is predetermined from eternity, then I do not make it: the idea of causation in matches and other finite things becomes invalid. I make no difference by striking the match, nor does the match by contact with the fuel; for in a predetermined universe nothing finite makes anything! Mr. Yates' argument that "some means is necessary to implement" fate is arbitrary. If fate is everything, what room is there for other agents? We have a "static, block universe."

The very idea of agency requires that the agent shall do something that would not have been done otherwise: i.e., causation and contingency are interlinked; each idea presupposes the other. They are necessary intellectual tools, neither of which we can do without.—Yours, etc.,

ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON.

ARE WE ADVANCING?

Sir.—In an article in your issue of 5th September entitled "The Second Coming of Christ," Mr. W. H. Wood writes: "Why is Atheism gaining ground so rapidly and Christianity declining? . . . It is because of Man's growing intelligence."

It would be pleasant if this were true, but I am afraid it is only wishful thinking. It is as true in our day as it was in Seneca's—that the crowd of mankind stands opposed to right reason and is the defender of its own evils and miseries. The significant corollary of the decline of Christianity is the rise of the Labour/Socialist/Communist movement. There is no real advance. People are merely forsaking the unfashionable superstition for the superstition *à la mode*.

The Freethinker who cannot see that Marx is as big a humbug as Moses is as yet only half-baked.—Yours, etc.,

W. E. NICHOLSON.

A FINAL WORD

Sir.—Mr. Rowland is incorrigible. He called Edgar Allan Poe a drunkard, a wastrel and a weakling, "to say the least of it"—meaning, of course, that he was really much worse; and he now has to admit "that it is difficult to find contemporary evidence" for these outrageous libels. As for my own quotation, I was not called upon to give only contemporary evidence—though I could have given plenty.

But to clinch the matter, he quotes the Encyclopaedia Britannica—and I hope the reader will have noticed that there is not a line in it about Poe being a weakling or a wastrel, and that Professor Cestre actually accounts for the "drunkenness" of Poe in much the same way as I did.—Yours, etc.,

H. CUTNER.

DEAF AND BLIND

Thus, Lord, I keep my faith in Thee
I will not hear, I will not see—
Tho' cities blaze and skies may fall
I will be blind and deaf to all.
Tho' thousands perish in the blaze
I'll drown their cries with songs of praise,
Put the lamp of knowledge out
For close on Wisdom's heel creeps Doubt—
I will not raise the veil to see
Lost my God may fall and shatter me.

LITA JARRATT.

OBITUARY

MINNIE TERRY

With deep sorrow we announce the death of Minnie Terry, wife of Frank Terry, which took place on September 14, in her 74th year, after a long and painful illness. She was one of the oldest members of the Birmingham Branch N.S.S., and served the Movement loyally and well during the whole period of her membership. Her husband has held the position of branch librarian for many years.

Her domestic circle was a particularly happy one in which affection, freedom, frankness, and her never failing cheerfulness were outstanding features. To the husband, daughter (married), and all other members of the family we offer our sincere sympathy in their great loss. A word of grateful appreciation must be given to the sister for her affectionate attention during the long period of illness. The cremation took place on September 18 at Lodge Hill Crematorium, Birmingham, where, before an assembly of relatives and friends, including members of the Birmingham Branch N.S.S., the Branch Secretary, Mr. C. H. Smith, paid a warm tribute to the character and activity of Minnie Terry, after which a Secular Service was read by the General Secretary of the N.S.S.

R. H. R.

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 N.S.S. (Marble Arch, Hyde Park).—Sunday, 4 p.m.: Messrs. E. C. SAPHIN, JAMES HART, G. WOOD, E. PAGE.

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Crime and Punishment," Mrs. A. BLANCO-WHITE, O.B.E.

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

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

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

Crawshawbooth.—Friday, September 24, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Glasgow (Brunswick Street).—Sunday, 3 p.m.: Messrs. S. BRYDEN, E. LAWASI and J. HUMPHREY.

Great Harwood.—Saturday, September 25, 6-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. BARKER. (Wimbledon Hill, Wimbledon Common).—Sunday, 3-30 p.m.: Mr. J. BARKER.

Nottingham (Market Place).—Saturday, September 25, 7 p.m.: Mr. T. M. MOSLEY.

Sheffield Branch (Goldthorpe).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: Mr. T. M. MOSLEY. (Barker's Pool).—7-30 p.m.: Mr. T. M. MOSLEY.

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (38, John Bright Street, Room 13).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: "Shelley, the Great Poet," Mr. HENRY LENNARD.

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "Economic Conditions in Europe," Mr. E. STOCKDALE.

Halifax Branch N.S.S. (I.L.P. Rooms, St. James Street).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "The Church and Private Property," Mr. FRED SHAW.

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THEISM

- (1) Though not essential to the basic theses of these notes, some summarised remarks on Theism are desirable.
- (2) For this reason only a brief reference to this large subject need be given here and that, necessarily, dogmatically.
- (3) Theism deals with belief in, and arguments for, the existence of those extra-natural powers called Gods.
- (4) The study of this subject is of great importance sociologically because of its influence on human history.
- (5) But details of that study are both impossible and unnecessary for the purpose of these present notes.
- (6) In past ages Theism was overloaded with an enormous weight of very involved recondite arguments.
- (7) These formed an interesting study, especially in the Middle Ages, but were no more valid then than now.
- (8) Only a small fraction of nominal Christians have ever taken a studious interest in academic theories.
- (9) For the mass of these people the issues were always, and still are, far more definite, objective and personal.
- (10) For them three were predominant; a First Cause; Divine planning and intervention; and Human Immortality.
- (11) The hypothesis of God as a "First Cause" is logically untenable and personally immaterial.
- (12) Logically it is subject to indefinite recession and to presuppose any beginning is arbitrary.
- (13) It is humanly impossible to conceive a beginning or an end; the former without the latter is illogical.
- (14) These hypotheses are vain attempts at an explanation and serve merely to create further difficulties.
- (15) Considered personally, one need not be interested in an infinitely remote past of which one knows nothing.
- (16) All that humans know is an ever continuing sequence, both in the subjective and objective spheres.
- (17) They cannot have any historical, much less personal, knowledge of the suggested beginning of the Universe.
- (18) Therefore this hypothesis of a First Cause can be based only on something outside both science and history.
- (19) That something may be a belief, resting on a supposed authority the validity of which is arbitrary.
- (20) In any case that remote past can affect humans only if it determines either their present or future.
- (21) The "Argument from Design," presumably, does not rest on some purposeless kaleidoscopic patterns.
- (22) To be effective the argument must presuppose a purposeful design; moral, immoral or amoral.
- (23) If the design had no purpose then neither has the argument; is that purpose moral and benevolent?
- (24) There seems no real evidence to show any purpose at all; still less one that is benevolent.
- (25) Such evidence goes to show that all life is a material struggle for survival on a pragmatic basis.
- (26) It may be maintained that there is no evidence of universal purpose, but only inevitable patterns.
- (27) Or it may be postulated that there is a design which human minds are incapable of knowing.
- (28) Or that extra-natural power is neither omniscient nor omnipotent, although benevolent.
- (29) Or that this power is all three, but that humans, being given freewill, have wrecked the design.
- (30) Evidence supports the first hypothesis; the other three seem illogical, impossible and improbable.
- (31) The "problem of evil" seems insoluble by presupposing an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God.
- (32) Therefore religions rely on some form of dualism in power; a kind of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.
- (33) Some rely definitely on a ditheistic system in which the struggle is continuous and the results uncertain.
- (34) Others confuse both the logic and the issue by introducing human freewill and consequent aberrations.
- (35) Human depravity, however, does not explain the problem of evil, even if it is supposed to explain Sin.
- (36) To-day most humans live in the belief that the sequence of Nature is generally stable and continuing.
- (37) If they accept some vague notion of a First Cause they do so without questioning its contradictions.
- (38) They believe in the regular sequences of Nature more and more and in adventitious intervention less and less.
- (39) The "problem of evil" has been accepted on the basis of its propounders without much further consideration.
- (40) But the difficulties of religious explanations for its existence grow progressively more evident.
- (41) These disputations and involved arguments leave most humans unenlightened and uninterested.
- (42) Such arguments may be of academic interest to students, but they have no appeal to most people.
- (43) They have neither the ability nor the training for judging; their main motive is emotional satisfaction.
- (44) To them religion is a matter of very simple unconsidered faith, in terms of their own personality.
- (45) Such a faith is not the result of study; it is a crudely personal anthropopathic emotion.
- (46) These beliefs are ultimately dependent on the one fundamental hypothesis of human immortality.
- (47) The subjects of a First Cause, or a Divine plan and intervention are all subsidiary to this ultimate continuity.
- (48) All the theories and doctrines become of academic interest only unless individual human life continues.
- (49) It is not so much the present, still less the past, but the future in which religious people are interested.
- (50) Thus in modern times the whole basis of religion rests more and more on a belief in human immortality.

W. EDWARD MEADS.

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