

THE FREETHINKER

Founded 1881

Editor CHAPMAN COHEN

Vol. LXVIII.—No. 51.

[REGISTERED AT THE GENERAL
POST OFFICE AS A NEWSPAPER]

Price Threepence

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Practical Atheism

I WOULD point out that the title of this article is not of my creation. It was used by a Theist in order to consider its value. We can then commence with the statement that an "Atheist" is one who does not believe in a God. I say that, although I should not recognise one if I ran into one, and I have a strong conviction that all other men and women would be in the same position. So far as we can go it would seem that a "God" is something that really stands for nothing. God is a name. God is something that is unknowable. It is something that begins in a dream and dies in a nightmare.

Major-General Forlong says in his very learned book, "Rivers of Life," that no one seems able to give any meaning at all to "God," and Dryden's opinion that

The priest continues what the nurse began,

And thus the child imposes on the man,

is sound philosophy. "God" is something from nowhere and ends in the same region. I turn to a dictionary and find a definition that "God is one of a class of powerful spirits," that may stand for something, but it leaves as anywhere or nowhere. The less one knows about God the more certain one is of his existence. Finally, modern science agrees that Man existed before the gods. It is a certainty that gods come and go, and to-day there are far more gods being rejected than are accepted.

If one were not familiar with the vagaries of religious reasoning, one would not be surprised at any condition, special or individual, being taken as the consequence of either the presence or the absence of religious belief. For if experience counts for anything, it proves conclusively that religious beliefs may co-exist with every conceivable condition of vice or virtue, or health or disease. The religious belief of a fool may be as fervent as that of a philosopher. A criminal may believe as sincerely as a thoroughly virtuous person. The exploiter will repeat his confession of faith with as much earnestness as the exploiter's victim. People have gone to the stake in the name of the same Deity that those who sent them there believed in. Neither poverty nor wealth, neither vice nor virtue, neither cruelty nor kindness, creates religion. Its existence is consonant with any and every condition both of the plainest lessons of history and experience, and the ignoring of it by religious people is just one more piece of evidence of how ineffective religion is for purpose of mental and moral discipline.

It is not merely the absence of a belief in God that pious people have in mind when the phrase "practical Atheism" is used. No purpose would be served if it only meant that people did not believe in God, but were all right in their domestic and social relations. The way to refer to people of this kind is to speak of them as being Christians without knowing it. To give point to the expression, it must be applied to people whose conduct is plainly bad. The useful fact is not so much that

these people do not believe in God, but that they are bad citizens. They may, as they often do, believe in God, and are not Atheists at all, but this is screened by that blessed word "practical." If they are not Atheists in theory, they at least act as though there were no God of whom they stand in dread. The Theist is a bad man because he does not allow his belief to direct his theory It is the good old game of heads I win, tails you lose.

But why on earth should religionists place the responsibility for the world's evil on Atheism? When it suits their game we are assured that Atheism makes no advance. On the contrary, Atheists are few in numbers, and exert but little influence. Or on the other hand, Atheism is one of the most powerful of the world's forces. Really, the Christians ought to make up their minds. The Atheist is always ready to meet on fair terms. If the Atheist does not meet the enemy it is because the latter gathers his stupidity around him like a coat of armour, and against stupidity "the gods fight in vain."

The world as we have it is really not an Atheistic world. Atheism has never had strength enough to direct affairs. The present generation is mainly of a religious stock, if we are to trust our history. People have based their theories on what they knew and made the best of them. They have looked to religion in times of health and disease, of joy and sorrow. In it the priest, not the Atheist teacher, has had the world in leading strings. Priests and parsons have elaborated extensive and costly machinery for dealing with evils of various kinds. And it will clearly not do to place the responsibility for their continuance upon a theory which has never been consciously advocated by but a fraction of the people. The religionist is really on the horns of a dilemma. He must either admit that religion is responsible for the evils he laments, or that it is powerless to remove them. And his case is most exquisitely damned on either conclusion.

Besides, neither the lower classes nor the upper class are really Atheistic. Our neuropaths, and our socially degraded classes, actually contain a larger proportion of religionists than does the normal population of the country. Why, we have been told by preachers how little influence Freethought and Atheism has had with the people. We had no less a person than Mr. Churchill say that Atheism is a small fraction in England. We could agree with him that there is some truth in that, but the march of Freethought is getting stronger and stronger.

The only honest and intellectual meaning of practical Atheism is living without belief in God or gods. And why this should be expected to result in evil living is just a mystery. Police experience does not find that Freethinkers are in a majority in prisons. It is well to say that this legend that Freethought and ill-living is, much to the sorrow of our preachers, rapidly dying out.

Some years ago I found that all people in prison were permitted to have visitors from their appropriate religion. The prisoners were pleased at the visits. It broke the dullness of the Royal prisons. At that time a man had

been summoned for selling "The Freethinker," charged with the religious "crime" and duly sentenced. But no visitors were permitted to the confined Atheist. I inquired if someone representing Freethought might not be a regular visitor to the prison. I went to all the authorities from lowest to highest. In each case I met a wall. Finally the Home Secretary agreed that Atheists should have the same privileges as Christians in prisons. But, he added, the number of Atheists in prison were so very few that it would not justify new rules. I thought I would let the matter stop there.

To return to our subject, there was a very fine summary of the matter by one of our judges—Justice Steephen—referring to the bosh that is poured out concerning the dangers that might follow the destruction of Christianity, he said:—

"If human life is in the course of being fully described by science, I do not see what materials there are for any religion, or indeed, what would be the use of one, or why it is wanted. We can get on very well without one; for, though the view of life which science is opening to us gives us nothing to worship, it gives us an infinite number of things to enjoy. . . . The world seems a very good world, if it would only last. It is full of pleasant people and curious things, and I think most men find no great difficulty in turning their eyes away from its transient character. Love, friendship, ambition, science, literature, art, politics, and a thousand other matters will go equally well, as far as I can see, whether there is or not a God or a future state."

Practical Atheism is, in truth, only one of the many cries designedly or thoughtlessly used in the interests of religion. Some see it knowing its falsity, others repeat it because it is a catch-phrase which they know will please their readers. In either case it is only one more illustration of the way in which religion lowers man's decency. Misrepresentation, slander and falsehood, are well tried weapons in the Christian armoury. Ignorance is the mother of devotion, and it has a not very distant relationship to all forms of personal and social vice. Christianity, theoretical and practical, has not yet succeeded in making the world what it might have been, and improvement has generally resulted from the control of affairs being taken out of its hands.

Atheism, theoretical or practical, could not fail more decisively in the future than religion has done in the past. And it may well be that "Practical Atheism" with its consequent faith in the power of human knowledge may go towards solving problems that have withstood the attack of religion. The assistance of the gods has not protected man from failures. It is only common sense to make good what Christianity did so much to destroy.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

IN PORTUGAL

November 2, All Souls Day, the streets were crowded with people on their way to the cemeteries, carrying huge bunches of flowers, etc., to spend the day with their dead. I caught a glimpse inside some of the sepulchres, which are veritable little houses, or better still, chapels, all lined with marble and containing urns with the bones of the dead generations, and altars embellished with gold-branched candlesticks, prie dieu with damask cushions, silk curtains, silver vases, etc. The crying and howling and praying went on all day. I see from the paper that several of them were robbed next day. N. F.

THE PAPACY AND "CATHOLIC ACTION"

"Kill them all, my son, at the Last Day God will know how to distinguish between them."—ARNOLD, Abbot of Citeaux, Papal Legate and Inquisitor in the Crusade against the Albigenses (1209).

THE fall of the fascist empires at the end of the second World War put an end to the grandiose dreams entertained by the Papacy of exterminating with fire and sword the contemporary forces of social progress. Nonetheless, the Church survived. And except South of the Pyrenees the Papacy no longer appears before the world as the ally of Fascism. However, this is not to imply that it has given up the ghost and has resigned itself to inevitable dissolution, quite the contrary! The Vatican has never been more active in world affairs than it is to-day.

The chief political weapon in the hands of Rome to-day is the international organisation of "Catholic Action," the movement founded by Pope Pius XI; no doubt as a counter blast to the current advance of Communism, Socialism, and other enemies of the Church on the terrestrial plane. The movement itself is closely bound up with its founder's cult of "Christ the King"; that is, it exists to promote the reign of the Church in this world.

Its founder himself defined "Catholic Action" as the "Apostolate of the Laity in the service of the hierarchy," a somewhat long-winded definition which is more infallible than intelligible! Actually, "Catholic Action" may be defined as an organisational basis for Catholic politics rather than as a political party in the ordinary accepted sense. To borrow an expression from contemporary Socialist organisation "Catholic Action" may be broadly described as the political and social "International" of militant Catholicism; here again, the Church and the Jesuit opportunists who lead it, have known how, yet once again, to borrow from the arsenals of their secular opponents.

The late Mr. Lloyd George once used an analogy in relation to the Protestant Churches and the political parties which we may find helpful in defining the contemporary rôle of "Catholic Action." The famous Non-conformist once compared the relationship of the Churches with the political parties as that of a power station which radiated currents of spiritual energy throughout the political field. This metaphor is applicable to the relationship of "Catholic Action" with Catholic politics and to political parties with a Catholic basis.

Such parties are to-day found all over the Western world. For, we repeat, political Catholicism was never more active than during the post-Fascist era (1945-48). For, except in the Iberian Peninsula, Rome has now dropped Fascism like a hot brick. In an age such as ours, whose conspicuous feature is professionally a universal adherence to Democracy—a name which to-day covers a multitude of sins—and meanings—the Church of Rome, the oldest enemy of Democracy in the world has gone all democratic too; after all, even the God-Emperor of Japan, a more ancient religious leader even than the Vatican, has been transformed overnight by atomic democrats from a deity into a Democrat!

Similarly, the Church of Rome is now represented in the political arena by a whole congeries of "Christian Democrats" and similar parties. And the secular "sword" of the Church against what now more than ever before is the chief bug-bear of the Vatican, Russian Communism, is no longer Fascist Germany, but Democratic (with a capital "D") America.

There is an apposite story told of that famous clerical diplomat, ex-Bishop Talleyrand. One fine July day in 1830 he was watching the fighting in the streets during the Parisian revolution which overthrew the Bourbon Monarchy. Suddenly he turned and exclaimed "We are winning"; when asked who "we" were, he replied. "I don't know!"

One might almost call this reply the classic motto of clerical diplomacy, and of political Catholicism. The Vatican will support anyone or anything upon the sole condition that it will look after the interests, both secular and spiritual, of Rome. And that is nowhere more evident in papal diplomacy than to-day. Yesterday, pro-Fascist, to-day, pro-Democrat, the Vatican remains consistently pro-Catholic.

To-day, the Vatican under a host of pseudonyms and political nom-de-plumes, holds, or shares power in half the countries of Europe and Latin America, besides being by no means a negligible force in (ostensibly) Protestant America, Britain, and Australasia. And for a totalitarian régime like that over which the Papacy presides, to hold political power is essential for the effective guarantee of its ethical and religious ideologies. The history of such totalitarian régimes as Catholicism itself, Islam (Mohammedanism) and Hinduism, proves this up to the hilt.

In contemporary Europe, west of the so-called "Iron Curtain," the Vatican represents to-day the most powerful ideology, in fact Communism and Catholicism represent, undoubtedly, the two most powerful forces in contemporary Europe—not to mention the hardly less powerful influence wielded by Catholicism throughout the Americas, and its not inconsiderable influence in Australasia. What an anti-clerical French writer has aptly described as "The Church of Moscow and the Church of Rome," divide between them by far the greater part of the European continent.

As our author aptly comments in this connection: if one takes away from the contemporary map of Europe those lands not subject to either Catholic or Communist influence, one is left with only Turkey, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries.

To-day, chiefly through the agency of "Christian Democratic" Parties (outside the Iberian Peninsula), political Catholicism governs in the interests of Rome, either solely or in coalition, Italy, France (De Gaulle's victory there would intensify clerical rule), Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Austria and the "Benelux" countries. Political Catholicism also represents the dominant force throughout Western (non-Russian) Germany. In Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, political Catholicism is the illegal, but only real opposition to the otherwise totalitarian rule of Moscow and its henchmen.

In a Europe in which Capitalism and the bourgeoisie are discredited by their "collaboration" with Fascism, whilst Social Democracy is in a state of decay, political Catholicism is unquestionably the most powerful non-Communist force. It is America's most powerful European auxiliary in its approaching clash with Russia for the unchallenged domination of the whole world.

And the list just given only comprises Europe. In Protestant America, Rome is a potent social and political force. In Catholic (Latin) America, she appears to be still the dominant ideological and social force everywhere, except in the sturdily anti-clerical Republic of Mexico, perhaps the most progressive country in our contemporary world.

Whilst in South America, Rome is to-day engaged in a Napoleonic strategy, of which the Peron dictatorship is the secular "sword," to build up the Argentine, the greatest power in Latin America, upon the basis of

militant Catholicism into a World Power, into the "U.S.A." of the next (21st) century.

Consequently, when in the autumn of 1948, Pope Pius XII, himself a shrewd professional diplomat and a politician, rather than an ecclesiastic, looks out upon World-Catholicism under the dynamic inspiration of "Catholic Action" and of political Catholicism which springs from it, he has no reason to feel dissatisfied, for Rome is still a World-Power after centuries of Liberalism and Secularism have done their worst.

However, whilst the Western sky is bright, that in the East becomes ever more menacing. For Communism, which already in 1846, Pope Pius IX had found occasion to denounce, by 1948 has grown from a humble acorn into a massive oak, and one has only to open any Catholic newspaper to-day to see that Rome regards Russian-inspired Communism as the pre-eminent heresy of our era, the "Calvinism of the twentieth century" as I have elsewhere termed it.

All over the Western world to-day, what Robert Louzon (cited above) has described as the conflict between the "Church of Moscow" and the "Church of Rome," is in full spate. Nor is this description of Rome versus Moscow one merely figurative in character, for the two totalitarian creeds that to-day contend for mastery all over the Western world, Catholicism and Communism have more than a little in common, for if its whole history demonstrates that the Church of Rome has many of the characteristics of a political party, it is equally obvious that Russian Communism has many of the characteristics of a Church.

Dogmatic intolerance, unquestionable obedience, tortuous casuistry, are common to both rival creeds, as is also the famous ecclesiastical motto; "the heretic is worse than the infidel." It is not only at Rome that this last maxim is understood and practised, the successive heresiarchs of Communism from Trotsky to Tito, know it, to their cost. And Moscow, no less than Rome knows too, that in the world of power politics, "the end justifies the means." Both the ancient practice of the Vatican and the modern practice of the Kremlin illustrate this famous axiom of the Jesuits.

To-day, the Papacy is looking Eastward, and already she proclaims the "holy war" against Moscow, as against Jerusalem in the Middle Ages and also against Protestant England in the epoch of the Spanish Armada. And since this "holy war" for religion must, willy nilly, be fought with the weapons of an atomic science that may well leave a ruined civilisation in its wake, so be it! Better to ruin civilisation, better to ruin humanity itself, than to tolerate the poisonous weed of heresy. Who lives if the Church dies? Better a dead mankind than a heretical one!

When the rain of atomic death shrouds the East in its fiery mist the bells of the Vatican will ring in triumph as at the news of the Massacre of the Protestants on St. Bartholomew's Eve in 1572. And the Papacy will raise the old crusading battle cry "Deus Vult" ("It is the Will of God"), as once over the Crusaders of Peter the Hermit and over the destroying hordes of the most Holy Inquisition which exterminated the Albigenses.

F. A. RIDLEY.

THERE WAS ONCE—

A PARSON. He spent his miserable life preaching against man's sinful ways. He forbade every form of amusement and pleasure, and there was no joy in him.

But he was looked upon as a good man—because he saw evil in everything!

W. H. W.

ACID DROPS

Canon Collins hopes that the recent tour of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra organised by "Christian Action" will foster international peace "on a Christian basis"; we cannot see how music will foster it. We think Canon Collins should let well alone and try not to look so foolish by his imagining that music is "Christian." "Christian Action" has had some useful publicity out of the stunt, and the Berlin Orchestra has had the opportunity of living here for a short time in luxury compared with their life in Germany.

A.D. 1947 was a great year for the British and Foreign Bible Society, as another nine languages were added to their translations of the Bible—making 778 versions to date. The mind baulks at the prospect of the mountains of paper and seas of ink used to perpetuate a collection of fairy tales that even the majority of Christians no longer accept. The "White Man's Burden" is being unloaded on unsuspecting natives of the East.

Fifty thousand Missionaries is the conservative estimate of Bishop Stephen Neil needed to meet "the opportunity of the East." No one but a solemn Christian would think of such a scheme, particularly when we are told that there is a shortage of recruits to the ministry at home. Can it be that the home-produced Christianity is a glut on the market, and the 50,000 salesmen are needed for the export only trade?

The Greek Premier, M. Sophoulis, was critically ill recently, so ill in fact that hope had almost gone and the usual Last Sacrament was administered. As the term implies, this is the last effort by the Church to ensure an easy passage for the soul to appear before the Almighty. But a few hours later, M. Sophoulis sat up and insisted on eating a boiled egg and drinking a bottle of beer, later on still another bottle of beer was demanded. The latest report is that there is a distinct improvement in his condition. "Would be a courageous man, who, after the Church had issued a passport to heaven, would dare to weigh up the respective merits of Extreme Unction and Beer.

William Gallagher, M.P., has managed to start a controversy on "Communism and Christianity" in the "Times" (of all papers). We can afford to sit back and view the contestants with a detached air, but feeling rather sorry for the champions of Christianity, for William Gallagher can hurl Biblical texts with much more effect than the Christians. The Communist has it that there is room for Christians under Communism, whereas the Christians find that Dialectical Materialism is too much of a snag. The "Daily Worker" editorial, in an endeavour to be impartial, rather spoils the case for Mr. Gallagher when it states that "Marxism excludes the supernatural and the dogmas of theology." We wonder if the "Red Dem" knows anything about that?

Some time ago we reprinted the "Ten Commandments of Communism," the sixth Commandment being "A good young Communist must also be a militant Atheist." Whereat we were taken to task by the Editor of a Communist periodical suggesting that the publishing of this item would "do nothing but harm to the cause of British-Soviet relations." After this we dipped into Omar Khayyam for solace; he must have had something

like this in mind when he wrote: "... a great argument about it and about, but evermore, came out by the same door as in I went."

According to Fr. John Heenan, the worst of all enemies to Roman Catholicism is "the loud, empty Catholic" who is outwardly "often vociferous" but very sinful inwardly. Most of us have met few Catholics who have not been "outwardly vociferous," especially the more religious ones. What about Fr. Heenan himself? Of course, we cast no reflections on him "inwardly," but from the way he talks—as he does very often—there can be very few decent people anywhere, not even the majority of Catholics; except, of course, those who always say "Yes" to Fr. Heenan.

To show its strict impartiality the ecclesiastical authorities in Argentina have been investigating a case where a peasant girl claims to have seen "apparitions of Our Lord as the Good Shepherd." Ten thousand people have believed her, and have visited the scene where the girl insists that she saw the Apparition 30 or 40 times by a tree; and for our part, we cannot see that these 10,000 were any more deceived than the millions who have visited Lourdes or La Salette. But too much competition in shrines is bad business, and the Church frowns on this particular miracle—"and does not assign any value to these apparitions." It is a splendid example of the Church's strict adherence to the truth!

The Archbishop of Canterbury has now issued directions for the control of religious films—a control made necessary, it appears, because of the quality of some of these films. They have to compete in popularity with Betty Grable and Bing Crosby among hosts of other stars, and it could never be easy. In any case, the "Church Times" is very disgruntled at some of the films—for example, the one entitled "Belshazzar's Feast" has been criticised as "bad photography and bad theology." It is made all the worse as bad theology means "the dissemination of erroneous opinions." Which all goes to show that even with Divine opposition Hollywood could never be beaten.

Although Dr. Garbett "sees no sign of a religious revival," he seems to be rather pleased to report, in a letter to his Diocese, that "there is no aggressive hostility and people are prepared to discuss religion." Personally, we think the Archbishop a little too optimistic. There is hostility, and not only from outside, but also inside his own Church. But note the change of attitude compared with earlier Christianity—then, the only "discussion" was with rack, thumbscrew and stake. Of course, the Archbishop will assert that this now "tolerant" attitude is inherent in Christianity; and the heretic and the Freethinker, who throughout the ages bitterly fought the Church, can be conveniently forgotten.

No Church will stand long in an atmosphere of toleration, for the very fact that all religions are based on "revelation" must preclude any discussion. It would never do to reach the conclusion that God had made a mistake in His "revelations." Dr. Garbett knows full well that in this connection doubt is the beginning of wisdom, hence his efforts to minimise the effect of any opposition.

"THE FREETHINKER"

Telephone No.: Holborn 2601.

41, Gray's Inn Road,
London, W.C.1.

TO CORRESPONDENTS

Mr. C. C. Dove regrets that in his last article, Simon Magnus was printed for Simon Magus, and for the corresponding reference the figures should be pp. 225-248.

Mrs. Albon, Cornwall.—Thanks for cuttings.

T. Fox, Sussex.—Thanks, back numbers of "The Freethinker" are always useful for re-distribution.

The General Secretary, N.S.S., gratefully acknowledges a donation of 3s. from Mr. A. George to the Benevolent Fund of the Society.

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

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

Lecture Notices should reach the Office by Friday morning.

SUGAR PLUMS

The announcement of the N.S.S. Annual Dinner on January 29 has been received with warm appreciation and applications for tickets are coming in. The dinner will be in the Criterion Restaurant, Piccadilly Circus, London, W. 1., and is to be followed by speeches and a musical programme. Tickets are 12s. 6d. each, which should be included with the application.

The Home Secretary has given Spiritualists the assurance that mediums will not in future be prosecuted—unless, of course, they are fraudulent. Exactly how our police authorities will find this out is not very clear. Are there really any *genuine* mediums—that is, mediums who can get in actual touch with people in Summerland? There are plenty who *say* they can, and they get people to believe them; but what is the evidence? In actual fact, priests and parsons claim almost the same reality for their Paradise as Spiritualists do for their Summerland, and if one is fraudulent so is the other. Yet no priests have ever been prosecuted. For our part, we insist that Spiritualists have exactly the same right as Christians to preach "immortality"—a hopeless delusion of course—and we agree with the Home Secretary's decision.

The West London Branch N.S.S. should have a very interesting closing to the first half of its syllabus to-day (December 19) when Mr. F. A. Ridley speaks on "The Origin of Christianity" in the "Laurie Arms," Crawford Place, Edgware Road, London, W. 1., at 7-15 p.m. Mr. Ridley is a well known writer and speaker, and one who knows his subject well. Admission is free.

Members of the West London Branch are reminded that the Annual General meeting takes place on January 2, we believe in the same hall.

The Stratford Town Hall demonstration was not well attended but it served its purpose as a starting point for the revival of activity in the local N.S.S. Branch. Some new members were enrolled, and other contacts promised. All the speakers were in good form, and the Branch President, Mrs. E. Venton, made an excellent Chairman.

THE BIBLE AS FICTION

I

WE have come a long way from belief in the plenary inspiration of the Bible by God; from the Grand Old Book; from Gladstone's Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture; from the Authorised Version as the last word in divinely guided translation; to understanding of the Bible resulting from increased knowledge of Eastern literature and thought, to fuller interpretation and free criticism.

Resultantly a variety of translations are now offered the student, differing in many details, often materially. Additionally large volumes of exegesis are available in which the different books of the Bible are examined microscopically. Anthropology is revealing to us the mentality of the peoples responsible for originating that mingled collection we call the Bible; establishing the background against which its contents were told and retold centuries before being written down.

To students in many departments of human activity the Bible is valuable, increasingly revelatory as more is known about it. But as a religious and ethical guide, less and less dependable, and the common man is gradually abandoning it more rapidly of recent years. One wonders why the Bible is still used for taking the oath upon in law courts and other legal places, because that is merely survival of ancient fetishism.

Those interested in having the Bible read and believed carry on persistent propaganda. They have an organisation, the British and Foreign Bible Society, which boasts of distributing millions of copies in all languages.

Beyond that is a diversity of efforts to popularise the Bible. Larger clearer print and tinted and ornamental bindings to make the volume look more attractive, with maps and illustrations, photographic or coloured, are employed. Here one remembers one's youthful gazing with joy upon the decorations by Gustave Doré. What he lacked in delicacy or restraint he compensated by strength and vigour. Doré's men were all Samsons, his women Amazons, his children sausage armed and legged, his clouds tempestuous and his rocks adamant.

Further to tempt readers to the Bible the latter has been modified, selected, anthologised. We see it issued as the modernised Bible. Great play was once made of the Bible as literature, one edition being titled *The Literary Man's Bible*. Some of us are prepared to go to the logical conclusion and see a collection of extracts printed "The Bible as Fiction." The trouble is the comprehensiveness of this. Some would include the whole Bible in it, Apocrypha as well.

II

One remembers the atheist father who sent his children to a Church School, not withdrawing them from Scripture lessons or religious observances. When tackled about it he laughed, replying, "I don't forbid my children history and literature, folklore, drama, poetry or humour. On my shelves you'll find Bible and prayerbook and hymn book alongside the Arabian Nights, Chaucer, Grimm, Andersen, Heptameron and Decameron, Mother Goose, Perrault and others such. My youngsters are free to read all or any of them, and will so learn their values."

A sensible answer, which brings us nearer to the facts of the case. Even religious people to-day are prepared to admit the Bible is not scientifically accurate or historically correct enough to withstand minute research. They will talk readily of its verbal felicity, its moral teaching, its lessons, its exemplary or warning characters.

Anyone reading the Bible dispassionately will recognise the allegory and parable, the imaginative biography, the restatement of events, with national, racial, political or religious bias. Doubtful if ever a parable was told so cogently as Jotham's in Judges IX of the tree choosing a king. All the productive trees refused, but the useless bramble accepted. It is still applicable.

Or where is a more witty anecdote than that of Jesus' reply to the scribes and Pharisees who brought to him a woman taken in adultery: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her: And they which heard it went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last?"

But to discuss the humour of the Bible would arouse fierce and painful controversy. Nevertheless, it could and should be done.

III

To specialists the Bible is a storehouse of fable and legend, myth and magic, folklore which links up with masses of other material from all parts of the world, illuminating traditions and practices, ritual and superstition of primitive peoples.

The more ordinary viewpoint of story and novel readers may be considered. This is not so new as many persons imagine. John Bunyan would have been shocked if told he had written a sensational novel, but "Pilgrim's Progress" is that. Cut out the numbered references to the passages of the Bible he is quoting and a picturesque, often lurid tale remains, precursor of the eighteenth century Gothic romance.

Drawing largely on the Bible for "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained," Milton's enormous learning would not let him stop there. He ranged through all faiths, creeds and mythologies to build up his massive epics. Consequently, Jehovah and Christianity take their places as one of many gods and religions, while Satan comes remarkably near being the hero. Certainly Milton failed in his avowed purpose of justifying the ways of God to man, but "Paradise Lost" is curiously close to being a novel in verse. In "Samson Agonistes," the Bible story, obviously a sun myth, is transformed into drama; which the book of Job is without being touched by modern hands.

Leaving out the genealogies and priestly injunctions, discounting the distorted history, omitting the political bias of the prophets, knowing that primitive people saw the hand of gods in every unusual phenomenon we are left with a mass of fictional material. The Old Testament could be recompiled as such, or would provide a quarry in which to delve for hundreds of plots.

The story of David is a picaresque novel, such as medieval authors and readers, especially of Latin countries, would have delighted in. Ruth and Esther are the eternal Cinderella motifs. Equally universal in fiction are giants, so the Bible provides them. Beside the sons of Anak there were giants in the land, and more specifically names and details of Samson, Saul and Goliath. No doubt they were as real as Polyphemus, or the giant slain by Jack.

Nearly as popular is the theme of the despised or bullied younger brother making good. It occurs in all literatures, an outstanding example being the Biblical one of Joseph and his brethren. What writer of love stories ever let himself go with such fervour of eroticism as he who wrote the Song of Solomon, himself an entirely Arabian Nights character? The Prophets would be usable fellows in fiction, while Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are typical utterances of Eastern fakirs.

Reading through the four Gospels fails to give a connected biography of Jesus Christ. Dean Farrar in his "Life of Christ," and Renan in "Vie de Jesus" essayed to do so. George Moore, completing his great novel "The Brook Kerith," went on to introduce Paul of Tarsus. Lesser writers of Christmas and Sunday School books regularly retell Bible matter in story form, as Dorothy Sayers dramatised it for a broadcasting series, "The Man Born to be King."

One finishes with a gigantic imaginative vision in the Apocalypse, but telling tales as recorded dreams is an old mode in fiction.

A. R. WILLIAMS.

THE DEVOTEE OF DUMAS

IT was, I think, Robert Louis Stevenson who once put on record his conviction that Dumas' "The Vicomte de Bragelonne" was the greatest historical novel ever written. This, when we consider such works as Tolstoy's "War and Peace," is a bold statement; yet I am not at all sure that it is not justified. Dumas is in some respects heavy and repetitive; but I have recently read "The Vicomte" for the first time; and I certainly found it far superior to anything which Scott ever wrote. (I know that such a statement will annoy the advocates of Scott, but the critic can only speak as he finds.)

Historical fiction is, in some respects, a hybrid art; it does not necessarily appeal to all fiction lovers. Indeed, in our day, the public which enjoys the works of Jack and Philip Lindsay, Marjorie Bowen, Margaret Irwin, and Rafael Sabatini is probably a highly specialised public, not necessarily enjoying the compeers of those practised hands in the sphere of what one may call the "straight" novel.

But where, it may be asked, does one find the real quintessence of Dumas? Wherein lies his peculiar excellence? Well, I think that it is in his ability to tell a story. Early on in the book which provides the peg on which this article is hung the great D'Artagnan is trying to find his old friends, the Three Musketeers of the book of that name. None of them, it seems, is available, and so D'Artagnan rushes about, more or less all over France, trying to run them to earth. The suspense of each attempt to find his old comrades is brilliantly done, and no one who has not tried to write fiction will be able to realise just how well that part of the story (a minor part of the very involved plot, when all is said) is told.

Some people hold that historical novels are not worth either writing or reading, in that they necessarily involve a stupid transformation of history. Either "straight" fiction, dealing with the time of the writer, or "straight" history, dealing with the time of the past, in accordance with the most careful scholarship are, in the opinion of these critics, the only satisfactory types of literature. With this I do not at all agree. History, unless written by a genius like G. M. Trevelyan, is apt to be dull stuff, as many of us, ruefully remembering our schooldays, will readily admit. Yet the historical novelist, presenting his fictional characters in a carefully-drawn background which is correct, may be able to give to many a reader a knowledge and an insight into history which he would otherwise be quite unable to gain. That, I think, is why the historical novel is popular. It is, of course, to some extent open to the criticism that it is "escapist," since it enables a reader, obsessed with the puzzles and problems of his own time, to dive into the past and forget the worries of to-day in the worries of yesterday—or the day before.

Yet, since history is a valuable study in that it presents us with a description of the way in which our ancestors faced problems not unlike those which face us, it is a study which is not altogether "escapist."

Dumas, in "The Vicomte de Bragelonne," for example, is mainly concerned to provide an exciting sequel to "The Three Musketeers," in which he can introduce once more the grand characters who made their bow in that book. But at the same time he is compelled to portray for us Cardinal Mazarin, Charles II of England, and other men whose policies, personal and political, helped to make the history of Europe. For that reason the book is valuable; but it is enjoyable, I think, mainly because it is such a rattling good yarn—which is as good a reason as any other for enjoying a work of fiction.

JOHN ROWLAND.

PAMPHLETS FOR THE PEOPLE*

THERE must be very few readers of this journal, if any at all, who have no Freethought pamphlets on their shelves, and they must have often wondered which is the best way to keep them. In the nature of things pamphlets are bound to be "ephemeral," they are difficult to keep clean, difficult to hold together, and difficult to avoid lending to friends—which often means losing them.

Some of the finest Freethought has gone to the making of our own pamphlets, specially designed for gaining converts, and for this reason they have often become very rare. Moreover, for some cause or other, pamphlets are not often reprinted even though there may be a good demand for them.

Nevertheless, we should, I think, take every care of our pamphlets, for many of them are worth re-reading and mastering; often they contain the quintessence of wisdom on the particular subject dealt with. As I write, the titles of some of the most famous come to my mind—"A Plea for Atheism," by Bradlaugh, "The Mistakes of Moses," by Ingersoll, or "Atheism and Morality," by Foote, though, of course, there are dozens of others. And among them is the series which is so well known as "Pamphlets for the People." In them particularly will be found an epitome of what their author, Chapman Cohen, has taught for over half a century.

The complete set of eighteen make a library of the basic principles of Freethought, and almost any reader who masters their argument should be a match for even the most subtle "theologian" the Christian Church can put forward. In simple language, the author has dealt with the many sides of the Freethought case necessary to know in meeting the enemy, and they must have done a tremendous lot of good in equipping Freethinkers for their "religious" battle.

All the same, the problem of keeping a set together is one which can only be solved by binding them in one volume—and this has at last been done.

Here, then are the complete eighteen pamphlets tastefully bound in cloth—a handsome volume of some of the best work associated with the name of their author; and I can fancy few better presents for the season—or, for that matter, at any time.

The edition is strictly limited and should be exhausted in a short time—doing the work we all have at heart, the work described by George Meredith as "the best of all causes."

H.C.

* "Pamphlets for the People." Complete set of eighteen: cloth 5s., postage 3d. (Pioneer Press).

OBITUARY

It is with regret that we note the death of Mrs. Seaton Tiedeman in her 90th year (October, 1948). She was a member of the Ethical Society and a valiant fighter for Divorce Law Reform. It was in connection with this movement that she will be best remembered. Almost her whole life was taken up with this question, and A. P. Herbert's "Divorce Bill" owes much to her. The N.S.S. has cause to thank her for her many fine lectures and untiring propaganda on Divorce Law Reform, one of the aims and objects, it should be pointed out, also of this Society.

J. S.

LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

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

LONDON—INDOOR

Rationalist Press Association (Alliance Hall, Palmer Street, S.W. 1).—Monday, December 20, 7 p.m.: "Current Theories of Personality." Sixth Lecture. "The Eclectic Approach." Dr. FRIEDA GOLDMAN.

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "The Blood of the Martyrs." Mr. ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON, M.A.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, W. 1).—Sunday, 7-15 p.m.: "The Origin of Christianity." Mr. F. A. RIDLEY (N.S.S.).

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

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

Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Barker's Pool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. A. SAMMS and others.

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Blackpool Debating Society (46, Adelaide Street).—Tuesday, December 21, 7 p.m.: "Rationalism." Coun. F. H. AMPHLETT MICKLEWRIGHT.

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "This Evening's Programme is 'In the Lap of the Gods'."

Glasgow Secular Society (East Hall, McLellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: "Did Jesus Ever Live?" Mrs. M. WHITEFIELD.

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "The Challenge of Secularism." Mr. T. M. MOSLEY (Nottingham Branch N.S.S.).

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, 2-30 p.m.: "The Meaning of History." Mr. BERT HAYLETT.

JUST ISSUED

HANDBOOK

of the

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Vital Information
for all Members
and Freethinkers

32 pages.

7d. post free.

LIFT UP YOUR HEADS, An Anthology for Freethinkers.
By William Kent. Price, cloth 5s., paper 3s. 6d.; postage 3d.

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

HELL IN HEAVEN

THE baby had taken a turn for the worse and was dying. The poor wee mite was only three weeks old. But her mind was made up. Twenty-one daily headlines in the "Morning Mail" had helped her to reach the decision. She would tarry no longer in this world of woe. Alas, in her innocence she was unaware of the enormity of the peril in which she placed herself. Not so the hospital staff, who being quite naturally very upset, were anxious to do all that could be done for the child.

The first major signs of the child's decision became apparent during the night nurse's spell of duty. She was really concerned for the child as are all nurses under the hard shell of their exterior. As is natural on all such occasions, she fell to musing on the meaning of life and death, and the purpose of the heartbreak attending such a fleeting visit to this planet. But, being nothing of a philosopher, she was about to relinquish the quest when suddenly her memory stirred and she was shaken to her foundations. Her foundations were the ritual and circumstance of the Christian religion. Her memory revealed the terrible truth that the baby had been admitted to hospital unbaptised. And now it appeared to be taking its leave of this world in abysmal ignorance of the destination of the uninitiated. There was only one thing to be done, she must baptise the infant herself.

Having once made the decision it was a matter of minutes only to arrange the ceremony. The two necessary requisites were words and water. Holding the babe in her arms she lightly sprinkled the forehead with water saying, "I baptise thee in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost." An intense relief immediately came over her. She could almost hear the glorious song of praise from the heavenly host, rejoicing at the salvation of yet another soul. Her halo perceptibly expanded by two inches. But now doubts and fears began to assail her. Was she the proper person to perform these rites and had she included all the essentials in the ceremony? Her anguished brain could think of no omission, and satisfying herself that she had done her best, she determined to ask her relief about it if so be that the child had not then departed.

Promptly at the appointed hour her relief arrived and, "God be praised," the infant still breathed. The watcher of the night rapidly unburdened herself of the worries that beset her and reassured herself on the correctness of her officiation. But to make doubly sure they agreed to hold a repeat performance, this time with the understudy (the oncoming nurse) in the star role. Once more the mystic rites with water and the word and once more the feeling of relief.

But complications set in. A fellow-worker chancing on the scene was sure that the child was of a Roman Catholic family, and being herself of that denomination, she promptly stepped into the breach. Yet again this initiation ceremony, for the third time the paraphernalia of a baptism, but now with a Roman Catholic background.

At this point arrived evidence of the C. of E. origin of the babe, and protests at the Roman Catholic ceremony were interspersed with a violent defence of it and the assertion of its indissolubility. Peace was partially restored by the arrival of the Ward Sister for the day. Seemingly sisters are equipped with two halos to the nurse's one, giving them a higher standing and greater influence with the almighty. At any rate she was exhorted to re-enact the scene yet again.

The peals of laughter which were her first reaction to the farce which had been played out, soon turned to

positive disgust. She warmly "congratulated" the angelic three for their prompt action in saving the babe from its deserts, the hell-fire and eternal damnation which would otherwise have been the price of its three weeks innocent existence, and turned her attention to the pressing needs of the living.

The babe died. The three, unable to agree which denomination had legal right to the babe's soul, left the issue to be fought out in the realms above. They had succeeded in rescuing the babe from the hell below, only to transfer it to a hell in heaven.

J. F.

LOVE ONE ANOTHER !

How Christians love to quote The Book
And give you verse and line,
Together with that unctuous look
That makes them feel divine.
"Love one another" Jesus said,
(A beautiful oration)
Yet each would clout his neighbour's head
On any provocation!
The R.C. willingly would send
The Protestant to hell;
And Protestants a hand would lend
To burn the Pope, as well.
The Low Church always hates the High,
The Free Church is taboo;
Salvationists would sooner die
Than join the Oxford crew.
The Methodists, the Quakers,
The Elimites and all,
The Baptists and the Shakers
Forget their Maker's call—
"Love one another"—No, not they!
Yet all expect a pew
Reserved for them in heaven one day—
But *not* for me and you!
O what a peaceful home is there,
Beyond those Pearly Gates;
Where all can sit and spit and air
Their loving little hates.
A fishwives' paradise indeed,
Well-splashed with blood and guts—
If that's the *Love* on which they feed,
Then give me *Monkey Nuts!*

W. H. WOOD.

A PRAYER

The following copy of a prayer offered some years ago in given in the "West Somerset Free Press":—

"O Lord, Thou knowest that I have nine houses in the City of London, and likewise that I have lately purchased an estate in fee-simple in the county of Essex. Lord, I beseech Thee to preserve the two counties of Essex and Middlesex from fires and earthquakes; and as I have a mortgage in Hertfordshire, I beg thee likewise to have an eye of compassion on that county. And, Lord, for the rest of the counties, Thou mayest deal with them as Thou art pleased. O Lord, enable the bank to answer all their bills and make all my debtors good men. Give a prosperous voyage and return to the Mermaid sloop, which I have insured: and, Lord, Thou hast said, 'That the days of the wicked are short,' and I trust Thou wilt not forget Thy promises, having purchased an estate in reversion from Sir J. P., a profligate young man. Lord, keep our funds from sinking; and if it be Thy will, let there be no *sinking fund*. Keep my son, Caleb, out of evil company and from gaming houses. And sanctify, O Lord, this night to me by preserving me from thieves and fire and make my servants honest and careful; whilst I, Thy servant, lie down in Thee. O Lord. Amen."