

THE FREETHINKER

Founded 1881

Vol. LXX.—No. 29

[REGISTERED AT THE GENERAL
POST OFFICE AS A NEWSPAPER]

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Price Threepence

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Christianity and Modern Astronomy

"THE Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork." These grandiloquent words of the Hebrew psalmist have formed the text for many a Christian sermon and recur frequently in the older textbooks of Christian apologetics. The splendour of the Heavens on a clear night, the glories of the dawn and the departure of the day, the magnificent spectacle of the setting sun, the tranquil glory of the rising moon; how often have these and similar glories of nature been invoked by eloquent preachers who, as the phrase then went, argued "from nature to nature's God"!

However, poetry, not science, was the strong suit of the ancient religious literature of the Hebrews, still "religiously" preserved in our Old Testament. The picture given by modern astronomy of the Universe whilst in many ways even more grandiose and spectacular than was the petty Universe of the ancients, is far less comforting to human egoism, and by no means lends itself to the argument from "design" so dear to the astronomical theologians of an elder age and of a more parochial science. For, whatever else it might be, it is, at least, certain that the great Universe which we inhabit is quite unconscious of the honour we confer upon it by so doing; upon the cosmic scales, as present-day astronomers disclose them, mankind, if a little larger than the dust, is not, essentially, more important—except, of course, in his own estimation! However, interested parties are not usually their own best judges or supply the most disinterested evidence with regard to their own affairs.

In a recent series of broadcasts upon the Third Programme of the B.B.C., a Cambridge astronomer, Mr. Fred Hoyle, gave a lucid summary of the present state of astronomical knowledge. These five broadcast talks, which made a considerable sensation when first delivered, have now been published in book-form under the title of *The Nature of the Universe*. Collectively, they undoubtedly constitute a valuable and intelligible summary of the present state of astronomical knowledge in the light of recent—in some cases, very recent—discoveries. The only criticism which a layman in this obtruse science may venture, is that the author, a young man of 34, speaks at times with, perhaps, excessive self-confidence, and does not altogether avoid a certain tendency to confuse his own personal opinions with the objective facts of astro-physics that he so learnedly described in his talks on the B.B.C.

The considerable controversy excited by these broadcast talks was actually due rather to the unorthodox philosophical conclusions of the learned broadcaster than to his scientific exposition, properly so-called. To find a broadcaster and a University don at that, who will publicly hold Christianity up to criticism and even derision upon that ultra-respectable pillar of "Christian civilisation," the B.B.C., is so rare an event, a blue moon in an evening sky, no wonder the welkin—

and *The Listener*—rang with angry denunciations by indignant clergymen, and by theologians of all denominations.

Here, however, we propose to ignore the anti-Christian criticisms with which Mr. Hoyle concluded, as though interesting from their place of origin, they are not, to tell the truth, particularly original—coming, say, from the pen of Mr. Chapman Cohen, they would actually appear as the mere common places of critical thought. Also, they have already been commented upon elsewhere in this journal. Here, we propose to limit ourselves to a few brief remarks upon the traditional concepts of Christian theology in the light of the actual Universe disclosed in and by these lectures.

In the Universe of (what is here described as) "the new astronomy," space and time are depicted upon a scale which makes "the six days" of Creation depicted in Genesis appear completely ludicrous. Furthermore, in a Universe of endless "galaxies," where space is calculated in millions of "light years" and Time in thousands of millions of years, the Biblical cosmogony appears as absolutely fantastic. Instead, for example, of our own planet having been made by the "Creator" about 6,000 years ago, as in the famous computation of Archbishop Usher, the approximate age of the earth, according to our author, is about 2,500,000,000 years—we say "approximately," since what do a few noughts matter when such colossal figures are involved? The stars, including our star, the Sun, are given up to 4,000,000,000 years and—staggering figure even to contemplate—our Sun has about 46,000,000,000 years still to go before it reaches its final stage prior to decomposition into the elemental floating gas from which, like all other celestial bodies, it eventually arose. However, by that time, our Universe—and, therefore, presumably "we" too—will no longer exist. For Mr. Hoyle paints a scientific picture of the Earth's—mankind's—ultimate future which no medieval fantasy ever surpassed in sheer horror, not even the Inferno drawn with such consummate poetic sadism by the great Catholic poet of "The Age of Faith." In 10,000,000,000 years—or thereabouts—our Earth will become absolutely uninhabitable, the seas will boil, and life will die out in the solar system, on account of the vastly increased heat of the Sun. At a still later stage, the Sun will expand and absorb its nearer planets, including our Earth. Not much providential "design" about that, at least from the standpoint of human preservation.

Our Earth, which, astronomy teaches, originally emerged from the fiery depths of a star, will end where it began. Life is merely a fire insurance—and a very brief one at that! (According to Mr. Hoyle, it was another star than our sun from which we ultimately derive.)

In such a Cosmos, there is not much ground for ultimate optimism for, even if we can avoid atomic suicide now, the human race, along with life in general, is "for it" ultimately, sooner or later. Whilst, as for an all-wise Creator, he is conspicuous by his absence in the

Universe of expanding stars and frozen planets here revealed.

Whilst as for human hopes and fears, the Cosmos takes no account of them at all, as another Cambridge philosopher, Mr. Bertrand Russell, long ago, eloquently reminded us!

"All the labour of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system." (cf. B. Russell, *A Freeman's Worship*.)

However, as Mr Hoyle himself admits: upon one point, at least, medieval theology correctly anticipated the ultimate state of human life, as depicted by modern astronomy. Hell fire is not so very different from the ultimate fiery doom of mankind. However, there are two differences, both in favour of modern science as against medieval theology; mankind has still, according to astronomy, got 10,000,000,000 years in which to live and experiment, and one can do quite a lot in that time; and when the time comes for life to be cremated, we shan't know anything about it, which was not the case in Hell!

F. A. RIDLEY.

A MEPHISTOPHELIAN SAGE OF THE RENAISSANCE

THE character and teachings of Nicolo Machiavelli have occasioned interminable controversy and exceedingly diverse judgments. That he was highly intellectual and, in truth, as ethical as most men of his time seems certain, despite the dark pictures of his personality, painted by his detractors.

He was born in Florence in 1469 when Lorenzo, the Magnificent, assumed the rulership of that supreme centre of the culture, art and refinement of the Renaissance. This was also the year when the nuptials of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile were celebrated, thus uniting the Spanish realms, and their reign likewise witnessed the voyages of Columbus, the conquest of Granada with the expulsion of the Moors, and the beginning of a century's Iberian dominion in Europe. Of the spectacular changes of the time, Machiavelli was an observant witness who was deeply impressed by the rapid emergence of contemporary States from the petty principalities, bishoprics and dukedoms of preceding generations.

Machiavelli's parent was a Tuscan lawyer, but the son lacked advancement until, with the expulsion of Lorenzo's successor, Piero, Florence became a republic. Then, Machiavelli obtained a civic appointment. To him the golden age of antiquity was that of Pagan Rome and, as Professor Hearnshaw avers: "He looked with enthusiasm to the revival in Florence of the great days of antique Rome, and he held the fervent hope that in the Florence of his day, as through the Rome of two thousand years earlier, Italy would attain unity and peace."

Machiavelli was for a time an adherent of Savonarola, but he deserted the reforming friar when endangered. The friar's failure he traced to his inability to enforce his doctrines and decided that power directed by craft is ever essential to political success. This conclusion was confirmed by all Machiavelli's experiences as secretary to the Second Chancery of Florence, an office he held for fifteen years until, in 1512, the Republic was overthrown by the restored Medician autocracy. As secretary he performed his duties with marked ability and visited many courts and camps on missions to preserve the freedom of his beloved city.

His tasks, however, were intensified when French, Spanish, Swiss and other intruders made Italy the

battlefield of the contending kings of the Continent. It was with the French that Machiavelli had most trouble and at a time when Florence was at strife with Pisa, a truculent City community assisted by Spain, and the Empire. Unfortunately, Florence was dependent on French support and Louis XII's troops were her sole safeguard against the devilish devices of Cesare Borgia and the exiled Piero de' Medici. Moreover, the French King and his subordinates treated Florence with open contempt. Her citizens were plundered with impunity and most shamefully insulted by their Gallic "friends." Machiavelli's humiliating experiences at this period strengthened his conviction that, to safeguard Italy from insult and injury, she must be able to maintain her independence without foreign or mercenary aid. As Dr. Hearnshaw reminds us: "Four times was Machiavelli sent to Louis XII to plead for better treatment, and the humiliations he was compelled impotently to suffer are like a red hot iron into his soul. How was it, he asked, that the French were so much stronger than the Italians that they could do with them what they liked? . . . How was it that the representative of an Italian State such as Florence—a state eminent throughout Christendom in commerce, science, art and learning—could be treated with a contempt reserved in other lands for serfs and dogs? The answer to Machiavelli was plain: the Italians lacked political unity, and the small States into which they were divided lacked, whether singly or in combination, military power."

Disunited Italy was certain to suffer in these circumstances. The English monarchy had become stronger than ever before under the Tudors, while the incorporation of Burgundy and Brittany within the French kingship, and the unification of Navarre, Castile, Aragon and Catalonia, with the Moorish remnant of Granada under the dominion of Ferdinand and Isabella had consolidated Spain.

But in Italy chaos reigned supreme. Despite the fact that the peninsula was the rabbit warren of the Romanist priesthood, vice and corruption were everywhere in evidence in spiritual and temporal spheres alike. Racially and culturally the Italians were widely divergent for the masses were woefully ignorant and superstitious while the privileged minority were sceptical and cultured. Unification appeared impossible, yet consolidation was indispensable if Italy were ever to cease to remain the prey of her aggressive and greedy neighbours.

In the light of the truth that Italy was divided into five antagonistic States, her unification seemed chimerical to contemporary observers. In the north Milan and Venice disputed predominance in the Lombard plains and the custody of the Alpine passages, while in the south, degenerate Aragonese rulers of Naples fought for supremacy against a militant Papacy. Tuscany, dominated by Florence, occupied a central position. As for the Papal possessions, all trustworthy authorities, from Symonds downwards, testify as to the utter depravity that prevailed. As Hearnshaw justly concludes: "Treasons, betrayals, poisonings, assassinations, perjuries, hypocrisies, sacrileges, infidelities were employed without scruple or remorse. The Papacy, in particular, under such Popes as Sixtus IV, Alexander VI and Julius II, forgetting its sacred nature and ignoring its international responsibilities, made itself notorious for its violence, selfishness, treachery and mendacity." Machiavelli came to regard it as the root cause of Italy's disunion and debasement." (*Renaissance and Reformation Thinkers*, Harrap.)

Machiavelli was deeply depressed by the effeminacy of the Italian people. Although extremely passionate

and revengeful, their intense devotion to commerce and finance, their unrestrained sensuality and pre-eminence in art and letters made them dependent on hired mercenaries for protection against the trained troops of invaders when they crossed the mountains or came by sea to slaughter, pillage and subjugate. For armies and navies had been developed by their foreign foes, while Italy's unprotected shores and unguarded passes enabled her enemies to sack her opulent cities and spoil her fruitful plains.

Therefore, concluded Machiavelli, there remained no remedy for these disasters save the creation of a nation in arms. In his *Art of War*, he said: "All able bodied men between the ages of seventeen and forty should be drilled so as to be always ready to defend their country." Even in his most celebrated and denounced work, *The Prince*, almost one-eighth of the entire book is devoted to this theme. Moreover, Machiavelli spent six years of his official life in an attempt to create a national militia. But quaintly enough, he deprecated and forbade the use of firearms with which Italy's enemies were well equipped. Thus, when the French protectors of Florence were expelled by Pope Julius and his foreign mercenaries and gunpower was employed against Machiavelli's militia, they became panic-stricken and fled. The banished Medici then returned to Florence and Machiavelli was arrested, imprisoned, tortured and sent into exile. No wonder he recommended princes to adopt devious contrivances to preserve their power, and asserted that craft and guile were indispensable in the art of government.

Much as Machiavelli has been reviled, his political precepts were adopted by Richelieu, Frederick the Great, Bismarck, Hitler, Mussolini, and others who must be nameless. Yet, the much maligned *Prince* was never intended by Machiavelli for publication, and it was subsequent to its author's death that, owing to the inadvertence of an injudicious Pope, Clement VI, that a guide, intended for princes' eyes alone, was in 1532 made known to the reading world.

T. F. PALMER.

A PILGRIMAGE TO FATIMA

THIS pilgrimage was arranged for the British Colony in Lisbon, and a representative of the British Embassy attended. Also in attendance was our Portuguese correspondent.

Saturday, June 10, after assembling outside the Irish Dominican Church, Lisbon, we entered the waiting buses for Fatima, a journey of about four hours. The two priests in our bus gave out the rosary and led the hymns. As we sang the verse of "Our Lady of Fatima, Hope of the World," I thought of you all. It ran:—

"We pray for all sinners,
And souls that now stray,
From Jesus and Mary
In heresy's way."

After the solemn High Mass at midnight, the procession of pilgrims, each holding his big, wax candle, filed out from the church. The whole space was flooded by the white, yellow, red, green beams from the searchlights worked from the tower of the basilica. The enormous cross over the church shone in the glory of its many pearls and diamonds, as did the beautiful, solid gold statue of Christ, with his arms outstretched as if ready to embrace the whole world. The undulating serpent wound its way round the ground in the direction of the shrine erected on the spot where Mary appeared

to the little shepherd children. It was a colourful mass consisting of Knights of Christ in red flowing cloaks, with their arms extended in the form of a cross, members of the Confraternity of the Rosary bearing on their shoulders the bier with the statue of Our Lady of Fatima, the Children of Mary in their blue and white star-spangled robes, three bishops, amongst whom was the English Bishop of Shrewsbury, in all the pomp of their robes of office; embroidered caps covered by mitres, and cloaks of purple silk, walking under the canopies held up by choir boys in soutane and surplice, then hundreds of pilgrims and last of all the sick, the worst cases on stretchers and the others on foot. Amongst the sick, I recognised the horrible looking face of a woman leper, all yellow, swollen and puffed, and if it were not for the two watery, shining eyes, the face could be mistaken for a fetid tumour, ulcerated in various points; there was also a young girl in the last stages of consumption, spouting up red blood which ran down her chest and which the sister at her side wiped off with one hand as she offered her a glass of miraculous water with the other. All the time, young priests ran along the sides of the procession calling out through amplifiers: "Lord make that I see! Lord make that I here! Lord make that I walk! Lord have pity on me! Lord if you will you can cure me," etc. The procession reached the precincts of the shrine where the Bishop of Leiria spoke to us of Penance, of Suffering, of Poverty, as the gentle wind blew his robes of purple silk, of precious lace, and played with his gold embroidered mitre and bellied out the sides of the heavy satin canopy under which he stood. We then all prayed for Russia. I was a little surprised at the bishop asking us to do this as all the way in the bus I heard repeated cries of: "We must have World War III: we must crush Russia!" Rosaries, medals, bottles of Fatima water, etc., were held up to be blessed: after which all rushed to touch the statue of Our Lady with them, and to kiss the feet of the statue. I saw a child kiss the statue after the leper: at this I said, with horror in my voice, to the priest at my side: "Oh, Father, how dangerous!" He replied reprovingly: "Woman, where is your faith? Our Lady has never let any one catch an illness here!"

After the lunch next day, the workers who are levelling down the great hills round the shrine to make all into a smooth plain, collected under the balcony of the enormous pension run by the Church to receive the lumps of bread and the pennies thrown down to them by the children of the English pilgrims. When I spoke to my friend the priest of the pain I felt at the sight, he replied: "These working class have no shame!"

"Isn't it rather the people who pay the workers 18 escudos per day (4s. 6d.) who have no shame?" But we had no time to finish the argument, as we were called off to see the wonderful monstrosity, presented to Our Lady of Fatima by the Irish pilgrims and which had cost £50,000. On the way back we sang "He's a Jolly Good Fellow" for the Bishop of Shrewsbury, who beamed with satisfaction. Our two priests led us in songs like "Pack Up Your Troubles," and said, "Who says religion can't be jolly?" In fact, I noticed a tendency towards religion through joy.

N. F.

LIFT UP YOUR HEADS, An Anthology for Freethinkers.

By William Kent. Price, cloth 5s., paper 3s. 6d.; postage 3d

MATERIALISM RESTATED. Fourth edition. By Chapman Cohen. Price 4s. 6d.; postage 3d.

ACID DROPS

The Leader of the Oxford Group, Dr. Buchman, has been awarded the Legion of Honour, and the Paris newspaper, *France Soir*, is pestering the French Foreign Office with the question, did M. Schuman, French Foreign Minister, know of Buchman's pre-war remark, "Thank God for Hitler," at the time he awarded the honour? reports the *Evening Standard*. Needless to say, if M. Schuman did not know, then he is the only one. Students of international affairs will be forgiven if they give credence to the rumours that Dr. Buchman was one of the guiding hands behind the "Schuman Plan," or that the Legion of Honour is of such little merit that almost anyone can be the recipient.

In the good old days, Atheism was generally honoured by pious Christians with the adjective "blatant"; nowadays, the term is changed to "Communistic Atheism," and as Communism is very unpopular in Christian circles, every effort in the attack on Atheism—which is, after all, the real enemy—is made to tar Freethought with Communism, though Freethought must always be the most bitter enemy of Totalitarianism. It is, therefore, quite piquant to read how the Archbishop of Canterbury, while deploring the Red Dean's allegiance to "Communism," is now insisting that this Totalitarian system, as preached by the Dean of Canterbury, is thoroughly Christian—as fervently religious as that proclaimed by the Archbishop himself. Perhaps, Dr. Fisher is discovering that the Red Dean is making more converts than he is himself.

Although every effort was made to obtain a good attendance at the first rally of Young Christian Teachers (Roman Catholic), only 20 turned up instead of an expected 300. This did not prevent the speakers from letting off steam against the present Education Act. One of them, a Miss McGuire, angrily asked: "Are the 3,500,000 children in county schools to be denied the knowledge of God?"—as if Miss McGuire knew any more about God than the average Australian Aborigine. As a matter of fact, the Act insists that school lessons should begin with religion, but facts generally mean nothing to angry Catholics. What they want in education is complete submission to the Pope, with non-Catholics paying for the tune without calling the piper. And it won't come off.

In truth, Catholics hate paying for teaching their tenets to their own children. As an example, Canon Gilleran, of Leicester, protested that Catholics there will have to pay "for the next 30 years 5d. a minute" to give their children a Catholic education. So what? They ought to be only too glad to do so—any monetary sacrifice is better than letting God Almighty down. We are sure that if it were possible to *compel* non-Catholics to pay the sum required, Canon Gilleran would whoop for joy. Money received anyhow and from anybody—except Catholic money—is what he wants.

Should priests who have "mistaken" their vocation be sacked (the impolite way of telling them to resign) or not, was discussed at the Church Assembly and sharply criticised. It was obvious to some of the clergy that such sackings would only make it more difficult to keep up the supply of priests, difficult to get anyway in these materialistic days, and it would do the Church no end of harm. In addition, an ex-clergyman would find it very hard getting another job—as indeed many, who were still in the Church, but who no longer were believers, know to their cost. What with fewer calls to the Lord's service

and obvious misfits, the Church is finding things, like the way of transgressors, very, very hard.

The Rev. R. C. Firebrace had the shock of his life the other day. In a South London church where "the Catholic tradition" is observed, he saw, among tracts designed to give people the true faith, "four or five" emanating from the voluminous literature of Jehovah's Witnesses. This must be as horrific an experience as if he saw some tracts by a blatant Atheist hidden under Christian glory. Yet we always understood the Witnesses stood for "True" Christianity, the Christianity of "our Lord" Himself, and violently opposed the Churchianity of true Catholics, Anglican or Roman. Mr. Firebrace will have to brace himself up still more for he is bound one day to get far severer shocks—yea, even from Freethought.

According to Mr. Geoffrey Carr, of the *Sunday Pictorial*, the evidence for Evolution is so overwhelming that not only has the Church of England accepted it but even Roman Catholics admit that the theory can apply to man's body; God, however, creates each individual soul. Mr. Carr must mix with a different circle of R.C.s. than do others. It is left to the Association of Education Authorities—of all Associations—to protest against the B.B.C.'s recent broadcast on Evolution in the person of the former Mayor of Southend, who said that religion cannot be taught in school if broadcasts of a nature contrary to the Bible are allowed.

The attempts to square the Creation story with the Evolution theory are of such vintage that Freethinkers are really no longer amused at the ingenuity displayed. The prominent churchmen who assert that the Biblical seven days of Creation really mean seven great periods of time are not really clever, and only increase their own difficulties. So, too, do those who will accept Evolution when applied to man, but conveniently forget that their God is also subject to the same theory.

The House of Lords, whilst discussing the "reorganisation of society to secure its survival," added little that was useful, much that was irrelevant, and more that was ridiculous. Lord Blackford wants a revival of church-going, and Lord Mountevans thinks this could be achieved if religion were made more attractive with some humour—snappier prayers, he asserts, would also help. The term "snappier" is unfortunate, its connotation is Hollywoodian. It would be interesting to hear the Archbishop of Canterbury leading prayers in a fluent Yankee idiom. Even Lord Pakenham could suggest little else but prayers!

During the debate in the House of Lords the Archbishop of York showed much concern about slums and overcrowding. He protested that the present policy of the Government was not reducing the slum population. That the problem is acute, no one will deny, but that a representative of an organisation controlling many areas of slums should start lecturing others, tempts one to quote from his own Book of Books: "Before thou seeest the mote in thy neighbour's eye . . ."

The sex snoopers of the Vatican have been busy. Policemen in Rome put fig leaves on three statues in the Piazza Maotei. The reason given is that the statues would offend the pilgrims visiting Rome for Holy Year. Fortunately, some of the Italians still retain their sense of humour, for we read that practical jokers removed the original leaves.

"THE FREETHINKER"

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

Mrs. K. GRIGSON.—So pleased you like and read *The Freethinker*. But you still have a long way to go in *unbelief*.

When the services of the National Secular Society in connection with Secular Burial Services are required, all communications should be addressed to the Secretary, John Seibert, 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.

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

We have received the following, addressed to all admirers of the works of George Bernard Shaw. It explains itself:—

All readers, admirers, correspondents, acquaintances, friends, translators, interpreters, enemies, cartoonists, satirists, caricaturists, sculptors, painters, photographers, of the wayward Irishman are invited to co-operate with me in the vast project of the Centennial Biography of Bernard Shaw. This work, designed for publication in 1956, Mr. Shaw's centennial year, will probably run to several volumes; and like my earlier works on Shaw is authorised by the subject. Correspondence with owners of manuscripts, letters, postcards, likenesses, caricatures, cartoons, programmes, playbills, portraits of players in Shaw roles, photographs of scenes from his plays, and all other types of Shaviania, is earnestly invited. Newspapers in all countries please copy.

Please send all matter to Archibald Henderson, 721, East Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, U.S.A.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. gratefully acknowledges the help of Mr. J. Clayton's surprise visit and lectures for the Branch during his holiday in the area. Thanks to his tact and the rally of some local saints, a series of very good meetings were held, and the rowdy Christian element became less religious and more tolerant citizens in consequence. The Branch hopes that all who can, will support the meetings; details will be found in our Lecture Notices column.

The holiday season is now in full swing and an occasional leaflet can often be deposited in places where they may come into appreciative hands. The leaflets can be obtained by writing to the General Secretary, N.S.S., 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the "colour bar" problem may be, it is a fact that our glorious missionaries are mostly to blame. They bring the "Gospel of Christ" to natives whose ancestors have lived for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years in comparative happiness, teach that all men are equal in the sight of God, as well as the incomprehensible twaddle of Christianity, give them where possible an "education" utterly unsuitable for their environment, make them work as seamen or navvies among white people, and then turn round full of surprise that these half-educated, half-civilised people are not welcomed as the equal of their white "brothers."

This little England of ours is already the most densely populated civilised country in the world, and if it were not for missionary enterprise few coloured folk would want to settle here. Their proper place is in such vast, uncultivated continents as Africa, Central America, or Australia, and among their own kind there need be no colour problem. The problems of inter-marriage are far more complex than some people think. In any case, missionary interference with age-old customs can mean nothing but injustice and unhappiness for coloured people, who are now beginning to find out that the wonders of Christianity are nothing but painful delusions.

BUTTERFLY MIRACLES

ONE of the books which must have given great pleasure to thousands of readers, and indeed was perhaps their first introduction to natural history, was Charles Knight's *Animated Nature*, published over 100 years ago in two large volumes, with about 3,900 illustrations. It has, of course, been completely superseded, but I doubt whether any book published since for "the masses" could ever give its readers more entertaining instruction both with the reading matter and the magnificently engraved illustrations.

Knight was a great pioneer (with William and Robert Chambers) in providing genuine literary and artistic culture for the people during the mid-Victorian era and he played a great part in a "renaissance" against illiteracy and ignorance—a part not always appreciated these days. I recalled his work when looking through Captain Bernard Ackworth's *Butterfly Miracles and Mysteries* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1947; 12s. 6d. net) with its many illustrations of all kinds of butterflies in line and colour, for those given in *Animated Nature* were beautifully reproduced as well.

Readers will perhaps recall Captain Ackworth's fascinating book on the cuckoo and its mysteries, and in this work he writes just as fascinatingly on those extraordinary little insects which are perhaps the most beautiful of all—miracles, he calls them—certainly, there can be few living things in nature which can equal them for sheer beauty of design and colour. We humans can only marvel at this, Nature's handiwork at its best in many ways, and we must marvel all the more when, as Captain Ackworth points out, "we learn something of the inner history of these insects which the patient and brilliant studies of many specialists in this branch of natural history, armed with lenses and infinite patience, have made available to mankind."

His book, is not so much a scientific treatise on the general history of butterflies, as one "upon the mysteries and miracles of their existence." Captain Ackworth, who is, I believe, a very devout Christian and an anti-Evolutionist, uses the word "miracle" here without exactly defining it. When we who are Atheists, Materialists, and Evolutionists, use the word, it is in the *theological* sense—something performed by somebody outside all the known laws of nature to further a supernatural religion. I should call the Virgin Birth a miracle, or Jesus flying above the streets of Jerusalem in the arms of a Devil to be put upon the pinnacle of the Temple, or feeding a multitude of people with a few fishes and loaves, or turning water into wine. But I can use the word "miracle" for lots of other things, such as calling the engraving of the Lord's Prayer on a six-pence a "miracle" of skill, or a painting by Titian, a "miracle" of colour. It is useless in our present state of knowledge to ask us to explain "miracles" of nature,

whether the galaxy of stars called the Milky Way, the why and wherefore of our Expanding Universe, the "waves" working a television set, or a hundred thousand things which the inquiring mind of man has been unable to solve.

When Captain Ackworth says, therefore, that one of the objects of his book is to show that "miracles, in the strict sense of that rather loosely used term, are still being manifested daily before our eyes," I can heartily agree with him; only they are not theological miracles. I might quite well be converted by Jesus if he could show me Hell existing for ever packed with devils and sinners, into which I should be pitched with religious gusto by the Son of God if I did not forthwith believe in Him. But I am not at all disposed to believe in Hell because a book which its admirers call "God's Precious Word," merely talks about this Hell. If it exists it would be a miracle; happily it does not.

On the other hand, to detail for me the wonder of the birth of a butterfly makes fascinating reading, but it is no more a miracle in the proper, theological sense of the word, than the birth of a baby; and the marvel of a newborn baby thrills me far more than that of a butterfly.

For the enthusiastic entomologist everything connected with the production of the finished butterfly has always been of supreme interest, and Captain Ackworth's chapters on butterflies' eggs, on caterpillars, and on the chrysalis, his minute description of what happens to them before turning into a Painted Lady, a Purple Emperor, or a White Admiral, are absorbingly interesting. I must confess that I knew little of the "mechanics" of the successive changes which "cunning" Nature has imposed before we get the beautiful flying insect fluttering in the summer sun in all its beauty of colour and design.

Of course, such a believer as is Captain Ackworth, would substitute for my term "cunning" Nature (which is not meant in any way to imply anthropomorphism or Animism) "Creative Wisdom" or "a Great Master"; and I hope he will not mind my pointing out that whatever term is used we are still faced with the great mystery—the "how"? To say it was all conceived by an "Almighty Mind" who designed every detail, does not solve any of the puzzles which face entomologists as they contemplate, for example, the metamorphosis which takes place as the caterpillar is transformed "into a seemingly dead confined corpse"—the chrysalis. The term "Creative Wisdom" explains nothing except that the man who uses it, faced with Nature's mysteries, believes in a God, a Designer of everything. But to say that "God did it," explains nothing whatever; it only adds to the mystery of Nature. In other words, Captain Ackworth, who believes in God, and I who do not, are both completely ignorant of the why and the wherefore of Nature's "miracles."

All this, however, does not detract from his very fine description of butterflies and the "mechanics" of their existence. As he pointed out in his book on the cuckoo, birds are without "understanding," and he insists that this is the case with butterflies. They move about in a purely mechanical way. And he thus only the more confirms my "mechanistic" Materialism.

Has a butterfly "got senses such as our own?" asks Captain Ackworth. "Can it see, taste, smell, hear and feel, as man does? Are they automatic senses?" And he proceeds to discuss these problems in a fascinating exposition, giving astonishing details of the way butterflies, wasps, bees, and other insects, live their brief lives.

Is a butterfly a robot? Does it know what it is doing

when flying or does it direct its own flight? Are the various organs in the butterfly's body living examples of the kind of machinery we get in an aeroplane? In great detail, these and similar problems are cleverly discussed, and the reader can or need not agree with Captain Ackworth's conclusions; in either case, he will have learned a lot about the "mysteries" of Nature in general and of butterflies in particular.

At the close of an excellent chapter on "instinct" Captain Ackworth has a lot to say on "What is Man?"—and it would require far more space to answer him than he gives in laying down the law. Readers who are interested in entomology need not worry about his views on a subject which has been discussed every since Man began to think. But I am sure they will find what he has to say about butterflies, and the very fine description he gives (with illustrations) of many of the most famous ones, fully worth studying. We live in a marvellous world and how little we know of it!

H. CUTNER

CANONISATION OF A NEW SAINT

THE Holy Father recently ordered the canonisation of Blessed Maria Goretti should be held in St. Peter's Square in a ceremony unique in the twentieth century. We are told that the body of this 12 year old peasant child was brought to Rome, from its shrine at Nettuno.

The ostensible reason for her speedy canonisation soon after her death is that several miracles have occurred, due, it is claimed to her direct intercession. Incidentally, this is the first time in history that a mother has been present at her child's canonisation.

It is a remarkable fact that before the Pope announced his decision to hold the ceremony out of doors, some 200,000 requests had been sent to the Vatican for the 50,000 places available in the Basilica. This event was of course one of the star acts in the performance of the comedy (or should it be tragedy?) of Holy Year, and it is clear that the Pope, like other leading actors, prefers to play to a full house.

The story of Maria Goretti, as told to us by one Vincent Kerns, M.S.F.S., is an essay in human credulity and is obviously intended for very simple minded people. Freethinkers reading the following account will have more evidence of holy humbug, and will no doubt note how Holy Church still trades in human folly and traffics in ignorance. It is indeed true to say that the strength of the priests lies in their monopoly of the dead.

The following is the story of Blessed Maria Goretti as told to Catholics by Catholic teachers and priests and is in no way touched up by the present writer:

"The poverty-stricken Goretti family was forced to share a farmhouse in the marshy district near the famous Anzio beach-head, with a widower and his two sons.

One of the sons, Alessandro Serenelli, tried to induce little Maria to sin with him. On three separate occasions he tempted her, threatening violence, and even death.

Three times the child's answer rang out, 'No! No! Alessandro. It would be a terrible sin and you will go to hell. God forbids it.'

But the lust in Alessandro's heart boiled over. Fourteen times he drove his stiletto into Maria's beautiful young body. Then he ran off and locked himself in his room.

Maria's brother, Angelo Goretti, who is travelling recently in New York for the canonisation, told a priest recently 'I can see her now as they carried her downstairs from the ambulance, eyes closed and face deadly pale.'

'Because no anaesthetics could be given to her she suffered agonies as her wounds were treated at the'

hospital. They could do very little for her, her case was hopeless.'

Alessandro, who served a 30 years' sentence for his crime, was forgiven by his innocent victim just before she died.

On Christmas Eve, 1947, he went to visit the girl's mother and ask her forgiveness. It was readily given, and together, on Christmas morning, the two of them knelt side by side to receive their Christmas Communion.

'I was determined to kill her,' the humble penitent said, 'if she would not consent to sin with me. I knew I was breaking the law of God. I killed her because she refused. Never by a word or smile had she encouraged me. It was all my fault. Maria did well.' So well in fact, that the Church now wants us to call her St. Maria Goretti, and ask her to pray for us and our cruel, degraded world."

This, then, is the story of Maria Goretti, whose "intercession" has given us several miracles—for which, alas, the evidence is nil.

It is quite clear that such a story would seriously offend the intelligence of any people not steeped in the superstition of the Church. Yet we are in danger of having thrust upon us a system of education which will condition future generations of children to believe such stories of intercession. Bishop Beck, Co-Adjutor Bishop of Brentwood, one of the Roman Catholic propagandists, for a full Roman Catholic system of education said at Maynooth recently: "Had all the Irish in England held their Faith, England would now be blessed with ten million Catholics to-day instead of the three and a-half million now recorded," and advocated the formation of an organisation to reclaim the majority of those Irish in England.

The Rev. C. Lucey, M.A., D.D., Ph.D., at the same meeting said: "We should remember that the scientific claims of experts on education were often no more than pretentious opinions, particularly those writing in the popular press." He also said: "It is essential that religious instructions be continued and a course in social ethics provided."

Cardinal Griffin, speaking to more than 5,000 women of the Catholic Women's League in the Albert Hall, said: "If you are working outside the home, and have the opportunity of being a member of a trade union, then join that union and do your best to attend the meetings and make your influence felt. If you are keen on public speaking why not join a political party and take your position there, becoming city councillors as so many have done already."

It is not to be supposed from the foregoing story that the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church are themselves simple-minded fools actually believing such rubbish. On the contrary, they are without doubt very able, competent people, who know only too well the value of superstition to those who seek and wish to retain power.

It is fortunate for the civilised world, that in their strength lies their greatest weakness. They are of course obliged, at least to some extent, to profess some measure of belief in the doctrines which the Church teaches and preaches, and if (which is not at all uncommon) a Pope is elected who deludes himself that he really has direct communication with the Trinity of Gods, makes pronouncements on matters of faith and morals which are palpably absurd to all thinking men and women the leaders of Mother Church are forced into a rather peculiar position. It is at this moment that Freethinkers can make the fullest use of the great weapon of ridicule.

Let Freethinkers read again the advice of Cardinal Griffin (quoted in this article) and let Freethinkers ask Catholic aspirants to such civil or political office, such a question as, "Do you really believe that your new saint,

Maria Goretti, will intercede for you if you ask her?"

The weapon of ridicule is without question one of the finest edged weapons that able Freethinkers can use, and members of trade unions and political parties should note the fact, and by making the fullest use of it enable rationalism to defeat the reactionary forces of organised superstition so well developed in the Roman Catholic Church.

E. W. SHAW.

CORRESPONDENCE

A QUERY

SIR,—The following is culled from "The Rationalist," February, 1948:—

"HYMN OF DESPAIR"

Christians in many parts of the world sang this hymn in November:—

'Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide,' etc.

A century ago Henry Francis Lyte wrote those words at Nice, where he was lonely and ill. His wife had died, and there had been dissension in his church because of his unorthodox views. It was a cry of despair, a feeling for a hand that is never present when wanted. A few days later he died.

Christians, pathetically perhaps, still sing the hymn; but do they ever inquire whether Lyte would have written it if his parishioners had not treated him so inconsiderately? Or whether he would have written it if the Lord had given him better health?"

I would like to know what was Lyte's "unorthodox views" which caused "dissension" in his church?—Yours, etc.,
E. S.

LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

OUTDOOR

- Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. J. CLAYTON.
- Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Broadway Car Park).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. H. DAY.
- Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: Mr. F. A. RIDLEY.
- Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Platt Fields).—Sunday, 3 p.m.: Messrs. C. McCALL, L. SMITH, G. WOODCOCK and R. BILLINGS. (St. Mary's Gate, Blitzed Site).—Sunday, 7-45 p.m.: Messrs. C. McCALL, L. SMITH, G. WOODCOCK and R. BILLINGS. (Alexandra Park Gates).—Wednesday, 8 p.m.: Messrs. C. McCALL, L. SMITH, G. WOODCOCK and R. BILLINGS. (St. Mary's Gate, Blitzed Site).—Lunch Hour Lectures every weekday, 1 p.m.: Messrs. C. McCALL, L. SMITH, G. WOODCOCK and R. BILLINGS.
- North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, 12 noon: Messrs. A. CALVERLEY and L. EBURY. (Highbury Corner).—7 p.m.: Mr. L. EBURY.
- Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: Messrs. T. MOSLEY and A. ELSMERE. (Old Market Square).—Saturday, July 15, 6-30 p.m.: Messrs. A. ELSMERE and T. MOSLEY.
- Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Barker's Pool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. A. SAMMS.
- South London and Lewisham Branch N.S.S. (Brockwell Park, Herne Hill).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. J. BARKER.
- West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park, Marble Arch).—Sunday, 4 p.m.: Mr. C. E. WOOD.

INDOOR

- South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "The Struggle in Malaya," Professor G. W. KEETON, M.A., LL.D.

A GRAMMAR OF FREETHOUGHT. By Chapman Cohen. An outline of the philosophy of Freethinking. Price 3s. 6d.; postage 4d.

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

THOUGHTS ON RELIGION

XIV

THE religious oratory practised in the pulpits and the instruction in religion given by its votaries are an intellectual poison for which the antidote is reason.

Atheism, as it is expressed by some of those who profess it, is a dogmatic belief. The attitude of some atheists toward a god whom they defy in one sentence and whose existence they deny in another sentence is neither reasonable nor philosophical.

It has been said that the truth will always out; and the truth about the article on "Atheism" by the Abbot Yvon in the French Encyclopedia of the eighteenth century is that it is false. For example, he wrote:—

"But on the other hand, even the most tolerant of men must admit that a magistrate has the right to suppress all who dare to profess Atheism and even put them to death if he cannot otherwise save society."

The abbot's tolerant spirit is further illustrated by the following remarks in the same paragraph as the above:—

"We should regard a man like this—an Atheist—as the enemy of all others, for he destroys all the foundations on which their preservation and their felicity is principally based. Such a man ought to be punished by everybody as a natural right. In consequence, a magistrate should have the right to punish not only those who deny the existence of a Deity but also those who make this existence useless in denying providence; or in preaching against his religion; or those who are guilty of formal blasphemy, of profanation, of perjury, or even of the lightest of oaths. Religion is so necessary for sustaining human society that it is impossible, as pagans fully recognised, as well as Christians, that society can subsist unless we admit an Invincible Power who governs human affairs."

This is an expression of the superstition of the barbarous ages of Europe. Belief in gods never did any society on earth any good. If belief in a god, like the belief of the Arabs in Allah, has unified some nations so that they could massacre their neighbours, we are permitted to doubt that such a result is good. The moral advantages of belief in a god are small; for, however useful the conception of an avenging god may be as a restraint on men, a morality based on the conception is based on fear which is one of the worst elements of their natures.

We should be glad that we live, not in the century of the Abbot Yvon but in this twentieth century of enlightenment, tolerance, and periodic wars over confused political fictions but generally over nothing at all.

The state of mind of men who feel that they are inferior, sinning creatures before an imaginary god is caused by doubt concerning the unknown, by instability and lack of unity of mind, by the opposition of nature to them, and by ignorance of the natural world and of their position in it. Instruction in the fundamentals of science and philosophy makes such a state of mind impossible in the minds of men of sound intelligence.

When you reflect that in the name of divinity and in the interest of religion men have committed atrocities, deceived each other, and pervert and damn the love of the truth, you may be a little disgusted with the human race.

Regarding the relation of religion to crime, it may be said that the low intelligence required for belief in religions in their popular forms is the same as the low intelligence of those who are unadaptable to social ways and to culture and who as a consequence easily become criminals if the motive and the occasion are presented.

In his funeral oration for Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conde, Bossuet related how the prince died piously. "The prince, without moving, allowed the Duke of Enghien, his son, to regain his spirits; then calling his daughter-in-law, whom he saw speechless and almost dead, with a tenderness which had nothing feeble about it, gave them his last orders, all of which breathed piety. He ended, blessing them with the faith and the vows God expects, and, like another Jacob, he blessed each of their children in turn, becoming feebler and feebler as he went on." Bossuet further related that the prince said of his religion: "I have never doubted," he said, "the mysteries of religion, whatever people have said." According to Bossuet's eulogy the prince was a remarkable man as history also shows; but he was a killer of men, that is, a great military leader. It would be difficult to explain how soldiers could be ethical.

Michel Le Tellier, chancellor and keeper of the seals under Louis XIV, was praised by Bossuet in his *Orations* as a great sage and as a man of piety. However, this sage contributed to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and therefore was the partial cause of the persecution of the Huguenots. The pious edict of revocation meant the abolition of the religious tolerance proclaimed by Henry IV. This kind of wisdom is scarcely to be admired; and there is nothing more admired in the faith of Bossuet who was never more eloquent than when he spoke of the extermination of those who thought differently than he. He quoted in the oration what the six hundred and thirty Fathers in the Council of Calcedonia said: "You have affirmed the Faith; you have exterminated the heretics; it is the crowning work of your reign; it is its principle character. Through you, heresy no longer exists: God alone could have performed this miracle. King of Heaven, preserve the King of the World; it is the vow of the Church—the vow of its bishops." This was addressed oratorically to Louis XIV; and it is a lowest depth of fanaticism. The first words might be interpreted to mean, not in translation, but in effect: "You have exterminated those who have thought differently from what we think about things of which we know nothing except what an old Jew book tells us and what the priests who do our thinking for us teach us." Bossuet was no doubt an orator and a writer whose works are perhaps worth reading; but, if he was a man of talent in the art of expression, he was also narrow and fanatical in his views, and his intolerance counterbalances his literary and philosophical qualities.

WILLIAM BITTENOUR (U.S.A.)

According to Michael Davie, of *The Observer*, the Korean Church is the most outstanding example of successful Christian evangelisation in Asia. "In so far as American Democracy has made any headway," states Mr. Davie, "it is almost entirely due to the connection between American missionaries and the Korean Church." History does not always repeat itself exactly, but we leave readers to complete the quotation: "first the Missionary, then the trader, then the gunboat. . . ."