

The Freethinker

Volume LXXVIII—No. 37

Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

Price Fivepence

I define Religion as a belief in the existence of a supernatural or extra-natural force or personality which brought the Universe into existence, which regulates its life and working and which can be influenced to alter its allegedly eternal plans by certain methods peculiar to Religion; namely, prayer and ritual. Now, as there is no evidence for this force or personality and as, *a fortiori*, there is no evidence that this non-existent force can be so influenced,

belief in it must be on grounds of what is called "faith", which is reputed to be able to move mountains (I doubt this and would much prefer to use bulldozers). I define religious "Faith" as an effort of the will in defiance of reason to believe something for the truth of which there is no evidence, since, if there were evidence, there would be no need for faith.

This attitude to Truth was bad enough in the "Age of Faith" when there was little else to believe beyond what the priests taught, but in these days when there is super-abundant knowledge about history, anthropology, ethnology, psychology, astronomy, etc., to believe by faith in things for which there is no evidence is downright dishonest. And on top of that, there is a vast field of disagreement in the established religions and all the casuistry in the world will not reduce it one cubit.

Divine Drive

Why then, we ask, does all the drivel about dead bodies coming spontaneously to life, and then floating up to the sky, about virgins having babies, about lamb's blood baths have some moral efficacy, about the virtue of a cannibalistic theophagy, about the beauty of the suffering inflicted, by definition, on humans by a malignant god, and all the repulsive superstition of the Christian mythology; why, we ask, does this obviously insane rubbish survive? And it does survive. I was reading recently a French review and, being interested in the matter indicated by the title of an article by a French Jesuit priest, I turned to it. It was headed by a quotation from a sermon by Bossuet, as follows: "*Qu'est-ce que l'esprit du christianisme?—Esprit de fraternité, esprit de tendresse et de compassion, qui nous fait sentir les maux de nos frères, entrer dans leurs intérêts, souffrir de leurs besoins.*" I thought of the tenderness and compassion of Torquemada, of Bloody Mary, of the Esprit of the decree *de haeretico comburendo* and the extermination of the Lollards; of Franco, Stepinac; and, as for suffering for our needs, did any priest starve or join a soup queue during the terrible depression of the thirties? Has any bishop, priest or parson ever been on the dole? Not on your life. As I felt the learned Jesuit really believed that the quotation from Bossuet was true, we parted company. I have no truck with people who believe flagrant and obvious falsehoods. Yet they survive.

Religion and Morality

I believe there are two reasons. One is that people still are mesmerised into believing that religion and morals are

identical when, in fact, there is not the remotest identity. Religion is a set of beliefs in things that are simply not true and a routine of prayer and ritual in elaborate, but comical, fancy dress and its only influence on conduct is demonstrably for the worse. Morals are what man has evolved to suit his needs for a properly regulated code of conduct in organised societies; this evolution is still going on and is purely secular; today, our code of laws is made

by men elected on a democratic suffrage by free people liberated from canon law imposed by self-elected priests from above and enforced by the cruellest penalties. The best that we can say of priests and parsons is that they sometimes do act as moral

policemen, just as secular officers of government do without having to subscribe to the preposterous rubbish taught by the Churches.

God and Mammon

The other reason for survival of religion is that it pays; if it ceased to pay, it would die and as it is ceasing to pay, it is dying but much too slowly.

And that is all that Religion is for—to keep priests in luxurious, parasitic idleness. For his £10,000 or so per annum, what does the Archbishop contribute to human progress? Queen Victoria knew her bishops when she wrote, "The Queen thanks the Archbishop of Canterbury very much for his kind letter giving an account of the meeting of the bishops at Lambeth . . . The Archbishop will have had the opportunity of making many interesting acquaintances". And she might have enquired, if she did not already know the empty answer, "And, Your Grace, what exactly did the meeting of bishops do"? My answer is the cube root of minus zero.

The Fruits of Belief

And now, we may ask, what does Religion do? To a large extent, it produces criminals and unhappy frustrated minds and dark clouded minds. It subsidises hypocrisy, as in the monk I once heard say from a pulpit that he was not interested in money; he had taken a vow of poverty. His pulpit robes were of the finest stuffs; his outfit would be worth at least £50. His suit, when he walked abroad, would cost £40, his shoes £6 and so on. He lived in a quarter of a million pound palace, he had exquisite food, a room to himself, all the books he wanted inside the papal censorship system; all this was paid for by somebody and he lived luxuriously and parasitically in "holy poverty".

Religion and Crime

This equivocal ethic is rampant amongst the clerics and their unhealthy sex ethic transferred to their flocks produces the rending frustrations that make Catholics the worst sex crime exponents in the world; figures from Holland and Belgium on this point are very revealing. And in crime generally Catholics lead the way by streets while the non-religious are hardly at all represented in

—VIEWS and OPINIONS—

Religion : What Good is It?

—By Dr. J. V. DUHIG—

the prison statistics. It is hard to see why free democratic peoples tolerate this system of disreputable superstition. Religion is not only no use (except for the sale of fake fire insurance to the credulous) it is a menace to peace, order and good government; without it the world could seriously start to be a happy, tolerant place without the hate-promoting divisive force of institutional wealth—and power—drunk religions. The Jesus myth is a failure as people who now read the Bible critically and honestly know that

Jesus was a vain, bad tempered, irresponsible egotist whose menacing threats to people who could not honestly agree with him was the first sample of millennial intolerance in history right from the original Christian source. Reverent Rationalism is wasted time and breath: the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal of Westminster will not move out until outraged public opinion forces them to, and go they must. They are a blight on the social landscape.

“Creation’s Amazing Architect”

By H. CUTNER

(continued from page 283)

I need hardly say that there is not the slightest evidence that dividing “waters from waters” really means the “creation” of amphibia or insects; nor is there the slightest evidence that one set of “waters” means “clouds” and the same word in the same verse means “oceans.” It is pure, unadulterated ignorance on the part of the heavenly writer. He obviously thought that the “vault” of “heaven” was something solid like a hemisphere the edges of which rested on the flat earth like an inverted cup on a saucer.

Mr. Beasley* tells us that “dry land” appeared on the third day because God said “Let the dry land appear.” Scientific geology tells of the Cambrian, the Ordovian and Silurian eras during which dry land surged “upwards,” and this proves that it must have appeared during the third day of “Creation.” The impudence of this need only be referred to here. It would take a lot of beating even by the most ignorant girl in the Salvation Army.

Obviously, the Genesis writer had to make dry land follow an earth which at first he described as without “form and void.” The animals had to live somewhere. And he had to provide them with food, so he made his God bring forth herbs and seeds, etc., to feed them. It was just guesswork, but quite logical guesswork. If animals are “created” they have to be fed. But the difference between the scientific account and the primitive story in Genesis is fundamental. Geology posits enormous periods of time for each era, while evolution insists that it took hundreds of millions of years before the various amphibia and animals began to shape as we know them. They did not appear in one or two *days* as Mr. Beasley claims on his chart.

Of course he knows very well that the “days” of Genesis is just drivel. So he does his best to fog the reader with extracts from various modern scientific writers. And he puts in his own comments which look as if science was in full agreement with Genesis, like this one:

The modern scientist, even if he cannot give the precise origin of the earth, at least realises that it is part of the universe around it. He realises that, whatever may be the origin of other spheres, the earth had a similar origin. The Genesis writer agrees in this, that the origin of all heavenly bodies is to be found in a creative act of God.

This passage is typical of Mr. Beasley—for if not carefully read it looks as if, because the modern scientist cannot give a “precise” account of the origin of the earth, the Genesis writer fully agrees, and therefore “the origin” of all heavenly bodies is due to a “creative act of God.” What a “creative act of God” really means is something we all must understand because it is in the Bible and because Genesis is literally true. As I have already intimated, I can fancy nothing so supremely silly even in the most foolish Fundamentalist tracts which have come my way. And just one other comment. Whenever Genesis does not support modern geology, overboard it goes and Mr. Beasley runs to Job—admitted to be a more or less pagan poem which somehow or other got into the old Testa-

ment—and quotes some of its poetical imagery as “science.” For example, Job says that God “hangeth the earth upon nothing” and so we get an illustration of the earth on “nothing”; but we are *not* given an illustration of the anger of the Lord “which shaketh the earth out of her place and the pillars thereof tremble.” Nor an illustration of “the pillars of heaven” trembling. Job certainly thought both the earth and heaven were supported on pillars.

Nothing is more typical of the defenders of the Genesis story than the way they try to get over the various “daily” creations. Mr. Beasley in his two-page illustration of “Creation,” calls each day a “day,” just as the “Holy Record” does; but in his “commentary,” he calmly tells us “Days can be eras.” It appears that the Hebrew language “has words that have rather elastic meanings”—that is, I suppose, you stretch them to fit any theory. Nothing in Scripture is so clear and unambiguous than the word “day” in the first chapter of Genesis. “And the evening and the morning were the first day” makes the meaning unequivocally clear. But even if that were not so, there is the famous Commandment, the Gibraltar of Sabbatarians, “Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work. But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God . . . for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth . . . and rested the seventh day . . .” No attempt to make the “days” of Genesis “epochs” or “eras” can dissolve this clear injunction and statement. The Lord thy God did not rest during an “era,” and in giving that Commandment to the Israelites, he was not asking them to abstain from work for an epoch. Besides, how long is an “epoch”? We know that the reign of the great reptiles and monsters like the Ichthyosaurus lasted some 150 million years. Some “day”!

Verse 4 in Genesis 1 is not dealt with by Mr. Beasley in his illustration of “Creation,” and no wonder. For it says that “God divided the light from the darkness”—a most illuminating statement which has caused much laughter among physicists when compared with the *fourth* day. For on the fourth day we get God “creating” lights “to divide the day from the night.” Mr. Beasley does not attempt any explanation of this typical piece of sheer—though divine—nonsense, but tells us this *proves* the great “climatic” changes which physicists have noted, as well as “stupendous changes in Earth’s crust.” It also proves that there were coal-beds in Australia. What else? “Desert conditions in Europe.” Will the reader please note that the coal-beds and desert conditions, etc., are all inferred from God “dividing” night from day.

(To be concluded)

—NEXT WEEK—

FACTS AND FANCIES ON LOURDES

By J. M. CROWLEY

*Creation’s Amazing Architect; Marshall, 8/6.

Flights of Fancy

By COLIN McCALL

DO YOU WANT a very unusual, perhaps unique little book? One that will puzzle you, intrigue you, stimulate you? Then Axel Stern's *Metaphysical Reverie* may well be what you are after. I say "may" because it will certainly not suit everybody's palate. But for three and sixpence it is worth tasting. It does not, and Mr. Stern would not claim that it intends to provide a full philosophical meal. It is rather one of those quite exquisitely prepared hors d'œuvres that you may like or dislike. Personally I like it, so let me tell you about it.

It is short, just 31 pages, attractively produced, with a photograph of the author and a number of abstract drawings by Jean Krillé. It is short because Mr. Stern likes short books, particularly on philosophy. As a professional philosopher he has to read many massive tomes and attend many tedious philosophical congresses. I can appreciate his desire to keep the work short.

Born in Leipzig in 1912, Axel Stern was brought up a Protestant. He had a classical schooling; studied physics, crystallography and chemistry at the universities of Jena, Zurich, Goettingen and Geneva; then turned to psychology and, finally, philosophy, which he has taught at Edinburgh and the University of Hull, where he is now Lecturer. Early in life he recognised the contradictions in Christianity. What he attempts in *Metaphysical Reverie* is to overcome these difficulties, purely as a logical exercise.

In fact, he does not believe in metaphysics. He considers it irrelevant in philosophy; yet he likes it and he thinks it "worth while to show that to be non-metaphysical does not mean either being deprived of the 'metaphysical urge' or having repressed it." We may—he writes—"simply have put it aside once we have realised its philosophical irrelevance." But "if metaphysics had a bearing on reality, this is what I should have to say..."

It is essentially in the light of these words that the book must be read. Mr. Stern, disbelieving in Christianity or metaphysics, propounds a metaphysic for Christianity. The universe is evolving towards God, who "as yet is not, but of whose coming we are aware through the existence of the soul." God is (or will be) "All-Spirit": the goal of Nature, which proceeds through three aspects, the inorganic world, the organic world, and the spiritual world, represented by the human soul. The spiritual world will achieve its perfect blossoming in God, the All-Spirit.

In fine, Mr. Stern constructs a concise theology just for intellectual and æsthetic pleasure. But within his terms of reference, he manages to illumine one or two vexed philosophical problems. Determinism, for example, on which he is worth repeating. If causes are unknown or unknowable, he says, "this in no way affects the determinist principle, which is the principle of causality. This is what certain modern physicists forget when they declare the principle of causality to have been shaken, or even to be false, because they find it impossible, in principle or in fact, to discover the causes of certain phenomena. It has always been impossible, in fact as in principle, to discover all the determining causes of human volition. But who would have inferred from this that determinism had been proved false in this domain? By the mere fact that he carries on his research, the physicist acknowledge the principle of causality, and so do all other scientists."

When his reverie is ended, Mr. Stern gives us some serious comments on the character of metaphysics. Metaphysical realism (which he uses as meaning "a global and comprehensive view of reality and its nature") and pheno-

menism ("experimentally verifiable theories, interpretations, and predictions") have merely heuristic value, he suggests. "Whenever the one has led to an impasse we turn to the other, and *vice versa*." In fact, he says, scientific progress is dialectical in its fundamental approach. Newton's mechanics, for instance, owed much to the former method, whereas the development of thermodynamics was largely phenomenistic.

Traditionally, however, metaphysicians lay claim to "truth." There being no "decision-procedure" regarding the verification of the truth or falsehood of metaphysical assertions, logical empiricists regard metaphysics as nonsense. But to say—as the logical empiricists do—that "all metaphysics is literally meaningless and non-sense, and to leave the matter at that," appears to Mr. Stern to be unsatisfactory. May we not call the grin of the Cheshire Cat a "metaphysical grin"? Well, then, it is an idea which Lewis Carroll had and which we can share. It is *literally* meaningless, but surely not *wholly* meaningless. Or, if you prefer it, it has "emotionally or notionally associative meaning," as opposed to "logical (literal) meaning." Indeed, whatever anybody says has *some* meaning, though it may not be worth while trying to discover it. Metaphysics may perhaps be described as "a more or less systematic elaboration or elimination of childhood (and some adolescent or adult) dreams and nightmares." There is nothing wrong with metaphysics, says Mr. Stern, so long as we recognise it to be "metaphorics."

I think I have said enough to confirm my opening sentence. If you want something different: the fanciful—but not over-fanciful—play of an acute mind on a usually solemn subject, enter into *Metaphysical Reverie* with Axel Stern.

[*A Metaphysical Reverie*, by Axel Stern. Gaberboochus Press Ltd., London, 1956. 3s. 6d.]

EDITORIAL NOTE

Articles on Atheism from the pen of Dr. Axel Stern will be appearing in THE FREETHINKER soon.—Ed.

From Japan

Nobuo Iizuka (Professor of German literature in a Tokio University), is editor of the Japanese Humanist Society's Monthly Bulletin and sends me an interesting report of the Society's activities.

A monthly general meeting is held in Tokio and this usually takes the form of a lecture followed by questions and discussion. Readers will gain some idea of the ground covered by perusing the list of lectures given during the past year:—"Marxism and Humanism"; "Ghandi and Nehru"; "The World-State Movement"; "Negro Writers"; "American Society" and "Professor Kanjiro Kawai—A Japanese Freethinker".

The Aims and Objects of the Society are:-(a.) To conduct research into anti-social elements in Japanese social life; (b.) The education of the younger generation in the name of humanism; and, (c.) The introduction of the philosophies of Western and Asiatic humanists. In the field of literature the Society has issued four volumes in its "Modern Humanism Series", each of 280 pages. At the time of writing the Society has encountered no opposition, states my correspondent, but this can be explained firstly by the (at present) small numerical strength of the Humanists (150), and secondly by the general weakness of religion in Japan today.

D. SHIPPER.

This Believing World

Should the Bible be filmed for the cinema was the great and momentous question argued on TV the other Sunday between Miss Mary Field, the Rev. J. Huxtable, and Mr. S. Reed of the British Film Institute. They were all, of course, profound believers in the "historicity" of the Bible, Miss Field in particular. And they all came to the conclusion that, as it was most difficult to film the great "historical" scenes of the Bible, it would be better not to do so. How could anyone hope to depict the grandeur of Christ, for example?

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None of these people had the slightest doubt that God Almighty gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai, or that Jesus performed miracles of healing; there these things were—in the Bible, the Precious Word of God. None of them appeared to have the slightest conception that modern Biblical criticism had smashed both the authenticity and the credibility of the Bible into smithereens. The Jesus put forward mostly by the Churches now merely depicts a good Sunday school superintendent, mouthing a few ethical platitudes. Whether Jesus or the Ten Commandments are or are not portrayed on the screen will never make the slightest difference one way or the other as far as Christianity is concerned. That religion is literally fighting for its continued existence.

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So another well-known cricketer, Mr. Alan Rayment, is leaving the national sport for "evangelism" only, unlike the Rev. D. Sheppard, he is ready to give up even his wife for Christ's sake. Mr. and Mrs. Rayment were once known as the king and queen of rock 'n' roll, but he now considers dancing sinful, while his wife, not being yet converted, "does not see things" his way. In fact, Mr. Rayment "can only hope that the Lord will change her decision." The way these Christians love to pass the buck on to the Lord is truly delightful.

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In the meantime, there is the wife's point of view, for which we must thank the *Daily Mail*. She declared firmly: "I don't want to become an African missionary's wife. . . . I don't share my husband's views . . . he's gone evangelical . . . and all that sort of thing." Dear, dear, how very un-Christian and un-wife-like! Whatever would that champion woman-hater, Paul, have said? However, Mr. Rayment has the last word, "Our marriage is in the hands of the Lord . . . I must do what the Lord tells me." Which proves conclusively that the only way to save England is through true Christianity and the Christian sacrament of marriage.

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As everybody knows, religion is compulsorily taught in all schools—though parents are allowed to withdraw their children from the religious classes if they want to. But it is fairly certain that the charming youth who recently snatched a handbag containing £10 from an elderly lady on her knees praying in St. Mark's Church, Marylebone, with the threat, "If you shout, I will do you," was thoroughly inoculated with Christianity at school. He raced away—nobody, not even God Almighty, caring a tinker's cuss for either the poor lady and her sublime trust in the sanctity of the pious edifice, or whether the Christian thief got away or not. But he did get away unscathed.

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We note, not without amusement, that in their Encyclical of the recent Lambeth Conference, the Bishops have thrown over their own Authorised Version when quoting the Bible,

and used the American Standard Revised Edition. This means, if it means anything, that after all, the A.V. is not altogether God's Precious Word, though no doubt it will be still used by nearly all the Protestant clergy all over the world as well as by all our courts of law for people to swear that they are telling the truth, "Swelp me God!"

★

Of course if the ordinary lay person hasn't found out the Bishops have. They know that the A.V. is a faulty version of other faulty versions, and that it is just impossible to know what God's Precious Word is until we find the "original" Hebrew and Greek containing it. Our translations are from *selected* texts which in reality have no authority whatever. Even if they had, it would make no difference. There is no such thing as God's Precious Word—and don't the Bishops know it!

Points from New Novels

By OSWELL BLAKESTON

THERE is a wonderful "Reverend" in Peter de Vries' gloriously funny new novel, *Mackerel Plaza* (Gollancz, 15s.). His pulpit is in "free-form designed by Noguchi. It consists of a slab of marble set on four legs of four delicately differing fruit-woods, to symbolize the four Gospels, and their failure to harmonise." "It is the final proof of God's omnipotence," he preaches from his pulpit, "that he need not exist in order to save us." After torrential floods, the Reverend begins his sermon with: "Let us hope that a kind Providence will put a speedy end to the acts of God under which we have been labouring." His private thoughts are also engagingly lively: "I thought some more about the business of my temper. At least in that respect I was resembling our Lord, who was forever losing his. It took very little to rile him—Scribes and Pharisees, his family—even a fig tree." A delightfully merry book!

Mario Soldati's new novel, *The Confession* (Andre Deutsch, 11s. 6d.), is built round a convincing analysis of the hair-splitting scruples of a fourteen-year old Italian in a Catholic school. The boy's confessor, to scare the lad off women for life, tells him that his dreams are putting him in danger of hell fire. The Jesuit, for instance, relates to his penitent a tale about another boy who died without having confessed his last impure thoughts. The dead boy's mother suspects the worst, and approaches her son's corpse and with an instinctive movement grasps the shoulders and cries out through her tears: "Tell me, tell me this, at least! Are you saved, my son?" Then the cadaver gives a shiver, and raises itself upright on the bed, and, without opening its eyes, vomits blood and flames from its mouth, and screams in a horrible voice: "I am in hell! I am in hell, I am damned for eternity!" This, the priest assures his trembling listener, is "an authentic, historically verified event" with "complete documentation of it, with certified declarations from the parents, the servants, some nuns who took part in the vigil, and even a doctor who was a friend of the family."

Yes, there is the authentic note about Signor Soldati's detail, and there is also a superb surprise in the final design: for the hero, having been scolded by so many threats about the corruption of women, happily and innocently enters into a homosexual affair which is so untainted by thoughts of the female that it never occurs to the participant to mention it in his confession. The satire, then, is brilliantly constructed; and this novel is economically written with moral indignation that is transmuted into art.

THE FREETHINKER

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THE FREETHINKER can be obtained through any newsagent or will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates (Home and Abroad): One year, £1 10s.; half-year, 15s.; three months, 7s. 6d. (In U.S.A.: 13 weeks, \$1.15; 26 weeks, \$2.25; 52 weeks, \$4.50.)

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Lecture Notices, Etc.

OUTDOOR

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

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 (Marble Arch).—Meetings every Sunday from 5 p.m.: Messrs. L. EBURY and A. ARTHUR.

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.

Mersyside 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. (Mansfield Market Place).—Sunday, 6.30 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

INDOOR

Orpington Humanist Group (Sherry's Restaurant—Sunday, September 14th: J. B. COATES, "Humanism in Practice.")

Notes and News

AN ITEM from the *Daily Telegraph* (21/8/58) may be taken to epitomise the harm that can be done by sincere, well-intentioned Christians. Germany, like other countries in Europe, was recently swept by storm, and many buildings were struck by lightning. But, at a Roman Catholic nursing-home in Stuttgart, a nun—poor, simple soul—"lit a candle in a window to ward off the storm". Alas, it set fire to the curtains and 10-day-old twin babies were burned to death.



ACCORDING to *Time* (25/8/58) a "Contraception Controversy" is taking place in New York. It seems that Dr. Louis Hellman was prevented by his supervisor (Dr. Harvey Gollance) from fitting "a contraceptive device to a diabetic woman, mother of three, whose life, in his opinion, would be endangered by another pregnancy." Dr. Gollance, in turn was "acting on the order of Dr. Morris A. Jacobs, (Jewish) Commissioner of hospitals". As New York State law "specifically authorizes physicians to prescribe birth control devices or drugs if the health of patients requires it," Commissioner Jacobs was accused of yielding to Roman Catholic pressure. Whether this was so or not, the Catholics naturally sprang to his support, while Protestant and Jewish organisations opposed his action. Catholic Mayor, Robert F. Wagner said he was

opposed to the use of contraceptives in city hospitals but left the matter to the doctors. *Time* envisages a long and drawn out battle and quotes the *New York Times'* editorial opinion: "Freedom of religion works both ways; and in this delicate area hospitals must certainly remain neutral, neither imposing birth control therapy, when it is medically indicated, on anyone to whom it is religiously repugnant nor withholding it from those to whom it is not." In the present situation, that is presumably the most reasonable course, but Freethinkers look beyond this. For the benefit of mankind, Catholics included, the Roman teaching must be fought and overcome.



Two excellent letters appeared in *The Post* (the journal of the Union of Post Office Workers) exploding the myth that Christianity is the friend of progressive movements or that the Sermon on the Mount can be interpreted as a battle cry for the betterment of social conditions. One of the writers, Mr. C. Oakes, declared his membership of the N.S.S. and this is always useful publicity.



THE QUEEN—or rather, her scriptwriter—has never displayed great imagination in the composition of speeches. These are invariably so dull and platitudinous that, we feel, few intelligent people take any notice of them. More positive harm is done, however, by her continual references to Christianity. One of these occurred recently and was printed by the *Sunday Times* (August 10th, 1958) in its section, "People and Words," viz., "The greatest asset of every nation is its number of happy Christian families." Now, insofar as the Queen has any real value today, that value is as symbolic head of the Commonwealth, and the Commonwealth contains people of many religions and none. Don't the Queen and her advisers ever give a thought to India, Burma and Ceylon, to name three important non-Christian countries of the Commonwealth? It's about time they started.



READERS in the Edinburgh area of Scotland should make a point of attending the splendid meetings of the local National Secular Society branch on the Mound, just off Princes Street. As the Branch Secretary, Mr. William Cronin, aptly puts it: "In all sorts of weather, we still get together . . . at the Mound!"



MRS. MARGARET KNIGHT'S next Television appearance will be on October 5th, when her opponent on A.T.V. will be the Rev. Leslie Weatherhead.

Fifty Years Ago

WE regret that members of the T.U.C. at Leicester stooped to listen to what is called the "official sermon" by the Rev. F. Donaldson. This gentleman merely presented the claims of the Church under cover of moral truisms that are as old as the records of human thought and were hoary before Christianity was thought of. His object was to persuade "the great labour forces of the world" that they ought to "claim the alliance of religion"—whereas it is really religion that is claiming the alliance of the labour forces. He spoke of "Labour's natural ally, the Church of God". *Natural ally*, forsooth! An ally that comes in at the twelfth hour when the battle is nearly over and the victory almost won!

An ally that did nothing but give open or underhand help to the enemy during all the previous eleven hours! Freethinkers like Charles Bradlaugh, John Morley and Prof. Beesley stood up for Trade Unionism when it badly wanted friends.

(The Freethinker, September 13th, 1908)

John the Baptist—The Founder of Christianity

By F. A. RIDLEY

SOME TIME AGO I had the pleasure of reviewing in these columns, the first four publications of a new and extremely interesting series of religious biographies written by French Roman Catholic scholars under the collective title of "*Men of Wisdom*". So far, four of these scholarly little volumes have appeared, the Men of Wisdom who form their subjects being, Buddha, St. Paul, St. Augustine and the medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, all certainly eminent figures in the annals of both religious and historical evolution. And all, with the possible exception of the rather shadowy Eckhart eminently suitable for biographical treatment. Now, two more *Men of Wisdom* are introduced to the English speaking public: the Prophet Muhammed, for long the public enemy number one of the Christian Church, and St. John the Baptist, the most enigmatic but perhaps also, one of the most influential figures in the fascinating but obscure annals of Christian origins. It should be added that while the authors of all these volumes are men of scholarship and culture, intimately acquainted with their self-chosen themes, their point of view is that of orthodox, but scholarly Catholicism and most rationalistic students of comparative religion would take exception, if not to the wisdom of their heroes, at least to many of the orthodox inspired statements that they make about them with such unquestioning confidence.

In the case of St. John, with whom Monsigneur Jean Steinmann is here concerned, we are confronted with an initial difficulty not to be found elsewhere—so far at least in this *Men of Wisdom* series. While we do not know of any serious scholar who questions the historical existence of St. Augustine, Muhammed, or even St. Paul, one could make out a quite plausible case for the mythical character of the shadowy Preacher of Repentance, John the Baptist. Our information about him is meagre in the extreme; it amounts to a few passages in Josephus and in our Canonical Gospels, passages which contradict each other. Furthermore, those ultra-sceptic critics who deny any historical character whatsoever to all the Gospels, in my opinion, an extreme and on the whole improbable view, will, nilly-willy make even the historical existence of the Baptist depend solely on the testimony of Josephus who describes him as a prophet and reformer who finally excited the wrath of the Jewish ruler, Herod Antipas, who eventually put him to death as a potential rebel and trouble-maker. The picturesque details of Salome carrying the severed head of the Baptist to her vindictive mother, does not occur in Josephus and may be pretty safely dismissed as dramatic or melodramatic fiction. Perhaps however, the obvious importance which all evangelists agree in ascribing to the Baptist, the Fourth Gospel equally with the so widely divergent Synoptics, is entitled to be cited as a serious argument for at least, his actual existence and preaching, if only on the time-honoured assumption that where so much smoke exists, there must be at least, some kind of fire.

For Monsigneur Steinmann as an orthodox Catholic who accepts the Gospel as verbally inspired, such doubts and difficulties do not arise. *Everything* that the Gospels tell us about the locust-eating "Forerunner" of Jesus Christ is, and *must* be true. So also, no doubt is the corroborative evidence of Josephus, even though his sources can hardly have been the same as those of the Gospels. But our author is not content to rest his case purely on the authority of the Church, or even on that of Josephus. As a mid-20th century scholar he ransacks the now world famous Dead Sea

Scrolls for further non-biblical corroboration of the historical existence of the Baptist and for the sources of his recorded teaching. Here, he seems to be on firmer ground, and has much that is instructive to tell us: for not only was John's baptismal activity located in the Jordan Valley, quite close to the then still existing Monastery of Qumran where the Scrolls were excavated, but further there appear to be points of undeniable resemblance between the mental outlook and even detailed rites, described in the Essene Manuals discovered at Qumran and that recorded of the Baptist in both Josephus and the Canonical Gospels. Making an "Act of Faith" in John's existence on the combined testimony of Josephus and all four Gospels we may perhaps assume that John, as Mr. Steinmann and other commentators suggest, had originally been an Essene, perhaps even an inmate of the Qumran monastery, and that his teaching, summed up as Baptism, Repentance and the proximate coming of the Day of Judgement, had been originally derived from Essene sources. All our authorities are agreed that Baptism formed the core of John's prophetic teaching; it appeared from the Dead Sea Scrolls that amongst the Essenes the baptismal rite was regarded as perhaps even more important than circumcision, then, as now, the central and distinguishing rite of orthodox Pharisaical Judaism. If so, the Essenes, who bequeathed the central sacrament of Baptism — and perhaps the Eucharist also?—to Christianity, must be regarded as one of the most important sources of Christianity, and the shadowy John deserved his title of The Forerunner, as the most probable missing link between the Essene source and the finished product in the Christian Church, which came into the historic scene just as the Essene monks were about to vanish from the margin of history.

Was this all that the Forerunner was—the missing link between the New Testament and its Jewish forerunner, the "New Covenant" of the Essene? Personally I do not think so, though, failing more direct archæological evidence we are never likely to know for certain. Yet even in our bowdlerised records, drawn up when the Church-sponsored myth of the Forerunner was already obscuring the "Baptism of John" with the saving baptism of Jesus, besides a recurring tendency to "play down" John as a secondary figure compared with the unique Messiah, Jesus the Christ, rather suggesting that in certain early Christian circles John was regarded as the *superior* of Jesus, supposition borne out by the unanimous tradition that Jesus himself began as a *disciple* of John. Was John not actually the Forerunner but the real and ultimate Founder of Christianity, which would then have started actually as an Essene sect, in which case Apollon, who knew only the "Baptism of John", may have represented an earlier and more genuine form of Christianity than did the Pauline writer and later Christian orthodoxy.

Naturally one will not find such heretical speculations in an orthodox Catholic writer like Mr. Steinmann. What one will find in this beautifully illustrated little book is a scholarly account of all that is known about St. John the Baptist (indeed, perhaps even more than all?) and also a scholarly account, not only of his Essene predecessors, but equally of the tradition of the great prophet of the wilderness in both Christian art and hagiography; and also, outside the confines of Christianity in Islam, which respects John, along with Jesus, as an authentic prophet and forerunner of Muhammed, as also, amongst such Gnostic

sects as the still existing Mandæans, who revere the Baptist as the greatest of prophets. Even those who do not accept Mr. Steinmann's orthodox point of view will find much to interest them in this reconstruction of the first great revivalist in the annals of Christianity, who predicted the end of the world and actually assisted in creating a religion which has outlived it by now nearly two thousand

years. May we not reasonably hope that further excavations in the Jordan valley give us more precise information on the desert preacher than is to be found in the Gospels or Josephus.

(St. John the Baptist and the Desert Tradition by Jean Steinmann: Longmans, Green; "Men of Wisdom" series; 6/- net.)

Lourdes: A Catholic Admission

By DR. EDWARD ROUX

There is one aspect of Lourdes to which this journal has not yet referred, namely the reaction of Catholic scientists to D. J. West's *Eleven Lourdes Miracles*. It will be recalled that West was given access by the Lourdes Medical Bureau to the documents relating to the eleven "authenticated" miracles which occurred between 1946 and 1957, and which had passed the triple test introduced by the Catholic Church (in 1946). After being "passed" by the Bureau, each report is sent to the International Lourdes Medical Commission in Paris and finally to a Canonical Commission set up by the bishop in the region from which the patient has come.

West's conclusions may be summarised in his own words as follows: "After having examined all the dossiers the puzzle that stands out in my mind is psychological and not medical. How can scientific men indulge in such farcical rationalisations? What is the point of bolstering up weak evidence by glossing over unwelcome points and making authoritative pronouncements of doubtful validity? Why does the International Lourdes Medical Commission, a collection of undoubted experts, behave with the efficiency of a rubber stamp? The Catholic doctors concerned are surely damaging the religious cause they intend to support."

Almost by accident there came into my hands recently Bulletin No. 30 (April, 1958) of the Philosophy of Science Group of the Newman Association. It was sent to me by Dr. P. E. Hodgson of Reading University in response to an article of mine discussing a Catholic Truth Society pamphlet which he had written (see THE FREETHINKER, August 29th, 1958). In this Bulletin (essentially the mouth-piece of Catholic scientists in Britain) there is an article on Lourdes by Dr. A. T. Macqueen containing a review of West's book.

This Catholic doctor makes some rather significant admissions. "In effect," writes Dr. Macqueen, "his book is a serious criticism of the documentation and administration of the Lourdes Medical Bureau. When faced with this sort of criticism the Catholic is, I think, under the obligation to ponder St. Thomas' remark 'It doesn't matter who says a thing; it is what he says that counts.'"

Referring to the case of Madam Rose Martin, whose alleged cancer West suggested was probably an intestinal obstruction, Dr. Macqueen mentions Leuret and Bon's book, *Modern Miraculous Cures* (1957). He considers that the account of Madam Martin's case given by these two Catholic authors "is not satisfactory from a medical scientific point of view."

Dr. Macqueen is quick to inform his readers that West has not shaken his confidence that miracles occur at Lourdes. After further criticism of the inefficiency of the Lourdes Medical Bureau, he says: "Why aren't these cases put out sufficiently fully to warrant the respect of critics like Dr. West? Mainly I believe because insufficient funds exist to support the necessary staff and publish the evidence in accordance with modern scientific standards."

This is a curious admission from a member of the Roman Catholic Church, which one imagines is one of the richest organisations on earth.

While Dr. West appears to be puzzled by the peculiar psychology of the Catholic medical men at Lourdes and Paris, their behaviour does not seem to me entirely inexplicable. I should imagine these Catholic scientists can be divided into two groups, the enthusiasts and the time-servers. Everyone knows how the scientist with a bee in his bonnet (or a pet theory) often thinks he sees what his critics fail to see, or conversely fails to see what his critics have no difficulty in seeing. We can remember how the believers in the "canals" on Mars made beautiful clear drawings of these objects which other observers, using telescopes of equal power, completely failed to see.

One can imagine the Catholic doctors in Madam Martin's case being so keen on having found another miracle (they are not so frequent these days, only one on the average in 25,000 patients) that they entirely overlooked the evidence of the nurse concerning the unusual motion of the bowels which relieved the patient of her intestinal obstruction.

On the other hand one may be less charitable and suggest that possibly some members of the Medical Bureau and the Commission are simply following the party line. As one who was once a member of a Party that had a very strong line, I can understand the sort of pressure, direct and indirect, that may be exerted on scientists who belong to a totalitarian organisation. When, following Lysenko's speech at the Soviet Academy of Sciences meeting in Moscow in 1948, it was announced that Stalin and the Political Bureau of the Communist Party had officially adopted "Michurinism", there were not a few well known Soviet geneticists who declared their faith in "Soviet biology" and denounced "bourgeois Mendel-Morganism."

In any case we now have it from a responsible Catholic source that, while Catholic scientists continue to accept the miracles, they concede that non-Catholics, relying as they must on the reports of the Lourdes Medical Bureau cannot be blamed if they remain sceptical.

FOR NEWCOMERS

Christian Arguments

The great achievements of man on earth prove that his personality is built on a scale that this life cannot possibly exhaust. The creator of science and art, the creator not only of machines but also of poems and symphonies, surely cannot be snuffed out at death.

This claim for the immortality of man is made on the basis of something he never did as an individual. The aeroplane was not made by man but by generations of men from the ones who first made tools of the simplest kind. We are asked to admire the achievements of the whole

human race and then credit them to each individual as a reason for his surviving death. Even if the argument had any validity at all (and it is really only a wish and not an argument) it could only apply to the survival of mankind, not of individual man.

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What of the army of Christian martyrs? Would men die for a falsehood?

Yes, human beings have died for all kinds of false notions. The Babi martyrdoms alone ran into five figures. Men of different religion, or of none, have been put to death for their beliefs. In the case of the "noble" army of martyrs, the vast majority were in pursuance of the ecclesiastical industry of martyr-making: about two thousand were involved in the Diocletian persecutions alone. Martyrdoms make good propaganda. In the brilliant modern play, *The Making of Moo* by Nigel Dennis, which brings the full force of blasphemy and satire to bear on religion for the first time on the Western stage, the successful religionist observes that "Religion is two thirds submerged in grief, on which we build this sunny uppercrust."

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Would not the overthrow of Christianity endanger public morals?

On the contrary, it is a solid fact that unbelievers are in proportion to numbers the least criminal section of the populace, the most criminal being the Roman Catholics. This is a recurring picture wherever we look, and in his *Crime and Religion* (1954) Joseph McCabe collected statistics from various countries which prove the point. In Britain, broadcaster Margaret Knight, in support of her theme, "*Morals without Religion*", has produced some figures devastating to the Christian case. G.H.T.

Leicester Log

THE Leicester Secular Society Youth Fellowship is the name of the new youth club formed by Mr. C. T. Powell for members aged 12 to 18, meeting on two evenings a week. The project interested the local press photographers and two pictures appeared of a group at the billiard table. The society's president is quoted as saying: "We are not concerned with their religious or political beliefs and we do not give the members any secular (secularist?) instruction." It is intended to organise camping and hiking activities besides indoor games. The experiment will be watched with interest by other NSS branches less fortunately placed.

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THE newly published history of Leicester, which is Volume 4 in the Victoria County Histories Series, makes a brief reference to Leicester Secularists (footnote page 228): "Other (Parliamentary) candidates considered by the Liberal Committee (of 1884) were Joseph Arch, Herbert Spencer, and G. J. Holyoake. The latter's interest reflected the interest in Bradlaugh, whom he had supported on the question of the Parliamentary Oath. Leicester was one of the strongholds of the Secularists, who built the Secularist Institute in 1873." Actually it was the land which was purchased in 1873, the Secular Hall being completed and opened in 1881.

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THE tenets of Secularism are kept well before the public in the secretary's letters to the local press. Mr. Hammersley has started more controversies in the Leicester newspapers than any other correspondent, and while some of his

opponents may evince a genuine desire to get at the truth, others are merely pathetic. One lady in the current number of the *Mercury* writes innocently, "I can assure Mr. Hammersley that Christianity is a wonderful tranquilliser." Another Christian—of the better-informed kind—is aghast at the spectacle of motor cars undergoing a divine bath at their annual Christian blessing at Blaston, and asks how such a service can possibly make for road safety.

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THE Sunday evening lectures at the Secular Hall are preceded on October 5th by a Tea followed by the film *Jan Huss*. An attractive programme for the rest of 1958 includes visits by three university lecturers in Prof. P. H. Nowell-Smith (Nov. 23, "Modern Philosophy"), Prof. H. Levy (Nov. 30, "What is Scientific Evidence?") and Prof. A. J. Allaway (Dec. 14, "Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls"). There will be a New Year Party on Dec. 28 and there are plans to hold a Freethinkers' Dance in the spring, the proceeds to go to some charity.

FOSSIL

CORRESPONDENCE

CONTACTING GOD

There is one aspect of Christianity signally worthy of interest and which deserves comment. It is the difficulty of the Christian trying to keep in touch with his god. True, he has prayer but this is unsatisfactory, dubious, and produces poor results. So he has to sin as well. Once a sinner all is changed. He can pray for forgiveness, perform penances, and imagine himself to be in some schizophrenic state of remorse. This makes his whole relationship with god more realistic. This fact is seized upon by the Catholic clergy, who instil a guilt complex into the minds of the young and then see the resulting adults at the confessional (I speak from experience as ex-R.C.). This process can also replace honest doubt as to the existence of god; to a more suitable pre-occupation with forgiveness.

It would be interesting to find out the Christian's precise attitude to Satan's mixed-up role in this comic opera. I suspect, if anything, it should be gratitude, since without Satan there would be no sin, and they would have to confine their prayers to such ordinary things as the weather and the pools and racing, which would place an intolerable burden on god, coming simultaneously from the holiday-maker and farmer, the man at the races and the bookmaker!

A. T. BROWNE

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