

The Freethinker

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THROUGHOUT the two centuries since the Industrial Revolution first began to evolve a scientifically based civilisation, Christianity, the traditional religion of the technically advanced West, has been engaged in an unceasing conflict with the mounting forces of scepticism and unbelief. During the past decade, since in particular the end of World War Two, the Industrial Revolution has expanded and is expanding today at an ever-increasing tempo amongst the formerly backward races of Asia and Africa, and in the non-Christian world. As a result of this current dynamic impact of the industrial civilisation based ultimately upon science, on the stagnant agrarian civilisation of the East, we may shortly expect to see the same "conflict of science with religion" which has agitated the West in recent centuries; in their turn, the other great historic religions will encounter the same critical opposition as Christianity has already done.

— VIEWS and OPINIONS —

Reason and Revelation in Islam

By F. A. RIDLEY

Reason versus Revelation

Accordingly, the appearance at this juncture of *Reason and Revelation in Islam* by Professor Arberry is particularly apposite. For not only is Islam the traditional rival of Christianity since the era of the Crusades, still one of the four major religions of the world and probably the most widely diffused next to Christianity, but, in the present writer's opinion, it is more free from medieval accretions and has greater survival value than any other of the traditional religions. During the past decade Islam has undergone a revival in the political field and a theological revival of a modernist kind based on contacts with modern knowledge is heralded in certain quarters. As Professor Arberry indicates with a wealth of appropriate detail, Islam has a lengthy theological evolution behind it and in that evolution, particularly during its formative era the conflict of "Reason and Revelation" played an important part for several centuries.

Islam, Jewish Catholicism

The cosmopolitan religion of Islam — that is, submission to God — originated, as is common knowledge, in Arabia in the seventh century of our era. Its Founder, Muhammed, was traditionally a member of a Mecca family of merchants long associated with the custody of the pagan "Kaaba," the worship of which had made Mecca a holy city already in pre-Muslim times. How far Muhammed's creed was a genuine Unitarian Arabic reforming movement or how far it was derived from Christian or Jewish sources is a hotly controverted question; the present writer would suggest that it might aptly be described as a cosmopolitan form of Judaism, or "Jewish Catholicism," as I have elsewhere described it. In its rigid Unitarianism, in its veneration of the "Book" and in its prophetic tradition, from Abraham, via Jesus, to the last and greatest Prophet, Muhammed, Islam, I suggest, represents the authentic expansion of Judaism on the cosmopolitan scale.

The "Uncreated" Koran

The early followers of the Prophet, like, probably, the earliest Christians, constituted a revivalist sect in which theological speculation was absent. But as also in the earlier era of the Christian Church, when the new religion took root in the intellectual centres of earlier civilisations, the need for a speculative theology was felt. Muslim theology, as it has now lasted for thirteen centuries, was formulated after a series of bitter controversies in the early centuries. The most bitter of these controversies was over the precise nature of the Holy Book, the Koran: was the Koran a book at all and as such, created like every other thing, or was it not, rather, the eternal uncreated Word of God, coequal with this everlasting Deity? The latter dogma eventually prevailed, and it is now the orthodox dogma of Islam that the Koran is the eternal repository of all Truth, dictated verbally by Allah to Muhammed but in no sense the work of the Prophet himself. Having thus consolidated itself on an infallible basis, and thus reduced reason to a mere auxiliary of Faith, Muslim theology proceeded to settle accounts with the philosophers who tried to rationalise the revealed dogmas of Islam, in particular, to apply the test of reason to the infallible Word of God itself. For, as a result of the dramatic impact of the Arab conquerors on the East, a new Arab-Persian culture had arisen, the centre of which was in Baghdad and which was deeply influenced by Greek philosophy and science. From the intellectual basis provided in particular by Plato and Aristotle, a powerful school of liberal thinkers arose in the Islamic world, which reached its peak in the Persian, Avicenna and the Spanish Moor, Averroes. In the 11th and 12th centuries respectively, these scholars, without absolutely denying the existence of God or the Revelation of Islam, yet sought to rationalise religious dogma. In a totalitarian creed like Islam in which heresy was punished by death, criticism was dangerous. Accordingly we find the Muslim philosophers taking refuge in the subterfuge that religion — including the Koran — speaks two languages — one for the philosopher and another for the common uneducated people.

The Literal Interpretation of the Koran

As Professor Arberry shows, the great stumbling-block to Islamic philosophy lay in the literal, often crudely literal, language used in the Koran about both Allah himself and in particular about the after-life, which the Koran described in luscious and sensual terms, calculated to appeal to the primitive Arab warriors who flocked to the green flag of the Prophet. Avicenna and his followers tried to spiritualise these crude descriptions by dismissing them as allegories. They also denied the corporeal attributes which the Holy Book ascribed to Allah. Despite some modern assertions to the contrary, medieval Islam was no more favourable to rationalism than was medieval Christianity. Critical

philosophy was regarded with the greatest suspicion by Muslim orthodoxy. Eventually it died out, along with Islamic culture itself, which was forcibly destroyed in the East by the Tartars and in Spain by the Christian Spaniards in the thirteenth century: a cataclysm of culture as equally destructive as the Fall of Rome before the German Barbarians in the fifth century. Professor Arberry could perhaps have devoted more attention to these non-intellectual causes for the decline and eventual fall of Islamic philosophy.

"The Proof of Islam"

Even before the dire catastrophe, philosophy in Islam was already in decline. Omar Khayyam—twelfth century—already denounces the unreasoning fanaticism of his times in his famous verses. One of Omar's own Persian contemporaries, al-Ghazali, hailed by Muslim orthodoxy as "the proof of Islam," marked the turn of the theological tide. In a famous book, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Ghazali reasserted the literal interpretation of the Koran—including the physical joys of Paradise—and elaborately refuted the impious allegories of the philosophers. He may perhaps be termed the Muslim St. Thomas Aquinas, and marked the definitive turn of the tide. After

his time—he died in 1111—critical philosophy was taboo in Islam, and its rationalist exponents were classed amongst notorious heretics. The "two and seventy sects" of orthodoxy celebrated by Omar Khayyam resumed their sway.

The Muslim "Dark Age"

From the thirteenth to the present century, a "Dark Age" has subsisted in Islam. Whilst Muslim—like Catholic— theology has continued to employ the philosophical terminology of Aristotle, it has remained unoriginal and scholastic in form. Under the impact of Western science, there appears to be a renaissance of critical philosophy in the form of a Muslim "Modernism," and students of religion will watch its future with much interest.

With the growing importance of the Muslim East, it can be assumed that we have not heard the last of Islam. Prof. Arberry's highly specialised study of the early conflict of Revelation and Reason in Islam, originally delivered as lectures to the University of Liverpool, represents a valuable contribution to this little known branch of study: one of particular interest to Western rationalism on account of its intermediary position between modern critical thought and its Greek originals.

[*Reason and Revelation in Islam*, by Professor A. J. ARBERRY. George Allen and Unwin. 12s. 6d.]

The Church on St. Helena

DRUNKEN and seditious clergymen enliven the history of the island of St. Helena, England's second oldest colony. Philip Gosse, the historian, attributes the alarming mutiny of 1683 to the "scurrilous and insulting speeches" of the chaplain, Dr. Sault. Another of the chaplains was censured by the East India Company for being an "encroaching, avaricious person." Yet another was represented as "a liar". Another was proved to be an incendiary. And so on.

The records are full of scandals. For instance, the Governor wrote in 1704 of the chaplain, Mr. Kerr, "that he found Mr. Kerr's talent lay much more to Bacchus than his own profession, being never better pleased than when his face is of a scarlet dye by his beloved Punch, which makes him very captious. On the 17th inst., being very flushed as usual, he did tell me his black coat was as good as my red and called me a little fellow."

Parson Tomlinson, a few years later, seems to have been no improvement. He sold arrack to soldiers, and he refused to pray for the Governor and the Council as he "did not think them worth praying for." The Governor retorted by inverting the old proverb which says "No Penny, no Pater Noster"; he declared "No Pater Noster, no Penny," and cut off the vicar's stipend. The succeeding cleric, a Mr. Jones, tore the gown off a councillor and struck him with his fist in the eye.

One wonders why the East India Company persisted in dispatching chaplains on a journey of five thousand miles to the island in the South Atlantic Ocean, when the gentlemen only made mischief and misfortune. Governor after Governor complained of the place being bedevilled by clerics who were so unrepentant that sometimes they had to be flogged or imprisoned. Yet still the myth persisted among the higher authorities in England that it must be "the right thing" to "support religion on the island."

In his new travel book, *Isle of St. Helena* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 21s.), Oswald Blakeston brings the story up to date and reports on the oddities and marvels of life on the island today. Moreover, he tells how there is no chance for the islanders to escape from their dreadful poverty while

contemporary clergymen maintain a reactionary stranglehold. Blakeston writes:

"One meets a poor man and asks him about his family, and he says 'Oh, the usual step ladder.' Children growing up at almost nine-month intervals. How can the island support a growing population? How can a man keep a large family on the average wage of about thirty shillings a week? A doctor did try to open a birth control clinic in recent years, but the High Anglican influence quashed it. Yet humanity is crying out for it."

Present day priests on the island may not behave like the old reprobates of the past, but their work is still as destructive of peace and prosperity!

[F. A. Ridley's full-length review of *Isle of St. Helena* will appear in our next issue.]

TRIBUTE

THE LATE MR. W. J. MCKELVIE (see Obituary, last issue), who died in retirement at Blackpool, was formerly Chairman of the Liverpool N.S.S. Branch. Many Merseysiders will recall with pleasure his quiet and efficient chairmanship of the meetings in the old Colquitt Street days. The movement has lost a loved and loyal comrade.

He was secretary of the old Liverpool Secular Society, which under his direction became the Liverpool N.S.S. Branch. In his last letter to me he estimated his association with our movement at over 50 years, and lamented that his old friends had "one by one crept silently to rest." He was still getting an occasional letter into the local press, and had been plying a Roman Catholic doctor with freethought literature, not without some effect.

Under the name "Tom Blake," his son Charles wrote some stories for THE FREETHINKER in the 1930s.

It is pleasing to note that a secular service was requested and was conducted by our Blackpool Branch secretary.

G.H.T.

NEXT WEEK

REPUBLICANISM IS NOT DEAD
By WILLIAM KEAR

The Mysticism of Richard Jefferies

By G. I. BENNETT

I HAVE PREVIOUSLY alluded to but not written about the mysticism of Richard Jefferies (*Richard Jefferies' Last Words*, THE FREETHINKER, 30/11/56). Of this there are hints in a few of his later writings, but its only full and intense expression is in *The Story of My Heart*—that impassioned book of the spirit composed in Jefferies' springtime as a writer. It is a work in which the Wiltshire naturalist manifests an extraordinary, almost psychopathic, longing for perfection; in which he pursues the quest, through every gallery open to him, for an enlargement of what he calls soul-life. Prayer of a particular sort plays a considerable part in this. Although it is quickly apparent to the reader that Jefferies' use of these words—soul and prayer—is in no sense orthodox but peculiar to his own needs, we have, somewhat oddly, to await an explanation of them until the very last pages of the book. And there we are informed that "one of the greatest difficulties I have encountered is the lack of words to express ideas" (as though from many a halting page we didn't know, by then!). "By the word soul or psyche I mean that inner consciousness which aspires. By prayer I do not mean a request for anything preferred to a deity; I mean intense self-emotion, intense soul-aspiration. . . . (But) these definitions are deficient, and I must leave my book as a whole to give its own meaning to its words."

The truth is that from early youth—probably from boyhood—prayer for Jefferies meant a kind of pagan rapture, a sensuous delight in and worship of the earth and the things of the earth. Many are the passages in the *Story* where he describes his powerful feelings of ecstasy, his inexpressible elation, in the presence of Nature. Climbing up through "a perfect amphitheatre of green hills," he has told how he would find a spot where he was "utterly alone with the sun and the earth." "Lying down on the grass," he writes, "I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth's firmness—I felt it bear me up; through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me. . . . I was breathing full of existence. I was aware of the grass blades, the flowers, the leaves on hawthorn and tree. I seemed to live more largely through them, as if each were a pore through which I drank. The grasshoppers called and leaped, the greenfinches sang, the blackbirds happily fluted, all the air hummed with life. I was plunged deep in existence, and with all that existence I prayed. . . ."

Thus by absorption in Nature does he enjoy communion with her. With a temperament so delicately poised as his, this sort of mystical oneness with elemental things was, in his earlier days at least, a necessity of living. It was a pagan enchantment, which in the *Story* extends to the thought of his very death when, he says, he desires cremation in the open air on the summit of the hills, because "that is the natural interment of man—of man whose thought at least has been among the immortals: interment in the elements."

It is an uncommon and, some have felt, an unnatural desire—this passion to increase the fullness of soul-life, to know more and feel more than one mind and heart are capable of knowing and feeling, with which *The Story of my Heart* is suffused. Jefferies had transports of spirit akin in some way to those of the religious mystics. But whereas most of them were ascetics who have found the road to

transcendent heights by wilfully neglecting—even scourging—the despised body, Jefferies, on the other hand, exults in physical well-being, because through it pulses radiance and gladness on which, for him, the soul's life so greatly depends. "I believe it to be incumbent on every man and woman to encourage their physical life by exercise, and in every manner," he writes. "Those who stunt their physical life most certainly stunt the soul." And because the soul is made higher by gazing on beauty, every form of beauty is to be accepted joyfully and without reservation.

It was never as an intellectual but always as a man of the country that Jefferies wrote. Thought for him does not lie much in books; it "dwells by the stream and sea, by the hill and in the woodland, in the sunlight and free wind." Those who have read such of his essays as *Meadow Thoughts* and *The Pageant of Summer* know just how much was the inspiration he derived from these things; and perhaps his writing there gains from being free of the transcendental vision that struggles for expression in the *Story*.

For Jefferies everything is "so full of unexplained meaning," so much a cause for wonder, so pregnant with exciting possibilities, that he feels "always on the margin of life illimitable." There are, he thinks, rich valleys of potential thought beyond the valleys of thought, vast regions of truth as yet unentered and unknown. He seeks—and believes in—"an existence as superior (to the ordinary human life we know) as my mind is to the dead chalk cliff." But is it legitimate to endeavour to see beyond this mortal realm and material reality? Can we ever hope to understand anything that lies outside the bourne of human life and experience? Ah, what paradox is there here! As if we could ever hope to understand! And yet the desire to know more than we can—and, maybe, ever shall—is strong in some. It is strong in Jefferies. If he could, he would have the omniscience of a God; he would possess the power, the insight, to penetrate the very heart and essence of the universe and all that is. We have most of us, I daresay, felt the same way at some time or other. Oh, to break loose of every earthly prejudice and human limitation and see more than mortal eye has yet seen! But, while admitting the likelihood that there are oceans of truth on which we have never put to sail, we perforce resign ourselves to knowing such of reality as we shall perhaps ever know and making the best of that.

This is where, I believe, Jefferies clutches at air and strains his whole being to draw aside the veil to no purpose. We may like the—as I think—impersonal ardour of his inquiring and original mind, so different from the type of mind that would see behind the drappings of externality a heaven for the soul to rest in and a fount of everlasting joy to drink deeply at. But to express conviction, as he does, that there is "a vast immensity of thought, of existence, and of other things beyond even immortal existence" is to play unmeaningfully with words. Moreover, it is to admit by implication that you can't begin to envision what you predicate—with more confidence than knowledge—is really there all the time.

(To be concluded)

This Believing World

Our own eminent spirit healer, Mr. H. Edwards, who has cured hundreds of thousands of people by merely laying on his hands, should be particularly interested in his comrade in San Francisco, Evangelist A. A. Allen, who, according to *Progressive World*, is doing for America what Mr. Edwards is doing for England. At his meetings he insists that "Christ in bodily form is seen on the platform . . . to lay hands on the sick and the dying and are healed instantly. Goitres disappear! Cancers vanish! Short legs instantly lengthen! The blind see!" That's the stuff to give 'em — we always knew America could go one better than poor old England.

★

After all, when his carpenter "father" Joseph made a door too small, Jesus always stretched it to fit by a miracle; so we should not be too surprised to find him lengthen a short leg on Evangelist Allen's platform or even provide a perfect new one if the unfortunate patient had only one leg. These things ought to be commonplace healings when Jesus himself is on the platform, whether actually seen, as in San Francisco, or only "in spirit," as here in London. Horrid infidels should always remember that Faith can move mountains.

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We were delighted to note that our priests and parsons are not the only people who have positive knowledge of "God's purpose." A lay lady preacher, a Mrs. Hesketh, delivered a beautiful sermon on Palm Sunday last in Bolton Parish Church, and the reporter assures us that it was "extremely balanced and sensible" and all about "God's purpose." The idea that men only know all about God and his purpose should be sternly repudiated, and we are sure Mrs. Hesketh knows all about it and all the answers as well as the most learned Cardinal or Archbishop. One decisive proof she gave was that God insisted "on the necessity of religion to us all." What an acquisition the lady would be for the BBC, TV, and ITV!

★

A wonderful proof of the truth of religion in general and of Jesus Christ in particular comes from the *Sunday Pictorial*. A doctor was just about to dive into a swimming pool when he noticed — ye Gods! — a Cross reflected in "the far end of the pool." So he didn't dive, but "clambered to ground level" and dipped his toes in the water. And then? He found the "pool was empty." If that does not prove God's Providence and the way Jesus looks after everybody who trusts him, we cannot guess what does. This story, surely, is as convincing as the one above and should be taken to heart by all blatant infidels.

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It was only to be expected that "The Universe" would make great play with the religious funeral of the late Edouard Herriot, who had always been known as a Free-thinker and anti-clerical during his long political career. No one knows what *really* happened, for when it comes to "infidel deaths," the Roman Church in particular can lie with impunity. From the story given out by the Church, it seems most likely that the proceedings were engineered by Mme. Herriot who no doubt was — like so many wives of eminent men — deeply religious. While Herriot was alive he loathed the Church, and a religious funeral *after* his death just means nothing at all.

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Although Easter is the time when — in Christian countries at least — Jesus is more invoked than any other God, the London *Evening News* gave space the other week to an article on the "faces" of Jesus which, no doubt, will hurt

crowds of devoted believers. Of course, everybody knows what Jesus really looked like, and many books have been written, fully illustrated with his numerous portraits. Mr. Kay, who wrote the article, sadly admits, however, that "in all the records of Christ's life there is nothing which gives details of Jesus's appearance of face, of body, or even of . . . the colour of eyes and hair." He then proceeds to show the utter falsity of every "portrait."

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The truth is that the first portraits showed a beardless youth exactly like the Greek Adonis or Apollo, and certainly they could not have represented a dark-skinned Jew, which, if the New Testament story is true, Jesus must have been. When the Renaissance painters were commissioned by the powerful Churches to paint him, he began to look suspiciously like the self-portrait of Durer, the great German artist. But they were, after all, only artistic "conceptions," for it is impossible to visualise a myth. As Mr. Kay is obliged to say, "the appearance of Christ on earth remains a mystery." How right he is!

The Rising Generation

XX—THE BOOK OF ACTS

FOR SOME REASON best known to our Church leaders, the New Testament book known as the Acts of the Apostles — it has many names in the "original" manuscripts — is rarely referred to in public. You will not find many broadcasts devoted to it, and even the wonderful religious lessons broadcast to schools prefer to ignore it as far as possible. This is not surprising, for it is packed with perhaps more sheer nonsense and gibberish than any other book in the Bible. It is difficult to read it without laughing.

Acts is supposed to be a continuation of Luke written by the same author — whoever he was, for, of course, nobody knows. The name Luke occurs three times in the New Testament, and in one he is called a "physician," which, of course, makes him a perfect physician in the most modern sense. Indeed, if Jesus had not been the greatest physician the world has ever seen, the honour would have gone to Luke. Unfortunately, we know literally *nothing whatever* about him, though, even if we did, it would not make either the Gospel of Luke or the Acts one whit more credible.

Although the book is called the Acts of the Apostles, about the only Apostles it deals with are Peter and Paul, who both make long speeches to vast audiences in exactly the same manner, that is, the manner of the *writer* of the book. In other words, the speeches have been *made up* — exactly like everything else in the book, with the possible exception of some notes of a journey of Paul (or some other person). All the miraculous events with which the book is filled are plain *lies*; just as is the supposed murder of Stephen, for which there is no authority whatever. It is completely unknown to Josephus, who gives us a minute history of the exact period, and who entirely ignores nearly everything related in Acts. What is quite proven, however, is that the writer of Acts *copied* from Josephus so as to get some of the Jewish details and names right.

Incidentally, Paul in Acts is called Saul, and nobody has ever proved that Saul is really Paul, just as nobody has ever proved that Saul ever wrote any of the Epistles ascribed to Paul. It is all pure conjecture — as indeed almost everything about the New Testament really is. And Acts could not possibly have been written before about the year 150 A.D.

H.C.

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THE FREETHINKER

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Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 41 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1.

Details of membership of the National Secular Society may be obtained from the General Secretary, 41 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1. Members and visitors are always welcome at the Office.

TO CORRESPONDENTS

Correspondents may like to note that when their letters are not printed or when they are abbreviated the material in them may still be of use to "This Believing World," or to our spoken propaganda.

Lecture Notices, Etc.

OUTDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Broadway Car Park).—Every Sunday, 7.30 p.m.: Messrs. DAY, NEWTON, and SHEPPARD.

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (The Mound).—Every Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. CRONAN, MURRAY and SLEMEN.

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

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Deansgate Blitzed Site).—Every weekday, 1 p.m.: Messrs. WOODCOCK, SMITH, CORSAIR and FINKEL.

Sundays, 7.15 p.m.: Messrs MILLS, WOODCOCK, and SMITH.

Merseyside Branch N.S.S. (Pierhead).—Meetings most evenings of the week (often afternoons): Messrs. THOMPSON, SALISBURY, HOGAN, PARRY, HENRY and others.

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead).—Every Sunday, noon: L. EBURY and A. ARTHUR.

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square) — Thursday, 1 p.m.: R. POWE. Friday, 1 p.m.: R. POWE.

West London Branch N.S.S.—Every Sunday, at the Marble Arch, from 4 p.m.: Messrs. ARTHUR and EBURY.

INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, May 12th, 11 a.m.: D. G. MACRAE, M.A., "China, the Making of a New Nation."

N.S.S. Annual Conference 1957

THE WHITSUNTIDE CONFERENCE of the National Secular Society will be held this year in Leicester. The Saturday evening reception (June 8th) and Sunday morning and afternoon sessions of the Conference (June 9th) will be held in the Leicester Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, which has been kindly made available by the Leicester Secular Society. An Outdoor Demonstration will take place on the Sunday evening, and a coach trip will be arranged for Whit Monday.

It is important that hotel reservations should be made quickly. These should be addressed to the General Secretary, N.S.S., 41 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1. Please write without delay.

Notes and News

Two young Mexican freethought periodicals have now been brought to our notice. One is *El Libre Pensador* (*The Freethinker*), now in its third year, and the mouthpiece of the freethought leader General Cristobal Rodrigues, describing itself as 'a monthly publication for culture and

information by the National Association of Freethinkers." It has four pages, a little larger than those of this journal. The other is *El Liberal*, still in its first year, with four large pages, an independent political and anti-clerical paper.

★

THE "desecration" of Holy Days is spreading to those centres of English tradition, the Universities. A Cambridge cricket trial was actually held, for the first time in history, on Good Friday. The cricketers intended to play throughout the day but what is called, in the current number of *Cricketer*, "clerical intervention," postponed the start till 3 o'clock.

★

MR. C. H. HAMMERSLEY, of the Leicester Secular Society, is getting an effective short freethought letter into the local press almost as often as once a week. He has mastered the art of making one effective point in about five to 25 lines, and it is paying handsome dividends in the form of continuous propaganda for our cause. In his present controversy on the Dead Sea Scrolls the Christian answer was really brilliant. "How can the Gospel that has lasted for 1,900 years possibly be upset by something discovered recently?" Such masterpieces of argumentation leave one breathless.

★

WHEN the Gospels were compiled, wrote Mr. Hammersley, "it was considered quite legitimate to improve them by interpolations and transpositions. St. Paul says in Romans, 3, that a small inaccuracy, provided it enhances the glory of God, is not a bad thing. Thus it is possible by comparing documents to eliminate what is blatantly untrue. A new set of documents such as the Dead Sea Scrolls may upset the work of centuries, but in the interests of truth these documents cannot be ignored."

★

OUR Manchester Branch Secretary, Mrs. H. M. W. Rogals, has made contact with the Polish Freethinkers in Warsaw. This was done by her writing directly to Mr. Gomulka, in the first place. Our Polish comrades are desirous of making translations of English freethought works, and Mrs. Rogals has been plying them with some of our literature.

★

AN interesting case arose in the District Court of Appeals, San Francisco, U.S.A., when the American Civil Liberties Union filed an *amicus curæ* brief on behalf of the Fellowship of Humanity (Oakland, California), an organisation which assays a "non-theistic religious humanism." The organisation had claimed "religious tax exemption," but the Alameda County Tax Assessor refused the claim, on the grounds that their premises were used for purposes other than "solely religious." As they do not believe in God, said the assessor, they do not qualify as a religion, and are therefore disqualified from the tax exemption granted to all religious organisations.

★

THE Civil Liberties Union contended that to require that "religion and religious worship must include God as an essential deity" is contrary to the First Amendment (guaranteeing freedom of religion). The District Attorney replied: "The argument contained in the *amicus curæ* brief of the A.C.L.U. is an example of tactics frequently adopted in modern times by *alien elements* which seek to clothe unlawful conduct in the garment of constitutional sanctity."

★

PAPAL News Agency *Fides* recently stressed the importance of *native* priests to replace missionaries and the Pope obviously agrees, as he has created 17 Negroid Latin rite bishops in Africa during his Pontificate.

The Aga Khan's Religion

By C. G. L. Du CANN

ENGLISH newspaper-readers are familiar with the Aga Khan as some sort of Eastern Potentate, the spiritual head of some Mohammedan sect: but what is more to the point, immensely wealthy, and a fashionable figure cutting capers in the Western World. They are even more familiar with his son, Aly Khan, as a person whose matrimonial adventures, provide mildly exciting copy for gossip-columnists and themselves.

Probably they do not realise that "His Highness" is the head of the Shiah Ismailia sect. But recently the *Sunday Times* busily engaged in investigating the mystery of life after death (as known to modern celebrities) has produced an article for the Sabbatical reading of English Christians purporting to be by this person — perhaps I should say personage. No doubt the article may express the old man's views. But that he has had the journalistic training to compose that piece may be doubted.

Yet if you believe the newspapers — if anybody does — anyone can write a skilled journalistic article, if he once gets into the news. Though he never wrote a line in his life before for publication, the mere invitation to be a contributor causes the untrained to write with such technical mastery that he might have been an author and journalist all the days of his life. This is one of the miracles of our English way of life. Nothing like it has been seen since the Day of Pentecost when humble fishermen of Galilee suddenly spoke all the languages upon earth, as so convincingly related in the Acts of the Apostles.

With journalistic technical perfection, then, the Aga Khan writes on the "Hope of Islam". He at once falls foul of the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body. He imagines apparently, that all Christians have the same Burial Service and that this Christian service implies that they all believe that a similar bodily resurrection to Christ's will be the "fate" (surely a mis-chosen word) of all who "die in Christianity".

To those who know the Christian faith at first-hand, it will be pretty plain that this Oriental does not know what he is talking about. Christianity has as many sects and divisions as Islam. These have different burial services of course. Many Christians — despite the Apostles and other formal creeds — do not believe in any bodily resurrection at all, and think it would be highly regrettable if it took place having regard to what some bodies are like. It seems grotesque to some minds to suppose that a missionary eaten and digested by cannibals or the scattered ashes of a cremated corpse ought to be re-assembled, and it is paying the Almighty a poor compliment to suppose that he has nothing better to do than engage in such trivial housewifery, over human microbes of no particular importance.

However, the Aga Khan is so far correct that he might argue that most unthinking Christians, and some thinking ones, do believe in a bodily return. But our superior Oriental friend regards such a belief as "extremely materialistic". He is, however, too polite to his Christian audience to call it absurd and debased though he obviously thinks that it is. He goes on to tell us that Islam believes in a different thing which he calls "Companionship on High" — the last word of their Prophet, whom, by the way Christians believe to have been a false prophet.

But Companionship with what or whom?

Apparently with the Creator. What Creator? The Aga Khan tells us. Although the Creator is not Light, yet the

consequences of the light (with a small "L") as seen in the universe are the nearest we can imagine about the person of our Creator. That seems to be about as unilluminating as any light can possibly be to me; as useless as the last gleam of a spent electric torch. Rather worse than "the Light" in that old-time musical comedy "The Belle of New York".

So much — or so little, rather — for God, as envisaged by this eminent Oriental. "Consequences of light" — no more! I must say that "Companionship with the consequences of light" seems to my unregenerate non-muslim self, nothing very much. It seems to be mere words devoid of all real significance or meaning.

Just as the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas is the foundation of Catholic theology, so the Aga Khan tells us. Averroes changed the outlook of Islam. That well may be — though I doubt if many Sunday-newspaper readers have heard of the celebrated Averroes. But what did Averroes teach that our Islamic mentor wants us to know? That reasoning — the work of the material brain — can never grasp spiritual truth. Nor can science or logic.

How may we benighted beings get it then? It is "an illumination and enlightenment" (what is the distinction between these two words?) "directly given by the Creator to those who have the grace to receive it".

And who are they? You or me or Christians? Not likely. Only, it would seem Mohomedans. For "this spiritual knowledge directly given, can be objectively studied, learned, and followed by the whole Islamic mass of the population". So the readership of the *Sunday Times* is definitely out of it! But what of those more fortunate, "the whole Islamic mass". Having got this boon, having studied, learnt and followed, what then? "It is a Muslim's highest duty by intensive prayer and spiritual abandonment of self to the great universal Soul of the Universe to get the supreme blessing of direct communion with absolute reality."

Now for my part, I am all for reality, absolute or any other kind. But there seems to me to be an absolute lack of reality in these high-flown vague phrases. Having got (let us suppose) our direct communion with reality, what then? One gets into communion for some purpose — unless one is on the telephone to the wrong number. So what are absolute reality and I going to do with, or say to, each other when direct communion is achieved?

The Aga Khan does not say. I fear that this is because he has not the least idea. He just doesn't know; he has come to the end of his tether on the subject. He has pursued his verbiage to a point where it can go no further, and so it ends, or rather, breaks off, in utter unreal nonsense. Here the writer might well have stopped.

But the newspaper-space has to be filled. So the Aga Khan goes on to talk of "the death-bed scene of our Holy Prophet so well authenticated by evidence which took place in the presence of his two cousins, Ali and Ibn-Abbas, his wives, and above all, his future great successor the Caliph Omar". But what have all these to do with what we were talking about: Companionship on High with the Consequences of Light, the Supreme Blessing of Direct Communion with Absolute Reality?

If there had been a million cousins, as many wives as Solomon boasted, and all the Caliphs in the Arabian Nights together with Beckford's Caliph Vathek — my favourite caliph by the way — that does not convince me of anything

at all, except that they were probably after the dying man's goods and chattels, especially the wives. The Holy Prophet has my sympathy; but this tale about him adds exactly nothing to the point.

Indeed this stuff of the Aga Khan's is merely offering the inquiring reader stones for bread. It is poor religion and worse journalism, even by the pretentious standards of the more respectable English Sunday-papers. It tells the reader nothing except that the Aga Khan is able to walk as delicately as Agag in expounding very little of his brand of Islamism to modern Western Christians. He will offend no one. But he will convert no one, either.

As a simple Englishman, I had always believed that the creed of Islamism could be substantially expressed in a single sentence:

"There is no God but the One God and Mohammed is His Prophet."

But from the perusal of this exposition I gather that God can be half-a-dozen or any other number of "consequences of light" and that Averroes (*alias* the Spaniard Ibn Rushd) and *not* Mohammed (unmentioned by name throughout the article) is his Prophet. Perhaps this is one of the consequences of having journalistic collaboration with a Christian unbeliever in composing an article in a language not your native tongue.

However, that may be, of one thing I am perfectly certain. The Holy Prophet Mohammed, if he was anything like what his Koran and his life-story show him to have been, would have little use for the Aga Khan's polite, vague and inoffensive sermon. Not a Christian dog barked in reply. There was indeed nothing to bark at. Decidedly this was not the shining scimitar which Islam used to conquer Christians in the days of Saladin.

Love Among the Lowly

By G. S. BROWN

ONE OF THE POETS in his survey of the world concluded that everything in it was admirable, and that "only man is vile." It all depends, as the late Mr. Joad would say, on what you mean by vile. Some of the proceedings of insects and arachnids can only be so described, and especially those associated with their sex affairs. It happens that most female insects require only one sex experience to enable them to lay fertile eggs for life, after which impregnation in many cases the male insect concerned is promptly murdered and devoured by his spouse (proving, incidentally, a fairly universal fact, that propagation of species is everything and the individual nothing, except as a means to an end).

The case of the honey bee is well known, where hundreds of drones (males) are brought into existence so that one of them, and one only, shall fertilise a queen and die in the act. After which the remaining drones are slaughtered—directly or indirectly. Then there is the praying mantis, who has actually begun to devour her mate before the sex act is completed. The female scorpion, one reads, injects a poison into the male after copulation, which turns his insides into fluid. She then sucks him dry, swallowing the fluid, leaving him an empty, desiccated corpse. Male spiders are in similar deadly peril at that time but if they are quick off the mark they may escape. If not, they too are murdered and eaten. Other instances could be cited but these will suffice.

I think such things can only be described as vile and disgusting. As an Atheist, however, I accept them as part of the scheme of things as philosophically as I can. Not so, I'm afraid, the orthodox Christian, who has to recon-

cile such occurrences with his belief in a benevolent Creator who, we are assured, among other things, has every sparrow in mind and might be expected to have a care over insects and arachnids as well.

It is usual to attribute man's vileness to his sins and his alleged possession of free-will, thus exonerating God from responsibility for most of man's vileness. This does not apply to the lower forms of life.

I notice from time to time orthodox religionists writing to THE FREETHINKER. I invite them to visualise their Deity calmly planning the things I have described and should like to know their conclusions, unless they fall back on "God's ways are not our ways"—I know that already!

CORRESPONDENCE

MATERIALISM

Some of Mr. Cutner's remarks in his fifth article on "The Two Contemporaries" call for comment. "Obviously," says Mr. Cutner, "this world of ours was once something like a gaseous ball on which no life or mind could possibly exist." Here Mr. Cutner falls into the common fallacy of confusing the "obvious" with the "familiar." There is, of course, nothing "obvious" about the proposition. Put it to an intelligent Australian aborigine and he would demand proof. In any case, such a proposition is only intelligible if we assume an intelligent observer existing at the same time. In the terms of the proposition, however, there could not be an intelligent observer, and it would therefore seem that Mr. Cutner is up to his neck in the old metaphysical nightmare, the "Thing-in-itself."

Since Chapman Cohen maintained that the "matter" of the Materialism he championed was matter as we know it in consciousness, I cannot see the force of Mr. Cutner's statement that what is called "matter" must have come *before* "mind." Perhaps I too have a blind spot.

As regards Mr. Cutner's examples of the weight of the electron and the atom bombs on Japan, what are they but the modern equivalent of the great Dr. Johnson trying "in his ignorance to disprove the thesis of Bishop Berkeley by kicking the ground to show that it existed?" (*Materialism Re-stated*, page 73.)

W. E. NICHOLSON.

WHAT! NO BIBLE?

Your report of there being no testament at hand at the Glamorgan Quarter Sessions reminds me of an incident that happened at a County Court many years ago when I had to attend as a witness in an action. I arrived early at the court, and had with me James Thomson's *Bible Profanities*, which I was reading. My case happened to be first on the list and, after Judge entered and counsel put forward his arguments, I was called as the first witness. Walking into the witness box, I placed *Bible Profanities* in front of me. Then the elderly usher commanded me to take the book in my right hand, uttering the Mumbo Jumbo words, and ordering me to kiss the book, which was usual in those days; so I did kiss it with a big smack. I gave my evidence, and was pleased to hear the old Judge say "Splendid witness." I then left the box, leaving my *Bible Profanities* there, and sat watching all the other witnesses, swearing on Thomson's book and kissing it.

This went on in all cases during that morning, and when the court adjourned for lunch, I walked to the witness box to collect my book. The usher noticed me, and shouted as I walked away, "Hey, you there. What are you doing with that book?"

I explained to him that it was my book, and showed it to him. He then opened his attaché case and muttered, "Well, I'm damned. All the witnesses this morning have sworn on that book, for the Testament is here in my case, and I clean forgot to take it out." "Well, that does not much matter, does it?" I said. "No, of course not," he replied. "But if the old Judge only knew, there would be a hell of a row."

PAUL VARNEY.

THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

In a recent issue in a letter from a correspondent in which the validity of the materialist conception of history was assailed, it was stated that Feudalism and Capitalism existed side by side in medieval Italy.

Feudalism as a system was based on land and agriculture and the relationship between the superior and the inferior was service; the inferiors were bondsmen and serfs. A money or payment in money relationship was not recognised, but that is not to say that there were not any craftsmen, traders or merchants.

Crafts, trade and merchants existed under the slave system and other early forms of society; that is obvious from the finds in excavations. These craftsmen and traders existed from very early

times but they were not the predominant part of that society, and the point to be stressed is that, in medieval times, the legal, the political, the religious and the cultural relations which existed were the relations conformable to feudal society with its serfdom and agricultural set-up, and not to the merchant and trading class which was growing within the system.

The materialist conception of history definitely and clearly points to technology; that is, the means and methods of production, as being the selective force in the development of societies, the means of production being the environment and means of transport, etc., and the methods being the available tools and equipment.

What "natural selection" is to biological development so technology is to sociological development, and so much so that man in creating around himself an artificial environment, is to that extent counteracting the effect of natural selection on his future biological development.

WM. MUIR McALPIN.

RATE EXEMPTIONS

With reference to your comment in Notes and News, April 12th, I see no earthly, or heavenly, reason why the residences of parsons should be exempt from rates.

So, as requested, I'm writing to members of our U.D.C. to see if they can get a move on, and induce the Council to follow the St. Marylebone Council's decision that parsonages and vicarages cannot be excused from rating.

I hope other Freethinkers will follow suit. C. E. RATCLIFFE.

CATHOLIC PERSECUTION

The procession of Roman Catholics to Westminster Cathedral to pray for persecuted Catholics in other countries was the most ridiculous spectacle I have ever seen, in view of the fact that the Roman Catholics are, and always have been, the greatest persecutors of all time, in countries where they are in power. In Avro Manhattan's book, *The Catholic Church against the Twentieth Century*, he says:

"Being the relentless institution that it is, the Catholic Church will not rest. As we have pointed out, to attain its goals it will continue the patient process of machination and counter-machination. It will employ artfulness, daring, diplomacy, religion, intrigue—and all the armoury of great nations bent on expanding their dominion abroad."

Therefore, as an ex-Roman Catholic, I know that the procession was just another subtle move to gain expansion and advertise their religion.

(Mrs.) NORAH RUTHERFORD.

MONARCHY

The difference between Mr. Macfarlane (22nd ult.) and me is not over the ultimate goal, but the method of reaching it. It should be recognised that the Freethought vote is negligible against those of the great political parties. It is true that the only reason that priests continue to exist is muddled thinking on the part of the people, but how can that be improved except by preventing priests from injuring the minds of infants by indoctrination?

It was laid down against the Stuarts that the monarch reigns, not by divine right, but by the will of the people. This idea should be fostered because the monarchy is popular. Secularism needs popularity if it is to vanquish its main enemies—the Churches. And ardent Republicans can console themselves with the knowledge that "when bishops have gone, kings won't last long."

W. E. HUXLEY.

OBITUARY OF A DEITY

It was noted in the issue of March 15th that Satan was dead and had no known grave. So I feel that a proper obituary notice is called for. After all, his Satanic Majesty preceded the Christian era by some thousands of years. In point of fact he never fitted into theology at all well (perhaps that it is why he was considered a gentleman).

His origin was as the nature god of Western Europe, where his best biographer was undoubtedly Fraser. The early Church kept up a running battle but their efforts were frustrated by the peculiar opinion held by those forcibly converted that this life is a sounder proposition than the next. Among the peasantry, things did not change much; it was nice to have a prospect of salvation but that did not make the crops grow. There are definite cases of medieval village parsons who managed to serve both gods without any difficulty at all.

The position was further complicated by the impossibility of combining a nature god with platonic philosophy and Judaism. As Christianity advanced and divided into Rich and Poor versions so did the worship of the old god. He had three kings of England—William Rufus, Richard I and John, also the Byzantine emperor Justinian among his adherents, plus sundry bishops.

The best attempt at syntheses were the various Dualist heresies, which were dealt with in a very practical manner—i.e., fire and

sword—but were never effectively refuted by other means. The Protestants took a very strong line on the Devil, possibly because he induced people to enjoy themselves, which is a conception still only just tolerated today. But it was the industrial revolution which settled both gods. The Christian one lingers on as a cosmic policeman, a role for which he was invented, while the old god, having no material wealth or monument, died almost at once. But not before being reduced to the position of chief warden in the eternal penitentiary of the Christian after-world, long after Dante had terrified the faithful in the *Inferno*, though this probably never reached beyond the intellectuals before the 17th century.

PETER F. MOORE.

THE DOLLAR AND THE VATICAN

I read Mr. Avro Manhattan's article on his fine book, *The Dollar and the Vatican*, in THE FREETHINKER, I had been searching all the weeklies and monthlies for reviews of the book and I wandered around our public library in vain. I have read reviews of first novels by the hundreds in my time. Not one in a hundred would I ever read even if I was cast on a desert island for the rest of my life. The proof of the need for Mr. Manhattan's book is the fact that it is selling well, despite the difficulties. I think that it is a blot on British journalism that such a work should be boycotted even by what is termed the highbrow papers. I was pleased to see Mr. Manhattan's picture in THE FREETHINKER.

JANE GLYDE.

N.S.S. EXECUTIVE MEETING

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17TH.—Present: Messrs. F. A. Ridley (Chairman), Alexander, Arthur, Barker, Cleaver, Corstorphine, Ebury, Gordon, Hornbrook, Johnson, Shepherd, Taylor, Mrs. Grant, Mrs. Venton, the Treasurer (Mr. Griffiths) and the Secretary. Apology from Mr. Warner. New members were admitted to Central London, Glasgow, Merseyside, Wales and Western, West Ham, West London and Parent Branches (ten in all). San Juan (Trinidad) Branch was officially approved and welcomed to the Society. Future lecture activities in Worthing, Bristol and West Ham were noted. Manchester Branch "Allegro" meeting was reported. Thanks were expressed to Mr. H. Pollard for gifts to the library and Mr. P. G. Young for constructive work in Hampshire; a donation to the National Campaign for Abolition of Capital Punishment was authorised. Tentative decisions were taken regarding representation at the World Union Congress in Paris. It was agreed to finance the printing of *Chronology of British Secularism* by G. H. Taylor. Conference matters were then considered. Nottingham was the vote of the Branches (but it has since proved impossible to get accommodation there, and Leicester—the second choice—has been fixed instead). The Secretary was instructed to write protests to the Minister of Transport and the Minister of Works about the proposed new traffic regulations for Marble Arch. The next meeting was arranged for Wednesday, May 8th.

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