

The Freethinker

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"I'M AN EVOLUTIONIST, not a materialist," remarked Prof. Sir Julian Huxley in the TV programme of May 20th, which concluded the series on 500 million years of evolution.

But—to turn a famous phrase once used in another connection—we're *all* evolutionists nowadays. Huxley's Christian opponents on the programme also, like himself, accepted evolution. The theory of the interrelatedness and development of all life on earth from the simple to the complex, making life one great web, has long since passed from the realm of speculation to that of fact. It is accepted by practically all who are able to read and think, Christians and Freethinkers alike, with Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, etc., not excluded. We are all evolutionists these days if we except Fundamentalists and other boneheads and also a few Catholic writers trying hard to save their Pope's face. (The Pope, of course, has always two faces to save. He saves them separately by showing one at a time.)

An Evolutionist

The term evolutionism does not denote one of the generally accepted schools of Philosophy and until Huxley raises it to that status an evolutionist can imply nothing more than a believer in evolution. The term is therefore only useful against an opponent who *rejects* evolution. As a term for discussion between Huxley and his Christian opponent it is common ground and therefore valueless as distinguishing Huxley's position from theirs.

The important difference is that of interpretation. The Christian may wish to make evolution run co-eval with the supernatural; Huxley does not. The Christian may see in evolution the permeation of a "guiding spirit"; Huxley does not. The Christian may postulate an outside management, a *deus ex machina*; Huxley does not. The Christian may accept evolution as the work of a Great Evolver; Huxley does not.

Huxley Rejects Purpose

Evolution is all the time common ground, but the Christian adds what he calls Meaning or Purpose. This Huxley specifically rejects. His reading of evolution is certainly not palatable to Christians. This is what he says:

When we men act so that a desirable result is produced it is usually the result of a mental process which we call purposive activity. But to argue that all processes which are similar in result must therefore be purposive is really so puerile a piece of logic that we can only be amazed that the contention is still so widely made. . . . It was precisely this which Darwin once and for all disproved. (J. S. Huxley: *Essays in Popular Science*.)

In the Proceedings of the British Association for 1936 Huxley is quoted as follows:

Evolution is efficient at the price of extreme slowness and cruelty, but it is blind and mechanical. Accordingly its products are just as likely to be morally or intellectually repulsive to us. . . . Any purpose we find manifested in evolution is only an apparent purpose. It is we who read purpose into evolution. He returns to the theme in *The Science of Life*, refuting the Paleyan argument:

There is now no trace of conscious design. Variation is at random and in all directions; good, bad or indifferent. The blind pressure of the struggle for existence sets in motion the equally blind forces of natural selection, with the result that harmful variations are bred out of the stock, useful variations bred in. The whole process is as superbly inevitable as the motions of the planets. Conscious purpose appears as a faint glimmering in the higher animals, but only plays an important role when we come to man.

In *Essays of a Biologist* he writes:

Purpose is a term invented to denote a particular operation of the human mind and should only be used where a psychological basis may reasonably be postulated.

Huxley's Philosophy

A godless monism having affinities with Spinoza's Pantheism is the general impression one gets of

Huxley's philosophy from a reading of his books, essays, articles and lectures. He has traced emergent evolution as manifesting, in turn, (a) increases in the size of organisms (by cells or aggregations of cells), followed by increases (b) in complexity, (c) in harmony, (d) in self-regulation, and finally (e) in mental activity at the human level; all without bringing in either supernatural or vitalist agencies. It is plasticity of brain power that gives man his eminence among animals. God is unnecessary, "a stop-gap explanation," as he has called it. Since, he says, there is no interference with deterministic cause and effect, such a God would be no more than a fly on the wheel, a ruler without power. Taking what he has called, for convenience, "world-stuff" as his datum, his fundamental substance, Huxley's intellectual reconstruction of the universe as science finds it has certainly nothing in common with Christianity and everything in common with Materialism. His term "evolutionist" is therefore inadequate for marking off his viewpoint from that of his Christian opponents.

Some Philosophical Interpretations

Philosophers, no less than religionists, have also "interpreted" evolution in ways quite foreign to Huxley's. In most of these interpretations "God" does not come into the reckoning, but the properties of matter are not solely operative. In Holism, for instance, there is an alleged whole-making principle responsible for collecting matter into new syntheses; Jan Smuts, the distinguished South African and a man of many talents, was the originator of this Philosophy and had support from the eminent biologist, J. S. Haldane (senior).

Neo-Vitalists have held that the actual direction taken by evolution follows a path laid down by a life of principle, much as a train's path is determined by railway lines; this again is not Huxley's view of the implications of evolution. For the Panpsychists, what we regard as matter is actually a continuous structure of "mind-stuff." In the case of Teleology no interference at any point of evolution is posited, but the process, instead of being pushed from behind, is, as it were, pulled from in front. Reaching right back to Aristotle this Philosophy has been presented in various ways, and in modern times there

—VIEWS and OPINIONS—

Materialist or "Evolutionist"?

By G. H. TAYLOR

has been quite a stream of defenders from the pre-evolution philosophers such as Ralph Cudworth and John Toland, down to such 20th century worthies as W. R. Sorley, A. Seth-Pringle-Pattison, Prof. J. Arthur Thomson and Prof. R. A. Millikan, while Dean Inge seemed frequently at the point of making his entire religion boil down to Teleology.

Materialism

In refutation of such interpretations the materialist is compelled to go further than a mere reaffirmation of evolution; he has to be more specific. Evolution is the description and explanation of the working of nature; it is for materialism to give it the proper philosophical setting. Since theories other than materialism hold evolution to be true, any rejection of these theories carries affirmations which overstep evolution.

The materialist contends that the properties of nature, percolating ultimately to those of material nature, are, unaided, capable of evolving phenomena. The physical analysis of material nature may be left to the scientist; matter is simply the category for phenomena having space-time dimensions and capable of appealing to the senses either directly or through the mediation of instruments.

"No mind without matter; purpose is an evolved product; the supernatural is a figment of the imagination." Those are materialistic principles to which, there can be no doubt, Huxley would subscribe.

Points from New Books

THE FREETHINKER is mentioned on page 28 of Oswald Blakeston's new travel book about Finland, *The Sun at Midnight* (Blond, 21s.). The author is recording how much he resents the licence given to the Salvation Army to enter Finnish cafés and sell their publications. He remarks to his companion on the trip, Max Chapman, "I wonder what the Salvation Army would feel if I went into their hostels and tried to sell copies of the Brewers' excellent paper, *The Morning Advertiser*, and the Rationalists' brave weekly, THE FREETHINKER?"

The author also discusses some of the strange ecstatic sects surviving in Finland and the bleakness of Lutheran Church architecture, where the only relief from a chaste décor of white and gold is an elaborately carved pulpit. But the sightseer can have a surfeit of pulpits. "I reached the stage," he writes, "when I imagined the righteous gentleman standing up in them and declaiming, 'As God says, and rightly so . . . !'" But for secular Finland, Mr. Blakeston has nothing but praise, for the romantic islands, the thrilling modern architecture and the nostalgic Chechovian palaces of wood, the democratic *sauna* baths and the cheap local brandy! For freethinkers, Finland is a splendidly rewarding country.

A lovely evil Bishop turns up in Gwyn Thomas' new novel about Don Juan, *The Love Man* (Gollancz, 13s. 6d.). The Bishop guzzles wine in his palace built over dungeons that distil the evil of time. The Governor of the Province says to this cleric: "A Bishop cannot be pushed too far, Bishop. In terms of absurdity he has covered the course." Later, when Don Juan is hauled off by the Bishop's servants to his Court of the Inquisition, the famous lover cries: "Looking at you, Inquisitor, I would say there are pursuits more humiliating than lust."

There are some amusing digs at the mumbo-jumbo of religion in another new novel, *Sheldrake* by Michael Wharton (Blond and Wingate, 13s. 6d.). This book brilliantly satirises the absurdity of regional patriotism and describes a city in the North of England which is out for its own flag and independence, and invents its own religion. The Archbishop preaches a heavenly gibberish sermon

in the Cathedral, which includes such gems as: "Oh, the sorrow of those years! under the dominion of giants, celibate sundials, who believed that it is better to marry than to be born"; but now "the wasp shall lie down in the jam," for "ours is the candle, the tower and the promontory!"

Afterwards, there is a communion service, with so many things to eat it might be a kind of harvest festival. The Archbishop, brandishing a fork in one hand and crossing himself with the other, greedily eats large red sausages, and from the participants at the communion table comes "a noise of gulping and swilling, mingled with the intoning of prayers, the bellowing of the organ, and the shouting of people down the aisle."

From New Zealand

HERE THE CHURCHES ARE FIGHTING hard to preserve the sanctity (and dullness) of the Sabbath. However, in the Dominion's largest city, Auckland, it would seem that they are losing the fight. Recently their influence was insufficient to prevent a huge athletic display on a Sunday. The Zoo also opened, the Maori Community Centre ran a monster concert, while a number of suburban cinemas were open, having obtained the necessary authority. The Churches have little chance of stemming the tide where sport and entertainment are concerned.

The Churches are campaigning to extend religious teaching in the State schools and have tried to get the new Education Minister on their side. A heartening reaction has been the forthright opposition of the President of the N.Z. Educational Institute, who said on a public occasion: "The Institute holds firmly to the belief that the child's religious education [What a misnomer!] belongs to the home and the Church and not to the school." Teachers' delegates, at another conference, are instructed to press for the retention of the present system as against Church demands.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been running into trouble. Having booked the Levin District War Memorial Hall (near the capital), the local Servicemen's Association made strong protests and the Council revoked its decision and returned the money to the Watch Tower Society, which had booked the hall. This was followed by a series of similar refusals elsewhere.

The Servicemen said the Witnesses had hindered the war effort. Possibly—but I recall war sermons by the R.C. hierarchy during and after the war which came very near to subversive activity, and to which the Servicemen's Association turned a deaf ear.

ARTHUR O'HALLORAN.

Conscientious Objection

THOSE who think the days of religious prejudice are over should be interested in a solicitor's letter received by a member of the National Secular Society and reader of THE FREETHINKER. A Coventry man, he wished to remember the Secular Society Ltd. in his will, and he approached a well-known firm of solicitors in his city. Asked what was the function of the S.S. Ltd., he told the solicitor that it was anti-Christian. Later came this letter, dated June 21st, 1958:

"Dear Sir,—Upon reflection, the writer feels unable to deal with the instructions to draw your will upon conscientious grounds. He believes strongly that without Christianity this world would be a far worse and unhappier place; and is not prepared to assist in succouring any society pledged to destroy Christianity.

"He must therefore decline to deal with your instructions.—Yours faithfully, (Signed) ———."

Review

By H. CUTNER

A Challenge to Christianity by J. B. Coates. 206 pages. (Watts, 1958.)

THIS WORK is almost entirely a "challenge" from the Humanist point of view—as if, in the main, Humanism had something very much better to offer the world than Christianity. The difficulty I have, and always have had, is that Humanism, however Mr. Coates may define it, contains so much that nearly any Christian can accept it.

Mr. Coates appears (to me) to have very little use for the past "challenges" to Christianity. Bradlaugh, Ingersoll, Paine, Foote, are never mentioned. He hardly touches on the credibility or authenticity of the Gospels. He does, it is true, just mention the theory that Jesus may not have existed, but it has no interest for him. He admits that "God and Christ have made no unequivocal pronouncement on the great issues of our time" without explaining how was it possible for "Christ" to do so. He feels that "Christian teaching" goes back to "the sayings of Jesus," which he describes as "wise"—though, of course, of more use to the communities of his own time. Never does he stop and seriously ask himself whether these "wise" sayings were ever uttered, and explain how hating one's parents (for instance) could be applicable to the Jews of 30 A.D.?

Mr. Coates's chapter on a "Humanist Revolution in the School" made me gasp. If any Humanist Revolution could accomplish what he claims could be or might be accomplished, then every school in England would have nothing but top boys and girls in the classes. There would be no dunces, and the children would all be M.A.s in no time.

In my younger days I was for some years connected with a very good preparatory school, and we had relics of the Montessori and A. S. Neill systems (which he favours) of "free" schools to re-educate. Perhaps we were unlucky, but bigger fools than these children would be hard to imagine. I pity any child who has been "educated" under the true Montessori tradition—though no doubt for mentally deficient Italian children it may have had some uses. Mr. Coates advocates "the right of the child to play his part in deciding school questions," and thinks it ought to be guaranteed by law. The ex-Montessori pupils would have supported this wholeheartedly, and no doubt (to my mind at least) they would have decided on abolishing not only "school questions," but quite possibly all schools. I was not surprised, however, to find that even with Mr. Coates "second thoughts" prevailed because he later hastily informs us, "It should perhaps be added that the freedom of the child is plainly not a right to disorder and riot," a right which all the Montessori pupils I met thought was part of the teaching. However, due to my own obtuseness no doubt, I find Mr. Coates often has "second thoughts," and between what he says on one page and what he says on another there may be a world of difference.

Perhaps I am doing him an injustice, but I think he would advocate in *all* schools what he says "large schools are able to provide." That is, "a well-equipped theatre to serve also the purposes of cinema and concert hall, a swimming bath, workshop, studios, and a good library." In fact, "the concern of humanism (is) for the principle of consent, for responsible freedom, choice, creativeness," and this "implies far-reaching changes." No doubt; and with these and many of Mr. Coates's other suggestions, somebody will be called upon to foot the bill. Education runs now into hundreds of millions every year; all rate-

payers must view with some apprehension its running into as many thousands of millions. Here is a specimen curriculum:

The pupil should learn something of Greek thought and ideals and institutions, of Roman law, of the religious experience of the Jewish people. They should learn of the rise of the great religions, of the lives and teachings of their founders. The great movements of history should be outlined, the growth of the Middle Ages with its integrated thought and hierarchical society, the emergence of the Reformation and Renaissance, the rise of liberalism and capitalism. Some account should be given of the great non-European civilisations. . . .

Personally I feel that a good grounding—and I mean a good grounding—in the three R's, that is, Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, with some work in science, history, and craftsmanship, will pay pupils far more than the ability to detail Jewish religious experience. But Mr. Coates says not a word as to the cost of finding competent teachers and fully equipped schools. Will they be so easily found?

Then Mr. Coates has a go at our journals and newspapers, many of which he dislikes wholeheartedly. "The great newspapers," he tells us, "should be independent public corporations operating on a charter," and

their aim to provide an adequate service of news and comment, to elucidate issues, to stimulate intelligent and informed controversy, to build the spirit of community through communication.

Some of us remember that all this could well fit the British Broadcasting Corporation, which also is "independent" and operates "on a charter." We also remember the many intelligent and informed controversies we get broadcast with the participants very carefully chosen so that people with Mr. Coates's sensitive nature to discussions he does not like, carefully guarded against "heretical" debates. I am pretty sure if Mr. Coates's suggestions were all put into practice, nine tenths of the number of journals and newspapers would simply disappear. As far as I can make out, he never tells us *who* is going to decide what we should or should not hear or read. Will it be a "humanist"? Even publishing firms "should function under public charter" and "no consideration but that of merit should determine the choice of books for publication." Here again "the humanist" would, of course, be the judge of what should or should not be published. But nowhere does Mr. Coates tell us what qualifications these Humanists have for making their judgments? To put it another way, what Mr. Coates is arguing for is the severest kind of censorship so long as it is done in the name of "humanism."

That "creative" artists in the fields of literature, art, and music have often a rotten time we must admit, but in the end genius prevails, if not always during a great artist's lifetime. Some of Rembrandt's greatest paintings were despised during his lifetime; so were Van Gogh's. Under Mr. Coates's suggestions, both these artists would have been, if possible, eliminated. Van Gogh especially, for he hardly sold a single picture during his lifetime. And now? They are worth more than their weight in gold.

That all kinds of reforms are necessary in this complex world of ours I admit, but I cannot recognise that Utopian hopes emanating from some very vague "Humanism" practised by Humanists who would receive Mr. Coates's warmest recommendations, would help us very much.

But what about his "challenge" to Christianity? As my space has run out, I will reserve this for another article.

(To be concluded)

This Believing World

Although Canada is prominently a Catholic country, there is a strong Presbyterian element among the people, and their leaders are now accusing them of not being "loyal" to the Church. And what is this disloyalty? Declared Mr. Dutton, who is the chairman of the board of administration: "We have multitudes of people who make no contribution to the work of our Church. If they were to do so, we would have no money problems whatever." Thus it is not at all a question of doctrine so stoutly believed in by all Presbyterians—but a question of hard *cash*.

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This seems to have been the worry of all the great leaders of the Church. When Peter or his followers murdered Ananias and his wife and blamed God for it, the motive was based entirely on money. Mr. and Mrs. Ananias probably believed all Peter believed and perhaps even more. But they didn't pay up—a most terrible crime. Of course they lied—but when it comes to money . . .!

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Anybody who disbelieves in Devils and Demons should get in touch with the Rev. Shulldham Shaw, who is, according to the *Sunday Dispatch*, "The Man Who Fights Demons." He ridicules those Rationalists and Scientists who have the temerity to "scoff," for "devils exist as they always have done." He was once called in to save a terrified curate from a Devil in a church—"The sense of evil was shocking. . . . And behind the organ . . . well, it was absolutely terrible . . . it stank of the devil." So Mr. Shaw set to work.

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As a first rate exorcist and armed with Holy Water and a Cross, he had no difficulty in routing the infernal gent, with the result that, "At one moment there had been," he said, "the pervading sense of evil, the next utter emptiness." Mr. Shaw thinks any Christian can cast out a Devil if he has faith—but it appears that he has to have some Holy Water and a Cross as well. In other words, Faith is not enough. But he frankly admits he has never seen "flames" or "auras" hopping about. And now what have scoffing Rationalists and Scientists to say?

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Theosophists do not get much publicity these days—perhaps because such eminent leaders like Mme. Blavatsky and Mrs. Besant are difficult to replace. We note, however, that one of Mme. Blavatsky's followers, Mr. C. W. Barratt, who believes in "elementals" and no doubt everything that redoubtable lady poured into the *Secret Doctrine*, has "a bash" at scientists in *Psychic News*. "What right has Science," he stridently asks, "to present the public with a roasted and packeted theory of life and evolution. . . .?" He tells us that "one could make a list as long as one's arm of fundamental facts of which Science knows nothing whatever."

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Science, he adds, "knows nothing whatever" of consciousness, mind, electricity, magnetism, psychic-states, heredity, death, and only the most fragmentary and outwardly operative knowledge of matter." The Theosophical "operative words" are "nothing whatever." For sheer ignorance this would be hard to beat even among students of Theosophy. Science knows a great deal of them all, and knows immeasurably more than all the bunch of Theosophists put together. Mr. Barratt actually calls fire "the greatest scientific bogey on earth"; and with that typical piece of Theosophical nonsense we can leave the "all-knowing" believer in "elementals," Spiritualism, and the Occult. It would be a waste of time to deal with him.

The Bishop of Ripon—who is, by the way, a bachelor—has certainly raised a howl of anger even among those of his brethren who always talk about turning the other cheek and loving each other. He refuses to give "Holy Communion" to a couple who want to get married in a church because the bridegroom has been divorced, though he is the innocent partner. Personally, we feel that anybody who wants Holy Communion at all should be ruled by his Church and his Bishop. If he won't obey the rules, then he should get out, and get married according to the law of the land. Does he not know that a Church marriage is *not* legal by itself? Holy Communion doesn't make a marriage legal or even a success any more than eating fish and chips.

Women, The World and War

I HAVE JUST COME BACK from an international women's conference at Mannheim, where women of 20 countries were represented—mainly business and professional women. I would be surprised to learn that, other than myself, there was a freethinker among them, although some seemed to have a reasonable outlook on international affairs. These women are supposed to foster friendship towards their kindred business and professional sisters all over the world, but my observations lead me to believe that many will only go so far, and draw the line at attitudes which might have an effect on their business interests.

While at Mannheim I made friends with many German women, and discussed various questions, but the lesson that impressed me most was the stupidity and artificiality of war. Only a few short years ago it would almost have been thought treasonable to have been friendly with these people. Now that attitude of unreasoning hostility has switched to Russia, and even some freethinkers fall into the trap of being led to hate people they do not know, and may never meet. This kind of propoganda is produced by the religious, political, and military groups.

When I was in Moscow last October I met representatives of women's organisations who were very anxious to meet their counterparts in other parts of the world, and discuss problems. This would be one way of helping to resolve differences. The men don't seem to be very successful, but the women might do it yet. I am doing all I can in this respect.

I feel sure that the great progress that has been made in Russia is in large part due to the fact that most of the younger people are atheists. Unlike us, the Russians have discovered that it is no use expecting God's help in these matters, so they get on with the job themselves, and the results are plain to see. I am saying this quite regardless of politics. It is not, it seems to me, essentially a matter of politics so much as a matter of the attitude of mind, and the atheistic attitude of mind—we must do it ourselves and not rely on "god"—is evident among the ordinary people one meets in the Moscow streets. So, whatever the future of world politics, it is obvious that there is a future for the freethought attitude of mind—provided that we can prevent nuclear war and ensure a future for the world.

KATHLEEN TACCHI-MORRIS.

—NEXT WEEK—

THE DARWIN-WALLACE CENTENARY

By DR. EDWARD ROUX

THE FREETHINKER

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

J. F. BROADHURST.—Thanks for interesting information.

Lecture Notices, Etc.

INDOOR

Orpington Humanist Group (Sherry's Restaurant).—Sunday, July 13th, 7 p.m.: G. ELPHICK, "Marriage and Family Life in Primitive Societies."

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, July 14th, 7 p.m.: Mrs. MARY STOCKS, "What Have Women Done With Their Votes?"

OUTDOOR

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

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

London (Tower Hill).—Thursday, 12-2 p.m.: Messrs. J. W. BARKER and L. EBURY.

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

Merseyside Branch N.S.S. (Pierhead).—Every Wednesday, 1 p.m.; every Sunday, 7.30 p.m.: Various speakers.

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. Sunday, 11.30 a.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

Wales and Western Branch N.S.S. (The Downs, Bristol).—Every Sunday, 6.30 p.m. D. SHIPPER.

West London Branch N.S.S.—Every Sunday at the Marble Arch from 5 p.m.: Messrs. L. EBURY and A. ARTHUR.

Notes and News

THE prevalence of jokes and cartoons in the press at the expense of the Lambeth Conference may be taken as some indication of the general attitude towards the Established Church. It is nowadays treated with indifference or amusement. The cartoons culminated (to the time of writing) in the *Daily Express* (4/7/58), where Cummings portrayed Dr. Fisher and five attendant Bishops lined up, brandishing scissors and saws, alongside an absurdly short Procrustean bed named "The Church's Dogma," on which lay "20th Century Man," much too long in the arm and leg and awaiting amputation. The caption delivered the coup de grâce to the Church: "Well, my dear sir, we've made you an admirable bed—now we'll adjust you to fit it."

THE electorate of Gellgaer Urban District (main town, Bargoed) voted in favour of Sunday cinemas, defeating the Churches in a 37% poll by 5,487 to 3,221.

SLOUGH Humanist Group continues to get a very good local press. The *Express* reported a recent meeting at which a Roman Catholic priest, Father Anthony Hulme,

was the speaker, and referred to the fact that most of the Group "profess atheistic views." Father Hulme denied that the Roman Catholic Church was reactionary in spirit. It was, he said, the "great protagonist of liberty." Asked then why it placed certain books on the Index, he countered by asking if the audience knew which books were on the Index. The name of one book being mentioned, he retorted: "Well, who wants to read that nonsense anyway!" On evolution, the Father seemed singularly lacking in inspiration. "I don't believe in evolution, and I don't disbelieve in it. I am waiting for proof." A nice example of Catholic scepticism.

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CRITIC (Mr. Kingsley Martin) of the *New Statesman* made good a deficiency in the other obituaries of Douglas Jardine, famous England cricket captain. Off the field, he pointed out, Jardine was "a gently spoken, warm-hearted philosopher, who detested the Christian religion." What a pity, though, that Rationalist Mr. Martin perpetuated the old error of equating Christianity with morality, so that Jardine became "more than commonly Christian in his private behaviour."

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ONE of our readers, Mrs. C. N. Tole of Tonbridge, recently wrote to the Dean of St. Paul's, asking him how he reconciled the existence of an omnipotent God with the suffering of innocent animals. In reply Dean Matthews tried to blind his correspondent with philosophical definitions. He would like to know what Mrs. Tole understood by "omnipotent." Our reader referred the Dean to the Concise Oxford Dictionary definition, only to receive the following: "I have not got the dictionary you mention, but do you mean by omnipotent the power to do everything conceivable or everything that is possible, e.g., do you consider that it includes the ability to make $2+2=5$? Yours sincerely, W. R. Matthews." Realising the impossibility of conducting a satisfactory argument, Mrs. Tole replied: "I am not sure if omnipotence includes the ability to make $2+2=5$, but I assume it includes the ability to make $3=1:1=3!$ "

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SPIRITUALIST infuriation at the negative nature of the Church of England's commission on spiritual healing may be mitigated by the, at least partial, admission of demonic possession. Not overmuch, though, we fear, for the report contains many qualifications. "There is a danger in the misuse of exorcism, and the patient must be carefully examined both medically and spiritually, the doctor and the priest working in close collaboration." "Exorcism should be practised only with the authority of the diocesan bishop." As has been noted in "This Believing World," Spiritualism, as well as Christian Science, is frowned on. But perhaps the worst rub of all was the plain admission that "Some members of the committee were not persuaded that demons may cause any malady."

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A READER in British Columbia sends us details of the heated controversy concerning Sir Jacob Epstein's giant figure of Christ, which—in the words of the *Vancouver Province*—"Vancouver is going to get . . . whether it likes it or not." It is very apparent that many people don't like it, describing it as "too horrible to behold," "atrocious," "infamous," "a hideous monstrosity"; instead of "gentle Jesus." The merits or demerits of the statue need not concern us here, but the reaction of our reader's 10-year-old granddaughter is worth repeating. Hearing a lady viewer remark that it looked as though Christ had webbed feet, the little girl promptly commented: "So that's why he could walk on the water!"

Avicenna—a Persian Rationalist

By F. A. RIDLEY

IT HAS BEEN NOTED before in this column that the evolution of human culture appears to have been characterised by alternate periods of Eastern and Western supremacy. So far, neither East nor West appears to have been in their prime together; periods of successive Oriental and Occidental culture appear to have emerged alternatively. Thus, human civilisation, in the Old World at least, appears to have originated in the East, in the fertile valleys of the Nile, the Euphrates and the Indus; subsequently at about the 6th century prior to the Christian era, it migrated West to Greece, and later, Rome. Throughout the Middle Ages, the centres of culture migrated to the East only to return to the West at the Renaissance, which, during the 19th century, became almost synonymous with human civilisation. This has again proved a premature view as the current resurgence of Asia (and nowadays, Africa also) indicates.

It is useful to recall this alternative cycle of culture before proceeding to glance at an unusual and most absorbing book by a Persian scholar, Dr. Soheil M. Afnan, which has just been published in London and deals with the biography and cosmopolitan influence of an eminent Persian philosopher of the 11th century Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna who, whilst nowadays forgotten in the West—at least by everyone except a few Oriental specialists—wielded in his own era an international influence. His name was nearly as well known in the Western Universities of Oxford and Paris as it was in his native land, Persia, and throughout the Muslim world from India to Spain. For Avicenna was a universal man, an encyclopædic genius almost of the calibre of Aristotle in antiquity or Leonardo da Vinci in the Italian renaissance. Physical science, medicine, literature, philosophy and, last but not least, religion, came within his scope. Furthermore, his name and fame along with those of his Moorish successor, Averroes, were almost as well known in the Christian West as in the Muslim East. As Dr. Afnan indicates with a wealth of detail, the medieval Catholic doctors, Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon, knew and admired—even when they opposed—the works of the celebrated Persian thinker. Dante placed him in Limbo amongst the noble, but unbaptised Pagans who had escaped Hell; whilst Chaucer mentions him by name in the *Canterbury Tales*. That was in the Christian West; in the East, as Dr. Afnan also indicates, Avicenna possessed an almost legendary reputation, though his philosophy, in particular his bold modernism in relation to Islamic orthodoxy, aroused the wrath of the Muslim devotees of the Koran. In particular, Al Ghazali, "The Proof of Islam," the Muslim equivalent of St. Thomas Aquinas, launched a terrific attack on the Muslim rationalists, of whom Avicenna was the most famous, in a book written under the devastating title of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. At a later date Avicenna's fellow-heretic and successor, Averroes, went one better still; he launched a counter-attack upon Ghazali under the still more formidable title of *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. A man who could draw the fire of both Aquinas, the greatest of Catholic theologians, and of Al Ghazali, the most famous pillar of Muslim orthodoxy, not to mention allusions to him in Dante and Chaucer, was evidently a figure in world literature, as this term was currently understood in the

limited world of medieval times.

Avicenna was born in 980 near Bokhara on the Persian frontier, and died in 1037 A.D. His life coincided with one of the most brilliant periods in Persian and Oriental history. For this was the Golden Age of Islam, which coincided with the maximum retrogression of the Christian West. The 10th century in Europe contemporary with Avicenna's birth, represented about the darkest century in the European Dark Ages. In the East, however, the irruption of the vigorous Arab barbarians who were the first Crusaders of Islam, had led to the rise of a new and extremely vigorous civilisation which found its best known expression at the Court of the Abbassid Khalifs of Baghdad and which produced *The Arabian Nights* in literature and important developments in science and, in particular, in mathematics and astronomy, as is still evident from such names of Arabic origin as Algebra and the names of such stars as Algol, Aldebaran, Beltegeuse, etc. (A more sinister term in our vocabulary, "Assassin," was derived from the same source, from the "Hashishim," the Hashish-drugged killers of the "Old Man of the Mountain," a fanatical sect of that era). At the time of Avicenna this brilliant culture was still at its peak, though the political power of the great Khalifs of Baghdad which had reached its zenith under Haroun al Rashid and Al-Mamun in the 9th century was already in decline. Fortunately for himself, Avicenna lived before the terrible obliteration of this brilliant civilisation by the Tartar barbarians of Jenghis Khan and Tamerlane in the 13th and 14th centuries; one of the most terrible massacres in the recorded annals of mankind, and from which Western Asia did not recover for centuries.

It is a moot point on which we would welcome fresh light in succeeding works by the learned Persian author; how far Avicenna, Averroes and the whole species of Muslim "Philosophers" of which these were the best-known names, can accurately be described as Muslims at all, or whether even the brilliant culture which produced them, ought really to be described as an authentic *Muslim* culture at all. Such famous modern Western rationalists as Buckle, Draper and Gibbon—all of whom wrote at length on this subject, appear to argue that this was a genuinely Islamic culture; but the views of a Persian scholar like Dr. Afnan would be particularly interesting upon this topic. Certainly the religious views of Avicenna as here described do not appear to have much in common with the creed of the Koran and with the basic Muslim dogmas. Did Avicenna really believe in a personal god or in personal immortality? For that matter, did Aristotle, whom both Christian and Muslim theologians acknowledged as their common Master, believe in either? Both Avicenna and perhaps, as a result of his influence, the Catholic schoolmen of the Middle Ages, accepted Aristotle's definitions of God as "The Pure Act" and "The Unmoved Mover," but while these definitions are still accepted by both Catholic and Muslim theology, it is still far from clear whether Aristotle, who originally coined them, had really any belief in either a personal god or in personal immortality? At any rate there was always a rationalist wing in the Aristotelian schools! Avicenna and Averroes were the best known representatives of this wing and their claim to be regarded as Muslims at all

must be regarded, I suggest, as at least doubtful. The fact that they called themselves such, proves nothing. Medieval Islam, like medieval Christianity, was a persecuting creed, and the execution of heretics—by stoning—has continued down to modern times. Avicenna, whose fondness for carnal pleasures was notorious, had evidently no desire to become a martyr for his ideas, however little they had in common with the vulgar orthodoxy of the day.

Dr. Afnan's book is not only rather technical in parts, but also labours under the further disadvantage of dealing with a period and people of whom few in the West know much about today. The Middle Ages are so remote from us in thought that we really know much less about them than we do about the classical era. Of Persia in the 10th and

11th centuries we know even less. The present critical study of perhaps the greatest Persian thinker, by a modern Persian scholar, is therefore particularly timely. It will provide readers who are prepared for some serious study, a fascinating glimpse of a vanished civilisation; besides making them acquainted with the encyclopaedic philosophy of a thinker who, in the extent of his influence throughout the later Middle Ages, belongs nearly as much to Europe as to the East. Who, incidentally, has as much (or as little) to do with the evolution of Christianity as with that of Islam.

[*Avicenna: His Life and Works*, by Soheil M. Afnan. George Allen and Unwin, 30s.]

The Lesser Evil

By COLIN McCALL

"THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND has always been frightened of miracles," wrote Rhona Churchill in the *Daily Mail* of June 12th. Personally, I do not blame it. Anglicans are, I think, attempting the impossible when they try to adapt Christianity to the modern world (there is a basic incompatibility), but at least they try. And they do not exploit the credulity of millions with contemptible frauds, as the Roman Catholic Church does at Lourdes, Fatima, and many other places. I am, of course, a strong opponent of our "national" Church, but I am glad to learn that it prefers doctors to faith healers; that the *Report of the Archbishop's Commission on the Church's Ministry of Healing* recognises dramatic "cures" as being, more often than not, merely the natural remission of the disease. This Report also points out that, "Later, when death overtakes the patient, the healer has often lost contact with the case." (I do not, here deal with demoniacal possession, also referred to in the Report.)

Miss Churchill is very dissatisfied with the Report. The Roman Catholic Church, she says, "fears an abundance, and therefore a cheapening of miracles just as keenly as does the Church of England," but it has taken steps "to regulate the supply." "Every miracle claimed," she continues, "is so searchingly and soundly investigated that the few which are officially accepted have withstood the test of time."

This is typical of many statements on the subject by Catholics and non-Catholics, and it is very misleading. Miss Churchill, I take it, is a non-Catholic. Let us now turn to the American Catholic weekly, *The Register* (April 20th). Miracles are not common, it says, but there have been many of them in our own age at Lourdes, "although only about 54 are designated as having passed the severe test of the miraculous." "Yet the Lourdes Medical Bureau has accepted 5,000 cures"—it adds; and concludes—"The Church is more exacting than science!"

It is obviously necessary, in the light of these two short quotations, to clarify the machinery of Lourdes. To identify the Lourdes Medical Bureau with "science," is ludicrous. It is appointed by the Church, and its members are Catholic doctors. Prior to 1947, when Monseigneur Théas, Bishop of Lourdes, felt compelled to reorganise the Bureau, it was, to say the least, quite inadequate; or, to use Dr. D. J. West's adjective, "rudimentary." But it is to this earlier period that the bulk of the 5,000 "cures" belong. Indeed, since its reorganisation it has dealt quite severely with cases retained for further consideration. As these cases are held in abeyance for one year until the

patient can make a second visit to Lourdes, there is a year's lapse between the alleged cure and its recommendation (or rejection) by the Bureau. And of the 36 cases in 1946, reconsidered by the Bureau, 32 were rejected and 4 passed on to the International Medical Commission in Paris, which is the next higher authority. In 1947 the Bureau rejected 69 out of 75 cases and passed on 6 to the Medical Commission. Of these, incidentally, the Commission accepted only 1. Clearly it will take a long time for the reorganised Lourdes Medical Bureau to recommend 5,000 cures at this rate.

The cases that pass the (Paris) International Medical Commission are still not official miracles, however. They then go before an Ecclesiastical Commission. And of six such cases relating to the 1947-1950 period, the Ecclesiastical Commission pronounced three to be miraculous. On the face of it, this process might seem to substantiate Miss Churchill's claim that the cases are "searchingly and soundly investigated." The truth is that the Church authorities are now wise enough to eliminate the obvious frauds and absurdities; that an *appearance* of scientific verification has been instituted which, in fact, is nothing of the sort.

This illusion of scientific verification is safeguarded from general exposure by two main factors: (1) Access to the records, though allegedly easy, is not; and (2) the majority of people are not qualified to investigate them anyway. Dr. Guy Valot, who is qualified to investigate them, is not permitted to do so, for example, because he is known to be critical. Dr. West was allowed to investigate them, and he found all eleven recently proclaimed "miraculous cures" to be wanting when critically examined (see *Eleven Lourdes Miracles*, Duckworth, 1957).

There is some reason to believe that the Church of Rome has its own doubts about the validity of Lourdes cures, because it makes use of one further—and I would add, deliberately dishonest—safeguard. Lourdes is not a dogma of the Church, as Papist propagandists are only too ready to inform an awkward questioner. Indeed, the whole policy of the Roman Catholic Church towards miracles is dishonest. For the benefit of its more intelligent members, and in order to meet opposition, it carefully withholds official recognition of the countless miraculous claims of all kinds from Lourdes and elsewhere. On the other hand, it makes no attempt whatever to prevent the exploitation of these unless they are a positive danger to its own well-being. Thus, whilst Lourdes is not an official dogma, every Roman Catholic paper and every Roman Catholic

diocese "cash in" on it in one way or another.

Not only does this dishonest policy fool its own devotees; many non-Catholics (Miss Churchill e.g.?) are also deceived by it. And this deception is hard to combat. It is far easier to publicise a miracle claim, however wild, than it is to expose one already publicised. A case mentioned by Dr. West will illustrate this. Dr. Fr. Leuret, late President of the Lourdes Medical Bureau, wrote in 1950 that the increased facilities for examining patients at Lourdes had not been wasted for, "in 1949, we had the good fortune to register the cure (which will not, however, be official until after the second examination in 1950) of a little girl of three suffering from cerebral diplegia since birth, whom we had actually examined three days before her cure." Apparently the cure was not confirmed—says Dr. West—"because no account of it has been published, and Dr. Grenet, President of the International Commission, told me he did not know of the case." How many readers of Dr. Leuret would take his statement at its face value? Very many, I think. How many would learn that the miraculous "cure" had somehow got lost or been dropped before it reached the Medical Commission? Very few, I fear. And Dr. West records: "I have been able to discover no other instance in which a cured patient has been examined by the Lourdes Bureau both before and after the event." So much for the "science" of the Lourdes Medical Bureau!

I hope it is now clear why I prefer the Church of England's "fence-squatting"—as Miss Churchill terms it—to the much more dangerous and much less honest "fence-squatting" of the Church of Rome. It is very much the lesser of two evils.

CORRESPONDENCE

LOURDES

I think Dr. Valot's criticism overdone and rather discourteous. I wrote my article to show that the statement that Bernadette saw somebody, which the Church asserts, could be true and that therefore it might be unwise to say it was pure hallucination and that she saw nothing. I simply related, on excellent authority, what I heard in the countryside; and proof that such stories are not uncommon is proved by a recent similar story from *Le Canard Enchaîné*, though the promiscuous peasant lady is in a lower social stratum than my Tarbaise. My story was not solely for the purpose of ridicule; anybody reading the opening of my article with any intelligence would not think so. Also, what does Dr. Valot know of the state of the flora and of the grotto 100 years ago? I have read elsewhere a sharp criticism of Dr. Valot's excessive enthusiasm about his own ideas; he cuts less ice in France than with you. As to the river, I flatly and absolutely disagree with him. On the first day I visited Lourdes I did so with my colleague-host, a doctor who worked at a hospital in Lourdes, and it was he who told me about the Lourdes priests consulting a doctor, as he treated some of them himself. He belongs to a family established in Béarn for over a hundred years; he is honourable, truthful and dignified. He stated categorically that the water was pumped in from the Gave de Pau, and so it is. In a back number of *Paris-Match*, a weekly with a world-wide circulation, there was published in the Télégrammes column a notice of the intention of the Electricité de France to weir off the water above Lourdes and of the vigorous protest of Mgr. Théas, the Bishop of Lourdes, supported by Cardinal Gerlier and other clergy and politicians. Is the Catholic Church so idiotic as to protest so openly to protect a swindle? The protesters categorically stated they wished to protect the flow of water from the Gave de Pau as on that the continued prosperity of the miracle factory depended. To state they simply wished, by a public statement of such gravity, to cover up an old fraud is preposterous and portentously silly. I questioned members of a Glasgow pilgrimage and they really believed the water came from the grotto. The Bonnefont story is irrelevant as the facts are as I state.

J. V. DUHIG.

HUMANIST MORALS

As a Humanist I challenge Mr. Anderson's contention that "if this life is the end, ethics and so-called moral principles are meaningless." Belief in a future life means nothing to me. My

morals and ethics are based upon the observation that men appreciate kindness generally, that honesty is the best policy, and similar observations based on my own personal experience, and that of others. What this has to do with a future life I do not understand. Morals and ethics affect me now, as they do Mr. Anderson. Immoral and non-ethical behaviour are to me irrational and, I believe, will make human life unbearable, if not impossible. This is reason enough for me to wish to maintain my standards.

G. DICKINSON.

HOW I BECAME A FREETHINKER

The first step to my becoming a freethinker was, paradoxically, taken in church. As a lad, I used to attend regularly, taken there by my father, not of my own desire, of course—I preferred the open air or the seaside in our sunny land.

One of the preachers usually dealt with the gospel miracles. One evening I began musing on the numbers mentioned there: 7 and 12 so often. Now 7 is three plus four, and 12 three times four. So I wondered if these numbers were to be taken as fact, or as symbols, my experience telling me that in life these numbers did not so often appear as in the Bible.

The corollary was, were the supposed miracles facts, or just symbolic? As I at 15 never really believed, or could believe, in them as factual, my decision was: "Symbolic."

And that led me on to reject the rest as not factual. So I became a budding secularist. Atheistic books or periodicals had nothing to do with it. I saw them much later only, including THE FREETHINKER, and indeed was glad they confirmed my views.

South Africa.

LEONARD MARTIN.

NO RETURNS

Unlike Thomas Cook and the many agencies who arrange holidays with a return ticket, the Christian Church learned, very early in its development, that one-way tickets are the best, and by issuing excursion tickets for Heaven, with the train not leaving until the client is dead, there is no possibility of him demanding his money back.

PAUL VARNEY.

ROBIN HOOD

I was very interested in J. Martin Alexander's article about Robin Hood. If his theories are correct, and they may well be, as he has obviously put a great deal of research into the subject, they open up a completely new (or alternatively, very ancient!) approach to religious and historical aspects of contemporary society. I was particularly interested in his reference to William Rufus (the "Red King"), and wonder whether we might have something from him on this theme.

L. MONROE.

OBITUARY

We were sorry to hear of the death, at the end of March, of Edward S. Swinson of the North London Branch of the National Secular Society. An artist, Mr. Swinton was a frequent attendee at Hyde Park meetings, where his pleasing company and colourful personality will be missed.

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