

The Freethinker

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In 1940 there appeared a book by the then Astronomer Royal, Sir Harold Spencer Jones, entitled *Life on other Worlds*. In this book, the writer reviews the whole question of the possibility of life existing on planets other than our own. Sir Harold's astronomical conclusions are of the greatest interest, particularly today when the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. have made outer space a topical theme and the moon a kind of next door neighbour. For Rationalists who reject supernatural explanations of the Universe, the conclusions reached are of additional interest, philosophically as well as astronomically. For though the former Astronomer Royal is extremely cautious, yet his philosophical conclusions come down heavily in favour of a natural, as against a supernatural, explanation of the origin and nature of living matter.

Conditions for the Appearance of Life

As the author effectively demonstrates, life is not something which, so to speak, grows on trees whenever and wherever one chooses to plant it. Contrarily, the elementary conditions which alone make life even a possible growth are detailed and probably rare, certainly in our solar system and, most probably, throughout the universe. Assuming that life everywhere is composed of the same fundamental elements, based throughout on the properties of the carbon atom, then we know that it can only exist under a very restricted range of physical circumstances. Dr. Jones enumerates them in detail: a world in which life is even possible, must be at a certain distance, neither too near nor too far from its primary source of solar energy; and it must also be a certain medium size, too small to hold *all* its atmosphere and too large to let it all escape into outer space as, for example, that of our satellite has presumably done. The earth, as the author demonstrates, is relatively fortunate in all the above respects; it is not too near the sun to be roasted, nor far enough away to be frozen. Similarly it is big enough to retain an appreciable atmosphere but not big enough to retain it all; in which case life would be literally crushed out of existence. In which respect, despite its numerous drawbacks (from our point of view) of deserts, mountains and arctic wastes, the earth is nature's favourite son, as far as life is concerned.

Life in the Solar System

That this is indeed so, is indicated by the author, who analyses in detail the other planets, in particular relationship to his special theme, the possibility of life in other worlds. These chapters make melancholy reading and though Sir Harold does not stress the point, they ought to be made compulsory for all present and future Christian apologists who set out to advance the famous "Argument from Design." If it is life—any kind of life—that is the objective of "Design," the overall result is pretty lugubrious: one by one the great Astronomer passes the planets in the solar system under successive review. The sun itself: only proverbially fire-eating salamanders

could possibly live on it. Mercury, "the sun's moon," has one side turned perpetually away from the sun; one half of it at the temperature of boiling lead, whilst the other half represents a dark, frozen wilderness compared with which the arctic regions would be an earthly paradise. Venus, our beautiful evening star, and the earth's nearest neighbour in both space and size amongst the planets, appears as a gloomy enigma; a desert world swept by perpetual sandstorms and shrouded in Stygian gloom on account of the dense atmosphere which now effectively hides it from terrestrial observation. The moon—another dead world—made up of rocks, not sand like Venus, without any appreciable atmosphere

and subject to extremes of climate by day and night, and continually bombarded by meteorites from outer space; a world of which the classic definition still stands, "A world in which there is no weather and in which nothing ever happens." And this is the world we are all anxious to visit! As for the great outer planets, stretching from Jupiter to Pluto from 400 to 2,000 odd millions of miles from the sun, Dr. Jones includes them all under the comprehensive definition of "dreary, remote, frozen wastes of the solar system." In none of these planets, from Mercury to Pluto, is any conceivable form of life remotely possible.

Life on Mars

One planet has been purposely left out of this list—Mars—which Dr. Jones, like many other observers, regards as something of a special case. Mars, he says, again in common with other more recent observers, whilst too deficient in atmosphere to support the higher forms of life such as warm-blooded mammals, yet may, and in his opinion probably is, able to support plant life of a very primitive kind. I may relevantly add that since the re-issue of *Life in other Worlds* in 1952, we have had an important study on the theme of life on Mars, *The Red and Green Planet*, by Dr. Hubertus Strughold, which analyses the whole problem of life on Mars and confirms Dr. Spencer Jones' supposition about the probability of there being vegetation there. Both authorities recognise the significance of even this humble form of life as a proof that life as such, is not confined to *this* earth. Neither Sir Harold nor Dr. Strughold regards the presence of any higher form of life than primitive plant-life to be even remotely possible in the thin air of Mars, which, according to Dr. Strughold is equivalent in density to that at 56,000 feet above the earth's atmosphere—nearly twice the height of Everest. Dr. Jones writes at some length upon the famous Martian canals which were once supposed to prove the existence of *intelligent* life on Mars. His conclusion is that in so far as they appear to exist, they do so only as natural phenomena on a nearly waterless planet.

Life in the Universe

In our solar system, life appears to exist only on the earth and in perhaps a very primitive form, on Mars. Elsewhere it is impossible for the reasons enumerated above. But the

— VIEWS and OPINIONS —

Life on Other Worlds

— By F. A. RIDLEY —

sun is only one of innumerable stars. Have these stars, or some of them, also got planets circling round them? And do these, or some of them, contain life? With regard to both questions, the distances involved are too vast to admit direct observation. But there is some evidence for the presence of unseen planets—very large ones—circling some of the nearer stars; and Dr. Jones's conclusion is that there may be others and they may contain living matter. The whole problem, however, awaits a more satisfactory explanation of the origin and constitution of the universe than any yet propounded.

"We never know what we are talking about"

I seem to recall that it was Bertrand Russell who once perpetrated the *bon mot* "In mathematics we never know what we are talking about or whether what we are saying is true!" Something similar may also be said about the

problem of the presence of life in the Universe. For who knows what life really is? As both Sir Harold and Dr. Strughold repeatedly affirm, all we can do is to argue upon the assumption that life elsewhere follows a similar pattern to here. And who knows whether this is true? Life elsewhere may take totally different forms or even, as Dr. Strughold suggests, dispense with crude bodily matter altogether and resolve itself into pure energy. Assuming it to be similar to what is here, Sir Harold's conclusion is that the essential conditions for its recurrence are exceptional but recurring in the vast frame of the Universe. But he gives no confirmation to the teleologist. His conclusion is that "Life does not occur as the result of a special act of creation or because of some unique incident, but that it is the result of the occurrence of definite processes; given the suitable conditions, these processes will inevitably lead to the development of life."

Secularism in Trinidad

By FELIX F. CORBIE (SAN JUAN BRANCH, N.S.S.)

SECULARISM has come to stay in Trinidad. For many years the soil of unbelief was only tilled by a few individuals; until about six years ago a branch of the National Secular Society was organised in the village of Fyzabad in South Trinidad. The Society was unheard of in other parts of the island, but in every age and every society there can always be found those who don't believe. In the north of the island a few brave individuals got their heads together and decided to do something about their unbelief. Fortunately, they met a founder of the Fyzabad Branch, who was now living in the north, and plans began in earnest to organise a branch in the north. And so Trinidad can now boast of two branches of the N.S.S. The members of the northern (or San Juan) branch have militancy as their watchword: a more devoted group of individuals for any cause could not be found, and so again it must be mentioned that Secularism is firmly planted in the island.

But the job of the Secularist is by no means easy in Trinidad, in a cosmopolitan community where many creeds and cultures are interwoven. Quite a few Christian sects are represented, from Baptists Shouters (those that catch the power of God) to Roman Catholicism. Two Spiritualistic sects whose origin is said to have been in the African Congo are also active. They are the Shango and the Jaraba cults. Their ceremonies consist mainly of dances to the beat of a drum, and it is claimed that the leader has the power to order spirits as he wishes, for good or evil. I have witnessed many of these dances, at which goats are slaughtered and their blood drunk; trees planted; and spectators fall foaming at the mouth infested by the spirits. All those partaking in the ceremony seem to be hysterical. Besides these, there exist among the people superstitious beliefs in various forms which have been handed down generation after generation from the days of slavery when everyone was owned, and worked in the sugar and cocoa plantations.

Just to illustrate the things the Secularists have to face in Trinidad, here are some of those prevalent superstitions. In the home, sweeping the house after six p.m. brings poverty. Money must not be paid after six p.m.; that, too, brings poverty. The worldwide ban on walking under a ladder is another. Belts must not be hung up, otherwise waist pain is the result. Hats must not be rested on beds, or bad luck follows. While picking feathers from a chicken after it is killed do not talk, otherwise more feathers will keep protruding. Old women with evil eyes go about killing babies by their look.

Hunters are among the most superstitious. Vines can cause them to lose their way in the forest if they are trodden on. Spirits follow them, spoiling their catch. When going out to hunt at nights they must not pass a pea garden. That, too, would be bad luck. It is a common belief that people deal with the devil, who can change into any form. Old women fly through the air with fire at their tails! Phantoms float about catching people at night, and pretty young ladies—demons in disguise—seduce young men at night for evil purposes.

These are only a few of the hundreds of beliefs prevalent in Trinidad. And they are by no means confined to the simpletons. They linger among the educated and intelligent. No wonder they both worship the same God. I hope this article will help readers to realise that Secularists in Trinidad do not face an easy job. But the job has been started.

For Adults Only

SPEAKING at a circuit meeting, the Rev. Maurice Jones, superintendent of Pwllheli Methodist Circuit, vigorously demanded a complete ban on the use of alcoholic drinks to toast newly-weds at wedding receptions, a "cursed practice," he cried. He had actually attended one wedding where "only two of us drank lemonade"!

Worse was to follow. "The tragedy is that Church members imbibe as other guests at these receptions." Mr. Jones thought the Band of Hope should exert pressure against the "destructive prominence given to alcoholism in radio and television plays."

The circuit steward, Mr. Emyr Thomas, said a campaign among parents was urgently needed. "How can we expect the children to grow up into useful citizens when they see their father and perhaps their mother unashamedly filling in football coupons in their presence?" he asked.

It is hard to believe that any parent could be so depraved as to "do his pools" in front of a child, realising the degradation which must be ultimately entailed.

—NEXT WEEK—

AN OLD ENIGMA—FREE WILL

By T. M. MOSLEY

U.S. Bishops Answer the Call

By COLIN McCALL

LAST SEPTEMBER, when the Pope issued his Encyclical Letter on films, radio and television, Mr. Jack Gould remarked in *The New York Times* (22/9/57) that "the prospect of the Legion of Decency addressing itself to the broadcasting media . . . must give cause for deep concern." The behaviour of television in the United States, he said, "has not been such as to warrant the censure that seems implied in the Vatican's call for intensified vigilance," and "Under these circumstances the Pope's direction to Bishops to set up an appropriate office to pass judgment on TV is altogether disquieting." Two months later the Vatican's call was answered by the Roman Catholic Bishops of the U.S.A., and Mr. Gould's "disquieting" vision had become reality. As our own TV services seem likely to lean as heavily on America as our film industry has done—to its cost—it may pay us to look a little closer at the Bishops' statement.

It is long and carefully worded; the careful wording being, I think, significant and, in one sense, even encouraging. There is nothing unusual, of course, about a disarming preamble, but the Bishops are at pains to stress that their activities "cannot justly be termed an attempt to exercise censorship." This is clearly a case of protesting too much, but it is encouraging to know that the Bishops feel it necessary to do so. They realise that the idea of censorship is inimical to Americans.

Freedom of the press—they acknowledge—"is patently a key safeguard of civil liberty. Democracy does not exist without it." But there are limits to freedom, they say, and light must be thrown on these limits. A recognition of the limitations of freedom of expression has been recognised by the U.S. Supreme Court, in connection with a recent case of obscenity. It is obscenity that the Bishops have pledged themselves to fight, and the Court ruling, "We hold that obscenity is not within the area of constitutionally protected speech or press," serves them in good stead.

But there is obscenity and obscenity. The views of the now senile and always celibate Roman Pontiff are likely to differ considerably from those of the average American. The former may be shocked by the sight of a pretty girl in a bikini; the latter will usually like it. The former may then declare that the latter is lewd; that it would be better for him not to see any girls in bikinis, but it is safe to say that this is a minority view. The average American may surely retort that, if the Pope is shocked by girls in bikinis, he has no need to look at them; but he has no right to prevent others from looking—and enjoying!

The Pope, however, believes that he has that right. He is absolute head of the Roman Church, which holds that right "from her office as teacher of morals and guardian of divine truth"—as the Bishops phrase it. Ideally, the Bishops might wish that "no man-made legal restraints were ever necessary," but "society must face its responsibility and exercise its authority." And—the crucial point this!—"It must be recognised that civil legislation by itself does not constitute an adequate standard of morality."

For this reason, the National Legion of Decency was set up to guard "morality" on the films, and the National Office for Decent Literature to scrutinise written works. Not that these constituted censorship! After all, as the Bishops say, "The right to speak out in favour of good morals can hardly be challenged in a democracy such as ours."

Well, Cardinals Mooney, Stritch, Spellman and McIntyre, with their entourage of Archbishops and Bishops, have had their say. Let us turn again to Mr. Gould and his warnings. The great danger he sees is anticipatory censorship. Already present in television under the sponsorship system, this will be increased enormously with the formation of a National Legion of Decency for TV (or whatever other euphemism is substituted for "Roman Catholic censorship"). "If there were so much as an outside chance of a Catholic prelate instructing his flock not to watch a given programme—and hence miss the accompanying commercials"—says Mr. Gould—"a sponsor would turn handsprings to avoid such an economic threat."

"The mass medium's fundamental credo of avoiding controversy—because it seems good business to do so—is a social problem that has grown alarmingly in the electronic age," he continues. He isn't worried about an occasional lapse in taste. What worries him is the "infinitely greater immorality of cultural and intellectual sterility." And we can surely agree with Mr. Gould. We can agree with him that the Legion of Decency is no way of avoiding that danger.

The Legion, indeed, the Roman Catholic Church—as the Bishops admit—is primarily concerned with morals, not aesthetics. They claim, of course, that "Art that is false to morality is not true art," but that is a vague and controversial remark. What we do know is that the Legion's effect upon films has been disastrous. Sooner or later, the stand must be made, and there are some indications that Americans are recognising this. I hope they will join Mr. Gould in fighting this new Roman Catholic threat and affirming that, in the long run, the public is "both the most reasonable and alert watchdog."

Sunday Soccer

NORTHERN IRELAND gave a fine performance to reach the World (Football) Cup finals by beating Italy 2—1. After winning, an official stated that the team would not be allowed to play on Sundays in the finals in Stockholm this summer.

As the opening matches are scheduled for *Sunday*, June 8th—when *all* teams will be engaged—and the World Cup Committee are unlikely to waive the rules for the sake of *one* team—it seems as though the officials will either have to swallow their stern sabbatarian principles or withdraw from the competition.

The players are hardly likely to worry about Sunday play. Most of them have already played several Sunday games on the Continent with their clubs!

Catholic Patriotism

THE "Question Box" of *The Catholic Times* for 10/1/58 carried the following interesting query: "Is a Catholic obliged to put his Church before his country?" The answer is: "Only if and when there is conflict between the two interests. If the government of a country makes laws which clash with the laws and teaching of the Church, then a Catholic is *obliged* to respect and be loyal to the laws and teaching of his Church." The answer goes on to explain that "Patriotism is one of the virtues which a Catholic must practise"!

This Believing World

A doctor, a lawyer, and a Mother Superior, on TV the other Sunday all gave their ardent testimony to the way they found God and Jesus, and how happy they were now because the two Deities had entered their lives. Their avowals were the usual mixture of credulity, ignorance, and childishness, but no doubt some people will try to find Jesus the same way. Needless to add, the doctor and lawyer were both Christians to start with, and it was incredibly easy to get them back to the fold. We have an idea, all the same, that for most viewers the show was insufferably boring. Still, this is supposed to be a Christian country, so one has to put up with religion sandwiched in between music hall stuff and gangsters films. We *must* cater for all tastes!

★

Some of the civic Counsellors in Lewisham were very angry that Spiritualists were going to hold a meeting with mediums to see if it were possible to get into touch with the victims of the recent rail disaster there. Relatives, they said, thought such a meeting "an insult." But why? Why shouldn't Spiritualists hold their meetings with just as much freedom as the Churches? Spiritualists believe in "immortality" just as fervently as Christians, and have just as much right to say so. We disagree with both—but we stand for freedom in these matters.

★

In any case, however, the meeting proved a veritable fiasco, though more than 1,000 people attended to hear the medium, a Mr. J. Benjamin. As he already knew the names of the victims, he had no difficulty in "summoning" them to come unseen on to the platform. But—did any of the relatives of the victims attend? According to the *Daily Mail*, "None admitted their presence." In other words, the medium completely failed to prove survival except, of course, the survival of credulity.

★

The Bishop of Coventry recently had a tilt at Science, which, like most Christians, he does not at all like. Some scientists, he is reported to have said, "on the air, speak as though they had the key to all knowledge, and that God is now outmoded as though he were the invention of the simple-minded." Of course, "God" was not invented by the "simple-minded," but what a Godsend he has been for the priesthood for the "simple-minded." Bishops in particular have made a fine, fat living out of telling the "simple-minded" all about God, and what wonderful times everybody who believes in God and the bishops are going to have when they "pass over."

★

The Bishop of Coventry wants scientists to be like "the Wise Men who humbly brought their gifts to Christ." That he is obliged to believe this fairy tale (otherwise he couldn't be a genuine Bishop) we sadly agree. But it is difficult to imagine anybody who knows anything whatever of Science and of comparative religion, believing a story which has about as much truth in it as that of Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp, though we admit it is *sunnier*.

★

In a "psychological" study in the *Daily Express* of that monstrous murderer, Haigh, the "acid bath murderer" as he is known, Sir Ronald Howe and an unnamed psychiatrist do their best to account for his crimes—in a way that will not be exactly appreciated by our bishops. It appears that "his upbringing was on the whole appalling." Why? Because his parents "loved him but were fanatically religious"! In other words, Haigh, who murdered nine people,

had a thoroughly religious upbringing. No blatant Materialism was allowed to disturb his unblemished faith in himself as "a sinner for ever threatened by a literal Hell." When he dreamed, it was of "a forest of crucifixes," which, of course, were always "dripping blood." And what is the conclusion of Sir R. Howe? Haigh, "though guilty of monstrous crimes," was "not himself a monster." This proves the magnificent grace and wonder of true religion.

★

We have an idea that all earnest Christians will not like Prof. P. H. Nowell-Smith, of Nottingham University, for his recent plain speaking. In a lecture on "Remaining and Agnostic," he complained that "all organs of propaganda in Britain promulgate religious ideas and suppress those of Agnosticism," including, of course, the "three propaganda organs, the BBC, the press, and schools," the worst offender being the BBC. And he added, "The BBC has always refused to give an Agnostic complete freedom on the air, except on the Third Programme, where the majority of listeners are Agnostics anyway." We wonder what all the doctors, lawyers, chefs, dockers, trade unionists, and others, who come in a constant stream of pious belief before us on the radio and TV have to say to Prof. Nowell-Smith?

As I See It

IT IS EASY TO BELIEVE, to accept on trust; it has never been particularly easy to think. There are some things about life and being that are difficult to understand. It is not always possible to say we know how or why, whatever may be our degree of scientific education or intelligence. Perhaps there are secrets of nature and of the cosmos that will be for ever withheld from us—who can say? The attitude of the thinker or the philosopher is to behold and to inquire without any preconceived notions or set opinions, dominated by a single passion—the passion for truth.

It is comforting to know or think we know; it is unsettling to have to admit that we don't know. Where knowledge and intelligence cannot help him, the thinker or the philosopher resigns himself to this latter condition: he could not be a thinker or a philosopher otherwise. But few people are capable of such detachment. Religions teach doctrines and encourage simple beliefs. Their sacred writings show that Truth, supreme and all-sufficient, was once revealed to man and so it shall be to the end of time. And in the light of this Truth all the problems of life are capable of being resolved, or of being "explained." But explanations are often left to the casuist and high priest. Simple trust and faith in an Almighty will get the ordinary believer through; and what He has decreed shall be humanity's common lot it is right for man to accept without cavil or complaint, and not question the fitness or reasonableness or justice of. As Thomas à Kempis in his celebrated *Imitation of Christ* puts it, "There is a great difference between the wisdom of a devout man enlightened by God and the knowledge of a learned and studious scholar. More noble by far is the learning infused from above by divine grace than that painfully acquired by the industry of man."

The state of mind that looks to find every major difficulty met in the superior wisdom of God, and places child-like trust in Him in the dark and sombre days of life, is one not hard to acquire. And men and women, who for a large part of their lives are on somewhat distant terms of acquaintance with God, discover Him afresh in the disappointment of an idealistic love, in the fell grip of sudden tragedy, and in the sorrow and loss of death.

G. I. BENNETT.

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

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics Institute).—Sunday, February 16th, 7 p.m.: A Lecture.

Central London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, 5 minutes Edgware Road Tube).—Sunday, February 16th, 7.15 p.m.: MENA SILAS, "Freethought and Music."

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, February 18th, 7.15 p.m.: H. HYND, J.P., M.P., "Keeping Peace in Industry."

Leicester Secular Society (75 Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, February 16th, 6.30 p.m.: ROY SEAR, "Freethought in Poland."

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Co-operative Hall, Upper Parliament Street).—Sunday, February 16th, 2.30 p.m.: Dr. D. N. DOUGLAS, "Mental Health."

Nottingham University (Portland Lecture Hall).—Tuesday, February 18th, 4.30 p.m.: Debate—"That Religion is an obstacle to clear thought." Mrs. MARGARET KNIGHT and Father M. SHAW, S.S.M.

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, February 16th, 11 a.m.: W. E. SWINTON, PH.D., "Ships and Shoes—Beginnings of Social History."

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 and CORSAIR. Sunday, 8 p.m.: Messrs. MILLS, WOODCOCK and 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.

PORTCHESTER CREMATORIA

THE PORTSMOUTH BRANCH of the National Secular Society is at present involved in a matter of some public importance. A photograph of a proposed new Crematorium to be built at Portchester showed that the main feature would be an eight-foot cross over the entrance. This—the Branch felt—would make the building specifically Christian, when it would be used by people of all faiths and none. A reasonably-worded suggestion that the cross be omitted from the finished building or, if it should be too late for this, that facilities for covering the cross when non-Christian ceremonies were in process, was accordingly addressed to the Portsmouth Sub-Committee in December. In mid-January the Portchester Joint Crematorium Committee refused these requests and some rather objectionable references were made to atheists by members of the Committee. The most inept was probably the one that atheists were insensitive to symbolism, when this specific instance illustrated their sensitiveness to symbolism.

However, Mr. Peter G. Young, the Portsmouth Branch Secretary, has rightly refused to be ruffled by the often rude speeches against him. Knowing his position to be reasonable, he has defended it with "sweet reasonable-

ness" in the local press and—on February 5th—on the West of England Home Service of the BBC. A crematorium—he says—should be a place where people of all religions and none should be able to meet on terms of equality. Many Jews are cremated: the cross is as unsuitable for those occasions as when a secular service is being conducted. Mr. Young also corrected the idea of an alderman that Secularists "make light of their dead."

In his broadcast reply, the Chairman of the committee said that it was not possible to cover the cross because it was large and inaccessible. Very few people—he thought—would object to it anyway, and there was an alternative crematorium at Southampton for those who did. (It should be noted that this is 12 miles beyond Portchester, which itself is eight miles from Portsmouth).

Portchester Crematorium might well prove a test case. An important principle is at stake and it is good to know that the Secular case is in the reliable hands of Mr. Young and his fellow members. Their reasonable attitude is winning them valuable support.

C.McC.

Notes and News

THERE is still time to reserve a seat for the National Secular Society Annual Dinner/Dance at the Mecca Restaurant, 11/12 Blomfield Street, London, E.C.2, on Saturday, February 15th. Phone the General Secretary (HOLBORN 2601) right away and join this social gathering of members and friends.

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WE are pleased to report that the statue of Charles Bradlaugh which stands in Abington Square, Northampton, has now been cleaned and renovated by the civic authorities. It is well worth a visit when one is in the vicinity, and is a fitting tribute to the founder of the National Secular Society.

★

WE note with no little amusement that Mr. Barbanell (we apologise for having given him only one "I" in his name) in *Two Worlds*, does not want to "waste more time or space" on the answers made by Mr. H. Cutner to his attacks on our contributor in five successive numbers. Mr. Barbanell was completely wrong in his references to D. D. Home, the Fox sisters, the R.101 airship, Houdini, and lots of other things, as was pointed out to him. But it would never do to let the readers of his paper find this out. It would never do to allow his readers to study Houdini's *Magician Among the Spirits*, or Maskelyne's *Supernatural*, or Rinn's *Sixty Years of Psychical Research*. Thank Heaven, they will never, never even read THE FREETHINKER!

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THE *Daily Herald* is to be congratulated on publicising an intolerable aspect of child adoption that we have often noted, namely, that it is virtually impossible for an atheist to adopt a child in this country. The *Herald* (January 23rd) instanced a "very decent couple, who badly wanted a child to care for" who were turned down by the National Children's Adoption Association "for their honesty in describing themselves as agnostics." "I checked"—said the *Herald* writer—"and, to my astonishment, was told at the Association's Headquarters: 'Quite true. We are non-sectarian and have babies of all religions adopted. But we do insist on some religion.'" The writer—himself an agnostic—commented: "As if there was something sinful about honest doubt!"

If Christ be Myth . . .

By C. G. L. DU CANN

MANY PEOPLE constantly assume that if it could be proved that Christ was not an historical character but merely a myth, then the whole of the Christian religion would come crashing to the ground as an imposture.

Hardly, I think. That is too superficial a reading of the situation, the wish being father to the thought.

Without doubt, great masses of Christian doctrine would crumble at the impact like falling rocks. For the teaching that Jesus Christ the son of God became incarnate in human life in Palestine some nineteen hundred years ago, is, at present an integral part of Christianity. Hence the violent assertions by opponents of that faith that Jesus never lived; that the stories told of him are told of other saviours in other religions; and that the Gospels are fictional, not factual.

Let us for the moment agree these assumptions and suppose them proved. What then? Christ-stories being told of others in other religions is a double-edged sword that cuts those who wield it as much as those against whom it is used. The events in any man's life are often repeated in other men's lives; and this repetition shows probability quite as much as plagiarism. That the claim of Virgin-birth for Jesus is not unique proves nothing. The claim is not unknown in modern England and has probably been made at many times in many lands, apart from divine claims.

Again there is a valid answer to the objection: "Jesus never lived." That answer is the answer to an objection to Shakespeare's Hamlet or Stendhal's Julien Sorel never having lived. They live now. Not merely on the printed page, not merely in words, but as real people in our hearts and minds far more real than many flesh-and-blood people whom we see, hear, and shake hands with in our daily lives. It is futile to plead that Jesus never lived to those in whom he lives far more vividly and intensely than you or I do.

A mental and spiritual existence of this kind is just as real as, and for certain purposes far more important than any physical existence. It is a multiplied life like a television-projection.

Even the "real live" people of flesh and blood have no existence for us except as we apprehend them, and as they are mirrored in our minds. And just as Hamlet and Julien Sorel had an original self in their respective authors, though different from and, it may be, inferior to, the real men, their creators, so the literary Jesus of the Gospels may well have had an original.

Some people think that truth is to be found only in fact itself. Others of us know that truth is to be found in the symbolism of fiction, poetic or otherwise. A fiction may contain more truth than factual evidence in certain cases. Indeed, "facts beyond dispute" may seriously mislead. If, for example, you have the facts, both chemical and physical, about a human being, you still lack the truth which is a mystery, namely his livingness, which eludes science and her facts altogether.

The living quality of Jesus Christ is beyond dispute for he most certainly lives as a great literary character, to put it at the lowest upon which believers and unbelievers can agree. It may be significant in this connection to recall that St. John, the subtlest and most philosophic of the Evangelists, wrote of him as "the Word." True, he went further and added "made flesh" and emphasised it by further adding "and dwelt amongst us"; there, indeed, you

have the whole issue between Christian believer and unbeliever expressed.

To express it concisely, the question is whether Christ is an historical or a mythical figure. But if everyone accepted the mythicist theory that would not—as anti-Christians are too ready to think—destroy Christ as a faith. For a myth may be a symbol to be believed in just as ardently as a person. Those who wish to destroy Christ and Christianity need to go much further than showing that Christ is a myth. They need to show that he is a living lie and the creed a falsity in itself.

That is a difficult, perhaps an impossible, task. For Christ is no more a lie than Hamlet is, though again, like Hamlet, the written account of him that has captured and held the world's attention so firmly is probably altogether different from the historical person. Nor is the creed associated with his name entirely false; with all its accretions there is much truth in it.

At this late date it is certainly impossible to prove either that Jesus is, or is not, historical or mythical. No discovered scrolls or scrolls likely to be discovered are valid to prove any such thing further than it is already proved or unproved by written documents. Disbelievers are fond of saying that there is "no evidence" that Christ ever lived, which is an ignorant misapprehension of the position, for biographies and traditions are always "some" evidence, though they may not be weighty or trustworthy evidence.

The truth may well be, when the matter is impartially considered (as it needs to be), that Christ is both historical and mythical—as most characters in biography are. For his alleged words: these may be garbled and misreported, for they were not taken down upon utterance verbatim in shorthand. For his actions: as reported, they may be based upon hearsay, which is usually regarded as untrustworthy though it may be true. Christ never wrote one word of his Gospels, and he seems to have relied upon his tongue instead of a pen, the mightier instrument.

Consequently, we can only look at him through the distorting spectacles of the Evangelists' personalities. It is foolish indeed to blame the subject for what may be the falsifications and misapprehensions of his biographers—though the average reader always does, of course.

So it comes about that for the great mass of mankind Christ is only a literary character. However, mystics say that they have a personal experience of him in themselves: mysticism, indeed, is the ultimate residue of religion. To the unbeliever mysticism is humbug, and the mystic is either a deceiver or self-deceived. In what respects mysticism is valid or invalid needs too long an enquiry to be undertaken here. But none who feels that "The Kingdom of God is within you" will be moved from that comprehension based upon subjective "knowing" by objective arguments that Christ is a myth. Experience of a personal nature is impervious to argument.

Altogether, nothing is more certain than that if Christ could be proved a mere myth, that would not mean the death of Christianity but only the shedding of much Church doctrine and dogma. That does not go to the root of the matter at all. Besides, in these non-fundamentalist days, the issue is not between God and No-God as it used to be. Rather is it between those who believe that there must be some Purpose or Meaning behind Life and the Universe and those who believe: None.

Anthropomorphic representations in the shape of human

god or gods are misleading concessions to a mental infantilism, as where a Michelangelo or a William Blake portrays a human Father-God, long-bearded, benevolent and majestic. It flatters human conceit to show God as a man rather than as a horse or dog, though Dean Swift could hardly think of the Deity as one of his men-Yahoos, I imagine. The ancient writer of the Second Commandment knew better than that when he forbade the making of images of anything known, to represent the great Unknown.

The real issue, then, is not the existence of Christ but the existence of Anything or Nothing behind the pheno-

mena of the Universe in which mankind are mere unimportant bacteria. Those who stridently and insistently proclaim that Christ is a myth should cultivate a sense of proportion which would make them realise that their thesis is somewhat less important than they think.

Lastly, if Christ be a myth, we all know that a living myth, unlike a dead, forgotten, historical fact embalmed in unread books, may be a burning reality in human hearts and minds—the places that really matter! It is not the Biblical Christ but the subjective Christ that keeps the Christian religion alive.

Problems of Demography

By G. H. TAYLOR

(Concluded from page 43)

In Poland it is difficult, though now not impossible, to procure a clinical abortion. In Czechoslovakia the first birth control clinic was opened exactly a year ago.

Evidence that even the Roman Catholic authorities are worried about population increases comes from Geneva, where the Catholic Institute for Social Research is sponsoring a \$5,000 prize for an essay on the best solutions consonant with Catholic doctrine. This implied reflection on the Pope's divine powers may not pass unnoticed among the faithful. Surely an *ex cathedra* pronouncement would solve the problem instead of having recourse to 5,000 dollars!

The International Planned Parenthood Federation has now organisations in twenty countries throughout the world and much progress has been achieved. Undeterred by religious or political dogmas, their methods may fairly be described as Scientific Humanist; there is no question of alienating any religious bodies who are prepared to co-operate, and the international character of the federation means that no special religion is upheld as a light to follow. Several member organisations are in the Far East, where the situation is particularly critical. In his presidential address to the Singapore Family Planning Association last year Sir P. McNeice said:

"The three great countries—India, China and Japan—with a population approaching a thousand millions, though diverging widely in their ideologies and their systems of government, have all openly, spontaneously and energetically taken up the campaign for controlled populations in the interests of the welfare of their people. We in these South Sea territories are steadily and no less sincerely carrying on our efforts."

In India a Family Planning Board has been set up and the Health Minister has expressed herself as convinced that India's population problem is of extreme urgency, calling for "a planned and scientific approach... as the main objective of a national campaign for family planning."¹⁶ More recently Nehru, at an F.P. Board meeting at New Delhi, stressed the need for "language understood by the common people" to awaken their interest in population control. Religion, he said, had sometimes been brought into the picture, but "There is no need at all for us to go about attacking men of religion on this issue." Like most political leaders, of course, Nehru customarily pays homage to the religious forces in society.

The difficulties of getting Indian women to co-operate is shown from the experience of the Calcutta Bacteriological Institute, which produced an extract of the common pea, metaxylohydroquinone, as an oral contraceptive. However, few Indian women can read a calendar or even count correctly, and work is proceeding on another compound which is independent of calendars.

A number of steroid preparations, we may here note, are on sale in the United States as correctives for menstrual irregularities, but it remains to be shown that they are safe as regards side effects as a result of long-term use. The efficient production of synthetic steroids, however, seems well on the way, and could be an established fact before the present year is out. It is the habit of scientific progress to sweep religious opposition aside.

In Japan the population is limited only by a terrific number of abortions and sterilisations annually. Dr. Yoshio Koya estimates the former at some two millions a year, thus replacing the infanticide of a century ago. In 1956 about 45,000 sterilisations were reported, the actual figure being estimated at about a quarter of a million. The government last year took matters in hand and there is now co-ordination of family planning throughout Japan.

It is obvious that disregard of religious or governmental laws is universal. A survey carried out in Puerto Rico in the Caribbean revealed that although 80% of the Puerto Ricans are Roman Catholics, their practice of birth control is at variance with Church teaching.

In Jamaica the family planners are using the radio as a continuous means of propaganda. Three series at least have already been run. For instance, the flash will begin with the noise of a baby crying, followed by a voice: "If you don't want to have your next baby for two or three years, consult the Family Planning Clinic"; the address and hours of consultation are then given. Radio propaganda is also being tried in Bermuda and in Singapore in the Far East.

The monthly *News of Population and Birth Control*, issued by the I.P.F.F., gives news of the concern of the authorities in places as far apart as Mexico, Malaya and Mauritius, while in Egypt the population has trebled in less than a lifetime (from eight million to 24 million) and the resulting misery is one of the causes that have thrown up the nationalist regime. The Egyptian Minister of Social Affairs has said birth control is an absolutely immediate necessity. "If we continue to reproduce," he says, "with maximum biological impetus we shall have more weaklings, vagrants and beggars." It has been recommended that the population of Cairo shall be limited to 3½ millions.¹⁷

The arguments one hears against population control are often rather feeble. To say the motive is pure selfishness, with young couples preferring to spend money on motor cars and TV sets rather than on babies, is an argument that would be quite meaningless to the teeming millions of Asia who have never even seen a car or a TV set, and who, if the present population trend continues, never will.

(16) *Hindu*, Madras, 28/10/56.

(17) *Egyptian Mail*, Cairo, 6/9/56.

CORRESPONDENCE

PERCEPTION

In reply to Mr. Cutner, I am sorry if through a slipshod way of writing, I gave the impression in my article "The Problem of Perception," that Berkeley agreed with Locke that we never know physical objects directly but only "representations" of them. On the contrary, of course. Berkeley, in denying the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, also abolished Locke's unknowable "substance," and held that objects are perceived immediately. I agree that it is probably misleading to describe Berkeley as a subjective idealist, since he believed that the external world is dependent on the mind of God for its existence and not on individual human minds, as Hume did.

(Rev.) J. L. BROOM.

RACISM

F. A. Ridley, speaking of the "racist dogma," refers to "its inherently unscientific character and its implicit denial of evolution as a universal characteristic of mankind."

Now, evolution is a "universal characteristic" of *all* life, not merely mankind, so on F. A. Ridley's line of argument all animals are potentially equal to mankind, in brain power, which is absurd. Just as some breeds of dog are more intelligent than other breeds, some species of monkeys brainier than others, etc., would it be surprising if some races of mankind have better bodies or better brains than others?

Whether this is so or not will no doubt be decided by ethnology and psychology, and not by F. A. Ridley. ELLIS ALLEN.

THE MOSLEM CALENDAR

In an otherwise excellent article on the New Year, Mr. Cutner errs in stating that the Moslem New Year is in July. It commenced in that month in 622 A.D., but since it is a lunar calendar it is about eleven days shorter than a solar year. This sufficed for nomads, but when the new faith spread to agriculturists, they were obliged to retain their old solar reckoning for seed-time and harvest. Both the Persian year (Sol) and the Turkish (Iel) begin at the Vernal equinox, but they are in no sense Moslem.

W. E. HUXLEY.

VIVISECTION RESEARCH

I have just read Mr. Bennett's article on "Humanitarian Considerations" with considerable pleasure and benefit. The article in general is a real help to freethinkers but I was particularly struck by the information he holds concerning vivisection experiments and I certainly hope it will be possible to pass the evidence on to your reader in a series of articles

I should like also to comment on his last paragraph wherein he makes the point that a reform in our living and eating habits would obviate the need for so much research by vivisection. The wholesale abuse of our farmlands by the use of chemical farming, by which our food (cereals, milk, meat, vegetables and fruit) is devitalised and semi-poisoned is one of the prime factors today in the widespread diseases of civilisation. Organic farming would undoubtedly cure much of our physical and mental illness by providing the nations with disease-free foods. S. C. DENNING.

HUMANITARIANISM

I should like to thank Mr. Corrick for his letter to THE FREETHINKER on kindness to animals. A feeling for dumb creatures is something which has arisen out of the movements towards liberation from theological ideas of the creation. Doctrines that animals have no souls have made for the cruelty which is observable all too often in Latin countries. Ages of a more intensive faith did little in England to create a kindly feeling to animals. As has been often pointed out, the Puritan dislike of bear-baiting was occasioned more by annoyance at the pleasure which the spectacle gave to the spectators than by any feeling for the bear! Few of the leaders of the much-vaunted Evangelical revival seem to have concerned themselves over animals. It is when one comes to the freethinkers of the last century that one notices a different feeling. More recently, such pioneers as the late H. S. Salt, friend of G. W. Foote, did yeoman service by their propaganda that humanitarianism was mere dust and ashes unless it was also humanitarian in its outlook. Personally, I cannot see how any true humanist could countenance the horrors of vivisection or of bloodsports. They can only be excused by the boastful claim of the supernaturalist that the animals were knowingly put into the world for the use of man. Perhaps a great deal of good could be done within the progressive movements of today if something like Salt's old Humanitarian League, of which G. W. Foote was a prominent member, could be revived and become active again. It was a first war casualty which could be ill spared.

JOHN HASTINGS.

LECTURE REPORT

PARAPSYCHOLOGY was the subject of the lecture by Dr. Manfred Lowengard, PH.D., to the Central London N.S.S. Branch on Sunday, February 2nd, before an audience of some sixty people.

Expressing himself utterly opposed to supernatural explanations, the speaker detailed some of the work done in this field, for which there exists as yet no adequate account in terms of cause and effect.

The lecturer expressed to me his pleasure at the high level of the lengthy discussion which followed his address.

G.H.T.

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