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VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Man and the Universe

IN the year of Our Lord 1600, upon February the 23rd of that year, the Holy Roman Inquisition committed to the fire "all that was mortal" of the arch-heretic, Giordano Bruno. Bruno, former Dominican friar, Copernican astronomer, and pantheistic philosopher, had long been a thorn in the side of the Holy Church. For he taught many heresies: that the earth went round the sun, that man was mortal and material, that "all comes by nature," but the arch-heresy of the arch-heretic was his daring hypothesis that there was nothing unique nor even exceptional in the earth and its inhabitants; that there are innumerable worlds scattered throughout an illimitable universe, and that consciousness and life are not confined to this small planet, but are scattered impartially throughout the infinite universe.

Giordano Bruno was, in fact, the first thinker to draw in and to their fulness the necessary or possible deductions from the Copernican theory of the universe which the Polish astronomer, Copernicus, had published in 1543, the year of his own death and (probably) of the birth of Bruno himself. But what in the academic vision of Professor Canon Copernicus had been merely a theoretical speculation in astronomy which its author does not seem to have regarded as unorthodox, since he dedicated his revolutionary thesis to the reigning Pope Paul III; in the more speculative mind of Bruno, the Copernican astronomy was transformed into a death blow to Christianity, since the geocentric astronomy of the Jewish Scriptures and of Christian theology was paralleled by the anthropocentric theology of the Church, in which the earth is the pre-ordained centre of the Universe and mankind the centre and measure of all things.

At one blow Bruno swept away this limited medieval Universe, in which all centres upon man, the accidental product of a paltry planet, and substituted for mankind's own exaggerated estimate of his own importance, one more in harmony with the newly-disclosed heliocentric conception of the Universe. Bruno was a logician as well as an astronomer: in his heretical logic, if there was nothing exceptional about the planet upon which we live, neither can there be anything exceptional or peculiar to earth in conscious existence. We may relevantly add that this daring hypothesis, first advanced by Bruno before (eight years after his own martyrdom) the invention of the telescope (1608), proved by the researches of Galileo, the definite truth of the Copernican theory, is still in advance of our actual knowledge. We still lack instruments of sufficient power and precision to give definite proof or disproof of the presence of articulate life scattered on the worlds marooned in infinite space.

Bruno's bold hypothesis, however, roused the Church to fury. For what becomes of the Incarnation of God's "only begotten son" if mankind is only one of innumerable species needing redemption? Does the Son of God spend His whole time wandering about the Universe and

carrying salvation from planet to planet? And, further, what becomes of Heaven and Hell in the new cosmic scheme? Where are the eternal fires? The Church could not answer these questions except by lighting a temporary fire in which to silence and to extinguish her unanswerable critic. Upon the very day of Bruno's martyrdom in Rome, an orthodox witness of his execution wrote to a foreign correspondent expressing his relief and that of the Church at finally silencing the unanswerable heretic.

"We hope," he wrote, "that in his journey through the Universe, Bruno, should he encounter the inhabitants of those other worlds of which he spoke, will not fail to tell them how the Romans deal with heretics."

Giordano Bruno was a philosopher, a speculative intellect rather than a precise observer, like, in fact, all astronomers prior to Galileo, Bruno's own younger Italian contemporary, who also was to fall foul of the Roman Inquisition. For, strictly speaking, astronomy began as an exact science only in 1608, when the discovery of the telescope for the first time enabled the astronomer to see the heavenly phenomena in some detail: that is, to *know*, instead of merely to speculate. Since the early years of the 17th century when Galileo first turned his newly-discovered glasses heavenward in what must have been one of the most exciting moments in human experience, an enormous expansion has since transpired in both telescopic vision and in astronomic knowledge. But, three and a-half centuries later, we have still not yet caught up with all Bruno's daring speculations. For no one has yet *seen* a planet circling round any other sun except ours, and we do not yet *know* for certain whether or not conscious articulate life actually exists in any other world except our not very important planet circling round our not very important sun. In which respect the astronomers, since Galileo, are not in a much better situation than were their classical predecessors, the ancient Greeks, the astronomic "science" of whom was merely guesswork, since they were completely devoid of instruments of precision wherewith to verify their often inspired guesswork. The guesswork of many of these astronomers from Aristarchus of Samos who first advanced the theory that the earth goes round the sun (c.250 B.C.) down to Copernicus (died 1543), was the guesswork of genius; in particular, the astronomic "discoveries" made by the ancient Greeks solely with the human eye, must rank as one of the most remarkable feats of pure intellect in human annals. However, it remained guesswork—though often very scientific guesswork, for lack of any technical apparatus to verify its conclusions. Will the post-Renaissance science of astronomy, which has now augmented telescopic vision with other artificial aids, ever get beyond this still rather unsatisfactory state of things? There is, to-day, a school of scientific—or would-be scientific—speculators which is definitely of the opinion that it will, and that we are at this precise moment in history upon the threshold of a new era in astronomic science, the era of empirical first-hand investigation of

the heavenly bodies—in the first instance, of the planets in the Solar system to which our own planet belongs—by “space-ships” manned by human explorers.

“The Conquest of Space” was, indeed, the precise subject discussed at a recent International Scientific Conference called by the “British Interplanetary Society” in London, of the concluding public meeting of which the present writer was an interested spectator. *The Conquest of Space* is also the title of a newly-published book by Mr. Arthur C. Clarke, the chairman of the “British Interplanetary Society.

In his informative and closely reasoned book, Mr. Clarke goes very fully into the whole question of “The Exploration of Space.” He certainly makes out a prima facie case at least and, whether one accepts his conclusions or not, his book makes absorbing and intriguing reading. We have no doubt at all that, possibly within the confines of the present century, whether successful or not at first, attempts will be made to reach the moon and, more problematically, the nearer planets, Mars and Venus. If we are to believe Mr. Clarke, himself a man of scientific qualifications, there are no insuperable difficulties left in our present age of atomic power and of rocket-propulsion that has already penetrated the stratosphere on the fringe of space. Certainly, whether we share the convictions of the author or not with regard to the possibility of “space flight” everyone interested in human relations with the external Universe ought to make a point of acquainting him or herself with this admirably lucid statement of a, perhaps, epoch-making step forward in human evolution.

Mr. Clarke concludes his book with a resounding declaration. Referring to the discovery of atomic power, he declares: “The power that was released on that day can take us to the stars, or it can send us to join the great reptiles and Nature’s other unsuccessful experiments.”

A bold speculation which would, we think, have delighted the heart of Bruno, whose conviction on the universality of life in the Universe our author also shares. Perhaps, as our author observes, our prehistoric age will only end when Man quits his planetary isolation and makes contact with other forms of living matter within the boundless horizons of the Universe.

F. A. RIDLEY.

[*The Conquest of Space* by Arthur C. Clarke, B.Sc., F.R.A.S. Temple Press Limited, London. 12s. 6d.]

ISRAEL IN MEDIEVAL SPAIN

(Concluded from page 391)

IN his second volume dealing with medieval Jewry in Spain (Jewish Publication Society of America), President Neumann has presented a *Social Cultural Study*. This supplementary notice completes the review of vol. 1 published on November 11. Well bound, printed and illustrated, the second volume opens with a survey of *Moral Conditions*. Derived, as this study is, from rabbinical records and traditions, the outlook is largely religious. But the moral standards of the Jewish communities varied considerably in different parts of Spain. Sexual relations between Jews and Gentiles were officially condemned. Neumann notes that: “The penalty for sexual intercourse between Christians and non-Christians was death by fire. . . . The extreme penalty was not always exacted but rarely was it possible for the Jewish offender to escape the confiscation of his wealth.”

The sexual sins of individual Jews were visited on the entire community, when mob animosity or official rapacity intervened. Consequently, the Jewish authorities adopted stern measures to avoid charges of this character.

Neumann regrets the fact that some Jewish communities sanctioned prostitution within the juderia “in order to keep dissolute youths from consorting with Christian prostitutes and thereby endangering the whole Jewish population.”

Then as now, gambling was widely prevalent in Jewish circles, and the rabbis exerted all the power they possessed to extirpate or, in any case, to minimise the evil. Not that this vice is confined to Jews, for gambling in some form or other abounds in every community. Indeed, some of the Spanish sovereigns encouraged it, inasmuch as it served to increase their revenues. Restrictions were removed, and, when the Valencia Jews disregarded the royal mandate, and the Infante Don Juan discovered that they sought no advantage from the official removal of fines and confiscation for gambling offences, “they were sternly threatened with a fine of one thousand *marabatins*.”

Neumann’s book contains an informative account of courtship and marriage as well as a survey of marriage customs and ceremonies. Boys and girls were almost invariably betrothed by their male parents or guardians and, as a rule, the future bride and bridegroom merely obeyed the behests of their parents. Several of the marriage ceremonies were grotesque, and Neumann notes that in hard cases the woman was usually the sufferer. Child marriages were common at the age of puberty, and when the husband died without issue, the Jewish Bible provided a levirate union in which the defunct husband’s brother espoused the widow. In religious theory, this union was ordained to secure offspring to the race of Israel but this claim met with little public acceptance. As Neumann avers: “The fact that by entering into marriage with his brother’s widow he became the sole heir of his estate gave an unfortunate touch of plausibility to popular skepticism.” Moreover, these widows usually regarded this Biblical commandment with decided disfavour and this need occasion little surprise, and fortunate were the widows whose husbands had furnished them with a conditional divorce when faced with approaching death.

Custom varied concerning strict monogamy. In regions most influenced by Arabian ascendancy, polygamy extensively prevailed. The rabbis differed in opinion, but in instances of a barren marriage, a second wife was permitted in the alleged interest of procreation. To the Catholic Spaniard, bigamy was a crime, so it was usually a Jewish expedient to divorce the first wife before taking a second unless the Government officials were adequately bribed.

Although with a religious people such as the medieval Jews, it appears anomalous, Neumann states in his chapter on *Educational Ideals* that: “The duty to provide and support public instruction. . . was from ancient times recognised as the sacred obligation of the Jewish community, ranking higher in importance than even the maintenance of divine worship.” Yet, illiteracy existed among the indigent, although wealthy Jews established and supported schools in their own habitations for well-to-do pupils, and in one instance, a benefactor “paid for the instruction of all the poor children of the community.” Also there are many records of bequests and donations for the support of indigent children and teachers. But unfortunately the persecutions of the 14th and 15th centuries and the confiscation of Jewish property swept an enormous proportion of these benefactions away. Still, even in turbulent times, Jewish books frequently escaped destruction, despite the fury of Catholic fanaticism. Yet, as Neumann states: “In the fearful summer of 1391 the fury of the Christian mobs descended upon man and book

alike, and the libraries shared in the fate of the general massacre. The written word, like the living spirit, never revived completely from the holocaust." But Jewish thought and medical practice were improved, largely by the influence of the humanist philosopher, Maimonides, the science of the Saracens, and even the patronage of such Spanish rulers as Alfonso the Wise.

The curious careers of pseudo-Jewish Messiahs who appeared from time to time, and bemused the more credulous sections of the juderia are described in Neumann's elaborate chapter *Rabbinic Culture*, where the records of these impostors prove that there is little limit to human stupidity.

The synagogue was the centre of religious life, and the academy, the public assembly edifice and charitable institutions stood in its precincts. Some were of fine architecture so much so that the clergy envied their splendour. Two stately edifices in Cordova are historic. Neumann observes that: "The chief synagogue completed in 1250 was of great height and of such magnificence that it aroused the wrath of the archdeacon and the local chapter. Pope Innocent IV made it the subject of a Papal bull in a vain effort to interfere with its construction, 'as causing a scandal among faithful Christians, and much harm to the Church of Cordova.'" Neumann continues, "The building of Jewish shrines continued to the 15th century when, as a result of two tragic catastrophes following close on each other in 1391 and 1412-15 the synagogue and its votaries fell before the fury of the mob, inflamed by unbridled religious fanaticism. The Jewish population of Spain was decimated in one generation by massacre and wholesale conversion and hundreds of synagogues were looted, pillaged and burned or were annexed to the nearest churches and convents."

For centuries, both under Arabic and Romanist rule, the average Jew remained more or less on friendly terms with his non-Jewish neighbours. As we have seen, the clergy were always antipathetic, and fiery preachers were apt to envenom their superstitious and illiterate flocks against them with its sequel of massacre, rape and robbery.

Yet, intellectual Jews were converted into ministers of State, and served as financiers, treasury officials and farmers of taxes. Even under Ferdinand and Isabella, when the expulsion occurred, converted Jews and others held important positions at Court. But Torquemada triumphed, and all Jews who had refused baptism were compelled to depart in 1492.

T. F. PALMER.

FREETHOUGHT AND DOGMATISM

THE term "Freethought" is often used in a facile and glib style of writing. We should remind ourselves that *genuine* Freethought is rather in the nature of an *aspiration*—a great ideal. Merely to scoff at all forms of concrete religion by no means constitutes Freethought—nay, is too often sheer dogmatism. In putting forward certain views—scientific alternatives to Christian or religious dogmas, for instance, the Freethinker must always remember the points on which he is ignorant. Charles Darwin was the illustrious example of this sincere approach. In his *Origin of Species* he many times frankly states and discusses the *difficulties* that lie in the pathway of "Evolution" as a scientific account of the adaptation of organisms. The true Freethinker then must be aware of the vast gaps in our knowledge as well as the points

wherein we have truth. To slur over such gaps with an assumed knowledge is the dogmatism of science or the dogmatism of philosophy, or rather of false science and false philosophy—every whit as dangerous as that religious dogmatism that would "explain" all things by the existence of a personal god or a triune deity. Hence, though Evolution is generally accepted nowadays in scientific circles—Materialism, insofar as by dogmatism it slurs over scientific ignorance; Atheism, insofar as it is merely destructive; positivism, while it declared the relation of the finite to the infinite to be beyond solution, and pessimism, which also treats the problem as beyond solution, but replaces belief by *no* system of enthusiastic human morality—these one and all are *not* identical with Free-thought. Questions concerning the nature of our conscious selves—the issue of immortality in its different meanings, or total extinction at death—we have no scientific justification for treating these as closed questions.

It is a profound reflection that there are a vast number of human beings whose thought is extremely subjective (and among these many "Secularists") who believe what they *want* to believe and reject and deny what they don't like. Personally, I have never met an unbiassed person, a thinking man must have convictions; but these must always be subject to correction and fresh evidence. A priori dogmatism is and should remain the preserve of the Christian believer. And then, of course, *toleration* of another's views must be the result of long thought, of patient study, of a single-eyed devotion to truth, even though its acquirement may destroy a previously cherished conviction. Since the publication of Sir J. G. Frazer's volumes and the writings of Dr. Carl Jung on the psychology of religion, the early nineteenth century approach is quite definitely dated—namely, that religion was merely another name for superstition and priest-craft, although these have played a large part in religious institutions. The time has come when among serious students a distinction should be clearly seen between the fundamentals of *religion* and the dogmas of the historical religions. The contemplation of the starry heavens at night, even without a telescope, is surely staggering. "The un-devout astronomer is mad," said eighteenth century deism; to-day we are more apt to think that the uncritical astronomer is dense. As William Archer remarks in *God and Mr. Wells*:—

"There is a sort of colossal stupidity about the stars in their courses that overpowers and disquiets us. Consciousness itself is essentially greater than the very vastness that appals us, seeing that it embraces and envelops it."

The non-theist thinker can see and accept the unifying principle in which all things are linked up—"the starry heavens above and the moral law within"—which the Buddhist philosophers have always known as the *Dhamma*—the good law that shapes existence, leading all life onwards and upwards to its highest goal—enlightenment—which is life's end and aim; and *this* is surely the moral, social and scientific ideal of the religion of the future.

R. J. JACKSON.

THE CARDINAL'S INHERITANCE

They say the cardinal's family,
Whose blood's quite blue,
Has one heirloom, so cosily
An old corkscrew.

OSWELL BLAKESTON.

ACID DROPS

Looking through a biography of the late Mr. David Lloyd George, we recently encountered the following diverting anecdote. As is well known, Mr. Lloyd George, before becoming a nationally-known figure, won his spurs in connection with the Welsh nonconformist agitation against the then established (Anglican) Church in Wales. In the course of his agitation, Mr. Lloyd George visited a Welsh town where he was due to address a public meeting on the subject. Introducing him to the audience, the local chairman announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, we have with us, to-night, Mr. David Lloyd George, who has come to address us on the subject of the English Church in Wales. Ladies and gentlemen, the Bishop of St. Asaph spoke in this hall last night and told us that the English Church had always been the best friend of the Welsh people. I have no hesitation in declaring that the Bishop is the biggest liar in Wales, but in Mr. Lloyd George here, thank God, we have his match."

The Pope has at last proved beyond all possibility of doubt whatever that God exists. He has discovered that the earth was created 5,000 millions of years ago, and therefore God did it. What more wonderful proof could there be than that? As for Genesis, he rejects with scorn that a day in Genesis means a day, and that the Universe was, therefore, created with all its contents in six days. Our anti-Evolutionist rectors and all-believing scientists who imagined that when the Word of God said the date of the Creation was 5,000 years ago it meant it, have once again to learn that when the Pope says a thing it really comes from God Almighty and must be believed. Amen and Selah!

The optimism of our Christian friends is surely astonishing, for we learn from the *Christian Herald* that, at long last, the man has arrived upon these shores who is capable of converting these islands to Christianity. Perhaps we ought, rather, to say, reconverting it. He is the Reverend Roland Brown, an American evangelist. And in, say, another twenty years time, the Lord, we presume, will raise up another evangelist to succeed where Rev. Brown failed, as he, in his turn, tries to do what a host of previous evangelists, from John Wesley to Moody and Sankey, have failed to achieve.

There were seven of them, five little girls and two little boys of tender school age. Six sat on the pavement, their backs resting against a front garden wall, and one little girl as teacher standing on the kerb. They were playing at scripture lesson in school and the ten commandments were being chanted. No doubt, as a whole, there was a holy mix up, for as we passed six shrill infant voices were piping out, "Thou shalt not commit adultery in the presence of thine enemies"—advice certainly worth remembering.

For the benefit of the more "educated" listeners, the B.B.C. has just finished on the Third Programme a series of lectures on the "dying God" in Paganism and Christianity with a priest putting everybody who disagreed with him in their proper place. There was only one "dying God," it appears—Jesus Christ. He was "historical," while all the others were myths. In this logical, lucid, and rational way, Paganism is kicked out of the Third Programme, and all its hearers should now go bodily over to God's own Religion. Of course, the possibility that Jesus Christ is as mythical as Attis was not

even discussed; but one day—we hope—it will be, and won't there be ructions in the Christian camp!

Every now and then we get a gem of the purest water in our Spiritualist journals. For example, in an account of Mr. R. J. Lees, a medium who flourished at the close of the last century, we are told that "through his psychic powers he was instrumental in tracking down the infamous Jack the Ripper." Now if ever a murderer was *never* tracked down it was this monster—and to this day no one can say for certainty who he was and, of course, he was never "tracked down." If the *Two Worlds* denies this we shall be happy to give space for any evidence from the police that he was tracked down entirely through Mr. Lees' "psychic powers."

Just as all reincarnationists believe that in their former lives they were princes or high priests or great ladies, and never slaves or dustmen, so our mediums, finding it very unprofitable to get in touch with an ordinary Gladys or George, are turning more and more to the great figures of the past. Here we have Mr. S. O. Cox in his *Talks with the Immortals* contacting Plato, Euripides, and Chopin. What about making a speciality now of Biblical heroes and heroines? There are Solomon, Esther, Noah, Jonah, Habakkuk, Peter, Paul, and of course, Jesus Christ himself, all of whom would no doubt be only too glad to help God Almighty with another Revelation for a world of sinners. And at a pinch, could not the Lord in all his Majesty be contacted in the same way?

So the Design argument is now vindicated. In Australia, enormous bush fires are threatening homes and thousands of cattle have been destroyed, prayers for rain have been offered up. In Italy, the deluge of rain has brought burst river banks, widespread floods, ruined homes and many lives lost. Prayers have been offered up to stop the rain. Surely only a wise designing Mind could produce such a cock-eyed arrangement!

"New Monasteries" we learn are being reopened shortly, "including one in the heart of officially Atheist Moscow." We are anxiously awaiting the news that Lenin has been canonized as a saint of the Holy "Orthodox" Church. In which case, perhaps the Vatican will follow suit. Lenin, it is true, was an atheist but, then, so have been many of the Popes. Perhaps when the Red Dean has been slung out of Canterbury by our Tory Government, they may give him a berth in the new monastery in "atheistic Moscow."

The "Daily Express," organ of the pious Lord Beaverbrook, recently astonished us by quoting Thomas Paine. No, not *The Age of Reason*! If the Beaverbrook organ had quoted *that*, then we could almost think that "The Age of Reason" had arrived actually.

"The Rev. Arnold Mallinson, Vicar of St. Frideswides, Oxford, and St. Margaret's, Binsey, is appealing for stuffed owls to put in the belfries to discourage bats." We can quite understand a church having bats in the belfry; it seems congruous with the mentality of so many of the worshippers below! But what we would like to know is, why import owls? We always thought that the owl was the symbol of wisdom.

"THE FREETHINKER"

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

ERRATA.—We much regret that the names of two of our contributors were inadvertently omitted in last week's issue. The poem, "Primer of Progress," on page 415, was by Mr. Arthur E. Carpenter, whilst the article, "To End Wars," on page 420, was by Mr. A. R. Williams. We tender our sincere apologies to both these gentlemen who are, of course, regular contributors to this journal, and whose work is always so appreciated by our readers.

In our issue of November 25 the donation marked "Railwaymen's Club," etc., should read "B. Dupree, £2 12s. 0d."

THE FREETHINKER will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates (Home and Abroad): One year, 19s. 2d.; half-year, 9s. 7d.; three months, 4s. 11d.

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.

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

Lecture Notices should reach the Office by Friday morning.

SUGAR PLUMS

Under the fostering care of its efficient secretary, Mr. Harry Cleaver, the West London Branch, N.S.S., goes from strength to strength at its regular meeting-place in the "Laurie Arms," Edgware Road, London, W. The branch holds crowded meetings Sunday after Sunday. The lecture syllabus is not confined purely to religious questions, but embraces impartially wide political and cultural fields.

The last two Sundays have been distinguished by two outstanding lectures delivered, respectively, by Mr. Adrian Brunel and Mr. Peter Cotes. Mr. Brunel, the Founder and President of the Paine Society, spoke on Thomas Paine and added many interesting and little-known details to our knowledge of that immortal figure in the story of the mental and political emancipation of our race, whilst Mr. Cotes spoke on "The Play of Ideas" and handled this double-barreled title with remarkable skill.

In Mr. Cotes' case, practice has long accompanied theory; for years past, he has been fighting a lone and courageous battle against the soulless and brainless commercial monopolies which have reduced the West End stage virtually to the intellectual level of a game of skittles. The lecturer replied in a masterly manner to an animated discussion. The Branch President, Mr. F. A. Hornibrook, presided over both lectures. Next Sunday, the speaker will be one of London's great figures, Mr. Bonar Thompson, orator, wit, and author, who will speak on "Shakespeare and Shaw," and those present may expect an unorthodox lecture marked by that peculiar combination of wit, irony and eloquence which have made Mr. Thompson a household word to London audiences.

Readers of *The Freethinker* who contemplate giving books as Christmas presents, might find something suitable in the list of our contributor, Mr. William Kent. The prices of his books—mainly on London—range from one shilling to twenty shillings. The latter is the price of the revised edition of the *Encyclopædia of London*, which contains half a million words and has sixteen illustrations. A list can be obtained on application to 71 Union Road, S.W. 4 (Mac 2007). There will be no extra charge for autographs!

OBITUARY

R. H. ROSETTI

It is with profound regret that we have to announce the tragically sudden death on Sunday last, December 2, of Mr. R. H. Rosetti, President of the National Secular Society. A biographical notice appears next week and an appreciation of his lifelong service to the National Secular Society and to the cause of Freethought.

The cremation will take place on Friday, December 7, at Mortlake Crematorium, Chertsey Arterial Road, S.W.14, at 11 a.m. No flowers by request.

"THE FREETHINKER" FUND

Donations for the week ended Saturday, December 1, 1951: H. W. Mitchell, £1; W. McKee, £4; G. Swan, 10s.; A. Brooks, 5s.; H. E. Prince, 14s. 9d.; Mr. and Mrs. J. F. A., £2 2s.; A. Hancock, 1s. Total for week: £8 12s. 9d. Total received to date: £357 7s. 5d.

The Secular Sunday School, Pole Lane, Failsworth, is producing the three-act light comedy "Mountain Air" by Ronald Wilkinson at 7-30 p.m. on Saturday, December 8 and 15, and Tuesday and Thursday, 11 and 13 at 7-45 p.m. All seats are bookable at 2s. 3d. each, children, 1s. Tickets from 7, Lord Lane, Failsworth.

ANOTHER ANTI-EVOLUTIONIST

A READER from the North was good enough to send me a pamphlet written by C. J. Stranks, M.A., M.Litt., the Canon of Blackburn, entitled *The Faith and Practice of a Christian*. Canon Stranks, it appears, takes classes in Philosophy and, in one of these, he boasted that just as Einstein had demolished some of Euclid's propositions after they had been accepted by the world for over 2,000 years, so Evolution will be laughed at as a kind of unproved theory in a few years from now, and people will once again go back to the Rock of Ages, the unconquerable Bible, as a Revelation from God Almighty.

But the worthy Canon does not discuss Evolution in this pamphlet. As he is primarily addressing Christians who already believe—it is published by the Adult Education Committee of the British Council of Churches—he has filled his 24 pages with the same kind of mixture of Christian exhortation and twaddle familiar to anyone who has been reading this kind of stuff for even a year. There is not an original line or idea in it. For 2,000 years, something like this has been yelled at people from pulpit and market place, or from books and pamphlets, and the same sorry exhibition of nonsense will certainly continue long after we are dead.

How can Canon Stranks explain the necessity of such a pamphlet? Have not the Christian Churches been teaching Christianity almost ever since the New Testament was being compiled? Why is it that Christians have always to be exhorted, wheedled, cajoled, explained to, threatened and, for that matter, humbugged into believing the Grand Old Story?

According to Canon Stranks, everything in the New Testament is literally true. He believes what the early Christians and the Christian Fathers believed, Devils, Goblins, Angels, and all. But surely the men and women who "accepted the message" were the biggest idiots in history? To put forward such fools as "examples" for modern man to follow is really something which sometimes makes one despair of progress.

Look at Jesus cursing in no uncertain terms everybody who did not "believe"—damning them to eternal flames. Judaism is silly enough in all conscience, but it never went as far or as low as that. It taught that people should "honour" their parents—but in the beautiful teaching of Jesus we are clearly told that, unless one hated his parents,

he could not be his disciple. And no one more clearly showed how he hated his parents than the Lord's Anointed. There is nowhere in the Gospels one decent word uttered by Jesus to his mother; and as for Joseph, that poor old gentleman disappears very early in the narrative and everything said afterwards about him is—as the Christian Church admits—unadulterated myth.

According to Canon Stranks "Jesus was born and brought up in a working-class home." This is funny enough in all conscience. For centuries we have had dinned in our ears that Jesus was a Prince—the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace, the Greatest Prince Who Ever Trod This Earth; but such stupid adulation is rather out of date these days, so Jesus is now a Working Man, no doubt also the Greatest Working Man Who Ever Worked. There is, of course, no evidence whatever to show what the home life of Jesus really was, and no wonder. There never was a home life. Like Jesus himself, it is just a myth.

Jesus is always, in the Gospels, indulging in arguments with "the Jews." And naturally always beating them. Seeing that the Gospels in the form we have them were all written about 150 years after his supposed death, that is, written up and edited, can one wonder that Jesus always beat "the Jews" in argument? During the war, Canon Cockin came to the microphone with an "unbeliever," and had some excellent "discussions" with him. The unbeliever was always beaten, and eventually became a "believer." It was Canon Cockin himself who wrote the script for both the believer and the unbeliever so it was a dead easy victory for the "Faith." We are never likely to hear of Canon Cockin meeting, not a tame and reverent Rationalist, but a vigorous Freethinker who insists that the whole story of Jesus is just sheer fiction, and that the Son of God is just as mythical as the Lord himself.

As the "death" of Jesus is based on the myth of the Dying God of Paganism, the Gospel writers had to show "the Jewish leaders" as "angry and jealous," though there is not a scrap of evidence anywhere for this ridiculous assumption on the part of the Gospels and Canon Stranks. The passages in Josephus which mention Jesus are the rankest forgeries, given up by most Christian authorities, and the great historian never mentions a word about the "Jewish leaders" being jealous, or has a single word on the events after the mythical death of Jesus. Fancy a Jewish historian relating in the greatest detail hundreds of trivial incidents happening in Palestine and Jerusalem at the time, and not a solitary word about Paul, Peter, the Blessed Apostles, Stephen, or anything whatever so fully related in that book of fairy tales, the Acts of the Apostles! It is incredible, if the events really happened.

Canon Stranks tells us that "by the death of Christ it was made possible for God and man to be brought into close relationship again." For sheer fatuity this would be hard to beat. What does it mean? Does anybody know? Does Canon Stranks know? Has *he* come into closer relationship with God? Why, he has no idea of what "God" actually means, let alone be in closer relationship with him. There is no word in our language which has caused so much discussion as this word "God," and in spite of the learned tomes which have been written about it, no one is a whit the wiser. People get on just as well without either the word, or what it is supposed to stand for. If Canon Stranks imagines that people think of *him* as "a man of God" in the same way as we think of a man with a motor car, he had better think again.

There is one very artful way in which the "message" of Christianity is got over and that is, by mixing the supernatural balderdash on which it is founded with the best

modern ethical teachings as if they were part and parcel of one another. Nothing could be more deliberately dishonest. The early Christians were expecting the end of the earth—of all earthly life—and "faith" was of infinitely more consequence and value than "works." Moreover, a "sinner" who "repented" was much more welcome by Jesus than ninety-nine ordinary people. A "sinner" who believes is even in these days of more account than a decent, honest man who looks upon Christianity as a hotch-potch of myths and legends, and Jesus himself as completely unhistorical—as I do.

Canon Stranks' pamphlet is hardly worth even this notice. As I pointed out, it is just a boring repetition of what most of us have read thousands of times—the kind of evangelical tosh which used to fill religious tracts so much more prevalent when I was a boy and which, for sheer lunacy, would be hard to beat. They had no value and this particular pamphlet has no value. It means nothing in our modern life.

By the way, I notice that the publishers have issued several other pamphlets "for further reading." They are supposed to be for "adults," but if they are like this one, what an indictment of our modern education!

H. CUTNER.

THEATRE

"**Women of Twilight.**" By Sylvia Rayman. Vaudeville Theatre.

THIS is a grim, sordid, depressing, and remarkable play of some merit, by a new author.

There is always a certain quota of plays exposing social abuses, but they seldom offer a solution. In this respect, *Women of Twilight* is no exception. Of recent years we have had *The Gorbals Story*, and pre-war we had that masterpiece, *Love on the Dole*. This one deals with an unscrupulous woman who runs a boarding house for unmarried mothers. The conditions on which this is run are cruel and dishonest, for she trades on the unfortunate position of these girls, and there is neglect of the babies on a scale which can only be criminal. Yet not one of these girls has the gumption to form a united front against her, although they are not all intimidated.

In fact the woman finally brings about her own downfall by what amounts to almost unpardonable clumsiness, and this is perhaps the main weak spot of the play. Otherwise it is well constructed, the characterisation is good and the dialogue excellent.

The terrifying villainess is played with a certain amount of charm and in a most convincing manner by Barbara Couper. The whole cast were good, and it is not to be little the others that I single out Joslin Parlane as the good girl, in a refined performance, and René Ray—the father of whose child was executed for murder. Vida Hope, a powerful actress, is awe-inspiring as a servant. Miriam Karlin has captured the prostitute, with off-shoulder frock, dog and room in Soho.

In many respects the idea of this play is not unlike that of *The Monkey Puzzle*, by Shirley Cocks, which dealt with a tyrannical woman who ran a house for old people. It seems Miss Cocks's idea was not in the right setting, but she did not miss her goal by much.

RAYMOND DOUGLAS.

MATERIALISM RESTATED. Fourth edition. By Chapman Cohen. Price 5s. 3d.; postage 3d.

SOCIALISM AND RELIGION. By F. A. Ridley. Price 1s. 3d.; postage 1½d.

CORRESPONDENCE

THE LATE JOHN SEIBERT

SIR,—May I add a brief word of tribute to John Seibert. I found in him a fellow worker for international freethought with a view uncircumscribed by any narrow patriotism. He was always helpful and understanding. "The world was his country and to do good was his religion."

To me, his death is not only a loss to our cause, but a personal one.—Yours, etc.,

C. BRADLAUGH BONNER.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

SIR,—In your correspondence columns of your issue of November 11, all three letters have reference to my recent contribution.

The first from Mr. Carpenter. I would remind him that he has his prototypes in both Germany and Japan, as well as other countries, namely, the people who believed in what their respective military forces carried out at our expense. He says he is proud as a Briton. My freethinking has no national boundary, but embraces all the world. I see militarism as an evil by whomsoever practised. It is the final argument in the struggle by rival national groups for raw materials, trade routes, spheres of influence, etc. I know of no cause which justifies wholesale slaughter, and the vast devastation accompanying.

As to J.R.R., he accuses me of being a "victim of his own mental condition." As to which has the fuddled mind, I am quite prepared to be tested against him in any examination set by, say, the Editor of *The Freethinker*. I did not champion German warmongers, and his charging me with so doing proves that his is the fuddled mind.

I appreciate Mr. Raymond Douglas's reply and I confess I do not know enough about the third son to be able to charge him with cowardice. If the charge can be truly laid against him, then calling him a kind of conscientious objector is not justified. My whole objection to the sentence quoted was the implication that cowardice implied conscientious objection.

Would Mr. Douglas say "as the boy also hated shedding of blood and could not bring himself to fight" he was therefore a coward?—Yours, etc.,

EDMUND J. FORD.

THE CREATION MYTH

SIR,—Re Mr. Cutner's pertinent comments in your November 11 issue on the support still given to the ancient Creation myth by certain scientists: it would probably not be difficult to unearth some scientists who still believe in witches and in the Bible command that they be put to death, in poltergeists, human parthenogenesis, possession by demons (insanity), astrology, and almost any sort of foolishness. Not very long ago all scientists believed that the world was flat. Columbus's insistence, before a Board of priests and scientists, that the world was round very nearly cost him his life, for blasphemy!

A scientist has to have some knowledge, but he is not necessarily intelligent. Just because a man is a scientist, with some specialised knowledge of, say, plant diseases, or metallurgy, or synthetic resins, his opinion of the Creation legend is just as worthless as that of anyone else unless he has made a careful, critical study of *Evolution and of the history of the origins of primitive religious beliefs*. Since without knowledge opinions are worthless.

Unfortunately for the rapid diffusion of truth there are, all over the world, from Lambeth Palace to the Witch-Doctor's hutch in Central Africa, and from the Vatican to the Head Hunter's temple up the Amazon, very powerful vested interests organised to maintain people's belief in ancient religious superstitions—their bread and butter depends on it. Also, most people, having no time or inclination for study, are content to swallow their opinions ready-made, from their parents, teachers, newspaper, or favourite film actress. They just believe what they were told to believe as children. They don't worry about such a tiresome thing as *evidence*, except when compelled to do so in a court of law. In an unbiassed search for truth you base your verdict solely on the evidence, not on what somebody else thinks or tells you to believe.

The massed evidence for evolution contained in geology, astronomy, anthropology, biology, etc., is absolutely overwhelming, as anyone of average intelligence who takes the trouble to spend a few hours reading in any good public library can see for himself. The only evidence for creation is contained in ancient writings of unknown date, origin and authorship, the obvious imaginings of a primitive mentality.—Yours, etc.,

M. C. BROTHERTON, Comdr., R.N.

MUDDLED IRRATIONALISM

SIR,—While I am all for freedom of expression, especially in the pages of *The Freethinker*, there is surely a limit where freedom ends and unlicensed abuse begins, and it seems to me that in his vicious and irrational attack on people in Germany, J.R.R. has passed it.

As rationalists we hold the biological specimen, *homo sapiens*, to be a single species of animal life, which acts in certain specified

ways in certain specified circumstances, and we recognise no biological differentiation between the specimens of this animal by reason of their geographical, social or other environmental nuances. Like most animals the *hominidae* act in a vicious manner when frightened, and these of the English or German habitat, between 1940 and 1945, were very frightened indeed.

"We began to bomb objectives on the German mainland before the Germans began to bomb objectives on the British mainland. This is a historical fact. . . . We have shrunk from giving our great decision of May, 1940, the publicity it deserved. This was a mistake. It was a splendid decision."

These were the words, not of Dr. Gobbels or Hitler, but of a member of Mr. Churchill's wartime Government.—Yours, etc.,

P. C. KING.

ANY QUESTIONS?

SIR,—I note you are having a Secular meeting on Thursday to ask for questions.

Here's one. "Why has Christianity now been reaching to the uttermost parts of the earth, after Jesus said: 'Go ye unto all the world and preach the Gospel'? It has!!!"

2. Why was Charles Bradlaugh an Atheist, agnostic, and his brother a Christian? Do you know what a Christian is?

3. Reading *The Freethinker* about the Festival, did you go to the Central Hall, Westminster, during the Festival to see what Christianity is doing? You wouldn't go I don't expect.

"By their fruits ye shall know them."

God open your eyes and minds to all that is lovely, positive and not negative.—Yours, etc.,

W. G. LERCELON.

OBITUARY

JOHN V. SHORTT

We greatly regret to record the death of another Freethought stalwart of the North—John V. Shortt, who died last October at Preston. An ex-Catholic, he always prided himself on his early break from Catholicism and, for over twenty-five years, carried on active propaganda for Freethought, both from indoor and outdoor platforms. He has left a fine legacy of friendship for his impartiality and tolerance to those who differed from him. Our sincerest sympathy goes to his family—his wife, two sons and a daughter.

W. P.

LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

OUTDOOR

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

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (St. Mary's Gate, Blitzed Site).—Lunch-hour Lectures every weekday, 1 p.m. Speaker: G. WOODCOCK.

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, 12 noon: L. EBURY and W. G. FRASER.

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

INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, 6-45 p.m.: E. V. TEMPEST, "Freedom in Capitalist and Socialist Society."

Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1). Tuesday, December 11: R. S. W. POLLARD, J.P.: "The Divorce Commission at Work."

Glasgow Secular Society (McClellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: A Debate—"That Russia is the Greatest Threat to World Peace." Affirmative: Mr. H. W. HENDERSON. Negative: Mr. KEITH S. BOVEY.

Leicester Secular Society (Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: Mr. E. W. SHAW, "The F.B.I., Democracy and Freedom."

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, 2-30 p.m.: Mr. JOHN C. DANIELS, B.Sc., M.Ed., "An Eye Witness Account of the Changing Face of Poland."

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, December 9, 11 a.m.: Mr. S. K. RATCLIFFE, "The Religion of Bernard Shaw."

West London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, W.1).—Sunday, 7-15 p.m.: BONAR THOMPSON (the famous Hyde Park orator), "Shakespeare or Shaw?"

POPULATION IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

I WAS interested in the "Acid Drop" (September 2) re Black Death being increased by the destruction of cats as witches familiars.

It is well known that Rome and Italy generally were more populous under the Empire than later on, in the Dark Ages. I have seen this attributed to malaria; but it seems to me that the real cause of the deterioration was the abandonment of the sanitary engineering of the Empire period. Rome had sewers and water supply by aqueducts, as also had many other cities of the Empire.

After the establishment of the Christian religion, these works were allowed to decay, as it was felt that churches and monasteries were far more important to man's welfare.

The pagans practised cremation, and burial of the dead *outside the city walls*. Christianity, on the other hand, preferred to bury under the church floor, around the walls, and in the land immediately surrounding the church itself (churchyard). The introduction of infant baptism, just over the decaying corpses in the crypt, with water drawn from a well in or near the churchyard, is, I think, the real cause of the drop in population that occurred; infant mortality must have increased enormously; and attendance in church, breathing the corpse-exhalations, must have had a bad effect on those who did survive to maturity.

Perhaps something like a thousand million babies have been poisoned at the font. It is well known that, down to the early nineteenth century, all the cities and large towns had death-rates exceeding their birthrates; that is, they kept up their populations by immigration from the adjacent rural areas. This is true of all Europe, and the enormous increase in the population of India during this century was caused by the improvement in refuse collection and conservancy pails where there is no sewerage system; also waterworks with piped supplies instead of wells.

The opposition of Christians, particularly R.C.'s, to birth control is therefore peculiarly hypocritical. Especially when we remember that, until the loss of sovereignty by the Popes in 1870, the Roman Catholic Church practised the castration of choir boys to prevent their voices from breaking; as the service of the larger Cathedrals were impeded by the loss of voice by choir boys just when so much trouble had been taken to train them.

M. BAKER.

THE CONWAY HALL "BRAINS TRUST"

On Thursday, November 29, a very successful "Brains Trust" was held under the auspices of the National Secular Society at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C. For two hours a keen and critical audience bombarded the platform with questions, which were efficiently answered by a team consisting of Mr. F. A. Ridley, Editor of *The Freethinker*, Mr. Len Ebury, Vice-President, N.S.S., and Mr. J. W. Barker, of the National Executive. The chair was taken by the late President of the N.S.S., Mr. R. H. Rosetti.

The questions covered a very wide range of subjects, ranging from poltergeists to the relationship of secularist philosophy with current questions of a political nature. One question put the platform in the unusual position of having to explain Christian dogma to Christians! In his concluding speech, the last, unfortunately he was destined to deliver to a secularist audience, the Chairman, Mr. Rosetti, pointed out how impossible such a tolerant and comprehensive discussion would have been in the dogmatic circles of religious orthodoxy. Altogether a most successful evening which introduced the philosophy of secularism to a considerable number of newcomers previously unacquainted with its dynamic message.



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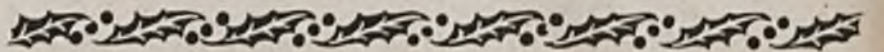
GOD AND THE UNIVERSE. By Chapman Cohen. A Criticism of Professors Huxley, Eddington, Jeans and Einstein. Price, cloth 4s. 3d.; postage 3d.; paper 2s. 6d.; postage 2d.

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