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VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Christianity and Progress

SOME little time back I ventured to criticise in this column the excessively negative attitude of certain freethinkers who can apparently see neither any good nor social utility in Christianity at any stage in its existence, past and present. Such an attitude is obviously grossly unscientific. Worse, it plays directly into the hands of the theologians and, indeed, goes far to substantiate their claim that Christianity is inexplicable except as a miraculous phenomenon.

For a religion which managed to last for 2,000 years and to influence humanity profoundly, as Christianity has undoubtedly done, without rendering *any* useful service to mankind or without satisfying *any* social need, would assuredly be a "miracle" in the most literal sense of that theological term. It would be, literally, "something which cannot be explained in any other way"—the precise legal definition of "an Act of God" or, in other words, a "miracle."

Actually, Christianity as and when viewed against the background of world history, may be described as, socially, a kind of "mixed grill," in its origins, progressive in some respects, whilst reactionary in others. For, with regard to the rise of Christianity, as with reference to all important historical phenomena, it is necessary to differentiate between its bad and its good aspects. For, historically, progress and reaction are frequently found side by side in relation to identical phenomena. For black and white are not the only colours of which the muse of history makes use. Often too, she perforce, makes use of the more ambiguous grey!

Every age has its own peculiar social problems which it has to solve under pain of social disaster and ultimate disintegration. We, for instance, are to-day only too painfully aware that the stark alternative before our generation is world unity or atomic war and eventual dissolution into social chaos.

When, 1,900 years ago, Christianity first made its appearance upon the world stage, mankind had not yet arrived at the historical juncture where world unity presented itself as the next inevitable step in human evolution. Then, 1,900 years ago, in the days of the Roman Caesars, the social aims of mankind were more modest; the tasks which contemporary history set before classical antiquity in its final phase were twofold: politically, the unification of (what we may term) the Mediterranean "world" and, intellectually, the creation of a popular culture based upon the classical civilisation of the ancient Greeks.

How did Christianity fare in its contribution towards the solution of these fundamental problems? For in fact, as apart from propaganda, Christianity could not have continued to exist and expand, had it taken up a purely negative attitude towards these urgent contemporary questions. For historical science is concerned with what actually happened; not in the least with what the con-

temporaries of the events actually thought was happening. For history, so far, has always gone on over the conscious understanding of the vast majority of its active participants: "the unity of theory and practice" still remains a dream of a so far unattainable world.

I do not, myself, see how it can reasonably be disputed that, speaking politically, or if you will, sociologically, Christianity discharged originally a highly progressive role in its early formative period. When the "Pauline" writer went on record with the historic declaration that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, circumcised nor uncircumcised, bond nor free" (Galatians ch. 3, v. 28), in the circumstances of his own era he was progressive in precisely the same way as, under the circumstances of a more advanced era, Thomas Paine (also a theist) was progressive when he uttered the historic words "the world is my country, mankind are my brethren, to do good is my religion." It is merely inverted bigotry in our case with reference to "Paul," as in that of the Christians, with regard to Paine, to damn "Paul" and to praise Paine for what were, under the concrete conditions of their respective epochs, virtually identical sentiments.

In the second century of our era, the pagan historian, Plutarch, succinctly described the political conditions of the classical world when he wrote that every city state (in Greek, "polis"), to be truly such, must have two things, "a god and a town hall." In the early centuries of our era the Roman Empire did away with the "town halls"—the local statelets—whilst the Christian Church did away with the "gods" who represented the hundred and one local statelets whose endless feuds made up the history of the Mediterranean world prior to the Roman Empire.

Politically speaking, both the Roman Empire and the Christian Church discharged identical roles in their respective spheres: *they unified the Western "World."*

Why, we repeat, should the one be regarded as progressive, and the other not? Let us express the then existing situation in the concrete terms of our own day. If a new religion to-day set out to do away with our modern town halls, the national states, whose outmoded rivalries to-day threaten our contemporary world with destruction, and actually unified the world, would one not have honestly to admit that in this respect at least, such a religion was progressive?

Christianity, I repeat, was neither a supernatural miracle nor a diabolical invention—which latter, to be sure, would represent an inverted miracle! Contrarily, it was a sociological phenomenon and, like all such, was confronted with contemporary social and historical problems, which last it had to solve on pain of extinction. It solved them—and survived!

In an age which was still too socially and technically primitive for unification by reason, and where Greek philosophy was already dying before the victory of the Church, the concrete alternative was unification by religion or no unification at all. The survival of the

Church is the unanswerable proof that it solved its problem.

However, over and above the sociological problem there was, also, the intellectual problem: the extension and preservation of the classical culture. Here, too, the new religion—precisely because it was a religion—met with overwhelming success from its own point of view; the absolute clerical domination of mediæval culture and the universal diffusion of the ecclesiastical ritual language (Latin) prove this indisputably.

But here its ascendancy was far less favourable to progress, again precisely because it was a religion founded upon the supernatural and not upon human reason. For example, whilst the Church undoubtedly preserved *some* classical culture, it did not preserve it all and—a much more serious charge—it did not preserve the best.

In philosophy, for instance, it only preserved what was agreeable to itself; viz., Plato (the Greek "Berkeley"), an expurgated Aristotle, and the Greek idealists. The far greater materialist thinkers, such as the Ionian atomists and the Epicureans, it either destroyed or allowed to perish.

Whilst its supreme innovation, religious persecution for "heresy" was accurately described at its start by a Christian saint as "the introduction of a new and inexpiable crime upon the earth." Here we have not progress, but retrogression in its most monstrous form, from the normal standards of the classical culture.

Accordingly, the rise of Christianity must be regarded as a "mixed grill" predominantly progressive sociologically and predominantly reactionary intellectually. It is only in more recent times that the Church has become completely reactionary and (in the words of a Portuguese historian), its priests have become "African witch-doctors who depend for their continued power upon their ability to whip up the passions of the uneducated mob." But this latter state of things requires and must be reserved for another article.

F. A. RIDLEY.

(To be concluded)

THE RIGHT TO DIE

If man has a right to live (which war-mongering States and Churches deny) he surely must have a right to die.

Yet the right to die is denounced by Religion, by Law, and by many, perhaps most, individuals. A young female to-day cannot so much as jump into the Thames from Waterloo Bridge to despatch herself ably and quickly and so save others the cost and trouble of her burial, but some interfering "hero" will go in after her to pull her out. "One more unfortunate weary of breath" so Thomas Hood has it.

Considering that there are far too many people in England, and that there is not enough decent food or houses for them, you would think that the Government and man's fellow-men would applaud a man's suicide. (If sufficient English men, women and children killed themselves each year we should not need the Third World War with Communism to do it for us.) However, English Governments and individuals seldom think sensibly, and still more seldom think at all. Prejudice takes the place of free, unfettered thought.

There is great prejudice, but little reason, against suicide. Christians abhor Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus, although it is arguable that as the instrument of salvation and atonement all men should be grateful to him, and Judas committed suicide by hanging. The Church sets its face like a flint against suicide and for

long years denied burial in consecrated ground to the destroyer of his or her own life. Shakespeare nobly protested against this in Ophelia's burial scene, and it has been suggested that he did this because of a contemporary happening of this kind at Stratford-on-Avon.

The best argument against suicide that my free-thinking gives me is that it is unnecessary. You will die soon enough. Too soon, indeed; however late you die.

The conventional English inquest-lie "while the balance of his mind was disturbed" is contemptible as a compromise to avoid both the stigma of lunacy and the stigma of deliberate self-slaughter in an unthinking community where traditional Christian prejudice takes the place of hard thinking. For usually the suicide is a brave, determined person who thinks it better not to bear the ills he has and prefers extinction. His mind was probably far less disturbed than his relatives who have to face the trouble of inquest and funeral. He only had to face death; and we are all doing that every second that we live.

Deliberately, coolly and calmly to kill oneself, having placed all one's affairs in order is to die "after the high Roman fashion." That great moralist and noble mind the Emperor Marcus Aurelius advocated it, and he had thought far more deeply upon the problems of right and wrong than those who speak conventionally of "the sin of suicide."

Certainly I think a man has more right to take his own life than he has to take any other's. That, however, is not conventional law nor conventional morality which decree soldiers, sailors, airmen, hangmen and rewards their killing activities as honourable and proper at the word of the State. Otherwise not. Could there be a clearer or more convincing demonstration of the real modern God of the English being not the non-slaughtering Jesus Christ but the slaughtering State to whom the right-to-kill is so readily accorded by vulgar minds?

If you imagine (as many are fond of saying) that suicide is "cowardly," you can easily prove to the hilt that this is utter nonsense. All you need to do is to take a loaded revolver, put your finger firmly on the trigger, and place the muzzle firmly against your temple. You will be surprised how much courage that little experiment of Robert, Lord Clive, takes and how much determination you have to summon up. Or go up to the top of Westminster Cathedral and try to stand for a second or two on the extreme edge! If you try either of these suicide-preliminaries, you will know that it took all your courage even to approach suicide. And there is a next step!

No. Even impulsive neurotic suicide is no more cowardly than the hysterical soldier who flings himself in terror on the bayonet of his opposite number. Still less is the serious, quiet, determined suicide anything but brave when he faces that King of Terrors who at times appals the stoutest human heart.

Suicide is a rather rare proceeding in England, there being about 5,000 suicides a year and about 3,000 unsuccessful attempts at it. Of these the majority are men, the men exceeding the women by about 2 to 1. This is perhaps significant to those who think, English people are much more ready to kill themselves than to kill others (without State orders), for the private murders generally run to about 140 a year, to prevent which we hanged in 1936 only eight people.

It is, of course, perfectly true that madmen sometimes destroy themselves and that sometimes impulse to self-destruction is a symptom of madness. But sane men also destroy themselves, and suicide, in certain cases, may be a symptom of sanity. People put animals suffering beyond endurance, and beyond hope of recovery, out of their pain by a swift merciful infliction of sudden death. Shall a man be less merciful to his own suffering and incurable self than to his dog or cat or the beetle in the dust?

Prosecuting the would-be suicide, as our law does, is all wrong. There is more to be said for indicting for murder the survivor of the joint-pact suicide since he or she may have instigated a death and may even have used the pretence of his, or her, own suicide to cause the other's death. It is a curious fact that although many would-be individual suicides are prosecuted, extremely few are punished nowadays. English magistrates endeavour to secure no repetition of the attempt which, however, in the last resort, they are quite powerless to do unless the defendant is certified insane and confined. Even then. . .

Obviously in modern times the right to die is not conceded. If it were the State would surely provide an institution and a Refuge for Euthanasia where would-be suicides could go and take the last act painlessly, giving themselves and others the least possible trouble, going away from this horrible world in a kind of twilight sleep. A sort of last hotel. A place where one could write one's will and testament and one's last farewell letters and listen quietly to the arguments of the Director-General that one had better not, but that if one had absolutely made up one's mind—well, the facilities of the establishment were at one's disposal, of course! A Chaplain—if one required a Chaplain—would be upon the premises, to say the last words of comfort or a Freethinking friend to say: "Goodnight, sleep well, and soundly, too."

Such an idea is probably too civilised for England in 1949. When superstition and prejudice give way to cool, steady, uninhibited thinking, the right to die may be admitted on all hands. Meanwhile, however, we haven't even got the right to live in this age of the Atom Bomb and the "cold war" which is now warming up.

C. G. L. DU CANN.

THE INFIDEL OF CHENIES

WITHIN a few miles of my home, literally at the gateway to the Chilterns, is the charming village of Chenies. Situated on a high level overlooking the beautiful Chess Valley, where winds the little trout stream until it joins the river Colne some miles further on at Rickmansworth.

Chenies and the Chess Valley is, no doubt, very well known to readers for several good reasons. It is the subject of one of James Anthony Froude's "Short Essays on Great Subjects"; it is, indisputably, the most attractive of all the near London beauty spots, and it is owned and controlled by the great Russell family, many of whom have been distinguished freethinkers.

As Froude in his essay points out, the Russells have not encouraged the progressive outlook in the village that so distinguishes them in their attitude to the world at large. Rather, they and their henchmen have fostered and encouraged a hallowed atmosphere calculated—even to-day—to reduce in intensity the raucous shouts of London's most bellicose hikers.

In the Russell mausoleum situated alongside the Church, the remains of the great Russells have been housed and entombed from the first titled member of the family in the reign of Henry VII until our own time.

The various approaches to the village are impressive; the village itself has withstood the corrupting and blighting influences of suburban civilisation in a remarkable manner. Naturalists and nature lovers generally—although within twenty-five miles of London—still seek and enjoy the wild flowers, plants, birds and creatures that inhabit field, stream and hedgerow in the neighbourhood.

I have known the district since a boy. I have been chased as a boy by the Russell's village foreman for catching fresh water crayfish in the stream; but, although having known the village and its environs so long, the last thing I ever associated the solemn stillness of Chenies with was infidelity. However, my disillusionment was brought about in a curious manner.

A charming friend of mine, resident in the village, returning some books to me, inadvertently included a copy of a curious and arresting book entitled: "Personal Recollections of Lord Wriothlesley Russell and Chenies," by F. W. B. Dunne, LL.B.

The Rev. Mr. Dunne was apparently a one-time rector of Chenies and he tells the story—which loses nothing in the telling—of the one-time Lord Russell who took upon himself the rectorship of Chenies Church and village.

According to Mr. Dunne, Lord Wriothlesley Russell was a very good man, who as a rich man found the poor villagers a fitting subject for his loving care and charity.

Unfortunately, however, if the pious Rev. Dunne is to be believed, a discordant note of scepticism disturbed Lord Wriothlesley and his angels, an infidel appeared, disturbing alike the peace of the village and the simple childlike faith of the people.

But you must read the account of this village anti-Christ in the Rev. F. W. B. Dunne's own words:—

"With young men his influence (Lord Russell's) was magical. . . One striking occurrence happened where a young man, well known to his lordship, was led away, at first by vanity, afterwards by sin, into adopting infidel opinions. Here it was useless for any but himself to encounter this evil. The parents had failed, friends had failed and even the remonstrances of a newly-wedded wife were of no avail, but when his lordship called to see this young man, he was instantly admitted.

"Then former religious professions were alluded to, and lastly, even prayer tolerated. . . The reader will like to know that in time these doubts were cleared away, and the young man (he was then in consumption) died a simple believer in Christ." Page 33.

I was—as you can imagine—deeply touched on reading this pathetic story of the Infidel of Chenies, my friend was rather annoyed at the story getting into my hands and I am sadly afraid that I was suspected of indulging in a little mockery at the expense of the mendacious Dr. Dunne.

However, perhaps all true infidels after reading this feeble account of one of their tribe (even if a backslider) will make some pious sign or genuflection on passing through or being near the hallowed spot.

I sincerely trust no critical reader will ask me for proof or verification of this story. The Infidel of Chenies lives on like the founder of the Christian religion himself—a legend. A legend at which the pious will bow and believe and the sceptical will smile, steeped as they are in sin and unbelief.

R. F. TURNEY.

ACID DROPS

We note that the official Church Mission to London is to suffer competition, for a "man in a mask is to begin a one-man crusade to put the Christian Church in order," reports *Reynolds News*. Sounds like a reincarnation of Sysyphus to us, for the only way to put the Churches in order is to abolish them. Our Crusader is, however, certainly an optimist. *Reynolds* further reports that he could not quite make up his mind what disguise to wear, and decided to be content with a mask. We could suggest a fancy dress: why not disguise himself as one of his spiritual ancestors? He would be tolerably certain of huge congregations if he preached dressed as a Congo witch-doctor.

The Rev. Dr. W. Lofthouse does not seem at all sanguine as to the possibility of co-operation between the various Churches, despite the Archbishop of Canterbury who once said that his longing was "that we should grow to full communion with other Churches." Dr. Lofthouse gave instances from his own experience when he spoke of his own diocese where the principle of no interchange of pulpits was rigidly enforced, and where Church gentry would not attend Chapel, or vice versa. There is going to be quite a mix up when Peter starts sorting them out when they get to the Pearly Gates.

We have often given our advice in cases where prayers for rain are concerned, and have always advised those who pray to specify the amount of rain required. If only our advice was followed perhaps we would not have such bungling on the part of Our Lord such as has happened in North Wales when so much rain fell that sheep were drowned, while high winds uprooted trees and brought down farm buildings. Whilst in the Manchester area (strange as it may seem), the authorities are getting very anxious about their water supply due to the lack of rain. What is the good of a God who cannot look after his children's welfare?

Police were called to a Leicester Church when members of the National Union of Protestants interrupted a service and protested at the "blasphemy and idolatry of the Consecration of the Blessed Sacrament." Somehow this sort of thing is no longer exciting. In the good old days, God would have arisen in his wrath and struck the interrupters dead. Even not so long ago brawlers in church would have their noses slit or ears neatly sliced off. Now a good-humoured "Bobby" ensures that the peace is kept, which rather makes the rumpus appear silly and childish.

A secondary schoolmaster in Glasgow has just released some awful news. He has discovered that a good many of his pupils—nearly all of them, in fact—are not only unable to make the sign of the cross, but they can neither say "Our Father" nor "Hail Mary." Such godless education must inevitably turn Christian children into naughty Pagans, and cause excessive grief to God Almighty. There is only one cure—hand over the whole of our schools to priests and nuns under the Roman Catholic Church in Italy, and all will be well in Heaven. The Pope will guarantee it. We give this brilliant suggestion gratis to the Government.

Our Lady has recently made another appearance—this time to a Bavarian peasant woman, and we are sorry

to say that the Vatican is showing unnecessary scepticism about it. Surely the Virgin has as much right to appear before a poor, but virtuous and pious lady of the peasant class, as before two children in Portugal. It is painful to observe an increasing tendency in Popish circles to unbelief in some of these apparitions—as if the Virgin did not know her own mind. A chapel was to have been built on the spot, but the Vicar-General has banned it, and actually claims the woman to be a victim of hallucinations. Perhaps he meant a much smaller word.

The perpetual "crown of roses" has turned up again. This is the third as the others "withered" after all, one in one year and the other in two. We are gravely informed that "people from all over the world" came to see the last roses—rather expensive, we should imagine—and no doubt they'll come again to see the miracle. A six-year-old girl was given the honour of putting the roses on the statue and queues commenced early to see the wonderful sight. We still think, however, that most of the women would have preferred to hear Donald Peers, and most of the men to see Betty Grable.

The Rev. P. Gliddon has been complaining at the way in which people are willing to pay an undertaker £50 and only 7s. 6d. to a parson as the marriage fee. He added, "Parish priests are almost bribing young couples to be married in church by undercutting register office fees, and by offering the considerable advantages which a church possesses for those who want to make a spectacle of their wedding." We think that as a spectacle the Church has a register office beaten to a frazzle—but does such a "spectacle" make marriage a holy sacrament?

A tourist travelling in Switzerland, the Rev. C. Robertson, was killed when a three-ton rock crashed on his charabanc. This would have been easy to explain had the unlucky victim been a Freethinker, but it only shows again how mysterious are the ways of the Lord. Still, a Swiss clergyman, who gave first aid, prayed for Mr. Robertson—though to simple-minded folk like ourselves, prayers after a man is killed strikes us as being utterly futile. Were they to prevent the victim from being sent to Hell, or what?

The Almighty appears also to have shockingly neglected St. Barnabas Church, Wellingborough. Two boys of eight are alleged to have set the church on fire, with the roof falling in, and one fireman injured. Whether the vicar will now pray for the dear children or see they get a good spanking, we are not informed. But what the heck does the Lord do these days?

The Bible abounds with pratings of "love one another," and it seems that every second word in a parson's mouth is love. Which is all right in theory, and the sonorous phrases of "Be ye kind to one another," etc., may sound rather good in a sermon, but when it comes to a practical test, the boot is on the other foot. We are, therefore, not surprised that a scheme to exchange pulpits in Washington, U.S.A., between twelve white and twelve Negro preachers was cancelled at the last minute, and the "love that passeth all understanding" just could not stand the strain, even though both white and black are "all God's chillun."

"THE FREETHINKER"

Telephone No.: Holborn 2601.

41, Gray's Inn Road,
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TO CORRESPONDENTS

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Lecture Notices should reach the Office by Friday morning.

SUGAR PLUMS

It is two weeks to the N.S.S. Annual Conference at Nottingham, during the Whit week-end, and for local members with no need for hotel accommodation we give this reminder of details. Saturday evening at 7-30, reception of delegates and friends in the Victoria Station Hotel, Nottingham. Sunday, June 5, business sessions in the same hotel at 10-30 to 12-30, and 2-30 to 4-30. Lunch at 1 p.m. At 7 p.m., public demonstration in the Co-operative Hall, Parliament Street, Nottingham. Admission free, some reserved seats at 1s. each. The business sessions are for members of the N.S.S. only, and current cards of membership must be shown for admission.

The *News Chronicle*, true to its tradition, joins with the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail* in regularly boosting religion. Gladly it quotes the Rev. J. Short: "Man is incurably religious"—and, adds the *News Chronicle*, "If man rejects God, he will seek idols and in the end the idols will crush him." This leaves us breathless, for even the pure and innocent *News Chronicle* writer must be aware of men, and crowds of them, too, who certainly reject both God and idols; who, in fact, look upon "God" as an "idol."

We are told that the "secularist spirit" has its "ultimate form in the Marxist-Communist State." This is just nonsense, as some of the greatest Secularists, like Bradlaugh and Ingersoll, loathed the "Marxist-Communist State"—and they have left many followers. Their ultimate goal was *Freethought* which opposes totalitarianism in all its forms.

It is interesting to note, however, that Professor Toynbee is quoted—"In the life of the spirit, put the secular structure back on to religious foundations." No doubt that is what the learned but religious professor would like, but both he and the *News Chronicle* can rest assured that our quarrel is with religion, and with religion *Freethought* will never compromise.

To-day (May 22), Mr. T. M. Mosley, Secretary of the Nottingham Branch N.S.S. will debate with the Rev. Kenneth Waights, Methodist Mission, in the Market Square, Nottingham, at 8-15. The question for debate is "Christianity or Secularism?" We understand the Rev. Kenneth Waights has a good local reputation as a preacher, and we know that Mr. Mosley is well able to take care of himself on the subject for debate. It should result in a Sunday evening well spent for all those who intend to be present.

"IN THE NAME OF HUMANITY"—A DOCTOR REPLIES

WITH great interest I have read both Joseph Lewis's "In the Name of Humanity" and Mr. Cutner's review of it in your Journal. There are many different theories about the origin of circumcision—a custom which is found among many peoples all over the world, including the Australian aborigines, whose theological concepts are vastly different from those of the Jews or the Muslims.

Mr. Lewis's theory, that it was a blood sacrifice to cleanse the boy of contamination of having come in contact with the mother's blood, may or may not be correct. Would Mr. Lewis offer the same explanation for the rite of "female circumcision," which is found among many African people?

But, whatever its origin, it is unwise for Atheists, Agnostics, Rationalists, or Freethinkers to condemn it merely because they believe it to be connected with religion or magic. A custom may be beneficial even though it had a religious or magic origin. As a surgeon, whose professional experience extends over 35 years, I believe that circumcision is beneficial. The fact that it is sometimes carried out by incompetent operators, or on children who, for some special reason, are unsuited for it either temporarily or permanently, is not a valid reason for condemning it in general. Of course it should not be carried out on weakly babies, or on babies suffering from *Hamophilia* (bleeding disease); and it should be carried out only by persons properly trained to perform it skilfully, and with all the necessary surgical precautions.

The fact that it has, in the past, sometimes been carried out by unskilful *mohels* (ritual operators) with lack of surgical skill, or defective precautions as to asepsis, is to be deplored, and it is very necessary that nobody should be permitted to do the operation unless he has passed a stringent test. But this is true, not only of circumcision, but also of any other procedure, such as piercing the ears, removing the tonsils, or extracting a splinter from the flesh, or even removing a piece of dirt or other foreign body from the eye. It would be very desirable that such procedures should be undertaken only by highly skilled surgical specialists, under conditions of perfect surgical cleanliness.

As a matter of fact, most ritual circumcisors, in Western civilisation, at the present day, are properly trained and are subjected to careful tests before they are licensed to act as *mohels*. Indeed, most duly qualified medical practitioners who have themselves carried out a number of circumcisions and have witnessed the same operation being carried out by a *mohel* will admit that they consider his skill, and the method he uses, superior to their own. It is not uncommon for surgeons to go to *mohels* to be taught how to carry out the operation in the way prescribed by the religious authorities.

It is true that, in earlier days, before the principles of asepsis were understood, a *mohel* has sometimes infected the child with syphilis or tuberculosis. But doctors sometimes infected their patients with these diseases, or others, because of a similar ignorance of asepsis when carrying out other surgical procedures.

The technique which led to such deplorable results has now been abandoned, and the *mohel* is trained in proper surgical technique which he applies in carrying out the ritual procedure.

I cannot accept Mr. Lewis's statement that circumcision dulls genital sensation. I have performed the operation on a number of adults and have questioned them carefully on this point. Some of them have said that it made no difference, and others that it actually

increased sensation. It is often helpful in cases of premature ejaculation—a disturbance that affects a very large percentage of men. While it does not afford 100 per cent. protection against venereal diseases it undoubtedly renders the liability to infection very much less. And there seems to be no doubt that cancer of the male organ, and of the neck of the womb, are much less common among peoples who practise circumcision than among those who do not. Cancer of the male organ is rare anyway, but it is almost, if not quite, unknown among those who carry out the circumcision of infants. Cancer of the neck of the womb is by no means rare, but a recent discussion in the medical journals made it quite clear that, in a group of South Sea Islands where two communities live side by side, one of which practises infantile circumcision while the other does not, this form of cancer is almost unknown among the women of the first group but quite common among the women of the second group.

Quite apart from these diseases, circumcision facilitates genital hygiene. Owing to the repressive sexual taboos which we acquire as we are brought up, most people are so frightened by the (quite unjustified) threats of the ill-effects of touching their sexual organs that they are afraid to touch them even for the purpose of keeping them clean. The result is that the majority of uncircumcised males, however often they bath and however cleanly they are in other respects, are anything but cleanly with regard to their sexual organs. This leads to local uncleanness of an incredibly disgusting character, from the aesthetic as well as the hygienic point of view, and, indeed, lowers the resistance of the tissues so that local inflammation is by no means uncommon and the local liability to infection by the germs of venereal disease is much increased.

Nobody admires Joseph Lewis, as a Freethinker, more than I do, but I cannot help feeling that, in this book, he has let his prejudice warp his judgment.

NORMAN HAIRE

(Editor, *Journal of Sex Education*,
President, Sex Education Society.)

A FREETHINKER'S PHILOSOPHY

SO many people have, in recent years, sneered at the general attitude to life of the Freethinker, that it seemed to me worth while to try to set down, in simple terms, what I thought the attitude of Freethought means. But first of all, it seems to be necessary to say frankly what Freethought is not. It is not an attitude to life which is reactionary in any way. Some of our Marxist friends (particularly those who accept the dogmas of the Kremlin) are inclined to say that the Freethought Movement is a dead affair, slowly moving towards complete extinction. On the other hand, it is not, as so many of our friends in the Churches would like to suggest, tied either directly or ideologically, to the strict party line of the orthodox Communists. It is, in fact, the accepted "third force," which the Socialists in France are trying to build between Communism and De Gaullism. It is the attitude of mind taken up by the man who is resolved to see his own way through the muddles of our day, without accepting the mental dictatorship of any of the authoritarianisms now fighting for the rule of the world.

And what are the ideas which must underlie any kind of Freethought which remains independent of competing dictatorships? What should we believe, if we do not believe in accepting our ideas ready-made in the way so general among Catholics and Communists alike?

Well, first of all, as I see it, we must take all the help that we can from science—but without swallowing any idea because it is put forward as scientific. The late Sir James Jeans and Sir Arthur Eddington, in their lamentable attempts at working out a philosophy which would settle the age-long squabble between science and religion, showed the dangers of relaxing for a moment that scepticism in the realm of ideas which is a necessary prerequisite of any Freethought worthy of its name. But, even though we do not accept everything that the scientists tell us, preserving a sense of balance in this as in all other spheres, we do realise that science, more than any other activity of man, is likely to give us a lead as to the way in which the world works.

And what is the corollary of this? Well, first of all, it means that any activity of the mind of man which runs directly counter to the facts discovered by science must be in error. This, I think, is where the pseudo-sciences of our day go wrong. This is where Christian Science, so-called, errs hopelessly. This is where spiritualism makes its fatal mistake. In spiritualism, for example, the critical faculties are voluntarily held in abeyance. The Society for Psychical Research, which has been sternly critical of all the phenomena that it has investigated, has failed to discover any really crucial evidence for the spiritualist crudities set forth in such journals as the "Psychic News." Admittedly, the S.P.R. has unveiled some remarkable and as yet unexplained matters, particularly in the realm of telepathy, and he would be a bold man who would forecast what is likely to happen in this sphere in the next hundred years or so; but to say that is by no means to agree with the general attitude of the spiritualists in constructing a substitute religion, which is what, in effect, they are doing.

And that leads me to the main attitude of the Freethinker, which marks him off from the non-Freethinking part of mankind. He is resolved to stand on his own feet, to make up his own mind about the problems of existence, and to see that man can become master of his environment. No one who takes either ideas or philosophies ready-made from any source can be a Freethinker.

That is the strength of the Freethought Movement, but it is also, in this world of mass organisations and the counting of heads, its weakness. The two main associations of Freethinkers and Rationalists in this country probably have a membership put together not equal to that of one of the lesser Churches or even the smaller branches of political parties. That is, in a sense, a weakness; it results in the dictatorship of the Churches in the columns of the ordinary Press and in the programmes of the B.B.C. It results in the comparative lack of protest against the unsocial activities of such bodies as the Lord's Day Observance Society. It results in all sorts of restrictions and limitations. And it is not at all easy to see how this is to be overcome. Freethinkers will never be in a majority of the population—or not until the world improves. It was Bernard Shaw who once said to me in effect that such people as he and H. G. Wells had spent their lives trying to make men into more reasonable creatures; but that the only way in which this could be done was to start with the children, for if children were indoctrinated with irrational ideas in the schools the teaching of reason would have to start again from scratch with each generation.

I have said, however, that the way in which the Freethinker has to make up his mind for himself is at the same time the strength of the Freethought Movement. This is so, since it means that there is no chance of the true Freethinker being taken in by the specious claims of authority. In our day it is only the individual resister to

mass-organisation who has a chance of preserving his mind and his freedom. That far, at any rate, the philosophic anarchists are right. Authority, by such moves as the retention of military conscription (in the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R., and the U.K.), the direction of labour, the preservation of concentration camps, and so on, can attempt to influence opinion so that no genuine opposition exists. But, even with the threats of atom bombs and concentration camps, the true Freethinker can overcome all opposition. No authority, however powerful, can overcome the mind of man for ever.

This may seem, in some ways, a dismal analysis of the tendencies of the time; but it is, I am convinced, a true one. We have, as Herbert Read once said, to make up our minds to face the worst with courage, resolved to endure whatever may come. And the philosophy of Freethought, better than most philosophies, will enable us to do that.

JOHN ROWLAND.

THE SECULAR ALPHABET

- A are the Arts that have lifted our race;
- B are the Books that have moved us apace.
- C is Credulity, nearing its end;
- D stands for Doubt, the true Truthseeker's friend.
- E is Endeavour, the Secular pray'r;
- F is the Freedom to think and declare.
- G is the Gloom that is passing from life;
- H is Hypocrisy, less and less rife.
- I is Instruction in matters of fact;
- J stands for Justice in thought and in act.
- K is the Knell of the biblical blight;
- L stands for Liberty, Logic, and Light.
- M are the Mystery-mongers exposed;
- N are the National ills diagnosed.
- O are the Orthodox, foes of the Truth;
- P are the Priests, the corrupters of youth.
- Q are the Querists that smile at Taboo;
- R is the Right to be honest and true.
- S is Salvation of man by himself;
- T is the Truth, spite of parsons and pelf.
- U is the Union of Christ-sundered hearts;
- V are the Virtues that Science imparts.
- W stands for the Work of to-day;
- X the "Unknown," to which thoughtless folk pray.
- Y are the Years that are wasted on God;
- Z is our Zeal; and for Truth we will plod.

G. L. MACKENZIE.

MINDSZENTY IS NOT GUILTY—YET . . .

All Catholics firmly believe that Communism is a temporary thing and that the Church will go on living for ever. So Communism is to be fought with every means at the disposal of the Catholic Church.

"Peace, if it comes, will be on Church terms, not Communist terms. . . . Many priests are living in Soviet-controlled territory incognito. They live ordinary daily lives. They dress as the townspeople dress, and they are not known to the police as priests. . . . In some countries Catholics have printing presses already hidden away. These will be used to turn out pamphlets and newspapers to give Catholic news coming from the outside world. There are a few hidden radio stations scattered about, too."

(Reported from Rome, in "U.S. News and World Report" of March 4, 1949.)

GOD AND THE UNIVERSE. By Chapman Cohen. A Criticism of Professors Huxley, Eddington, Jeans and Einstein. Price, cloth 3s. 6d., postage 2d.; paper 2s., postage 2d.

CORRESPONDENCE

SPIRITUALISM

SIR,—I was extremely relieved to read Mr. Wood's reply to my letter on life after death. Mr. Wood has, apparently, not intellectually sunk, rod, line and sinker, he just thinks there may be something in the spiritualist's "planes of existence," "vibrations," etc.?

I can assure Mr. Wood it is in no mood of undue levity that I pursue this inquiry. I should really like to know if Mr. Wood thinks there may be something in the other "phenomena" enumerated in my letter?

Mr. Wood is in a bad way, but not quite so bad as I at first suspected. My primary interest in Mr. Wood is, that he has written some excellent and witty articles and poems for "The Freethinker," and that it is not too late for him to avoid the intellectual annihilation of a Conan Doyle.

I would suggest, as one of his past admirers, that he turns his attention from the grisly throng to something of more human interest.

Perhaps a course of Anatole France would save our valued contributor from the spiritual Nirvana for which he is undoubtedly heading.—Yours, etc.,

ROBERT F. TURNEY.

AN APPRECIATION

SIR,—May I express my appreciation of the brilliant and witty articles of F. A. Ridley. In originality and brightness they remind me of G. W. Foote. As one who was born into the R.C. Church and know its power in Ireland, past and present, is to know how impossible it is to make any social, political, educational work without the R.C. support. Trade unions, political bodies must all bend their knee to the Church.

F.A.R. is right; "clericalism is the enemy." In this country, except amongst their own people, they must keep their gloves on, and hide the iron-hand. They must keep up the pretence of being tolerant.

Especially do I want to thank Mr. Ridley for calling the attention of Freethinkers to the little masterpiece of Bakunin, "God and the State." The American "Truth-Seeker" in reviewing it, said it combined the "Age of Reason" and the "Rights of Man." It is a masterly challenge to those who would limit Freethought to purely theological problems. Though written many years ago, it is a refutation of those alleged scientists and thinkers, who when the gods have been pushed out of the front door, try to bring them in by the back-door. Bakunin aimed at the abolition of government, i.e., Anarchism, his contention being that mankind can only be free when government above or below is completely abolished.—Yours, etc.,

M. KAVANAGH.

LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, 12 noon: Mr. F. A. RIDLEY (Highbury Corner); 7 p.m., Mr. F. A. RIDLEY.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Marble Arch, Hyde Park).—Sunday, 6 p.m. Messrs. E. BRYANT, F. WOOD and E. PAGE.

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Goethe's Humanism," Dr. KARL WOLFF.

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Cur Park, Broadway).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m. Mr. H. DAY.

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market).—Sunday, 3 p.m. and 7 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Crawshawbooth.—Friday, May 20, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Hapton.—Wednesday, May 25, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: Messrs. WINTER, WHITAKER and BARKER.

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Sunday, 8-15 p.m.: Debate, "Christianity or Secularism?" The Rev. KENNETH WAIGHTS (Methodist Mission). Mr. T. M. MOSLEY (N.S.S.).

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

WORLD UNION OF FREETHINKERS

(Arrangements for the International Congress are proceeding apace, and we print part of the Bulletin No. 1, 1949, of the World Union of Freethinkers.)

THE 29th International Congress of the World Union of Freethinkers will be held at Rome, by invitation of the Italian National Society "Giordano Bruno," September 9 to September 12, 1949.

All are invited to attend who value the unhampered operation of the reasoning mind, who believe that to enable mankind to develop and progress men must have freedom of inquiry, freedom of expression, freedom of publication and freedom of association.

The Congress will celebrate the quater-centenary of the birth of Giordano Bruno (at Nola in 1548) and the centenary of Garibaldi's Defence of Rome; and will discuss:—

1. The Problem of the Schools;
2. The Religions, the Churches and International relations;
3. Humanism and Freethought.

The President of Honour of the Congress will be Monsieur Edouard Herriot, supported by a Committee of Honour.

The Congress will, it is proposed, assemble in the Campo dei Fiori, the scene of the burning of Giordano Bruno, and at the monument to Garibaldi near the Aurelian Gate.

Those wishing to attend the Congress must obtain admission tickets from the Secretary of the Society to which they belong. If they desire accommodation to be reserved in Rome, they should then write to the Congress Secretary, Dr. Cesare Serafino, via Cavour 57, Rome, Italy, giving the name of the society to which they belong, or the office from which they obtained an admission ticket, and stating what accommodation is desired (approximately 1,000 lire per person per night plus taxes).

Those who attend the Congress must bear in mind that it will be no platform for political doctrine; the Union is neutral with regard to politics save that it supports all movements to emancipate the mind and to resist any attempt to hinder the free operation of opinion.

Giordano Bruno was born near Naples at Nola in 1548. Distinguished for intelligence, he entered a Dominican convent at the age of 15, and was ordained priest when 24. Three years later he had to flee from Naples for heretical opinions concerning the Trinity. From this moment until his arrest by the Inquisition, he was harried from one refuge to another over Western Europe. A brief sojourn in Geneva impressed him that Calvinism was, not a Reformed, but a Deformed, religion, which aroused as it was openly expressed, the enmity of the Calvinists. A year in Toulouse gave him his Magister Artium; three years in England under the protection of the French Ambassador, Castelnuovo de Mauvissière, and befriended by Sir Philip Sidney, gave him the leisure to do his best work. To Sir Philip he dedicated *Lo Spaccio della Bestia Trionfante*, in which he set out a natural theistic religion—he liked to call himself Filoteo, the Lover of God—denying all revealed religions and deriding the notion of a divine nature. After 14 years' wandering, during which he gained a great reputation and his lectures were sought after, he was invited from Zurich to go to Venice by a former pupil, Mocenigo, who denounced him to the Holy Office, and the unfortunate Giordano Bruno spent seven years in the prisons of the Inquisition. On February 17, 1600, he was burned alive in the Campo dei Fiori at Rome.

To this steadfast, brilliant and outspoken man mankind owes a great debt. He was a scientific philosopher, maintaining the infinity of space, natural selection, and supporting the theories of Copernicus. To him we owe the expression *Libertas Philosophica*—he was one of the most formidable opponents of unreason yet to appear, and found the Christian creed, whether Roman Catholic, Calvinist or Lutheran, repellent.

Giuseppe Garibaldi, born at Nice in 1807, fell under the influence of Mazzini, and, to help the Savoy expedition planned by Mazzini, schemed to seize the arsenal at Genoa. This plan failed and Garibaldi was condemned to death by default, but escaped to Brazil. Here he gained a great reputation as a guerilla leader and formed an Italian Legion. When it was bruited in that an attempt was to be made to drive the hated Austrians out of Italy, he hastened back to Europe and offered the services of his Legion to Charles Albert of Sardinia and Piedmont. After the defeat of the Piedmontese he fled to Switzerland. The new Roman Republic summoned him to their aid against the Neapolitans and French, and Garibaldi gained a series of brilliant victories. The defence of Rome will go down as one of the heroic events of history. All was in vain against overwhelming forces; the city was forced to surrender and Garibaldi escaped, making an astounding retreat through Italy, finally escaping to America. He lost not only many of his closest friends, but also his admirable wife Anita, the companion of his adventures. Five years later he returned to Italy, and bought the island of Capri thenceforth his home till his death in 1882. His remarkable feats in the liberation of his country made him a popular hero, and a hero to all freedom-lovers throughout the world. He was outspokenly anti-clerical, and was president of honour of the Societa Atea (Atheist Society).

In celebrating the anniversaries of these two indomitable men, we honour moral courage, physical courage and invincible fortitude; Bruno, the solitary thinker; Garibaldi, the leader and man of action.

The English-speaking societies supporting the World Union of Freethinkers are: in Great Britain, the National Secular Society, the Rationalist Press Association Ltd., the South Place Ethical Society, the Ethical Union; in U.S.A., the Association for the Advancement of Atheism in America, the National Liberal League, the Freethinkers of America, the American Humanist Association; in Australia, the Rationalist Society of Australia, the Rationalist Society of Queensland, the Rationalist Society of New South Wales; in New Zealand, the New Zealand Rationalist Society.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY
Co-operative Hall, Parliament St., Nottingham

A FREETHOUGHT DEMONSTRATION

on WHIT-SUNDAY, JUNE 5th, 1949

Chairman: R. H. ROSETTI

Speakers:

J. T. BRIGITON (Chester-le-Street)	J. CLAYTON (Burnley)
H. DAY (Bradford)	L. EMURY (London)
T. M. MOSLEY (Nottingham)	F. A. RIDLEY (London)

Doors open 6-30 p.m. — Commence 7 p.m.
Admission free. — Reserved seats 1s. each.