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Price Threepence

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Freethought and Christian Values

I DO not think that any religion ever made such a sheer terror of death as did Christianity. From the outset death was a frightful and fearsome thing. It was the beginning of eternal bliss or eternal torment, and, as Christianity developed, the certainty of hell for the vast majority became greater. The Christian was always preparing, but never ready, for death; and the poorest character was the most certain of salvation. If a man believed he was bound to go to heaven, while the majority of his fellows would take the other road, well and good. In practice the bigger the brute the more certain might he be of salvation. If the Christian happened to be of a sensitive nature, and intellectually above his fellow-believers, he would more probably die in fear concerning his destiny. The wife-beater, the child-torturer, the murderer, were not likely to be so fearful. These might rely upon the pardon granted the thief on the cross as a precedent, and upon the gospel of Spurgeon that "great sinners shall have as much joy as the greatest saints." No more cheerful gospel entered the condemned cell. God was no respecter of persons. It was worshippers he wanted; quality did not matter. Without worship gods wither and die.

Wait till you Die!

So Christianity became in practice a method of teaching men how to die. The test was the way in which one faced death. The least important thing in a man's career became to the Christian of vital consequence. His job was to save his soul from damnation, even though he had a soul that was never worth a damn. "Wait until you die," was the message the Christian flung at the Freethinker, and he also provided death-bed scenes, where the Freethinker died shrieking for Jesus to save him. I was not surprised by the Christian acting and talking as he did. What surprised me was the attitude of so many Freethinkers towards it. They argued solemnly that these stories were lies, that the Freethinker could face death as fearlessly as any Christian, and even procured documentary evidence to prove that the unbeliever died "allege samee clistian."

Personally I never troubled seriously to contradict these ancient Christian fables. I knew that seriously to argue against them was to convince Christians of their value and probable truth. I knew they were lies and said so. I also explained that I didn't care to the value of a brass button whether they were true or not. My concern was how Freethinkers lived, not how they died. I was even willing to grant that every Freethinker that ever lived, did now live or would live in the future, would die howling for Jesus to save him, and then proposed getting on with the more important question, "Is Christianity true?" Every Freethinker knew quite well that there were quite a number of things that determined how a man died. Every Freethinker knew that the impor-

tant question for man was life, not death, and that death meant simply—nothing at all. He knew that all the talk about facing death bravely was a survival of superstition concerning what came after death. He knew also that he would have as little cause for troubling about what happens to him after he is dead, as there was to trouble about what had happened to him before he was born. He knew all this, and yet argued as though he was still in the Christian camp.

Challenging God

There are stories of men challenging the gods in Greek mythology, but that belongs to an advanced stage of theology, or, one ought to say, to a more developed social sense. Christianity was a reversion to a lower type of religious belief, and the farthest it got was disobedience to God, or neglect of God. To defy the gods in the name of man was too intellectually heroic for Christianity. But the Freethinker had to be depicted as something revolting to the slave mentality of the Christian, and it quite unintentionally presented the Atheist as one of sufficiently heroic stature to defy God. But even then it had to be presented in a stupid way, for it made the man who did not believe in God challenging him to prove his existence by killing his challenger.

When I came along, the figure around whom this story gathered was Charles Bradlaugh. At one of his meetings Bradlaugh had pulled out a watch and gave God, if he existed, three minutes to prove it by striking him (Bradlaugh) dead. The Christian told the tale in tones of undiluted horror, the Freethinker listened with an indignation that he could hardly suppress. I met this story much as I had met the death-bed one. I was not surprised at a Christian lying for the greater glory of God, I expected it. I didn't even bother to tell the Christian he was a liar. That information would probably have been unnecessary to his friends and useless to his enemies. I just said that three minutes seemed a long time to take over so simple a job, when a mere mortal armed with a "cheap and chippy chopper" could have done it in as many seconds. It looked like a reflection upon the efficiency of God.

The story that an Atheist should seriously propose testing the existence of God by challenging him to strike someone dead was one that could only enter the head of a Christian of a rather poor mental type. But the story was common enough, although it usually took the form of the wicked unbeliever doing something religiously shocking and being blinded or paralysed as a consequence.

The Grip of the Past

But it was not the Christian I was really concerned with so much as the Atheist. He took the charges too seriously. He was far too concerned in proving that the stories were not true. He rejected the death-bed conversion as a reflection upon the quality of Freethought, and repudiated the challenge to God as though that were something that to him was substantially different

from challenging a mythical giant of Anderson's fairy tales to mortal combat.

From the very first I treated these silly charges with the contempt they deserved, with the result that I very seldom had the same person bringing them to me more than once. One ought never to treat an opponent too lightly; on the other hand one ought never to take him too seriously. One ought to examine what one is asked to defend much as a lawyer will examine the terms of an indictment before pleading to it. I have followed this plan all my life, and now that some of these ancient Christian falsehoods have worn so thin that they are seldom used in controversy, I think that I may, after nearly sixty years of advocacy, take to myself a little credit for the change.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

SIMPLE SAM

THE few readers of *The Freethinker* who attended the Stratford Brains Trust were no doubt duly grateful for the comedy turn provided by the Rev. Wallace-Hadrill, Vicar of Holy Cross, Hornchurch. That he was not casually comic was implied by the review of his book, *Twenty Answers: A Pocket Armoury for the Layman*, by the late Adam Gowans-Whyte in *The Literary Guide*. It was, perhaps, the last written by him. He started by saying that the author "may be shocked to learn that one reader at least has found this little book a source of merriment, perhaps not wholly innocent." Indeed, it struck me that—divested of his ostentatious (perhaps College) scarf, dressed in clerical attire, and deprived of his pipe—which the grace of God could not enable him to abstain from even on a public platform—he would have made a good stage curate.

He, at any rate, was pleased with his platform performance for he has now burst into print with some inspired answers to one Sam, easier to please than Archibald (Robertson), Leonard (Ebury) and Robert (Rossetti), for his stooge seems satisfied to be met in the framework that there is as much history in the Bible as in any volume of Trevelyan. Presumably if anyone said of Biblical history what Henry Ford said of history in general, that it was all bunk, the reverend gentleman would have no words—if any thoughts—equal to the occasion. One wonders how he would have answered if Sam had remarked on the little history to be found in the sacred book after such ecclesiastics as Canon Cheyne and Bishop Barnes had done with it. Simple Sam had no knowledge to probe in this direction.

The latter's Christian name should be noted. Clerical stooges do not usually answer to the names of Algernon, Cecil—or Wallace. Such would not give scope for clerical condescension. They might imply Eton or Harrow, and knowing ones from public schools who would not so humbly agree that the real seeker after truth must seek clerical counsel. We hear nothing of Sam's occupation, but presumably he works at a bench, where also—without that perfect skill which one might have expected the incarnate god to have had—Jesus laboured. Our author forces this doubt about craftsmanship upon his readers in the following extraordinary passage:—

"I am quite certain that on occasions Jesus hit his thumb with a hammer or cut his wrist with a chisel, and that his thumb or wrist were for the time being out of commission."

Happily there is no suggestion that He said anything when He so badly mishit! "The Son of God could do

something with stormy waves but nothing to control a tool. "Not omnipotent after all," as Moncure Conway's uncle wrote on the margin of his Bible at Judges 1, 19 which records that Jehovah "Could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had chariots of iron." How vexatious such qualified omnipotence must have been!

The author is an M.A. M.D. would be more appropriate if it stood for Master of the Disingenuous. "Why doesn't God abolish evil?" is one of Sam's questions, reminiscent of Man Friday, though nowhere in the book do we hear of Hell or the Devil. They are played out, but parsons must not say so. This one starts his reply thus: "I'm only thinking of one kind of evil in this section, the sort that matters, moral evil or sin. I'm not thinking of cancers or earthquakes"—apparently trifles unworthy of consideration! Perhaps Sam was thinking of such things but he was too well-drilled to say so. Perhaps the simpleton was thinking the parson would come to the other sort later on. Not he! Cancers and earthquakes cannot be blamed upon man, whom every parson will load with liability to save the face of his god. When the stern voice of duty constrained the Lord to give his creatures free-will—as the stock Christian evidence answer goes—because automata are anathema to him, cancers and earthquakes, even a parson must admit, were hardly envisaged in that ruthless experiment!

Yet, amongst general advice to the would-be apologist for Christianity in combating the infidel, is "Pin him down." I wonder if the Rev. Wallace-Hadrill remembers how, in these columns, I pinned him down about his absurd assertion at Stratford that Darwin was a Christian. I sent him a copy of *The Freethinker*, but he did not even acknowledge the prick. His clerical colleague on the Brains Trust once had to dissociate himself from one of his rash answers. Pin him down! Certainly. "Who made God?" Sam is supposed to ask. This is the answer:

"Here's an empty match-box and my foot rule. Just measure off an inch and a half of love, will you, and pop it in the match-box for me. All right, I'll say it for you: 'Love can't be measured with a foot-rule and can't fit in a match box. Nor can truth, nor can goodness.'"

Rev. Wallace-Hadrill is proud of this bright idea for it is, word for word, what he said at the Brains Trust. Yet, on another page, he says: "Never let your opponent change the subject. He is almost certain to do this if he finds himself manoeuvred into an awkward position. . . . A common way of changing the subject is to take an illustration and go off at a tangent from it!" This was no answer at all. Logician, heal thyself!

On one page we are told that "the real stumbling blocks to Christianity are not intellectual but moral"; yet elsewhere: "Beliefs about Christ matter a very great deal, I should say, and without those beliefs his moral teaching doesn't really come into it. Beliefs first." Pin him down. Does this mean that to a parson a pious man of middling morality is better than an impious one of superior character?

Here is a priceless passage:

"It is good for us all to remember that, as God's instruments, it is not our job to be original, nor to produce something new and striking. God and the terrible weight of sheer Reason which is in God, is a great deal older than the hills."

The reverend gentleman is too modest. God

weighted down by reason—like some Atlas of astronomical dimensions—is a highly original idea. It suggests a Permanent President of the Rationalist Press Association, world without end, amen. It is a pity a few droppings of reason do not fall on the author of this apologetic. The book seems to have been inspired by a clerical friend, the members of whose flock, fighting doubters without gathering strength, ring up their vicar for ammunition in the wordy warfare. I can only say that if this booklet is the result of Rev. Wallace-Hadrill's reflections, I would advise none of these Christian soldiers to risk the result of a ring. They might get even dustier answers than he gives here.

The booklet is published (at 1s. 3d.) by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, but the writer's knowledge—even of a Christian sort—seems strangely lacking. One would suppose he had never heard of Modernism or Higher Criticism, or is it that he did not want Sam to know of them? Strangely, too, he supposes that the nonconformist bodies insist on total abstinence from intoxicants as a condition of membership. They have never done so.

One question Simple Sam might ask. It would certainly get under the parson's skin. Would Jesus have smoked? Let me help him to a reply if such a nasty one came from Sam, turned from simple into subtle: "I do not think he would mind, but I am sure he would take the pipe from his mouth before he preached the Sermon on the Mount."

WILLIAM KENT.

THE MIRACLE OF THE ASSUMPTION

(continued from page 23)

III

BUT I must get back to Mr. Preece's article. The next matter I wish to deal with is Mr. Preece's allegation that the Vatican at some time somewhere has deplored the use of the atomic bomb, and, therefore, the Vatican is right in saying that "simple faith that can believe an absurdity is preferable to scientific knowledge that can produce a monstrosity." Hence, apparently, scrap all further scientific discovery and go back to miracle-mongering and other absurdities. Apart from the complete *non sequitur* of this passage, anyone who has read Avro Manhattan's recent work, *The Catholic Church against the Twentieth Century* (Watts & Co., 1950), will have noticed that each Pope of this century, especially during the last twenty years, with his tongue in his cheek has deplored the use of force as being un-Christian, but all the time has followed the sordid example of so many of his predecessors throughout the Church's long history and has connived at and even encouraged the use of force, often in abominably cruel forms whenever it was used to further the Church's policy.

What was Pius XI's attitude towards Mussolini's Abyssinian aggression, involving as it did the deliberate low flying by Italian airmen and the spraying by them with agonising poison gas of not only the belligerents, but also of helpless native villagers far removed from the theatre of war (*Survey of International Affairs*, 1935, vol. 2, p. 327, and the Emperor of Abyssinia's speech before the League of Nations on June 30, 1935, *ibid.*, pp. 493, 494)? Not one word of public protest did he make (*ibid.*, p. 102). It should be noted, moreover, that his Secretary of State at that time was Cardinal Pacelli, the present Pope, who was directing the Vatican's foreign policy and who was always in agreement with

him. (*Catholic Church Against the Twentieth Century*, p. 131.)

It appears that Pius XI prevented the bells of St. Peter's from chiming when practically all the other bells throughout Italy vigorously chimed both at the beginning and at the conclusion of the aggression, but that silence was the expression of the neutrality of a sovereign state and not the expression of moral censure of a religious leader. (*Survey of International Affairs*, p. 102.) One word from him would have silenced every church bell in Italy. Finally, he could not refrain from publicly showing his true colours when a few days after Abyssinia had succumbed, namely on May 12, 1936, he unequivocally declared himself in favour of the aggression by publicly stating that he was partaking in "the triumphant joy of an entire, great and good people . . ." (*Catholic Church Against the Twentieth Century*, p. 128.)

Then again, Avro Manhattan's chapter about Spain will be an eye-opener, showing as it does how the Vatican and its bishops were encouraging and praising that Catholic gentleman Franco when he countenanced the atrocities committed under his command, including wholesale massacres and the deliberate machine-gunning of civilians as they fled from their towns and villages which either had just been bombed, or were about to be captured. (For details of some of these atrocities, see *Searchlight on Spain*, Duchess of Atholl, Penguin Special, 1938, Ch. IX and pp. 185-189, 200, 201, 264-270.)

The Duchess of Atholl, on p. 334, does mention one particular protest from the Pope concerning the bombing of open towns, but a perusal of Vol. 2, 1937, of the *Survey of International Affairs* will show that that protest was the only protest made by the Pope. It was made as late as 1938, it had reference to the bombing of Barcelona and it was made just after other protests had been made by Great Britain and by France (*ibid.*, p. 382). It will be also noticed on this latter page that Barcelona, being part of Catalonia, was one of the least anti-Catholic parts of Spain. It follows that the Pope had two motives for making that protest, namely, (1) to impress Great Britain and France and (2) to help really good Catholics. This latter motive lay behind a request made by the Pope's Secretary of State on June 27, 1937, to the Archbishop of Toledo instructing him to ask Franco to exercise the greatest moderation in his operations against the Basques, when he would be dealing with a devout Catholic population and clergy (*ibid.*, p. 221). The obvious meaning of all this is, "Spare devout Catholics, but as to everybody else, we do not interfere." That is typical Vatican policy.

Thus, apparently, there was only one protest by the Pope and that was made in the special circumstances which I have described and was not made until after nearly two years of thousands and thousands of murderous atrocities.

Franco, in a speech which he made in the spring of 1939, showed that he had the Vatican on his side all the time when he said that the Church had "collaborated in the victorious crusade and spiritualised glory of the Nationalist arms." (*Catholic Church Against the Twentieth Century*, p. 100.)

J. H. G. BULLER, LL.B.

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

Although it is true that some lectures by non-Christians are now broadcasted, though—as far as we know—mostly by scientists only, the “antidote,” from some priest or parson, quickly follows. One of the queerest we have heard is that by the Rev. J. Burnaby on “Liberty by the Grace of God”—queer because the reverend gentleman painfully tried to show that the only freedom worth having is that “by the Grace of God,” whatever that means, for his voluble word-spinning could have meant anything. However, this delicious titbit is worth preserving as the last word in sheer twaddle—“The only freedom which carries with it no menace is the freedom of the forgiven sinner.” Whether looked at sideways or upside down, it still remains twaddle.

That terribly important problem whether Jesus had any brothers and sisters is still quite unsolved in spite of the numberless prayers wafted to the Almighty for a solution. The *Church Times* tells us that the Lord’s “brethren” are held to be “our Lord’s cousins” or “children of St. Joseph by a former marriage.” As in so many cases you pay your money and take your choice. But nobody knows the answer—except, of course, those who hold that not only Jesus and Mary are myths but also Joseph and the “brethren” of Jesus. All the stories are just plain fiction.

Most bishops love writing about themselves and their work, so one need not be surprised to learn that Bishop Walter Carey has followed in their footsteps. Among the revelations he feels so certain will interest lay people is, as he says, “I also gradually learnt the truth about sin, repentance, confession, absolution.” This stupendous piece of information proves the crass stupidity of theological teaching, for, of course, what Bishop Carey may call sin is not necessarily sin, and what he calls repentance may mean something entirely different to somebody else.

He constantly uses words in this way without defining them, as when he says, “If you are haunted, if you’ve got a ghost in your soul which hamstringing you, well, I’m a good ghost-layer, and . . . I’ll pronounce the Prayer Book sentence of absolution, and then your ghost (if you are truly penitent) will be laid for ever.” If words have any meaning this is just pious balderdash—but probably the Bishop means (without being able to say so) that you must believe the nonsense he believes, otherwise you’ll go to Hell.

Our Minister of Education is quite right in stressing a love of reading as he did recently, and he is also quite right in saying, “Perhaps the one great book which has been more neglected than any other is the Bible.” It is a pity, all the same, that he did not stress the reason why. Most of it is completely boring, and we would lay a copy of our *Bible Handbook* to Mr. Tomlinson’s own Bible, that he has hardly read it himself. Could he tell us offhand what it was that Zechariah, Joel, and Obadiah were talking about? Could he even tell us the scheme outlined in Revelation? One of the most extraordinary facts about the Bible is the earnest way its defenders always want other people to read it—without doing so themselves.

The “*Church Times*” wants to “rekindle a delight in Bible reading” but no matter what is done in that way, the Bible, as a “delight,” is deader than mutton. Most of the Bible heroes, including Jesus, are just bores;

their fulminations against “sin” cause roars of laughter. The Oriental outlook of 2,000 years and more ago has as much significance for us now as that of the caveman primitives. If the *Church Times* and Mr. Tomlinson have not yet learnt their lesson about the utter valuelessness of the Bible, they will.

Some people, like the Rev. M. E. MacDonald, are very dissatisfied with the way Christ is being preached. He wants our parsons to preach Christ “in His cosmic totality,” a Saviour big enough “to cope with the gigantic dilemmas of our world” including “the gigantic dilemma of human doubt” and “the gigantic dilemma of Personality.” Mr. MacDonald no doubt does preach Christ in this way—so what? Has anything happened different from the way other people preach Christ with less bluff and more modesty? Not on your life.

When people are not writing a new life of Jesus, they find consolation and perhaps cash in telling us what John or Paul really meant. How many books have been written to “expound” John we really do not know, but a Mr. E. K. Lee has got another out, and we notice it because we are told that he is “fully conscious of the relations between St. John and contemporary philosophical and religious thought.” We wonder how many of our philosophical masters these days ever glance at the boring words which John has invented for Jesus? Or what effect they have on their thought? Still, even if the answer is none at all, this will not prevent other books “expounding” John from appearing.

A Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has commenced so that “God may, in his own good time, bring about reunion.” As disasters generally follow a course of National Prayer it would not surprise us if “Reunion” did bring about the expected disaster. In any case, as the “planner” of the scheme is a Roman Catholic priest, it is obvious that the only answer God could give to the Prayers is to advise everybody to become Roman Catholics. And would not that be a terrible disaster?

An excellent letter recently appeared in *The Times Educational Supplement* on the question of Communism in our schools, in which the writer pointed out that Atheists and Materialists are not necessarily Communists, and that it was most unfair to claim that they were. In general, Atheists had the “moral and intellectual integrity” not to allow their private beliefs to influence their teaching. It is good to find someone writing in this way.

The “*Methodist Recorder*” regretfully records the fact that so far “there is no sign that the people are returning in great numbers to the Church,” and it admits that only about ten per cent. have “a serious link with the Church at all.” But why? Isn’t it because—as Robert Blatchford said 50 years ago—that Christianity is not true?

In one of our Fundamentalist weeklies, *The Life of Faith*, Mr. M. P. Wood asks “for Christ’s sake, for the world’s sake, and for our own sake,” several questions about religion, but mainly whether it is “retreat, revival, or return, in 1951?” He plumps for Christ’s Return which “is even at the doors.” He asks, “What if we are approaching the last Trump?” And we can only wearily whisper, “What indeed?” What can one say in the face of pious drivel?

"THE FREETHINKER"

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

Mrs. K. GRIGSON.—Many thanks for your most interesting letter re the Stone of Scone. We note you read us regularly and hope one day that you will see most of the "history" from the Bible you still believe is just fiction. There is no evidence, for example, that there ever was a Temple of Solomon.

A. STEPHENSON.—Surely your query is not serious? A man can be *by nature* very religious, but he can, at the same time, be intensely sceptical. That certainly was the case with Newman.

A. E. C.—Always pleased to get your witty verses. They will all be used.

Will correspondents kindly note to address all communications in connection with "The Freethinker" to: "The Editor," and not to any particular person. Of course, private communications can be sent to any contributor.

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 FRIEDENKER (Switzerland), DON BASILIO (Italy).

Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1, and not to the Editor.

Lecture Notices should reach the Office by Friday morning.

Correspondents are requested to write on one side of the paper only and to make their letters as brief as possible.

SUGAR PLUMS

It looks as though the Annual Conference of the N.S.S. will be held in London this year. A special circular sent to all branches by the Executive suggested the Festival of Britain might be an additional attraction to provincial members for holding the Conference in London has drawn no disapproving note and arrangements will, therefore, be put in hand at once.

A few hours after the Annual Dinner of the N.S.S., Mr. R. H. Rosetti fell a victim to flu' and it is very doubtful if he can travel to Nottingham this week-end to address the Cosmo Debating Society on Sunday afternoon and lecture for the local N.S.S. branch in the evening. It will be the first occasion for very many years that he has had to disappoint his audience through ill-health, but it is still very disappointing to him. There will be some delay in dealing with things at the office and it is hoped that this reference will be accepted as the explanation.

The N.S.S. is arranging a Freethought Forum at the Conway Hall on Thursday evening, February 8, at 7 p.m. Questions will be invited from the audience on Religion, Non-Religion, Sunday Entertainment, etc., and dealt with by a panel of competent speakers. This is a unique occasion for the exchange of views and opinions, and it is hoped that London readers will give it full support. Admission is free. Bring your questions.

THE POET OF HUMANITY

An Anniversary Peroration

("Burns' Day is January 25)

ALL that live must die; genius passes through life to immortality. Burns was mortal. His body lies a-mouldering in the ground, but his song goes marching on. His sympathies were infinite. Fragile flower—Freedom's sword—tenderness and strength. From crimson-tipped daisy to crimson-drenched field of battle. . . . For mouse or man, for louse or lord, his charity was boundless. He wrote of wife and weans, of the happy hearth, of the ecstasies of lovers as no other poet has ever done. But, such is our Scottish bard's universal appeal, that, were some malignant force able to blot out all memory of his genius save three short syllables, undying glory would still be his. For these three words express everything that is sweet and good, loving and understanding in the heart of humanity. Reverberates eternally the ether. In every clime, at every time, someone, somewhere, clasps a brother's hand for the sake of "Auld Lang Syne."

J. EFFEL.

CHRISTIAN "EVIDENCE" AGAIN

IT so chanced that we were listening to the radio some little time back when a clergyman, the name of whom escaped us, was announced to speak on "Jesus Christ in the modern world," or on some similar title. As we are always anxious to hear the results of modern scholarship in any field with which we are at all familiar we continued to listen in the hope that some real Christian "evidence" might be forthcoming—at last! We have, of course, often been promised "fresh light" on Jesus but, as a rule, the light is inconspicuous and the promised new "proofs" turn out to be actually a not very "fresh" rehash of the old.

Now, however, that Christianity has pressed the technique of science into its service in the shape of the B.B.C., perhaps we could expect something positive—even, perhaps, some real "evidence."

We must confess, however, that, though disappointed we were hardly surprised when we heard what the B.B.C. apologist for Christianity had to say. For, apart from some obvious rhetorical flourishes, which sound very impressive upon the air, but which actually fail to get us very far, all that the reverend gentleman produced by way of serious argument was to juggle with dates—in this case, with the dates of the four canonical Gospels, the only actual "evidence" that we possess for "the most wonderful life in history," that of "Our Saviour" Jesus Christ. Briefly summarised, his arguments amounted to this:—

Whereas, say, half a century ago, most of the "higher critics" of the Bible dated the authorship of our Gospels to the second century, even fairly late in that century, to-day, most of them, or so our B.B.C. theologian asserted, admit their first century authorship. And so—what?

In reference to this rather peculiar line of argument one could, of course, reasonably take the line that the dates of the Gospels are immaterial; what matters is their content. Such a criticism implies that whether such fantastic impossibilities as Virgin Births, or swine possessed by suicidal demons, or water turned into wine by alcoholic alchemy, were imagined or written down in no matter what century, makes no difference at all. Such things don't happen in any century. Such ideas are in themselves the, it would seem, inevitable products

of primitive mentalities and of an animistic cast of thought which has no criterion of critical science whereby to draw the line between what is and what is not a possible occurrence in the actual world.

The above line of argument is a strong one. *So strong is it, in fact, that all Christian scholars themselves would accept it in relation to any other literature apart from their own.* For example, let us take the pre-Christian epic of the pre-historic Hellenes (Greeks), the *Iliad*. This great poem, still perhaps the greatest in the world's entire literature, was composed at an unknown date prior to about the year 550 B.C. when Pisistratus, the then "Tyrant" of Athens, caused it to be edited in the definitive form in which we have it to-day. Even now, we understand, very few classical scholars are agreed upon the exact date of the great Greek epic, or even as to whether it was the actual composition of one of the greatest of poets, traditionally named Homer, or the collective work of a school of poets extending, perhaps, over centuries. (We may, perhaps, disregard the ingenious theory of some scholastic wag that "Homer was certainly not written by Homer but, perhaps, by someone else of the same name!")

Thus it is indubitable that there is as much uncertainty about the date of the *Iliad*, indeed, probably since the various estimates differ by centuries, even more than in the case of those later Greek literary compositions now known as the Gospels. Whilst the authorship of all these famous products of Greek literature is equally unknown.

So much for the actual composition of the *Iliad*. But when we turn to its *contents*, then we face complete unanimity on the part of critical scholarship. No present-day classical scholar, whatever his own religious beliefs—and this includes the most devout Christians equally with the most pronounced sceptics—believes in the "tall" stories with which the great work of "Homer" positively teems; no classical scholar, we repeat, Christian or sceptic, really *believes* that the Homeric gods took part in the war against Troy, or celebrated celestial orgies in honour of Greeks or Trojans, or begot children with mortal women as a result of amorous intrigues. There seems little doubt that the author, or authors, of the *Iliad* believed the mythology which they reported with such literary flair. But no modern scholar does so, not even the most devout.

Nor do the protagonists of different theories about the great epic disagree in rejecting its mythology. They all reject it as a matter of course. Whether written by one poet, or by a score of poets, about 800 B.C. or a couple of centuries earlier or later, mythology remains mythology, the primitive mental creation of primitive man imbued with animistic credulity.

Thus, if we apply the ordinary canons of critical scholarship, canons which it applies as a matter of course to all *secular* literature, we are absolutely justified in rejecting *a priori* the whole mythology of the New Testament, angels, devils, virgin births, miraculous cures, the resurrection of the dead; all the products of primitive thinking, which flow inevitably from certain known mental states, and to which innumerable parallels exist in both secular literature and in the sacred literature of other religions. In so summarily dismissing them as *a priori* impossible, we do not act arbitrarily, any more than classical scholarship as in the case of the *Iliad* already cited, acts arbitrarily in, *a priori* and without argument, dismissing the adventures of the Olympian

gods as the congruous celestial "reflexes" of the pugnacious, amorous, and bibulous Greek barbarians who, prior to attaining the level of civilisation, created their gods in their own image.

Thus, it appears to be indisputable that such literary incidentals as the date and authorship of the canonical Gospels are completely irrelevant to the entirely different question of their truth. To revert again to our Greek analogy: if we were fortunate enough to discover the original copy of the *Iliad* signed "Homer" and with a recognisable date—a somewhat improbable find—the "historicity" of the gods of Olympus and for their partiality for Greeks and Trojans, as so eloquently described in the Greek epic, would not be one iota more probable than it is at present when we do not know precisely when, or by whom the "Homeric" poems were actually written.

Similarly if some fortunate, or credulous archaeologist some fine day finds the original of our Gospels, signed by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, or by all four together, and dated exactly, it would still remain equally improbable that, say, Mary gave birth to a god, that Jesus cast out devils, or that, to take the most recently proclaimed miracle, His mother was "assumed" uncorrupted into heaven after her death. These things and their kind happen amongst peoples of primitive mentality: they do not happen amongst civilised people acquainted with canons of scientific evidence—and there is no mystery as to which of these mental environments was responsible for our Gospels. Animistic, that is, primitive thinking is obvious on every page.

Actually, even questions of date and authorship are irrelevant to-day, as in the past. No Christian scholar now claims that *our* Gospels are the work of eye-witnesses of the startling events which they describe; at most, it is claimed that they are based on such now vanished statements. The date of our New Testament is known to within a few years.

A.D. 144 the Church of Rome excommunicated Marcion, the editor of the first "New Testament," the distinctively Christian "Bible." In the course of the following generation the Christian Church wrote, or edited its own New Testament, including *our* Gospels in reply to those of the heretics. *Our* Gospels thus indubitably date from about the middle of the second century. There *may* have been older Gospels but, if so, the Church did not consider them worth preserving and cannot, accordingly, now appeal to them as reliable witnesses—even on the B.B.C.!

F. A. RIDLEY.

INCONSTANCY

The tranquil glory of the rising moon,
After the burning heat of mid-July,
So different from the chill of early June,
Affects me so that I aloud could cry
For joy, exulting in a lovely sight,
When day-long sunshine yields to softer light.

Winter will come and will the tables turn,
Late January nights be freezing cold;
The moon high in the heavens warmth will spurn
And glare down on a world now sick and old:
Then shivering folk will yearn for the bright rays
Of the hot sun in dusty July days.

BAYARD SIMMONS.

CORRESPONDENCE

MARXISM

SIR,—Could a studious freethinker argue that the attitude of Mr. Cutner toward Marxism is rational? His anti-Communist outlook, replete with all the clap-trap of the penny Press, is surely the product of emotional and intellectual aberration. For there is not the slightest reason to believe, in fact, that Mr. Cutner knows what he is talking about!

Marxists claim to be wielding a scientific method, dialectical-materialism, which has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy and in the conceptions of many modern thinkers, notably Hegel. This method, opposed to the static outlook of the conventional approach to phenomena, has gained considerable prestige of late, even among scientists of the capitalistic countries. I can see no reason, therefore, for rejecting its "authoritativeness" without further study and investigation.

Neither U.N.O or Mr. Bertrand Russell are "things-in-themselves." Mr. Cutner, pure, free from bias. The pronouncement of both are not above a rational suspicion. Russell's political views, for instance, conveyed in his book, "Unpopular Opinions," have about them as much factual and objective data as those of the Archbishop of Canterbury!—
Yours, etc.,
RICHARD KEAN.

SIR,—In reply to Mr. E. Barnard, the word "Freethinker" indicates a mentality which, although opposed to the opinions of his opponent, at least realises that the latter has a right to hold and express same. Unless a controversy can be conducted in this spirit then neither disputant has the right to claim to be a Freethinker. Every new idea has to fight for a hearing and adoption and the title of one book on my shelves, "Humanity's Gain from Unbelief" indicates what I mean.

I see no irrelevance in my remarks about Ancient Rome. This and other Mediterranean empires were based on the exploitation of the many by the few, and however much Mr. Barnard may regret the break-up of "The Great Roman Civilisation" this was due as much to the weakness of the social structure as to the virility of its opponents. What virtue is there in decadence and why cry over spilt milk?

Karl Marx was first a politician who became an economist in his search for the cause of the insecurity, poverty and unrest which he found in the world in his day. One of his conclusions was that the (then) new system of Capitalist Production, whilst resulting in unparalleled wealth production (in the form of manufactured goods) also brought want and suffering to the majority and that no amount of pious talk or charity could alter this.

Since then we have had 100 years of Capitalism and if Mr. Barnard will look at the world around he should find full justification for Marx's conclusion. Two world wars in 30 years and preparations for a still more destructive one do not encourage any thinkers to believe in a "civilisation" which produces such results. If he will refer to the Devil's summary in "Man and Superman" he will find Bernard Shaw fully confirms my view.

In contrast to this is the peaceful and continuous development of the U.S.S.R. and the New Democracies. Having been to the U.S.S.R. twice I can very well understand the dismay of the capitalist world at another form of civilisation developing whilst their own is decaying.

With regard to the "Red Prussian" the matter at issue is not that of personality but of Economics, and no abuse of Marx can alter the truth of his scientific conclusions any more than abuse of the Atheist can help the religious-minded. Rather the contrary.

Finally, I am prepared to make Mr. Barnard the same offer as does *The Freethinker*. If he will send me his address I will post him the *Soviet Weekly* for four weeks free.—Yours, etc.,
T. D. SMITH, Senr.

"TOTALITARIANISM"

SIR,—Such foolish letters as those that appear under the heading of "Totalitarianism" (January 7 issue) hardly deserve a reply, yet I would remind the writers that at one time the Socialists were reviled just as the Communists are to-day. Was it not said that they would confiscate our savings?

When Labour's party first got in,
The old Professor hid his tin,
But memory still plays him tricks,
And now he finds himself with nix.

We Atheists should welcome Communism rather than decry it, for if and when the Communists ever gain control in this country our most cherished hope would be realised, i.e.,

Secular elementary education in the schools—as in Russia to-day—and the power of the Church drastically curtailed.—
Yours, etc.,
W. ASHTON.

THE UNITED NATIONS

SIR,—In a recent issue of *The Freethinker* Mr. Cutner advised support of the United Nations as an essential means of preserving some degree of free thought in face of a threatening totalitarian onslaught. This raises the question as to the advisability of supporting the Vatican against the Kremlin. When there are two devils at large in the world, each in virulent opposition to the other, is it not right that Freethinkers should support the less dangerous against the one which is more so? After all, the Vatican does not possess 200 Divisions of armed men with all their array of tanks, aircraft, and so forth, and as an organised power in the world its services might be useful in countering the greater danger from the East. Is it possible for the Freethought Movement to have any existence at all in the event of a triumph of the Red Devil of the Kremlin over the White (or Black) Devil of the Vatican—i.e., in the sphere of religion or anything?—
Yours, etc.,
F. O'DEMPSEY.

HEAVEN'S GOD OF WAR—MARS?

SIR,—Witness, as published, with illustrations, in London newspapers, the Archbishop of York with the Dean of Westminster Abbey during the Intercession Service for Prime Ministers, with members of the Royal Household in attendance on the King and Queen, accompanied by British Cabinet Ministers with a number of wives; everybody seated in the stalls; when the Archbishop read from the Bible, "Isaiah," about Hezekiah's letter being taken to the House of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.

Dr. Garbett then prayed for all present to seek God's merciful guidance at this time of threatening world war. Let it be questioned in all rational sincerity the consummate folly, superstition and uselessness of such a divine service and religious prayers, when the Bible emphatically states that God is a man of War, and Jesus Christ came not to bring peace, but a sword?—Yours, etc.,
WM. AUGUSTUS VAUGHAN.

LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

OUTDOOR

- Manchester Branch N.S.S. (St. Mary's Gate, Blitzed Site).—Lunch-hour Lectures every weekday, 1 p.m.: Mr. G. WOODCOCK.
North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, 12 noon: Mr. L. EBURY.
Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Barker's Pool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. A. SAMMS.

INDOOR

- Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (Satis Cafe, 40, Cannon Street, off New Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: H. FAGAN, "The Soviet Union in World Affairs."
Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics' Institute, Science Room).—Sunday, 6-45 p.m.: HAROLD DAY (Branch President), "Modern Antiques."
Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, January 30, 7 p.m.: J. HENRY LLOYD, "What do we Owe to Marx?"
Glasgow Secular Society (Branch of the N.S.S.) (McLellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: DAVID MURRAY, "Karl Marx Looks at a Skirt."
Leicester Secular Society (Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: W. C. CLEMENTS (Headmaster at Mellor Street Junior School), "Life in a Junior School" (with film illustrations).
Liverpool Humanist Fellowship (Cooper's Hall, 12, Shaw Street, Liverpool, 6).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: H. J. BLACKHAM, B.A., "A Humanist Manifesto."
Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, 2-30 p.m.: R. H. ROSETTI (President N.S.S.), "Man's Animal Ancestry"
South London Branch N.S.S. (London and Brighton Hotel, 139, Queens Road, Peckham, S.E.15).—Sunday, 7-15 p.m.: F. A. RIDLEY (N.S.S.), "The Social Origins of Christianity."
South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON, M.A., "What Shaw has Taught Us."
West Ham & District Branch. N.S.S. Branch Meeting will be held at Locomotive Men's Hall, 62, Forest Lane, E. 15.—Tuesday, January 30, 8 p.m.: also Talk—"Future of Freethought."

OLD LAMPS FOR NEW

TO anyone who has followed the trend of religious apologetics, it is noticeable how, at the present time their line has altered in form, at least. It is true that it is still our alleged lack of knowledge that is advanced as a reason why there is a god, but here the position has shifted, and it is no longer chiefly the origin of life, or lack of links in the evolutionary chain that are adduced, but the entire venue is altered, from things that can be materially tested to the alleged evidence afforded by what our new champions call "the heart," or to use Mr. Gerald Bullett's phrase, "certain spiritual insight." It is the purpose of the present article to examine in some detail the assumptions made by recent apologists of the above school, who have been given space recently in the rationalist press to put the claims of this new (?) approach.

I will begin with John Rowland's article (*The Freethinker*, December 31) in which "the heart" is claimed to be the real test of truth. Now surely there is need of definition here. Does the writer mean the organ so named? I assume not. Then there only remain our feelings, and as Mr. Rowland seems to extend the term, our likes and dislikes. But to infer, as the whole tone of his article does, that this part of our life is something entirely distinct from our mental processes and has no scientific reason, is, to me at least, but another proof of the bankruptcy of the supernatural approach. For the question at once arises—are the feelings a safe guide in that part of our social life which is related to what are called "good and evil." In the *Descent of Man*, chapter 2, Darwin quotes the case of a native of W. Australia whose wife died from disease, and who, feeling it to be his duty to kill someone in order to appease the ghost of her he had lost, pined when given to understand by the local magistrate, his master, that he would be executed if he did, and at length disappeared from his employment, returning about a year later, fully recovered in health and spirits. It was learned later that he had taken a life. Mr. Rowland tells us that there are then, spheres of life in which the idea of scientific proof does not necessarily apply, and earlier in the same article: "I suppose that those who assert the irrationality of all religious ideas and attitudes will say that such a feeling can be explained by the idea of a social conscience, or something of that kind." It is obvious that this argument demands a clear statement. Does the writer utterly deny that our feelings are the products of our bodily structure and metabolism, acted upon, like every other mental activity, by our environment, using that term in its broadest sense? The optimism expressed on international matters—"if all men believed that there was a God," brings vividly to my mind the newspaper reports of Gen. McArthur's public recital with his troops of "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us," in the midst of the utter destruction of the city of Seoul. I might add in this connection that there have been other ideas as to the value of the heart as a guide, such as the well-known phrase—"the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked," but J.R. prefers the view that he puts before us in up-to-date clothing but which is clearly our old Quaker friend, the "Inward Light," and one can almost discern beneath the disguise of its modern phraseology "now on a certain day it was given unto me. . ." But it is not only in morals that superiority

is claimed for the theist. The same claim is made in the aesthetic sphere. Is there, however, more agreement here than on credal matters among the religious? The answer is clear. Ask a group of artists or critics, either musical or plastic, and one will speedily discover that agreement or difference is certainly not a matter of their belief in the supernatural, and if one considers the lives of great artists, one would be indeed puzzled to sort out their relation to their art, their piety, and their morals. Let Mr. Rowland try on his own selection. In passing one thinks of Benvenuto Cellini, a supreme artist, very pious, and with regard to morals well, I do not think that they fit well, to say the least, with the claims made for the relation between art, supernaturalism and morals. I would ask what is the relevancy of the argument that because we cannot give the same scientific proof of the superiority of one artist over another, that science only applies to a limited sphere of our lives and that because it cannot measure social and personal emotions, we must seek light elsewhere. It is true that a doctor cannot measure or weigh a pain, but he can and oftentimes does, discover its cause, which is the only way to effect a cure, which is the function of science. And likewise, while it is true that we cannot weigh or measure sunlight or storm by the yardstick or pint pot, science has rescued us from the practice of those who, putting their trust in religious intuition, rebuked the wind in storm and devils in disease.

In summing up, what is new or novel in the claims of this school of reaction, Mr. Bullett and Mr. Rowland alike claim that superior moral good is inherent in god belief. Well, there is nothing either new or true in this. Self-praise is no recommendation either for a creed or a person, and the habit of giving unsolicited testimonials to one's own fancies is as old as the hills, nor does its age add to its value. To Mr. Bullett, the atheist has no right to be dogmatic because, as he puts it, "we should allow for the recognition of possibilities beyond human knowledge." We thus see that our lack of knowledge of some things is used as a plea against our claim to reject the discredited superstitions of the past. Mr. Bullett does not claim to know everything about the universe, but does he because of this dogmatically refuse to accept folk tales or Catholic dogmas? I think not. And we too refuse to either accept these or other panaceas offered by the above quoted writers; and as to their claims to be rationalists and freethinkers, it is not disputed that given their premises, their conclusions follow, but as I have already shown, we utterly deny their premises, and we deny the title of "freethinker" to anyone postulating an unknown pulling the strings behind or in the material universe. In conclusion I would remind the advocates of agnosticism who have given it such glowing praise as an elevating factor in life, that it was against agnosticism and not atheism that Mr. Driberg in his tirade in the columns of *Reynolds News* produced such depressing but anonymous evidence. Both writers desire the unbelievers to carefully consider their case and this I am sure their readers have done, and both have been afforded considerable space in our press to express their views on the virtues of religion. Now, if the open mind is, as we both agree, essential, let me ask them in what religious journals the atheist will find hospitality to express his side, or is this the one virtue lacking in religion?

JAMES H. MATSON.