

# The Freethinker

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SOME years ago the late Dr. F. H. Hayward wrote a life of Marcus Aurelius in which he illuminatingly portrayed "a saviour of men" of an entirely different order from Jesus, the putative Christ. Himself "no panegyrist of religion," Hayward was an admirer of the Roman emperor's little book of *Meditations*, and in his biographical study he significantly wrote: "To-day its fame and its value show no marks of decline; and if, as some people contend, the world will ultimately have a non-theological ethics, the text-book which Marcus compiled as a guide to himself in the years that were running so rapidly out will take a high and perhaps the chief place in the code."

I already had a high regard for the book of *Meditations* when I first read Hayward's biography, and my regard for it has grown with deepening acquaintance. There is something about the tone of it that leads the sympathetic reader to exclaim on putting it down: "Was there ever a man possessed of finer soul, purer heart, braver spirit, loftier mind, more benevolent disposition, than Rome's sixteenth emperor!" And here *Chambers's Biographical Dictionary* lends support by describing him as "one of the noblest figures in history." On the evidence of the twelve books that constitute the *Meditations* this verdict is hard to avoid, for the beauty of his character pervades many a page.

Now I had it put to me by a freethinking lady correspondent that the language of the emperor's "Golden Book" lacks grace and charm, and that in this respect, at any rate, the Bible is superior. That, of course, is a matter of opinion. Nevertheless, it is true that there is no literary finish or polish about the *Meditations*. They were the hurried personal jottings—in Greek, the cultured language of the day—of a man whose life was unwontedly busy and trouble-filled, taken up with the performance of an endless round of irksome and uncongenial duties. Perhaps some of those lines were written in surroundings of imperial splendour at Rome. But others (and I suspect the majority) were written in the long silent watches of the night from a soldier's tent, somewhere on the northern frontiers of the empire, during the years Marcus was campaigning against invading Germanic hordes. Books I and II, finishing respectively with the words, "Written among the Quadi on the Gran" and "Written at Carnuntum," leave no doubt as to their place of authorship.

What a fate for a man of retiring philosophical temperament to spend the middle and closing years of his life thus! Here in his private memoranda was some relief from the spiritual isolation he felt in being cast, as it were, into unhappy imperial eminence among men who cared nothing for the things nearest and dearest to him. Here in this form of self-communion was a means of rededicating himself to the Stoic principles of life he had adopted in youth.

In the abrupt, disconnected sentences and the rough-phrased pages of the *Meditations* are occasional passages

of rare beauty. But much more than that, in them is contained a nobility of thought and outlook that elevates and tinges with grandeur even their pedestrian passages. Let us take two or three examples:—

Life is short. This only is the harvest of earthly existence, a righteous disposition and social acts.

This is the mark of a perfect character, to pass through each day as if it were the last, without agitation, without torpor, without pretence.

Salvation in life depends on our seeing everything in its entirety and its reality . . . ; on our doing what is just and speaking what is true with all our soul. What remains but to dovetail one

good act on to another so as not to leave the smallest gap between?

The book of *Meditations* is perhaps the greatest manual of the spiritual life ever written; and the whole work is instinct with an honesty and a sincerity that put the charge of pharisaism in its author out of question. Not only is he ever-conscious of his limitations and shortcomings; he consistently under-values his abilities and chides himself for not being a better man than he is. One freer of human vanities it would not be possible to find. His mode of life was unpretentious and his wants austere few. Of ambition in the ordinary sense he had none; and before he died in his fifty-ninth year, he had altogether overcome the desire for fame or after-fame. "Reflect," he says, "how many have never even heard thy name, and how many will very soon forget it, and how many who now perhaps acclaim will very soon blame thee, and that neither memory nor fame nor anything else whatever is worth reckoning." Yet the *Meditations*, wherein he wrestled with himself to cast out this "last infirmity of the great," secured for him a fame that eighteen centuries have not extinguished. Of all sorts and conditions have been men and women to whom, down the ages, the emperor's little volume has appealed. Even so eccentric a Christian as General Gordon, it has been said, read it and was inspired by it, although this I have not succeeded in verifying.

But for those who seek the certitudes of revealed religion there is poor comfort in this book. It is, as Matthew Arnold declared, for those who "walk by sight, not by faith." As a conscientious pagan, Marcus Aurelius acknowledges the gods, but in so nominal a way that one cannot think they exercised any particular influence on his thought. He also speaks of God—but with a sort of deist detachment. That the universe was pervaded by a Rational Intelligence of which man had an allotted portion the Roman emperor seems to have believed, and he identifies God with the harmony and unity he perceives in the nature of things. But he often wavers in this faith. Time and time again he poses the alternative—a universe divinely governed, or an unordered concourse of atoms?—without any definite personal commitment to one or the other view.

In immortality he does not believe and pushes thoughts of it resolutely aside. "Man," he writes, "has but one life,

— VIEWS and OPINIONS —

## The "Meditations" of Marcus Aurelius

By G. I. BENNETT

and this for thee is well-nigh closed." "But a little while," he says, "and thou shalt be burnt ashes or a few dry bones, and possibly a name or not even a name." And elsewhere he bids himself remember, "Thou wilt very soon be no one and nowhere, and so with all that thou now seest and all who are now living." At most, he holds, the soul after death retains its identity for a limited period, and is then re-absorbed into the "universal substance" whence all came. (This was the orthodox Stoic view.)

Not for him the promise of reward now or hereafter for right-doing. "When thou hast done a kindness, what more wouldst thou have? Is not this enough that thou hast done

something in accord with thy nature? Why seekest recompense for it?" Virtue and goodness are hence their own rewards. They are an inalienable part of human nature, and in practising them man is but justifying himself as a "social creature," born to the service of his fellows.

Again and again Marcus Aurelius reminds himself that the individual is a small but vital part of the great whole of humanity, whose fulfilment lies in doing what he can to further humanity's well-being. For Marcus Aurelius, as a Stoic, the brotherhood of man was a cardinal doctrine in which all ethical and altruistic action found supreme sanction.

(To be concluded)

## The Christian Revolution

By F. A. RIDLEY

RECENTLY an old Roman inscription was dug up in Spain: it ran as follows:—

"To the Divine Emperors, Diocletian Augustus, dedicated to Jupiter, and Maximianus Augustus, dedicated to Hercules, who have suppressed the Christians, who constituted a menace to the State."

This inscription dates from shortly after the year 300, and it was composed to celebrate the last, and most thorough-going, effort made by the Roman Empire to suppress the growing power of the Christian Church. The emperors concerned were Diocletian, one of the greatest pagan rulers of Rome, and his colleague, Maximian; the patronal gods of whom were, respectively, Jupiter and Hercules. This jubilant announcement, however, of the definitive defeat of the Christians proved decidedly premature. These emperors abdicated in 305, and their successors were forced to abandon the attempt at suppression. Finally, Constantine, who had started his military career as an officer in Diocletian's body-guard, came to terms with the victorious Christians, and owes his title, "The Great," to his later "conversion" to the creed which had formerly "menaced the (pagan) State."

Often it has seemed to the present writer a pity that rationalistic critics of Christian origin have spent so much time describing (more accurately, guessing)—for very little is known about this—the origins of Christianity in the first century. The far more important fourth century (that of Diocletian and Constantine), which witnessed the final arrival and victory of Christianity as the state-religion of the Roman Empire, has been inadequately treated. Prior to the fourth century, when, what can be termed, "The Christian Revolution" took place, our interest in Christianity is primarily for what it was destined to become about 300 years later. This was the victorious revolution in what came to be called the Christian era—named after the new religion. Up to that time Christianity had merely enjoyed a shadowy existence in the not very respectable religious under-world of the Roman Empire. We get only stray references to it as a curiosity of the religious under-world, which, currently, was known vaguely to the educated world of that day.

To tell the truth, the influence of the "Christian upbringing," which is the lot of most rationalists, has given them a distorted view of early Christianity. Down to the third century, when far-sighted Celsus raised his cry of alarm at the startling growth of the new oriental creed, the formidable potentialities of which he seems to have been the first pagan critic to grasp, Christianity remained quite insignificant. Its alleged founders, Jesus, Paul, Peter and the rest of the "herocs" of the New Testament (even if they and their prototypes actually existed), were absolutely insignificant in the eyes of the contemporary world. So were the saints and martyrs, upon the sufferings of

whom (real or fictitious) the later Church was to cash in so heavily. We must always remember that down to A.D. 180, the date on which the great historian Gibbon fixed for the opening of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—this being the year of the death of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius—the Christian Church and cult were merely examples of a freak religion, probably not better known, or regarded more seriously, than say, the Mormons, or the Theosophists of our day.

Christianity only began to assume real importance in the third century, which was the first "Dark Age," when the old classical and pagan Graeco-Roman culture began to go to pieces under the simultaneous impact of the armies of barbaric mercenaries and of superstitious oriental religious cults. It was this era that marked the political decline and cultural collapse of the ancient world. That collapse witnessed the final disappearing of the rationalism of antiquity in the Stoic and Epicurean Schools of Philosophy, when Christianity, of the previous evolution, of which (we repeat) *we know next to nothing*, rose to importance. In that age of fast-mounting superstition, which reflected the current economic and social collapse, Christianity counted its adherents chiefly among the *civilian* population. At about that date Christianity ranked as of inferior importance to the rival solar-cult of Mithra, essentially a *military* creed. It was, in fact, the mainly *civilian* character of Christianity that led to its final adoption as the state-religion of the Roman Empire. By the fourth century, Constantine and his successors were trying to put an end to the arbitrary rule of the army, which in previous centuries had, at will, set up and deposed emperors. The aim of these emperors of the fourth century was to rebuild the imperial regime on a predominantly civilian basis.

By the middle of the third century, we find the Emperor Decius, a stiff pagan conservative of similar type to his contemporary Celsus, complaining that the Bishop of Rome was more powerful than the emperor. Decius, therefore, attempted to break the power of the Christian Church by force. Probably he, like Celsus, feared that Christianity would eventually supersede the pagan state and empire by the end of that century. As the Spanish Roman inscription shows, fear of the Church had become widespread, and Diocletian; and his colleagues, Maximian and Galerius, did their best to crush it in the most severe persecution that Christianity had encountered. The failure of Diocletian's repression left the way open for final victory for the Church under Constantine and his successors. Indeed, Constantine, not being able to crush the Church, decided to ally the Roman Empire with the new dynamic creed.

The Christian "revolution" of the fourth century is undoubtedly one of the most important events in the his-

tory of the Western World. So far, it has in the main been viewed through Christian eyes, save those of Gibbon, chiefly, and a few others. But much has come to light since the *Decline and Fall* was written. As the present writer has noted in his book on *Julian the Apostate* (and we have seen no Christian reply to this contention), the whole era of the Christian rise to power has been distorted by the assumption dictated, in our opinion, by theological prejudice rather than by historical fact. This prejudice was, and is, that the ultimate victory of Christianity was Divinely ordained and, as such, inevitable. Actually, as I observed in reference to the attempted pagan counter-revolution under the last pagan emperor, Julian, "The Apostate" (A.D. 361-3), the language of relief and wild jubilation used by the contemporary Christian "Fathers of the Church," when they heard of that emperor's untimely death in battle, does not sound as if they thought his attempt to restore paganism was hopeless. They were evidently frightened out of their wits! In truth, there does not seem to have been anything inevitable in the ultimate victory of Christianity. The issue of the conflict was often in doubt, and had Julian lived as long as his uncle Constantine, the upshot could just as well have been in favour of Mithra or Jupiter, as of Christ. Right down to the end of the decisive fourth century the Christians were a minority in the Empire, and, in particular, in the all-powerful army. Once in power, the Church ruthlessly repressed all pagan competitors. Not yet has been written the definitive history of the Christian Revolution. This little-known fourth century has always been found peculiarly fascinating by the present writer, who confesses that he would like, some day, to have a crack at it!

FOOTNOTE.—In view of what has been said above about the civilian character of Christianity, it is worth recalling that Julian was both the last pagan emperor and the last great military emperor of Rome.

## Censorship

In his article "On Censorship" Mr. H. Cutner takes leave of his usual good sense and allows his anti-communism to blind him to the point at issue. All the evils of the U.S.S.R. (together with those, which Mr. Cutner omits to mention, of the American Way of Life) can in no way justify or mitigate the evils, be they comparatively ever so insignificant, in our midst. England may be "the freest nation in the world" (as I do not live there myself, and as I have not visited all the nations of the world, I do not know whether this is so), but that isn't saying much. While the Blasphemy Laws, Mr. Cutner's own pet aversion, remain on the statute books, and while the laws of obscene libel, of Sunday entertainment, the licensing laws, and so many others well known to all liberal-minded men remain in their present archaic state, there can be no freedom in England. This is so, and it would remain so were the remainder of the inhabited globe under the blackest and cruellest tyranny of all time. It is no defence of one's own transgressions to say that one's neighbour is guilty of worse; and well Mr. Cutner knows it. Though tempted, I will not take up the gauntlet of Mr. Cutner's disapproval of "army" language, but there are two statements in his article which cannot go unchallenged. "You cannot deliver a reasoned lecture against Lenin on the wireless" (i.e., in Russia). And in Great Britain you cannot deliver a reasoned lecture against God or the Church on the wireless. Wherein lies the difference? "... woe betide the poet or artist or musician who dares to question (Marxism's) authority." That this is no longer true is proved by recent events in Soviet literature, the most significant being Ilya Ehrenburg's latest novel, *The Thaw*. But then, it seems to me that in this case Mr. Cutner is not fundamentally interested in facts; he is a patriotic Englishman, and like Pavlov's dogs, he foams at the mouth when the appropriate bell is rung. May I emphasise once again, that all Russia's censorships and concentration camps (which I do not deny) are irrelevant to Mr. Matson's article, and may well be left to the Russians to sort out for themselves.

W. AULD.

—NEXT WEEK—

### THE HELLISH TWINS

*A Study of Catholic and Muslim Theocracy*

By F. A. RIDLEY

## A Half-Truth for Listeners

By P. VICTOR MORRIS

ON the afternoon of Sunday, November 21, 1954, exactly forty-four years and seven months after Mark Twain died, the B.B.C. Home Service included a talk by Alvin Langdon Coburn on two visits he paid to the great man in 1905 and 1908 in order to take photographs of him. On the former of these occasions Mr. Coburn said that he asked Mark Twain, then seventy years old, what reading he did, and Twain replied: "If not the Bible, *Uncle Remus*."

Reported in this bald way, the statement will no doubt have been accepted by some millions of listeners as another tribute to "The Book." It should, therefore be set against a letter that Mark Twain once wrote to a Brooklyn librarian who had complained to him that *Huckleberry Finn* was unsuitable for juvenile reading. Twain's reply was as follows:—

"The mind that becomes soiled in youth can never again be washed clean. I know this by my own experience, and to this day I cherish an unappeasable bitterness against the unfaithful guardians of my young life, who not only permitted but compelled me to read an unexpurgated Bible through before I was fifteen years old. None can do that and ever draw a clean sweet breath again this side of the grave."

It should also be noted that it was in February, 1905, that Mark Twain finally decided to publish his book *What is Man?*, in which he stated his disbelief in all dogmatic religion. Yet this year is the one in which, we are told, his chief reading was the Bible and a book of children's stories. Mark was obviously pulling the photographer's leg, classing *Uncle Remus* with its talking Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit with the book in which a talking serpent and a talking ass figure among the characters.

From a more reliable source than the B.B.C. we learn that the books Mark Twain read over and over again included Suetonius's *Cæsars*, Pepys's *Diary*, the *Memoirs of Saint-Simon*, Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Lecky's *History of European Morals* and Andrew D. White's *Warfare of Science with Theology*.

Having misled listeners as it so often does when it drags in religion, the B.B.C. ought to correct the false impression given by Mr. Coburn's reminiscence. Besides mentioning the facts given above it could quote Mark Twain's opinion of the Christian God, given in a passage that is as mordant in its sarcasm as it is unanswerable in its indictment.

"A God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice and invented Hell—mouths Golden Rules, and forgiveness multiplied seventy times seven, and invented Hell; who mouths morals to other people and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man's acts upon man, instead of honourably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor, abused slave to worship him."

Will the B.B.C. accept the challenge to broadcast the truth about Mark Twain's attitude towards religion? They have the opportunity now.

## This Believing World

In discussing *Faith Healing* in the *Sunday Dispatch*, Mr. Godfrey Winn is exceedingly puzzled, so remarkable are the cures he has investigated. For example, there is a very religious medical man who nearly became a priest, Dr. Woodard, who has a number of "divine cures" to his credit—or perhaps we ought to say to the credit of Jesus Christ through Dr. Woodard. What puzzles us is why does Dr. Woodard allow so many hundreds of sick people in his local hospitals to be treated in the orthodox medical way, some of them taking months to cure, when a visit from Christ Jesus accompanied by Dr. Woodard could clear the lot out in a morning?

This particular doctor believes that a touch from the elders of the Church, with a little help from olive oil—as emphasised in the Epistle of James—"can prove the most efficacious medicine of all." Good—then why does he not begin with our hospitals? Dr. Woodard's little son was cured of meningitis by prayers to Jesus, and we can hardly believe that this is unique, that is, that Jesus would allow the hundreds of poor little victims of the same disease to remain ill if Dr. Woodard prayed as fervently for them as he did for his son.

Naturally, as a true believer, the doctor also believes in the Devil, and he helped to "exorcise" the Evil One out of the body of a little girl. "It was a clear case of possession," admitted the doctor, so the patient was anointed and her mother felt something very cold brush against her cheek—obviously the Devil who couldn't stand the prayers or the anointing, and cleared out post-haste. And Mr. Winn reports the case of Lourdes water curing a very sick six-months' baby—all very puzzling, of course. We should advise Mr. Winn now to look at the cures—genuine ones—made by many despised herbal and patent medicines. They are just as remarkable as any performed by Jesus Christ.

In the final instalment of his autobiography, Mr. Sean O'Casey, the eminent Irish dramatist, does not hide his anti-clericalism, much to the disgust of Mr. Ivor Brown who recently reviewed the book in the *Observer*. Mr. O'Casey thinks little of the late G. K. Chesterton, and Mr. Brown comes to Chesterton's defence. "Does not Mr. O'Casey remember," he asks, "that, when street corner Atheists were prosecuted or imprisoned under the Blasphemy Laws, while other Atheists sat unprotesting in the Cabinet, it was G.K.C. who exposed this piece of clerical and political humbug?"

That may be true—but what did G.K.C. do for the abolition of the Blasphemy Laws? Nothing whatever. He would have been severely reprimanded had he tried to do so, for the stoutest defender of those obsolete laws was and is always his own Church. In power, the Roman Church would use the Blasphemy Laws to their utmost. In any case, most, if not all, the "unbelievers" in Parliament today are unlikely to run the risk of losing Christian votes by supporting any appeal for the abolition of the Blasphemy Laws. To put it another way, all Chesterton did in the matter was having a dig at Atheists, and not at all at the Blasphemy Laws.

Lecturing on the radio to schools the other day, a gentleman called Walton did his best to grapple with the problem of evil, to show that God Almighty was Infinite Goodness. A sillier or lamer defence of the Almighty was certainly never heard anywhere. Faced with the monstrous

horror of allowing six millions of Jews to be exterminated by the Germans, Mr. Walton thought talking about it was "one-sided." We forget, he loftily told us, about the lovely things in the world—sunsets and beautiful landscapes and courage and love showered on us in such profusion by a beneficent Maker. We should forget polio and leprosy and blind children and other horrors and concentrate on grapes and peaches and the other lovely things we get from the Lord. And this is the kind of religious drivel dished out to children! No wonder Christianity is more and more contemptuously rejected by intelligent people.

## Chapman Cohen on Disobedience

THERE is something significant in the Christian teaching tracing all disasters of mankind to a primal act of disobedience. It is a fact which discloses in a flash the chief function of religion in general and of Christianity in particular. Man's duty is summed up in the one word, obedience, and the function of the (religiously) good man is to obey the commands of God, as it is that of the good citizens to obey the commands of the government. The two commands meet and supplement each other with the mutual advantage that results from the adjustments of the upper and lower jaws of the hyena. And it explains why the powers that be have always favoured the claims of religion. It enabled them to rally to their aid the tremendous and stupifying help of religion, and to place rebellion to their orders on the same level as rebellion against God. In Christian theology Satan is the arch-rebel; hell is full of rebellious angels and disobedient men and women. Heaven is reserved for the timid, the tame, the obedient, the sheep-like. When the Christ of the Gospels divides the people into goats and sheep, it is the former that go to hell and the latter to heaven. The Church has not a rebel in its calendar, although it includes not a few rogues and many fools. To the Church revolt is always a sin, save on those rare occasions when it is ordered in the interests of the Church itself. In Greek mythology Prometheus steals fire from heaven for the benefit of man, and suffers in consequence. The myth symbolises the fact. Always man has had to win knowledge and happiness in the teeth of opposition from the Gods. Always the race has owed its progress to the daring of the rebel and the rebellious few.—*A Grammar of Freethought*.

## In Germany

Since the State revenue offices of the Soviet Zone of Germany have ceased collecting the church tax, the church tax revenues have dropped by 22 million Marks (approximately £2,000,000) per annum. At the same time the State subsidies have been reduced by 30 per cent. In the Eastern Sector of Berlin alone 8,000 inhabitants have left the Lutheran Church during the past twelve months. The number of church weddings and confirmations has also dropped. According to the Lutheran Church historian, Professor Meinhold, Kiel, it is not the R.C. Church but freethought which is threatening Schleswig-Holstein (the smallest of the West German Laender). From 1923 to 1950 the share of Roman Catholics in the total population has risen from 3.5 to 6 per cent. In the same time freethought membership has risen from 1 per cent. to 6 per cent. In Kiel the capital alone, 15 per cent. of the inhabitants do not belong to any church.—*Der Freidenker*, July, 1954.

## Epitaph on Tomb of Oscar Wilde

And alien tears will fill for him  
Pity's long-broken urn,  
For his mourners will be outcast men,  
And outcasts always mourn.

—The Ballad of Reading Gaol.

# THE FREETHINKER

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

## To Correspondents

J. O'CONNOR.—See "Science Front," last issue.

D. NIXON.—Copies of the week's issue were sent to J. Stanley Pritchard, the Editor, *Radio Times*, and the B.B.C.

CANDIDUS.—Thanks for your excellent translations which shall be used.

## Lecture Notices, Etc.

### OUTDOOR

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

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Deansgate Blitzed Site).—Every weekday, 1 p.m.: G. A. WOODCOCK.

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, December 5, noon: L. EBURY, H. ARTHUR and F. A. RIDLEY.

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Every Friday at 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

### INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics' Institute, Second Floor).—Sunday, December 5, 6-45 p.m.: W. BARTHOLOMEW, M.A., "International Relations."

Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, December 7, 7 p.m.: Prof. H. LEVY, "The Challenge of the Atomic Age."

"The Diggers" (14, Upper Brighton Road, Surbiton).—Thursday, December 9, 8 p.m.: P. VICTOR MORRIS, "Atheism."

Junior Discussion Group (South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall).—Friday, December 3, 7-15 p.m.: The Rev. H. R. MOXLEY, M.A., "Our Responsibility Towards Refugees."

Leicester Secular Society (Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, December 5, 6-30 p.m.: D. P. FLANNERY, "A Case for Disestablishment."

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Large Lecture Theatre, Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, December 5, 2-30 p.m., Debate: ELDER J. PRESTON CREER v. G. H. HUNNINGS, "Is the Book of Mormon Authentic?"

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, December 5, 11 a.m.: Prof. T. H. PEAR, "Are Modern Scientists Afraid of Doing Good?"

West London Branch N.S.S. (The Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, Marylebone, W.1, five minutes from Edgware Road Station).—Sunday, December 5, 7-15 p.m.: P. VICTOR MORRIS, "Some Problems in Secularist Propaganda."

## Notes and News

This is the season for Christmas and New Year gifts—and readers will find in the many books published by the *Pioneer Press* quite a number which should prove most acceptable, not only now, but as permanent acquisitions for one's library shelves. Next week we are giving a list of some of our best sellers and, for making Freethinkers, they will be found indispensable.

## The Chapman Cohen Memorial Fund

Previously acknowledged: £529 5s. 9d.

F.B.B., £100; H. Pollard, 7s. 6d.; F.D. (Glasgow), 10s.; J. D. Graham, 2s. 6d.; Mr. & Mrs. T. Colyer, £1 1s.; W. T. Hawkes (South Africa), £2 15s.; Mrs. H. Rogals, 5s.; F. Brooks, 2s. 6d.; Miss A. Lloyd, £1; F. W. Pamplin, £2 2s.; A. Hepworth, 2s. 6d.; W. J. Burns, 5s.; Charles H. Smith, £1 1s.; A. Hancock, 1s.; J. Tidey, 10s.; G. A. Kirk, £2 2s.; W.H.D., 2s. 6d.; Miss G. D. Davies, £1; J. Bell, £2 2s. Total to date: £644 17s. 3d.

Donations should be sent to "The Chapman Cohen Memorial Fund" and cheques made out accordingly.

## True Spiritual Values

By PROSPER ALFARIC

(Emeritus Professor of the History of Religions of the University of Strasbourg)

[A Paper read by M. Jean Cotcreau at the International Free-thought Congress held at Luxemburg September 1 to 6, 1954, translated and abridged by C. Bradlaugh Bonner.]

WE claim that as a group we Freethinkers are characterised by an endeavour to think freely; our first care is to free our minds as far as we can from those treacherous illusions which mislead and hinder human thinking. Hence our opponents are those whose thinking is not free, but, of their own wish and preference, is shackled by age-old prejudices and ancient superstitions. Because we deny what they affirm and reject the hoary beliefs in which they have been brought up, they reproach us for misunderstanding and even failing to recognise the spiritual values bequeathed us by our ancestors which they hold to be precious, even the most precious part of our heritage. They claim to be the true guardians of this inheritance; but this claim is nonsense, the barefaced brazenness of which is only equalled by its ineptitude. The truth is that we who think freely are the defenders of the genuine values which we endeavour to bring to fruitfulness against the efforts of all attackers.

First, what is meant by "spirit" and "spiritual?" Alas, how vague and confusing are the definitions we are likely to meet. "Spirit" is not "body"; it is not anything which can be perceived. Personally I must confess that, deprived of my senses, I can no longer perceive anything and lose all knowledge of myself.

Well, exclaim our adversaries, "spirit" is the part which "thinks." Very good, say I, but "thinking" is closely connected with "body" it is a function of the brain and waxes and wanes with bodily powers; it is the infinitely complex resultant of a multitude of subtle and delicate vibrations which are translated and synthesised into images without any conscious effort, thus providing the prime material of imagination and of analysis. Language has facilitated this process and writing has given it permanence. "Spirit," if it means just the thinking part and no more, is the organised and orderly labour of the brain. Here we have a definition which is at once precise and clear, qualities lacking in the explanations put forward by believers in incoherent and inconsistent dogmas.

Second, whence comes this "Spirit?" Our opponents answer: "From God, who is pure spirit; he has created our spirit in his own image." Such a mystical solution is pure mystification (*obscurum per obscurius*). We have obtained a clear notion of human "spirit," but I defy the most subtle theologian to explain clearly and precisely what he means by "god." Whatever he terms "it," immediately we try to give "it" comprehensible form "it" fades away into a confusion of contradictions. There is however a definition I commend for consideration, that

formulated by a monk of days long passed, one François Rabelais, "a chimæra bombinating in a vacuum."

Let us get down to brass tacks; this "god" is no creator, but a creation. Man made him and into this fancy man projects all that he admires in himself—Intelligence, Love, Freewill, Power. He idolises his own fiction, kneels before it in adoration and pretends to be the humble creature of his own fabrication, the recipient of "its" noblest gifts!

The Spirit given by this "god" is the shadow of a shade, and the values qualified as "spiritual" evidently fictive. Our question derives from an unjustified separation and opposition of "mind" and "matter." Living matter has developed, enlarged and gained vastly in complexity in the course of immeasurable periods of time. This process has produced "spirit." No Jahweh breathed it into Adam. Adam is just another myth; the Fall of Man just another fiction, a lamentable fancy for it includes the frightful doctrine of Original Sin, the product of unwholesome imaginations which regard all mankind as condemned without redress "for ever and ever."

Third, "What is the End of Man?" At the head of the catechism which I learned as a child stood, "Why was man created and placed in earth?" and the official answer ran, "to know, love and serve God in this life and to glorify him in the next." To "know" something hidden in inaccessible light which none has ever seen nor can see; to "serve" something which is complete and has no needs therefore; to "love" something of which no acceptable idea is obtainable; and to "glorify" something beyond comparison. Such is the aim of living offered us by our adversaries, for whom the Trappist and the Carmelite are the finest flower of mankind; but for us grotesque caricatures.

On the other hand what do we, the Freethinkers, consider our Aim and End of Man? Of all the realities about us the supreme in significance to us human beings is the human society in which we live. In it we were born, by it we have been moulded, through it we subsist, thanks to it we can think; without it the best of life would not be at all. All that we can call human as distinct from the other animals we derive from society. It is society which arouses in us the grand ideas, the noble sentiments and the generous aspirations which taken together may be called "soul." And what is the End of Man? I answer "To know, love and serve Mankind which has created all that is best in us, to exalt Humanity by our lives and to leave to our nearest and dearest a memory which they may prize."

These are the true "Spiritual Values," measured by their influence on human society. Hence we salute with respect and gratitude those men and women who work to save us from suffering, whether physical or mental, who labour to enlarge our powers and to increase the measure of our durable happiness; and in particular those who strive to liberate our minds from the domination of outworn myths and of "chimæras bombinating in a vacuum."

True Morality is more sublime than any formulated in the mists of Sinai. Prayer, fasting and confession, the observance of saints' days and pilgrimages, how vain and futile are they! True Morality teaches men to refrain from doing harm to one another and to render mutual service as members of one great brotherhood.

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According to a report of the *Norddeutsche Zeitung* of June 24, 1954, Chancellor Dr. Adenauer stated at a joint conference of the R.C. and Lutheran Churches at Bad Boll that he was worried about the disinterestedness (literally: distance and abstinence) of all clergymen in political affairs. More than before clergymen should play a leading part as politicians and should lead their congregations to political responsibility.—*Der Freidenker*, September, 1954.

## After Many Visits

By A. R. WILLIAMS

i

AT my first visit I was in my teens. Coming from a big town I found the hillside village delightful. My parents' friends lived in an old stonebuilt cottage high up the slope.

It had two bedrooms. My host and hostess being childless occupied them alternately to keep them aired. The back one looked over an orchard, a fascinating study of pink and white blossom in spring, though I developed a growing admiration for it in autumn, when ripening fruit among dark green leaves glowed at morning under the rising sun. Beyond was pasture and the wooded hilltop.

For I holidayed here at all seasons of the year. From the front bedroom window I looked across gardens to the road, farther more cottages and gardens, and in the distance another tree-crowned ridge of hills, separated from this one by a steep-sided valley.

In winter it was windy and cold up here, though deep snow gave it a sharp beauty with grey stone walls and dark trees etched against blanketing of pure snow. Summers were correspondingly hot. The sun seemed to have more intensity, its rays striking fuller, making lounging in the shade the best method of spending the day.

Then evenings were pleasant. Moonlight had a loveliness of its own, casting deep shadows accentuated by the absence of street lamps.

Among such surroundings I walked and wandered, roamed and explored till I knew the country in detail for miles around. And the people too. Colin Bedley was a local man. His parents still alive, and most of his brothers and sisters settled in the village, I found myself involved in the family connections.

So I was present at christenings and weddings, birthday and Christmas parties, and occasionally funerals, besides getting introduced to friends of the family. Conversation was mainly local gossip, largely personal.

An outsider before her marriage to Colin Bedley his wife retained a certain amount of disinterestedness. Sharp of wits and tongue, yet good-humoured, she capped her husband's accounts of local people and happenings with comic or scandalous anecdotes and analyses of character.

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An accommodating youth I was content to share pleasures with my host and hostess. This made Sunday the least satisfactory day of the week. All the Bedleys were strong Church people, Colin outstandingly so. He had been baptised and confirmed, educated in the Church School, attended Sunday School, and sang in the Church Choir. As soon as his voice settled after breaking he rejoined the choir, singing a light bass of good tone though untrained. He was on the Church Council, took communion regularly, and was a bellringer.

Consequently I accompanied him to church Sunday mornings. This was not without its compensations on the social side in the number of people met to talk to after service. It had its humours too, as when a small niece of Colin Bedley discovered her uncle in the choir as it made a procession up the church. She was about to cry aloud "Look! There's Uncle Col!" when I slipped my hand over her mouth, so the shout was subdued enough to be lost in the singing.

After a big dinner Colin Bedley slept of Sunday afternoons. I read or went for a walk. At night Mrs. Bedley joined us going to church. Following that would be a slow walk home by a devious route, to finish, through the wood were the weather fine enough, or a visit to one of the Bedley family.

Grown up, I often broke the Sunday routine, and I noticed Mrs. Bedley sometimes did. Her husband grew more devoted to church as he aged.

Bellringing, I discovered, also could be a sociable function. When the team of ringers was ending practice of an evening I went into the tower belfry, after which we all adjourned to the nearest inn for drink and gossip. The latter never ceased to entertain me, while the former developed my taste for good beer.

Otherwise Colin Bedley took his churchmanship seriously. At Sunday School treats, fetes, bazaars and whatever function the church promoted he helped. He was on respectfully familiar terms with the Rector. His reading was largely of a church tenor, the parish magazine and other Anglican periodicals, and books of a similar religious and Church—High Church—flavour.

Also it affected the household decorations. Church calendars and almanacs hung on the walls, and pictures of a pious trend, varying from choir photographs and portrayals of bishops and ecclesiastical buildings to copies of medieval religious art. In each bedroom was a crucifix and little crosses made of twisted palm were stuck in vases.

iii

As I grew older I went to the hillside village less often till I was summoned to Colin Bedley's funeral. This the

Church made into an impressive processional ceremony, with solemn music and singing, the fullest and most elaborate ritual to befit such a devoted son of it.

Some months later I stayed a week with the widow. I noticed many differences in the house. Not only had the rooms been redecorated, but there seemed to be something much missing from formerly. Looking around I realised all the religious relics and pictures had gone. Going to bed I found my bedroom similarly denuded of everything which had a pious tinge. Slipping into the other bedroom after Mrs. Bedley went downstairs in the morning I saw it likewise stripped of all religious reminders. Under pretext of looking for something to read I discovered nothing left of a church or theological nature.

I said naught about it, neither did Mrs. Bedley till after Sunday tea, when I asked her: "Are you going to church to-night?"

"No. I haven't been to church since Colin died."

She paused, smiled and resumed, "And I don't suppose I shall again."

"Oh."

My hostess concluded in a placid but firm voice: "Religion, Church, were Colin's hobbies, his entertainment and pastime, not mine, never were. They amused him, but they didn't me; don't interest me one bit. So I've dropped them out of my life."

## The Hypocrisy of B.B.C. Religion

By H. DAY

READERS will have their personal views regarding the undue privileges extended by the British Broadcasting Corporation to organised religion. They will note the huge proportion of programme-time allocated to the propagation and dissemination of supernaturalism and superstition. But all readers are not necessarily aware of the subtlety and cunning displayed by the Religious Dept. of the B.B.C. and its "stooges." This is on a par with the B.B.C.'s avowed intention that nothing shall go on the air which may in any possible way tend to disturb or ruffle the mainstream of pure Christian traditions.

One imagines that the proportion of listeners to the daily "blurb," "Lift up your hearts" at 7-50 a.m. each weekday, is very small. Most workers are at their desks, counters, benches, or machines by that time, or on their way to them. The mothers are busy getting the kiddies off to school, while others are often abed still. To those of us who enjoy (sic) listening to these choice examples of religious apologetics, it is both irritating and intriguing, yet sometimes delightfully entertaining to note the crude stuff which is poured out by the heart-lifters, both professional and lay. One hears the "heartrending" and "soul searing" sob-stuff of the amateur apologist, who it is rumoured are paid four guineas for telling listeners in five minutes how he, or she, couldn't do his, or her job. Unless, that is, he, or she, really believed in a collection of biblical legends and fairy tales about gods and devils, angels and spirits. Also, of course, those who believe in the professional pundits, who endeavour to make sense out of traditional fables, which most intelligent people know to be at best theological, allegorical, symbolical and parabolical. I have frequently written to such heart-lifters requesting them to amplify and to explain their utterances and/or to justify their pronouncements. On rare occasions I have received replies, which generally tend to confirm the view that the broadcasters are either hypocritical or credulous, or both. In no case is the reply a detailed answer.

Within the past week or two, listeners to the Third Programme have been regaled on two occasions by what

purported to be a "discussion" on Free Will between Father Copleston, a Roman Catholic of Jesuit fame, and Prof. A. J. Ayer. The writer of this article listened for some 50 minutes, hoping to hear something new and striking on this subject, but was only impressed by the fact that two alleged cultured, educated and intelligent broadcasters could use up so much language and talk so long, while saying so little. The Jesuit ran true to form as a professional and fundamentalist Christian apologist. He advanced the usual supernatural ideas about spirits and spiritual experiences, inner promptings, conscience, etc., which got us nowhere at all. What was most striking about this so-called debate was the circumstance that Prof. Ayer, who, one presumes, is a rationalist and a materialist, if not, indeed, a confirmed Atheist, scrupulously avoided putting Father Copleston "on the spot." He was, apparently, avoiding putting to Father Copleston a single unequivocal question about the real meaning of the word "free" in this connotation. One did not notice a single question in regard to the arbitrary creation of all the circumstances in which one must make a choice between two, or more, apparently possible courses of action. One wondered if Prof. Ayer was a "free agent" or whether he was bound to a script, vetted and approved by the Religious Broadcasting Dept. to ensure that he should not put his religious opponent into any sort of dangerous or difficult position. If this is *not* the case, then one can only deplore the scrupulous regard for his opponent, which inhibited Prof. Ayer from confronting Father Copleston with the simple logical arguments against the idea of a "free" will entirely unconditioned.

On Sunday, October 17, the T.V. programmers brought before viewers the Rev. George Duncan in Epilogue, to present the "Facts of Faith." What a title! As though fact and faith could be synonymous terms! This professional apologist made judicious use of a film in slow-motion photography to demonstrate the truly remarkable and interesting development of microscopical plant life in the hot dry sands of the desert; the film showing tiny flowers of the greatest beauty and symmetry. This was

all to the end of "proving" the loving and providential care for its creatures of a something which is called by the name God, but of which, apparently, nobody seems really to know anything. The speaker played the customary tunes upon the abstract themes of beauty, truth and goodness, as though these abstractions were the peculiar and particular possessions of the abstraction called God. One presumes, of course, that it would not occur to viewers—even if to the broadcaster—that he could have secured similar films showing equally clearly and vividly the marvellous intricacy and development of a number of other things far less conducive to his particular theme; things which live and move and have their being in the sands of the desert. He might, for example, have chosen films showing the life-cycle of a scorpion, or the tsetse-fly, or a louse, or a spider. He might have chosen films depicting the story of the bug, the flea, the house-fly, the body-louse, the tapeworm, the spirochete. He could have dwelt on the number of kinds of bacteria, which, apparently, are with us for the special mission of being a most confounded nuisance to the human species, that masterpiece of the Lord of Creation. Such selection would not, of course, have lent itself to the lecturer's aim, but it would have been equally relevant. As with most religious apologetics, the case was presented with apparent bias. Obviously, if there be a God, and if God be a Creator, then God created all things, good and bad, true and false, beautiful and ugly. It is high time the B.B.C. permitted these pundits to be fairly and squarely challenged.

## Ask at Your Library

*The Scalpel, The Sword.* The Story of Dr. Norman Bethune by Sydney Gordon and Ted Allan.

Reviewed by F. A. HORNIBROOK

THIS is a fine book about a very great man, and yet, in some ways, a man little known to the vast majority of people.

Dr. Norman Bethune was a Scot-Canadian and the story of his life and work, by two of his fellow Canadians, is written with sympathy and understanding.

The authors quote Dr. L. Eloesser, Clinical Professor of Surgery, Emeritus of Stanford University Medical School, California, who said: "No doctor, not Hyppocrates, not Jenner, not Pasteur nor Sir Alexander Fleming is known and venerated by as many people as Norman Bethune. To many millions he is the embodiment of devotion and self-sacrifice, of the burning pursuit of a noble purpose which, after he had attained it, ended by consuming him. This book records Bethune, his development, his life, his accomplishments and his death in stirring and often impassioned pages."

In 1930 Dr. Bethune was in hospital, dying of T.B. when he heard about Dr. J. Alexander's conception for collapsing an infected lung by the removal of part of the rib, and was so impressed that he submitted himself to the treatment and was cured. For the rest of his life he worked harder than do the majority of people who have two lungs.

He had a lucrative practice and an international medical reputation, but he sacrificed both, and even his life, to fight in the cause of freedom. In this thrilling story the authors tell how Dr. Bethune went first to Spain to help the badly pressed Republicans and then, after returning to the United States to try to raise money for medical equipment to China who was then being attacked by Imperial Japan:

always to the place where the need seemed to him the greatest. The Chinese wounded were dying by the thousand and a cry for help was sent to Bethune who immediately responded. He said: "I refuse to live in a world that spawns murder and corruption without raising my hand against them. I refuse to condone by passivity the wars which greedy men make against others. . . ."

Bethune instituted blood banks which saved thousands of lives and operated on hundreds of wounded, often right at the front. His slogan was: "The doctor should go to the wounded, not the wounded to the doctor."

This book very ably portrays the character of this extraordinary man who was not satisfied by merely curing cases of T.B. by thoracic surgery, but spent all his time when not engaged in lecturing and writing about the causes of the disease, showing how for one T.B. case cured in hospital, scores were manufactured in the wretched slums in which many thousands suffering from malnutrition and the lack of sunshine and warmth had to live.

It was in January, 1938, that Dr. Bethune arrived in China and in November of that year he died there of septicemia, the result of operating without rubber gloves, owing to the fact that supplies of drugs and surgical equipment to China had been stopped. Every year there is a solemn pilgrimage of thousands to the grave in China of this great humanitarian.

This story is as exciting as an adventure story—more interesting than any novel. The authors quote from an article Dr. Bethune wrote on "These men make the wounds": "What do these enemies of the human race look like? Do they wear on their foreheads a sign so they may be told, shunned and condemned as criminals? No, on the contrary they are the respectable ones. They are honoured. They call themselves and are called 'gentlemen.' They are the pillars of the State, of the Church, of Society. They support private and public charity out of the excess of their wealth. In their private lives they are kind and considerate—these men make the wounds."

## Correspondence

### FLYING SAUCERS

As a reader of your paper, *The Freethinker*, I feel I must protest about the article in "This Believing World," November 5.

In this article you attack people believing in "Flying Saucers." You accuse them of credulity and gullibility, to quote your own words. Surely nothing could be farther from the truth. We disbelieve in God and Religion because they are contrary to all logical thought.

Flying Saucers are not contrary to logical thought. I personally think it highly probable that they do exist.

I ask you, what is strange about flying-machines a bit more developed than our own being flown from another world? [Our italics.—Ed.].—Yours, etc., K. F. DAVIDSON.

### SPIRITUAL HEALING

I was very interested to read Frank Burgess's letter about his experience with a Spiritualist Healer. Perhaps, however, he would enlighten us further by giving us more details as to the treatment which led to his cure? Then we can judge whether or not Mr. Burgess is right in claiming that "this man had something in his body that could—and did—cure or heal."—Yours, etc., JILL B. WARNER.

The letter from Frank Burgess telling of his "faith" cure is of the deepest interest, but he omits two details necessary to complete the picture, and if he would now supply these details, I for one would be very grateful to him. These are: (a) What was the disease from which he was suffering, i.e., what was the "official" diagnosis? (b) How was the cure effected, i.e., what did the healer do during his visits?—Yours, etc., W. AULD.

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