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## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

### On Contemporary Atheism

LET me begin by saying that I often wonder exactly what makes some people "authorities."

I can understand, of course, that a great painter can tell us a lot about painting, that a famous novelist can well give a budding writer some excellent advice, that a professor of history or of physics with many degrees to his name will teach his students to pass stiff examinations. But sometimes, especially when I listen in to some of the bright experts on the Third Programme, I wonder who passed their script. Who made these people "authorities"? A recent lecture on James Joyce by a Mr. Henry Reed made me roar with laughter.

But it is a fact that for Roman Catholics, M. Jacques Maritain has long been a name almost worthy to be placed by the side of Aquinas—or should I say, Mgr. Ronald Knox? It really does not matter, for M. Maritain is one of the most distinguished French Catholics with many books to his name and, for some of his work, no doubt fully deserves his reputation. As I have not read any of it, except the article I am about to deal with, I cannot say for certain.

He has every right to deal with any subject he likes and every right to criticise them. And as he chose to give a lecture on Atheism for the Third Programme the other week, I settled down to listen and see what famous contemporary Frenchman who was a Roman Catholic with so great a reputation, could say on a philosophy about which so much has been written—a philosophy accepted by Diderot and d'Holbach, to say nothing of many only just less famous than these eminent masters.

Maritain called it "The Meaning of Contemporary Atheism" and it was translated into English and delivered by the noted Catholic actor, Mr. Robert Speight. Fortunately, it was also reprinted in *The Listener* which gave me the opportunity of reading it at my leisure. When I heard the lecture I was set wondering almost at once—who made M. Maritain an authority? After all, it is not difficult for an intelligent man of letters, especially in France, to "mug up" a subject, and Atheism never did shock the French quite as much as it did us. In other words, M. Maritain could easily have found out what Atheism really was.

Instead, amid a forest of words, he proves quite conclusively he has only the most hazy notion of its tenets. His talk on Atheism in fact seemed to me quite as silly as Mr. Reed's talk on Joyce.

It will be remembered that Bradlaugh and some of his contemporaries insisted that they never denied God—all they did was to deny the various explanations or definitions given by believers; and this seemed to me to be a distinction with very little difference. If one is going to deny all the definitions of a Deity presented to us, one might as well deny the "Almighty" right away. I have never compromised on this.

Maritain appears to me to claim that Atheists really believe that God exists but they refuse him and defy him. "Absolute Atheism," he declares, "is also positive. It is something much more than a simple absence of belief in God; it is a refusal of God and a defiance of God." I say quite deliberately that anyone who can talk like that about Atheism is just talking nonsense.

Any "Atheist" who "refuses" God or who "defies" him must necessarily believe that God exists. He cannot therefore be an Atheist. And really that need be the only criticism of the eight closely reasoned columns with which we are favoured from the French Catholic "authority" on Atheism.

But M. Maritain insists on showing the difference between "positive" Atheism and "absolute" Atheism which are he says "involved in a dual contradiction." By positive Atheism, he tells us he means "an active combat against everything that reminds us of God—an anti-theism rather than an Atheism properly so called." He has a right to define his terms in any way he likes of course but he has no right to expect an Atheist to accept his definition especially if it is unmitigated rubbish. As an "absolute" Atheist myself, I do not combat everything that reminds me of God for the very simple reason that nothing does. As I do not believe that any God exists, how can I be reminded of him? What can possibly remind me? The men of God—and I am sure M. Maritain is ready at any time to grovel before them as it is they who remind *him* of God—no more remind me of any God than does an African witch doctor.

M. Maritain, however, does admit the existence of a negative Atheism "which rejects the idea of God and replaces it by a simple void." Well; I certainly reject the idea but what is meant by "replacing it by a simple void"? I haven't the ghost of an idea of what M. Maritain means by his God and I do not replace something I do not understand by a void. There is no void. There is simply the absence of any idea of God—the idea which M. Maritain believes in so fervently or the idea propagated by an ordinary witch doctor. If I reject the idea of a Griffin, this surely does not mean I have replaced it by a "void."

When, however, he gets into the heart of the discussion we soon see him lost in that extraordinary maze of stupidity and insolence with which only Catholic intellectuals can get away. They think, as no doubt he does, that they are all profound; and no doubt they are to the average Catholic. They remind me of the patronising way with which I have always been greeted when declaring myself an Atheist. "My dear chap," some nobody will say, soothingly, "not an Atheist—an Agnostic, a Rationalist if you will, but not, *not* an Atheist." They do not continue however in this strain after one minute's discussion with me.

M. Maritain gives us what he calls "certain rational and speculative inquiries into the problem of God," and then calmly proceeds to add that the Atheist "has not

submitted these so-called philosophical arguments . . . to any critical examination. He takes them for granted." This kind of writing leaves me helpless. The idea that Maritain, or any Catholic, can provide Atheists with arguments which we cannot easily answer, or that we take for granted certain "Aunt Sallies" put up very carefully by them, and thus become negative or positive or absolute Atheists who really believe in God Almighty as defined by the Pope, but prefer to defy him is just solemn nonsense. Mr. Speight went on and on repeating variations of this kind of thing from his master, quite possibly feeling he was doing God's work.

In the end, M. Maritain confidently assured us that what we needed were "signs or miracles"! And he finished up, as so many of his kind invariably do, to advise us to believe in God so that "the earthly hope in the Gospel can become the quickening force of temporal history."

I am quite sure that the Directors of Religious Broadcasting really believe that this specimen of sheer drivel will teach "contemporary" Atheists the Truth, and bring them back contritely and humbly to grovel before Jesus or one of his priests. If that is not the case, then I cannot see the object of spending good money on this kind of hopeless futility.

And, anyway, how many Atheists have joined the Roman Church as a result of the broadcast?

H. CUTNER.

### ANTIQUITY'S BEQUEST TO LATER TIMES

THE late Professor, W. G. de Burgh's *Legacy of the Ancient World* (new edition, revised and enlarged, Macdonald, 517 pp., 1947, 21s.) is a work of considerable merit. Well written and so clearly expressed that he who runs may read it is nevertheless marred by blots and blemishes. While stressing the permanent benefits of the teachings of the Old Testament prophets in their rejection of Israel's old tribal god and devotion to monotheism, our author constantly assumes the authenticity of the so-called Pauline Epistles and never suggests that the genuineness of many of them has been seriously questioned by eminent critics, or that Prof. Van Manen rejects them all as spurious in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*. Moreover, the martyrdom and burial in Rome of Peter and Paul are treated as truly historical. Also, in an appendix he craves, much in the spirit of Arnold Toynbee, for the restoration of "pure" Christianity as a panacea for the trials and sufferings we now endure.

Still, apart from alleged Judaic contributions to ethics and theology, our historian traces the genesis of modern science, culture and philosophy to the tiny Greece of antiquity, and admits that the legal codes of contemporary Christendom are very deeply indebted to the law-givers of Pagan Rome. Still, the whole realm of secular culture reposes on ancient Hellas. As Dr. de Burgh eloquently avows: "In philosophy and science in art and literature, the Greek genius achieved results which in their range and value are without comparison in the history of mankind. The period which intervened between the birth of Pericles and the death of Aristotle, i.e., the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. in Greek history, is undoubtedly whether considered by itself or with reference to the effects it produced on the destinies of civilised man the most memorable in the history of the world?" So wrote Shelley, and all thinkers and poets are witnesses to the truth of his words."

Hebrews, Hellenes and Romans alike, were all children of the Mediterranean area, and this, or its vicinity was the cradle of civilisation. But with Rome's fall the Mediterranean tradition was continued by Byzantium, the city States of Italy, including Venice, until the 15th century of our era, when the discoveries of Columbus, Gama, Diaz, Magellan, and other seamen not only enlarged men's concepts of space, but led to the oceanic economy now prevalent.

The volume under review contains a fascinating account of the rise and progress of Hellenism. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Herodotus, Hesiod and Homer, with other illustrious Greeks all receive their due meed of reverence and appreciation. The chapter devoted to the greatness and glory of Athens is truly magnificent. Tribute is paid to Thucydides, the premier Greek and, perhaps, the greatest of all historians, ancient or modern, who preserved the splendid oration of Pericles in honour of the soldiers who had fallen in combat with the enemies of Athens. Thus, Pericles acclaims the ideal Athenian democratic State: "Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with that of others. We do not copy our neighbours but are an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while the law secures equal justice to all alike, in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognised; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty a bar, but a man may benefit his country, whatever may be the obscurity of his condition. There is no exclusiveness in our public life. . . . We are lovers of the beautiful yet simple in our tastes, and we cultivate the mind without loss of manliness. Wealth we employ not for talk or ostentation, but when there is a real use for it."

At a later period, Rome inherited much of the splendour of Greece. All Latin science, literature and art, was dependent on Grecian models. In Rome's magnificent days, Hellenic influences proved dominant. If the Latins conquered Greek dominion, the intellect of Hellas dominated every department of Rome's cultural life, save that of jurisprudence alone.

When surveying the overthrow of the Roman republic our author concedes that the assassination of Julius Caesar was the worst blunder recorded in history. Yet he refuses to regard this murder as a crime by pleading that Brutus and Cassius were incapable of comprehending what even Cicero failed to realise: that the patrician republic was doomed. And he even cites Shakespeare's appellation of Brutus as the noblest Roman of them all. Brutus the avaricious usurer who charged his clients 8 per cent. interest on his loans. Still, even Homer nodded on this occasion. Yet, in *Hamlet* he refers to the mighty Julius, while in *Richard III*, we read:—

"That Julius Caesar was a famous man:  
With what his valour did enrich his wit,  
His wit set down to make his valour live:  
Death makes no conquest of this conqueror;  
For now he lives in fame, though not in life."

Dante, however, consigned Brutus, Cassius and Judas Iscariot to hell's hottest regions as the arch-malefactors in history. Truly, Caesar paid dearly for his clemency in permitting no proscriptions or confiscations when his most venomous and spiteful enemies were entirely unarmed to his death, thus leaving his many beneficent projects unfulfilled.

It is difficult to reconcile the picture of the Middle Ages of Catholicism presented in de Burgh's study with that of Dr. Coulton and other expert authorities. Still, he presents the secularisation of life so clearly manifested during the Renaissance and Reformation periods, on purely evolutionary and economic principles. He assures us that: "We have only to turn from Dante to the great humanists of the sixteenth century, Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes and Shakespeare to appreciate the magnitude of the revolution. Shakespeare's interest is almost wholly absorbed in human life, as enacted amid its actual surroundings; and, in portraying men's intellectual perplexities and moral crisis, he gives scarcely a thought to God or the life to come. By the sixteenth century, humanism was in the ascendant; and the spirit of secularism was dominant explicitly in men's thought, and instinctively in their practice. The age of reason had begun."

The work of a Christian Theist, this volume candidly acknowledges the dependence of Catholic theology or, in any case, its indebtedness to the speculations of Plotinus, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and other ancient thinkers and, if one cannot accept all de Burgh's conclusions, one must admire his breadth of view. For instance, his tribute to the Sage of Ferney and his adherents is noteworthy, when he avers that "the freethinkers of the eighteenth century sounded the knell of persecution, e.g., Voltaire's exposure of the Calas tragedy which constitutes one of the great events in the history of civilisation. But now in face of the Nazi intolerance alike towards Jews and Christians the battle has to be fought over again."

T. F. PALMER.

## HUMAN NATURE AND HISTORY

"YOU can't change human nature." That is one of the oldest blasphemies, still repeated with unction by many a reactionary. Actually human nature—or what is believed to be human nature—has been changed over and over again in the course of the centuries. It changed, for instance, with the death of duelling; those who still retain some small grain of optimism about the future will hope that it may change again with the death of war, somewhere in the next few years.

Mr. Charles Duff's book *This Human Nature* was first published in 1930. A revised version appeared in Messrs. Watt's Thinker's Library in 1937. What its author describes as a definitive edition now appears again in the Thinker's Library at 3s. 6d. A comparison with the earlier edition reveals an interesting change in emphasis, but—most marked of all—there is the growing awareness of the threat in recent scientific developments, especially the applications of atomic energy. Mr. Duff castigates the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima as "the cruellest single war-time action by a State against a civilian population in the whole history of mankind." This is something with which a large proportion of the population of all countries would, I think, agree. The mere fact that public opinion can begin to take an independent line on such matters is an indication that human nature has changed.

Admittedly, Mr. Duff spends a good deal of his space in the latter pages of his book in pointing out that the ethical side of this atomic problem has counted for very little, and that even the churches, which might have been expected to denounce such indiscriminate destruction, have tended to temporise and to allow the

use of atomic energy in a future "defensive" or "preventive" war. And all wars can be represented (and usually are represented) as being fought in self-defence. As a footnote to what Mr. Duff says on this point it is worth quoting a resolution moved at the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in London:—"This Annual Meeting . . . records the conviction that the common man in every country, no matter under what economic system he earns his livelihood, has no desire to engage in this fratricidal conflict either on behalf of economic theories or national imperialisms. It, therefore, calls upon the common man everywhere to pursue peace and to force upon his government theories of peace."

This is a note which, if echoed by the other churches, might produce results—though we have the difficulty that the voice of a church in Great Britain has little chance of being heard on the east side of the so-called "Iron Curtain."

Readers may feel that I am spending most of my space on one comparatively minor part of Mr. Duff's book; this is because I feel that this matter of atomic energy is the one issue of our time that should break down all barriers, economic, political, and theological. Much of Mr. Duff's book would be agreed between all schools of thought (save those tied to the Vatican). Even the part which deals with the early evolution of man requires only supplementing by some such book as Mr. Chapman Pincher's recent *Evolution* (Jenkins; 7s. 6d.), which is a useful summary of knowledge on the subject.

Mr. Duff summarises recent developments thus: "The superficial standardisation of human nature, much of which may be directly attributable to the influence of the machine, which already seemed to take a grip on the 'souls' of men and women in many parts of the Western world."

Yet "eating, drinking, sleeping and breeding will ever remain the most important functions of human life." That, I might add, is Mr. Duff's opinion; it is an opinion with which some would disagree—especially among the members of the more thoughtful of church congregations. But the case which Mr. Duff makes out, and the way in which he describes man's nature at many points in history, is something that is a most readable story, even for those who would fervently disagree with his diagnosis at one point or another. It is not often that one comes across a book with a serious purpose that can be read as easily as a novel: *This Human Nature* is certainly that. And so Mr. Duff will receive the congratulations of many readers of all shades of opinion; for his book contains something which will appeal to all, save (as already suggested above) the obedient sons of the Vatican.

JOHN ROWLAND.

## VIOLETS DIM, BUT SWEETER

Great men have risen from the lowest ranks,  
By work and energy, or stronger wills;  
They lead an army, or they govern banks,  
Those corner buildings where they discount bills.  
Great men live long, like Mr. Bernard Shaw;  
Others have climbed to pinnacles of power,  
Where they for little men lay down the law:  
But I would spurn them all for one sweet flower.  
The violet that grows near old stone wells,  
Or under leaves that strew the tall tree's foot;  
More charming they than dainty blue hare-bells,  
That grace the downs they clasp with shallow root:  
The violet's grateful perfume, never keen,  
Is Mother Nature's work with fingers green.

BAVARD SIMMONS.

## ACID DROPS

**The stunt** of the Rev. R. Waterson, who was fasting to attract attention to his demand for the formation of a committee to negotiate with the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A., on the H-Bomb, has ended after 14 days. And so, Bexhill's parson, having made his contribution to world peace, will now sink back into oblivion. We have no means of finding out whether the report of the fast in *Reynolds* was written sarcastically or not, but it is stated that for 14 days, the parson has "eaten nothing but a light breakfast and a supper sandwich."

**It is reported** in the *Glasgow Evening Times* that the Lanark and Hamilton Presbyteries have objected to Sunday cinemas in Cambuslang district. The Rev. M. Ogilvie said that he did not object to people going to the pictures on Sundays, provided that they go to Church first, and provided that they are sure of seeing the right type of film. A correspondent, who sends us this cutting, pithily adds, "I have no objection to Sunday Church, provided people go to the pictures first, and provided that they go to the right type of church." Further comment from us is unnecessary!

**The priest responsible** for replies in the *Universe* to puzzled believers tells one of them that "Angels are not members of the Church Triumphant for they never belonged to the Church Militant." Good for the Angels! If this means anything, it means that Angels are not exactly adoring believers of the Church of Rome, and thus, as unbelievers, may even be condemned to Hell. But how can good Angels go to Hell? We leave the problem to be thrashed out by acute Jesuistical sophists--it appears to be exactly their cup of tea.

**God took a front seat** on the occasion of the Church service at which the Arsenal football team with their Directors, managers, and autograph-hunters prayed for success in the Cup Final. Cheering children and football fans mobbed the Arsenal team until "God's house" looked like a preview of a Cup Final. Everybody was happy; the Rev. C. Daintree got his house full, the kids got their autographs, the players and Directors no doubt felt a glow of self-righteousness. But surely it was most unsportsmanlike to call in God to lick Liverpool!

**Dr. Frank Buchman's Moral Re-armers** are angry: that is, if Oxford Groupers can be guilty of such base passion, because Mr. Arthur Deakin has warned them not to interfere in the Dock dispute. Groupers claim that they are only concerned with the "generation of a new spirit between employer and men." Mr. Deakin objects to "meddling amateurs," and apparently realises that religion is useless in Trade Union affairs. He may also remember Dr. Buchman's penchant for dictatorship methods is not likely to endear him and his team of hysterical and exhibitionist morons to the dockers.

**In the Divorce Court recently** a case occurred in which the third chapter of Genesis was dragged in—it has been the laughing stock of everybody since it appeared in Holy Writ. Chivalrous Adam blamed Eve for having "tempted" him and a similar plea was put in the divorce case to be contemptuously rejected by Lord Merriman who said, "That excuse was not allowed to prevail in the Garden of Eden, and it is not allowed to prevail here." The point to note of course is that the

co-respondent must have believed implicitly in the Serpent speaking Hebrew and, no doubt, so does Lord Merriman. Adam, Eve, the Garden of Eden, and a talking Serpent, are all History!

**Although excavations** are still proceeding in the attempt to find the tomb of St. Peter, according to the *Church Times* it is exceedingly difficult to get any information owing to "the traditional Vatican reticence confused historical evidence, and Vatican control." In addition, the workers are sworn to secrecy. But there may still be another weighty reason. Supposing there never was a Peter—that, like Jesus, he is just a myth? In any case the *Church Times* actually says "There is no definite evidence about the existence of the tomb, which seems almost conclusive, and would result in just as big a blow for Anglican as for Roman Catholicism."

**The Archbishop of Canterbury** has put out a statement as to the position of Church schools under the 1944 Education Act which, he admits, was fair all round, and therefore accepted by his Church. Now he finds that these schools are almost under the same disabilities as Roman Catholic schools, but he considers their remedy "would completely destroy the basis of the 1944 settlement," and he could not accept that. So where stands the Archbishop? As the *Church Times* pathetically says, the Archbishop's statement "appears to state very little." It is, in fact, just wind. And yet Secular Education is the one remedy which would solve for ever all these religious squabbles, and it is a remedy which must come sooner or later.

**The centenary** of the death of Wordsworth has led to a lot of hot discussion as to what his religious beliefs really were. In general, he has been considered a Pantheist with Christian leanings—or as he called himself "A worshipper of nature." Late in life, he probably became more and more Christian, but most of his best work had by then been done and there was very little of the usual pious twaddle in it. But is Wordsworth very much read these days?

**Once again** we have to endure the usual religious outbursts in praise of St. George for England though it is nearly certain that like other Christian "martyrs," he never lived. Calvin called him a myth, and Gibbon called him a swindling army contractor who was lynched for fraud. But these Christian myths and legends have got such a good start that Truth can never catch up with them, and so they go the rounds every year, the believers shrilly shrieking that it is all true. But St. George and his dragon and his princess are all myths just the same.

**In a recent number** of this journal, we reported that *La Prensa*, the last of the Liberal daily newspapers in Argentina, had been banned. We have since been informed that this is not strictly true, only the stocks of newsprint have been confiscated, and the newspaper has to rely on supplies handed out by the Government, which seems to us to be an effective guarantee against any criticism of the Government. Another ever-present danger hanging over *La Prensa* is an old Argentinian law brought up to date in conformity with the totalitarian outlook, *Desacato*, that is, "disrespect" for any Government official. Presumably, *Desacato* will include the Blessed Virgin Mary who is a colonel (with pay) of a regiment.

# "THE FREETHINKER"

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## TO CORRESPONDENTS

**JAMES GRUNDY.**—The Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as held by the Roman Catholic Church is to the effect that the Virgin Mary in view of the merits of Jesus Christ was, from the first moment of conception in the womb of her mother free from Original Sin. The Immaculate Conception is not to be mixed with the Virgin Birth (i.e., birth without the sex act). Obviously, Jesus was also "born" without Original Sin. The Doctrine was declared an article of faith by Pope Pius IX in his *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854.

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.

The following periodicals are being received regularly, and can be consulted at "The Freethinker" office: THE TRUTH SEEKER (U.S.A.), COMMON SENSE (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), DON BASILIO (Italy).

Will correspondents please write on one side of the paper, and keep their letters brief. This will give everybody a chance. Lecture Notices should reach the Office by Friday morning.

## SUGAR PLUMS

Details for the N.S.S. Annual Conference wanted are: List of Branch Secretaries complete together with names and addresses of Branch delegates and detailed statement of any hotel accommodation required. Private members wishing to attend the Conference and desiring hotel accommodation must also send in their requirements to the General Secretary, 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C. 1. Only members of the N.S.S. can attend the Conference and the card of membership for the current year is necessary for admission. That may help as a reminder to any members whose current subscription has not yet been remitted.

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. will begin open air operations to-day (May 7) at 11 a.m. in the Old Market Square, Nottingham. The Branch President, Mr. A. Elsmere, and Mr. T. M. Mosley will be the speakers. The Branch President has a first rate colleague in Mr. Mosley and we wish both speakers, and the Branch, a useful and successful season. It may be that an evening meeting will also be held but any announcement concerning that will be made at the morning session.

It is hoped that South London Freethinkers will rally to the opening meeting of the South London and Lewisham Branch in Brockwell Park on Sunday, May 7, at 6.30 p.m. Mr. Len Ebury is to speak and a good audience will give the Branch a flying start for the season. Meetings are to be held every Sunday evening during the Summer and any offers of help will be gratefully accepted.

If Gallup Polls can be trusted, the U.S.A. is even more irreligious than Britain, for in the recent poll it was found that more than half of the Americans questioned could not name the four Gospels. Only 35 per cent. could name them all correctly and only 12 per cent. managed to name from one to three.

## THE HOLY QURAN\*

1.

RECENT political events have tended to draw attention to the existence and power of Islam, the creed founded by Muhammed in Arabia in the seventh century. The formation of the Arab League and its war against Israel and the creation of new Islamic sovereign states in Pakistan and Indonesia represent obvious examples. Throughout Asia and Africa the Muhammedan religion is still a formidable force. A recent popular writer on religion has even classed Islam with the Roman Catholic Church as the two most powerful creations of the religious spirit. Historically speaking one would be justified in describing modern Islam as the most potent opponent of Christianity in the missionary field.

Direct peaceful contacts between Christianity and Islam are comparatively recent. In the Middle Ages they were entirely hostile. In India and Africa, Christian and Muslim missionaries have found themselves in direct competition ever since Christian missions first began to penetrate these lands. Converts from Islam are said to be few and far between. Nor is this surprising, since the austere monotheism which has always characterised Islam seems more logical and is certainly easier to understand, particularly by primitive races, than are the complex metaphysics (not to mention the mathematics) of the Christian Trinity.

The startling discoveries of modern thought which have caused such intellectual devastation in the Christian camp, have also not been without their effect upon the rival religion of Islam. Modernist movements inspired by scientific and historical criticism are not unknown in modern Islam, particularly in India and Egypt; the two most culturally advanced lands within its orbit. Under the title of *Modern Trends in Islam*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has recently surveyed these contemporary "trends" chiefly in India.

As the author convincingly demonstrates, these modernist movements and, indeed, the whole modern Islamic propaganda intended for western assimilation, is profoundly influenced by the impact of modern western culture. The first and most famous specimen of this literary genre of Muhammedan apologetics intended mainly for readers with a Christian and western background is *The Spirit of Islam*, by the late Ameer Ali, which has passed through numerous editions in India and Europe.

The Commentary on the Holy Quran—or Koran, to give it a name more familiar to Europeans—is a work of a similar class to the above work of Ameer Ali. The author is the Head of the Ahmadiyya Community, a heretical sect in the eyes of orthodox Muslims. The Community is of a universal character founded in India towards the end of the last century. Its Founder, Ahmed, claimed to be the "Mahdi," or Messianic Prophet whom the heretical as well as some of the orthodox Muslim sects have expected to succeed Muhammed as the last and greatest of mankind's Prophets.

The Ahmadiyya Community presents Islam under a universalistic and evolutionary form as the last and greatest religions, just as Muhammed and his Ahmadiyya successor, the promised Mahdi, are here represented as the last and greatest of the successive Prophets of God. Islam is here indicated as the universal religion of which the earlier "religions of the Book" as Muhammed himself called Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity, were the semi-inspired predecessors.

\* *Introduction to the Holy Quran* by Hazrat Mirza Bashir Ud Din Mahmud Ahmad. The London Mosque, 12s. 6d.

Readers of such Christian modernist writers as Bishop Barnes and Dr. Inge, will not fail to note the striking resemblance between their representation of Liberal Christianity and the above presentation of Islam.

In his *Modern Trends in Islam*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has given us an interesting analysis of the character adopted in recent years by Muslim apologetics, particularly when such propaganda is directed to the western world. Muhammed becomes the ideal representative of an abstract morality which, however, on closer inspection, turns out to be remarkably like the accepted code of middle-class European morality which it is the object of western education to achieve. Muhammed divests himself of the typical and, to modern tastes, unpleasant characteristics of an Arab of the seventh century and becomes the legislator and personal apotheosis of an essentially western and bourgeois code of morals such as, for example, Lord Macaulay introduced into India in his famous Report, and which has since formed the ethical basis of higher education in India.

The impact of western ideas and the distorting lens of western cultural spectacles are here very evident. Muhammed, whose history according to most western historians, displays the periodic barbaric traits of cruelty and lechery which would naturally be expected of a semi-barbaric Arab of the seventh century reared in an atmosphere of vendetta and bloodshed, here becomes a radiant and blameless teacher of a modern nineteenth century ethical code: a good husband, a kind father, even a champion of women's rights, a humanitarian who modified slavery even where he could not abolish it. In fact, a typical modern reformer, a very good man, indeed, perhaps even too good to be true!

To a large extent the above picture of the Prophet and his mission in which, incidentally, both the orthodox Ameer Ali and our heretical author under present review substantially agree in presenting, is, no doubt, intended as a defence against the attacks of Christian missionaries who often indulge in personal attacks on the character of the Founder of Islam which could provoke an action for criminal libel if written to-day about any actual living person. Readers of *The Freethinker*, however, hardly need to be reminded how dearly the votaries of rival creeds are prone to love each other!

Written from the above general standpoint and using almost exclusively rose-tinted spectacles, the author surveys in a comprehensive, learned and often interesting manner the life and times of Muhammed, the theological dogmas and ethical precepts of the Quran and of Islam, and also considers their applicability to the present-day world and their relationship to other religions.

Throughout, Muhammed is presented as the best of men and Islam and the Quranic teaching as the fine, and final flower of religious evolution. Many readers will find this surprising as perhaps would the historic Muhammed himself. No doubt, the Arabian Prophet was a religious reformer in his day and I do not think that anyone has ever doubted his historical existence; no doubt, also, the original Islam represented in many ways, a genuine improvement on the previous barbaric tribal religion of pre-Muslim days. But the evolution of Islam has not, nevertheless, been all sweetness and light as our author suggests. There have been darker shades. For example, it is a fact that members of our author's own Ahmadiyya Community have themselves been stoned to death as apostates under Islamic canon law in recent years in Afghanistan. And this barbarous practice is still the accepted principle of Islamic orthodoxy.

The learned author also deals with the relations of Islam with Christianity and the Bible to which we will refer in a further article.

F. A. RIDLEY.

## OUR MISSIONARY HEROES

FOR scores of years China has been regarded by the Christian churches as the one country most suitable for conversion, and therefore a promising land for the missionary; and money has been poured out like water for this cause.

In his book, "My Years in China" 1926-1941 published in London by John Lane, The Bodley Head Hallett Abend, who was correspondent for *The New York Times*, and probably the best-informed American correspondent to study China and the Chinese, shows conclusively that the chances of christianising China are less to-day than they ever were.

The hardships and privations that the missionaries were supposed to suffer whilst engaged in "labouring in the vineyard" are debunked. Thus Chefoo, which was used as a base for the American Asiatic Fleet was also patronised by hundreds of missionaries and their families who spent the hot months there in order to escape the humidity of inland stations.

Mr. Abend says: "Extra-territoriality endured for a century before the United States and Britain announced in October, 1912, that this iniquitous system of administering foreign law on Chinese soil was to be voluntarily abandoned. . . . Certain it is that a victorious China will no longer welcome a continuance of the effort to 'Christianise The Heathen.' The patronising attitude inherent in any effort to 'save their souls' will be rejected with violence, and the day of the evangelising missionary will be at an end. . . . The mere presence of missionaries in a land of newly awakened nationalism and justifiably proud patriotism will arouse feelings of resistance, particularly since historically in the Chinese mind the missionary has, even though unjustly, been regarded as one of Imperialism's outriders."

This opinion of the author was shared long ago by Sir Robert Hart who knew the Chinese as well as any foreigner has ever known them. In his book, "The Chinese Question" he says: "As for the missionary class, their devotion, zeal and good works are recognised by all; and yet while this so, their presence has been felt to be a standing insult, for does it not tell the Chinese their conduct is bad and requires change, and their cult inadequate and wants addition, their gods despicable and to be cast into the gutter, their forefathers lost and themselves to be saved by accepting the missionary teaching?"

In 1923 there were 8,325 American, British and Canadian Protestant missionaries in China. In 1935 this number was reduced to 6,150. In 1930 American and Canadian missions cost over \$6,000,000 in American money for salaries and maintenance. What the R.C. Church effort cost we do not know as they don't publish a balance sheet, and the mugs who subscribe would never question their book-keeping—not even a bleat from the poor sheep who supply the money. These rival followers of Christ who went to China to preach about "love" hated each other so much that they would not speak even when they met in the street. As the author says: "No wonder the Chinese mind was confused. Many a Chinese smiled at himself when he heard of the Tower of Babel."

Lord Halifax, who was our praying Foreign Secretary during the war, and was afterwards our British Ambassador in Washington, declared, "We know that, stripped

of the accidents which have brought this or that nation into war, the real issue for us is whether Christianity and all that it means is to survive. It may be that some would think that an over-statement. We have not always considered what Christianity implies, or remembered that nearly everything of value in our lives has a Christian Ancestry."

Commenting on this statement the author said that Lord Halifax's utterances made no appeal to the Chinese masses and were a positive insult to the people of India, where religion is a much more vital thing than it is to the Chinese.

Quoting from the book: "If some such phrase as 'morality and religion' had been substituted for 'Christianity,' Lord Halifax's reputation as a diplomat would have been enhanced."

Gone are the days when devoted and ignorant missionaries could visit Chinese temples and, when "the spirit of the Lord" came strong upon them, sing christian hymns. If such a thing should happen in the future, they will be booted out, and rightly so, and there will be no British or American troops to appeal to. In the past, as a well-known Chinese writer pointed out, the Chinese knew that behind the Christian bible was the Christian bullet and bayonet.

For many years the Chinese, Indian and other conquered peoples have had their calvary and they are no longer interested in the Christian fairy tales of an imaginary Christ hung on an imaginary cross. Missionaries may then help the community by doing some useful job of work.

F. A. HORNIBROOK.

### BEHIND THE SACRED DOOR

The Sacred Congregation of Sacraments Control Commission for Matrimonial Tribunals, issued a secret circular letter to all bishops of Italy for their guidance in regard to diocesan tribunals, stressing the particular gravity of their "matrimonial nullity" actions. In addition, the circular reminds the bishops of their duty to see to it that, for the position of officers or justices, they only delegate to the tribunals such priests whose judicial competence and "indubitable integrity" they can vouch for.

These instructions were given out as a result of the examination of recent sentences passed by several diocesan tribunals during these ears. It appears that in regard to the dissolution of conjugal ties the S.C. of Sacraments, the highest ecclesiastical authority in this matter, noted a certain degree of broadmindedness . . .

Observers have found noteworthy the fact that the Vatican felt necessary to issue their particular instructions when the pending law-suits against the papers *L'Unità* and *Il Paese* were still *sub judice*. As will be remembered, these two papers were charged with making malevolent comments on the high costs of ecclesiastical nullity suits and on the privileged proceedings which the priests in certain cases deign to afford. If, at this juncture, the Congregation of Sacraments has to remind the diocesan suffragans of indubitable integrity as a prerequisite, some malignant secularists take this as a clue of the Congregations itself being less agreed upon the integrity of their ecclesiastical justices who, so far, have sat on the Matrimonial Tribunals. In consequence—these malevolent people argue—the S.C. has proved to believe themselves in the blasphemous insinuations made by the said two papers.

However, the supreme pontifical authority need not be too much worried about such infamy. It is to their own

disgrace that the editors of *L'Unità* and *Il Paese* do not bear such names as Cippio (a prelate who embezzled 100 million Lire), Guidetti or Rodolfo Graziani. One reason more why justice will take its course and infamy must be crushed.

(Translated from *Don Basilio* by P. G. R.)

## CORRESPONDENCE

### SYMBOLS AND NUMBERS

SIR,—Adverting to the review of *God and Science* in your issue of the 2nd April, may I please be allowed to offer the following observations thereon?

Is it rational to assume that numbers are of no symbolical value when these same numbers so often occur as "teaching symbols" from Genesis to Revelation as well as parts of the Apocrypha?

If "J.R." is a freethinker, may I suggest that he frees his thought from any idea that J. W. Doorly teaches or sponsors numerology? That word embraces the assumption that man's destiny is governed by numbers—a proposition absolutely eschewed in his writings.

Numerology is quite a different matter from teaching spiritual truths using numbers amongst many other symbols such as moon, stars, dragon, candlestick, pillars of fire, seven thunders to be found in the Bible.

That grand old book is replete with these symbols, an outstanding example being Revelation I: 20, which reads: "The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks." The explanation of these symbols follows, viz.: "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches."

Surely this is proof positive of numbers and objects being used as symbols?

To quote the great metaphysical writer (the late Mary Baker Eddy) "Spiritual teaching must always be by symbols."

"J.R.s" thesis would render the Bible *reductio ad absurdum*.—Yours, etc.,

H. HARCOURT VERDEN.

## LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

### OUTDOOR

- Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Broadway Car Park).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. HAROLD DAY.
- Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Sunday, 3-15 and 7 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.
- Great Harwood.—Saturday, May 6, 6 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.
- Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. J. BARKER.
- Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Bombed Site, St. Mary's Gate).—Lectures every lunch hour, 1 p.m.: Messrs. G. WOODCOCK and C. McCALL.
- North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, 12 noon: Mr. F. A. RIDLEY and R. A. CALVERLY. (Highbury Corner), 7 p.m.: Mr. F. A. RIDLEY.
- Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Barkers Pool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. A. SAMMS.
- South London Branch N.S.S. (Brockwell Park, Herne Hill).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: Mr. L. EBURY.
- West London Branch N.S.S. (Marble Arch, Hyde Park).—Sunday, 4 p.m.: Mr. C. E. WOOD.
- Worsthorne.—Friday, May 5, 7-15 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.
- Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: Messrs. A. ELSMERE and T. MOSLEY.

### INDOOR

- South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1.).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Biology and Human Behaviour," Dr. MAURICE BURTON, D.Sc.

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE PAPACY.** By F. A. Ridley. Price 1s.; postage 1½d.

**THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CHURCH.** By Colonel Ingersoll. Price 2d.; postage 1d.

## THOUGHTS ON RELIGION

## VI

THERE is a great deal of difference between Christ as he is described in the Bible and a committee of preachers and religious officials smoking cigars and discussing sociology and the problems of state and national church work without much show of Christian humility or of wisdom.

Religion is largely a social phenomenon depending for its existence on the credulity of the people and the dishonesty of its founders and of religious leaders. The higher the rank of a religious leader or official, the smaller is the possibility that he believes the religion that he professes; and it is to be doubted that any of the great religious leaders believe their religion or that they believe anything supernatural. So it is that the private meetings of some professional religionists are often not characterised by a proper piety; and their attitude toward religious matters at such times is different from the solemnity which they exhibit when in the pulpit or when otherwise addressing the commonality of religious believers.

The basic error of Buddhism is that it contains the assumption that desire can be eliminated while there is life. Yet, the desire for life is the greatest desire; and, if the Buddhist lives, he has this desire; or else he would not live; and his life itself is a contradiction of his religious beliefs. In "The Foundation of The Kingdom of Righteousness," an early sermon attributed to Gautama Buddha, the doctrine of the elimination of suffering through the denial of the desire for life is expressed in verses 6 and 7:—

"Now this, O Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering.

"Verily, it is that thirst (or craving), causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there—that is to say, the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for (a future) life, or the craving for success (in the present life).

"This then, O Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering.

"Now this, O Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering.

"Verily, it is the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst; the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, the harbouring no longer of this thirst.

"This then, O Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering."\*

Neither Buddhism nor any renunciatory philosophy denies life; it simply stunts it. However, there is wisdom in the partial renunciation of desire when such renunciation is a matter of reasonable philosophy. Religions are the metaphysics of the people; and, while some religions contain little that resembles wisdom, the fundamental teaching of Buddhism that the suffering of life depends on desire and ignorance is rather realistic and shows a better acquaintance with life than anything found in Jewish and Christian writings. The Buddhist cure for the suffering of life through the acquisition of enlightenment and the renunciation of desire so as to escape rebirth in the wheel of existence and to attain Nirvana is like other religious cures and is based on

\* Translation of T. W. Rhys Davids.

imagination rather than on knowledge. However bad life may be, total renunciation of it in the Buddhist style or in the Christian monastic style is not a solution to its badness. Anything which vitiates the natural life is itself bad.

WILLIAM RITTENOUR (U.S.A.)

## FIVE MINUTES MORE

IN the realms of literature George Bernard Shaw is a king, but in his court the office of king's jester is filled by himself.

Whenever the crown weighs heavily on his head he casts it aside and dons the cap and bells, an example that leaden prose-pedlars might advantageously emulate for as Butler said: "A little levity will often save many a good heavy thing from sinking." Indeed, Shaw seems to prefer the motley; and thereby hangs a tale.

When the "Watch Story" was indignantly repudiated so often by so many in Bradlaugh's day, Shaw laughingly tried it out at a bachelor party.

He took out his watch, giving God the usual five minutes that God always requires for this act, but his audience declined to await the climax. Atheist and believer alike showed signs of panic, so their host neutralised the Almighty by forbidding the experiment.

No one had any suspicion that Shaw might possess a stop-watch and could circumvent the Deity by stopping it at any point before the specified time.

Nobody twigged that it was to be not just five minutes but five minutes by the challenger's watch, and Shaw would naturally trust Providence to play the game.

This story always looked like a Shavianism to me, to be put in the same category as the one in which Shaw, sergeant and an inspector of police, subsequently joined by a postman and a milkman whirled, slipped and tumbled around Fitzroy Square attempting to master a weirdly intricate dance that Shaw had seen performed at a ballet that February night.

Uniforms and coats were hung on the railings and their antics only stopped when the milkman broke his leg about four o'clock in the morning.

Even now that Shaw has repeated the "Watch Story" in *The Freethinker* I am not satisfied that it is jannock. You never can tell with a jester.

If it is not a tall story, might it not be one of those manifestations of a wayward memory, such as were cited by W. Kent?

The notion of questioning the veracity of Shaw's account never seems to have arisen.

If he really did frighten a number of Atheists and others into a skedadd'e, there should be many to vouch for it. To my knowledge no one has ever claimed that distinction.

Whichever it is, it's a jolly good story and would be no worse for the little embellishment, that after his defiant challenge to the Omnipotent, Shaw put his watch on the table and then accompanying himself on the ukelele, rolled out in a rich baritone the strains of "Five minutes more, only five minutes more," whilst his mutton-headed audience rushed the exit in a devil-take-the-hindmost huddle.

HENRY IRVING.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE MYTHICAL CHRIST. By Gerald Massey. What Christianity owes to Ancient Egypt. Price 9d.; postage 1d.