

# THE FREETHINKER

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## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

### Catholic Action and the Belgian Election

THE recent General Election in Belgium should be a matter of serious concern for Freethinkers. For it marks a definite gain for the power of the Papacy in politics, and signifies a rather ominous portent in present-day European politics. For which reasons, I propose to ask the readers of *The Freethinker* to turn their attention to the current continental political scene. *The Freethinker* has got nothing whatever to do with party politics, and it will be a sad day for both it and for Freethought in general if it ever has such a connection, but there is, notwithstanding, a political aspect for Freethought no less than for religion, and for the same fundamental reason in both cases: both Freethought and religion live in a world where unfortunately power-politics have the last, and often the first word.

In the recent case of the Belgian Election it is necessary in the first place to distinguish between appearance and reality. The nominal issue at stake was the not very important one of whether the exiled Leopold III should be recalled to the Throne, or left to continue to languish (quite comfortably, we believe, as is usual for "Kings in exile") in Switzerland, that impartial home of out-of-work kings and exiled revolutionaries. Leopold, it will be remembered, surrendered to the Nazi war-machine after a few weeks resistance in the debacle of May-June, 1940. His supporters claim that the King's surrender was due to overwhelming military pressure, his critics claim that the Belgian "Sedan" was due to royal sympathy with the Nazi counter revolution, a proclivity not uncommon amongst the then ruling circles in Europe.

A rather ancient issue, and not a very important one: particularly since Belgium is a democratic country where the "King reigns but does not govern" and which in any case only plays a minor role in contemporary European politics. Were the issue of the restoration of King Leopold really the only one at stake, it would be altogether superfluous to draw the attention of the readers of this journal to so trivial an issue.

However, the real issue in dispute at the Election was quite different and far more fundamental. For the real protagonists were Rome and "Catholic Action" on the one hand, and Freethought and Democracy on the other, and the result of the actual General Election was a decided, though fortunately not quite a complete victory for "The Black International" and its militant standard bearer, "Catholic Action."

For the result of the General Election was to displace the Social-Democratic-Liberal coalition of the parties of the Left, and to return the "Christian Democrats" as the strongest party with a strength of only two votes short of an absolute majority in the Chamber of Representatives and an absolute majority in the Senate. Fortunately, the Belgian Constitution adopted, with English support in the hey-day of Lord Palmerston, at

the Revolution of 1830, which created modern Belgium, is a Liberal one which requires that the Government should have an absolute majority in the Lower House. So, at the time of writing, it is still uncertain whether Mr. Van Zeeland, the "Christian Democrat" leader will succeed in replacing Mr. Van Spaak, the former Social-Democratic Prime Minister, in the coalition of the progressive parties, or whether King Leopold will, or will not, replace the present "Regent," his brother Prince Charles.

However, local Belgian political issues are not of precisely earth-shaking importance, the genuine importance for Freethinkers lies in the sinister gain which it represents for political Catholicism, by far the most dangerous creed, enemy of contemporary Freethought and, indeed, of current human progress in general. As such, the local Belgian scene becomes absorbed in a world-wide political drama.

It is scarcely necessary to remind the readers of a journal such as this, that the Church of Rome is, so to speak, a hybrid institution, partly religious and partly political, or more precisely, a religion in form and an empire in substance. These two aspects of Catholic activity are frequently indistinguishable. But it can be stated with complete assurance that whether it be religion or politics which is the "end" for which Rome exists—a hotly disputed question—its "means" are usually a mixture of the two: religious superstition and political intrigue habitually go hand in hand. The present aggressively political movement of "Catholic Action," which has just won its latest victory in Belgium, is but the last to date of a long series of movements which entered the political arena for "the greater glory of God"—and the temporal aggrandisement of the Vatican. In the course of its long struggle, militant Catholicism has employed some strange tactics and co-operated with some strange allies: Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, were only the last of many.

To-day, Fascism is, at least outside the Iberian Peninsula, a thing of the past, we are all Democrats nowadays—even the Pope! Accordingly the Catholic chameleon now assumes a new "protective colouring," no longer does it go about in Nazi brown, or Fascist black. To-day, "Catholic Action" is a wolf in sheep's clothing; a fascist-clerical wolf in democratic sheep's clothing! The bygone era of Catholic-Fascist collaboration, so exhaustively analysed by Avro Manhattan and others has now given way to the "Democratic" era, when the fighting standard bearer of "Christian Civilisation" is no longer Nazi Germany, but "Democratic" America. and it is, in my submission, a matter of the gravest concern for Freethinkers, that the fundamentally totalitarian Church of Rome, clerical fascism incarnate, has with diabolical cleverness succeeded in ingratiating itself with America and the United Nations to the extent that it bids fair, at present, to become their chief ideological ally in the present struggle against "communism." The universal uproar over the Mindzenty case was an eye-opener in this last connection.

To-day, either absolutely or in coalition,\* "Catholic Action" rules Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Ireland, Holland, Luxembourg and now Belgium, and this is to speak only of Europe, for in the Americas and Australia it is not less potent. It is a formidable claimant for power in the new German Republic, and as recent events have shown, "Catholic Action" is by no means dead behind the Iron Curtain. To assess their real significance the Belgian Elections must be studied against this factual background. It is a very serious outlook for Freethinkers.

A final, more fundamental point, Belgium is one of the most industrially advanced areas in Europe. It is by no means a backward country. Time was when the cruder type of "economic determinist" was assuring us that the effective substitution of industry for agriculture meant almost automatically, the end of religion. Belgian Catholicism, however, maintains its hold after a century of acute industrialisation. Evidently the matter is not quite so simple as some people used to suppose.

What conclusion must we draw from all this? Obviously, this: religion, particularly in its most aggressive form, Catholicism, will not disappear automatically. The progressive forces aimed at its destruction must be consciously directed. In view of the opportunism which is the second nature of politicians, only a movement for militant Freethought can accomplish such a task. The Catholic victory in the Belgian Election underlines the current necessity for an International Movement of Militant Freethought.

F. A. RIDLEY.

\* Coalitions are always dominated by their most reactionary section, this is a recurring political "law."

## AN AMERICAN SURVEY OF PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

DR. HUGH MILLER'S *Historical Introduction to Modern Philosophy* (Macmillan, New York, 615 pp., 1947, 26s. 6d.) is both stimulating and suggestive. If it is not so brilliant as Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, it is equally readable. Moreover, Dr. Miller is a sound Humanist who approaches philosophical problems from a strictly evolutionary standpoint and postulates man's highest ethical concepts as the indispensable basis of all that is beneficent both to philosophy and science. Also, he is firmly convinced that unless armed conflict between contending states is ended there is increasing danger of the human species terminating its career by self-destruction.

In every modern community the powers of official agencies are constantly extending. As our author points out: "Government tends to-day to replace the religious, educational, charitable, and other institutions which earlier helped ameliorate human relations. It is evident that this empowerment of government will proceed further, and that the United States and Soviet Russia loom so large in world affairs, not only because of their size, but because they have undertaken most deliberately and most successfully the development of man's political resources."

Miller stresses modern man's dependence on classic Greece. Yet, nearly all Grecian achievement in science, art, philosophy and letters, was confined to two brief centuries—550 to 350 B.C. Having broken the pride of Imperial Persia, the Greek City States failed to realise that unity means strength and, indeed, so impoverished themselves by internecine conflict that they fell an easy prey to Macedonian militarism whose Empire itself

speedily disintegrated after Alexander's death, only to become subject to all-conquering Rome.

Still, Greek thought persisted throughout Rome's prolonged rulership. Platonic speculations greatly influenced Alexandrian philosophy and later entered the theology of the Christian Church. Some readers will conclude that Miller unduly estimates the benign influences of Christendom's creed on Pagan life. Still, he candidly declares that "It is fairly well agreed among exegetical scholars that the earliest Christian conceptions, even those presented in the New Testament, are an inseparable amalgam of historical fact and imaginative interpretation. In one sense there is nothing new in the New Testament. No dictum there that has not its analogue in earlier wisdoms, no incident that is not reminiscent of earlier myth, no concept that is not implicit in some earlier train of thought." No doubt these and kindred factors contributed to the triumph of the Church, but the threat of eternal punishment intimidated multitudes of Pagans and barbarians into the Christian fold.

A thousand years of discord and darkness signalled the supremacy of the Church and, when at last science re-emerged, it was mainly under Arabian incentive. The fate of Abelard, one of the brightest spirits of his era, was not unique. Still, Miller opines that the Dark and Middle Ages were not so sombre as they sometimes seem. Duns Scotus, Albert, Aquinas, and St. Francis, are hailed as harbingers of a brighter day. Roger Bacon truly was a real reformer who, while professing strict orthodoxy, entreated the clergy to encourage scientific studies. But the clerics, as ever, proved obscurantist. As Miller observes: "It [the Church] imprisoned the hot old genius during the last decade or more of his long life, none other than the saintly and gifted Bonaventura, signing the order for his incarceration; and we shall never know what the Church might have become if instead of repudiating her great son she had united the development of modern science with her own religious aspiration, and not required posterity to choose between science and religious orthodoxy." Again, clerical treatment of Bruno and Galileo, among others, manifests Catholicism as the eternal enemy of enlightenment.

The Reformation and the birth of modern society are reviewed. Hobbes, Descartes, Leibnitz, Newton and Locke, all play their respective parts in the evolution of contemporary thought and conduct. Miller speaks highly of Shakespeare's historical plays, but he stands supreme in his tragedies. *Hamlet* is deemed the poet's profoundest study and Miller regards it as a drama which "calls into question the moral foundations of the universe."

In the 16th century, Copernicus' teaching revolutionised human concepts concerning our planet's predominance. Yet, the central position of the sun in the solar system had been established by Aristarchus of Samos, about 300 B.C. and had since been completely forgotten. Francis Bacon's services to science proved important, for he resumed the inquiries of Roger Bacon and Occam. But paradoxically enough, Francis, who did so much to discredit tradition, rejected with scorn the heliocentric theory of Copernicus.

Duly noted are Spinoza's rejection of all revealed religion with its anthropomorphism and persecution, and his affirmation that the only real divinity is the Substance which constitutes existence. As Miller avers: "Spinoza's criticism of biblical sources initiated a new era of critical and scientific religious study and was the important forerunner of the critical historical science of to-day. He widened the religious outlook of his age." Again: "The chief philosophical influence of Spinoza, over and above

the scientific influence exerted by his determinism to apply scientific method to ethics, psychology and sociology, has been due to his rationalistic monism."

Miller is an empiricist who claims that all human knowledge arises from experience of ascertained fact. He rejects all seemingly self-evident propositions unless they are confirmed by observation and experiment. This is of course, the inductive method so consistently applied in modern scientific research.

Our historian's realism is clearly displayed in his criticism of Kant's phenomenology. According to Kant, knowledge is confined to phenomena or appearances, the ultimate reality, the thing in itself, ever eludes us. But, as Miller notes, we all know what fire is and that, if uncontrolled, it leads to disaster. So we hasten to extinguish it. Yet, "Notice," he observes, "it is the real fire we put out, not the phenomenal fire merely. The appearance of fire we could extinguish merely by closing our eyes or moving elsewhere. Thus we move in a real world, we act upon real things, yet we see and know only appearances! Somehow, therefore, we do distinguish between phenomena and noumena, and this involves knowledge of both."

Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer were the great founders of social science and the latter was the long venerated philosopher of evolution. Miller, however, asserts that Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy, to which he devoted his life, might have been constructed apart from Darwin's *Origin of Species*, a work which transformed the outlook of the scientific world. But Miller's criticism furnishes no detailed acquaintance with Spencer's *Principles of Biology*, especially in that monumental work's final form. Of Darwin himself, Miller speaks in reverential terms. Despite minor modifications he avers that "Darwin's doctrine, in its essential teaching, stands more firmly than ever. It is generally agreed that the organic species did originate in time, that once there was on this planet no life, such as we know it, and that all the organic species have evolved from one or a few original forms of life."

The views of various other thinkers are subjected to critical scrutiny. The psychology of William James is treated as no longer authoritative. Croce and Bergson are regarded as tending towards mysticism, if not confusion of thought. But Bertrand Russell's important contributions to logical theory and analysis in his and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* are acclaimed as the leading philosophical achievements of recent decades. Thus, as a realistic protagonist, Miller opines that Russell's fame, in coming generations, will ultimately repose.

T. F. PALMER.

### GOD'S TRUMPETER

FREED from polemics, an account of the life of a man like John Knox must be exceedingly well written if it is to escape dullness. In this welcome reprint of her book, "The Life of John Knox" (Watts, 3s. 6d.), Miss Marjorie Bowen has achieved the almost impossible. Resisting all temptation to digress or take sides, she has written a biography that is always exhilarating and occasionally sparkling. The former quality springs from the author's rare blend of literary sensitivity and historical perspective, and the latter from the sheer gusto with which parts of the book are written. These attributes are not enough, being equally those of a glass of champagne or revue, and the real excellence of the book

is not at first sight apparent. So clearly and cogently is it written that one is not immediately aware of the research that must have gone into the writing of it, nor of the immense skill with which the tangled pattern of Knox's life is unfolded.

The result of the care with which Miss Bowen has done her work is that the life of John Knox becomes in fact a panorama of one of the most stormy episodes in Scottish history. The austere Calvin is here, nodding his head from Geneva, and gravely answering the questions put to him by the turbulent Scot. The tragic figure of Mary Stuart is seen plunging from indiscretion to folly, vacillating and compromising. David Rizzio, Bothwell and Darnley are here, together with the scheming Catherine de Medici. There is a glimpse of the Virgin Queen and her adviser Lord Burleigh. These characters are set vividly against the background of the bitter struggle between the two Churches, and as the story unfolds, the dominating figure of John Knox, thundering forth God's word, spreads his shadow larger and larger over the whole scene.

The sum total is a crowded and lively canvas in which personalities and ideas clash with often tragic results. It is a tribute to the skill of Miss Bowen that she has brought it off, without having to over-burden her text with footnotes, and without recourse to a turgid and bombastic style. For all its depth of learning, this remains an eminently readable book.

A real danger in writing a "panoramic" biography like this is that the main character may easily get lost against the general background, or that he may be crowded out by other characters, and it is interesting to see how Miss Bowen has faced this difficulty and overcome it. The strength of her book lies in the fact that it is free from surmise, and that as far as possible she has kept rigidly to the authenticated facts of Knox's life. For instance, he makes his appearance in the beginning as a grown man, tutor to the Douglas family. There is no conjecture—beyond a tentative paragraph—as to his place of birth or education. The facts of Knox's life are the framework for the story, however far it strays from them. This may seem a truism, but all too often phrases like "almost certainly," "without doubt," "it seems," and so on used in a biography serve only to distort the complete picture, while they may make it more picturesque. In the second place, care is taken that no irrelevant details of background are included, a sense of discipline is obvious here, and Knox is invariably the central figure against whom the events taking place in the background are seen. Equally, with the possible exception of Mary Stuart, whose life touched that of Knox at so many points, all the other characters are kept in a minor key; no others are allowed the full force of the author's pen. The result is a balanced work.

Reading this book, one is struck by the thought that it could so easily have been a biography of bits and pieces, a litter of historical episodes, yet in Miss Bowen's hands, it is a sane and lucid account, illuminated by a sympathy and understanding that its subject would have found so hard to understand.

The publishers are to be congratulated upon the format of these 3s. 6d. Thinker's Library Series. In these days they are excellent value, and make an inexpensive and pleasant addition to any bookshelf. The print is clear, and the binding far stronger than that of many far more costly books. There is, in fact, only one thing to quarrel with—why, oh why, is there no index provided?

VICTOR E. NEUBURG.

## ACID DROPS

A letter from "Thorough" to the *Northampton Independent* recently drew attention to the coat of yellow paint which has been given to the statue of Charles Bradlaugh—and rightly demurs, "He looked like a chimney sweep before," objects "Thorough," "now he looks like a politician who has tried to disguise himself as a Chinaman." And he clinches his letter with—"Whatever Bradlaugh may have been he was certainly never yellow!" Eternal vigilance seems to be as necessary for other things quite as much as for liberty!

Dr. C. M. Chavasse, Bishop of Rochester, has delivered that he is a walking advertisement. "I put on my glad rags," he says, "for this sort of publicity pays because thousands of small gifts come in." We can certainly believe it, people don't mind paying to be entertained, and what can be more amusing than a bishop in his "glad rags": top hat, gaiters, and a "pinny"? But do not forget that when it comes to gifts, large or small, they expect to be taken seriously.

In future the monthly meetings of the Ruthin Rural Council will be opened with prayer. There are four clergymen on the council. We hope for peace and quietness, that they are all of the same brand of Christianity, otherwise there will be trouble immediately. However, any electorate that votes in four clergymen do not deserve any sympathy.

The chief constable of the Cheshire Police is advertising for recruits, but readers of this journal had better think twice before applying, for apart from the usual requirements of physical fitness and height "all members of the Constabulary off duty will be expected to behave as Christian respectable citizens at all times." The implication that Christians are better citizens than others is absurd, and the chief constable, who should be in a position to know, ought to check up on our prison population. Incidentally, if constables are expected to behave as Christians off duty, does this not apply when on duty? It would certainly be interesting to see a "bobby" in a fracas turning the other cheek as fast as he could. What a day for the "wide boys"!

The one subject Christians hate to discuss—and in this they have the support of many Rationalists—is the problem of the historicity of Jesus. But the question constantly crops up, and the latest reply comes from Professor Findlay in the *British Weekly*. He was asked whether it was true that "there is no evidence . . . for the existence of Jesus as an actual flesh and blood historical reality." The "answer to the challenge" is quite simple. All you have to do is to read F. C. Conybeare's *The Historical Christ*, where "Mr. Conybeare, himself a Unitarian and an advanced critic of the Gospels, has blown it sky high and done it in the columns of the *Rationalist Press*!" That settles the matter. A unitarian writer does not agree with Robertson, Drews, and the rest—his book was published by the Rationalist Press, and hey presto! Jesus must have lived.

This complete farrago of drivel is put forward by a professor, and no doubt his readers will sit back smugly satisfied. There may be quite good arguments for the existence of Jesus, but why bother about them when a unitarian and one who believes that Jesus was the Historical Messiah straight from God disagrees with John M. Robertson? Incidentally the gallant professor

(who has never read Robertson) quotes, not Robertson as he should have done, but the travesty given by Conybeare; he actually says, "Here are some of Mr. Robertson's suggestions"—the "suggestions" being Conybeare's and not Robertson's. But the question is too big a one to be settled in a paragraph or two—all we wanted to do was to call attention to the "preposterous nonsense" (to use his own words) of Professor Findlay.

Mr. Misery Martin of the Lord's Day Observance Society does not always appear to have it all his own way. A Mr. Gilbert, writing to the *Sunday Dispatch*, says that although he is a churchgoer Mr. Misery's tactics "drive people from religion." If only this were true it would be a good thing; unfortunately there are huge numbers of people who believe that religion and misery, particularly Mr. Martin's brand of misery, inevitably go together. And they are ready to fight to the death to keep them together. Religion and misery are well and truly married.

Once the Vatican had decided that it was time to produce St. Peter's tomb to the world, we knew it would be done. One of the Sunday national newspapers gives front page news to "Ten Years Digging Proves Site of St. Peter's Tomb" just as if ten years digging would have been allowed to go unrewarded. But how do we know it really is the authentic tomb? Quite easy—the architect in charge of the excavations says they have confirmed the existence of Nero's Circus under St. Peter's the Circus became a cemetery, and St. Peter was buried near it. Roman Catholic tradition claims that St. Peter's Basilica was built over his tomb and there you are! This will cause joy in the hearts of all Christians, Jews, and Reverent Rationalists, who can now insist that if Peter existed, then Jesus, the Great Man, also existed and the Mythicist is rightly confounded!

The *Universe* is quite proud of the fact that quite a good number of Americans became Catholics as the result of reading the Knights of Columbus's "fact-giving series of advertisements on the Church." Well, America is a good long way off, and we would be more convinced if similar advertisements compelled *Freethinkers* here in this country to go over. The Church Commandos of a few years ago, like the Bishop of London's Mission recently, were both complete failures. Why don't the American Knights have a shot in England—or, if they want a more difficult nut to crack, why not try converting Russia with advertisements instead of with prayer?

All the very religious papers are angry with the Population Report because it has almost left religion out of the story. What God Almighty, or the Pope, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, thinks about the rise or fall of population is just ignored. Loud, very loud, in condemnation is Mr. Richard O'Sullivan, K.C., who scathingly denounces it much as Jesus used to go for the Pharisees—"There is not a spark of religion about it—a dreadful example of the way the mind of England has gone pagan." This should really be indicative of its necessity, but then poor Mr. O'Sullivan actually imagines he is condemning something by calling it pagan! Better a thousand times be pagan than Catholic.

For this week's great thought we are indebted to the Rev. J. Johnstone of Torquay, who said, "The great weakness of the Church to-day is that people don't go to church as they used to." Solomon in all his wisdom could not have been so profound.

# "THE FREETHINKER"

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## TO CORRESPONDENTS

R.E.C., Salford.—Thanks, but the case of the Vatican Financial Secretary's defalcations was dealt with in these pages.

G. FAULKNER.—The General Secretary, N.S.S., acknowledges with thanks a donation of 3s. to the Benevolent Fund.

Mr. David Moore, of 8, Fourth Avenue, Clacton-on-Sea, would like to contact local Freethinkers with a similar desire to exchange views and opinions.

*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

There are few journals or magazines in our day which deal with serious subjects in a readable way. We should therefore like to recommend to our readers the magazine "Enquiry," which makes its appearance this month in a new format and under a new editorship. Originally planned to deal mainly with the disputed facts of psychical research, "Enquiry" has been broadened so that it now discusses many matters of serious import. The current number, for instance, contains unpublished essays by three of the recently dead—Havelock Ellis (on eugenics), Arthur Machen, and M. P. Shiel. Among the other contributors are Eden Phillpotts, Stephen Graham, Professor H. H. Price, Roy Campbell (on Aldous Huxley), and two whose names frequently appear in these columns, Oswald Blakeston and John Rowland. A seventy-two page magazine with such material is good value at 1s. 6d. It is published monthly by Horace Cox Ltd., and we understand an attractive programme of articles has been arranged for coming months.

Mr. L. Ebury will speak at the first meeting of a season of lectures for the South London Branch N.S.S. at Brockwell Park, Herne Hill, on July 17, 7 p.m. Here is an opportunity for old Branch members and friends to renew acquaintance. It is hoped that there will be a big rally at the opening meetings again to put the Branch on the Freethought map. The Secretary (6, Templar Street, S.E.5.) will be pleased to receive offers of help. Brockwell Park is a name famous in the annals of Freethought propaganda and, except for the break of the war years, has been the scene of an unbroken series of meetings since about 1890.

This is a forward notice to Manchester readers that on Sunday, July 24th, Mr. J. Clayton, N.S.S., and Mr. E. Corcoran, R.C., will debate the question, "Is the Design Argument Sound?" The debate will take place in Platt Fields, beginning at 3 p.m. The Manchester Branch N.S.S. are also holding meetings every Wednesday evening at Alexandra Park Gates at 8 p.m. The local Catholic Evidence Guild refuse to allow platform opposition from the N.S.S. members, so replies to the Catholic Evidence speakers are reserved for Wednesday evenings N.S.S. meetings.

## NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

### Report of Annual Conference, held in Victoria Station Hotel, Nottingham, Whit-Sunday, June 5, 1949

OUR Society's Annual Conference is over once again, and loyal members may congratulate themselves on a successful event at Nottingham, the home of the youngest N.S.S. Branch.

Precisely at 10-30 a.m. the President, Mr. Chapman Cohen rose to open the proceedings. The following Branches were represented: Blackpool, Bradford, Bolton, Birmingham, Blackburn, Chester, Chester-le-Street, Glasgow, Halifax, Kingston, Manchester, Merseyside, Newcastle, North London, Nottingham, Sheffield, South London, West London, West Ham. There was also a good assembly of other members who were not delegates.

Undoubtedly the main interest of the Conference lay in the retirement of Mr. Chapman Cohen, President since 1915, and the nomination by the Executive of R. H. Rosetti, Secretary since 1928, to the vacant presidency. One of the most impressive speeches of the Conference was that in which Mr. J. T. Brighton (a Vice-President) paid tribute to Mr. Cohen's service in the presidential office. He said Mr. Cohen had more than just filled the place previously occupied by Charles Bradlaugh and G. W. Foote. They had cleared away much superstition, but Chapman Cohen had established Freethought as a more philosophic force in the life of the country. He (Mr. Brighton) had heard of Mr. Cohen's decision to retire from the Presidency with deep sorrow, and wished it were possible to put back the clock so that he might start all over again. He had won not only the respect but the sincere affection of a host of workers in the Freethought movement, and had inspired them to render better service to the cause than they could otherwise have given. This tribute was paid in the simple straightforward talking manner of which Mr. Brighton is a master, and though a number of others present added their testimony of Mr. Cohen's great work, and more would have liked to do so, it really said all that was necessary, ending with a reference to the hospitable, friendly atmosphere of the Cohen domestic scene which Mr. Brighton had been privileged to enjoy from time to time.

The retiring President had a great reception when he rose to reply. Obviously speaking with considerable emotion, he said that he had found in the Freethought movement the thing he liked best to do; that he had done whatever he had done better because of the never failing encouragement of his wife; and that he would continue to have the interest of the Society at heart as long as he lived. Meanwhile he was carrying on as Editor of the *Freethinker*.

In moving that Mr. R. H. Rosetti, nominated by the N.S.S. Executive, be elected President, Mr. Cohen said that the Executive had surveyed the field, and now recommended a man who had proved his ability and worth during a period of forty years' membership, including twenty-one years as Secretary of the N.S.S. He personally thought a better man could not be found.

Some delegates expressed the view that Branches should have more time to consider the appointment, and Mrs. Whitefield (Glasgow) moved that a plebiscite of Branches be taken and a conference called in six months' time to elect a President. This was put to the Conference and defeated. A suggestion was made that Mr. Cohen remained President for another six months, but Mr. Cohen said he would not agree to that. Finally Mr. Collins (Manchester) moved that Mr. R. H. Rosetti,

while continuing to be General Secretary, should be elected Acting-President until the next Conference and that was agreed to by a large majority.

In taking over the Chair from Mr. Cohen, Mr. Rosetti thanked the Conference for its confidence in electing him to the highest office in the N.S.S. The task of maintaining the Society's traditions was not one that any man could undertake alone. He called for the loyalty of the rank and file, and regretted that he began his term of office with the Society having to fight on two fronts. He hoped that those who had been hampering the work of the N.S.S. from within would soon realise that the forces of religion are helped by that line of action. Mr. J. T. Brighton (Newcastle) was re-elected Vice-President, and was joined in that office by the election of Mr. L. Ebury (N. London) two well merited honours for long and valiant service to the cause.

The solid achievements of the Conference were, the acceptance of the Annual Report and Balance Sheet, showing good work done and progress in the Society's financial position, including a much improved income from subscriptions, the election of a tried and trusted soldier of Freethought as Acting President, the filling of the offices of Secretary, Treasurer, and Auditor, and the election of the Executive.

The cost of the Annual Dinner was questioned and the Chairman pointed out that the dignity and prestige of the Society had been considered and upheld in that function. The Conference advised that the Executive aim at reducing the loss in future arrangements.

As there was no functioning Branch in Wales the nomination for that area was withdrawn. Kingston-on-Thames delegate moved that Mr. Taylor be not re-elected to the Executive. The motion was seconded, put to the vote and carried.

A resolution by a member of the Executive to safeguard the voting rights of members of the Parent Society, which had been questioned at the 1948 Conference, was opposed by the West Ham delegate, but was easily carried on a show of hands.

Other motions could have been dealt with if a minority of those present had not used every possible opportunity for time wasting. Christian opponents could have learned something in noisy obstruction from this self styled "reformist group." Those resolutions not reached were remitted to the Executive for consideration and action.

The reception on the Saturday evening was a well attended and enjoyable function. The Nottingham Branch Chairman, Mr. A. J. Hewitt officially welcomed the delegates and friends in a few well chosen words.

At the Sunday evening public demonstration in the Co-operative Hall, Mr. R. H. Rosetti presided and Messrs. J. T. Brighton, J. Clayton, H. Day, L. Ebury, T. M. Mosley and P. A. Ridley, made an excellent team of speakers before a very appreciative audience, which included Mr. Chapman Cohen and Mrs. Cohen. Mr. Cohen seemed to enjoy the unusual role of being with the audience.

Yes, it was a very enjoyable ending to the 1949 Conference.

P. V. M.

**MATERIALISM RESTATED.** Fourth edition. By Chapman Cohen. Price 4s. 6d.; postage 2½d.

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

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## THE THEORY OF VITALISM

THERE is no doubt that the theory of a "life-force" or principle in living organisms distinct from their physical and chemical energies belongs, like myths in theology, to an earlier age in which the scantiness of scientific knowledge coupled with the common practice of using words for obscure realities passed muster. But this is 1949, and the Vitalists are a "lingering group of elderly men whose watches stopped forty years ago," to quote McCabe.

Chapman Cohen describes the Vitalist as the disguised supernaturalist, and Bernard Shaw who used the term "life-force," as a man "carrying round the ghost of a god with him." In his "Primitive Survivals in Modern Thought," Cohen writes with his typical lucidity: "There is not vital phenomena and another thing called life: the word 'life' is merely the name we give to express the general relation of an organism to its environment. . . . The general movements of an organism is life and to believe life is more than this is nonsense. . . . And again, he says: "In terms of strict science 'life' is no more than a descriptive epithet used to indicate a synthesis of properties and qualities manifested by objects called living. . . . No useful purpose is served by separating the descriptive term from the properties and writing as though 'life' stood for something in itself. There is no more a conceivable 'life' apart from things called living than there is heat apart from things called hot. One might as well talk of a 'heat-force' as a 'life-force' . . ."

McCabe points out that not one biologist or physiologist in a hundred adheres to the Vitalist theory, and that confidence in the ability to prove immortality is now confined mostly to Catholics and Fundamentalists. One of the fundamental fallacies of Vitalism is the queer notion that if there are functions not at present explicable in physical terms, this points to some non-physical principle or "life-force." Even if one conceded the possibility of this "force," it no more explains vital functions than the word "god" explains anything else. Like the latter, it is an attempt to explain the obscure by a "something" more obscure. The Vital Principle was merely invented just as "Aquosity" was assumed to be the principle that made water wet. The word "life-force" is a mere name without an objective to which it should refer. It is an unnecessary *ad hoc* assumption. To appeal to a vague "something" essentially unverifiable to "explain" something material (and which does not in the least degree explain), is the antithesis of scientific method. It cannot be stressed too strongly that *words aren't things*; the verbal confusion over "life-force" arises from the wholly false image conjured up—that there exists somewhere a kind of "force," separate and distinct from things that are living. It is to set up a false dualism.

It used to be said that muscular movement could not be explained without a force called "irritability"; similarly, that neural action needed a "sensitive force." In such cases the erroneous idea of a specific "life-force" was invoked. But muscular action is now adequately explained on material principles, and the substitution of a mere word ("force") for a cause was long since abandoned. Vitalists used to say that certain substances would never be made synthetically. They are now so made, and once more the "vital force" takes a holiday. More important still, the instincts of animals are explained without the slightest reference to the imaginary "life-force." Experimental physiology and embryology attained such remarkable results that by 1912 Vitalism

was in as parlous condition as is religion to-day. Even as long ago as 1833, the great physiologist Müller menaced Vitalism with a destructive dose of facts in his "Manual of Physiology," in which he gave a demonstrative proof that there is really nothing to be said for this "life-force." Since his day it is correct to say that discoveries are constantly being made which confirm his view.

In the same way as a verbal confusion is set up by trying to separate "life-force" from things that are "living," so is it incorrect to imagine the word "function" as an entity separate from the structure of which it is merely the expression. Mr. W. H. Wood falls into this error and is put right by Mr. Lupton who correctly describes "life as a function of man." That being so, it is manifestly absurd to insist (as Mr. Wood does) that man must have existed prior to life. We have man, and we have his "functions," which is another word for his "activities." To say that these functions or activities existed either before or after man is to talk nonsense. They exist with him, and are as inseparable from him as is digestion from the digestive organs. Those who glibly make assumptions in the opposite sense are challenged, first to make themselves intelligible, and second to "prove" their theory. It is no good their putting forward illogical and unnecessary assumptions and then defying others to prove these assumptions false.

As to immortality, or "survival," this belief is more vulnerable than the belief in the existence of God. Considering that the leading Christian writers despair of proving it, and divines treat it with open scepticism, it would be asking Atheists, Rationalists, and others to take a retrograde step to investigate the pros and cons of the belief. The onus is certainly on the believers to show that there is any meaning in such terms as "mind," or "force," apart from the behaviour of the human organism as a whole.

RUBY TA'BOIS.

### "IGNORANCE IS BLISS"

We note that "Trimmer" of the *Church Times* (which would rather prefer to ignore *The Freethinker*) is good enough to mention us as "the journal of the North Country atheists." As the late Beerholm Tree said in another connection, this is funny without being vulgar. We have been published in London for nearly 70 years and the dear old lady thinks we are "a North Country" journal. Well, well. What a pity some of the readers of the *Church Times* do not pluck up a little courage and sample us. We are never afraid of reading the *Church Times* but how frightened Christians are of *The Freethinker*!

### CORRESPONDENCE

#### LIFE

SIR.—A phrase in Mr. Wood's article in your issue of May 29 is my excuse for this letter. Mr. Wood says that he imagined that Freethinkers were "eager to learn and understand the meaning and purpose of Life."

Well, if Mr. Wood can bring evidence to prove that there is a meaning and purpose in life, not only Freethinkers, but people of all shades of opinion, will certainly give him a patient hearing. The onus is on him. Workers for our cause have more tangible problems to tackle.

If we neglected our secular programme of action and joined Mr. Wood in his ambitious quest we would soon find the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, at our throats, to put an end to our lofty deliberations.

Life (with a capital "L") has, apparently, supplanted God as a conscious purposeful agency. Death is a greater "mystery" than life. It is hard to follow Mr. Wood through

the maze of his perplexities. Is life conceivable without death? Light without darkness? Cold without warmth?

Human survival may be a fact in Nature but, if so, it is a rather distressing prospect, for reasons too many to specify here.

No healthy human being relishes the idea of dying and I suggest that the "dogmatic" Atheist, who accepts the unavoidable (to him) extinction of his personality at death, is humbler, and likely to be more useful in *this* life, than the restless introspective unbeliever who is vainly reaching for the stars and trying to fit himself into a "scheme of things."

However, good luck to Mr. Wood! He is probably aware that he is not prospecting in a virgin field.—Yours, etc.,

E. A. McDONALD.

### A CATHOLIC "HUMANIST"

SIR.—In the course of his interesting review of the American historian, Professor Carlton Hayes' book on Nationalism, I was rather astonished to note that Mr. T. F. Palmer referred to the author as a "sound Humanist." In actuality, Dr. Carlton Hayes is America's leading Catholic historian and is one of the ablest and most persistent of Rome's cultural propagandists in the U.S.A.

Furthermore, as American Ambassador in Madrid during the latter part of the war, Dr. Carlton Hayes worked hand in hand with the Vatican and the Washington State Department to bolster up the then tottering Franco regime. Indeed, it was in no small degree due to the diplomatic efforts of America's Catholic Ambassador and his clerical coadjutor, Cardinal Spellman, that the bloodstained regime of "the Christian General" has been able to survive the Fascist debacle and has escaped from the overdue nemesis of its appalling crimes: a monstrous betrayal of everything for which the United Nations were supposed to be fighting. All of which seems to be rather peculiar conduct from a "sound Humanist."—Yours, etc.,

F. A. RIDLEY.

### LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

#### OUTDOOR

- Burnley (Market).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.  
 Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Car Park, Broadway).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: Mr. H. DAY.  
 Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: MESSRS. WINTER, WHITAKER and BARKER.  
 Hapton.—Monday, July 18, 7 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.  
 Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Platt Fields).—Sunday, 3 p.m.: MESSRS. KAY, BROADY and BILLING.  
 Merseyside Branch N.S.S. (Ranelagh Street (bombed site), Liverpool).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. W. PARRY.  
 North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, 12 noon: Mr. L. EBURY. (Highbury Corner).—7 p.m.: Mr. F. A. RIDLEY.  
 Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Market Square).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. T. M. MOSLEY.  
 Rishton.—Friday, July 15, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.  
 Rawtenstall.—Wednesday, July 20, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.  
 Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Barkers Pool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. A. SAMMS.  
 South London Branch N.S.S. (Brockwell Park, Heine Hill).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. L. EBURY.  
 West London Branch N.S.S. (Marble Arch, Hyde Park).—Sunday, 6 p.m.: Messrs. E. BRYANT, F. WOOD and E. PAGE.

#### INDOOR

- South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1.).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Morals in the Current Novel," Mr. S. K. RATCLIFFE.

#### OUTDOOR

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

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## THE INSIDE OF HELL

"Abandon hope all ye who enter here."—DANTE. *Inferno*. Canto III. line 9.

"HELL has enlarged its soul and opened its mouth without any limits—words taken, my dear little brothers in Christ Jesus, from the book of Isaiah, 5th chapter, 14th verse. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

The above is a quotation from Chapter 3 of the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, by the late James Joyce. The author had spent several years at the Jesuit college of Clongowes Wood in the county of Kildare and subsequently several more years at the Jesuit college of Belvedere in Dublin. The words above are the opening sentences of a sermon preached by a Jesuit Father in the Dublin college. The writer of this article was himself a student at Clongowes Wood a good many years after Joyce had left and can vouch for it that there is nothing exaggerated in Joyce's account. All this of course relates to utterances of forty or so years ago and it may be that such gruesome sermons are not preached to-day. A priest after reading Joyce's account would no doubt be cautious in what he would say on the subject of hell, but then we may ask: how many priests do read any such script? Such writings are hardly included in the curriculum at Maynooth or at the Irish College in Rome.

Introductory to the sermon of which Joyce relates in the present instance, the Jesuit Father spoke of Adam and Eve, the Fall, Lucifer and his rebellious angels, and then:—

"The preacher's voice sank. He paused, joined his palms for an instant, parted them," and resumed:—

"Now let us try for a moment to realise, as far as we can, the nature of that abode of the damned which the justice of an offended God has called into existence for the eternal punishment of sinners. Hell is a straight and dark and foul-smelling prison, an abode of demons and lost souls, filled with fire and smoke. The straitness of this prison house is expressly designed by God to punish those who refused to be bound by His laws. In earthly prisons the poor captive has at least some liberty of movement, were it only within the four walls of his cell or in the gloomy yard of his prison. Not so in hell. There, by reason of the great number of the damned, the prisoners are heaped together in their awful prison, the walls of which are said to be four thousand miles thick: and the damned are so utterly bound and helpless that, as a blessed saint, Saint Anselm, writes in his book on similitudes, they are not even able to remove from the eye a worm that gnaws it.

"They lie in exterior darkness. For, remember, the fire of hell gives forth no light . . . What name, then, shall we give to the darkness of hell which is to last . . . for all eternity?"

"The horror of this strait and dark prison is increased by its awful stench. All the filth of the world, all the offal and scum of the world, we are told, shall run there as to a vast reeking sewer . . . The brimstone, too, which burns there in such prodigious quantity fills all hell with its intolerable stench; and the bodies of the damned themselves exhale such a pestilential odour that as Saint Bonaventure says, one of them alone would suffice to infect the whole world . . . Imagine such a corpse a prey to flames . . . imagine this sickening stench, multiplied a millionfold and a millionfold again from the millions upon millions of fetid carcasses massed together in the reeking darkness, a huge and rotting human fungus.

Imagine all this and you will have some idea of the horror of the stench of hell.

"But this stench is not, horrible though it is, the greatest physical torment to which the damned are subjected . . . Place your finger for a moment in the flame of a candle and you will feel the pain of fire . . . our earthly fire was created by God for the benefit of man . . . But the sulphurous brimstone which burns in hell is a substance which is specifically designed to burn for ever and for ever with unspeakable fury . . .

"Our earthly fire again . . . is always of a limited extent: but the lake of fire in hell is boundless, shoreless and bottomless. It is on record that the devil himself, when asked the question by a certain soldier, was obliged to confess that if a whole mountain were thrown into the burning ocean of hell it would be burned up in an instant like a piece of wax. And this terrible fire will not afflict the bodies of the damned only from without . . . The blood seethes and boils in the veins, the brains are boiling in the skull, the heart in the breast glowing and bursting, the bowels a red-hot mass of burning pulp, the tender eyes flaming like molten balls . . .

"Consider finally that the torment of this infernal prison is increased by the company of the damned themselves . . . In hell all laws are overturned—there is no thought of family or country, of ties, of relationships. The damned howl and scream at one another . . . The yells of the suffering sinners fill the remotest corners of the vast abyss . . .

"Last of all consider the frightful torment to those damned souls . . . of the company of the devils . . . We can have no idea of how horrible these devils are. Saint Catherine of Siena once saw a devil and she has written that, rather than look again for one single instant on such a frightful monster, she would prefer to walk until the end of her life along a track of red-hot coals. These devils, who were once beautiful angels, have become as hideous and ugly as they once were beautiful. They mock and jeer at the lost souls whom they dragged down to ruin . . .

" . . . even they, the foul devils, must turn away, revolted and disgusted, from the contemplation of those unspeakable sins by which degraded man outrages and defiles the temple of the Holy Ghost, defiles and pollutes himself.

"O, my dear little brothers in Christ, may it never be our lot to hear ringing in our ears the awful sentence of rejection: *Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, which was prepared for the devil and his angels!*"

The difficulties encountered in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce's latter-day works, have turned many people away from him. His earlier books, however, including the *Portrait* here reviewed, are easy to digest and would repay some attention. It would not be a bad thing to include some of his books for the study of novitiates in theological seminaries, if only to save them from becoming a laughing-stock in contemporary life.

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