

# The Freethinker

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Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

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THE present laws against allegedly indecent literature say that a publication is obscene if it may tend to deprave or corrupt those "into whose hands" it may chance to fall. These ill-chosen words give *carte blanche* to any narrow-minded prude to cause a prosecution to be brought against some unfortunate author, for there are few important books which might not plausibly be alleged to have

such an effect on some feeble-minded person. The number of such actions has increased alarmingly in recent months, culminating in the ludicrous decision against *The Decameron* (fortunately quashed by a higher court). All true Freethinkers should regard these proceedings with profound uneasiness. Some discussion of this vitally important subject has already taken place in *The Freethinker*. But no one has yet set forth the main objections to censorship of every description from a freethought point of view, and this task I shall now attempt.

First, there is the general and simple argument that each person should be allowed to read whatever he or she pleases without dictation from anyone else. If a man is addicted to the novels of James Hadley Chase or George Viereck why should he not have his fill of them? He is as honest a citizen as the earnest student of Kant's *Metaphysics of Ethics* and is therefore surely entitled to indulge his literary appetites to the same extent, however depraved we may consider them to be.

### Who Decides?

Secondly, there is the very important point that none of our moral pundits agrees regarding which books are obscene and which are harmless. The definition of obscenity changes from century to century and from country to country, and when an author is prosecuted for publishing an allegedly indecent work there is often a long legal squabble as to whether the charge is justified, the verdict usually going to the lawyer with the more persuasive manner. Many books which were banned during the present century have since been "reprieved" and are now universally available—e.g., Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. But if they were unfit to read when first published, they are surely still unfit to read to-day. Parts of the Holy Bible are of course very strong meat indeed and if they were published separately would undoubtedly be condemned as indecent literature by our self-righteous Puritans (including, I am afraid, Foote and Ball!) The *Satyricon* of Petronius, the works of Rabelais and the *Droll Stories* of Balzac make *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* and the average papers marked pornography seem like Sunday-school textbooks, yet the colossal inconsistency which censorship always involves means the latter are condemned while the former are excused on the grounds of being classics, the argument apparently being that if a sin was committed long enough ago, it is pardonable. Yet from any reasonable point of view if old pornography is not censorable neither should the modern variety

be. As Voltaire pointed out, if there had been censorship in ancient Rome we should have had to-day neither Horace nor Juvenal.

### Who is Injured?

In the third place, censorship is wrong because it brings all people down to the lowest common denominator.

Children and idiots must be protected, so we must all be treated as though we were children or idiots. This argument is as sensible as prohibiting the manufacture of razors would be because young people or fools might cut themselves with them. In point of fact, it would be very difficult to prove that

any single person, child or adult, has ever been injured by reading a book dealing with sex, whether in the form of a novel or a psychological or medical treatise. It is a very naive person who imagines that by preventing a child from gaining access to a book on the facts of life, he or she is protecting the young from acquiring knowledge of sex. The knowledge will be obtained in spite of us, at school or elsewhere. A child who receives a thorough grounding in sex from an early age will find the lavatory obscenity found in every school merely boring in contrast to his friend, shielded by misguided parents, teachers and librarians, to whom it will be only too attractive. Moreover, below a certain age the reading of so-called pornography has no effect whatever. I myself devoured a copy of Balzac's *Droll Stories* at the age of eight, and remained quite unaware of the fact that they contained anything not mentioned in polite society. Had anyone told me the book was indecent (and indecent it certainly is by conventional standards) I would have thought they were insane.

### The Effects of Prohibiting

In truth, the great majority of those charged with sexual offences have probably never read a sex book at any period of their lives. In nine cases out of ten their distorted outlook is due to a combination of unbalanced glandular secretions and ignorance of the true function and purpose of sex brought about by the very attitude of prohibition I am attacking. It is a very curious and significant fact that the most fanatical censor does not dream of banning ordinary crime stories, either to the young, in the form of "blood and thunders," or the not-so-young in the form of mysteries. Yet if a person may commit a crime of passion after reading a sex book, his friend may equally, on the same argument, commit a murder after reading an Agatha Christie or Raymond Chandler. And murder is punishable by hanging, while many sex aberrations are not offences in the eyes of the law at all. If then anyone believes that pornographic books should be condemned because readers of them might sally forth and seduce an innocent maiden, he should logically also believe that crime stories should be banned because *their* devotees might slit the throats of those against whom they bear a grudge. Far from leading people on to commit sex crimes I believe that pornographic

—VIEWS and OPINIONS—

## The Censorship of Literature

—By Rev. JOHN L. BROOM, M.A.—



literature serves a valuable purpose in acting as a kind of prophylactic against promiscuity. Those who read them require the relief thereby afforded from the oppressions of convention as children require fairy tales to escape from the often prosaic realities of their daily lives. The pornographic literature addict is normally an inoffensive insignificant fellow who is scared of sex in real life and so finds a substitute by wallowing imaginatively in highly coloured descriptions of seduction and lechery within the covers of a book. He is the last person on earth to follow the example of the undesirable characters in the story; he lacks the courage. Yet if the outlet of enjoying pornography is denied him through the action of the censor he may conceivably be driven to resort to less harmless means for the satisfaction of his frustrated instincts.

Fourthly, the total illogicality of censorship is shown by the fact that it is always the *other person* who is said to be in danger from the offending publication. The cry is ever, "This book will corrupt Tom, Dick or Harry." It is never "This book has corrupted *me*." The would-be censor is always himself immune, and that being so it is sheer self-righteousness for him to claim that other members of the public are less able than himself to resist temptation as the result of reading a doubtful book.

#### Verboten

But surely the strongest argument against all forms of censorship is that prohibition automatically makes the

thing prohibited one hundred times more attractive. This is so obvious that one is sometimes tempted to believe that our censors are in the pay of the publishers of pornography, who know that any talk of banning their books will rocket their sales. Because of interference by well-meaning but stupid Puritans, many worthless publications gain an entirely undeserved notoriety—had they been ignored they would have died a natural death from neglect. The demand for pornography is largely due to censorship. As that fine writer George Ryley Scott put it "The best advertisement is the hanging of the word *Verboten* in front of an exhibit." In the words of Havelock Ellis, "No one would read a book because the Home Secretary recommends it, but there is a vast public for it because he condemns it."

#### "Every Burned Book Enlightens the World"

To sum up: Almost any book may be dangerous, and different books are dangerous to different people at different stages of development. But to make this an excuse for censorship would mean there would be precious few books left in our bookshops and libraries. Obscenity resides not in a book, but in the minds of its readers. "Every burned book enlightens the world," said Emerson. And I suggest that the only phenomenon we must suppress is the censor of every variety, an evil and pernicious figure who, by his loathsome actions, is attempting to stifle that hard-won liberty to read whatever we desire which as Freethinkers we must ever strive to defend.

## Open Letter to the "News Chronicle"

SIR,

After several years of broadcasting, during which religion has enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the air, an isolated broadcast by Mrs. Knight has brought a hornet's nest about her and about the B.B.C. Surely it is high time in this twentieth century that people grew out of the established superstitions of the Dark Ages and realised that the proper function of a nation-wide organisation such as broadcasting, should be objective and impartial and that its overall policy should be to provide a forum for controversy and for the free, frank and full expression of honestly held viewpoints on all controversial issues, including religion. In this connection it should be remembered that professional clerics of any persuasion or degree, as interested parties, can hardly be expected to be absolutely honest, unbiased, or impartial.

If what is loosely called by the term Christianity, or indeed, any other religious theory, can be defended, surely such controversy affords the orthodox apologists the opportunity to defend and establish their claims. If, on the other hand, it cannot be defended against intelligent objection and challenge, then we may, of course, expect the stupid outcry for suppression, and the return of the demand for the rack, the thumbscrew and the stake.

Mrs. Knight's competent and intelligent presentation of her case demonstrates conclusively that whether or no there is any degree of truth in the Christian claims, there is no foundation whatever for the claim so persistently made and implied by its apologists, that Christian believers, as such, or indeed any other brand of religious believers, to have monopoly of morality and ethics, or of the ordinary human virtues.

One point upon which Mrs. Knight should be better informed is, that the festivals of Easter and Christmas do not prove anything at all in favour of Christianity. It is surely common knowledge with intelligent people that these were originally Pagan festivals and were practised as Eostre and Yule, ages before Christianity.

It would be relevant to this controversy if we could have some authoritative definition of the terms Christianity and Christian—though one does not know any accredited source for such pronouncement. When we have the common and frequent occurrence of particular denominations denouncing the deviations and practices of others as non-Christian, such questions as what, precisely, is Christianity? and what, precisely, is a Christian? are perfectly relevant and pertinent to the issue.

It must surely be agreed by all intelligent students of the general subject of religion, that all religious theories and creeds are man-made and therefore liable to error. After all, Christianity, however loosely the term may be used, is merely the name attached to one of many world religions, all evolved by man. It has no more authority or authenticity than any of the others, and like all the others is likely to die of being found out and exposed. Quite naturally, its professors and adherents will endeavour by all means at their disposal to postpone its demise, even to the extent of reviving the Holy Inquisition.

If there be God, it is surely quite relevant to ask: What is *it*? Where is *it*? What does *it* do? What can *it* do? If there be Satan, or a Devil, or The Devil; again, it is relevant to ask: What is *it*? Where is *it*? What does *it* do? and what *can* it do?

Any objective study of the Christian scriptures and of the records of the Christian Church will demonstrate conclusively and emphatically that moral standards, ethical concepts and the practice of human virtues are not peculiar to Christians, either to-day, or in the past.

H. DAY.

—NEXT WEEK—

#### THE HUMANIST BROADCASTS

A composite article drawn from letters and material supplied by *Freethinker* readers.



# Atheism in the English Renaissance

By F. A. RIDLEY

MODERN civilisation, as and when considered as a single historical phase of human culture and world-history, began with the *Renaissance*, the self-styled "revival" of classical Græco-Roman culture. This powerful, though rather ill-defined, movement of culture, originated in Italy in the fourteenth century, and crossed the Alps into Northern Europe in the sixteenth century. As far as such a movement of the human spirit can be exactly defined, it may be said to have reached England, then the western outpost of European civilisation, shortly after the middle of the sixteenth century, that is, in the reign of the First Queen Elizabeth—1558—1603. In a period of rather less than a century, the new, classically-inspired secular culture produced an intellectual revolution here, as elsewhere on the European continent.

In mediæval England, as in the rest of "Christendom," all culture, including education, was absolutely under the control of the Church and of its clerical representatives: to be sure, in mediæval phraseology, the word "clerk," denoted equally either a person in Holy Orders or a literate person able to read and to write. This state of things was, perhaps, inevitable in an ecclesiastical culture, wherein Theology, the "Heavenly Science," was the recognised basis of education, "the queen of the sciences." The Middle Age learnt its Theology from the Schoolmen, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, and its History from Theologians like St. Augustine. Perhaps the most revolutionary innovation of the Renaissance lay in its substitution of a secular for an ecclesiastical culture. Its "classics" were the secular writers of pagan antiquity, who knew nothing about Christianity, and the exponents of the Renaissance, its scholars were "Humanists," that is, scholars independent of the jurisdiction of the Church. The Renaissance was an intellectual revolution precisely because of this fundamentally *secular* approach and of the Pagan or, at least, non-Christian outlook which underlay its manifestations.

The Renaissance preceded and was, in part, contemporary with the great *religious* revolution of the sixteenth century, usually designated as the *Reformation*. The two movements were, however, by no means synonymous—in point of fact, quite the reverse. For whilst the Renaissance was, in essence, a *pagan* movement that began with, and was largely inspired by, the mental outlook of a *pagan* culture, the Reformation, contrarily, was a *religious*, a specifically *Christian* movement, designed to remove mediæval accretions and ecclesiastical abuses by returning to the "pure faith" of the New Testament. In point of fact, the Reformers were often more opposed to the neo-pagan culture of the Renaissance than was the Catholic Church. Luther, for example, denounced the Renaissance Astronomy of Copernicus long before the Popes. It ought to be remembered in this connection that the Heliocentric system of Astronomy was not discovered by Copernicus but, like most of the Renaissance culture, was derived directly from the ancient Greeks, from Greek Astronomy.

The Renaissance, as such, was not anti-religious, nor even anti-Christian; before the Reformation it counted Cardinals and even Popes amongst the patrons of the New Learning. But the old pagan culture which it so much admired was a *free* culture, not inhibited, like that of the Christian Middle Ages, by the fear of religious persecution. Most of the old pagan authors held, but loosely to the rather primitive theology of their contemporary paganism. Some of the most famous, such as Aristotle, Pliny, Lucian and Lucretius, doubted, or dismissed as myths, the entire pantheon of the pagan deities. This freethinking strain in

classical culture quickly found admirers and imitators amongst the pagan scholars of the Renaissance. The latter applied to the dogmas of the Christian Churches the same critique as their classical models had done in their day to the pagan gods of Olympus. Perhaps the most famous anti-Christian work of the Renaissance was the critical book on human immortality by the Italian sceptic, Pomponazzi. Later on, in order to avoid persecution, Pomponazzi declared that he "believed as a Christian but doubted as a philosopher." Rationalism and Freethought, even Atheism and Materialism, in their modern sense, again raised their heads after the long interval of the "Middle Ages." The term "Middle Age" is itself a typical expression of the Renaissance attitude to the historic process.

There was, however, one essential difference between the easy-going pagan cults of antiquity and the intolerant Christian Churches; the latter both believed in and practised *religious* persecution. Both Rome and the Reformed Churches which sprang up during this self-same era, whilst they disagreed as to *what* precisely Christianity was, had equally no doubt that their version was the correct one, and that it was their duty to enforce it, if necessary, by systematic violence. Rome and the Reformers agreed in burning heretics; they only disagreed as to *what* constituted heresy. However, all agreed on the more radical forms of unbelief; accordingly, Rome burnt the sceptics, Bruno, Dolet and Vanini, whilst Calvin burnt the Unitarian, Servetus; and the Anglican Bishop of Norwich burnt English Unitarians and German heretics impartially. When, as in the case of the Anabaptists, *political* radicalism was combined with *theological heresies*, both Catholics and Protestants *united* to burn the former.

England, like its continental neighbours, was plagued with "heresy" and, at least if some theological writers of the period are to be trusted, with "atheists" also. It is, however, not always clear in what precise sense the word "atheist" is used. If we are to believe some agitated Christian apologists, there was an "atheist" under nearly every bush in the reign of the first Elizabeth! No doubt there is much exaggeration, as when, for example, a few years later a French priest, Fr. Mersenne, tells us that there were 40,000 "atheists" in Paris alone. However, theologians of the highest eminence, such as Bishop Latimer, Richard Hooper and the great Calvin himself, wrote against "atheism." So much smoke would appear to indicate some real fire.

The usual, and one or two unusual, heretical sects were actually found and persecuted in Elizabethan England. There were the usual Anabaptists, sufficiently important, not only to be burnt at Smithfield, but also to be mentioned in the contemporary "Thirty-nine Articles" where their alleged Communism is denounced by name. There was an heretical offshoot, known as the "Family of Love," which in particular was accused of "atheism" and converted into fuel wherever possible. There were also Unitarians, the best-known of whom, Francis Kett, a Cambridge Don, was incinerated at Norwich (1589). Norwich was the place of entry from the Continent for the German heresies of the period. There *may* even have been a few genuine "atheists."

The most famous "Atheist," however, in Renaissance England was not an Englishman but an Italian. He was a political writer, no theologian, no less than Niccolò Macchiavelli, "Old Nick"—the original one. This cynical

(Continued on next page)



## This Believing World

As an antidote to the terrible poison of "infidelity" a writer in our pious *Daily Mail* called Guy Schofield lets us know that "Science has no War with Religion." We heartily agree with him. Science has "busted" religion out of existence. At one time, religion was, so to speak, top dog. When a Pope or Cardinal thundered "Ex-communication," kings and princes trembled. Who trembles now? The threat of Hell was "a hangman's whip,"—but who cares now if told to go to Hell? Science has wiped out Devils, Hell, Angels, Heaven and Miracles. Any scientist who insisted that belief in the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, the wholesale resurrection of Jewish saints, the feeding of a multitude with a few scraps of bread and two or three kippers was the necessary equipment of a scientist, at a meeting of the Royal Society, would be perhaps considered as a *harmless* lunatic, but certainly as a lunatic.

There are, of course, scientists who believe with Jeans that the Universe is "a Great Thought," and that "Mind" came before Matter. We must allow for many theories of the Universe among scientists for, whatever the theory, it still remains a mystery. But Christianity can offer only an explanation of the Universe which causes derisive laughter not only among scientists but among most laymen. "God did it" conveys nothing but a jumble of words. And no threat of ex-communication can alter that fact. That is why "Science has no War with Religion."

On a recent Sunday a passing cloud of "smog" gave London and other towns a temporary "black-out." With a shriek of triumph the *Daily Mail*—and possibly other papers—reported that in the "frightening presence of the unknown" a number of women went on their knees and prayed not to "scientific humanism," but to God Almighty—which meant that "religion was everything—rationalism nothing." Of course it meant just that to the women who, like all Roman Catholics, Muhammedans and Buddhists, never miss a chance of grovelling before "God Almighty" or "Allah" or a statue of Buddha. That is one of our counts against religion—the idea of grovelling as something necessary to pacify an angry Deity. Grovelling has always been the hall mark of true religion.

So the Roman Church is now buying space in our newspapers to sell its religion much in the same way as patent medicines advertise their wares. Send a coupon and you will get free the remarkable cures which lifelong sufferers testify to with gratitude. Send a coupon and you will get "The Truth about the Catholic Church." In nine months, we are told, 6,000 people have sent in coupons and have written to tell "of their interest and gratitude." It is very difficult to believe that there are still people who know so little of Roman Catholicism that they have to write for particulars.

The truth about the Catholic Church was a stock subject during the nineteenth century for all good Protestants of whom there is little left now but the Protestant Truth Society so long connected with John Kensit. Unfortunately attacking Rome among Protestants, appears to have gone right out of favour, and blustering Jesuits and priests get away with a lot of pious talk some of which is even accepted now in Protestant circles. The Freethought attack has been too severe for one Christian sect to stand alone, and both Catholicism and Protestantism are grateful for each other's help. Religion must hang together or it certainly will hang separately.

Every now and then our Spiritualist journals resurrect the "Indian Rope Trick" as if there is a scrap of evidence that there ever was such a trick. That a rope can be thrown heavenwards and remain suspended while a boy and later the "conjurer" can climb up it; that both can disappear and the cut-off legs, arms, etc., of the boy can come tumbling down followed by the conjurer; that he can then put the pieces together and the boy restored to life; and that the rope can then be pulled down—all this is devoutly believed by all Spiritualists, of course. *Psychic News* tells us that it "intrigued" Queen Victoria—that *must* make it true!—and that she offered £200 to anyone who could tell her how it was done. Belief in spooks without evidence is naturally the hall-mark of true Spiritualism—but what evidence is given for this nonsense about Queen Victoria's offer? None at all. If any exists, could we have it?

"Site for St. George's R.C. Secondary School," announces a sign on a building in course of erection in Maida Vale, London. Another notice, which the contractors have put up nearby states: "This site is dangerous—especially for children." Whether Protestant malice or unconscious humour is behind the latter notice is not for us to say—but how true it is!

## Atheism in the English Renaissance

(Concluded from page 43)

Italian taught that religion is a *political device* for keeping the ignorant populace in obedience to the State. This *realpolitik* found many imitators in that age of cynical statecraft, and the theologians of the era never tired of denouncing it. "Macchiavellianism" was regarded as synonymous with "atheism." Later, the Elizabethan stage took up the charge. In Elizabethan literature there are literally hundreds of references to Macchiavelli, chiefly in his role of sorcerer and the Devil's ally. Eventually, "Old Nick" became the "godfather" (sic) of Satan!

Two of the most famous of the Elizabethans were actually accused of atheism in set terms: Christopher Marlowe and Sir Walter Raleigh. The former, who was savagely denounced by the theologians of the time, was actually due to appear before the Privy Council on a charge of "heresy"—then, of course, a capital offence—when he was so mysteriously murdered in a tavern brawl. But for this, Marlowe might have become England's most famous martyr. Sir Walter Raleigh actually appeared before the Privy Council but was acquitted and his "atheism" does not seem to have amounted to more than rather loose table-talk on theological problems. Another famous "atheist" who figures in the theological denunciations was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who is regarded by some modern scholars as the authentic "Shakespeare." De Vere, though charged explicitly with both "atheism" and "horrible and detestable blasphemy," was never actually brought to trial. Whoever it was that wrote "Shakespeare" could have been indicted as an unbeliever on the strength of several passages, notably that in *The Tempest*, beginning, "Our revels now are ended" [Line 148, Act IV, Sc. 1].

The present writer has often thought that a well-documented *History of Atheism* represents one of the major requirements of English critical literature. Unfortunately, for reasons already referred to in these columns, only poor men can afford to avow themselves as Atheists; such people cannot afford to write works of detailed research in which the labour and the financial reward are usually in inverse proportion! But should this projected *History of Atheism* ever see the light it will be found that Atheism in England did not originate with Bradlaugh, nor even Paine—who, incidentally, was not an Atheist—but can be traced back to the Renaissance and, perhaps, earlier.



# THE FREETHINKER

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## To Correspondents

VIGILANI (Liverpool).—Splendid. Please send address.  
"CAN YOU ANSWER."—We have read to p. 5 of your Catholic book. Self-initiated movement is reduplicated in some inorganic systems; hence your arguments based on the contrary fail. When you have overcome this point, we will read further.

## 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 week-day, 1 p.m.: G. A. WOODCOCK.  
North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, February 13, noon: L. EBURY and H. ARTHUR.  
Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Every Friday at 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

### INDOOR

At University House (Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green, E.2).  
—Friday, February 11, 8 p.m., Debate: "Christianity cannot solve the intellectual or practical problems of the common man in the 20th century." Canon FITZGERALD (R.C.) and F. A. RIDLEY.  
Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, February 13, 6-45 p.m.: COLIN McCALL, "Atheism and the Arts."  
Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, February 15, 7 p.m.: VIRGINIA FLEMING, B.A., "The Agnostic Parent and Religious Education."  
Glasgow Secular Society (McLellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street).  
—Sunday, February 13, 6-45 p.m.: J. WINGATE, "Labour's Success—Fact or Fiction?"  
Junior Discussion Group (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).  
—Friday, February 18, 7-15 p.m.: Mrs. K. G. DANIELS, "Setting a Standard."  
Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, February 13, 6-30 p.m.: E. W. SHAW, "Public Health, Sanitary Measures and Religion."  
Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare St.).—Sunday, February 13, 2-30 p.m.: Lt.-Col. J. K. CORDEAUX, "The Weapon of Propaganda."  
South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, February 13, 11 a.m.: Dr. W. E. SWINTON, "Sir Joseph Banks, F.R.S. (1743-1820)."  
West London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, W.1).—Sunday, February 13, 7-15 p.m.: F. A. RIDLEY, "The Future of International Freethought."

## Notes and News

Owing to the absence of Mr. Neuburg through illness, the W. London N.S.S. meeting on January 30 was addressed by Mr. F. A. Hornibrook and Mr. G. H. Taylor on the Humanist Broadcasts, and useful discussion followed. Mr. P. V. Morris, as General Secretary of the Society, urged members to follow up the pressure on the B.B.C., and to make their congratulations conditional on the B.B.C.'s continuance of the broader policy now shown.

An experiment in the training of new speakers is being made in connection with the W. London N.S.S. branch. The first meeting is to be held at the Laurie Arms on February 19, and who better to act as tutor than the redoubtable Bonar Thompson, Hyde Park's most famous orator, and himself a Freethinker. Look for details in next week's Lecture Notices.

## The Chapman Cohen Memorial Fund

Previously acknowledged, £769 15s. 5d.; T. E. Mapp, 2s. 6d.; W. J. Franklin (N.Z.), 16s.; P. M. Bamforth, 2s. 6d.; N. Cluett, 1s. 6d.; Robt. Green, Senr., 10s.; A. Hancock, 1s.; H. E. Duncombe, 3s. 9d.; C. Cullen, 2s. 6d.; Miss M. Fox, 1s.; Dr. Wm. Angus, £5 5s. Total to date: £777 1s. 2d.

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

## Chapman Cohen Memorial Fund

On February 11 a year ago the body of Chapman Cohen was consigned to the crematorial flames, in the presence of his sorrowing family, comrades and friends. Now, inevitably, will begin the dropping out of the public mind of a great man and superb protagonist. The "public mind," note: but not for his disciples. For a great man's writings and influence remain, and goes on growing undisturbed by this immediate post-mortem neglect. One cannot reasonably, blame the public for its short memory, which can be regarded as natural. Life, as the saying is, goes on, and new occasions bring new duties.

Consider: H. G. Wells and G. Bernard Shaw, the greatest English writers of the first half of this century, have not yet been dead ten years. They, too, are under this inevitable cloud: one rarely sees their names in the popular press. But who would dare hazard that their work will not later shine more resplendent than ever.

I was reading the other day some lines of the great Dean Swift, one of the brightest stars in British literary history. Captain Lemuel Gulliver will march through future Lilliputs to "the end of time." Yet his creator wrote these melancholy lines on the effect of his nearing demise on his friends and acquaintances.

"Here shift the Scene, to represent  
How those I love, my death lament.  
Poor Pope will grieve a month, and Gay  
A week, and Arbuthnot a day,  
St. John himself will scarce forbear  
To bit his pen and drop a tear.  
The rest will give a shrug, and cry,  
I'm sorry; but we all must die."

There you are: this expresses exactly what I mean by the immediate post-mortem neglect of the great. But a Memorial Fund helping to keep alive a great editor's memory in the paper he edited for decades depends upon us, who knew and laboured (we hope fruitfully) with him. By just so big as we make that Fund, just so shallow will be the post-mortem decline.

B.S.

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# Can Faith Resist Growing Unbelief?

By P. VICTOR MORRIS

[After the Mrs. Knight broadcasts, *The Star* published a series of articles called "Have We Lost Faith?" giving the views of representatives of Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Nonconformity and Judaism. The General Secretary of the N.S.S. promptly sent in a contribution stating an opinion of a representative of organised, militant freethought, but it was returned with appreciation and regret. *The Star* could not possibly "add to the number of articles used," having published "a great variety of letters from every point of view." We think *The Star* has been unfair to its readers in limiting the articles to those from religious sources and excluding the one sent in from an organised freethought body. We accordingly print Mr. Morris's article below.—Ed.]

RELIGIOUS leaders are saying that the nation has not lost faith in religion. Yet the fact of widespread unbelief is undeniable. What are the churches doing about it?

The outcry against Mrs. Knight's broadcast talks came from an outraged religious minority. Letters received by the more progressive newspapers showed a high percentage in favour of the free public expression of opinions critical of religion. It is clear that it is felt that this should apply not only to radio but to articles in the Press as well.

This demand cannot be shelved. Fair-minded listeners and readers will not remain satisfied with a one-sided presentation of the case. In my work with the oldest freethought society in the country, founded by Charles Bradlaugh in 1866, I have experience of the appreciation with which young people in clubs and discussion groups welcome talks that put their creeds on the spot. A lecturer can go much farther than Mrs. Knight, and, provided he can stand up to questioning later, is sure of a vote of thanks from an audience whose most cherished views he has undermined!

The hide-bound may be horrified, but intelligent nominal-Christians and nothingarians (the largest sect of all to-day) are anxious to know what the convinced unbeliever thinks, and what positive philosophy of life he offers in the place of religion. The constant stream of inquiries of this kind with which my Society deals has largely increased in volume during the controversy about Mrs. Knight's broadcasts.

Our members are mostly converts from the various Christian denominations, with a smaller number of life-long unbelievers like myself. Usually the converts only achieved their present position after a painful struggle, often involving estrangement from family and friends. The others have grown up in a knowledge of both sides of the question that the children of the orthodox never have. It is significant that this sort of upbringing nearly always produces a freethinker!

As a child I was first put off religion by assertions by the pious that unbelievers were wicked. My father was the kindest and most generous of men. Later I found my teachers unable to deal with religious difficulties I submitted to them. Only in freethinking circles did I find complete readiness to face the facts. As a soldier in the 1914-1918 war I continually heard it said that there were no atheists in the trenches, which was contrary to my personal experience. All my life I have found it a matter of the utmost difficulty to get representatives of religion to meet my objections to their claims fairly and squarely. Misrepresentation and evasion by theologians must have confirmed the scepticism of thousands like myself.

The personal religious experiences of believers, of which so much is made by preachers, do not impress me. I have sincerely sought the truth in all directions. I have read and listened to all points of view. Have I not deserved a divine revelation and an inner experience, if these are the

means by which the truth is established? Instead, I have been affected most deeply by irreligious teachers rather than mystics, by scientific explanations of things rather than Biblical stories, and by secular morals rather than sacred commandments and codes that appear remote from twentieth century conditions of life.

It is easy for the defenders of religion to dismiss us as old-fashioned, but not very effective. They must do more than this. Our arguments have to be met and answered, or it will not be long before the general indifference to organised religion now observable becomes a feeling more akin to contempt.

## Tributes to Joseph McCabe

We have to-day learned with deep regret of the death of Joseph McCabe at the age of 87 years. He was one of the founders of the Rationalist Press Association, a prolific writer and an untiring speaker in the cause. He visited our Fellowship at Lyme Park some two years ago and of those who heard him few will forget his vitality and sincerity.

*Manchester Humanist Fellowship Bulletin.*

We learned in to-day's *Freethinker*, with deep regret, of the death of Joseph McCabe. He gave his whole life to a great cause. Our Movement is going to miss him very much. We here in Dublin send our deepest sympathy.

JOHN BYRNE, Dublin.

I would like to send my appreciation of Mr. Hornibrook's tribute to the memory of Mr. Joseph McCabe.

As a boy I knew McCabe personally as he used to stay at my parents' home in Northampton when he lectured for the local Secularist Society on Sundays in the early days (1900s) before large audiences in the open air and indoors. He always drew large numbers—often 2,000 in the open air, and I well remember his magnificent voice, most clear and distinct, the way he put over his denunciation of the Roman Catholic Church, and his detailed account of his monastic life. He left an indelible impression on my life, especially by his chats with my father and ourselves at home, exposing the basis of fear and superstition in all religions.

As an advanced Socialist I also wish to pay my tribute to Mr. McCabe's honesty and courage in furthering the political, economic and social principles underlying Socialism and the Soviet Republic against the war-mongering American and British (including the leading Right-wing Labour politicians) imperialists.

I certainly feel very strongly that we Freethinkers should emphasise the great work of such brave men as Joseph McCabe and take every opportunity of paying tribute to all the great martyrs of Freethought and of political, social and economic ideas, even if some do not see eye to eye with certain aspects of their ideology.

F. W. GARLEY.

The Kingston Branch, N.S.S., wish to be associated with all other members in lamenting the great loss suffered by the passing of Joseph McCabe. No tribute could be penned that would be worthy of him, and the whole civilised world is the poorer by his leaving.

E. MILLS, Sec., Kingston Branch, N.S.S.



# Why Did Christianity Triumph?

By G. I. BENNETT

A CORRESPONDENT of mine—a kind, elderly man—in a letter to me writes: "I think Marcus Aurelius is for the few and will never be very popular." Then in a comment on the failure to prosper of the Roman emperor's philosophy, Stoicism, he remarks: "It produced a few great men of noble character, but was not able to stand against Christianity with the ordinary man." My friend goes on to say that this is "chiefly because Stoicism was a creed of despair; it was better not to be born."

There may have been a good deal of despair—albeit a sort of *magnificent* despair—in Stoicism. But if we were to accept that as the principal reason why it did not catch the imagination of the generality, what should we have to say about that great rival school of thought, Epicureanism, which probably had as large, or almost as large, a following in the Roman world as Stoicism itself? Unless any and every creed that does not look beyond this life for the fulfilment of man is to be regarded as "a creed of despair," Epicureanism could certainly not be said to be a pessimistic philosophy.

Whereas to the Stoics the performance of duty and the honorable discharge of moral obligation was all-important, to the Epicureans the quest for happiness was paramount. A Stoic would do what he deemed his duty, uninfluenced by considerations of personal happiness. He was, therefore, not eudemonist, as was the Epicurean, to whom the rightness of human behaviour in any given instance was to be judged by whether it tended to produce happiness. But in practice, these two Greek philosophies, despite their differences of approach, had this point of convergence: they both sought so to guide men's lives that inner peace and tranquility was attained. Why then did they, each and both, ultimately fail to grip the civilised world, and thereby open the way to the undisputed triumph of Christianity?

Let us straightway dispose of the idea of a surpassing New Testament morality, a selfless benevolence, exercising an ineluctable charm upon the popular mind. The truth is that the masses are not notably drawn to altruism, and if there is altruism in the preachments of Jesus as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels it has hardly ever interested them, and, with a few exceptions, has never leavened their lives.

Christianity, even more in the first centuries A.D. (when woeful ignorance among the populaces of the Roman Empire was widespread) than now, made a powerful appeal to self-interest by holding out, to those who would believe, the rich hope of heaven as the only alternative to the dire prospect of hell. To that appeal there was a ready, and eventually decisive, response. But it is significant that converts to infant Christianity were almost entirely from among the uneducated and dispossessed. They had little or nothing to lose in this world, and, they fondly imagined, much to gain hereafter, by adopting the Faith of the Cross. The well-to-do leisurely classes, on the other hand, had every reason for not doing so—until later, when they too began to be affected by the idea of buying salvation and a state of everlasting beatitude in a life beyond the grave.

That there have been Christians of high character is not an issue for debate; such people would have been of high character, anyway, as Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians—or as Rationalists and Freethinkers! When due allowance is made for environmental and educative influences, the good life is seen to be ultimately largely a matter of personal taste and inclination; and no religion has any right to pose as the source of its inspiration, or as its exclusive guardian. "It can do truth no service," wrote John Stuart Mill in his *On Liberty*, "to blink the fact,

known to all who have the most ordinary acquaintance with literary history, that a large proportion of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who knew and rejected, the Christian faith."

If indeed it had been an exalted morality that men sought they would not have discarded, in favour of Christianity, both Stoicism and Epicureanism, which were more solidly ethical in character than Christianity, by reason of its supernatural basis and sanctions, could ever hope to be. The secret of its success lay in its salvationism. With the unthinking majority it won an easy ascendancy over the two Greek philosophies by its promise of wrongs righted, injustices redressed, evil punished, and righteousness and piety rewarded by eternal blessedness, in "the world to come."

To us of critical temper, the Galilean Jesus, on whom Christianity was founded and is centred, appears as a poor, deluded fanatic who went to his death gladly because he believed he was God-blessed as the redeemer of men, but who, in the anguish of crucifixion, suddenly had an inkling of his appalling error. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Up to that instant of terrible realisation he had not felt alone—a point that pietists overlook, for the convenience of the moment, when they prate about his heroism and sacrifice being "not as those of any other man."

Actually, among adherents of the Stoic and Epicurean schools were men and women who lived and died more nobly simply because they were without the inner consolations, the comforting illusions, cherished by Christians. But they did not impress the multitudes, who naturally were far from understanding the lofty enlightenment of such minds and lives.

In one of his essays Matthew Arnold has interestingly written that ethical principles, "apprehended as ideas first, and then rigorously followed as laws, are and must be for the sage only. The mass of mankind have neither force of intellect enough to apprehend them clearly as ideas, nor force of character enough to follow them strictly as laws." They, he says, can be carried along a course full of difficulty and hardship "only by the tide of a joyful and bounding emotion." And so, as Arnold sees Christianity in this light, it has, according to him, its uses still where the masses are concerned. But those of maturer psychology and vision, to whom even bleak truth is preferable to rosy illusion, can have at least some admiration for the two philosophies that were eclipsed by Christianity—admiration that they could never feel for a faith based upon dogma and narrow calculations of self-interest.

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## Mrs. Knight "In the News"

By G. H. TAYLOR

IN the TV programme "In the News" (January 21) the question "What do you think of Mrs. Knight's broadcasts?" was put to the panel of four consisting of Lord Coleraine, P.C., Rt. Hon. Walter Elliott, M.P., Rt. Hon. Herbert Morrison, M.P., and Rt. Hon. Hector McNeil, M.P.

For the benefit of viewers, may we point out that the Socialists are the ones to the right of the viewer. They are usually better dressed.

The intellectual level of their discussion was akin to that of four tired old ladies at the Vicar's bridge table. Hector agreed with Walter, who agreed with Herbert, who agreed with Dick, and so, Dingle, as no debate is forthcoming, let's get on to the next subject.

If four fatuous flops, without two ideas to rub together, represent the cream of Britain's political brains, then give us the Senior Girls' Debating Class for a change.

Walter *knew* there must be a God because his mud turned into daffodils, Herbert basked in smug "confidence in the clergy's power to reply," Hector spoke glowingly of "spiritual experience," while Dick easily put his finger on Mrs. Knight's trouble: she simply *had no faith*, and that was the top and bottom of it.

Was she dogmatic? Yes; passed by four votes to none. She had failed to establish the case for atheism and free-thought in *ten whole minutes* of preamble to her main purpose. The case for Christianity was not shaken, after only thirty years of boosting on the radio week by week, day by day. And after a couple of brief spells by a Humanist, it was quite clear that Atheism was dogmatic.

"Dogmatic assertion," Walter objected, and then listened to Dick dogmatising about Faith. But the *pièce de résistance* came from Herbert, who referred to the late Lord Snell as a Secularist who really led a good Christian life. "One feels that, at this stage, Herbert is destined to live and die in the belief that Christianity and morality are the same. (In fact, even an avowed Rationalist, Mr. Archibald Robertson, writing in the *Daily Worker*, January 19, speaks of "the hydrogen bomb and other weapons of mass destruction," which "on any showing are unchristian.")

Should the B.B.C. have allowed Mrs. Knight to broadcast? "Be careful," said Herbert, "Do it in a responsible and serious spirit." It should "not be overdone." This is really brilliant! Permission for another humanist broadcast (not secularist) in thirty years' time! unless, of course, the Christian vote is reduced before then. In that case, our politicians may sing to a different tune.

And Walter—some of my mud has turned into weeds.

## Correspondence

### MR. HECTOR HAWTON'S REPLY

I should be grateful if you would allow me to comment on the letter by Mr. M. B. Drapier in your issue of Jan. 21. Both he and Mr. Cutner complain that there is little freethought in the 1955 *Rationalist Annual* "except by implication" and even less in *Literary Guide*. I think I understand what they mean, although their attitude seems to me to be curiously insensitive to the tremendous changes that have taken place in the climate of opinion in the past fifty years. A new public has come into existence which is not primarily interested in the old themes of the truth of the Bible and the conflict between religion and science, etc. It is no use approaching such a public with reasons, however convincing, why they should not accept the claims of the Church, because they never go near a church. They are bored and impatient with a great deal of freethought propaganda and ask, sometimes rather petulantly, "Where do we go from here?"

I think that we should fail in our duty, and certainly we should be neglecting to take history seriously, if we did not attempt to

demonstrate what difference rationalism or freethought or humanism—call it what you will—makes to sincere and thoughtful people seeking to find new bearings in a world of bewildering complexity. The rejection of traditional religion is only the first step, not the end of our quest. Our publications should have an educative as well as a purely destructive aim. I should have thought it would be of interest and importance for all who think as we do on broad issues, to note the reaction of qualified rationalist writers to new trends in thought and new discoveries in science. General Booth saw no reason why the Devil should have the best tunes. There is, I think, a specific rationalist (or humanist) culture and we must surely display it in our shop window.

I suspect that your correspondent and I differ about what constitutes propaganda. It is also a fact that *Literary Guide* is not, and has never been, the "official R.P.A. organ."—Yours, etc.,

HECTOR HAWTON,  
Managing Editor.

### WERE THEY IMPORTANT?

In view of the fact that Mrs. Knight's broadcasts are the biggest concession ever made to Freethought in Britain, I would ask all well-known Freethinkers to write to you saying why they think they were important.

In my own view the supreme importance rests in the fact that they imply that the B.B.C. governors no longer follow a policy based on the idea that Britain is a "Christian country." Instead of rigidly excluding all views which were not "in the main stream of Christian belief" (the reason advanced in the past), they have now allowed views which are frankly and radically anti-Christian. In other words the B.B.C. have adopted the basic idea that this is "a Free Country" rather than "a Christian Country." Staunch and earnest believers in the necessity of establishing this basic idea, rather than any idea based upon a particular body of positive doctrines, must welcome this change of heart, and we should make it our business to ensure that the change on the lines I have assumed—that the general public understand this thoroughly and will thus be likely to ensure that the new outlook is fearlessly pursued in the future.

The importance of the change rests in the fact that the pursuit of the idea of Britain being "a Christian country" in the past has kept the people in ignorance of the truth concerning the ideas which were animating many of the people around them. The suppression of contrary views has led to much mental apathy and even to atrophy of the power to think for themselves among the people. The fruits of indoctrination by all the power of the State has been mitigated to some extent by human common-sense in that the people were beginning to ignore or feel nothing but contempt for the B.B.C. The new policy could remedy these things very soon if eagerly pursued by the B.B.C., and if this is done we shall soon see a much greater appreciation of scientific methods and application of scientific thought than could ever be the case in a country dominated by ideas (like the virgin birth, miraculous death and supernatural attributes ascribed to Christ) which are so much at odds with science and natural experience.—Yours, etc.,

E. G. MACFARLANE  
(Parliamentary Candidate, Dundee East by-election, 1952).

"1984"

Your footnote to the letter by Mr. Peter Jones is typical. It is, of course, not to be expected that *The Freethinker* should open its columns to political arguments; but it is itself to blame. In the paragraph to which Mr. Jones appears to take exception one may observe the word "admitted," which is in itself an indication of where the writer stood. When dealing with such an issue as "1984," the M.P. in question should have been reported as "saying," etc. As one who has "had some," I can testify that (so far as the Russophobes who occasionally spill their virulence into the pages of *The Freethinker* are concerned) the search for truth certainly appears to stop short this side of the "Iron Curtain."—Yours, etc.,

J. PLIMMER.

[Mr. Jones achieved brevity at the price of clarity. His point probably was that a regime such as Orwell depicted would be unlikely to exhibit its worst features to a British M.P. on a visit.—ED.]

## Points from Letters

Mrs. Knight's broadcasts have done more for Secularism than all Billy Graham's speeches did for Christianity.—J. TOUDIC.  
May I commend an attitude towards the Rationalists that would favour them as allies and friends of Secularists.—A. D. CORRICK.