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Price Threepence

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Atheism versus Agnosticism

IN a recent issue of this journal, a letter appeared in the correspondence columns which criticised atheism from an agnostic, or "rationalist" point of view.

First of all, let us give the relevant portion of our agnostic's argument in his own words:—

"Rigid atheism is a nice aggressive argument in its way, but it, too, tries to explain away what it does not understand. The statement, "there is no god" is a completely illogical proposition. It would take an omniscient intelligence to explore the universe sufficiently to find out. Even for an omniscient intelligence to make the proposition is illogical, since such an entity would at least be something in the nature of a god."

Or, more briefly, to be in a position to pronounce upon the existence of a god, one would have to be a god oneself: "which is impossible," as Euclid was wont to say! Otherwise, one is in the self-evidently illogical position of trying to perform the inherently impossible feat of "proving a negative": viz., the proposition "God does not exist."

It is rather surprising at this time of day, to find an "agnostic" who is professedly anti-Christian, or so we assume, since he explicitly supports the point of view of the "Rationalist Press Association," yet repeating in substance the old theological chestnut that "the existence of god" is something provable or disprovable by reason: for, obviously, this presupposes that "god" is a rational conception and, as such, can be analysed by reason: from the days of such mediæval masters of "Christian Evidence" as Anselm and Aquinas, this presupposition has occupied a central place in Christian "apologetics" or, in what Roman Theology describes as "Natural Theology."*

For any self-confessed agnostic, it will, we submit, be strictly relevant for us to quote in this connection the incisive criticism made by a modern atheistic writer, of the famous Professor T. H. Huxley, the founder and classical exponent of agnosticism:

Professor Huxley (who, incidentally, originally coined the actual word "agnostic"), criticising the late Mr. Balfour's once well-known religious apologia *The Foundations of Belief*, argued on very similar lines to his present day followers.

Huxley, in an article in the *Nineteenth Century Magazine*, March, 1895, entitled "Mr. Balfour's Attack on Agnosticism," remarked:—

If our philosopher (Mr. Balfour), had contented himself with pointing out the indubitable fact that the limitation of human knowledge to the relative and the finite affords as little foundation for denial as for affirmation, concerning that which lies beyond our cognisance; if, by

way of counterpoise, to the proposition that "it is blasphemy to think that God is as we can think Him to be," he had added that it is preposterous to assert that there is no God, because he cannot be such as we can think him to be, I fancy he would have taken up a position of unassailable security, and might have done something to let the wind out of the bladder of dogmatic atheism.

To which defence of agnosticism against atheism, Mr. H. M. Cecil† made what seems to us to be a crushing rejoinder, which is, an unanswerable statement of the atheist case against agnostic criticism. Here it is in full for the benefit of our numerous agnostical "fellow-travellers"; (its importance justifies its length).

Referring specifically to Huxley's above criticism of Mr. Balfour and his once famous *Foundations of Belief*, Mr. Cecil writes:—

It is impossible, of course, for a pugnacious atheist to let this pass without comment. The atheist simply denies the existence of God in the way in which Mr. Huxley himself would deny it; that is, he merely says that the existence of a god is seen to be an impossibility as soon as the word "God" is defined. Mr. Huxley, for example, would have held that a first cause was unthinkable; then he would have denied that there existed anything corresponding to the theist's idea of a first cause; that is, he would to that extent have "denied" the existence of the theists' God. Similarly, if he held, as he certainly would have done, that an Infinite Intelligence is unthinkable, he would to that (italics in original) extent have denied the existence of the theist's God; and so on with all the qualities that are predicated of the Deity. Mr. Huxley would have no hesitation in saying that a four-sided triangle or a square circle does not exist; he would not content himself with the remark that these things "be beyond our cognisance."

It would be as impertinent as superfluous to add anything to this masterly critique of agnosticism from the atheistic standpoint. We commend this lucid statement of the case for atheism to agnostics and their fellow "rationalist" critics of atheism.

They are, in fact, unthinkable just, as a Deity is unthinkable; and the atheist who "denies" the existence of something which the theist calls Infinite Intelligence or First Cause, is simply in the position of the agnostic who denies the existence of four-sided triangles. The idea of triangle excludes the idea of four-sidedness; similarly, the idea of Intelligence excludes the idea of infinity. The idea of circle excludes the idea of squareness; similarly, the idea of cause excludes the idea of a First Cause. The one set of propositions does not any more than the other lie outside the circle of our cognitions; they are both merely phrases which cannot be translated into ideas. And if the agnostic "denies" the existence of four-sided triangles, he ought in the same sense to "deny" the existence of a god. It is in this sense, and in this sense alone, that the atheist denies any such existence. When Mr. Huxley writes that "it is preposterous to assert that there is no god because he cannot be such as we think him to be," he is simply

* By the term *Natural Theology* Catholic Theology indicates the proofs of religious truth which are arrived at by reason and which do not invoke the assistance of Revelation. —Bernard Boedder, S.J.—*Natural Theology*.

† (cp. H. M. Cecil—"Pseudo-philosophy at the end of the 19th Century," 1897—p. 292—footnote. It has been stated that "H. M. Cecil" is a pseudonym which hides the identity of the eminent musical critic, Ernest Newman.)

meaningless. The whole sentence implies that we have some conception answering to the term "god," whereas the agnostic himself, in his polemic against the theist, proves that every quality which the theist attributes to his deity is either unthinkable or a contradiction in terms. The atheist does not, any more than the agnostic, claim grounds for "denial" concerning that which lies beyond our cognisance. He simply says that what lies beyond our cognisance is the unknowable, and not a collection of hypostatized abstractions which men choose to label and which might as well be labelled "Abraacadabra." This does not lie beyond our cognisance, but is merely a confused attempt to mould contradictory conceptions drawn from within the circle of its own cognisance, into a consistent whole. So far as agnosticism, by refusing the atheists' right to "deny" the existence of something like Infinite Intelligence, which can no more exist than a four-sided triangle, claims that it is distinct from atheism, it is simply falling into confusion; while in so far as, by its own arguments, it shows (a) that the qualities attributed to the Deity are unthinkable, and (b) that every form of theism is only a badly-reasoned attempt to "account" for what can never be accounted for, it is itself atheism pure and simple, and there is no real need to call an old creed by a new name.

F. A. RIDLEY.

THE TURBULENT TIMES OF HENRY VIII

DR. H. MAYNARD SMITH'S *Henry VIII and the Reformation* (Macmillan, 1948, 30s.) is a very comprehensive study of bluff Hal's career. Although this history is the work of a D.D. of Oxon, at least in its political section it is completely free from Anglican bias. The dissimulation and duplicity of the three ruling Christian princes, Charles V, Francis I and King Henry, are dispassionately surveyed, while the temporisings and evasions of the Papacy are plainly exposed. It is true that the age was that of Machiavelli, and that candour and even common honesty were at a heavy discount. Indeed, a conscientious and veracious diplomat in that corrupt century would have been a liability to the State that employed him, when the crowned trio were constantly plotting and counterplotting against each other. In fact, the leading secular rulers of Christendom were they judged from an ethical standpoint, would be regarded as three unmitigated scoundrels.

The first division of Dr. Smith's study deals with the political aspects of Henry's reign and their relation to the religious questions of the time. This section surveys the separation from Rome, the establishment of royal supremacy in Church and State, the suppression of the monastic orders, the nunneries and the friars, with the partial toleration, and then persecution of Lutherans, which varied with the fluctuations of Henry's foreign policy.

The second section surveys the influence of the New Learning on the then religious outlook; the results of Bible reading in the English language in spreading sectarianism, and culminates in a review of those Romanists and Protestants who faced death rather than submit to their King's standard of orthodoxy.

The political division, however, is sufficient for one review, so a consideration of the more spiritual aspects may be reserved for later treatment.

The history opens with a sketch of Cardinal Wolsey's remarkable career. The King ascended the throne at the age of eighteen, and Wolsey soon proved himself an able administrator. An enlightened man, he unconsciously hastened the Reformation, for he was ever the

friend of education. But Henry became wearied with his wife Catherine, who bore him no sons, and fell in love with Anne Boleyn and this, with other unfavourable circumstances, led to Wolsey's fall. Dr. Smith concludes that if Henry had been able to obtain the Pope's sanction for a divorce, Wolsey might have continued his chief adviser. "This," he thinks, "might easily have been arranged if Charles V had not been nephew of the Queen, and if Pope, Clement VII, had not been in power. As it was, Wolsey did his best and devised several expedients which may not be to his credit, but prove how ready he was to oblige the King in a matter he disapproved. He tried and failed: his failure occasioned his fall."

Wolsey's arrogance and ostentation made him many powerful enemies, while as a Churchman, he helped to make the clergy unpopular. Thus, public opinion supported the curtailment of priestly privileges and favoured the King's repudiation of the Papacy. But Henry soon grew indifferent to the charms of Anne Boleyn, and she was sent to the block. Royal supremacy, both in Church and State was established, and Thomas Cromwell became the crown's Vicar-General. The clergy were ordered to abuse the Pope, and all who opposed the innovations were either executed or imprisoned, while spies made life precarious. Judgments of Henry's character vary with historians of the Tudor period. To some he appears a far-seeing statesman, while others regard him as a vain and egoistic charlatan easily influenced by temporary favourites. Dr. Smith asserts that: "Both views are wrong. Henry was a dynamic personality, splendidly endowed by Nature and only too well aware of his wonderful gifts. Being a complete egoist he was always convinced that what he wanted was right; being also impressive and plausible, he was generally able to persuade others that what he wanted for himself was really for their good, and being a consummate judge of men, he chose such instruments as would best serve the purpose he had from time to time." Thus, concludes our author, he was more "an inspired opportunist" than a sagacious statesman, but rather a ruler who evaded difficulties he had himself created by means of craft and guile.

Although the populace were mainly attached to the ancient faith there was considerable anti-clericalism in the capital and other cities. So, when the so-called Reformation Parliament assembled it was prepared to legalise the King's behests. For, of course, the King's supporters were always provided with seats. As Dr. Smith notes: "In their first session, the Commons introduced Bills to abolish mortuaries, to reduce the fees on the probate of wills, to deal with pluralities and non-residence, and to prohibit the clergy from engaging in trade." These measures were directed against the Church, and were so zealously advocated, that Bishop Fisher and other ecclesiastics were seriously alarmed. As a matter of fact, the Royal treasury needed replenishment and the vast accumulations of Wolsey, already confiscated by the Crown, indicated that the clerical, secular and religious—with their far-flung landed estates—more than half the richest soils in England—might yield an abundant spoil. So when charged with violation of the Statute of Premunire, the clergy were only pardoned on payment of at least two million sterling of present-day currency which was a stupendous sum at that time. Also, the clergy were not only compelled to admit their guilt, but had to acknowledge Henry VIII as the Supreme Head of the English Church. As the Spanish Ambassador told Charles V: "The King meant to be Pope in his own realm."

Thomas Cromwell, later Earl of Essex, as Vicar-General, was authorised by the Crown to carry out and supervise Church reforms. Then the dissolution and appropriation of the revenues of the monasteries was undertaken. The extent of vice and corruption in the religious houses has been keenly controverted, but that they had long outlived the usefulness they had ever possessed, is indisputable. That their suppression was unpopular in England's northern and less-civilised countries is shown in the Pilgrimage of Grace.

Under Wolsey himself, a few minor monasteries were dissolved and their revenues devoted to the furtherance of the Cardinal's educational schemes. And now under Cromwell, the wealthier abbeys, priories and other religious establishments were swept away. As our author concedes, if we remember the thousands of monks, all of them vowed to celibacy, many mere boys of sixteen, strict chastity could not reasonably be expected. Some scandals were glaring. "For instance," writes Dr. Smith, "Bartelot, accompanied by witnesses, surprised the Prior of Crutched Friars in bed with a prostitute. The Prior gave them £30 (£600 of our money) to hold their tongues; but when Bartelot went on to blackmail him for another £30 he preferred to have the matter ventilated in a secular court." Nevertheless, our author strives to discount the more loathsome charges against the religious so strongly urged by Froude and other eminent historians. "The monks in England," he avers, "in spite of well-attested scandals, were not so corrupt as the monks of Italy, or as corrupt as the monks of Germany, whom Nicholas of Cusa in the preceding century had striven to reform."

In any case, monasteries, abbeys, friaries, nunneries, great and small, were suppressed. Moreover, as the years rolled by, religious houses in Catholic countries were increasingly reduced in number. As a sequel to their suppression in England, grandiose schemes for the provision of hospitals, colleges, and schools and greatly improved Church administration were propounded. But the inappropriated wealth of the abbey lands excited the cupidity of Henry's courtiers and helped to liquidate the King's debts. Thus, a splendid scholastic and medical opportunity was lost.

T. F. PALMER.

A LEAGUE OF DECENCY

IT is well known that there is in America a body of Roman Catholics calling themselves the League of Decency. Directed by two young Catholic priests, the League consists of a few dozen women—all Catholics—who presume not only to dictate as to what films we may see, but actually interfere with the booking of English films in America if the League does not happen to approve of them. Thus we find that the masterly production by Sir Laurence Olivier, "Hamlet," is only fit for grown-ups to be allowed to see.

One of these precious priests, a certain Father Little, is reported as saying that: "We have no power to censor films even if we wished to do so. All we can do is to persuade our people to stay away when we find something objectionable." If the priests fail in their persuasion, does anyone suppose that the matter would rest there? Threats follow persuasion, and penance follows that.

I am sure that few people outside the Church of Rome realise, or have the slightest idea as to the power of the priest and how he uses it.

It used to be (and I have no doubt is still the same—the Church never mends its ways) quite hopeless to take

any theatrical company into the southern part of Ireland without first asking the permission of the local priest. Yes, I mean "permission." An advance manager had to be sent first to be interviewed by each local priest, describe the play and its plot and get the O.K.—or fail to get it. If the play was considered to be subversive of Catholic morals they did not "persuade" their flock to stay away. They ordered them not to attend. As the huge majority of potential playgoers are Catholics, the result may be imagined. I have heard of an entire audience consisting of one old man and a servant girl, both Protestants, in a case where the necessary precaution had not been taken.

When Father Little uses the word "persuade" when he means "order" he is talking just downright nonsense. They are ordered not to attend and punished if they disobey.

A Catholic acquaintance of mine is quite proud of his morals being in the hands of the priest. He points out that if he is ill he sends for a doctor, and if there is a question of morals he seeks the advice of the priest, and why not? The answer is, of course, that while one can with impunity reject the doctor's advice (I do so myself repeatedly) and consign his advice and his physic to the sink, no Catholic dare do the same with a priest. He can and does enforce his advice, and woe betide any of his flock who dare refuse to be "persuaded."

Now let us return to our National League of Decency. The members are all (unpaid) women who have been through a course of instruction, Catholic instruction of course, as to what to look for. Let it be repeated that they have neither will nor power to ban. They don't need either. Unless they pass the film as above suspicion, it will not be booked. One can hardly blame the booking agents. There are a few million Catholics among the potential audiences and no one wants to ask for trouble and lose money as well.

I have seen Olivier's film of "Hamlet." I am not only very familiar with the whole play but know almost the whole of it by heart and there is nothing to offend. But these bigots of women in America can influence their co-religionists and thus interfere with a noted English actor earning a just recompense for his labours. As though a few Catholics with a pruning knife could improve Shakespeare!

It would not matter too much perhaps, if these busybodies would confine their attentions strictly to moral standards but they can't and don't. "Is this subversive of morality" very soon changes to: "Is this against Catholic dogma" when once power goes to the head.

It does not necessarily follow that all Catholics refuse to sit out a picture so condemned, but it fails to secure bookings; no one is likely to risk losing his money on a film which has not been passed by these Mrs. Grundies.

So we have a herd of female religious bigots aided and abetted by two emasculated celibates whose "persuasions" should find their proper destination down the sink in the kitchen, or a more humble apartment.

STANLEY ROBERTS.

SELF-HELP

The Doctor could not come;
I lay in pain:
He could not come;
I rang him up again:
He could not come;
I, muttering "Oh Hell!"
He will not come,
Decided to get well.

BAYARD SIMMONS.

ACID DROPS

The Bishop of New Guinea, in a recent sermon, claimed that in Papua "there is an almost unique opportunity to build up a truly Christian civilisation," and we only wish that as many Christian bishops who agree with him would go to Papua and stay there to build up this "Christian" civilisation. It would give other civilised States a chance to throw off the outworn superstitions of Oriental primitives, and get on with the work of building purely secular States in accord with the latest developments in science. Not much hope, alas!

Newcastle Roman Catholics must be more than usually pious, for, not only do they not get enough church on Sunday, but they have arranged for ten specially-blessed statues of the Virgin to be set up every night in their homes when all the neighbours gather in saying the Rosary. It is expected that the statues will have been set up in three hundred different houses by the end of the month. The chief Intention for which prayers are offered is for Peace in the World. Though there is nothing like trying, we venture to suggest that something a little more tangible is needed. Prayers have been floating up for centuries, and, unless God is deaf already, surely His ear-drums must have been shattered by now!

How many times have we been told by exponents of Buddhism that it is not a religion in the usual sense of the term, that it is a system of ethics, a way of life, or even a secularist philosophy? What are we to think of the press-cutting which describes the action of a corporation that exports edible frogs to the U.S.A., who held a Buddhist ceremony to console the souls of the hundred and fifty thousand dead frogs? We can see no reason why frogs should not have souls, but could credulity go much farther?

The Bavarian theologian, Dr. E. Buck, was acquitted of "racialism" and "Folk-hate" after referring to Jews as "abandoned and execrable." Expert witness Prof. L. Faulhaber said that the phrase originated in Holy Writ. No wonder he was acquitted.

A nice little storm was brewing over the *Sunday Pictorial* exposure of the Holy Well at St. Winifride, which was supplied by the municipal pipe-line from the local reservoir. This was flatly denied by a Councillor who was given the opportunity to explain his reason for his denial, and to substantiate the accusation of lying. The *Sunday Pictorial* reports that the Councillor refuses to comment; but, the newspaper reiterates the charge was wholly accurate. This storm in a tea-cup is really amusing, for, if the *Sunday Pictorial* really wants to expose religious fakes, we will be pleased to give information. The Grotto of Fatima would be a good start.

The Rev. F. Jones at a Liverpool Boys' Brigade service complains that more young people to-day have a greater knowledge of Dick Barton than of Jesus Christ. At least Dick Barton's exploits are more plausible than those of Jesus Christ, and he also laughs sometimes.

We are informed from an authentic source that an official guide who conducts parties of visitors over the Alcazar, repeats as truth, that during a seige in the Spanish Civil War the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to the defenders and assured them that she would protect them against the wicked Republicans. With the help of Franco's forces she was just able to keep her promise.

Already the first pilgrim to Rome for the "Holy" year is on his way. He is going to walk across France and the A.p.s, and will firmly refuse all offers of free rides. He appears to have no money, and wants to take on a job as waiter in Rome to pay his expenses. We have an idea that this type of pilgrim is not exactly wanted in Italy just now. The pilgrims to be welcomed, who are "God-sends," are those with plenty of money to spend. The "Holy" year is just a ramp for getting tourists into the country—we don't quarrel with that—and the religious motive is a pure swindle. Still there will always be pious mugs who love to be swindled—religiously.

According to the *Universe*, the United Nations Assembly will open and close its deliberations with a silent minute for prayer and meditation. What for? And what would happen to an irreverent member who whistled "Lily Marlene" or "Two lovely Black Eyes" while his fellow members were meditating? Would the proceedings completely fail? Or would the offending member be sent off to immediate execution?

The Bishop of Tarbes denounced business people selling sweets, soaps, and eau-de-Cologne, said to be manufactured with holy water from the Grotto at Lourdes. But what would be the difference if tap water was used?

Needless to say, the Bishop of London's visit to America was marked with packed congregations all breathless to hear the Word of God from a live bishop. We ought to say from "bishops," for we are told that "it is safe to say that many American Churchmen had never seen so many overseas bishops before." The American Church "is not big as American religious bodies go," but now it is "increasing with considerable rapidity." We wonder what this exactly means? Does it mean that other Christians are being converted to the American Church, or that Freethinkers and indifferentists are flocking back in "considerable" numbers?

A writer in *The Times*, pointing out how the Roman Church is bearing the brunt of the struggle against Marxism, asks again whether it is not possible for the various Christian Churches to come together and see what are the chances for a "reunion." We can answer that one at once. If all the Churches outside Rome were to come in a body, admit their heresies, and express contrition, Rome would have them all back on her own terms in a flash. Otherwise, there is nothing doing. Why should there be? Rome claims to be the one true Church of God, and has never budged an inch. Its position is so strong, that it is quite likely the other Christian bodies will give in one day without any further struggle. The fight then will be between Rome and Freethought.

The Southern Cross claims that sons of the Reformed Church in South Africa took part in the inauguration ceremony of the new Catholic Cathedral, and that 60 per cent. of the local subscriptions came from non-Catholics. Religion at any price?

THINGS WE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW

Will the Spiritualists also claim the new "thought transference" act by two boys at the Empire, Edmonton, as further evidence for Telepathy and Precognition?

Why should the *Psychic News* be "rather surprised" that at a spiritualist armistice service, none of the "messages emanated from the war dead"—if they were dead?

"THE FREETHINKER"

Telephone No.: Holborn 2601.

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

TO CORRESPONDENTS

Will correspondents be good enough in future to keep their letters as short as possible. We regret to omit anything relevant to an issue and short letters will give all writers a chance of publication.

The following periodicals are being received regularly, and can be consulted at "The Freethinker" office: THE TRUTH SEEKER (U.S.A.), THE FREETHINKER (U.S.A.), THE LIBERAL (U.S.A.), THE VOICE OF FREEDOM (U.S.A., German and English), PROGRESSIVE WORLD (U.S.A.), THE NEW ZEALAND RATIONALIST, THE RATIONALIST (Australia), DER FREIDENKER (Switzerland), LA RAISON (France), DON BASILIO (Italy).

Lecture Notices should reach the Office by Friday morning. 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.

When the services of the National Secular Society in connection with Secular Burial Services are required, all communications should be addressed to the Secretary, R. H. Rosetti, giving as long notice as possible.

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.

SUGAR PLUMS

Our colleague, Mr. W. Glanville Cook, Editor of the *Rationalist*, Australia, who is in England after representing Australia and New Zealand at the Rome Freethinkers' Congress, has indeed been kept busy during his "holiday." His services as a speaker have been in great demand, and on Monday, 21st November, at 7.30 p.m., he will speak for the Sex Education Society on "Sex and Rationalism," at the Conway Hall. Admission for non-members is 2s. There will be few further opportunities of hearing Mr. Cook, as he will be returning to Melbourne soon.

Mr. L. Ebury is a well known speaker from N.S.S. platforms in and around London. To-day (20th November) he will lecture for the West London Branch N.S.S., in the Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, London, W.1, on "The Curse of Immortality." The lecture begins at 7.15 p.m. and Mr. Ebury's many friends will make a point of being present and try to induce some Christian friends to accompany them.

Mr. J. T. Brighton is making an effort to revive the Sunderland Branch N.S.S. and will lecture in the Labour Hall, Sunderland, to-day (20th November) at 7 p.m. He hopes to meet some of the old members, also some of the unattached Freethinkers in the area who are willing to join in the effort. The outlook for the Churches is getting worse, but it would be a bad mistake for Freethinkers to imagine that our work can therefore be slowed down.

A Mr. F. L. Wheeler, evidently dissatisfied with the million attempts which have so far been made to tell us who is God, has written the million-and-oneth, and readers can buy it from the Faith Press for 3s. 6d. *Who is God?* is the glorious title of his book—though we suspect that Mr. Wheeler's knowledge of God about equals that of the average member of the National Secular Society. Strange how some people are willing to pay 3s. 6d. to find out about God, even from an ignoramus.

An invitation is given to all Freethinkers in the Lewisham district to attend the Sunday evening meetings of the local N.S.S. Branch held fortnightly in The Hope Hotel, 73, Loampit Vale, Lewisham, S.E. 13. To-day (November 20) Mr. R. H. Rosetti will lecture on "An Evening with the Gods." It should make a very interesting evening, although personal introductions cannot be promised. The lecture begins at 7-15 p.m.; admission is free.

Wanstead and Woodford readers are invited to attend the next meeting of the local discussion circle in Wanstead House, George Green, Wanstead, E. 11 (near the Tube Station) on Tuesday evening, November 22, 8 p.m. Mr. F. A. Ridley will give an address on "Totalitarianism and Catholicism." An effort is being made to form a branch of the National Secular Society in this area; will those willing to help give name and address to the chairman of the meeting.

Readers with but a superficial knowledge of religion-soaked Eire will be intrigued by the attempt of the newly-formed Irish Rationalist Society in Dublin, to establish a Freethought oasis in the Irish "desert." The fact that such an organisation will have before it such a herculean task does not deter the Secretary, who earnestly begs all Irish Freethinkers, resident or visitors, to get in touch with him at Clonburris, Clondalkin, Co. Dublin. Irish Freethinkers should watch this column for further details.

We regret that we were in error when we said that Mr. Charles Smith represented American Freethinkers at the Freethought Congress in Rome recently. He went only as the delegate for his own journal the *Truth Seeker*.

We were pleased to see that the *Holborn Recorder*, which every now and then puts up as sturdy a fight for Christianity as it does for Toryism, reproduced (though without comment) a couple of "Acid Drops" which criticised its attitude. It is a pity, however, that the Editor did not tell us, as we hoped he would, whether he knew what was the precious message of Obadiah or Habakkuk, or even if the writer of his religious twaddle could have answered us forthwith. Does the *Recorder*, really imagine that in these days of Evolution and Science his intelligent readers believe in Devils, Angels, and Miracles?

One point we should like to make. We agree that *The Freethinker* has not the circulation of our national newspapers or weeklies though it has survived 68 years. It is a propagandist journal which appeals to readers who see in religion a huge, organised fraud. It tries to make people *think*, and goes to science, philosophy, history, and ethics, for a basis on which man must depend for happiness on *this* earth. We know of no future life, and our aim is to establish tolerance and freedom as far as possible in a war-scarred world. We can assure the *Recorder* that readers from all parts of the world, as well as here in Britain, look every week for what they often tell us is their weekly treat.

Canadian newspapers have headlined the refusal of Linn Gale to swear the oath of allegiance to the King as is commonly made by applicants for Canadian nationality. The courts have upheld his declaration of allegiance by affirmation, which is provided for by the Canada Evidence Act. Mr. Gale objected to the oath "entirely because he was an atheist." Honour to Mr. Gale!

THE DILEMMA OF BURIDAN'S ASS

EVERY now and again as lively as inconclusive discussion on *Free-Will or Determinism* is liable to crop up. So long as this dilemma is tackled in the metaphysical-absolutist approach which philosophy inherited from mediæval theology, it is bound to remain insoluble. If the will is "free" there can be no *science*; if there is no will, there can be no *history*! So one is reminded of the old mediæval dilemma of Buridan's Ass* that starved to death from lack of ability to choose between two absolutely equidistant, and equally attractive bundles of hay.

The problem -- Free-Will versus Necessity -- arose originally in Theology; it was in the first place a by-product of the doctrine of reward or punishment in a life hereafter and involves the pre-supposition of the antagonism between the "vile" material body and the "ethereal" and immortal soul. The theological doctrine made "Free" (i.e., undetermined, not-necessitated) Will the "faculty whereby man contrives to get damned to Eternity" (Voltaire).

Yet, at the same time this explanation raised sharply the problem whether God was not as responsible for His own Creation, and to His own creatures whom He made faulty but still answerable for their deeds to their imperfect Creator.

Before the Calvinist form of Necessitarianism or Determinism arose, a half-way-out was tried with the affirmation that God alone was free and answerable to nobody. Man is free only to realise the Will of God. This, however, insinuated that God foreknew that the majority of the human race would realise His Will only in the form of going to Hell.

Calvinistic Determinism arose as the doctrine of the revolutionary dictatorship of the Protestant-clerical leaders of the bourgeois revolt against the feudalistic Roman Church. The political necessity to effect a compromise between Calvinistic Republicanism and Catholic Absolutism lead to a compromise doctrine which conceded to man the power of negating God's freedom in practice, whilst in theory it remained in abeyance for use when necessary to negate man's freedom.

Determinism seems to be a practical maxim for the guidance of scientific investigators since it advises men to seek causal laws. Still, our every-day rules purchase simplicity at the expense of accuracy. Determinism, as a general doctrine, asserts that complete determination of the future by the past is always possible if we know enough about the past and about causal laws. Having discovered the laws regulating all the movements of matter and making them theoretically (and with the exclusion of accidents) predictable, we should be in a position to infer certain phenomena as likely to occur.

However, generalisations are only half-truths, if anything, and *absolute* statements are conditional truths. We cannot exclude accident and chance; we cannot reliably predict the weather nor whether a tossed penny comes heads or tails. There are occurrences subject to causal law and others where we have to do with probability.

Seeing that "Free Enterprise" with its profit motive and world-wide competition for markets is the cause of crises, mass misery and wars of all sorts, Sir Arthur Eddington, an apologist of "Free Enterprise," meant to palm off the law of causation. He pointed out that, according to quantum mechanics, it cannot be known

what an atom will do in given circumstances; we merely know the *ratio* at which atoms will take a definite set of choice alternatives, the regularity in the frequency with which they make the various possible transitions. Starting from the lawlessness, as it were, of the single atom, Eddington wishes to safeguard human "free" will (and free enterprise) in individuals.

Such "nuclear caprice," it is true, does not affect the laws of large-scale mechanics, and general State Laws for the people at large are welcome so long as "Free Enterprise" has a free hand of its own. Yet, men make their circumstances as much as circumstances make men, and the laws of mechanics have no bearing on the laws of reasoning. In Nature (insofar as we ignore man's reaction upon it) there are only blind unconscious agencies acting upon one another; and out of their interplay the general laws come into operation. Men make their own history, whatever its outcome may be, in that each person follows his own consciously desired end, and it is precisely the resultant of these many wills operating in different directions and of their manifold effects upon the external world that constitutes history.

Consequently, we must not see these individuals as they *seem* to be, but as they are, that is to say as part and parcel of society, active under *determinate* material limitation, presuppositions, and conditions independent of their will. These specifically conditioned—or:—

"Determinate individuals, productively active in a determinate way, enter, therefore, into *determinate* social and political relations" (Marx-Engels).

In this relation the antagonism between freedom and necessity disappears. Freedom, first of all, is a question of positive *power to act*. The power (to satisfy needs and desires existing in relation to society) is the objective content of the concept of "freedom"; Freedom is thus a *form* of Necessity, whilst the necessity is the *substance* of the "Freedom." "Freedom," said Hegel, "is the recognition of Necessity." To be "free" means to feel that one not only can but *must* act in such and such a way and to be debarred by the specific determination of one's will from entertaining any notion of doing anything else. Only so far as men in their social aggregation are conscious of and, furthermore, understand the nature, scope and possibilities (the social law of motion) in their given society, they are capable of using their power with the maximum of effect, and of increasing with it their Freedom.

The dilemma of those who cannot resolve the antagonism of Freedom and Necessity into the synthetic unity in opposition of *Necessitated-Freedom* and *Freely-operating Necessity* arose from purely dogmatic thinking. This synthesis only works, when within the limitations of external, social restrictions (Determinism) free volition (Decision) is exercised. Freedom—and Freethought as well—is negated if Buridan's Ass wants to do "justice" to two tempting opposites such as Atheism and Spiritualism.

Freedom is the determination, the power to act, to take sides and not cowardly to stand aside so as to shirk issues. Freethought, therefore, is an *active*, principled, materialistic, one-sided attitude which safeguards freedom only insofar as it excludes any slip-back into unprincipled, passive, idealistic conceptions.

A materialist's freedom lies within the materialistic determination and only if excluding any idealistic, spiritualistic deviations does it give the power to act. Power and freedom are identical, and power is neither "absolute" nor "abstract" (unbiased), but concrete, and therefore specifically conditioned and historically determined by the totality of the active inter-relationships between Society and Nature, and between Man and Man

* Jean Buridan, in the early 14th century, was Rector of Paris University. He revived the Ass Problem that he found with the writings of Aristotle.

within Society. A thing (or a man) can be "Free" only in terms of its (or his) *own specific* nature; and since specification is a *limitation* as contrasted with absolute generality, the greater the specification the greater the power to act in that particular way and none other.

Useful plants cannot have their specific Freedom unless the weed is properly "excluded"; and a "Freethinker" who cannot exclude the possibility of something idealistic-spiritualistic is not *free to think*, but doomed to die—mentally—between two likewise attractive temptations.

PERCY GORDON ROY.

CORRESPONDENCE

PURPOSE IN NATURE?

Sir,—Permit me to express my hearty appreciation for John Rowland's able article, "Two Reverent Rationalists," which appeared in the October 9 issue of *The Freethinker*.

Mr. Rowland takes issue with Mr. Alfred Machin, also with the evolutionary views of the noted Sir Arthur Keith. As the latter was kind enough to reply to certain of my strictures of his position (Evolution and Ethics) I shall bestow my strictures upon Mr. Machin's views—if I may.

To seek a "purpose" in Nature's manifestations is to look for an anthropomorphic ghost in the universe. Attempting to find reasons to justify nature "red-in-tooth-and-claw" as possessing beneficial social factors is to lose sight of the fact that humanity is one family. Rowland quotes Machin's statement, "What does the Creator aim and intend by this mysterious, gigantic, yet enormously slow process of evolution?" For many, the reason for this "aim" is found in the Bible or the teachings of the Catholic Church. Scientists know of no "aim" or "purpose" behind nature. All aims and purposes have a social value; without that perspective in mind, they retain a meaningless position, in the criterion of human values; and I know of no other criterion.

Hitler practised social Darwinism for a time, but the civilized world had to spend oceans of blood to eradicate him and his ilk. It might not be amiss to quote an opinion of Major Leonard Darwin, the son of Charles Darwin—president at one time of the Eugenics Education Society of London:

"In so far as Darwinism has any connection with Darwin this (Social Darwinism) is wholly erroneous. Several passages might be quoted from my father's writing very different from 'the will of the stronger.' In 'The Descent of Man' he told us that there are other agencies more important than the struggle for existence; for the moral qualities are advanced, either directly or indirectly much more through the effect of habit, the reasoning powers, instruction, religion, etc., than through natural selection."

Rationalism should look to reason rather than to emotion to bring forth solutions to pressing and important social problems.—Yours, etc.,

JACK BENJAMIN.

Brooklyn, U.S.A.

DISAGREEMENT

Sir,—Whilst wishing not to take up your valuable space on matters that do not rightly come within the province of *The Freethinker*, will you permit a brief reply to Mr. Corrick's letter in your issue of October 30.

Mr. Corrick adds nothing to his original assertions, which he blandly describes as "sober statements of facts;" evidently Mr. Corrick believes that repetition is equal to demonstration, which is not the case, even with W. J. Brown, M.P. thrown in for good measure. It may surprise your correspondent to learn that I have read probably more Anti-Soviet literature than has he; and if he will take the trouble to read the *Daily Worker* of the 1st November, he will get an insight into the manner in which various kinds of "proof" (of Communist tyranny) is cooked up.

But as Mr. Corrick seems so fond of quotations, let me offer him one of very recent date; the speaker is Marshall Plan "Boss" Mr. Hoffman: "The Western Nations must not underestimate the effort Russia is extending to improve the standard of living of those living under the hammer and sickle."

Finally, I am too familiar with the "Christian" trick of asking me to disprove the existence of God to be taken in by the same trick in different clothing.—Yours, etc.,

J. PLIMMER.

LYSENKO

Sir,—As I don't quite see the point of Mr. Harbour's last sentence of the letter in *The Freethinker* dated 6th November, may I quote from the opening words of the English translation, of the verbatim report of the said session, of the speech of V. A. Shaumyan (Director of the State Kostroma Cattle Breeding Station):—

"The attempts of some comrades to reduce the struggle of the Morganist-Mendelists against the Michurin doctrine to unprincipled and meaningless attacks must be discountenanced. This does not help us to fight against the Morganist idealists.

"The struggle against the Morgan-Mendel-Weismann theory has been going on for twenty years . . . During the last two or three years they have become so active that they constantly attack our positions and cause tremendous harm to the science of Biology and our creative practical work.

"T. D. Lysenko elevated the teachings of Michurin, Williams and Timiryazev to a still higher theoretical plane. In the struggle against the Morganist-Mendelists he successfully upheld this doctrine and is constructively developing it further."

As Prof. Hogben points out in his Conway Lecture (1949), the way some of our Geneticists have stuck their fingers into this pie, has not been at all helpful to their opposite numbers in Russia.—Yours, etc.,

ALBERT R. THORNEWELL.

LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanics' Institute.—Sunday, 6-45 p.m.: "Juvenile Delinquency." Councillor J. BACKHOUSE.

Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Tuesday, November 22, 7 p.m.: "Marriage Law Reform." Mr. R. S. POLLARD, J.P. (Chairman Marriage Law Reform Committee).

Glasgow Secular Society (McLellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: "A Chapter a Day for Atheists." Rev. J. T. FINLAYSON.

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "The Adult School Movement." Mr. J. S. HARRISON.

Lewisham Branch N.S.S. (Hope Hotel, Loampit Vale).—Sunday, 7-15 p.m.: "An Evening with the Gods." Mr. R. H. R. ROSETTI (President, N.S.S.).

London Anarchist Group (Trade Union Club, Great Newport Street, W.C.).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: "The Papacy in the Present European Crisis." Mr. F. A. RIDLEY.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (The International Club, 64, George Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: A Lecture.

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, 2-30 p.m.: "Fleet Street." Mr. NORMAN SMITH, M.P.

Sex Education Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Monday, November 21, 7-30 p.m.: "Sex and Rationalism." Mr. W. GLANVILLE (Cook (Australia). Tickets 2s.

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "The Problem of Growing Old." Surgeon Vice-Admiral Sir SHELDON DUDLEY, F.R.S.

Sunderland (Labour Hall).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: "Evolution of Man and God." Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

Wanstead (Wanstead House, George Green, E.11).—Tuesday, November 22, 8 p.m.: "Totalitarianism and Catholicism." Mr. F. A. RIDLEY.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, W. 1).—Sunday, 7-15 p.m.: "The Curse of Immortality." Mr. L. ENRY (Vice-President, N.S.S.).

OUTDOOR

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

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Platt Fields).—Sunday, 3 p.m.: Messrs. E. BILLING, G. WOODCOCK, C. McCALL and KAY.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Bombed site, St. Mary's Gate).—Lectures every lunch hour, 1 p.m.: Messrs. E. BILLING, C. McCALL and G. WOODCOCK.

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, 12 noon: Mr. L. ENRY.

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

CORNWALL — THEN AND NOW

I DO not know if it is solely because I am a Cornishman that I find books about Cornwall so interesting. I think that most people who are in any way acquainted with the far western country will agree with me that it has a strange attraction. The holiday-maker, spending his annual fortnight on a Cornish beach, does not, of course, get to know very much about the people of Cornwall, their superstitions and their rationalities, their Methodism and their occasional more sensible religious attitudes. But there are books in plenty to describe the people and the scenery of Cornwall to the satisfaction of all who can appreciate good writing.

To add more books to what has already appeared in print on the county may appear a work of supererogation. But two recent volumes, coming from the firm of Westaway Books Limited, seem to me so good in their own sphere that they deserve recommendation. They present, too, an interesting contrast, since one of them deals with the Cornwall of a hundred years ago, and the other deals with the Cornwall of to-day.

The first is a reprint of Wilkie Collins's "Rambles Beyond Railways." The present edition costs 7s. 6d., and it is a book which all lovers of the West of England should see on their bookshelves. It consists of notes of a Cornish tour undertaken by the great Victorian novelist in 1851, and devotes much space to such matters of interest to Freethinkers as the legends of the North Cornish coast, with their superstitious basis, owing nothing to Roman Catholicism, unlike the superstitions of much of Europe. Collins was a gifted writer, and in a factual book such as this, presents himself in a less lengthy guise than when writing fiction. His Cornish knowledge, indeed, was fairly extensive, and he later used it in a now little-read novel, entitled "The Dead Secret."

If we turn from the Cornwall of the past to the Cornwall of the present we see C. C. Vyvyan's "Our Cornwall," published at 12s. 6d. This is a collection of essays by a distinguished Cornish woman of the present generation, and presents both discussions of the position of the Cornish in the literary life of Great Britain, and (again) of the religious and superstitious beliefs which are possibly more widely held in Cornwall than elsewhere in the British Isles.

Lady Vyvyan has written previous books on Cornwall, but none, I feel, so poignantly evocative as this. She gives us a picture of the Cornish background far more real than that given by many of the younger novelists of to-day who, as she points out, are inclined to seize upon the more cruel aspects of the landscape and to take that as typical of the country as a whole—more, they are inclined to say that the people are representative of the scenery, which is foolish.

Freethinkers, I feel, will gain if they try to work out in their own minds the reason why such superstitious beliefs as are still to some extent held in Cornwall may have taken possession of the people. It is, I suppose, partly because the county was until fairly recently so isolated from the rest of Britain. And similarly it was the intensely emotional background of the religion of the average Cornishman which enabled Wesley to impress his philosophy on the people of the Duchy so much more profoundly than elsewhere.

This has left its mark on many of the people. Anyone who compares Wilkie Collins's picture with Lady Vyvyan's will see less change in the past century than would be visible, I think, in any other part of Britain.

But the Cornishman, as Lady Vyvyan points out, is changing. The coming of modern methods of communication, the coming of the wireless and the cinema, have proved factors of immense importance in breaking down isolations that have lasted centuries. But whether the division of the River Tamar will ever finally disappear seems at best doubtful. Many of us who believe that the preservation of local differences of dialect or outlook is a good thing will hope that this will never happen. True, we would wish that the average Cornishman might gain in rationality of outlook; but we would not wish that all the differences that divide him from the rest of the country should be ironed out of existence.

JOHN ROWLAND.

A STORY TO BE READ ON FRIDAYS

THE priest was sitting on a bench in the park, and near him sat a woman whose face was covered by an old-fashioned motoring-veil. She glanced at the priest to see whether he was observing her, and then she raised her veil and dabbed at her face with a handkerchief. Out of the corner of his eye, the priest noticed that her nose was a papier-maché sham attached to her veil. When the woman had adjusted herself, she said to the priest. "Father, forgive a stranger for addressing you; but, you see, I was a nun. Yes, I volunteered for service in the cannibal islands. Could my intention have been purer? Oh, before I sailed, my Mother Superior warned me of the dreadful temptation. Human flesh. Mother Superior said some of the nuns, wishing to make friends with the natives, had accepted invitations to dinner; and then they had become addicts. It was a fearful scandal, and perhaps rumours may have reached you? So I took a solemn vow that I would never accept a casual invitation to a meal. You can imagine how hard it was. Sometimes I would pass the natives when they were feeding outside their huts. Then I'd lie awake at night thinking of their beaming, satisfied faces. Really, they might have been eating manna. I became obsessed with curiosity. Surely, I'm only human, only a poor servant of our master? But I never broke my vow. And I never hurt another. You see, father, I became the first cannibal to eat—oh, just tiny bits, just wee bits at a time—the first cannibal to eat himself. Surely that's only a venial sin, father, not a mortal one like eating a missionary?" The priest look distressed. He said, "A venial sin, my daughter? It's true you have not taken another's life—but, well, there is the sin of gluttony. Did you take your meal plainly boiled or did you prepare a sauce?"

OSWELL BLAKESTON.

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