

The Freethinker

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Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

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ALTHOUGH in England the New Year is not celebrated as is Christmas—in Scotland it is the New Year and not Christmas which is celebrated—it does mark an important passage of time. As is well known, at least to our readers, Christmas is a purely pagan festival taken over by the early Christians because it more or less coincided with some of their opinions about the birth of Jesus, and because it was simply impossible to suppress the pagan festival of the “birth” of the Sun, the birth meaning simply that the long dark nights were at last giving way to longer days. Many indeed are the myths which have come down to us of the constant struggle between Day and Night and Summer and Winter, and which were “personified” in various stories by the Greeks and other myth makers.

But how was January 1st fixed as the beginning of a New Year? January is a Roman word named after the famous God Janus—the double-faced Deity. It was the day also when the Roman consuls took office and this helped Julius Caesar when he set about reforming the calendar (in B.C. 44)—it was in a high old mess in his early days—to settle the beginning of the New Year. Unfortunately, as the years went by, it was seen that his reforms did not coincide with the movements of the sun and moon, and so what we call “chronology” got eventually into more difficulties. Pope Gregory XIII took a hand in reforming the calendar in 1582 and it was adopted by most countries at different dates, England at last succumbing in 1752.

To get the new reckoning right, however, it was necessary to lop off a number of days—the eleven days between September 2nd and September 14th, causing riots in this country. How dare the Government thus take away 11 days from the lives of the people!

Janus and January

It is interesting to note that the New Year's day varied with the country and the date all over Europe. For example, the Jewish New Year begins in the spring (March-April) with the Passover, but they have another New Year in the seventh month (September-October) and Jews can take their choice. The Muhammadans date their New Year on our July 16th, the date in 522 A.D. when the Prophet fled from Hejira. Auguste Comte, the famous founder of Positivism, tried to introduce a new calendar without success just as the French Revolutionists thought that they could alter the prevailing one. And, of course, many attempts are even now being made to revolutionise the so-called faults in the one we are so used to. England has not so far succumbed—any more than in the case of going over to the metric system.

Dubious Dates

Although dates of all sorts of events are scattered in our history books as “B.C.,” it can be taken as a fact that many are quite dubious, and some completely wrong. Take as an instance the year “1,” the date given for the birth of

Christ and still kept as such. Indeed, one of the clearest proofs according to Christians that Jesus really lived as God and Man is that even Freethinkers and infidels have accepted that date as the veritable birth of “our Lord”; though few Christians are prepared to admit that our acceptance of Wednesday is proof that the Saxon God Woden really lived.

The date 1 A.D. was, according to all our encyclopedias, fixed for us by the mathematical calculations of a monk — Dionysius “the Little”—about the year 532 A.D. But it would prove most interesting, not to say very instructive, if it could be found how this legend—for legend it is—came into existence. The early Christians, like the early Jews, had very little idea of dates, and for centuries indeed, even the date supposed to have been fixed by Dionysius did not come into general use until the 11th century. In fact, it was not accepted in Spain, that most Catholic country, until the latter part of the 14th century. Peter the Great introduced it in 1700 A.D. into Russia—or tried to. His great difficulty was that the New Year there began on December 25th or January 1st or March 25th; and even in Italy, there was a year's difference between the dates in Florence and Pisa. Italy came into line only in 1749.

The greatest difficulty in fixing a real date was trying to find one for the “Creation” of the Universe based on God's Precious Word, the Bible. All the pious authorities who set about the task disagree, as indeed do the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint and the Samaritan. If Ussher's dates have been accepted by our Authorised Version, all his dates are very discreetly omitted in my edition of the Revised Version.

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Did He Exist?

Who was Dionysius, supposed to have been born “a Scythian” in the sixth century? It was the Benedictines, in their monumental work, *The Art of Verifying Dates*, who introduced Dionysius, but they produced no proof that there ever was such a person. How is it that the date 532 A.D. is given as the date when Dionysius is supposed to have settled once for all when Jesus was born?

According to F. F. Arbuthnot, in his rare work, *The Mysteries of Chronology*, this date, 532 A.D., was fixed by multiplying the lunar year of antiquity of 19 years by the solar year of 28 years, which comes to 532. Nobody can tell now anything about Dionysius, but we do know how the various monkish societies of the Dark and Middle Ages invented dozens, nay, hundreds of pious legends to account for this or that, which led the famous Jesuit Father Har-douin (1646-1729) contemptuously to reject at least three-quarters of his Church's “history” as forgeries in general, and the story of Dionysius in particular. In any case, it took many centuries before Christian records of any kind had a definite date put on them other than the date of a king's reign or something similar. Very rarely indeed was

♦♦♦ VIEWS and OPINIONS ♦♦♦

The New Year

♦♦♦ By H. CUTNER ♦♦♦

the date of the "Incarnation" given. It was probably quite unknown. And it is very curious that many or most of the Papal records down to the twelfth century have disappeared. And, as Arbuthnot points out, "It is a curious coincidence that in England our records (meagre as they are) begin about the same time as the series of documents in the Vatican—the latter part of the 12th century."

Circumcision Day

But as Christmas is actually a pagan holiday, and was so kept by the Saxons when they came first to England (under the name of Yule-tide) and made into a Christian one, it is not surprising that eight days later, when Jesus was transformed into a little Jewish boy, has always been celebrated also as a festival. The Romans kept it as a day in honour of Janus, and, like Christmas, it was taken bodily over by Christians in Europe. According to Brand's *Antiquities*, "the Festival of fools in Paris, held on this day, continued for 240 years, when every kind of absurdity and indecency was perpetrated"; but, of course, the Church never ceased to bewail the pagan customs so often introduced into holy Christian festivals.

Two-faced

Janus, after whom we name January, is merely a representation of the year; and giving him two faces meant that he could look back on the past year and forward to the new one. As Robert Taylor rightly pointed out, there is very

little doubt that some of the attributes of Janus helped in inventing Peter, for that famous apostle is also often depicted with two heads. Furthermore, Peter, like Janus, is shown with a key and a staff. Peter, according to the Gospels, was a poor fisherman of Galilee, but according to Acts it is difficult to see this. He could well be a tanner. It is, however, clearly stated in Acts that Peter "tarried many days in Joppa with one Simon, a tanner." Why Joppa? Joppa was the port to which Jonah went.

Peter was called a number of names—Simon, Simon Peter, Cephas, a Stone, a Rock, Satan, and also Simon-bar-Jonah (or Jonas, that is "son of Jonah." Taylor points out that in the Old Covenant it is the fish that catches the man, while in the New it is the man that catches the fish. Jonah or Jonas is really Janus, and Janus, who was not a Greek but a Roman Deity, has always dominated Rome. It is said that St. Peter's Church is built on the same ground as the one-time Temple of Janus.

Of course, it does not matter now how we settle which day is New Year's Day. Modern civilisation has left the crudities and superstitions of the religious past far behind and nobody takes much notice of them these days except very believing Christians. And they have to conform to the precise scientific age in which we are living, however much they dislike it. That is, if they really do.

The Croydon Case

By G. H. TAYLOR

WE HAD HOPED that religious tests for public appointments were becoming a thing of the past, at least in this "free country." The recent case at Croydon should therefore receive publicity and be the subject of some active concern to defenders of personal freedom, believers and unbelievers alike.

At a recent Croydon Council meeting it was disclosed that the successful applicant for the post of children's officer had given favourable answers to the inquiry as to what his religion was. He was a Christian—like some of the committee who gave him the job. Reports and comments have been appearing in the local press, including the *Croydon Advertiser*, the *Norwood News* and the *Times and County Mail*.

The matter was raised in Council by Councillor Mrs. George, who, describing the position as "damnable," said: "Any man in this England, which professes to be a free country, should be entitled to his religious and political views." She was told that the question, "What is your religion?" had not been asked maliciously but only "as a matter of interest." Mrs. George maintained that "whether the question is asked outright or whether it is worded in such a way that the candidate has no option but to answer it in order to be polite, it is abominable."

Another councillor said that although theoretically the candidate did not have to answer the question, yet if he did not answer it someone on the committee might "put a grey mark" against him. This, in view of the attitude of another member, Alderman Monk, is decidedly an understatement!

Alderman Monk declared that if a candidate were an atheist it would be a black mark against him.

"Why?" asked a member.

"Because I believe in my Creator and I think other people should, too," replied the Alderman.

There we have it plainly: the candidate's chances are increased if he pays respects to Alderman Monk's creator.

Have Alderman Monk and his Creator studied the crime figures showing people of no religion to be the least inclined to commit offences? Can Alderman Monk show cases of children being the worse for having been brought up by atheist parents? Can he hope to establish the superiority of religious morality over secular morality, either from present day figures or from the bloodstained history of religions? Does his impudent and baseless condemnation of atheists come from the realm of facts or merely from invincible ignorance?

A writer in the *Advertiser* says people have a right to know what sort of influence a children's officer is likely to have. Agreed: but in order to form a judgment they have also to know the truth about Christianity and its false claim to a monopoly of morality. We doubt if Alderman Monk, plus his Creator, could withstand an examination of this kind.

For the person who uses his position as public representative to impose his religion as a criterion for a public appointment we have as much contempt as we should have for the Creator of Alderman Monk, if such existed.

The hopeful sign, however, is that protests were made in Council and subsequently given publicity. We think the disgraceful business will not be repeated, but in the meantime these Christian bigots must be exposed.

Points from Letters

R. PEACE: As a freethinker, I would no more think of celebrating Christmas than of standing to "God Save the Queen."

W. BURGESS: Who *does* celebrate Christmas as Christmas, anyway? For most people it means food and drink, a football match or a TV show. Nothing about Christ!

STANLEY HULME: More power to Joseph Lewis's elbow. He has done a fine job in his broadcasts, and THE FREETHINKER has done a good job in reproducing them.

S. G. PORTER: It is all very well for Mr. Reader to advocate de-population. How does he propose to enforce it?

The Problem of Perception

By REV. JOHN L. BROOM, M.A.

THE RECENT CONTROVERSY in THE FREETHINKER between Messrs. Cutner and Nicholson on our knowledge of the external world, prompts me to take a new look at this age-old problem. To the man in the street, of course, objects exist out there in the universe distinct from man and are apprehended by him through his senses exactly as they are. But a little reflection shows that this view is beset by many difficulties. The height of a building or the shape of a coin appear to vary according to the position of the observer, railway lines seem to meet when seen from a distance, a stick held in water appears bent and so on. Moreover, when we look at a star we are not seeing it as it is today but as it was many years ago. But things can hardly be a different height or shape at the same time, nor can we see something which may no longer exist.

The conclusion seems to be that the perception of the external world depends to a greater or less degree on the mind of the perceiver. This, of course, was the position of the "subjective idealists" Locke, Berkeley and Hume. Locke maintained that we never perceive actual physical objects but only "representations" of them, which he called rather ambiguously "ideas." The primary qualities of objects (number, motion, extension and solidity) exist independently of man, but the secondary qualities (colour, taste, sound and smell) are contributed by the mind and have no reality apart from it. As Prof. Whitehead aptly expressed it, "Thus nature gets credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves: the rose for its scent; the nightingale for his song; the sun for his radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly."

Locke's great successor, Berkeley, soon pointed out the illogicality of this position. Firstly, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities cannot be upheld, since it is impossible to imagine, for example, a purely colourless object. (Black and white are, of course, philosophically speaking, colours.) Therefore, if secondary qualities are dependent on the mind for their existence (and Berkeley agreed with Locke that they are) the same must apply to primary qualities. Secondly, if, as Locke contended, we can never know objects directly but only "representations" of them, there is no reason to suppose that objects exist in their own right at all. Thus Berkeley arrived at his famous conclusion, "Esse est percipi," to be is to be perceived. Berkeley's position appears to entail the curious theory that if, for example, I close my eyes when looking at a chair it will cease to exist until I open them again, when it will appear just as before. Or, as Ronald Knox's famous limerick has it,

There once was a man who said "God
Must think it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the quad."

Berkeley's answer to this objection, however, is aptly summarised in the equally famous reply to the above:

Dear sir, Your astonishment's odd;
I am always about in the quad,

And that's why the tree

Will continue to be,

Since observed by Yours faithfully, God.

Clearly, however, the introduction of the Almighty begs the whole question. Indeed, it is inconsistent with Berkeley's belief that all knowledge is derived from sense experience, since we have obviously no sense experience of God. David Hume, who was an atheist, abolished Berkeley's improved hypothesis and hence reached the startling conclusion that all we can know are our own mental states. This is the position known as Solipsism, and it is very difficult to refute logically, though no one outside of a lunatic asylum, including, of course, Hume himself, seriously believes it to be true. Apart from commonsense, however, there are several rational arguments against it.

In the first place, if the objects and people I see around me are only in my mind and have no independent existence, there should be no distinction between perceiving a thing and remembering or imagining it. The fact that there obviously is such a distinction suggests that things seen are not in my mind at all. Secondly, it seems absurd to suppose that if I build up a fire before I leave a room and return to find it in ashes, the fire has gone out of existence during my absence and then exhibits exactly the same characteristics it would have shown had it been burning all the time. Thirdly, on the solipsist's own admission, he can never be aware of anything apart from the contents of his own mind. Therefore, he cannot be aware of any arguments in support of solipsism. Fourthly, as I have already hinted when referring to Locke's theory of perception, there is an elementary confusion in the idealists' use of the word "idea." He means by it both the object of the perception and the act of perceiving. This seems a foolish and obvious error and yet it can easily arise because of the deficiencies of language. As Prof. G. E. Moore pointed out, when we use an expression such as "The sensation of blue," it is very difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish in thought between the object of our sensation (the "blueness") and the sensation itself. We can neither, in other words, talk of blueness without imagining someone sensing it, or can we isolate the sensation without conceiving, at the same instant, the blue object.

It is comparatively easy on lines such as the above to criticise the idealist account of perception. To posit a satisfactory alternative is by no means so straightforward. In modern philosophy the theory of "sense data" has gained widespread acceptance. Clearly, the basic idealist contention that the things we immediately are aware of in sensation are not physical objects as commonsense supposes, is correct. When we look at a flower from the normal position, all we directly perceive is a coloured patch of a certain shape in a moment of time. We do not see the interior, nor the back, nor the underside. Moreover, the "flower" will present an entirely different aspect to an observer from the air, to a colour-blind man, to a botanist and to an artist. But there is no reason to suppose that any one of these aspects is more correct than any other. Where, then, does the object in itself that we call the flower come in, what, in other words, is the relation of the sense datum to it? This remains the occasion of much controversy. Some thinkers maintain that the object is the cause of the datum, many of whose qualities (e.g., colour, taste, touch and smell) are contributed by the perceiver. But this is simply Locke's representationalism in modern guise, and we are on the logical road to solipsism once more.

(Concluded on next page)

This Believing World

We are always pleased to give publicity to parsons who prefer to go to the "people" than to have people go to them. We have, for example, the Rev. W. Gowland, of Luton, who says, "I believe in taking Christianity to the places where men work, where they study. That is how I have become known as the non-churchgoer's chaplain." The operative word here is "non-churchgoer." A man who does not go to church might just as well be as thorough a believing Christian as Mr. Gowland himself. What we should like to see is Mr. Gowland meeting a Freethinker—whether at work or play doesn't matter—one who knows the case for Christianity as well as for Freethought. These parsons, like Billy Graham, always have their great successes with *Christians*—the more Fundamentalist the better. How many genuine Freethinkers has Mr. Gowland met or converted?

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On the series of articles in the London *Evening Standard*, "Is there a life after death?" Dr. Matthews, the Dean of St. Paul's, who summed up, had some very interesting things to say. He did not swallow all the evidence so glibly given as proof of "survival." For instance, with regard to Mr. Richard Church's encounter with his "dead brother," although Mr. Church was absolutely convinced his conviction "may have only slight evidential value for the sceptic enquirer." Dr. Matthews felt that Mr. Church *may* have been helped by his dead brother but—the "but" was inevitable—"obviously it would be easy to think of alternative explanations such as hallucination produced by the conflict in the unconscious." And Dr. Matthews, instead of swallowing the usual "spirit" explanations, calls the "phenomena" the "alleged communications through mediums, automatic writing, etc." (our italics),

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And what is Dr. Matthew's own belief? "A firm and worthy belief in immortality is bound up with a belief in God." Of course. How in the world can you have a "firm and worthy" belief in immortality if you don't accept his own particular God? But what is a "firm and worthy" belief in immortality? We just don't know, and we are sure Dr. Matthews himself doesn't. In any case, he insists that "empirical" evidence "can never demonstrate immortality." So if you want to be sure that you will live again, don't bother with evidence. Just believe that Christ Jesus is your Saviour, and you will have, as a dead cert, "Everlasting Life."

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Our ultra-religious national daily, the *Daily Express*, was tremendously lucky this year to get a special and "unusual report" (textual) from Palestine all about the "Day Christ was Born," piously illustrated with an angel, all glamorous, wearing the traditional nightie, and blowing a coaching horn. Ten million people will read these silly articles in spite of the fact that "the author [a Mr. George Gale] completed on-the-spot researches after consulting eminent Biblical authorities." We would dearly like to know who were the "eminent Biblical authorities" who guaranteed the angels, all singing hosannahs, accompanied by coaching horns, and a Star that looks (in the drawing) like a Sputnik.

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Needless to say, there is no reason for us to answer this ridiculous rewriting of the Biblical story to suit modern requirements in which Mary, Joseph, the Stable (or Manger), etc., are all treated as if their "sacred" history had never been questioned. The Gospels have been riddled to

bits not only by Freethinkers, but by Christians themselves. Still, one must not expect the readers of the *Daily Express* to know anything about modern Biblical criticism. They are far more interested in suggestions as to how football pool forms should be filled.

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Three eminent Christians—the Rev. T. Huddleston, the Abbot of Downside, and Dr. Nathaniel Micklem, gave the 100th programme on ITV the other Sunday, "Why Religion?" and they had to answer a few questions put to them by three laymen. In this, of course, they *utterly* failed. They could not even agree among themselves as to what was Christianity, what was meant by "the Church" or what really were Heaven and Hell. For sheer entertainment, the proceedings could not have been bettered. But for boosting Christ and his religion before Christmas, they were a farce!

Freedom in Israel

CERTAIN non-Zionist Jews reject the aims of World Zionism. The following statement by Judge Jacob Panken is reproduced from *The Jewish Newsletter*, October 7th, 1957:

"For the Premier of a country where a Jew cannot marry without the consent of a state-controlled Rabbinate, where the same Rabbinate controls all the intimate family relations of the citizens, as well as their diet, their mode of recreation and way of life; where a Jew cannot worship God except in accordance with the rites and practices of an orthodox religion which boasts that it has not changed in the last 3,000 years; where thousands of recently arrived uncircumcised immigrant youths of mixed marriages are rounded up by the Rabbis for barbaric public ceremonies of mass circumcision—for the head of such a state to claim that only in Israel can a Jew 'enjoy full freedom as a man and a Jew' is an insult to one's intelligence."

[*The Truth Seeker*, November 1957.]

THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION

(Concluded from page 3)

The greatest philosopher of our times, Bertrand Russell, who has wrestled with this vexed problem all his life, contends, in his last important philosophical work (*Human Knowledge*), that a solution can only be approached if we abandon complete empiricism and assume *à priori* certain postulates. Probably the most important of these is "Given an event A, it happens very frequently that, at any neighbouring time, there is in some neighbouring place an event very similar to A." That is to say, if we look at a table one second, close our eyes, and then look at it again, it is very probable that there will then be a "similar event"—it will still appear to be there. Acceptance of these postulates is also, of course, necessary to confirm the inductive methodology of science. The only alternatives are either to adopt solipsism which, as I have said, no one believes to be true, or to take refuge in the illogical hypothesis of an unknowable "substance" behind the sense data. Russell's solution is admittedly very unsatisfactory both for believer and sceptic, for it means that certain knowledge is impossible. But there seems no other plausible answer to this dilemma.

—NEXT WEEK—

WAS JESUS A FREETHINKER?

YES: C. G. L. Du CANN NO: H. CUTNER

THE FREETHINKER

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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 welcome during normal office hours.

Lecture Notices, Etc.

INDOOR

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (International Centre, 83 Suffolk Street).—January 5th, 7 p.m.: S. M. CAINES, a Lecture.

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics Institute).—Sunday, January 5th, 7 p.m.: A Lecture.

Central London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, W.1).—Sunday, January 5th, 7.15 p.m.: L. BERNARD, "Unity Theatre and the Progressive Movement."

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, January 7th, 7.15 p.m.: Dr. C. KNIGHT MACDONALD, "Does Jazz Matter?" Illustrated.

Leicester Secular Society (75 Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, January 5th, 6.30 p.m.: OWEN MANUS (Society for the Abolition of Vivisection), "Films and Discussion."

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Co-operative Hall, Upper Parliament Street).—Sunday, January 5th, 2.30 p.m.: Rev. RUSSELL POPE, "Modern Barbarians."

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, January 5th, 11 a.m.: W. S. SWINTON, PH.D., "The Old Year and the New—a Survey."

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (The Mound).—Every Sunday afternoon and evening; Messrs. CRONAN, MURRAY and SLEMEN. London (Tower Hill).—Thursday, 12-2 p.m.: L. EBURY.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Deansgate Blitzed Site).—Every weekday, 1 p.m.: Messrs. WOODCOCK, FINKEL, SMITH or CORSAIR. Sunday, 8 p.m.: Messrs. MILLS, WOODCOCK, SMITH or WOOD.

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

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY. West London Branch N.S.S.—Every Sunday, at the Marble Arch, from 4 p.m.: Messrs. L. EBURY and A. ARTHUR.

Notes and News

CONGRATULATIONS to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick E. Papps of Hewell, Redditch, who celebrated their Golden Wedding on December 28th, 1957. Mr. Papps is a long-standing member of the National Secular Society, and will be remembered by readers for his article on *Challenge of Our Age* on November 22nd, 1957.

APPALLED by the poverty of our opponents' arguments, we have an urge occasionally to try to improve them. "Design," for example: surely it could be better expressed than it is by the theists we meet. We thought that a BBC Science Survey talk the other week might have provided some ammunition, for it dealt with Insect Resistance to Insecticides. Houseflies resistant to D.D.T., malaria mosquitoes resistant to formerly fatal chemicals. Man's ingenuity foiled! Surely here was evidence of the hand of God? Alas, no! Resistant mutants—said Mr. Peter Win-

teringham, F.R.I.C., of the Pest Infestation Laboratory at Slough—were already present, and it was from these that resistant strains developed genetically. More: man was not going to be so easily foiled. He was investigating the means of resistance in different species; ascertaining corresponding weaknesses. And the work was being co-ordinated by the World Health Organisation. The insects were due for further shocks. Not much comfort for advocates of "Design" either.

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As a result of complaints filed by the Canadian Lord's Day Alliance, the Vancouver Mounties baseball team has been fined and prevented from playing baseball on Sundays. The team's president, Mr. Nat Bailey, has made it clear that the cost of operating in the Pacific Coast League without Sunday gates is prohibitive, but his words seem to have fallen on deaf ears as far as government and court are concerned. Obsolete laws are the trouble, of course, but even granting these, the action seems invidious. The Secretary of the Alliance says (*Vancouver Sun*, 12/10/57) that he doesn't think a charge will be laid against Sunday symphony concerts. And Sunday golf will be unaffected. Baseball, however, was entertaining too many people for the Sabbatarians.

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THE FREETHINKER and the National Secular Society receive many delightful greeting cards, and are grateful for all of them. Forgive us, though, if we mention just one. It was our first ever from Ghana, bearing the impressive coat-of-arms of that country embossed on the front, with the motto, "Freedom and Justice." It was from the Secretary of the Ghana Rationalist Group, Lt. R. C. K. Hewlett, who wrote: "Thanks for the leaflets sent to me. I know that in our great task of awakening interest in the affairs of our Society and kindred associations, we have to band together. I know that I can count on the support of the N.S.S. I can assure you that you can count on mine every time."

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THE Polish *Glos Wolnych (Voice of the Free)* reaches 12 countries, from which it receives Freethought literature in return. A recent issue quoted letters from Mr. C. H. Hammersley, of Leicester Secular Society, and Mrs. H. M. Rogals, Secretary of the Manchester Branch, N.S.S. "Members of Leicester Secular Society"—wrote Mr. Hammersley—"are very happy to know that Freethought in Poland is active again." Mrs. Rogals said: "I am already connected in a way with your country; my husband's grandfather was a Pole." Both expressed a desire to exchange information about activities with their Polish correspondents. THE FREETHINKER is already being sent to the *Glos Wolnych* offices.

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THE Secretary of the National Secular Society would like to remind members that 1958 subscriptions are now due. Branch members should remit to their Branch Secretaries; individual members to the Head Office, 41 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1.

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THE 52nd Annual Dinner of the Society will be held on Saturday, February 15th, at the Mecca Restaurant, 11/12 Blomfield Street, London, E.C.2, and will be followed by a dance. The Guest of Honour will be Stephen Swinger, M.P. Tickets are 17s. 6d. each, and are obtainable from the office.

A Great Book "Orpheus"

By F. A. RIDLEY

A SHORT WHILE BACK I came across a book, *Orpheus*, from which I learnt much in my youth when I first began to take a serious interest in the science of Comparative Religion. In fact, I may say that its masterly summary of the evolution of Christianity was one of the causes which effectively undermined my then assured belief in the supernatural character of that creed. Dipping again into the volume, I was confirmed in my general estimate of the great intellectual value of this remarkable book, even though one may perhaps pick holes in individual statements made by the author—as is indeed inevitable in a book which covers so vast a canvas as the evolution of religion—including all the principal religions in human annals from before the dawn of recorded history down to the year 1929, when the author, Solomon Reinach issued a final edition in a translation addressed to the English-speaking people. In his preface to his Anglo-American edition, the author informs us that since its initial publication early in the century, his *magnum opus* has passed through thirty-eight editions in French alone; a fitting tribute to its outstanding intellectual and literary merit. Reinach died, I believe, in 1931 and was thus spared the horror of the anti-Semitic massacres unchained by the Nazi regime a few years later, to the beginnings of which *Orpheus* refers in the concluding pages of the 1929 edition.

Reinach divides his work into two parts, the first dealing with the general history of religions other than Christianity; the second part giving a superb précis of the evolution of Christianity from its earliest beginnings up to the Lateran Treaty between the Pope and Mussolini in 1929. The title, *Orpheus*, is from the legendary founder of an ancient Greek mystical cult, and its learned and comprehensive survey includes not only the religions of classical antiquity in both East and West, but also the character and evolution of all the major and quite a number of minor religions of modern times which are included in this encyclopædic survey. In a remarkable introduction, the author discusses the origin and generic nature of religion considered as a universal human phenomenon; and essays the difficult task of summarising it in a definition. Religion is, he tells us, "a sum of scruples which impede the free exercise of our faculties." True enough, as far as it goes, but not quite the definitive definition sought for.

No doubt Reinach is correct in asserting that it was religion that produced the priests, rather than *vice versa*. All the same, one could name quite a lot of cases, ancient and modern, where conscious fraud has played a determining role in the creation or maintenance of religions. As Reinach himself shows, conscious fraud played a big part in the formation of Judaism and Christianity; whilst the Japanese "national religion" of Shinto was the creation of the military class after the revolution of 1867.

For European readers, the most interesting part of the book is that on the origin and evolution of Christianity: a veritable mine of information. Reinach is not a mythicist; he holds that somewhere at the back of the Gospel story there was a Jesus, though we know next to nothing about him. "The beginning of every history is shrouded in legend; Christianity constitutes no exception to this rule. The Churches insist that the legends of Christianity are pure history; if this were so, it would be the greatest of miracles." On the vexed question of the historicity of the Gospel Jesus, Reinach comments: "It is contrary to every sound method to compose, as Renan did, a Life of Jesus eliminating the miraculous elements in the Gospel story.

It is no more possible to make real history with myths than to make bread with the pollen of flowers. The very little we know concerning the historic Jesus comes from a quite different source, and though underlying the legend of Christ, is more contradicted than confirmed by it; obvious interests, both religious and political, have been at work to distort the truth."

Reinach appears to accept the Pauline Epistles in part, at least, as the work of their titular author, but his analysis of the Gospels leaves little standing of either their historical character or their general credibility. If Jesus spoke as he did in Matthew, Mark and Luke—he says—"he did not speak as he spoke in John. It is only necessary to read them to see that this must be so." Reinach holds that Christianity was, on the whole, superior in morality and less superstitious than most of its competitors. One could comment that this is not very high praise!

Both medieval and modern Christianity are fully described, and the account of the Reformation is absorbing. In these sections of his book, Reinach frequently quotes Voltaire. What a writer the man was! If only for preserving these inimitable passages from the great master of satire, *Orpheus* would be worth reading. Who else but Voltaire could have written this on the eucharistic changes wrought by the Reformation?

"Luther retained one half of the mystery and rejected the other. Thus, whilst those whom they call Papists eat God without bread, the Lutherans ate God and bread; soon after came the Calvinists, who ate bread and did not eat God."

Or take his inimitable description of Madam Guyon—a French mystic who died in 1717—who, says Voltaire, "had espoused Jesus Christ in one of her ecstasies and from that time onward had prayed no more to the saints, explaining that the mistress of a house does not petition her servants."

The greatness of even Reinach's masterpiece is enhanced by these superb quotations.

After a warning that the Vatican is nowadays "cashing in" on the fear of Communism, which is more true now than it was in 1929, Reinach concludes his book with an eloquent exhortation to Freethinkers to study the science of comparative religion as the essential antidote to a merely negative scepticism. His own book is perhaps the very best ever written upon this tremendous theme.

[*Orpheus: a History of Religion*, by Solomon Reinach. There are, I think, several editions available in English; the last American one, specially revised by the author, appeared in 1930.—F.A.R.]

Fifty Years Ago

THE REV. DR. BALLARD has just been interviewed by a representative of a religious contemporary. One of the questions asked was whether the discussion after his lectures had ever won over opponents to Christianity. Dr. Ballard was honest enough to admit that "it does not often occur." Of course it doesn't! In any discussion the Freethinker stands to win. One reason is that the Freethinker knows the Christian case, while the Christian does not know the Freethought case. Therefore, the Freethinker hears nothing with which he is not already acquainted, while the Christian hears things about his religion for the first time.—THE FREETHINKER, January 5th, 1908.

A Jesuit View of Secularism

By COLIN MCCALL

BURNS used the trivial episode of the louse on a lady's bonnet in church to show the general desirability of seeing ourselves as others see us. And it is always interesting, though sometimes shattering, to know what other people think about us. That is why I have been reading the Catholic Truth Society pamphlet, *Is Humanism Enough?* by Father John Russell, S.J. And let me say right away that it is nothing like so shattering as I expected.

From the Roman Catholic reader, who accepts or overlooks the very debatable premises, a negative answer to the title question will, of course, be assured. But this must be a hollow victory for a Jesuit. One of the aims of the C.T.S. is to spread the faith among non-Catholics, and I cannot see this pamphlet doing that. I would recommend it, though, to some of our Humanist friends: to those who have no quarrel with Christianity, only with "Churchianity"; who feel that Humanism is a less unfriendly term than Secularism. They will get nowhere with Father Russell and his ilk. Whatever the Father's obscurities, he is clear on one point. Humanism or, sometimes Scientific Humanism, he says, "is better called by the more specific name: Secularist Humanism, or Secularism," because the interest of the Secularist Humanist is "centred exclusively on this life," whereas, for the Christian, "eternal life is the only goal of human endeavour which is unconditionally valuable." It follows that "Christianity and secularist humanism are clearly incompatible"; that "If one is right, the other is wrong."

Thus far, Secularists will go along with Father Russell. It is when he begins his quiet, but categorical, assertions that the separation comes. What starts as the "Christian view" of man's nature—that he was made for God—becomes an accepted fact as Father Russell's thesis develops. Being made for God, man cannot be fully satisfied with earthly happiness; only the infinite goodness, wisdom and love of God can satisfy him. These infinities are, understandably, not called in question. A Roman Catholic author may be excused on that score.

But can he be excused for his subtle misrepresentations of Secularism? The individual is born, lives, and dies: true. His "account" is then closed, says Father Russell. What account? "His joys and sufferings are wiped out as if they had never been." This is not true. "Death concludes all." Yes, for the person who dies, but his influence continues in countless different ways. A man's joys and sufferings are not wiped out: life is not lived in vain when it is lived with others. "Man's destiny, for the secularist"—Father Russell continues—"is not essentially different from that of the animals. He is a mere product of natural forces. . . ." What is meant by "destiny"? What are *essential* differences? Why "mere"? If destiny is ultimate, then man's is the same as the animals'—oblivion—and "essentially" is superfluous; if destiny refers to achievement, the comparison with the animals is absurd: to launch an artificial satellite is far beyond any other animal's power. A Jesuit should do better than this as devil's advocate!

Father Russell's efforts to show the disparity between man's mortal life and his longing for eternity are doomed to failure from the start. He asserts that the Secularist is in a dilemma, but it is he who—like all Christian apologists—is in the dilemma: the dilemma of duality. For Christianity has never quite decided whether man is good or bad. To justify some Christian arguments he must be good: too good to die; for others he must be bad: bad enough to need

Christ's saving grace. In the present work, Father Russell concentrated mainly on the former aspect, but contradictions emerge. Having emphasised man's "infinite capacity for love," he declares that "love of wife, family, friends, country," though good, "are not enough." Man "finds himself with infinite desires and no worthy object for them." But surely a man with an "infinite capacity for love" might well find a "worthy object for them" in a fellow human being with the same infinite capacity. Having bestowed this infinite capacity on the man who is, as it were, the hero of his thesis, Father Russell seems to forget that he has bestowed it on all men. While extolling, he must also denigrate. Man, he says, "must try to satisfy his infinite hunger with mere creatures" under Secularism. "Mere creatures," that is, who have an infinite capacity for love!

Treating the assertion that "liberal secularists of a previous generation" were "the true begetters of Nazism" with the contempt it deserves, we come to the good old "moral law." The Secularist, we are informed, finds himself in opposition to this "at every crucial point." And, "Once the principle is admitted that an innocent man may be killed or mutilated for the benefit of society, there will be no logical stopping-point on this side of a complete totalitarianism." Oh! dear, dear! Father Russell is so anxious to ascribe this "principle" to Secularism that he completely overlooks its significance in Christianity. It is the Christian, not the Secularist, who claims that the death of an innocent man was for the benefit of society. This is the "crucial point" of Father Russell's religion, yet he is so carried away by his argument that he fails to see it.

On he leads us, into a nightmare world of his own imagination: a world where "Every man's life will be at the mercy of the Government official whose duty it is to decide whether his continued existence is or is not conducive to the greater happiness of society as a whole." This—according to Father Russell—is what lies in wait for us at the end of the slippery path of Secularism. And he is worried because Secularism is the "dominant influence for very many people nowadays." I, too, would be worried if I thought this lay in store for us. But I cast a mind back at the Inquisition, and I conclude that I have more chance of a free life under Secularism than under Roman Catholicism. Secularism—says Father Russell—"will never set the world on fire." The metaphor is well chosen: Catholicism has.

Supersonic Prayer

THE LORD GOD OF HOSTS in his Celestial Head Office pressed the button which summoned his Archangels to an extraordinary general meeting. When they appeared, wearing, as was necessary in the Presence, very dark glasses, He addressed them thus: "Gentlemen, something will have to be done about the prayers with which I am bombarded from the earth. They become a nuisance. They pray so much for peace on earth, I get no peace in Heaven. Day and night prayers are hurled at me in a hundred languages, most of which I don't know. I suppose you can hear them?"

Indeed they heard them, making in the aggregate a wailing growl as of a dozen Niagaras.

The Lord went on: "Not only do they harass me in so many languages, they pray for things I know nothing about. Only today a man prayed for the recovery of a lost

collar-stud. What is a collar-stud?"

Said Peter: "It is a gadget used by men to secure part of their garments."

"Indeed," said the Lord. "Well, it serves them right if they lose them, but for that scoundrel Adam they wouldn't have needed garments. I repeat, something will have to be done about these prayers. Most of them relate to matters that are in the hands of the Fates, over which, as they are pagan, I have no control whatever. Many others are the bleatings of snivelling sneaks soliciting privileges over their fellows. Many are just ridiculous: when they are at war both sides pray to me for victory, which is impossible, even to Me to whom all things are possible. Practically all the prayers in English want success in Football Pools. What are they?"

Up stood Gabriel. "They are a kind of lottery on the results of football games, involving necromancy, whereby one can get £75,000 for 2d."

"Certainly that is worth praying for," said the Lord, "but I can't help them there; the only game I know about is 'Forfeits.' Well, have you any suggestions?"

"Just one," said Michael, "but I believe it will meet the case. We could have the radio staff intercept all the prayers as they arrive and translate them into supersonic waves..."

"What are they?" interrupted the Lord. "And who invented them?"

"They are waves which make noises nobody can hear. They were invented by men on earth, mostly, I believe, married. So converted, you couldn't hear the prayers."

"For the love of Michael, what a brilliant idea," said the Lord. "It beats me why people as smart as that should pray to Me for anything. Put this plan in hand forthwith, and let me have the peace which passeth understanding."

Peter, however, had a qualm, and voiced it: "But, Lord, that way none of the prayers could be answered."

The Lord smiled, for once. "Be your age, Peter," quoth he, "none of them ever were—by Me." G. S. BROWN.

CORRESPONDENCE

BURNS

Although I am a convinced internationalist with a hearty abhorrence of all forms of chauvinism, I must confess that Mr. Paul Varney's letter made my Scottish blood boil more than somewhat. It is astonishing that he could cram so many errors into so brief an effusion. Firstly, to say that the Scots are Celts is literally a half-truth. Those inhabiting the eastern part of the country (of whom I am one) are a compound of Angles, Norse and mysterious pre-Celtic Picts. Secondly, I am frequently in Glasgow on a Saturday night, but have never encountered any of the horrible morons Mr. Varney mentions. In fact, garlic is not a common Scottish delicacy, and whisky is in more general favour than beer. But perhaps a bibulous clergyman is at times less shockable than a Puritanical atheist.

Thirdly, Mr. Varney seems unaware that drink can at present be obtained at any hour of the day or night in licensed hotels in Scotland on Sundays. But in spite of the "violent nature" of the populace, crimes are no more frequent than on weekdays, when the hours of opening are restricted.

Finally, the old legend that Burns died of drink has been disproved as often as the lie that Thomas Paine recanted on his deathbed. It is sad to see a freethinker repeating such a hoary and libellous fallacy. Burns died of rheumatic fever, caused by his work as farmer and exciseman in all weathers, and accelerated by wrong medical advice. (Rev.) JOHN L. BROOM.

SPACE TRAVEL

I want to say how much I agree with G. I. Bennett in his article on "Space Travel." The hands of the peoples of the underdeveloped countries are outstretched for help and almost all we can put into them are arms, the atom and hydrogen bombs, and now satellites. Nations need closer understanding of each other's problems; people yearn for peace. The difficulty of language inter-

pretation is obvious, the need for a common language all can understand tragically apparent, and all we can produce is "Bleep-Bleep." The great nations of the earth have missed a marvellous opportunity of proving themselves *really* great: instead of using their resources and genius in tackling the great problems of land erosion and the question of distribution of the world's resources here on earth, they choose to engage themselves in a foolish race to see who can reach the moon first. If it were not so tragic it would be laughable.

I expect I shall have all the scientifically minded types of people aghast at my appalling ignorance of the value of reaching the moon *first*, but so far as I am concerned it might as well be made of green cheese, and I am appalled at the latest development in this crazy race—the use of a living, breathing, innocent creature. But what is a dog when human life is valued at so little worth! (Miss) ANNE EXLY.

I wish to congratulate you for publishing such an article as the one by G. I. Bennett on the subject of Space Travel. I find the whole tone of this article most praiseworthy.

Thank you for printing articles that reflect such a world-spirit. Our need for it everywhere is *the* prime need today, and lack of it threatens, and could bring, an obliteration which, in one terrible sense, would be deserved. The reality of men's kinship everywhere stands patently revealed. G. G. SMITH.

THE MASSORETIC TEXTS

In a recent article, "Inspired Fallacies" by John Bowden, it is stated that "The fixation of the Hebrew Canon at Jamia (circa 90 B.C.) put an end to the tampering with [Hebrew] scripture," and, further on, it is stated: "True, the later massorettes, by inserting notes and comments in the margins for the guidance of readers, did much to correct errors, and when making copies of writings declared canonical transcribed the books or scrolls with meticulous accuracy" (errors and all).

As I have always understood that the massoretic texts were the oldest Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible (circa 900 A.D.) in existence, I would be grateful to learn if the the 90 B.C. manuscripts are still extant and, if so, where are they deposited? W. M. McALPIN.

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