

# The Freethinker

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Editor: F. A. RIDLEY

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ONE of the principal differences in English religion between the 19th and the 20th centuries lies in the household observation of religious practices. When the present writer, who was brought up in strictly religious ways—we hope that we do credit to them?—was a child, family prayers were still the recognised procedure in god-fearing families: that is, in respectable middle-class circles.

Nowadays, the practice, or so we gather from the agitated complaints of the clergy, has fallen into almost complete disuetude, due, perhaps, to the current housing shortage or, even, to the present startling growth of religious indifference which, despite the feverish efforts made by the churches to hide it, has continued uninterrupted for the past half-century.

## A Steady Best-Seller

Certainly, whatever the actual cause may be in the falling-off of family devotions, it is not to be found in any shortage of Bibles. For "God's Holy Word" is, or so we are continuously assured, a steady "best-seller": in fact, "the best-seller" of all "best-sellers." No modern novelist, we are assured, not even Dickens nor—if we may bracket them together—the late Miss Ethel M. Dell, equals the Holy Scriptures in their steady uninterrupted circulation. In fact, the only rivals of the Christian Scriptures in selling capacity are, or so we should imagine, the Holy Scriptures of other rival Faiths. What is the average yearly sale of the Koran in Muslim communities, we do not know, though it should be large, to judge from the fact that even more extravagant claims are made for its authorship and divine inspiration by Muslims than are made for the Christian Bible by even the most Fundamentalist believers. Behind the "Iron Curtain," the new political "Equator" that now divides our planet, the State-sponsored editions of the Communist Founding Fathers, Marx, Lenin and Stalin are also alleged to enjoy astronomic circulations, as, in Nazi Germany, did the late Mr. Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. However, the reasons for buying the above volumes are not necessarily *religious*, nor even *literary*, in character!

## Wanted! More Readers

However, whilst it would appear from statistical returns that the Bible still sells, it does not, nowadays, appear to be read: or so, at least, we gather from the frequent appeals by our clergy to read "God's Holy Word" more regularly and more frequently. From which it would appear that the sacred volume, more often than not, is left to repose amidst silence and cobwebs in obscure corners or on remote shelves in the average library. That, in fact, "God's Holy Word" has now attained what is said to be the hallmark of a recognised classic: everyone has heard of it, but no one ever reads it!

## Royalty to the Rescue!

However, the above state of things is not the fault, in England at least, of either the Church or the State. We

are still, thank God, sir, a Christian country! Or are we? Officially, at least, we are. For we have a State-Church to look after our souls—on condition, of course, that we look after its pockets!—whilst our monarch is, officially, Christian of the Anglican persuasion: that is, in England, for, as we have pointed out before, by a theological metamorphosis, as soon as our Sovereign crosses the Tweed he, or she, automatically becomes—a Christian, still, but one of Calvinistic, Presbyterian persuasion. However, in both these State-Churches the Bible bulks large. Nor are we allowed to forget this, for, at each successive Coronation, the newly-crowned monarch is presented with

a Bible, with the high-sounding description, "the most valuable thing that this world affords." A gratuitous insult to all the Queen's non-Christian subjects? Even from the purely literary point of view, a somewhat peculiar judgment on the language and literature which has produced Shakespeare! Is Isaiah really a better poet than Milton? Or the clerical authors of *Kings* and *Chronicles* better historical writers than Gibbon or Macaulay?

## A New Circulation Drive

However, despite the fact that the Holy Book receives every ounce of publicity that Church, State and B.B.C. can conceivably give it, the sad fact still remains that the people who buy do not actually read the Sacred Scriptures. This melancholy fact was brought home to us recently when that stately pillar of the True Faith, Broadcasting House, informed us on the Home Programme that a new circulation drive has just been launched with the object of inducing the general public to take up again the formerly prevalent, but now neglected, practice of Bible reading. This "drive" was suitably inaugurated in St. Paul's Cathedral, the Dean and Canons of which national institution make, incidentally, a good deal more, per annum, we imagine, out of Christianity than did the Holy Apostle after whom their episcopal church is named!

## What Has She Read?

Amongst the distinguished and devout congregation which met on that occasion to launch anew the masterpiece of the Holy Spirit, was Princess Margaret. However, whilst Her Royal Highness may actually be possessed of all the virtues which are ascribed to her in the popular Press, we doubt if she could be accurately described as a profound Biblical scholar: we doubt, in fact, if she could give us, off-hand, the dates ascribed by Biblical criticism to the First and to the Second Isaiah; or even whether Her Royal Highness could tell us off-hand what are the distinguishing characteristics of the Jahvist and Elohist narratives in the Book of Genesis? In fact, whilst her name will, no doubt, be used largely in the coming campaign for Bible readers, we doubt whether she is at all well-read in the higher criticism of the Bible. Has she read, or has she even heard of, Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, or Walter Cassel's *Supernatural Religion*, pro-

## —VIEWS and OPINIONS—

# God's Holy Word

—By F. A. RIDLEY—

bably the two greatest works on Biblical criticism in the English language? Has she read *anything* on this subject, the cheap reprints of the R.P.A., or even our *Bible Handbook*, which, we suppose that we may say, as we had personally no hand in its production, is about the best short introduction to the subject in the English language? Has she even read our distinguished predecessor, G. W. Foote's, *Bible Romances*? Perhaps, in these unbelieving days, we may even relevantly ask, has Her Royal Highness even read the Bible itself, except in her official capacity?

### The Study of Comparative Religion

At the last National Conference of the National Secular Society (1953) a resolution was proposed and carried, that the study of comparative religion should be made a regular subject in the current educational curriculum. We are very much afraid that, in the current political set-up, there is not much chance—more's the pity!—of any such addition being made to the current curriculum by any prospective government, whether Tory or Labour, under the present leadership of those pious Christian statesmen, Messrs. Churchill and Eden, on the one hand, or Messrs. Attlee and Morrison, on the other. However, the best possible antidote to the present drive, and to future drives to read the Bible, is not to attack the Holy Book so much as to *read* it and to *understand* it in its secular literary and historical contexts. For, once understood and appreciated in its proper historical context, the collection of miscellaneous Jewish and Christian narratives arbitrarily selected

and compiled, on completely unscientific, literary and historical principles, by Jewish rabbis and early Christian clerics, takes its proper place amongst the sacred books of the East. As such, the Bible will cease to be the Fetish Book that it is to-day, and will become one of the monuments of ancient literature.

### Literature and Dogma

A century or so ago, the celebrated literary critic, Mathew Arnold, extended his literary researches into the sphere of Biblical literature and wrote an interesting and important book on *Literature and Dogma* which can still be read by the critically-minded reader with both pleasure and profit. Briefly, the great critic's thesis was that our Bible, or, at least, the *Old Testament*, was a compilation of the surviving literature of the ancient Hebrews, and that the fundamental fault of modern theological scholarship is to study it as the imaginary vehicle of religious dogma, and not, as it actually was, as the surviving literature of an ancient people reflecting the ways of living of a by-gone age. As a human—in parts, as our *Bible Handbook* effectively indicates, an "all too human"—compilation of the present Biblical books, as and when divorced from their fictitious supernatural origin, are of great historical, literary and anthropological interest. Such, too, is the viewpoint of the essentially modern science of comparative religion. We venture to recommend this scientific view of "God's Holy Word" to Princess Margaret and to her clerical sponsors.

## The B.B.C. Muzzles Shakespeare

By P. VICTOR MORRIS

WHEN the B.B.C. presents a play of Shakespeare, and has to complete the performance in a space of two-and-a-half hours, some cutting is unavoidable. On Monday, 19th October, I listened to a broadcast of "Henry V," and before doing so, studied the cast as given in the *Radio Times*. I noted that two of the Bard's characters had been omitted from the B.B.C. version of the play. They were the Bishop of Ely and the Duke of Burgundy.

Some acquaintance with the queer mentality ruling at Broadcasting House leads me to submit that this choice of characters to be dropped was not dictated so much by the need to save time as by prejudices with which every department of British broadcasting is infected.

Without a Bishop of Ely, the play had to jump from the Prologue spoken by the Chorus to Act I, Scene 2. Now the omitted Scene 1 consists of a dialogue between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely, in which the Archbishop is revealed as an arch-conspirator, purposing to encourage the King to lay claim to certain French dukedoms, and thereby divert the attention of Parliament from a bill that, if passed, will relieve the Church of a large part of lands bequeathed to it by the devout. I can imagine the B.B.C. mind thinking that it will never do for the British public to be put wise to the fact that our national poet regarded high dignitaries of the Church as scheming politicians, to whom rapine and bloodshed by an invading army were unimportant compared with the preservation of ecclesiastical property.

The Duke of Burgundy has nothing to say until the last act, but when he does speak it is to deliver an eloquent appeal to the kings of France and England on behalf of:—

“. . . naked, poor and mangled Peace,  
Dear nurse of arts, plenties, and joyful births.”

The forty-five lines of blank verse that the Duke is given to contain the best poetry in the play. Is it fair either to the author or to the public to cut out this gem of pacifist and anti-militaristic thought from a work that is otherwise full of battle scenes and warlike speeches? To do so gives a one-sided and false view of the spirit and genius of Shakespeare.

I submit that other and better cuts to save time could have been made instead of these chosen by the B.B.C. The tennis balls incident, the exposure of the three traitors at Southampton, the Pistol, Nym and Bardolph comedy, and scenes at the French Court could have been pruned with advantage, and Shakespeare's acute study in priestly duplicity and his magnificent comparison of Peace and War left in. However, I am afraid that this would call for not merely a better sense of perspective at Broadcasting House, but a radical change of heart.

## REPORT

An excellent audience received Mr. H. Cutner at the Heretics Club at Oxford on November 4, and his address on the *Theory of Jesus* provoked a very good discussion. The lecturer was glad to see that some of his statements were vigorously disputed, the undergraduates responsible by no means accepting his conclusions. Altogether it was a memorable evening.

Mr. Cutner's address on "Why I am an Atheist" before the Woking Muslims on November 7 also provoked a long discussion. Naturally, such inveterate Theists did not allow him to get away with the argument, and for over an hour he had to submit some first-rate criticism, very well put. But the optimism of some of those present—that one day Mr. Cutner would become a good Muslim—we are afraid is doomed to disappointment. All the same, it was a great pleasure to meet so many hitting opponents.

# A Chronology of British Secularism

By G. H. TAYLOR

IT is a matter of some difficulty to decide when the history of secularism began. The term itself, in our use, dates from 1851, but the secularist outlook was implicit before that, and I shall start at the opening of Holyoake's career. What follows was primarily based on J. E. McGee's *History of the British Secular Movement* (Haldeman-Julius, 1948), but in checking the latter I have had recourse to a variety of other sources, such as local histories and memoranda, published and unpublished reminiscences, conference proceedings and annual reports. The late Mr. F. C. C. Watts was most helpful. In particular, I have tried to complete McGee's account from information probably not available to him in America, profiting, for example, from contact with our veteran members, both personally and through their recorded utterances; these include the late Ambrose Barker, the late T. F. Palmer, and that Tyne-side stalwart, Joseph Close.

McGee's history is surprisingly detailed and objective, the more remarkable in being published so far away from the scene of events. It is the only work of its kind on a national scale, and it is in no spirit of disparagement that I have made some attempt to attend to the following defects: (1) There are numerous minor errors in it, mainly in respect of N.S.S. branches, which do not detract from the central theme, and which perhaps indicate dependence on very old hand-written matter; (2) There is some unnecessary repetition, possibly the result of compiling the work over a long period; and (3) Though the information up to about 1904 is as full as could be wished, and to about 1922 quite representative, the author appears to have scraped about for material to cover the subsequent period. Let us not, however, dwell on this note: one must not be niggardly or stinting in praise for a most laudable and painstaking effort, which in its field is unique.

I am adopting the chronological method in preference to the stream method largely used by McGee, because I like to look at the cross sections, leaving the reader to pick out the threads which interest him most.

\* \* \* \* \*

1840. Under religious pressure a young instructor at Birmingham Mechanics' Institute, George Jacob Holyoake, aged 23, has to resign his position; he then becomes Owenite lecturer at Worcester.

1841. He goes to Sheffield in a similar capacity. The clergy now strike at heretical Owenism by getting its money collections stopped unless a religious oath is taken: many comply with this but Holyoake is among those who refuse and so he again loses his position. He goes to London, where he hears heresy more advanced than his own at the Hall of Science, where he meets Richard Carlile. After four numbers of *The Oracle of Reason* have appeared its editor, Charles Southwell, aged 27, is fined £100 and sent to prison for a year for blasphemy, and Holyoake takes his place as editor. During a lecture at Cheltenham, Holyoake is provoked and trapped into blasphemy and sent to Gloucester gaol for six months (for saying the Deity should be put on half pay). At this time Henry Hetherington is also given four months for blasphemy.

1842. Holyoake is again lecturing for Owenism at Worcester: he then becomes a branch secretary in London.

1843. Richard Carlile dies after his eventful career fighting religious bigotry. Having lost by imprisonment for blasphemy four editors in succession, *The Oracle of Reason* dies. Holyoake is co-founder of *Movement*, the organ of the Anti-Persecution Union, of which he is secretary.

1844. Robert Taylor dies. *Movement* fails.

1845. Holyoake is Owenite lecturer at Glasgow. The failure of an Owenist community leads to some disintegration in the movement, many regarding religion as the barrier first to be removed if free criticism is to prevail, and Holyoake is among them. Southwell's autobiographical *Confessions of a Freethinker* appears.

1846. Holyoake founds the *Reasoner*, a weekly organ for Owenism.

1848. Holyoake is co-editor of a short-lived Chartist paper, *The Cause of the People*, and although he is on the executive of the Chartist Union he disagrees with its leaders.

1851. A nodal point in the struggle is reached: SECULARISM BECOMES EXPLICIT. Trying to start a movement, Holyoake issues a statement of secularist doctrine from what he calls the Central Secular Society, London, proclaiming (1) science as the true guide of man, (2) morality as secular, not religious, in origin, (3) reason the only authority, (4) freedom of thought and speech, and (5) that owing to the "uncertainty of survival" we should direct our efforts to this life only. His statement shows affinities with the ethical side of Owenism, he adopts Utilitarianism, and he admires Comte's Positivism as "the scientific Bible of secularism."

1852. The central society, if it ever existed in anything but name, has now disappeared, but it has served its purpose, because scattered Owenite societies and groups now style themselves "secular," and individuals outside Owenism form other secularist bodies. The Leicester Secular Society is among those existent. Holyoake speaks at a Manchester conference and his *Reasoner* falls in line with the new secularist movement: plans are made for a national organisation. A Congregationalist minister, the Rev. Brewin Grant, who has set himself the special task of combating the rise of secularism, is one of Holyoake's debating opponents.

1853. Holyoake sets up a news and book agency and also purchases a reformist publishing concern, and these merge into a bookselling business at 147, Fleet Street. There is a steady output of propaganda, and Holyoake is agitating for the freedom of the press.

1854. An anti-church monthly, the *Investigator*, appears. Holyoake continues his public debates with Grant and others, and among his publications are a secular catechism and a book of secular prayer.

1855. At last the newspaper stamp is abolished. At another secularist conference the plans for a national association are still abortive: there is, however, much give and take between local secular societies in the matter of exchange of lecturers and in combined excursions. Hitherto isolated secularists were finding moral ammunition in contacting others of similar outlook.

1856. The London Secular Society, which is acting as a sort of parent body to five other London groups, founds a general benevolent society for all secular societies. Moreover, the social aspect is developing with picnics and concerts, the latter, one imagines, home-made. Religious pressure has removed Sunday bands from the public parks and the secularists not only energetically protest to Palmerston but also lend aid to a Sunday League for providing private bands.

1857. Another sentence for blasphemy gives impetus to the agitation for the repeal of the blasphemy laws.

(To be continued)

## This Believing World

To listen to B.B.C. broadcasts, and to read pronouncements from our Bishops on the Bible, one would imagine that it still held the place it held before modern criticism exposed it as a hotch-potch of credulous Oriental myths and legends. The other evening we had a broadcast from Mr. Eric Fenn, who is the literary secretary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and his address might well have been given in the 16th century. The Bible was still God's Precious Word, and the 19,817 books which have been written—many by Christians—in the past thirty years to prove conclusively that it was not, might just as well not have been written. And—let us face it—there are still millions of people who agree with Mr. Fenn.

We were pleased to see that one of our contributors, Mr. George Ross, had a devastating attack on the Sunday of the Lord's Day Observance Society in the *Dundee Courier*. He had no difficulty in pointing out that Sunday was not the Sabbath of the Scriptures, and he added that, in any case, "Sunday, Sabbath, and Lord's Day originated neither with Jew nor Christian but in Babylon." We congratulate the *Courier* for having the courage to print such a letter in the Sabbatarian wilds of Scotland. Half the success of the L.D.O.S. results from the fact that so few editors dare allow any attack on the ghastly Lord's Day.

All readers of "The Freethinker" should make a point of answering, whenever they can, in their local paper any boost-up of Sabbatarianism—or indeed any absurd defence of Christianity. Even religious editors know the value of some vigorous correspondence in their columns, and often allow a hard-hitting Freethought criticism to appear. And there is nothing the Churches hate more than such criticism.

We noted with not a little amusement how Roman Catholics have, all over England, reacted to the Protestant pamphlet attacking their infallible Church. The *News Chronicle* prints in one number eleven letters on the question from one side or the other and, as a cross section of Christian belief, these letters are almost—unbelievable! Talk about Christian love and toleration—they thoroughly support the way in which gentle Jesus denounced, for no reason whatever, the Pharisees. But there was one letter printed which the D'Arcys and the Knoxes will hate like poison. It is from an ex-Roman Catholic who went over to Anglicanism after being in the Roman Church 45 years. He could not stand Roman Catholic "totalitarianism"!

The Bishop of Norwich thinks it a mistake for the Church of England not to continue making saints, and only allowing that a few people from the very early days of Christianity were really saints. We think it a mistake, too. We would just love to see a few more holy men and women refuse to wash themselves for the rest of their lives, or shave. We want more believers to wear a prickly shirt for always, or lie on a nail-studded door, or refuse to eat anything but grass, and drink only dirty water. Why do not our Bishops and Archbishops give a lead? Why does not the Bishop of Norwich emulate that heavenly saint, Simeon Stylite, and live on a pillar for the rest of his life? Would it not be a glorious example of precept and practice?

A heading in "Psychic Realm" made us rub our eyes with wonder. It was, "Helen Hughes Supplies Missing Link"! Was it possible that a "medium" had at last got that for which our anthropologists and evolutionists had

been searching for nearly a century? Alas, Mrs. Hughes' "Missing Link" had no more to do with evolution's "missing link" than with ice cream. All it was, was the name of someone—the usual dreary proof of "survival" which is always a proof to fully believing Spiritualists and to no one else.

Our very religious Home Secretary has at last discovered like the late Mr. Chesterton, that "Christianity has as yet never been tried" which, at the time it was said, must have made God's Own Infallible Church gasp in wonder. But if it has never been tried, how does he know it will stem the rising tide of crime of all sorts in our Welfare State? As true Christianity always means giving the other cheek, does Sir David Maxwell Fyfe claim that if a man has his place of business robbed, he should allow his place of residence also to be thoroughly robbed? If not, what does he mean?

## Theatre

**Witness for the Prosecution.** This arresting title covers Agatha Christie's new play at the Winter Garden Theatre. The author is firstly a novelist, and this is apparent when she comes to drawing characters. However, in this play she has done some of her best characterisation and everything—from this angle—would have gone very well had she not made the people step out of character in the last scene in order to supply us with a surprise ending. It is, of course, a typical Christie climax, and it is a clever detective who can find the guilty party.

The play serves to point out that it is possible to trick the law if one is clever enough, for the law is a machine that works according to a prescribed rule. On the other hand it may be safely assumed that no legal provision would be necessary to cope with the leading characters in Mrs. Christie's play, for it is unlikely that they could exist.

The general standard of acting by a large cast is good, but notable are Patricia Jessel as the clever and scheming wife who takes the title part, and Derek Blomfield as a rather likeable and slightly naïve young prisoner charged with murder. Milton Rosmer's performance as a solicitor is one of great integrity.

**George Dandin**, by Molière (translated by John Ekers Redwood) at Bolton's Theatre is not a play of much light and shade. George Dandin is a rich peasant who has married well. His young wife is regarded as highly virtuous by her parents, but she is in fact carrying on a flirtation with a nobleman in full view of her husband. His repeated efforts to expose her infidelity to her parents fail every time.

Joseph Burns as Dandin has captured the spirit of the part, although his intonation is Irish. William Lawford also gave a creditable performance.

The play is preceded by **This Property is Condemned**, a sketch (which is almost a monologue) by Tennessee Williams. It deals with a destitute and neglected school girl in a small Mississippi town who draws a vivid picture of the sordid life around her. This is difficult to put over effectively, and Suzanne Wilde struggled with it not quite successfully.

RAYMOND DOUGLAS

**THE BIBLE HANDBOOK.** By G. W. Foote and W. P. Ball. Price 4s.; postage 3d. (Tenth edition.)

**THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE MYTHICAL CHRIST.** By Gerald Massey. What Christianity owes to Ancient Egypt. Price 1s.; postage 2d.

# THE FREETHINKER

41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1.  
Telephone: Holborn 2601.

## To Correspondents

A. P. STURROCK.—Thanks for cutting. You can obtain *Freedom* from "Freedom Bookshop," 27, Red Lion St., London, W.C. You did not enclose your address.

DAN EVANS.—Pleased to see you at 41, Grays Inn Rd. We have now looked up your query. *The Freethinker* of 1904-5 contained articles on Evan Roberts' "Revival," but no special literature appears to have been published on it.

## Lecture Notices, Etc.

THE FREETHINKER will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates (*Home and Abroad*): One year, £1 4s. (in U.S.A., \$3.50); half-year, 12s.; three months, 6s.

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 Secretary of the N.S.S. at this 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.

### OUTDOOR

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Every Sunday, 7 p.m.: FRANK ROTHWELL.

Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Every Sunday, 8 p.m.: Messrs. BARKER and MILLS.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Deansgate Bomb Site).—Every weekday, 1 p.m.: Messrs. WOODCOCK and BARNES. Every Sunday, 3 p.m., at Platt Fields, a Lecture.

North London Branch (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, noon: F. A. RIDLEY.

### INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, November 15, 6-45 p.m.: Open Night.

Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, November 17: E. BATSON, "Bernard Shaw, Immoralist and Heretic."

Glasgow Secular Society (N.S.S. Branch) (McLellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street).—Sunday, November 15, 7 p.m.: GUY ALFRED, "Is Atheism Out of Date?"

Leicester Secular Society (Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, November 15, 6-30 p.m.: H. S. TOMLINSON (Leicester City Council), "The Value of a Standard."

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, November 15, 2-30 p.m.: JACK LINDSAY, "The Byzantine Empire."

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, November 15, 11 a.m.: A. D. HOWELL SMITH, "John Bunyan, the Man and the Writer."

West London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, W.).—Sunday, November 15, 7-15 p.m.: J. G. SHARP (League Against Cruel Sports), "This Cruelty Called Sport."

## NOTES AND NEWS

Several interesting lectures have rewarded the numerous and, we are glad to record, steadily increasing audiences which, during the winter session, attend the lectures of the West London Branch, N.S.S. On October 18, Philip Sansom, well known as an eloquent and picturesque exponent of anarchism, spoke on "The Anarchist Way to Fight Religion." Mr. Sansom, in addition to his current rôle as agitator, is a member of the Editorial Board of our contemporary, *Freedom*, several of whose excellent articles on religious issues we have sought, and obtained permission, to reprint in *The Freethinker*. On October 25, Mr. Alec Craig, well known for his courageous defence of literary liberty, gave an illuminating talk on the current state of the law in relation to the banning of allegedly "obscene literature."

November 1 was something of a "red letter day" in the annals of the West London Branch; for the speaker

on this occasion was Mr. Joseph McCabe, a household word the world over, wherever religion is discussed or a critical outlook upon it defended. Mr. McCabe, who is eighty-six years of age upon November 11, must have something like a hundred books to his credit, several of which are already Freethought classics, and must have addressed, literally, thousands of meetings since he quitted the Church and the Franciscan Order in, we seem to remember, the year of Grace, 1896. Mr. McCabe addressed the West London Branch on "The Prostitution of Religion" with a vigour which makes us look forward to his centenary address on his hundredth birthday! The last of a great generation who is still in harness, Mr. McCabe is, we should say, now probably the greatest living exponent of the critical standpoint in religious affairs, besides being, we should imagine, the most prolific serious writer in contemporary English literature. More power to his pen!

Last Sunday, on November 8, Mr. F. A. Ridley, who needs no introduction to the members of the National Secular Society, spoke at the West London Branch on that dramatic but little-known episode, the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820. For the benefit of readers of *The Freethinker* who may not be familiar with the topography of West London, we may indicate that Cato Street, the name of which was recently—for the first time since the conspiracy in 1820—restored by the Marylebone Borough Council, is situated within a few yards of "The Laurie Arms," where the West London Branch has now held its meetings for a number of years. Mr. Ridley's lecture was, consequently, of local as well as of historical interest, and was listened to with great interest by a numerous audience. Thanks to the untiring efforts of the Branch president and secretary, Messrs. F. A. Hornibrook and H. Cleaver, the Sunday meetings of the West London Branch go from strength to strength, and now take their appropriate place as one of the highlights of London's intellectual life.

Our indefatigable contributor, Mr. H. Cutner, has also been on the oratorical warpath during the past week. On Wednesday, November 4, he addressed the Oxford University "Heretics" Club on the myth theory, of which he is a recognised exponent. We shudder to think of the possible effects of such a demonstration on the traditionally theological university of Cardinal Newman and of so many other famous pillars of orthodoxy! On November 26 the "Heretics" are in for another shock! For Mr. Len Ebury, vice-president of the N.S.S., will give them one of his famous straight-from-the-shoulder talks on the atheist case. "The home of lost causes," as Oxford is traditionally termed, is in for some shocks this winter!

Meanwhile, Mr. Cutner continued his critical pilgrimage from Jesus to Muhammed. For, on Saturday, November 7, he addressed the London Muslims on "Atheism." To tackle the Bible and the Koran, the two infallible "Words of God," in such close sequence is a dual feat of which few people would be capable. However, we do not doubt that our erudite and hard-hitting contributor proved equal to both occasions. We fear that his entry into the much written-up glammers of the Muslim Paradise is now as remote as his prospects of the more sober joys of the Christian Heaven!

Here's news! We were aware that the Sunday Press, headed by our esteemed contemporary, *The News of the World*, ran regular astrological columns on "What the stars foretell." But we must confess that it is news to us that England had an "official astrologer" during the war, one Louis de Wohl. However, *The Evening Standard* stated this a few days ago. Any questions?

# Existentialism: The Road to Nowhere

By C. McCALL

EXISTENTIALISM must be regarded as an outstanding phenomenon of our time. It claims adherents in many parts of the world, and in France it has assumed the nature of a cult. Even the least philosophical visitor to Paris hears of the existentialist cellar clubs of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and learns that it is the fashion to visit them. True, they are not likely to unburden the secrets of the philosophy from which they take their name, but they have helped to make it a household word. So, too, have the powerful novels and plays of Jean-Paul Sartre. But it is hardly surprising that Existentialism is little understood in this country, for its writings are generally abstruse, even in their original languages, and few are available in English translations. Then again, they are diverse in content.

Last year, however, saw the publication of two books which endeavoured to present existentialism to the English rationalist reader. *Six Existential Thinkers*, by H. J. Blackham (Routledge & Kegan Paul), and *The Feast of Unreason*, by Hector Hawton (Watts), vary in tone and intention, for Mr. Blackham is sympathetic and explanatory, whereas Mr. Hawton is avowedly critical. Thus, though covering virtually the same ground, the books are complementary and corrective.

Broadly speaking, I am with Mr. Hawton. Existentialism is representative of the irrationality around us and must receive the critical examination of rationalists. But I would go further. I find it necessary to relate existentialism and, indeed, all philosophies, to what I regard as the essentially scientific philosophy—materialism. The latter affords the basis for a thoroughgoing investigation and is more precise than the chosen positions of Mr. Hawton ("Reason") and Mr. Blackham ("Humanism").

The fundamental division in philosophy is, on the one hand, that being is primary (materialism) or, on the other, consciousness is primary (idealism). On both of these bases one may "build a world." But, among intellectuals one often detects a singular distaste for materialism coupled with a realisation that idealism is exploded. For dwellers in this philosophical "no man's land," some "third way" of escape is required, and such an avenue is proposed from time to time, either rising above the distinctions between materialism and idealism or correlating them. Of such is existentialism: a development of Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology, which Mr. Blackham aptly describes as being "interested in the world of experience rather than in the experienced world." For Husserl, knowledge of external objects came through "intuition of their essence" and after him the phenomenological method—in the words of its Hungarian materialist critic, Professor Georg Lukacs—"believes it has discovered a way of knowing which exhibits the essence of objective reality without going beyond the human or even the individual consciousness." Sartre confirms that this is the existentialist view. "There is [he says] no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity."

This subjectivity and specific concentration upon individual existence is quite unreal. To the materialist, man is a social animal: his speech, his thinking, his activities, his very existence are inseparable from the social milieu. Although it is possible erroneously to merge the individual in the group, it is impossible to understand him except in relation to the group, and it is in social relationships that human values evolve. Existentialism isolates the individual in a completely false way and endows him with a free agency which he does not possess. To quote Sartre:

"The existentialist . . . finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. . . . Everything is . . . permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn [and] without excuse." "Abandoned" and "anguished" are other existentialist epithets for the plight of man.

Dramatisation, rather than interpretation, would seem to be the characteristic feature of existentialism: dramatisation of the human situation. Sartre distinguishes between two orders of being, *en-soi* and *pour-soi*: things as they are, in themselves, and for themselves, respectively. These two modes are quite distinct and are responsible for the dilemma in which man finds himself (or Sartre puts him!). We are continuously striving to unite these two modes of being, to make them whole and coherent, yet we are doomed to failure. This makes life "absurd." And life is absurd in Sartre's estimation. As he has written in his philosophical tome, *L'Être et le Néant*: "It is absurd that we are born, it is absurd that we die."

A sense of doom is, likewise, evident in his novels. That they provide stimulating reading is undeniable, though a favourite device of their author is to jump from one character to another in the middle of a paragraph, so that one often has to ask, "Who is he describing now?" Admittedly his trilogy, *The Age of Reason, The Reprieve, Iron in the Soul*, now extended to form a tetralogy, deals with the fateful years prior to the last war and the fall of France, literally years of doom for France and Europe. But it gives Sartre the opportunity to express his existentialism, as when Mathieu, the philosopher, exclaims: "I am compelled to be free!"

Such feelings are also met with in Kierkegaard and Heidegger, particularly in the latter's emphasis upon "dread." Dread, as distinct from fear, seems to have no cause and is more disturbing. It invests everything with a "common worthlessness" and—as interpreted by Mr. Blackham—"encloses me in a solitude, where I am forced to choose whether I will be myself or not." Vague and meaningless though it is, dread becomes the most significant of the emotions, leading to the supreme moment of choice between a continuation of "inauthentic" existence and a new and vital one. With a weird existentialist logic "nothingness" loses its only valid meaning (the negative of something) and takes on an existence of its own. Nothing becomes some-thing for both Heidegger and Sartre. "I am nothing" is another remark of Mathieu.

Death, too, has a strange fascination for Heidegger, and he reverses Spinoza's proposition that the free man thinks of nothing less than death. The free man is dominated by the thought of death, he says; which is not only morbid but untrue. Death is a fact, of course, and a fact which has to be faced, but it is not the "goal" of our lives (as Heidegger would have us believe). Nor is it "absurd" (as Sartre states); it just—is.

Though there is more to existentialism than this, I think it should be clear that there is much irrationality in it. The individual philosophies differ on important questions as well as in emphasis, but Mr. Hawton is surely right in indicating their irrational content, for this is common to them all. Mr. Blackham holds that the time has not yet come "to attempt a sober historical assessment." Possibly not, but that should not prevent us from making a critical assessment. To materialists, the various philosophies are seen as products of the recent or present-day world, typical of the dilemma in which many intellectuals find themselves. For the latter, they seem to offer a third or middle

way between materialism and idealism and, more particularly, an alternative to Marxism. Sartre has defended existentialism as humanist, and Mr. Blackham (*The Plain View*, Spring, 1953) finds the importance of existentialism "in expressing the crying need for humanism." I cannot agree with Mr. Blackham here. Existentialism is too unscientific to be of use to humanists. It is, veritably, the road to nowhere.

## An American Looks at Europe

By IRA D. CARDIFF  
(Concluded from page 354)

IN the past two wars, the loss of life ran into many millions, and the financial loss to several trillions of dollars — losses so appalling, so staggering, as to defy the human comprehension. In America alone it has already saddled a debt of over ten thousand dollars upon every family, to say nothing of the continuing costs from pension and bonus raids upon the public treasury for another generation — likewise additional indirect costs from incompetent professional patriots in public office.

In the initiation of these wars, the common man has had little choice. He has invariably been the victim—done the fighting, suffered the losses of limb and life and, if he survived, was in most abject poverty for the remainder of his days. Nor did the various nations as such ever win. A few, on rare occasions, secured temporary gain from plunder and theft, but virtually all emerged from every war bankrupt—win or lose. The one invariable net result was increased hatred of their neighbours—a hatred which has been undying and revengeful.

However, national bankruptcy rarely has been a deterrent of war. Even though the people frequently, in their national assemblies, refused financial support to the militarists, the latter would see to it that their spies furnished sufficient alarming "information," or their agents provocateur were able to create the necessary border incidents to alarm the populace; in fact, rarely has it been possible for the people to cope with the military cabals who withhold from the public important information, falsify records, conduct systematic propaganda and persecute pacifists with charges of treason or lack of patriotism. The creation of war hysteria is by no means original with the United States of America and Nazi Germany, nor confined to the twentieth century. Likewise, throughout the long record of bloody European wars, that "fine Italian hand," protected by ecclesiastical vestments, has been invariably behind the scenes, manipulating the political wires and securing especial privileges — always on the side of the militarists and monarchists; e.g., the Pope refused to approve the Magna Carta, and issued an interdict against all England because of the adoption of this charter of liberty for the people.

About the middle of the nineteenth century, European wars became less frequent—in Europe. Most European nations, during the last half of the century, were engaged in foreign conquests—stealing large chunks of territory from so-called uncivilised people — subduing and Christianising these "heathen." Thus Europe was afforded a respite from war for a couple of generations. Then, early in the twentieth century (1914) "Germany invaded Belgium," or "Belgium invaded Germany," depending upon the viewpoint, and the First World War was on. It ran true to form in at least two particulars—created more hate and set the stage for another war. On the other hand, the various European states learned a new trick. Following previous wars, these small nations, if they could not plunder their neighbours or exact indemnities,

would go to work and recoup their lost fortunes. However, following the First World War, it was discovered that it was much easier to "borrow" from a sucker nation in the New World. This "borrowing" habit soon assumed epidemic and gigantic proportions. Inside a couple of years, 17 nations had "touched" the United States for almost 16 billion dollars. These "loans" enabled the war-loving Europeans to re-arm for the next patriotic holocaust, as a result of which the United States again "lease-loaned" these same criminals an additional \$45,000,000,000.00 plus a couple of hundred billion war expenditures on its own account. And the United States is still pouring the money into this happy home of Mars. Thus, in the past few decades, the United States has dumped over three hundred billions into this dismal swamp of death and despair, known as Europe. Has it ever been worth this much?

But this financial loss is insignificant in comparison to the suffering and loss of life. World War I had over 37,000,000 casualties, while World War II probably enjoyed close to a hundred million. Reflect for a moment —A HUNDRED MILLION CASUALTIES in one war, equal to the total populations of England, Scotland, Wales, France, Belgium and Holland. On top of all this is the tremendous destruction of property, of homes, of works of art, of national monuments, museums and libraries, plus more human suffering and grief than the human race has endured in the previous millions of years of its existence.

In view of this experience, have we a right to expect any permanent, worthwhile results from any effort for European betterment?

Since writing the above, ex-President Hoover has advised that we furnish Europe with no more men or money until she rearms herself. The advice would have been better if the period were after the word "money"; in other words, if he had omitted the last four words.

## The Goligher Circle

In the number of *Psychic News* for October 10, the Editor very angrily denounced me for not believing in Spiritualism and for saying that Dr. W. J. Crawford, who had written a couple of books on his experiences with Katherine Goligher (I regret that my typewriter let me down and spelt the name wrongly), found out that he had been tricked, and committed suicide. The Editor of *Psychic News* wants me to "substantiate" this statement.

Well, of course, as Dr. Crawford is dead, I cannot prove it in the way a mathematical problem can be solved. I might just as well ask the Editor to prove that the Fox sisters, through raps on a table, found out that a pedlar had been murdered, by producing the ghost of the pedlar.

That the Goligher circle was a huge fraud was shown by the investigations of Dr. Fournier d'Albe (who was, I believe, himself a Spiritualist) after Crawford's death. As J. F. Rinn points out in his book, *Sixty Years of Psychical Research*, "Dr. d'Albe, after reading all of Dr. Crawford's notes on his experiments, took up the investigation of the Goligher circle on May 15, 1921. Through the use of shadow photographs, as well as by investigating the methods of the circle, he discovered that Katherine Goligher had produced her phenomena through fraudulent methods."

Personally, I have not the slightest doubt that Crawford found out that he had been tricked, and it probably deranged his mind. And I said bluntly what I thought. Mr. Archer (I hope that I have his name right as Editor) has the right to think otherwise — and that is all there is in it.

H. CUTNER.

## N.S.S. Executive Committee, 5th November

Present, Mr. Ridley (in the Chair), Mrs. Venton, Messrs. Ebury, Griffiths, Taylor, Hornibrook, Tiley, Johnson, Cleaver, Corstorphine and the Secretary.

Twenty-three new members were admitted to the Parent, West London and Bradford Branches.

It was agreed that the 1954 Annual Dinner should be held on Saturday, February 27, at the Hanway Room, Lyons Oxford Corner House. The President, Secretary, Treasurer and Mr. Johnson were chosen as a sub-committee to make all arrangements. An invitation for the N.S.S. to be represented on "The Humanist Council," a body formed for liaison and public relations by the Ethical Union, the Rationalist Press Association and the South Place Ethical Society, was considered, and it was decided to accept. Reports of lectures by Mr. Clayton, the re-starting of open-air meetings by the Blackburn Branch, and the Chorlton Town Hall meeting on B.B.C. religious broadcasting were considered. Satisfaction was expressed with the first two items, and the Committee's special thanks for Mr. McCall's splendid presentation of the Society's point of view at the latter meeting were expressed.

The Committee heard with deep appreciation that Mr. Charles H. Smith, the veteran Secretary of the Birmingham Branch, had sent a donation of £100 to the Society now, in lieu of a legacy later. The Secretary was instructed to send a letter of gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Smith for the enthusiasm and loyalty that had prompted this generous gift.

The President reported that he and the Secretary had attended a quarterly meeting of the Central Board for Conscientious Objectors, and that the cases reported to the meeting were all such as the N.S.S. could support.

P. VICTOR MORRIS, Secretary.

## Correspondence

### ACTION OR THOUGHT

SIR.—The article in *The Freethinker* of September 4, 1953, by W. H. Wood on "Rationalism and Tolerance" stresses freedom of thought.

What is the point of freedom of thought or of speech if the action which follows from either or both are punished or suppressed?

One may shout "Fire!" as a joke, a hideous one, only to cause panic and death in a case where there is no fire. It is freedom of thought and speech, none the less.

I do not believe in freedom of all "action," certainly not for enemies against me.

A prisoner may grumble and yet secure no action. Since I do not support freedom of all "action" in this materialist world, it follows I do not uphold all freedom of thought or speech.—Yours, etc.,

CHAS. E. BERRY.

### CHRISTMAS—A CHRISTIAN SURVIVAL?

SIR.—It is refreshing to read Mr. Du Cann's common sense about Christmas. The whole pathetic rigmarole is obsolete and ridiculous, and it is high time that civilised people began to disregard what is mere folklore plus a lucrative racket for the tradesmen.

To enlightened freethinkers many birthdays are of importance—including that of Christ, perhaps; but no single figure deserves to be placed on a pedestal and removed from the sphere of rational criticism. Let us have a calendar of benefactors to humanity through the ages, and let us honour their memory if we choose so to do—but *not* in the rather gross way of over-indulging our appetites and over-exciting ourselves generally. If the turn of the year was celebrated by honest attempt to give a "good time" to the poor and unfortunate, there would be some justification for it. Something is needed to enliven the worst period of darkness and bad weather in this dreary island of ours—I have more than once tried to stimulate interest in the possibility of a conference or other gathering of a fairly serious nature (at least serious enough to exclude paper hats and parlour games); one would imagine that such a project might find support among freethinkers to whom Christmas means nothing. But, so far, no one has given my suggestion any thought at all. Perhaps it is impracticable, as even freethinkers are usually more or less "committed," to borrow a word from Sartre, with other less rational friends or relatives. But at least could we not make a beginning by cutting out Christmas cards and suchlike conventional hypocrisies—sending the

cash thus saved either to the N.S.S. funds or to some other worthy cause of our own choosing?—Yours, etc.,

EVELYN BELCHAMBERS.

### SWISS PLACE NAMES

SIR.—I read in *The Freethinker* of October 9, 1953, that Ulrich Zwingli was a native of Zürich. You might be interested to know that Ulrich, or Huldreich, Zwingli was born at Usighaus, a part of Wildhaus in Canton St. Gallen. I have been 22 years in Switzerland and have visited his natal home. Zwingli became a naturalised Zürcher.

Anent Bern, I cannot guarantee it but I heard that the last Zähringer duke so much liked the legends of the exploits of Dietrich (Theodrich) of Bern (= Vrona) that he also called his town which he built Bern. Furthermore, Schaffhausen should be derived from Schiff (=ship) owing to the Falls of the Rhine. Looking for a totem Bern would naturally choose bear and Schaffhausen the sheep.—Yours, etc.,

JOHN GRANTHAM.

### CANADIAN REACTION

SIR.—The enclosed cutting from the *Vancover Sun* of October 2, 1953, may be of interest to you and to readers of *The Freethinker*.

The term "Socred" is a contraction of "Social Credit"—the political party at present in power in the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia. The Alberta premier's impression of the British people is not surprising since the "Socreds" are noted for their religious fervour and constant reference to "the need for God-fearing men in governmental positions."

It goes without saying that Social Credit is the newest form (in Canada) of political reaction and as usual walks hand in hand with religion, in this case protestant evangelical religion.

You may use this letter and/or cutting in whatever way you think best.—Yours, etc.,

JS. IRVINE JONES.

### THE FEAR OF GOD

SIR.—The people who immediately reaffirmed their faith in God at the close of the Victor Morris lecture did so out of fear, obviously. They were in a sweat to show God that they were uncontaminated by the freethinking speaker. "The fear of God was deep in them. Does God value this terror-devotion? If I were a god I wouldn't think much of the religion of any Christian, which is sheer opportunism: just the old heaven and hell routine. Is that fine? I think it's plenty shabby in any civilised being. And what a poor opinion it shows of this god's intelligence, that he can't see through this sort of devotion. Men of fine minds dealing in such primitive notions is one of the wonders of the world. Truly, religion is the opiate of the people.—Yours, etc.,

J. F. K.

### WHY DON'T WE CARE?

SIR.—Incisive remarks as Meslier's, if extreme, are a tonic. A letter in "Federal News" said "Three-quarters of the world's population see our light as a warning of destruction, exploitation, repression and hypocrisy." We know whom to blame. From our Hyde Park rostrum was once recited an American poem "Why don't He seem to care?" Very trenchant. Can any reader supply?—Yours, etc.,

HARRY FIDDIAN.

### THE COST OF ROYALTY

SIR.—When one likes to use *The Freethinker* for propaganda purposes it is discouraging to find Mr. Matson immobilising you in issue of October 23 by referring to "the homeless multitudes who are taxed to provide several whole villages, besides palaces, and one parasitical family." Where are these homeless multitudes, and how do you tax them? Such stuff, sir, should be kept for the factory gates, where it belongs, and not infiltrated into *The Freethinker*. If the Royal Family vanished overnight no one would be a penny in pocket. Taxes, railway fares, rent, cigarette prices, cost of *The Freethinker*, anything you like to name, would remain just what it was, or, if it changed, would more likely go up than down.

There was some excuse for republicanism in Bradlaugh's day. Republics were few, and there were some rum monarchs. Now, however, the world is stiff with republics, and they are "nowt a lb."—Yours, etc.,

W. E. NICHOLSON.

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