

# The Freethinker

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Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

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THE recent "Congress of Asiatic and African Peoples" in Indonesia indicates the sweeping changes which have occurred in the Oriental world in recent years, in particular, during the period since the end of the last war. This current political revival amongst the non-European nations is accompanied and paralleled by a revival of the non-Christian religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, and, above all, Islam. For the cosmopolitan religion founded by the Arabic Prophet Muhammed in the seventh century of the Christian Era is, at present, enjoying a vigorous "come-back" or, if one prefers the term, "Indian Summer." From Muslim North Africa to the newly-created Muslim State of Indonesia, the world of Islam is, after a period of mediæval hibernation which has now lasted for several centuries, once again on the march. Since the study of comparative religion constitutes an essential part of a comprehensive free-thinking outlook, we are of the opinion that a glance at the present and future prospects of what is, to-day, certainly the most powerful religion in the world, with only the, perhaps doubtful exception of Roman Catholic Christianity, may not be inopportune.

## "Jewish Catholicism"

A recent contributor to these columns has indicated the close resemblance that exists between Islam and the Hebrew or Judaic cult, from which the creed of Muhammed, in part at least, originated. True enough, the present writer, has elsewhere indicated Islam as "Jewish Catholicism," that is, Judaism stripped of its national exclusive basis, and raised from the tribal to the cosmopolitan level. Similarly, we have also expressed the concurrent view that it is the Koran, the Holy Book of Islam, which, rather than our "New Testament," more properly deserves the title of "New Testament," as and when compared with the Hebrew Bible, our "Old Testament." From the purely literary point of view, we have been assured by Arabic scholars, that the Koran compares very favourably in eloquence with our "New Testament," which would not, perhaps, be difficult to imagine. Though, one must add, that the Holy Word of God, as originally delivered to Muhammed in the early part of the seventh century, does not appear as particularly impressive in its English translations!

## "A Mausoleum of Dead Religions"

This above description, one that is deservedly famous, was originally coined of Christianity; but this description appears to fit Islam equally well. As and when compared with the perhaps mythical Jesus Christ, the Arabic Prophet has, at least, one demonstrable advantage over his Galilean Predecessor. No one, as far as we know, has ever called in question his *historical* existence! When, however, we turn to his dogmas, which made up his new creed, it seems clear that there was nothing in any way original about them. The fundamental dogma of Islam, the Unity of God, the prophetic mission of Muhammed, Heaven and Hell, the

Holy Book; all these are fundamental dogmas of *Judaism*, and were so long before Muhammed's birth in (about) 570 of our present era. Even what we may perhaps term the secondary practices of Islam, the belief in angels, the pilgrimage to Mecca, even the Muslim name for God, Allah, were all previously known, and were, obviously, derived from either Judaism or Christianity, both well known in the

Arabia of the Prophet's own day; or from earlier, now forgotten, Arabic religious movements. It is, for example, known that the cult of the Supreme God, Allah, already existed alongside that of idols in pre-Muhammedan Mecca.

This unoriginal character of the Muslim cult is

indicated very obviously in the present Muslim cult of "The Black Stone" in the *Ka'aba*, or *House of Allah* in Mecca. It is a queer commentary on an allegedly *monotheistic* world religion, that its central religious rite has always been for thirteen centuries, and remains so to-day, the adoration of a pagan "Sacred Stone," or meteorite, which "fell from Heaven" at some prehistoric date, and was adored as a god by the pagan tribes of Arabia long before Muhammed came on the scene. As is a matter of common knowledge, every Muslim is supposed to go on pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime. The central and most important rite in this pilgrimage is still the ceremonial adoration of "The Black Stone," which occupies the hearth of *The House of Allah*. This Sacred Stone, analogous to "the stone which fell from Jupiter," worshipped by the pagans of ancient Ephesus, and referred to in our *New Testament*, is still attended in the central sanctuary of Islam with all the ceremonial attached to primitive taboos. Only a few years ago, when a pilgrim, overcome with emotion, was physically sick over the Black Stone of Allah, he was beheaded on the spot! It seems clear that Islam, like Christianity, represents a hotch-potch of ancient superstitions.

## Muhammed and Islam

That Muhammed himself was an historical character, who can be dated, approximately, from A.D. 570-632, appears to be certain. But beyond the fact, or probability, that he was an Arab and a native of Mecca, already a famous religious centre of the cult of "The Black Stone," not much is known about him. It is not even certain whether he could read or write. In the negative case, we must presume either that he *dictated* the Koran, or that "The Holy Book" must actually have been composed by some more literate "back room boys" who formed the prophetic "brains trust." In which last respect, tradition has recalled the name of Waraka, a learned—judged by Arabic standards—relative of Muhammed's wife, and it has been suggested that Waraka was to Muhammed what the more erudite "Paul" was to Jesus, or, to give a more modern example, what Sidney Rigdon, who appears to have actually forged *The Book of Mormon*, was to the Mormon Prophet, Joseph Smith. But this is mostly con-

—VIEWS and OPINIONS—

## Muhammed and Islam

By F. A. RIDLEY

jecture. According to tradition, before marrying a wealthy widow, Khadijah, which gave him economic independence—not to mention “time-off” for his celestial visions—the future Prophet had been a commercial traveller—sometimes rendered as a camel-driver—who had travelled extensively throughout Arabia. It seems clear that he was no theologian, and that the earliest *written* accounts of his biography are even further off in time from Muhammed than our Gospels are from Jesus—if anyone of that name ever existed at all. It is not even certain whether Muhammed ever intended to found a religion and, if so, whether it was not a purely *Arabic* reforming cult that he originally envisaged.

### The Word of Allah

The “Muhammedan” cult does not so describe itself; it calls itself “Islam”—the creed of “submission” (“Islam”) to Allah, the Omnipotent Sultan of the Universe. As for Muhammed, he was the last and greatest of the Prophets of Allah, and infallible in his prophetic capacity. If, however, Muhammed was human—for no Muslim sect has ever *deified* the Founder—this does not apply to the Koran. In the earliest days of Islam the Koran and its nature—partly human or wholly divine—appears to have been regarded as a legitimate subject for theological controversy. But that early phase is long concluded: the Koran has long since become a closed book, and the question of its nature, a closed question. It is now the unquestioned orthodox tradition that the Koran is neither human nor a book, nor is it the work of a human author, even of Muhammed; contrarily, the Koran is, like Allah himself, eternal, unalterable, and infallible; it was created by Allah before the Universe, and the Prophet merely took down the sacred syllables as Allah, through the intermediary of the Archangel Gabriel—whom Christianity used in *another* capacity—dictated them to his Prophet. As we have had occasion to note before, the Bibliolatry of the Koran goes far beyond anything which even the narrowest “Funda-

mentalist” has ever attributed to the Christian Bible; even the *language* in which Allah dictated the Koran, Arabic, is sacrosanct. It is firm Muslim dogma that all readings of the Koran *must*, to be acceptable to Allah, be in *Arabic*.

### The Evolution of Islam

Muhammed appears to us as a shadowy and remote figure. The most one can say is that he could have been a strong personality, an eloquent preacher, and a shrewd political psychologist, who welded the scattered Bedouin clans into a military confederation, united by his religion, which, after his death, went on to win astonishing victories and to build up, and convert to Islam, an enormous empire. At any rate, it appears to be quite certain that Islam, as a “world-religion,” owes far more to the *military* qualities of the early “True Believers” than to their theological superiority, including that of Muhammed himself. If Muhammed’s “successors” (“Khalifs”) had not won their battles, it is unlikely that Muhammed would have kept many converts, or that his name would still be remembered, at least outside of his native Arabia. Whilst Islam has propagated its tenets by also non-violent methods, it owed its first and decisive successes—and, therewith, its chance of becoming an international creed—to its initial success in waging the “Jihad” or “Holy War.”

### Islam and the Future

To-day, with the rapid expansion of Western science and industry, Islam, along with other Oriental religions, is beginning to find itself up against the same kind of problems which have long been painfully familiar to the Christian Churches in the more advanced West. How will this primitive agrarian creed face up to modern science and to modern criticism—including that of religion? A new, and from the point of view of Muslims, most threatening phenomenon is represented, nowadays, by the growing power of Marxist-Leninist materialism in Asia, parallel with the growth and expansion of Socialism in Asia.

## For Newcomers

A FAVOURITE device of Christians is to ask young people who are beginning to turn to freethought, “Do you consider your intellect greater than that of the many famous men who have been Christians? Do you pit yourself against Newton or Faraday or Pasteur—who were all devout believers?”

To this line of attack the following points are relevant:—

1. If we are to believe in Christianity on such authority as this, then we must all become Catholics with Pasteur, Spiritualists with Sir Oliver Lodge, Socinians with Newton, and Sandemanians with Faraday. Incidentally, we must all become Agnostics with Darwin, Rationalists with Keith, and Atheists with Russell and H. G. Wells.

2. We must distinguish between belief and evidence. It is not what a man asserts that is important—no matter how “famous” he may be—but his *reasons* for his assertions.

3. Christian persecution, sometimes open and (more often) underground, often sets a limit to what a public man may say about religion. In these circumstances, who is to measure a man’s public utterance against his private belief (or unbelief)?

4. In spite of this persecution there is much evidence of scepticism and freethought among the well known. In his *Autobiography* J. S. Mill wrote: “The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments, of those most distinguished even in

popular estimation for wisdom and virtue, are complete sceptics in religion.”

Disbelief in religious doctrine, in some cases amounting to Atheism, can be instanced in many classes of well-known figures. We confine ourselves here to three kinds only.

*Literature:* Marlowe, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Burns, Swinburne, Meredith, Robert Buchanan, James Thomson (“B. V.”), Goethe, Heinrich Heine, Voltaire, Emile Zola, Anatole France, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Richard Jeffries, George Eliot, Wm. Morris, D. H. Lawrence, Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Somerset Maugham.

*Music:* Beethoven, Mozart, Wagner, Chopin, Berlioz, Richard Strauss, Grenville Bantock, Sir Henry Wood.

*Historians:* Bolingbroke, Gibbon, Grote, J. A. Froude, J. W. Draper, Lecky, H. T. Buckle, J. B. Bury.

And if we were to embark upon names in Science and in Modern Philosophy our lists would become quite unmanageably lengthy, and it is in these subjects that opinions carry most weight, studying, as they do, natural phenomena as the alleged work of “God.”

G. H. TAYLOR.

—NEXT WEEK—

WHEN DICTATORS CLASH:

PERON v. THE POPE

By F. A. RIDLEY

CAN MATERIALISM EXPLAIN MIND? By G. H. Taylor, M.R.S.T. Materialism stated and defended. Price 4s. postage 3d.

# The Greatest Popular Fallacy

By LEON SPAIN (U.S.A.)

IN William Kent's invaluable handbook and anthology for Freethinkers, "Lift Up Your Heads," is a quotation culled from one of the letters of the immortal bard of Scotland, Robert Burns. The quotation is terse, and pungently and accurately points the finger of ridicule at the most time-honoured fallacy in the following way: "Of all Nonsense, Religious Nonsense is the most nonsensical."

It has been observed, time and again, that the greatest and most profound thoughts were expressed or written with a minimum of verbiage, and that literary tinsel and profuseness of oral expression have been rhetorical smoke-screens in the defence of self-evident absurdities. The pages of classic literature are replete with such instances, and controversial literature has more than contributed its fair share. For pithiness this sentence of Burns' could hardly be excelled, and is borne out by innumerable instances of nonsensicality under a religious guise.

It has been the contention of the champions of the various schools of theology and ethical religion that, while their cosmogonies have lost their former validity with reference to the universe, religion, by its very essence, represents an avenue of truth inaccessible through normal channels. It has been rhetorically referred to as "a facet of truth" by the defenders of revealed truth and institutionism; a "facet," it may be remarked, of which not even a plausible account can be given. However, the greatest popular fallacy and crowning absurdity—readily accepted by the uncritical—is that the standard for social morality and human ethics have been revealed to "divinely inspired" personages, and that the preachments of these individuals are valid, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. It has also been put forth by the apostles of current Christianity that a modern application of the doctrines of their founder would be a panacea for our domestic and international ills; that is, a return to "pure, unadulterated, primitive Christianity." The harsher features of Christianity are explained away as accretions of worldliness upon its pristine purity and doctrine of infinite love, but has it ever occurred to the exponents of Christianity, from its inception down to the present day, that there are utterances attributed to their founder which are fraught with the greatest ferocity, and that no amount of casuistry and dialectical subtlety can explain them away. No amount of pulpit oratory or rhetoric can dissipate the cruelty evinced by the human incarnation of infinite love, wisdom, and power, in the expression culled from one of his parables. "For I say unto you, that unto every one which hath shall be given, and from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away from him. But those, mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring them hither, and slay them before me" (Luke XIX 26, 27). Casuists will ever maintain that there is a deeper and more profound interpretation to be given to such a passage, and that it is beyond the bounds of fair play to quote a sentence out of context. However, for those who wish to consult the "sacred volume," neither rhyme nor reason will be found for such an emotional outburst, for our secular sense of decency and fair play will make, of any interpretation whatever, such a statement unacceptable. Perhaps it may be said in passing, that the devotees of bibliolatry cannot see the absurdity for the ornate and vivid poetry in which their sacred volume is rendered. Perhaps, also, T. H. Huxley's cogent comment is applicable in the latter instance: "But the faithful who fly to allegory in order to escape absurdity resemble nothing so much as the sheep in the fable who—to save their lives—jumped into the pit."

For a fallacy, without even a degree of plausibility, regardless of the literary merit with which it has been endowed, the following quotation by Cardinal Newman, from *Anglican Difficulties*, is, indeed, difficult to surpass:

"The Church holds that it were better for sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions who are upon it to die of starvation in extremest agony, so far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say shall be lost, but should commit one single venial sin, should tell one wilful untruth, though it harmed no one, or steal one poor farthing without excuse."

For gilded asininity such a statement stands alone, and the literary trappings with which it is attended cannot conceal the absurdities with which it is laden. By such a premise, and the logical deductions to be drawn from it, one venial sin can cancel all the social virtues, and the worst suffering conceivable is preferable to the commission of a single venial sin. In that connection, perhaps, would Cardinal Newman's present-day admirers prefer the unleashing of hydrogen weapons, which could conceivably reduce our planet to a piece of cosmic rubble, to the commission of a single venial sin? It is questionable if they would accept such an alternative, regardless of the seriousness attached to the nature of an act designated as a sin. The logic of Cardinal Newman was other-worldly, and the author of *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* should have written an apologia for his utter disregard of sound human interests and sympathies. The literary ornament, at various times, of the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church, it will be noted, could more than give expression to his fair share of nonsense. Only on the premises from which he proceeded is it explainable.

Unquestionably, subtle and able verbal manipulators can make nonsense sound learned, and make the most brilliant deductions from the most untenable propositions. Beyond a doubt, exponents and controversialists in issues of purely secular interest have made more than a modest contribution to "The History of Human Error," and in all likelihood will do so in the future. That "to err is human" has ever been acknowledged, even by the most severe taskmasters. And humorous analysts have undermined conventional fallacies in many fields of human interest, which were held in reverence by the unthinking and uncritical, but the fallacies of "the greatest human fallacy" die hardest.

Aye, verily: "Of all Nonsense, Religious Nonsense is the most nonsensical."

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## "EOSTRE"

Augustine himself describes how the whole City of Rome followed the "Holy Week" ceremonies of the great Mother, with its day of blood (Good Friday), and its day of rejoicing at the restoration of the God to Life.

Jerome tells how the birth and resurrection of Venus were annually celebrated in Syria, and in his letter to Paulinus (XXII, col. 581), he says that the cave at Bethlehem, which is now the lucrative "Birthplace of Jesus," was formerly the temple in which the death and resurrection of Adonis or Tammuz were celebrated.

Other well-known Gods which rose from the dead are Attis of Syria, Osiris of ancient Egypt, and Mithra, the old Persian God, who was so popular with the Romans before Christianity undermined their Empire.

Christianity seems to have no message for the modern world. Man will only save himself when he comes to realise that he has only himself to depend on, and that it is far better for him to stand on his own feet than help from mythical beings who exist only in imagination. C.H.H.

## This Believing World

The **Holy Shroud of Turin** is by no means getting away with itself, for even in *Picture Post* (which splashed Group Captain Cheshire's wonderful vindication of its genuineness) will be found letters from unbelievers more or less laughing at him. The Rev. W. Blackett bluntly asked whether he knew that there were *five* Holy Shrouds all equally authentic? Quite possibly Holy Shrouds were manufactured on demand just as bits of the True Cross always turned up when well paid for.

Even the "**Catholic Herald**" has published letters from Catholic unbelievers—that is, believers in all Catholic relics, but not in the Turin Holy Shroud; and they give good reasons. Still, such unbelief makes no impression on those who *must* believe—like the Group Captain himself. And there is now a "Holy Shroud Enquiry Centre," which almost guarantees making you a thorough believer if you are a Catholic. Personally, we cannot understand why any Catholic relic should be even questioned by a Catholic. Anybody who can swallow the Virgin Birth can swallow anything.

The late **George Orwell's "Big Brother"** in 1984 should be replaced these days by the "Big Eye"—according to ex-Councillor Thomson of Greenock. This Big Eye is Christian, and it belongs "to Someone you will have to face one day." We wonder whether the Big Eye is just one eye in the centre of Someone's forehead or if it's an Eye that squints? Mr. Thomson asks all believers to "Crucify Materialism with your cross"—an exhibition of skill and craftsmanship we would dearly like Mr. Thomson himself to show us.

The **Rev. B. Graham**, elated at his astounding success in Glasgow, claimed that, with the relay system, he had more hearers in Britain to Christ's Message than anybody else ever had, thus constituting a world record in the history of Christianity. This is quite possibly true, and the reason appears to be that the head of a tribe in North India which not long ago used to go regularly head-hunting, wrote him—no doubt in perfect English—"that an average of 400 tribesmen go down on their knees every day to pray for Glasgow." How could the Almighty fail such wonderful and grovelling adoration? No wonder Billy is such a howling success!

This success recalls another great Evangelist, the famous prophet Dowie, who insisted that he was an incarnation of the prophet Elijah, and (at the beginning of the century) managed to rope in plenty of cash in exchange for bringing Jesus Christ into thousands of lives. Dowie's hunger for cash was, however, greater than his hunger for souls, and after some unsavory attempts to get it big, his plans flopped and he fled to Mexico, where he died. Poor Dowie would have done as well as Billy if he had had a good publicity manager.

As everybody knows, the **Act of 1944** made religious education compulsory in the country, and therefore it is not surprising that Sir David Eccles, the Minister of Education, was shocked to find that Bibles were in short supply in our schools. Every child should have at least one Gospel in clear type, and all secondary schoolchildren, a complete Bible. This desperate attempt to bring back the Bible somehow, anyhow, is proof enough that nobody nowadays reads it—that its nineteenth century reputation has almost completely gone, and that neither Billy Graham nor Eccles nor any other pious Education

Minister or Evangelist will ever bring it back again in all its pristine holiness.

No one knows this better than the *Scottish Education Journal*, which topples over with religion, and which bemoans the decline of Bible-reading almost to tears. "The children of Scotland," it wails, "should learn to love the Bible," which shows that the children of Scotland have nearly to be driven to read it. What can a poor child do with the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* or *Revelation*, to say nothing of *Hebrews* and *Obadiah*? Really, could Sir David Eccles or the Editor of the S.E.J. pass a stiff exam. on any of the books of the Bible, to say nothing of those we have mentioned?

## Atheism and Sir A. Lunn

SIR ARNOLD LUNN, probably Catholicism's most able and skilful popular propagandist in Britain, writes in the *Universe*:

Whereas the Catholic is free to accept or to reject evolution, or, as I do, to declare himself an agnostic on this issue . . . evolution is *de fide* for the atheist."

Now for the sake of accuracy, and not with much hope of influencing Lunn's future pronouncements on the subject, let us point out that he is putting the cart before the horse. We accept evolution, not *because* we are atheists, but because of the evidence for it. It is not atheism which makes us evolutionists; it is the fact of evolution which helps to make us atheists.

Catholics born into the Faith are told what to believe. The atheist, on the contrary, does his own thinking and examining of evidence. Therefore to say the atheist *must* accept evolution because it is, as it were, an article of faith, is nonsense, since a rejection of evolution in favour of special creation by a Creator would have precluded him from becoming an atheist in the first place. An atheist is one who has already rejected the religious theory of man's origin. No church tells him that "evolution is *de fide*."

Besides the logical fallacy, however, there is at least some degree of factual error in Sir A. Lunn's statement, because one can think of atheists like E. D. Fawcett, Bernard Bosanquet and J. MacT. E. MacTaggart, who were all philosophical idealists, and as such could hardly entertain the full implications of evolution. G. H. T.

## LECTURE REPORT

The last meeting, on Sunday, April 17, brought back to Manchester, its former Branch President Mr. G. H. Taylor, who took for his subject "The Mind of the Ape," and gave a lucid explanation of experiments by Gestalt psychologists. He dealt specifically with the work of Wolfgang Kohler, and made effective use of blackboard diagrams in demonstrating the achievements of the famous "Sultan" and other chimpanzees. For Freethinkers, Gestalt experiments had particular interest, said Mr. Taylor. They provided the effective answer to religionists who denied the mental evolution of man (most of them had now admitted his physical evolution) and claimed that he was the only animal capable of conceptual thinking. Under the guidance of Mr. Taylor we followed Sultan and his fellow chimpanzees through numerous experiments, learnt something of their play, their capacity for remembering and their love of ornamentation. Mr. Taylor remarked on the difference between the solving of problems by Kohler's apes and the trained tricks of circus animals. Gestalt experiments, concluded Mr. Taylor, are knocking nails into the coffin of religion. An interesting discussion ensued and Mr. Taylor's illustrated answer to a religious questioner was—in the words of one of our members—"the quip of the evening." (*From the Manchester Branch Bulletin.*)

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## Lecture Notices, Etc.

### OUTDOOR

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Every Sunday, 7 p.m.: F. ROTHWELL.  
Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Broadway Car Park).—Every Sunday evening, 7-30 p.m.: HAROLD DAY.  
Manchester Branch N.S.S.—Every Sunday, 3 p.m., Platt Field; 7-30 p.m., St. Mary's Blitzed Site: Speakers, Messrs. MCCALL, MILLS, or WOODCOCK. Every weekday, Deansgate Blitzed Site, 1 p.m.: G. A. WOODCOCK.  
Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Every Wednesday at 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.  
N.S.S. Conference Demonstration (Marble Arch).—Sunday, May 29, 7 p.m.; three platforms: Speakers, Messrs. RIDLEY, EBURY, MCCALL, MOSLEY, DAY, O'NEILL, WOOD and ARTHUR.

### INDOOR

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (Satis Café, 40, Cannon St., off New St.).—Sunday May 29, 7 p.m.: A Lecture.  
Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Trades Hall, Thurland Street).—Thursday, May 26, 7-30 p.m.: A. HEWITT, "What is Determinism?"

## Memorial Tablet to Chapman Cohen

Friends and admirers of the late President of the National Secular Society and Editor of *The Freethinker* will, we are sure, be pleased to learn that a Tablet to his memory has now been placed in the Crematorium at Golders Green (Hoop Lane, N.W.11).

Visitors to the Conference and friends will be able to inspect it at any time during the day.

## A Rank Imposition

AFTER last Good Friday it was reported in the Press that some 400 ministers of religion had been permitted by the management of Odeon Cinemas to give religious talks to audiences on that day. No warning was given to those attending that such talks were to be expected. Having considered complaints regarding this, the Dagenham Branch instructed its Secretary, Mr. G. W. Warner, to write to the J. Arthur Rank Organisation Ltd. as follows:—

"The last meeting of the Dagenham Branch of the National Secular Society instructed me to write to your Organisation to enquire why it authorised Methodist Ministers to address cinema audiences on Good Friday.

As you are no doubt aware that such audiences are comprised of people of all religious beliefs and none, this item on the Easter programme, which, incidentally, was not advertised, is regarded by my members as an encroachment on the rights of cinema-goers. We suggest, therefore, that, in order to maintain the goodwill of the public, you concentrate wholly on entertainment in future, leaving the propagation of religion to the churches."

This brought the following reply:—

"I note with surprise that your organisation is devoted to the cause of militant free thought, because I suggest that although the second paragraph of your letter may be militant, it in no way indicates that you are willing to accept freedom of thought other than your own.

Before writing in the manner which you have, I suggest it would have been common courtesy to have enquired into the circumstances under which we allowed Methodist ministers to speak to our audiences on Good Friday.

Briefly, the facts are that some while ago the churches approached us asking if talks of this kind could be given on Good Friday and on other important days in the Christian Year.

We considered the matter most carefully and agreed to the

## The Chapman Cohen Memorial Fund

Previously acknowledged, £848 15s. 2d.; W.H.D., 2s. 6d.; A. Hancock, 1s.; S. V. Walter, 5s. 9d.; Merrill R. Holste (U.S.A.), 7s.; C. Coates (West Australia), 5s. 5d.; H. Seddon, 3s.; J. Clarke, 5s.; W. J. McKelvie, 2s. 6d. Total: £850 7s. 11d.

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request for Good Friday on the understanding that the talks should be kept short and that nothing should be said to which objection could be taken by any reasonable, tolerant person.

I believe that the preachers concerned have fulfilled these conditions and from observations we have made it is clear that the majority of our audiences welcomed these talks.

We do not feel that we have offended our audiences or given them cause for resentment. On the contrary, from letters received we know that with many the Good Friday talks have increased that goodwill to which you have so inaptly referred.

Yours faithfully,

J. DAVIS,  
Managing Director."

This letter was passed to N.S.S. Headquarters and was replied to as follows:—

"Dear Sir,

The Honorary Secretary of our Dagenham Branch has passed to me a copy of his letter of protest regarding the addressing of audiences in your cinemas by clergymen on Good Friday last, together with your reply of 9th May.

In reply to your first paragraph, it is your Organisation that has offended against the principle of freedom. Good Friday cinema audiences are obviously not composed of sincere Christians, who would not attend a place of entertainment on the solemnest day that Christians observe. You had no right to subject them to religious talks without prior notice.

The clergymen themselves would have behaved with less hypocrisy if they had held meetings outside your premises denouncing you and the audiences for desecrating what they claim to consider a holy occasion.

In reply to your second paragraph, Mr. G. W. Warner did exactly what you suggest he did not do. He wrote inquiring why the talks were given. He did so because of complaints he received. I gather from your last paragraph that, ostrich-like, you prefer to evade such complaints and find comfort in the approval of correspondents who are lacking in appreciation of what constitutes fairness and good taste.

Yours faithfully,

P. VICTOR MORRIS,  
Secretary."

## Holyoake on Belief

A man is forgiven who believes more than his neighbours, but he is never forgiven if he believes less. If he believes more than his neighbours, there is the presumption that he may have made some discovery which may become profitable one day to join in. It may be that he who believes most, may merely possess a more industrious credulity, or possess a greater capacity for hasty assumption. But this is seldom probed. He who believes less may have abandoned some important item or justifiable belief. But when he who believes less than the multitude, confesses to the fact in the face of public disapproval, the probability is that he has inquired into, and sifted evidence which others have taken for granted, and discovered some error which they have accepted. His greater accuracy of mind and exactness of speech are an offence, because a reproach to the careless or unscrupulous intellects of those who conduct life on second-hand opinions.

(*The Limits of Atheism.*)

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# Shelley

By COLIN MCCALL

I SUPPOSE all great literary figures suffer at the hands of friend and foe alike, but Shelley seems to have suffered more than most from both adulation and detraction. It is hardly surprising, of course, that a poet who so openly advocated atheism and free love should create a disturbance among the ranks of the orthodox. But there has been much disagreement over his poetic merits, too, and among Free-thinkers as well as Christians. James Thomson ("B.V.") found "distinctive marks of the highest poetry . . . displayed in the works of Shelley more gloriously than in those of any other poet in our language," whereas J. M. Robertson contended that "on examination, the long poems for which so much has been claimed are found to be faulty, diffuse, charmless, ill-considered, wearisome—so much 'rhymed English,' as Emerson bluntly put it." About Shelley's sincerity, there can be no such dispute. The most famous apothegm describes him as an "angel" and a "beautiful" one at that, albeit "ineffectual"; while there are many testimonies to the fineness of his character. Yet, lovable though he was, he must have been difficult to understand. He remains so to-day, but it may be useful to attempt some reassessment.

Certainly, Shelley was not so ineffectual as Matthew Arnold thought, nor did he always beat "in the void his luminous wings in vain." Born into a Whig family, he was sympathetic towards the revolutions in America and France and was strongly influenced by the radical ideas of his time, passing through republicanism to the anarchism of William Godwin rather more gradually than he would have us believe, and making his own distinctive contribution to freethought in Britain. It is important for us to appreciate the social conditions of the early nineteenth century: a time of revolt and revolutionary fervour, of food riots, struggle for freedom of the press; a time when men were pilloried and gaoled for selling the works of Thomas Paine or for ridiculing the Prince Regent. And it is important to realise that Shelley participated in these struggles though mainly, of course, with his pen.

In 1812 he published *A Letter to Lord Ellenborough*, protesting against the sentence of David Isaac Eaton to eighteen months imprisonment with two hours in the pillory once a month for issuing "a blasphemous libel of the Holy Scriptures entitled *The Age of Reason: Part the Third* by Thomas Paine." "Wherefore," asked Shelley, "is Mr. Eaton punished?—Because he is a Deist?—And what are you, my Lord?—A Christian. Ha then! the mask is fallen off; you persecute him because his faith differs from yours. You copy the persecutors of Christianity in your actions, and are an additional proof that your religion is as bloody, barbarous, and intolerant as theirs." He hoped that the judge would live to see the day when people of different faiths "will live together in one community, equally sharing the benefits which arise from its association, and united in the bonds of charity and brotherly love" but raised his "solitary voice, to express my disapprobation, so far as it goes, to the cruel and unjust sentence you passed upon Mr. Eaton, to assert, so far as I am capable of influencing, those rights of humanity, which you have wantonly and unlawfully infringed." Though not the "solitary" protest against the treatment of Eaton (Cobbett's, particularly, must never be forgotten) the *Letter* was a courageous, yet by no means headstrong, work by a young man in his twentieth year and it was significantly reprinted with an appropriate introduction (unsigned but possibly by J. M. Wheeler) in 1883 when G. W. Foote was likewise sentenced to imprisonment for blasphemy.

A year after the *Letter*, *Queen Mab* made its appearance and, though the poet later feared that it was "rather rough" and even stated wrongly that it was written when he was only eighteen, it remains one of his most famous poems. Legitimately so, too, for it contains all the main tenets that he elaborated elsewhere—anti-religion, free love and political revolution—expressed with particular clarity and force. Unfortunately these two qualities are generally frowned upon in poetry to-day and it is not surprising that the Oxford Companion to English Literature calls it a "crude and juvenile production." "Crude" or not, *Queen Mab* was definitely not "ineffectual," for it became a sort of Bible among the Chartists and reformers in this country. And it is as a revolutionary poem that it must be judged: a splendid embodiment of Shelley's philosophy. It is unrealistic to judge the poetry apart from the content, even if it be possible. And it is foolish to dismiss the poem as "juvenile" for it embraces an enormous amount of learning. One has only to turn to the *Notes* (well worth reading for their own sake) to confirm this. A recent commentator, Professor K. N. Cameron, has indicated the main sources of the poem whilst showing that "Shelley nowhere follows blindly, but accepts and rejects in accordance with his own general view." He was obviously limited by his time, particularly in having no concept of the evolution of man, but his insight was often remarkable and, on the whole, *Queen Mab* justifies Bernard Shaw's designation as "a perfectly original poem on a great subject."

The same great subject of man's relation to man and to the universe, recurs again in *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley was "averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind" as Aeschylus apparently did in his sequel to *Prometheus Bound*. It would, he maintained, annihilate the moral interest of the fable if we could conceive Prometheus "as unsaying his high language and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary." Shelley's Prometheus majestically endures his tortures and defies Jupiter until the latter is driven from his throne by Demogorgon. Then Prometheus is freed:

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains  
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man  
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,  
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king  
Over himself. . . .

Such was Shelley's picture of what the future might be if man overcame the tyranny of "Thrones, altars, judgment-seats, and prisons." But the magnificent speech of Demogorgon that closes the poem foresees further dangers and exhorts us:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;  
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;  
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Shelley described *Prometheus Unbound* as his best poem and that is probably the general verdict. Yet it lacks the clarity of *Queen Mab* and at times the poet's vision seems to have outstripped his pen. There are lyrical beauties and powerful passages but there is also a good deal of "unsubstantial splendour," as Coventry Patmore put it. In fact, much of Shelley's poetry displays what Francis Jeffrey called the "white heat of transcendentalism." The Scottish critic considered this to be unhealthy and it is a view I share.

Shelley clearly saw many of the ills of society and fearlessly exposed them; he hated intolerance and extolled human liberty. Shelley the rebel is an admirable figure. But it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that there was a less admirable neurotic streak in him too. This was exemplified in a number of ways: the rabid hatred of his father; the consistent desire for a woman companion in addition to his wife; the preoccupation with incest; love of the horrific. Now sanity is a valuable quality in literature, as in life. And attractive though Shelley was in many ways, he seemed frequently to lack this quality; in his poetry as in his life. Much of his work is undisciplined and monotonously high-pitched. *Adonais*, for instance, is almost hysterical compared with the nobility of Milton's *Lycidas* and Tennyson's restrained but moving *In Memoriam*, while the prose work, *A Defence of Poetry* is so extravagant in its claims that it becomes virtually valueless.

As I see it, then, Shelley was at his best when his imagination was kept within reasonable bounds: when he was dealing with specific issues of human freedom (as in *The Mask of Anarchy*) or writing a lyric. It was the transcendental in his poetry and in his philosophy that was his weakness. It prevented him from adopting a materialist view of life which, at times, he closely approached. He even recognised that matter was not inert but "infinitely active and subtle." He failed to realise that infinitely active matter is sufficient basis on which to build a world and, perhaps, a poem.

## A Convert

By A. R. WILLIAMS

I

AFTER service at Leaborough Baptist Church, either the Minister, Reverend Herbert Anslow, or Missioner Oliver Pearson, took his station in the porch and had a cheery word and a handshake with each member of the congregation filing out. Sometimes both participated in this farewell rite.

On a Sunday evening in November one of the last worshippers to go out was a young Chinaman. He smiled when Herbert Anslow grasped his hand and said: "You are welcome, friend, to all our services."

"Thank you. Goodnight," responded the Chinaman.

Minister and Missioner watched him down the steps and away into the darkness. Each turned to the other with the same query in his eyes, which Anslow expressed: "I wonder who he is?"

"I don't know. I must find out. Chinese Christians are rare in this country."

Next Sunday the newcomer was present at morning and evening service. As he shook hands the pastor ventured: "May I ask your name?"

"Cheng Foo."

"Good. I am sure you would like our missioner, Mr. Pearson to call upon you. We regard all our adherents as friends."

Cheng Foo made no reply except for a reserved smile, and with "Goodnight" went.

At the end of that week Oliver Pearson called upon Herbert Anslow. The missioner came to the purpose of his visit: "About that Chinaman, Cheng Foo. I met him along the street and had a talk."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the minister.

"Yes. He works at the Ivy Hand Laundry."

"Oh yes. I believe a number of Chinese work there."

"They do. I called during the dinner hour and had a few words with them. Cheng Foo invited me to his lodgings."

"You have done well."

"Yes. I went and had a talk with him. He has only a tiny bedroom in a lodging house, but we could converse uninterrupted. It was most interesting. Cheng Foo has been a Christian several years. His parents were converted by an American mission somewhere inland."

"The American missions seem most enterprising."

"They are. Cheng Foo was baptised, and appears to have clear ideas of his faith and why he believes. He can read English, so I gave him a Bible and Hymn book."

"I'm glad you paid him so much attention. How came he to England?"

"Poverty drove him and others to the coast for work. Cheng Foo got as far as Hong Kong labouring. From there he worked his passage to England, wandered about, arrived casually in Leaborough, and found work at the Ivy Laundry."

"Quite interesting. We must make him welcome. Are any of the others at the Laundry Christians?"

"Cheng Foo says not. He's rather reticent, but I gather he has suffered considerable persecution, mostly in his own country, but some here also."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope he'll stand fast in the faith. We must encourage and strengthen him."

II

A few weeks after Cheng Foo's first appearance the Rev. Herbert Anslow preached a Sunday night sermon on Prayer. As text he took "Our Father, which art in Heaven." Beginning with a sketch of the scene of the Sermon on the Mount he compared the Lord's Prayer with others, dwelling on its essential superiority over all; its perfectness as a model.

This led the preacher to a restatement of the importance of prayer. He emphasised its value, not for getting gifts or even grace, but as the finest and closest medium of intercourse between man and his Creator.

Anslow examined other means of communication with God: priesthood; sacraments; worship; poetry; sweeping them all aside as inferior to prayer as the vehicle of direct speech between man's soul and the universal spirit of which it is a part. Even the musings of the mystics did not equal prayer for nearness to the Almighty heart. By its kinship with Christ and sonship to the Father was established.

Stressing the historicity and universality of prayer as the resort in times of danger, doubt and emotion, the minister proceeded to rejoice in the prospect of that solemn occasion when all shall stand before their Maker and see him face to face.

Dropping his voice to a whisper, Herbert Anslow concluded: "Be assured of this, my brothers and sisters: we shall see our Father in heaven. Meanwhile by prayer we speak to him and know his presence. Every day 'Our Father which art in heaven' should be on our lips and in our hearts, binding us by gold chains to the Throne and preparing us for standing there."

The congregation filed out, shaking hands with their minister. Cheng Foo was unusually solemn. Not a smile appeared as his eyes shone and he said: "Thank you for beautiful sermon."

III

Early on Monday morning Oliver Pearson was awakened by loud knocking on his front door. Putting his head out of the bedroom window, he was addressed in beseeching tones: "Mr. Pearson. Come round at once. I'll wait for you."

Recognising the landlord of the lodging house where the Chinese lodged the missioner said: "I'll come."

Dressing quickly he joined the man and they hastened away. Pearson asked: "What has happened?"

"We found Cheng Foo hanging in his bedroom."

"No! Dead?"

"Yes. Cold."

"Terrible! Have you cut him down and sent for the police?"

"Yes. But you're so good in emergencies, and Cheng Foo liked you so much I thought you ought to come. And there's something else."

Outside the lodging house a little crowd gathered scenting morbid tragedy. At the bedroom door stood a policeman. Knowing Oliver Pearson he stepped aside. Drawing the sheet from the dead man's face the missionary looked sadly at the features, rigid and pale, but calm, almost happy.

Breathing a prayer, Oliver Pearson turned to the constable, who drew a sheet of cheap notepaper out of his pocket and handed it to him. Written on it he read:—

"I'm tired of this world, and lonely. I want to see God face to face now. I go to my Father which art in heaven."

## Correspondence

### WAS COHEN A RATIONALIST?

My critics, Mr. Wright, etc., appear to be very concerned over the precise definition of the term, rationalism—with or without—a capital R.

I suggest that life is too short to spend it quibbling about words. If Mr. C. Cohen did not like, or use, the term Rationalist—with a capital R—this, presumably, was because there are so many self-styled Rationalists around, to whom the prefix "Reverent" may be accurately attached. I do not see, however, that this affects the correct use of the term, as defined by McCabe. If all Rationalists—with a capital R—had been altogether rational, I do not think that so acute a logician as Mr. Cohen was, would have refused to use the term.—Yours, etc.,

F. A. RIDLEY.

### INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

Having attended the Freethought conference in Luxemburg last year, I made contact with several esperantists, Dutch, German and French and have since corresponded with them in Esperanto. They all seem to think it is time we freethinkers advocated that Esperanto should be made a common language for further W.U.F. conferences as time and energy are lost, and many don't know what is going on.

Freethinkers have been the advance guard in many spheres of thought and I think there is room for freethought in the Esperanto ranks.—Yours, etc.,

G. SWAN.

### BILLY GRAHAM'S COMPETITORS

What *does* Billy Graham hope to achieve by coming over to "Darkest Britain"? Does he expect to repeat the history of the Moody-Sankey days? Alas, these Evangelists came over to Britain in 1873, under vastly different social conditions. Few could read. When they did read, it was the bible. There were few newspapers. People worked long hours and had little leisure. They had few interests beyond working, eating and sleeping. Religion was, as Rev. Charles Kingsley had written sarcastically, "the opium of the people," making them contented with their lot.

This was the proper soil in which to sow the seeds of a "Revival" of religion. There was little to compete with the Evangelists. The world was a "vale of tears," with the promise of "pic-in-the-sky-when-you-die."

Now we are living in the "Happy Valley" of the Welfare State, from which we wish to postpone our departure as long as possible. Besides, many people have become disillusioned about both the "pie" and the "sky."

What a host of "competitors" Billy Graham will find today. Newspaper and periodicals of every kind; sport; the cinema; the Pools; the dance halls; and towering above and beyond all, the still unknown and unknowable "TV."

Again the vast spread of education among all classes has opened men's minds to the vast problem of the origin of the human race.

An attempt was made, I think, about the beginning of the century to repeat the success of the Moody-Sankey Mission—the Torrey-Alexander—but it was a pale imitation and its results were shorter-lived.

Billy's crowded meetings were attended by the present church-going people and will not affect or attract the large outer fringe of non-churchgoers.

The musical side of the Moody-Sankey "invasion" has been

repeated, but in a "secular" way. If some of the "hill-billy" tunes are carefully examined, there will be found in them the same "swing," the same lilt, the same verve, the same melodiousness that characterised the Moody-Sankey tunes. Their appeal to the people of the 1870's who were nurtured in the more staid, sober, stately and solemn psalm and hymn tunes, is quite understandable.—Yours, etc.,

BILLY BOYES.

### GOD

In reply to S. D. Brooks and his "inconsistency." To the atheist "God" is just another Santa Claus, a laughable fraud. But no real atheist claims to have discovered that he doesn't actually exist, and he doesn't have to any more than in the case of Santa. Driven into a corner, the believer always resorts to this strategy of "inconsistency," "lack of spiritual perception," etc., and gets away with it among his own. Atheism denies "God," yes. I deny Santa Claus, though in theory I don't *know* "he ain't." This is inconsistent? You may be free, boy, but you ain't much of a thinker! Not a bad trick, though. Can't blame you for trying!—Yours, etc.,

Toronto, Canada.

J.F.K.

### HITLER AND PROTESTANTISM

Hibernicus speaks of "the slight resistance that German Protestantism showed against Hitler."

The R.C.s in Germany showed just as little resistance to Hitler as did the Protestants, until the Nazis grabbed the schools.

The R.C. Cardinal of Austria welcomed Hitler as "a man sent by God."—Yours, etc.,

ARTHUR GRANT.

### TRUTH

S. W. Brooks (April 29) appears to have misconceived the essential function of the popular religion, which should be to *earn* the revenue that it yields to the priests and the Churches. As for the greater part of mankind being devoid of the power of logical reasoning, that is the direct result of an educational system which was rooted in the popular religions.

Imagine a world today in which there had been no myths, as of Christ, no appeal to the imagination of the meek and humble, no suppression of heretics, or of great thinkers; a world in which impartial education replaced dogmatic instruction. It is not correct to say that Mr. Average Man is not concerned with facts. From every pulpit and from every platform where Billy Graham projects his views, we can hear and read, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

It is the truth that men seek, and Christian myths are not needed.—Yours, etc.,

PETER MALCOLM.

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