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The Freethinker

Vol. LXXIV—No. 3

Founded 1881

Editor: F. A. RIDLEY

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THE Christmas season of 1953 passed to the usual accompaniment of hymns, carols and religious clichés, poured out in torrents for the benefit of the general public of this supposedly Christian land. In the domain of Christmas carols one noticed one or two changes in popular taste. For example, the beautiful continental carol, *Quiet Night, Holy Night*, which was virtually unknown in this country prior to the last few years, appears now to have become the most popular of Christmas carols and to have superseded, in that capacity, such old favourites as "Good King Wenceslaus." In general, however, the most recent Christmas ran true to type: its pre-dominating traits were seasonal platitudes, contrasting harshly with the grim realities of the actual world, imitation Dickens by the bucket, and commercial exploitation by the ton; a Christian-capitalist Christmas, which believed in serving God and Mammon at the same time and often by the same means.

begins anew his ascent towards spring; and thus promises fresh life to the dark world of winter. Long before the alleged birth at Bethlehem, December the 25th functioned as the Solar Birthday of the innumerable pagan gods who impersonated, successively, the life-giving Solar Deity.

All the above transpired in prehistoric times. But, even in the historic era, Christmas has a genealogy which did not begin with Christ. In so far as Christmas Day can be said to have a "god-father," it was the Persian god, Mithra, or, rather, his earthly representative and worshipper, the Roman Emperor, Aurelian (270-275 A.D.), who, in the year 274 of our era, proclaimed December the 25th as a

—VIEWS and OPINIONS—

Truth Will Out!

—By F. A. RIDLEY—

public holiday, the Feast henceforth to be celebrated throughout the Roman Empire as the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun," of Mithra, the Sun-God, the Divine Protector of the Roman Empire and, in particular, of the Roman Army. Since Mithra, as current survivals of his cult testify, was, pre-eminently, a military deity in special favour with the Roman Army. To Mithra, the Emperor Aurelian dedicated a temple at Rome, with a special state-endowed priesthood to sing the praises of the Solar God.

Christ Takes over "Christmas"

However, Mithra failed to look after the empire properly; the barbarians pressed on, and it became necessary for the Roman Empire to find a new celestial protector who would look after its terrestrial interests more efficaciously. So Constantine, born in, or about, the year of the first Mithraic Christmas — 274 — transferred his allegiance and that of the Empire to Mithra's chief rival, the Jewish god, Christ, and, along with the Roman Empire, Christ took over the birthday of his divine predecessor, Mithra. For Constantine the transition was easy, since it seems pretty clear that "the first Christian Emperor" was never a Christian in the exclusive sense, but went on worshipping Christ and Mithra, Son and Sun, down to the end of his days, impartially. From about 336 onwards Christ had a monopoly of December 25: "Mithramas" became the more familiar "Christmas." Previous to this date, the learned broadcaster was careful to point out, there was no agreed tradition in Christian circles as to when Christ was actually born. As, after all, a Christian cleric, one could hardly expect Dr. Micklem to suggest to his horrified listeners that this may have been because there never was a Birthday of Christ to record!

The Yule Feast

In northern lands, however, Christmas is a collateral, rather than a direct descendant of the Roman Mithraic festival. For in the bleak and frozen north, solar paganism, whilst identical in substance, took on superficially different forms to the solar cults of the warm Mediterranean lands. The "yule log," the holly, the mistletoe, immemorially sacred to the sun in Druidic rites—all these trappings of

A Startling Talk

There was, however, one exception to the normal seasonal output of sentimental tripe. It came from an unexpected source: a short talk on the Home Programme on "The Origin of Christmas," by the Reverend Nathaniel Micklem, a minister, we seem to recall, of one of the Nonconformist churches, possibly the Congregationalist. However, there was nothing particularly Christian, Nonconformist or otherwise, about the reverend gentleman's explanation of the origin of the holy festival. In fact, it could have been given by a member of the National Secular Society! We understand that Dr. Micklem has recently retired from the active ministry, which is, perhaps, as well in the circumstances.

A "Pagan" Festival

Briefly, what Dr. Micklem did was, in popular parlance, to "blow the gaff"! To reveal the actual historical origins of the Feast annually celebrated in ostensible honour of Christ's nativity. As such, his lucid explanation must have been an eye-opener to millions of listeners to the Home Programme, and left little to be desired from the Freethought point of view, even if he did not actually say very much that an educated Freethinker would not have known. In the ten minutes at his disposal, Dr. Micklem gave a quite lucid explanation of the actual historical genesis and subsequent evolution of this great "Christian" festival.

A Solar Festival

Dr. Micklem was quite candid in his explanation. Long before Christianity was ever heard of, prehistoric pagan cults, dating back, perhaps, to neolithic times, "celebrated" December the 25th, the shortest day of the year in the pre-modern calendar, as the Feast of the Winter Solstice, of the Solar Nadir, the point at which the life-giving sun

the modern Christmas spring from northern Norse and Germanic paganism, and not from the eastern cult of Mithra. So, also, does the famous "Father Christmas," that pagan Deity hastily baptised as "Santa Claus." It is actually rather curious that the pagan "Christmas tree," around which the Norse fairies originally danced, was introduced into the evangelical respectability of Victorian drawing-rooms by that pious Christian, the Prince Consort to Queen Victoria, Albert "The Good."

Modern Christian and Pagan Reactions

In Britain, the above facts appear to be virtually unknown outside the small Freethought Movement and, no doubt, a few students of comparative religion. On the European Continent, however, they appear to be more widely known, and have provoked both Christian and pagan reactions. In French Catholic circles, "Father Christmas" has been denounced from the pulpit as the German and pagan goblin that this contemporary of Odin and Thor actually is. The Catholic Church prefers the crib to the Christmas tree; Oriental to Norse paganism!

History of the Freethought Movement in Austria

By LEOPOLD SPITZEGGER (Vienna)
(Translated by Arthur Wild)

THE banner of freethinking in religious matters was unfolded in Austria in the revolutionary days of 1848. It was received with great enthusiasm. Carl Scholl, the former German Catholic and Free Religious preacher in Mannheim, carried on propaganda and worked with others for the newly-organised groups. (The German Catholic Movement had started in 1844 as a protest of Johannes Ronge, a Catholic priest, against the exhibition in Treves of a "holy tunic" worn in the opinion of Ronge's credulous contemporaries by Jesus before his crucifixion. Later the German Catholicism was united with the Free Religious Movement which also had started in Germany in the forties of the 19th century.—Translator's comment.) Unfortunately the victorious reaction destroyed also this thriving sprout of progress and used all its force to renew complete independence of the Church. This meant the suppression of the Free Religious Movement in Austria.

In 1887, Dr. Erwin Plowitz, the well-known writer and editor, founded in Vienna with 66 other members the Union of People Without Religious Affiliation. From this there developed in the course of time the Union of Freethinkers (1894), active also in Low Austria, and finally, after 1918, the Freidenkerbund Oesterreichs (Austrian Freethinkers' Society), covering all Austrian lands. In 1927 this important freethought organisation had nine Land Unions with 128 local groups. The Vienna Land Union with its 48 groups was the largest. Before it was prohibited, in the Spring of 1933, the Austrian Freethinkers' Society had about 45,000 members and its monthly periodical *Der Freidenker* had a guaranteed circulation of 50,000 copies.

The founders of the original Union were liberally minded middle-class men, but with the rising of workers' movement the Freethinkers' Society was more and more influenced by the Social Democrat Party. This was due also to the action of Ludwig Wutschel. The Society was becoming, under the control of this political party, a real business firm instead of being a movement of idealists. This led to the protest of well-known Freethinkers, e.g., of Angelo Carraro and Friedrich Haller, who seceded and founded a new Union called "Freigeist" (Freethought). A great majority of members stayed, however, in the old organisation and therefore the split remained without particular importance. The Freidenkerbund was a mass movement to which there belonged especially left-wing workers. In addition to it

Whilst in Hitler Germany, as our learned contributor, Arthur Wild, pointed out recently in the columns of this journal, an active pagan movement developed in the Third Reich which amongst other glorious relics of the undiluted Teutonic past, attempted to revive the pre-Christian yule log and other relics of the pagan past. Perhaps, indeed, we have not heard the last of such pagan revivals in Germany.

Truth Will Out!

In the course of his brief address, Dr. Micklem had not, of course, time to mention all the above features of the ancient cult of the 25th of December: But, in the ten minutes at his disposal, he did very well. We shall look forward to his next year's talk—that is, if the B.B.C. permits such outspoken talks in future. As long as Rationalists are forbidden to speak on the wireless, the best we can expect are rationally minded clergy of the type of Dr. Micklem. We congratulate him on his courage. In the recent Christmas orgy of sanctimonious humbug, his talk stood out the proverbial mile. "Truth will out"—even on the B.B.C.!

there existed the Ethical Community founded by Professor Friedrich Jodl and Marianne Hainisch. It was chiefly an organisation of Vienna intellectuals with hardly more than 1,000 members. Much greater, however, than the number of members was its influence. The refined and realistic way of its activity under the leadership of the writer, Wilhelm Börner, ensured to it a great influence on Austrian cultural life and unlimited respect in the eyes of its adversaries. These circumstances account for the longer duration of this organisation under the dictatorial régimes.

As a result of the unceasing educational activity of these organisations, in the census of 1931, 106,080 Austrians declared to belong to no Church. The majority—75,906—were Viennese. The total number of inhabitants of Austria in this census was 6,760,323. Most of the 106,080 had left the Roman Catholic Church after 1918. In certain years people were leaving in masses, e.g., in 1927 when 28,252 Austrians left Catholicism as a protest against the use of arms by the police against unarmed demonstrating workers. This was a sensible lesson for the Chancellor Prelate Dr. Ignaz Seipel. Also in the following years the numbers of Austrians leaving the Church were higher than 10,000. In 1933, however, under the strengthening political pressure the number sank to 3,020. In February, 1934, there began the great tragedy of the Austrian Freethinkers' Movement. Non-members of Churches were persecuted with great obstinacy and sacked from most State and other posts. The functionaries of the movement were sued in Courts under all possible pretences and all freethought organisations were prohibited. It is therefore understandable that from 1934 to 1936 almost 63,000 returned again to the Churches. The real ruler of the country was the triumphant Roman Catholic Church under Cardinal Theodor Innitzer. Only in this short period of time 37,000 people were forcibly converted to it. How many conscience conflicts and tragedies are hidden behind this number? Tens of thousands, moreover, brought great financial sacrifices to their independence before the victors saw them literally creep to the cross. The terror prepared in advance but it brought even worse events than this base proselytising. At Vienna University Professor Moritz Schlick, descendant of an old aristocrat family, fought for the rational teaching of Positivism. Hans Nelböck, a student who had

A Chronology of British Secularism

By G. H. TAYLOR

(Continued from page 5)

1882. Bradlaugh is again returned for Northampton and is still debarred. He is vigorously opposing royal grants. The Freethought Publishing Co. goes to 63, Fleet St. Camberwell Branch N.S.S., an offshoot of Walworth, acquires buildings and becomes a London stronghold. Foote becomes a Vice-President of the N.S.S. In a steady flow of pamphlets he is ridiculing Bible heroes. Symes exposes Christian persecution and Mrs. Besant takes up Bradlaugh's attack on the land system and also protests against the Egyptian war. A. B. Moss and Wm. Heaford are now contributing to *The Freethinker*, which so angers the bigots that a charge is brought against it and Foote appears before the Lord Mayor for blasphemy. The case is adjourned while the authorities consider how to get Bradlaugh implicated. The printer refuses to handle any more Bible sketches and the next issue (July 16) is without one; for July 23 he refuses to print at all, and continuity is saved by a few copies worked from a hand press at the last moment. For August 6 the term "comic" is dropped and there is a "Serious Bible Sketch", taken from an old Bible, and, of course, equally blasphemous. Foote's reaction to the Mansion House charge is to intensify the blasphemy, and *The Freethinker* proudly displays its new badge in heavy block letters on the front page. "Prosecuted for Blasphemy." The next Christmas number is deliberately designed to provoke the blasphemy law, and an indictment follows. Bradlaugh is giving valuable legal aid and Foote's supporters find securities for £600.

1883. Foote, his partner Ramsey, and the new printer Kemp are tried before a Roman Catholic judge: the jury disagree and the case is terminated and another one immediately opened by order of the judge, before another jury. The judge shows the utmost malice throughout, frequently interrupting and hampering Foote in every way. Foote gets 12 months, Ramsey 9, and Kemp 3. Foote's famous reply is: "My lord, the sentence is worthy of your creed." Bradlaugh foils the attempt to implicate him; he obtains a separate trial and is acquitted. After nearly two months in prison, Foote is brought to answer the charge of July, 1881. He again conducts his own defence and is this time, by another judge, permitted to make a brilliant long speech packed with learning, argument and wit (see *Blasphemy on Trial*, 1932, containing the speech in full), and prepared under the worst of conditions in prison. The jury disagrees and the case is dropped. J. M. Wheeler has a breakdown through anxiety and overwork, and Aveling edits *The Freethinker*. There is now an even greater agitation by secularists for the repeal of the blasphemy laws. There is also a petition for Foote, signed by many eminent scientists and literary men, and even some clergymen, but Holyoake is among those who refuse to sign. Holyoake starts *Present Day*, a monthly which, after his fashion, makes no doctrinal attack. Mrs. Besant brings out a form for secular burial and one for the naming of infants. Josiah Gimson (b. 1818) dies. F. J. Gould, a schoolteacher condemned for heresy, is now writing for secularism. Headingley's biography of Bradlaugh appears.

(To be continued)

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- THE BIBLE HANDBOOK.** By G. W. Foote and W. P. Ball. Price 4s.; postage 3d. (Tenth edition.)
 - ROME OR REASON? A Question for To-day.** By Colonel R. G. Ingersoll. Price 1s.; postage 2d.
 - AGE OF REASON.** By Thomas Paine. With 40 page introduction by Chapman Cohen. Price, cloth 3s. 9d.,

finished a course in Philosophy, pretending insanity, shot in his "moral indignation" the "God-less man" down and the whole clerical and fascist Press applauded and roared in choir: "Not the murderer, but the murdered man is guilty!" It is almost unnecessary to mention that Nelböck, who was sentenced to ten years, did not spend in prison even five and has been long a "normal" member of society again.

In this night of intellectual darkness there was burning, however, a bright light for the unconfused Freethinkers—the Sunday lectures of the Ethical Community with Wilhelm Börner as a permanent speaker. He dealt critically but moderately with the problems of that time and encouraged those oppressed and persecuted. The overcrowding at these lectures was so great that members queued for hours to get in. A part of Börner's speeches of that time was published in two stately volumes.

The Sunday lectures of the Ethical Community remained the only source of encouragement for Austrian Freethinkers until the Nazi invasion. In the first days of the reign of the swastika there took place one more Sunday lecture which became a pathetic farewell. A small group of firm and fearless listeners parted with tears in their eyes from their Teacher Börner who finally could hardly speak with emotion. A few days later Börner was imprisoned and only with the help of his friends abroad, who intervened, he could go to exile in America.

Dr. E. Blum, a writer well-known even abroad, the author of the famous book "*Lebt Gott Noch?*" (Is God Still Alive?), preferred, in the first days of March, 1938, a voluntary death to a much more dreadful end. In this truthseeker the movement lost an idealist of highest qualities. Let us mention that in and after 1938 it was even possible in Austria to become "faithless" (this was the Nazi term for people belonging to no Church—Translator). In the opinion of the new rulers this meant, however, an indirect declaration of adherence to Communism and therefore hardly anybody who wanted to survive used this opportunity.

Not many Freethinkers lived to see the restoration of Austrian independence after the war. The legally permitted political parties have been refusing so far to discuss thoroughly the subject of Kulturkampf. The present situation is characterised by rotten compromises in school education and by an unsatisfactory protection of the rights of those who do not belong to any Church. In Austria these people are called "Konfessionslos" (Non-confessional). The building-up of a freethought organisation was only started. The renewed Freidenkerbund thought that it should adhere to Marxism in its statutes. It was, however, bitterly disappointed, both Marxist parties ignoring it completely. The "Ethical Community," whose leader returned from his exile three years ago, resumed its activities in accordance with the pre-war tradition. In the meantime, however, Wilhelm Börner died at the age of 70 years. No suitable successor has been found so far for him as a speaker and a leader and therefore the Community has been rather inactive.

Despite this the Austrian freethought movement can be satisfied with its progress. From 1946 to 1950 there left the Church only in Vienna 379,620, 4,286 and 5,074 people. In the year of the census (1951) the number was certainly even much higher.

Still there remain many urgent problems to be solved. These are mainly the foundation of a freethought periodical, ethical instruction in compulsory State schools for children of "non-confessional" citizens, the care for "non-confessional" patients in hospitals, old age homes and other public welfare institutions in which usually nuns work as nurses and assistants.

This Believing World

It was a pity, if the story of Atlantis was to be "debunked," that the B.B.C. did not choose someone familiar with its so-called history. Mr. J. Bradford, who is a Lecturer in Ethnology of the University of Oxford, appeared to us never to have read any book on the subject, but went drearily discoursing on "upheavals" and the "Straits of Dover" and other geological marvels, without in the least meeting the arguments of Donnelly and the other supporters of Atlantis. It is true that Mr. Bradford mentioned Donnelly, but only with a sneer because he was also an upholder of the Baconian theory on the Shakespear problem.

Either the story of Atlantis has some historic foundation, or it has not. But if its claims to history have to be "debunked," let the arguments of its champions be met with something like knowledge, and not with a lot of irrelevant chatter on other subjects. Here is a promising subject—"Myth or Legend"—and it may be in danger of being let down by lecturers who know so little of their subject.

So even that pious contemporary of ours, the *Daily Mail*, has to admit that Christmas is a pagan festival and was celebrated long before the Babe of Bethlehem was ever invented. It quotes that Christian writer, Mr. Arthur Bryant, telling us, in his *Story of England*, of Pope Gregory, in the sixth century, decreeing that "these heathen celebrations" must not be displaced. "They were to be grafted on to the Christian year." Of course. Practically all the "Christian" festivals are pagan, and have no more to do with Jesus than with sausage rolls. For instance, Easter: did Jesus ever indulge in hot cross buns or Easter eggs?

The only reply that the Rev. E. Victor Pearce could make to the devastating attack by Dr. W. Cope on his infantile Christian beliefs with regard to Evolution was to quote the views of long-dead professors of something or other who always believed in Genesis, as Mr. Pearce and our Jehovah's Witnesses do, and it is just futile to argue with them. It may be of interest to point out that the Piltdown skull is not a fake, though it is not as old as was thought; but it is dated as of 50,000 years at least. In any case, the theory of Evolution is not in the least affected, whatever the date claimed for the skull.

There appears to have been quite a holy row at Erne Hospital, Enniskillen, when some nuns told a patient there, an unmarried woman having a baby, that "she was living in sin and that the child about to be born would be in sin." These nuns were allowed to visit patients, giving them "Christian" comfort, and this kind of thing is typical in certain Roman Catholic strongholds. Actually, if there is any truth in Christianity, everybody is born in sin, whether the parents are married or not—which is one reason why nuns delight in "mortifying the flesh" in the hope of appeasing an angry Deity. But what drivelt it all is!

Really, Jesus seems more and more getting out of favour. For example, that magnetic American personality, the Rev. Billy Graham, who is going to make all England tremble on its knees before an all-angry Deity unless they accept Christ forthwith, has rented the Harringay Arena for six weeks—during which, no doubt, a good deal of Christian money will change hands. Mr. Graham is, we are sure, in dead earnest in bringing backsliders to Christ Jesus, but he is just as earnest that they will have to pay for it in hard cash. Unfortunately, the ice-hockey fans, the 10,000-strong Harringay Racers Supporters' Club, who don't want

to be deprived of watching ice-hockey, are very angry—in spite of such a wonderful religious revival.

Although England is still a Christian country—at least nominally—there were actually boos when the club found that the arena was to be used for a religious revival. And this in spite of the fact that 1,000 voices were going to pour out divine hymns more or less incessantly to Almighty God in praise of the work of His holy servant, Billy Graham. Personally, we should have thought that the fans would have found some uproarious fun in watching the ineffable Billy grovelling in prayer before the Almighty Throne.

We hope that the B.B.C. can stage a debate between the unbelieving Rev. Nathaniel Micklem and the all-believing Mgr. Ronald Knox. Dr. Micklem broadcast a talk the other day on the "date" of Christmas which proved him to be a fervent believer in its completely "pagan" origin and a complete unbeliever in the story that we know anything whatever about the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem. Mgr. Knox is just as fervent a Fundamentalist, obviously believing every letter of the contradictory accounts of the birth of the Holy Babe in the two Gospels, and sticking to December 25 as absolutely Divine. They both broadcast the same evening and must have given, between them, all good Christians a complete pain in the neck. Do, do, please, let us have a debate between such stalwarts, Mr. B.B.C.

Theatre

Down Came a Blackbird, by Peter Blackmore, at the Savoy Theatre, is a light comedy in which the secretary of an Egyptologist is made conscious of her oversized nose by the friendly remark of an American journalist.

One is always self-conscious of one's own physical oddities, but others—if they notice it—learn to accept them and even like them. So when the secretary makes a flying visit to London and returns after a few weeks considerably glamorised, the impact on her employer, his son and the journalist is not altogether what she might have expected.

Before being brought to London the play was almost entirely rewritten by the industrious author, with the result that we have a neat and well-finished piece which is well acted with John Loder, Betty Paul and Viola Keats in the leads. But it is Betty Paul's play as the drab girl who undergoes a cinderellalike transformation.

Podrecca's Piccoli Theatre at the Princes Theatre is yet another show of marionettes, at present so popular a form of entertainment. These large puppets are among the most versatile and fascinating. Vittorio Podrecca has spent over forty years developing this form of theatre and now presents seventeen scenes in one of London's largest theatres. The Bull Fight, the Cotton Plantation and Fun in Inferno are triumphs in miniature excelled only by Maestro Piccolovsky, the pianist, whose unlimited movements are perfectly synchronised with the music.

Jack Hilton's Circus at Earls Court is notable for not having a weak link in the long chain of acts. The French Tarzan displays his performing lions in a breathtaking manner, the Troupe Bello amuse us with their spring-board acrobatics, and the Leonaris give us thrills with their original work on the flying trapeze, but unfortunately the lighting is not too good, and much that should be seen is lost in the shadows.

However, this must rank as one of the foremost shows of its kind in London, but it does, of course, raise the question about animals taking part and whether their lives are happy or miserable.

RAYMOND DOUGLAS.

THE FREETHINKER

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To Correspondents

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To the many readers who are kind enough to send us newspaper extracts and various items of news we wish to convey our warm thanks. They have been most helpful.

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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.

Lecture Notices, Etc.

OUTDOOR

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

North London Branch (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, noon: L. EBURY.

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Every Thursday, 1-15 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, January 17, 6-45 p.m.: H. DAY, "Professional Clerics: Cranks or Charlatans?"

Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq., W.C.1).—Tuesday, January 19, 7 p.m.: T. H. BOTTOMORE, "The Idea of Progress."

Glasgow Rationalist Press Association (Central Halls, 25, Bath Street).—Sunday, January 17, 3 p.m.: J. S. CLARKE, "Robert Burns."

Glasgow Secular Society N.S.S. Branch (McLellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street).—Sunday, January 17, 7 p.m.: P. VICTOR MORRIS (General Secretary, N.S.S.), "Secularism, Rationalism, Humanism: What's the Difference?"

Junior Discussion Group (Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq., W.C.1).—Friday, January 22, 7-15 p.m.: Mr. POVALL, "Human Values in Relation to the African Question."

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, January 17, 2.30 p.m.: J. PAINTER, "Anglo-American Antagonisms."

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq., W.C.1).—Sunday, January 17, 11 a.m.: A. ROBERTSON, M.A., "Some Verdicts of History."

West London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road).—Sunday, January 17, 7-15 p.m.: MAJOR C. DRAPER, "God in the Services."

Signs of Things Past

By MALCOLM STUBBS

SIGNS, M. Jean Paul Satre says, are not given in this world: if man says signs are given, he alone must bear responsibility for accepting and interpreting them. In 1832 there were many who saw more portents in earth than in heaven; the spirit of Liberalism with its "Rights of Man," "Progress" and so on was regarded as a significant omen, heralding a cure for all the evils and sorrows of mankind. But to others this elixir of life was suspect: the Tractarians clearly saw that a spiritual Authority was needed to combat Rationalism and Naturalism, and to provide one they returned to the Fathers of the third and

fourth centuries and the Caroline Divines. A religious revival in France had foreshadowed what was to take place in England. Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* in 1802; De Maistre's *Du Pape* in 1819, and in 1830 the journal *L'Avenir*, edited by Lacordaire and Montalembert, called to the Holy See to reassert its spiritual leadership in a world becoming secularised. But the exhortations of the Liberal Catholics fell on unwilling ears: Gregory XVI replied in 1832 with an encyclical of condemnation.

The same year saw the beginning of the Oxford Movement when John Keble raised his voice in protest against National Apostacy in his Assize Sermon. At that time the National Church was national in a limited sense—a mere department of the State, and whose shepherds were sleeping the sleep of Erastian men. From a Church that had become so bourgeois no one expected a spiritual Authority or to receive spiritual leadership to counter what Professor Harrold calls in his valuable essay* the process of man's "dehumanisation." For two centuries God had been a "Gentleman," and the clergy wore easily an engaging worldliness—that had been the bijou of Miss Austen's curates. But even under the tuition of the Oriel men and the *Tracts for the Times*, clerics not unskilled in the dalliance of the drawing room did not mature overnight into guardians of sacerdotal dignity. Yet Newman's journeys in 1833 from village to village to distribute the *Tracts* did have results. A long-forgotten ideal of the Church and man's place in it began to exercise many minds. Was not there a greater patriotism than a patriotism which previously had been measured by devotion to Church and King? Had not the theological virtues given way to middle-class ones of "human goodness," "human nature," and so on, and did not Church membership imply something more than a crude religious utilitarian belief of doing good for the sake of the hereafter? Arnold had said that the Church as it then stood no human power could save, and the Tractarians reiterated his warning by lifting the doctrine of the Apostolic Succession from the dust which had covered it for so long. By emphasising the Catholic and Apostolic character of the Anglican Church they presented an ideal of a Church, not as Protestant, insular or a department of the State, but as a living part of Catholic Christendom—yet free of the exotic growths of Rome and the dead wood of Geneva.

Keble, Newman, Froude and Pusey, when they spoke out against Erastianism in high places, were not unnaturally accused of being *agents provocateurs* of a foreign power. While the *Tract on Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge* was unfortunate in its title (causing its authors to be charged with Jesuitical practice), other *Tracts* inveighed no less against the accretions of Rome than against the perils of Dissent. The Tractarians went to the Fathers and the Caroline Divines for authority to support their theory of the *Via Media*—or middle-of-the-road orthodoxy—of the Anglican Church. Newman formulated the theory in 1838, and however "moderate" it may have seemed to later Anglo-Catholics, it caused no small stir at a time when the ideal of the Church was "respectability" and adjustment to worldly success.

What the Tractarians were concerned with was resuscitating the idea of man as a member of a Divine Society. Professor Harrold sees the Oxford Movement as "part of a vast European effort to retrieve and warn," a spiritual Authority, in fact, to rescue man from "the meshes of an atomic order." The movement did rescue him from the gross, bourgeois confines of the Salem, the Ebenezer, and the mawkish Evangelicalism of the Slopes, giving him a less crude vision of himself and the Church.

* *The Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature*. Princeton, 1950. Edited J. E. Baker. See pp. 33-56.

It is not difficult to see the limitations of a movement concerned largely with raising the ghost of things past: there is a tendency to see it less as the expression of a "Universalistic attitude"—as Mr. Christopher Dawson calls it—and more as a party fight between High and Low Church traditions, with the Latitudinarians now and again adding to the melee. The Anglo-Catholic has been seen—often not without reason—as an ecclesiastical Restoration gallant; the victim of a mania for defining the nice points of theology and ritual, stuffed doves to be suspended at Pentecost, fiddle-back chasubles (and in more recent times carrying his red flag with as much piety as his crucifix). To the early Tractarians such a rôle was unknown. To-day, English diocesans presiding at High Masses excite little attention; the craze for loading altars with candles is seldom hindered, although such enthusiasms seem strangely misplaced now that many Continental Catholics are sweeping their *ornamenta* away.

However, a new spirit of compromise was born of a generally successful Anglo-Catholic revolt against the bishops' Protestantism: we find the modern Anglo-Catholic surprisingly bourgeois—there are exceptions—insular, in spite of his membership of an International Society, and dependent politically on the Vatican. Yet it was a singular movement that Oxford gave birth to in 1832. Its characteristics are not unlike those of the gasbracket exhibited in 1851—arabesque, top heavy, and as dulcet as a sugar-plum. For all that it still has a glory.

McCarthyism

By LEON SPAIN

SAMUEL JOHNSON, one of the luminaries in England's vast galaxy of eminent men of letters, is said to have prudently commented: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Perhaps Samuel Johnson's powers of discernment were woefully deficient in making an estimate of such institutions as monarchy and established religion, and for venturing upon the domain of philosophical controversy, for which he was unequipped, in more respects than one. However, regardless of the literary merits of Samuel Johnson, his phrase, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," should earn him immortal renown, for it can be applied aptly to many a rascal who has draped himself with the mantle of patriotism. In this regard, perhaps, it would not be remiss to add that many a patrioteer has basked in the aura of sanctity and piety. This can appropriately be applied to many who deem themselves the knights in shining armour of political and religious orthodoxy, in the United States of America to-day.

To-day, in America, there is an intellectual and social excrescence which sociological authorities of the future will designate as "McCarthyism." "McCarthyism," or the movement which has arrogated to itself the authority of determining what views and opinions may or may not be held, is leaving an indelible mark upon the intellectual life of America to-day. In fact, the indelible mark can be construed as a blot of the deepest dye, for it is following, in many respects, in the footsteps of the medieval inquisitors. The ecclesiastical inquisitors left no stone unturned to ferret out religious heresy, while the self-appointed board of examiners, in the U.S.A., are seeking to ferret out both political and religious unorthodoxy.

Among the agencies and organisations who determine what views are acceptable and unacceptable are such censorious bodies as the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Daughters of the American Revolution, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and other bodies who regard with the gravest suspicion anyone who openly ventures to question their professed principles, which they

deem unchallengeable and beyond criticism. These self-appointed censors have, most thoroughly, impressed upon educators, the intellectually curious, and the public at large, that opinions expressed must meet with their approval, or dire penalties, in one form or other, will be incurred. A movement is well under way to revise historical textbooks in accordance with their views, and the pressure, from the aforesaid guardians of legitimate expression, has been to describe "godlessness" as one of the cardinal evils of American life. In their estimable opinion, it is necessary closely to scrutinise and supervise the educational curricula of the American public schools and universities, but nothing of a similar nature is mentioned concerning the parochial schools and Catholic universities. Odium has been cast upon various Protestant clergymen who, aside from their theological attachments, had the courage to protest against the procedures of the modern version of the medieval inquisitors and their ecclesiastical advisers.

The hue and cry for religious freedom and the right to worship as one sees fit is paraded about as evidence of a most cherished privilege enjoyed only by the residents of the northern part of the western hemisphere. However, a word is mentioned about the odium theologikum which professed Atheists and Agnostics, and Rationalists and Freethinkers, must bear. The clergies of the various denominations are usurping the role of preceptors and mentors of morals and ethics, and are attributing the increase in crime, juvenile delinquency, divorce, etc., to a complete departure from their theological tenets by those who have strayed from their denominational folds.

All the effusions on behalf of religious freedom do not rest upon any solid foundation in fact, for they belong to the usual repertory of pious and political rhetoric. However, the uninformed and gullible, whose critical powers have either been warped or undeveloped, are easily captivated by the elaborate verbiage of the pulpiteers and their political dupes, who see in the present atmosphere of intolerance an opportunity more firmly to entrench themselves. The arrest and prosecution of clergymen in eastern and central Europe, according to the heavily slanted views of the American Press, are incessantly brought before the American reading public, but the situation of Protestant clergymen and their congregations in such citadels of universal piety as Spain, Colombia, Peru and Brazil, are given little notice or are completely obscured. The political element is not invisible in this regard, for the recent treaty which the U.S.A. has concluded with Franco Spain, for air and naval bases, will make it expedient for them not to lay too much stress upon the right of Protestant sects to openly hold public worship or to proselyte, since Roman Catholicism is given unrestricted prerogative in the Spanish social fabric. In this instance, perhaps, it should be remembered that General Franco employed Moorish mercenaries—infidels, theologically speaking—to annihilate inhumanly Spanish Christians who fought for the democratically constituted republic of the early nineteen thirties. With the overthrow of the republic, medievalism in religious matters was re-instituted and, with it, a period of intellectual stagnation has followed. But all this has caused little or no concern on the American scene, to those who are vociferous about so-called freedom of religious worship. The maltreatment of Protestant missionaries in Colombia and other South American countries has received comment in the American Press, which hardly can be called scanty. It should be quite evident, to acute and informed observers, that to protest against the state of intolerance in Spain and the South American countries would be an affront to the Papacy and its political cohorts. (To be concluded)

The Cult of the Spiritual

By G. I. BENNETT

TO the question, What is mind? a philosopher may essay a reply, though for him it will be none too easy to frame a generally acceptable definition; but a physiologist, in his professional capacity at least, would hardly venture an answer. And he would be justified. Concerned as he is with studying the vital processes of living organisms, such an imponderable as mind lies outside his purview. He could only discuss the brain, from whose functioning consciousness and powers of thought and emotion arise, which we call mind, but which must cease with the cessation of the brain's activities at death.

It is undisputed that physically we all must die. Only in a certain figurative rhetorical sense does the mind of a person survive his physical death—that is, in so far as his moral and intellectual qualities continue to be a source of inspiration to and exert an influence upon, others.

Some great minds may be immortal by virtue of reacting powerfully upon successive generations of men and women, as Samuel Butler liked to believe. But it is not in this sense that religionists conceive human survival hereafter. They do not speak about the mind; more vaguely they speak about the spirit, the soul, or the personality—although it is only the mind they can mean. And they asseverate that this indwelling vitality—spirit, soul, personality, whatever name they give it—investing the being of everyone, is destined in those whose lives have been characterised by piety and devotion to endure timelessly in an exquisite, intangible world in some unspecified part of the ether—a world with none of the inconveniences, limitations and ills of this material world that we, here and now, unhappily inhabit. The biochemical basis of life, mental no less than physical, is blandly ignored.

Now mental life is a distinctive characteristic of human beings; and the more civilised and culturally advanced human beings become, the more does the mental predominate in importance over the purely physical in their lives. But while man remains man, and the laws of life remain what they are, there will never come a time when the mental or the spiritual (the moral, æsthetic, idealistic) qualities will assume exclusive value. A balanced satisfactory view of life demands that there shall be a place for both the physical and the mental, because they are complementary aspects of human existence. Yet a curiously persistent feature of religious thinking is to regard the mental or spiritual as though it were the whole—or very nearly the whole—of life.

The underlying idea, which but rarely reaches the fully conscious level, is that spiritually man is perfect, but that in proportion as his true nature (which is moral) is governed by regard for and comes under the sway of his body, his spiritual life is marred and his general character rendered imperfect. Thus to the extent that an individual is morally strict with himself, to the extent that he curbs his self-gratifying instincts and inclinations, he gains in spiritual stature. In its various manifestations, asceticism, the wilful denial of the body its natural and even necessary functions, is the outcome of such thinking, and, indeed, is only fully explainable in terms of it.

And so down the centuries, ever since man's religious thought took higher flight, there has been—often closely bound up with theology although, in a sense, standing in its own right—this cult of the spiritual, as we may call it. (That there has also been a philosophical cult of the spiritual is equally true, but it has followed saner and happier lines and does not call for consideration here.)

Death is therefore the great release, the great setting free

of the spirit from bondage to the circumscribing, compromising, sinning flesh, opening boundless vistas of glorious and perfect life eternal.

"You are aware I look on death as being life," wrote that great Christian soldier, General Gordon, to his sister some three-quarters of a century ago. "The end of our term on earth is much to be desired, for at best it is a groaning life."

Certainly in the great ages of faith the end of earthly existence was not feared; on the contrary it was eagerly anticipated. Why, then, should the believer be loath to die? If in our day there is hardly the same gladness to undergo what was long looked upon as a joyous rebirth, to what can it be ascribed but a decline in faith?

Considering the value set upon the spiritual life we find, not unnaturally, that from the earliest days of Christianity, sex, being an imperious physical passion, was regarded as a thing of the Devil—a chief enemy of spiritual progress. Marriage was permissible because it was preferable to fornication and adultery. St. Paul, we know, said that it was better "to marry than to burn"; and it will be recalled that in the Church of England marriage service matrimony is justified as being "a remedy against sin, and the avoidance of fornication: that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body." In the primal, formative years of Christianity the cult of the spiritual took firm and deep root and became an intergral part of that religion. Thus it was possible to see celibacy and abstinence as good for one's spiritual health. Marriage was simply a concession to those whose moral will was frail.

To-day the old religious prejudice against the flesh still persists; but from the terms of a church marriage ceremony, paradoxically enough, one might gain the impression that marriage, instead of being founded on a powerful physical urge, were almost entirely an affair of the spirit, the sexual function being passed over as a mere means of procreation, to bring about "the increase of mankind."

Here as in other directions the golden mean is to be sought, and it counsels a happy synthesis or combination of the two elements, physical and mental.

Jack London (The American Novelist)

He came with the song of the sea on his lips
 And the wind's salt tang,
 He wove strange tales of men and of ships
 And of wild scenes sang;
 We felt the sweet mystery of sea and stars
 And the boom of sails and the rattle of spars
 In our ears rang.
 He told of the grandeur of Arctic nights
 Where wolf packs prowl,
 Of barren ways 'neath the northern lights
 Of frost's fixed scowl;
 We heard the deep laughter of chesty men
 And leaned o'er the lone cub with him when
 Arose its howl.
 He drave his pen in the cause of the weak
 And smote with rods
 The deathless tyrannies that hound the meek
 And scorned the odds;
 Till, wearied of parry, thrust and fence
 He sought the eternal recompence,
 Denied the gods.

WILLIAM SIMPSON.

Correspondence

"LONDONER"

SIR.—As one who has studied London history and topography for years and is about to publish his fifteenth book on the subject—*London in the News*—I should like to say how much I appreciated Mr. John O'Hare's poem under the above title. It is worthy of inclusion in any anthology of London verse, such as the excellent one published by Phoenix House three years ago.—Yours, etc.,

W. KENT.

MATERIALISM

SIR.—First of all will you allow me to say that I really enjoyed reading your paper. It is the first time I have had a copy. But now comes the snag for me.

The idea I have had from reading *The Freethinker* is that your general Philosophy is one of Materialism. Am I right? Good, you are at liberty to enjoy this philosophy, but I wonder if you or any of your readers who deny some kind of supernatural power—God is the word I use—would answer these questions?

If matter is all, and if we are to take a Materialistic interpretation of the Universe, how do you account for Logic, Ethics, and the Human Mind? The Materialist says that Mind is a figment of the imagination. What proof is there in this postulate?

As I say, it is a big question, and if you would like it I could submit an article in denial of all you say and give proof of my assertions. But *The Freethinker* is an interesting journal. Good luck to you.—Yours, etc.,

DOUGLAS V. MORGAN.

HOW DID AN ANCIENT RITE ORIGINATE?

SIR.—Mr. Leonard Martin's article on the above subject is most interesting, but his story of the schoolboys having themselves circumcised "sub rosa" appears about as plausible as the advice given in the "spicy" American magazine of which he speaks, that this operation can be done in 15 minutes in a doctor's surgery without pain, etc.

One wonders how the newly circumcised schoolboy got home and how he concealed from his parents the pain and soreness that he must have been feeling, and also how he managed to attend to the necessary dressings, etc., "sub rosa" for the 14 days approximately required for the wound to heal. In addition, I have always understood, although I stand open to correction, that excruciating pain, at least in anyone older than an infant, is one of the immediate after effects of this operation and, some years ago, a book was reviewed in *The Freethinker*—its title being, I believe, *In the Name of Humanity*—in which the writer savagely attacked this custom, blowing sky high its supposed "benefits," and wrote at some considerable length of the pain with which it is attended and its revolting cruelty when practised on infants.

It seems reasonable to suppose that this custom arose, as Mr. Martin suggests, as a "manhood" rite or possibly a modified sacrificial one, i.e., the sacrifice of a "part of a part," rather than a complete human immolation, in connection with Priapic worship.—Yours, etc.

W. E. BOX.

MATERIALISM

SIR.—Mr. W. H. Wood, in the issue for October 20, emphasises his misunderstanding of Materialism. The play upon unsolved problems and conceptual difficulties he advances, apparently in order to embarrass the Materialist, leave the concept of Materialism wholly undisturbed. He might as well entangle or discredit science and all human effort because a long list of problems remain unsolved. If Mr. Wood were to try a new approach and decline to allow fire and passion to influence him, half his conundrums would vanish.

Take, for example, the question of purpose in evolution. The structure of any organism relative to its environment determines the organism's needs and, in satisfying needs, action becomes purpose. No high mentality is necessary, indeed in lower organisms, none at all. It is sufficient to feel comfort and discomfort. If we deny sensitivity to all living matter, we must decide at what period living matter became sensitive to stimuli!

It is difficult to see how constant repetition of response to stimuli could avoid an increase of intensity in feeling, or how changes in environment could avoid new needs and purposes through adaptation. But it is more difficult to imagine why, on materialist principles, the process of evolution should have halted on the appearance of the giant mammoths. Man is no more impossible on materialist lines than is the highly specialised mammoth; and if materialism can account for mammoth, it can account for man. In terms of cosmic directiveness what was the purpose of the mammoths, the species that became extinct and traces of which have been found probably more abundantly and more extensively than those of any other animal? Was the purpose to supply commercial ivory about the 10th century? But

here we superimpose purpose, and that is the beginning of trouble.

Let Mr. Wood consult any person or any organised social group, and let him verify the relationships of their purposes to their needs and of needs to conditioning circumstances. He will find purposes galore, some sensible, and an abundance of non-sensical, idiotic and rash purposes, besides cross-purposes. But the superimposing of epithets should not blind us to the fact that each purpose is causally traceable down to its roots. Why is Mr. Wood not satisfied with this verification? A cosmic mental directiveness is not only unnecessary, it would also be powerless to alter a process that is causally verifiable down to its foundations. Nor is there any comfort in assigning to cosmic directiveness the miserable course of animal and human development: it is a frustrating concept that befogs. By contrast there is no inspiration in the knowledge that to unaided man is due all the glory of alleviation.

A materialist, I should say, possesses a cultivated mistrust of those who know all the answers, and he is therefore not likely to respect the claim. But he has method. Apropos the question of purpose, he insists that relative terms become nonsensical when applied to a plane of thought where contrasted modes are precluded. To assign purpose to nature or ultimate purpose to evolution is no more intelligible than to allot to them the key of B flat.—Yours, etc.

J. G. BURDON.

N.S.S. Executive Committee, 6th January

Present: Mr. Ridley (in the Chair), Messrs. Ebury, Griffiths, Taylor, Tiley, Shaw, Johnson, Corstorphine, Barker and the Secretary.

Eight new members were admitted to the Parent Branch. The Secretary submitted details of paid-up membership at the end of 1953. The figures showed that during the past two years the total strength of the Society had increased by 40 per cent., of the Parent Branch by 50 per cent., and of the other Branches by 28 per cent. The increase did not include the newly-affiliated Leicester Secular Society, whose membership would be reckoned in with the 1954 figures.

A programme of toasts and entertainment items for the annual dinner on February 27 was submitted by the dinner sub-committee and approved.

It was reported that the new badges had been well received and were selling steadily.

P. VICTOR MORRIS, *Secretary*.

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