

The Freethinker

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AT SOME DATE between A.D. 50 and A.D. 150, four obscure authors belonging to a new, and still obscure Oriental religious sect, composed four biographies — or so they seem to have regarded them — of the founder of their sect, Jesus, already known as “the Christ” or “Anointed One”; the Messiah raised up by Jehovah, the God of the Jews. These four small works, which later came to be known as Gospels, were not the only ones of their kind, nor even necessarily the most authentic; they merely happened to be the ones which the expanding Christian Church eventually selected and elevated to the canonical status of the only official and authentic biographies of Christ to be admitted to the New Testament. For it ap-

pears nowadays to be a pretty certain conclusion of modern critical scholarship, that the authenticity and consequent Divine Inspiration of the four Gospels was not immediately admitted by the Christian Church; the style of the Holy Ghost was not as clear and unmistakable as all that! There was almost certainly quite a sizeable library of “gospels” throughout the formative era of Christianity (the first two centuries) and, in point of probability, each Church seems to have had its own favourite one, which it used in preference to the others. As we have had occasion to note more than once in this column, it was not until about 200 A.D. that, as part of its growing centralisation, the Catholic Church finally decided to codify its own Bible, the New Testament, as the Jewish rabbis about a century earlier had also decided to codify their Old Testament. The definitive version of the Old Testament, identical at all points with ours, was only finally decided by the rabbis after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

The Four Gospels

If we are to assume an approximate basis of fact in the current ecclesiastical tradition as recorded by the surviving Christian authors of the 2nd century, one must assume that the definite decision to canonise the New Testament as the Christian Bible — the new covenant of God with men — which would supercede the Jewish Old Testament, must have transpired at some time between A.D. 150 and A.D. 200. For, about the former date, the early Christian author, Justin Martyr was still referring to the “memoirs” of the Apostles, which were already read in the churches at the time he writes. Justin, however, does not appear to recognise them as canonical or inspired, and his quotations from them do not appear to come from our Gospels. Whereas, about half a century later, Irenaeus, a bishop in the Gallic Church of Lyons, not only recognises the four Gospels as canonical and inspired, but, by explicit definition, excludes the apparently numerous Gospels other than the “Big Four.” The Catholic Church was thereafter, of the same opinion as Irenaeus; for, not only did it reject the other Gospels — one of which at least, the Gospel of Peter, was also claimed to have been written by an Apostle and a very important one — but, to add insult to injury, it hereafter decided to denominate them collectively as

“Apochryphal” Gospels and they were quietly allowed to fall into a desuetude so complete that in the case, for example, of Peter, it has been left to modern research to rescue them from complete oblivion. For the past eighteen centuries, the term “Gospel” has connoted four — and only four — Gospels, viz: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, none of whom, incidentally, can be regarded with any degree of certainty as the authors of the Gospels which are named after them.

Why Four?

A question hard to answer. As far as one can judge by the application of common sense, it would have been more natural, as well as more convenient for Christianity to have had a single Gospel to record the

biography of Christ. Or at any rate a more critical ecclesiastical hierarchy would — or so one would have thought — have made some effort to edit the four Gospels so as to eliminate, or at least reduce, the glaring discrepancies between them; in particular of course, between the three synoptic ones and the fourth Gospel, John, which are actually not only divergent, but incompatible on the fundamental questions relating to the person and nature of Christ. As Dr. Barnes pointed out, it appears to be quite certain that John rejected the Virgin Birth; in all probability he actually said so in the unexpurgated original text. This originally heretical Gospel appears to have gone through quite a bit of editing before the Church finally admitted it to canonical status. The same, of course, is true of the Epistles ascribed to Paul. Gordon Rylands has drawn attention to one very significant example of this process: the phrase used by Christ in John, “Ye are of your father, the Devil” is probably a corruption of the original text which ran: “Ye are of the Father of the Devil,” which was the precise status assigned to Jehovah, the God of the Jews by the anti-Jewish heretic Marcion, of whom the original John was probably a disciple. Actually, efforts were made in the early Church to “square the circle” by eliminating the more obvious contradictions in the four Gospels; but this, in any case, probably impossible task, never apparently received any official encouragement from the Church. As for the fundamental question, Why Four? the answer appears to be in what one can perhaps term the sphere of ecclesiastical politics rather than in that of theology, properly so-called. The four Gospels had no more claim to authenticity than did their apochryphal competitors. But they happened to represent the favourite Gospels of the four most important Churches of the period: Antioch (Matthew), Alexandria (Mark), Rome (Luke), Ephesus (John), and the combined influence of these four sufficed to eliminate the other Gospels favoured by the minor Churches. At least, this appears to be the most feasible explanation. Irenaeus’s own explanation that as there were four winds and four cardinal points to the universe, so the Church of God must also have four Gospels only, appears to be too puerile to have been seriously regarded even by the admittedly uncritical Christian

VIEWS and OPINIONS

Comparative Religion and the Gospels

By F. A. RIDLEY

Churches around 200 A.D., when this ineffable *non-sequitur* was first propounded. No one of course knows — not even the “infallible” Pope — exactly when, where or by whom, the four Gospels were written. All that their names indicate is that they presumably appeared in religious circles which held men — probably otherwise unknown Christians of the first generation — of these names in particular honour, for perhaps local reasons. In the case of the aforementioned Apochryphal Gospel of St. Peter, its exclusion can only be due to the fact that it initially appeared in a Gnostic heretical sect. Even so, I have always been surprised that the Church did not edit its more heretical passages, as it presumably did in the case of John, and then include it. For Peter is actually the only alleged Christian Gospel to give a first-hand account of the Resurrection — otherwise the *worst authenticated* “fact” in history, being based entirely on second-hand evidence. Incidentally, the Church itself did derive one Article of Faith from Peter who is the only one to tell us that Christ descended to Hell to preach to the souls of the departed, which is now an Article in the Creed, but

one derived from an *Apochryphal Gospel*.

The Gospels and Comparative Religion

In the annals of comparative religion, Christianity represents merely one — though admittedly an important and widely diffused one — of a group of cosmopolitan religions. Cults of a professedly ethical nature, Islam and Buddhism amongst living, and Manicheism and Mithraism amongst dead, cults adhere to the same broad category. It has to be stated that, from the standpoint of the entirely objective science of comparative religion, the importance of the Christian Gospels derives entirely from their historical impact upon human evolution — which has been considerable — and not from their historical and literary value, which can be very variously estimated. (On the whole, I am inclined to agree with Reinach that they are actually superior to the extant Apochryphal Gospels, and that the Church made the best choice it could from the numerous Gospels available.) But it is only when we forget about the Christian prejudices of our society that we can really view the Gospels objectively — that is, scientifically — as religious documents.

Dr. Soper and His Hecklers

AT BALLYMENA (Northern Ireland) Petty Sessions on September 2nd, three ministers of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, and two of their followers were found guilty and fined under the Public Order Act, 1951, “that at a lawful public meeting [they] did act in a disorderly manner for the purpose of preventing the transaction of the business for which the meeting was called together.” The meeting in question had been arranged for Saturday, August 1st, at 12 noon, in Fair Hill market place, and some 500 people attended. From accounts, something like bedlam seems to have ensued for 50 minutes, and the speaker was unable to make himself heard. He was the Methodist minister, Dr. Donald Soper.

A very full report in the *Belfast Telegraph* (2/9/59) shows that there was a strong traditional flavour about this case: it followed the formula that the heretic is worse than the infidel. One of the near-fanatical Presbyterians (the five were, the Revs. Ian Paisley, John Wylie, H. V. Magowan, and Messrs. J. McGowan and J. Kyle) had, in fact, specifically shouted at Dr. Soper: “We would give you free speech if you came here as an infidel, not as a Christian minister.” And a banner had been displayed bearing the words “Dr. Soper denies the Virgin Birth of Christ.”

During the trial, Mr. D. N. O. Beal, who appeared for the defendants, asked the chairman of the meeting, the Rev. J. J. Harrison: “Is there room in the Methodist Church for a man who does not believe in the Virgin Birth of Christ?” The Resident Magistrate said he couldn’t allow the case to become a theological one, but Mr. Beal said he was trying to show that Dr. Soper had antagonised the crowd. When Mr. Harrison said Dr. Soper’s views were known to the Methodist Church and he was accepted as a minister of that Church, Mr. Beal asked: “You agree he does not believe in the Virgin Birth?” Mr. Harrison answered: “He does not believe in it as an essential doctrine.”

Mr. Beal continued: “Did Dr. Soper make a pronouncement on the Virgin Birth?” Mr. Harrison: “He did. He said he did not believe in the Virgin Birth.”

The Rev. Ian Paisley, Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church, described Dr. Soper’s attitude as being, “that those who accepted the fundamentalist view were just a lot of ignoramuses and that he was a sort of demi-

god.” Dr. Soper had said that Khrushchev and the men in the Kremlin were doing more good for Christianity than the fundamentalists; and Mr. Paisley believed him to be “a complete hypocrite.” Mr. Paisley added that he would heckle any man who professed to be preaching the Gospel, when at the same time he was denying the Apostle’s Creed in which he was supposed to believe. He further alleged that Dr. Soper had referred to fundamentalists in the audience as “intellectual rabbits,” and that this had antagonised them.

Nevertheless, Mr. Paisley and his colleagues had apparently tried to serve “not very complimentary” pamphlets on Dr. Soper as he arrived at Fair Hill, and the Head Constable confirmed the banner and testimony that, as soon as Dr. Soper spoke, he was interrupted by a loud voice — that of Mr. Paisley. There is little doubt then, that the Presbyterians set out with the deliberate intention of spoiling Dr. Soper’s meeting. Indeed — as the Crown submitted — this was implicit in the remark quoted above, “We would give you free speech if you came here as an infidel, not as a Christian minister.”

So, the findings of the court seem justified. At the same time, we think there was *some* justification in the ministers’ complaints against Dr. Soper, though not in the way they were expressed. We think that Dr. Soper, disbelieving in the Virgin Birth and many other Christian tenets ought, logically, to be outside the Church; at most, a Unitarian.

AFFLICTIVE PENANCES?

ACCORDING TO *Time* (21/9/59), Father Stefano Lamera, editor of the Roman clerical monthly, *Vita Pastorale*, has proposed rather revolutionary changes in the formula for penance for sins. Instead of the usual quota of “Hail Marys” and “Our Fathers” he suggests “afflictive penances” like rising at dawn or giving up smoking for a week. Well intentioned though the Father may be, we hold out no hope of his proposals being accepted. Confession and penance are farcical. But they are easy and more or less automatic: little more than conditioned reflexes. It is one of the strengths of Catholicism that the faithful need never think about their religion, once it is learnt. Making penances inconvenient, let alone hard, would cause havoc, and the Church is shrewd enough to realise it.

Mithraism

By J. M. LARKMAN
(Convenor, The Society of Mithra)

IN YOUR RECENT ISSUE of July 24th, you carry an article by Mr. F. A. Ridley on Mithraism and its revival in this country, based upon the report in the *Daily Mirror*, and your own contributor's general knowledge of the subject. May I try and clear up a few misrepresentations?

I am sure it will be appreciated that newspaper reports, certainly those of a sensational nature, are bound to be misleading. This was so in the case of the article in the *Mirror* and it is perhaps unfortunate that Mr. Ridley was not able to get in touch with us before writing his own piece so that we could have corrected any mistakes and have given him some idea of what we believe and what we are doing.

Firstly, the *Mirror* report was unable to deal with our beliefs and had to rely upon the rather superficial aspects or external trappings such as the "toga" (not home-made and not a toga but a robe based upon an authentic Persian sculpture), the wine-cup (which was not used on the Hampstead dedication), the kneeling and praying to Mithra (we do not kneel in prayer and do not pray to anything, at least not in the generally accepted Christian sense of prayer) and the baptism in bull's blood (this last is pure conjecture on Mr. Roll's part). Unfortunately your own Mr. Ridley worked on this and so the untruths multiply.

Now for Mr. Ridley's article. He states that no one today thinks of reviving the Druidic cult. I would point out that this "cult" was revived somewhere about 1924 or earlier and is now well established. The Druids have, in fact, returned to Stonehenge to restore it to its original purpose and their yearly celebrations draw many hundreds of people to watch, so much so that special transport is laid on for the purpose.

Your author thinks that Galileo and Frazer must have nailed the solar cults. I should have thought that the former reinforced them and, certainly, any new astrological discoveries would not affect Mithraism for Mithras is not the physical sun but the personification of Light of which the sun is merely a physical symbol. As for Frazer and the other writers on comparative religion, much of their work merely confirms the deeper truths of religious belief and such psychologists as Jung have much to say on this. I do not think, for example, that Christianity loses any of its pull for quite developed minds just because it can be revealed as a fusion of older cults and thoroughly eclectic. This rather adds to power.

The circumstances of the Hampstead Heath ceremony are described as "bizarre and incongruous." Again it is described as an initiation ceremony. Well, initiation of the revival, yes, but the actual ceremony was simple and basically the public announcement of the re-birth of the Mithraic faith and a solemn dedication on the part of some of those present to uphold it. Nothing could have been less sensational in actuality if not in import. It is most unjust to suggest that Hampstead Heath was not a suitable place to hold this meeting and, providing the authorities allow, we intend to hold more there. Your author does not think, surely, that we should have gone to Rome or even some cave in Asia Minor! The first Western and modern Mithraists have appeared in London and therefore London is as good a place as any to declare this fact.

The meeting was held on Hampstead Heath for very practical reasons. It is an open space and Mithraism has always had a deep reverence for nature. It was near to the centre of London and those present lived in London.

It is high up and overlooks the city — an appropriate position I should have thought. It was near to water — historically a necessary condition. There was no other place that fulfilled these conditions quite as well. All the better that the Heath is used for Londoners' relaxation and enjoyment!

Now, why midnight, your contributor asks and slightly suggests it was because of fear of the police. We have little fear of the authorities and would not be very firm believers if we had. No, it was held on that day because the Summer Solstice (just as December 25th) is traditionally a Mithraic Feast. It was held at midnight because it is at this time the sun "dies" and is "reborn" into the new day and the second half of the year. Sunrise is the sun's revelation — a new day begins at midnight. There is nothing, as your author would like us to believe, sinister or bizarre about this and it certainly does not justify him trying to portray the revivalists as either cowards or engaged in some diabolical form of magic. We are possibly, in some ways, more rational than he is.

Now we come to the Bull and its Blood, a point most detractors fix upon. The *taurobolium* was not strictly a part of Mithraic ritual. It was possibly used in later times now and again. How can Mr. Ridley believe that no Mithraic ritual was complete without it? The cost would have killed the religion for the ordinary soldier I should have thought. It may have been used for certain initiations but I do not believe it was firmly established. A symbolic act was, no doubt, substituted. Mr. Ridley is again wrong in saying that a blood baptism was the Mithraic substitute for the water in the Christian church. In Mithraism there was a water baptism. In our revival we are prepared to use a blood baptism, not sharing Mr. Ridley's squeamishness, but the nature of this and its real meanings we are not prepared to reveal. There are also other rites which would be open to the same misinterpretation and these, also, we would not reveal. Again, for very real and practical reasons.

It is not possible for me to deal with the other errors of this article because a re-reading of the standard works on the subject would show Mr. Ridley where he has gone wrong. This is all the more unfortunate as he has added to factual mistakes a deliberately cynical and superficial account of our movement which, small though it is, is all the same composed of sincere and not unintelligent persons. We allow considerable freedom of interpretation and most of our beliefs and ethics (in which Truth, Mr. Ridley, is paramount!) have a very rational basis.

In all seriousness we do ask that next time you carry any report on the Mithraic faith you get first of all in touch with us. Perhaps bad publicity is better than none, but a fair report would have been even better!

MURDER

Sir,—Please allow me, as a Roman Catholic, to state that birth control is murder.

— Start of letter to *Leicester Mercury* (9/9/59)
Starvation isn't, we suppose . . .

NEXT WEEK

EDGAR ALLAN POE

By H. CUTNER

This Believing World

The sacking of Fr. Harris for preferring an almost full-blooded Roman Catholic service in a Church of England church, by the Bishop of Southwark, has naturally been resented by those of his flock who also prefer the Roman Catholic ritual but who, for some strange reason, do not want to be labelled Roman Catholics. They accuse Dr. Stockwood of "a lack of Christian charity." Moreover, he has made it into "a national scandal." The "national scandal," according to these people and most Anglo-Catholics, is the undoubted fact that the mass of people in this country hate and fear "Popery" as it used to be called. Now Anglo-Catholics much prefer to call it "Rome."

★

The "Back to Rome" movement began in real earnest in 1833, and was then called "The Oxford Movement" with very earnest Churchmen like Newman, Hurrell Froude, Keble, and many other staunch believers in primitive Christianity, pouring out "tracts," the most famous being Tract 90. In this, Newman did his utmost to show that the Thirty-nine Articles were nearly, if not quite, pure Roman Catholicism. Naturally, English Protestants bitterly attacked this kind of "Popery," but it was not stamped out. The Church Union, with the present Archbishop of York in full support of its 15,000 members, certainly wants closer relationship with Rome in the sacred name of "unity" no doubt, but has this Union any real influence?

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Rome on the one hand and the Protestant Alliance on the other, both representing extreme Fundamentalism of the most primitive and credulous type have fanatical followers, it is true; but the greater number of "Christians" in this country are quite apathetic to religion of any sort. The sad thing about this attitude is that comparatively few on either side are interested enough in Freethought, and so they really help to perpetuate the kind of Christianity in which they were brought up, but which no longer attracts them. Don't these people ever *think*?

★

This is the period of "harvest festivals" when we are implored by our religious leaders to thank the Lord for the bountiful way in which he supplies our food — which, in the days of unscientific agriculture, or when man was groping to learn how to preserve enough food to keep him through the bitter winter, was scarce or could not be grown. It was not man by his incessant work on the land which gave us food but God Almighty, as was conclusively shown by his representatives on earth, the priests. So without working for it, the priests managed to get a comfortable living, praising the Lord when the harvest was plentiful, and blaming man when, through his unbelief and sins, the harvest was a failure. It was a beautiful game and still is, though even sinful man now is not quite so sure that he should always be blamed for poor harvests. That is, unless he is an all-believing Christian.

★

We are always interested in people telling us all about "the Living God" which is the title of a leaflet which has just reached us sent by "the brethren of Christ." It is simply marvellous how much the brethren know about the Lord who is, we are assured, "a consuming fire and must be obeyed." God is, of course, also "love," and if his creatures do not praise him enough, is it not reasonable "that he should deal with them in anger?" Of course it is, and we strongly advise a good wallop every now and then to keep them in order.

Moreover, it appears that there is a "forgotten side of God's character." He simply won't tolerate disobedience, and if we continue to sin after Christ's solemn warning "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish," we *shall* all perish. The "likewise" refers to the way our merciful Creator "exterminated" (we are solemnly told) the first Canaanites and then afterwards he "destroyed men, women and children of his own people." As his own people did not repent in spite of being exterminated, God gave us the Second World War, exterminating quite a lot of people, but particularly his own again; and there will be a Third World War if everybody does not forthwith accept Christ. So now we know. We sincerely hope nobody will be killed in the furious rush for conversion, though, after all, converts *are* promised Eternal Life!

THE FERRER CASE

THE SOCIALIST LEADER has timely reprinted an item by G. H. B. Ward from its predecessor, *The Labour Leader*, of September 10th, 1909, about the arrest of Francisco Ferrer. "The Spanish man hunters have made their great capture," it says. "They have captured our friend — my friend — Senor Ferrer, the founder and financier of Spain's small but growing 'Modern' rationalist and secular day school system, and publishing firm of elementary and science textbooks." "Ferrer is to be tried, and shot within 14 days, so it is said," Mr. Ward continued. "Three years ago it took 12 months to concoct a case and try him, but a jury found Ferrer innocent. There will be no jury on this occasion . . . The documentary evidence and proofs are all forged in advance, and a tribe of paid witnesses are ready to swear Ferrer's life away, even as they are always ready to swear in such cases. Only by strong public agitation can it be hoped to save Ferrer and hundreds of other active reformers of less renown who are already sentenced . . ." The agitation was strong, but not strong enough, as we now lament, 50 years later.

PARENTAL RIGHTS

SIGNORA PERANTONI lived in Rome, separated from her husband. The courts had decided that the couple's children (two little girls) should be brought up in the Monte Rotondo Convent.

Nuns always pounce on such prey (the little girls were respectively five and seven years of age) with morbid eagerness. They set to work to mould their characters by endless indoctrination. They filled them with hatred of "the world," and contempt for a normal and free life, and prepared them to live in cloistered seclusion.

Twelve years passed, and the mother claimed her children. The convent refused to give them up.

A lawsuit is in progress. The Roman Church — which never ceases to prate about parental rights when it is to its advantage — has no scruples about holding behind its dreary walls two innocent girls, under the pretext that one of them is soon to make her "vows."

The mother has laid a charge of arbitrary sequestration. But will the judges restore her daughters? In an Italy bled white and strangled by clericalism, will Justice, Right and Liberty be scorned and trampled under foot once again?

And the same awaits you, citizens of France, if you do not realise that these religious prisons should be closed, and the black-robed clique once for all, reduced to impotence.

From *La Colette*, September, 1959

THE FREETHINKER

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Lecture Notices, Etc.

OUTDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (rear of Morley Street Car Park).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Messrs. CORINA and DAY.

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

London (Marble Arch).—Meetings every Saturday from 6 p.m. and every Sunday from 5 p.m.: Messrs. L. EBURY, J. W. BARKER, C. E. WOOD and D. TRIBE.

London (Tower Hill).—Every 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).—Wednesdays, 1 p.m.; Sundays, 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.; Sunday, 6.30 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

INDOOR

Central London Branch N.S.S. ("The City of Hereford" Blandford Place, Blandford Street, W.1.) Sunday, October 4th, 7.15 p.m. G. H. TAYLOR: "The Future of Freethought."

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1.) Tuesday, October 6th, 7.15 p.m.: Prof. T. H. PEAR, "Politeness: Its Varieties and Functions".

Leicester Secular Society (75 Humberstone Gate.) Sunday, October 4th, 6.30 p.m., Tea followed by Concert given by the Leicester Accordion Club.

Nottingham Cosmo (Co-op Education Centre, Broad Street).—Sunday, October 4th, 2.30 p.m. J. S. L. GILMOUR, M.A., F.L.S., "Is Christianity a Lost Cause?"

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1.) Sunday, October 4th, 11 a.m.: W. E. SWINTON, Ph.D., "The Advancement of Science—Whither?"

Notes and News

WILL BRANCH SECRETARIES of the National Secular Society and kindred bodies be good enough to send all necessary particulars of meetings — exact date, time, place, speaker, subject — as soon as possible, if they wish them to be included in our Lecture Notices? If no printed syllabus is available, a postcard giving details should be sent to the Editor to arrive not later than the Friday before publication date. This is not only necessary for THE FREETHINKER, but also for office use, to ensure that supplies of the paper, books and pamphlets ordered shall reach the Branch in time for the meeting.

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TWO VERY USEFUL MEETINGS were organised on the sea front at Worthing on Sunday, September 20th, by the Secretary of the local branch of the National Secular Society, Mr. Walter Perkins. The weather was glorious and the audiences attentive. In the evening the challenge of the Salvation Army band was met and overcome, and one

The Freethinker Sustentation Fund

PREVIOUSLY acknowledged £272 16s. 5d.; J. Barlow, (Canada) 15s.; W.H.D., 5s.; J.W.A., 7s.; B. Cooper, £1; R. V. Ross (U.S.A.) £2 7s.; Worthing Branch N.S.S., £1 2s. 6d. Total to date September 25th, 1959: £278 12s. 11d.

soldier of Christ was persuaded to come on the platform. The story of his "bloodbath" provided a light interlude. Not that the speeches were heavy. Messrs. J. W. Barker, J. Gordon, C. McCall and T. M. Mosley, covered a wide field of subjects in varied styles, with serious intent, of course, but with humour, too. It was a very worthwhile occasion, and the local branch was able to give £1 2s. 6d. to THE FREETHINKER Sustentation Fund.

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WE HAVE OFTEN COMMENTED on the significance (or otherwise) of the American church attendance figures. Now we are told they have reached an "all-time high." Is this much more than the expression of an urge to conform and a desire to be one of a community? We do not think so, though fear of war has no doubt turned many people's minds towards a future life and Cecil Northcott, writing in *The Guardian* (19/9/59) reports that "The obsession with Communism and its effects on the world is evident in all the major church assemblies, and few speeches of church leaders omit references to religion." That church attendance and knowledge of Christianity are not synonymous was shown in a recent investigation by an Air Force Chaplain. Out of 387 men, says Mr. Northcott, "not one could name all the disciples of Jesus, and 204 could not name one, and 160 did not know there were Old and New Testaments in the Bible." Yet the "majority of the men had associations with the churches."

★

MR. TOM DRIBERG, writing in the *New Statesman* (19/9/59) after a visit to Rome, confirms the stranglehold of the Catholic Church on Italian television. "There is a strange (but officially non-existent) clerical censorship," he says, "directed both against dangerous ideas and against breaches of the dominant code of sexual morality. If a ballerina shows an inch too much leg, if a comedian risks a joke with a double meaning, early next day a monsignor will be on the telephone to a TV high-up, saying how grieved the Holy Father had been to learn of the deterioration in the programmes or there will be a disapproving paragraph in the *Osservatore Romano*." Mr. Driberg goes on to show that this tendency "has been carried to absurd extremes." He is surely wrong, though, in attributing this to the TV bosses being "plus papale que le Pape." It is more likely that fear of censorship has made the TV heads censors over themselves — perhaps the most terrible consequence of censorship.

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AND APROPOS CATHOLIC CENSORSHIP: remember that "listening groups" are highly organised in Britain and that they swamp the BBC and ITV with protests if they see or hear anything they don't like. Fortunately they haven't the power here that the Vatican has in Italy, but they do have an effect. That is why it is important for Freethinkers to write to the companies, too, praising and protesting as the case may be.

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THE TIMES (18/9/59) contained a brief but encouraging news item from Philadelphia. "A grand jury," it said, "has ruled that Pennsylvania schools were violating the constitution by ordering compulsory prayers and Bible readings. The case arose from an action brought by a Unitarian family.. We hope our American friends will let us have further details of this important case.

The International Congress of Freethinkers

By C. BRADLAUGH BONNER
(President of the World Union of Freethinkers)

(Continued from page 307)

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 5TH.—The first two hours were devoted to regional reports of activities; most of which naturally followed on the same lines of work as in past years. Of the European societies, the German would seem to be the most thriving. Two reports had special interest, those of New Zealand and of Sweden, given by Mr. Wallace Nelson, President of the New Zealand Rationalist Association, and by Mr. Ture Nerman, the first President of the Förbundet för Religiosfrihet, former senator and for long a well-known figure in progressive movements in Sweden. Mr. Nelson's report showed that his association is very lively and determined to make use of every opportunity of advancing Freethought, as in its use of Billy Graham's visit to increase its membership and its sterling defence of the secular schools (and also as shown by the special issue of its paper in four languages, which was in the hands of all congressists). In Sweden it is only a few years since a Swede could not legally quit the Church into which he was born save to enter another Church; relatively few have taken advantage of this change in the law, and fewer still to combine for militant action; hence the society had only about 400 members, those mostly in Stockholm; Swedes have a habit of joining societies, many being members of 20 or more; Mr. Nerman confessed to membership of 41 (that, I fancy, is his fate as a Senator).

These reports were followed by the paper by Maitre Robert Hamaide on Radio and Television broadcasts of Secular Philosophy and Ethics in Belgium, of which a summary has already been given in THE FREETHINKER. Maitre Hamaide displayed eloquence, wit and force, illustrating his theme with amusing and also affecting extracts from letters received. The Congress was greatly impressed and applauded with vigour.

The first main study of the Congress, in line with the commemoration of Ferrer, who sought to establish schools without religious instruction and with an emphasis on science and scientific thinking, was to consider the situation of such independent thinking in schools the world over. Reports were read by Belgian, Dutch, French, Luxemburg and British experts with further information given in the national reports from New Zealand, Uruguay and Sweden. I shall endeavour to combine these reports into a single study. Where there is compulsory education, the school curriculum may be secular, i.e., without religious instruction or a religious assembly. The aim is then to form "free" men and women who can reach conviction by independent thinking, e.g., in New Zealand.

The State schools may be secular; but subsidies may be given to sectarian schools. The State schools may offer non-sectarian religious teaching, as in England, or religious teaching of the dogmatic kind common in the country, as in Belgium; parents may withdraw their children from such religious instruction. This right of withdrawal is relatively little used today by Freethinkers, though taken advantage of by Jews, Roman Catholics, etc. State schools, nominally neutral in religious outlook, but dominated by a single sect, cease to be secular. Where there exist great educational institutions free of religious dogma, such as the Free University of Brussels, the whole outlook of the State schools tends to become emancipated.

In all countries, the religious institutions, the Churches, realising that with the spread of scientific knowledge and the increasingly swift application of science to everyday

life, religious dogmas are becoming more and more out of touch with life, and are revealed in their true aspect of out-of-date superstitious speculation, are making tremendous efforts to obtain ever greater subsidies for sectarian schools and educational institutions, which are often combined with social activities, e.g., youth clubs, holiday camps, libraries, marriage advice bureaux, etc. For all these the Churches demand public money. By such means they hope to tighten their loosening grip on the minds of men. Where there are more sects than one, as in Great Britain and in Holland, a tug-of-war develops. In any case there is a social pressure in favour of some kind of religious conformism. As this may be largely sham, it may have a thoroughly bad influence on the children. Dominance of non-sectarian religious teaching leads mostly to disinterest in religion, if not to disgust, conscious or unconscious. Dominance of sectarian teaching blocks critical thinking.

In most countries the Left-wing governments tend to adopt policies of appeasement towards the Church; they may have for many long years made repeated declarations in favour of secular schools, but in power, fearful of losing votes, apprehensive of the weight of religious political bodies, these politicians rationalise, and cease to be rationalist.

The struggle to maintain the secular spirit of the State schools, and to oppose the demands of the Roman Church, is fiercest in France and Belgium. In New Zealand and Uruguay, the Catholic attack is least successful. Few of the reports really assessed the degree to which children are encouraged to think for themselves; it was taken for granted that, in a school without religious teaching, the children would have a maximum opportunity for independent thinking, which is not necessarily the case. Where the progressive forces are rallied in defence of the State schools as opposed to Catholic ones, the project of a rationalist school is looked on with disfavour. Where the State undertakes responsibility, in whole or in part, for schools with religious instruction either non-sectarian or sectarian, the project would gain State support automatically, if there were sufficient rationalist demand. It is clear that in many countries an effort must be made, as has been made by the New Zealand Rationalist Association, to awake the masses and their chosen representatives to the seriousness of what is happening, and to rally the free thinking forces in a campaign to obtain free thinking schools. The importance of this is strongly underlined by Dr. Brock Chisholm, and the means of giving such teaching by Prof. Laugier. In England we must not forget that university institutions such as University College of London and the University of Birmingham were founded as secular institutions, and must be defended from invasion by theologians.

Generally in Western Europe, there would seem to be a marked retreat from the democratic and secularist principles of a century ago, to the great advantage financially, politically and socially, of the Churches. On the other hand, the spread of scientific knowledge and method has done much to undermine the authority of religious doctrine, so that the clerical gains are often more apparent than real.

(To be concluded)

Friar Genebro

By ECA DE QUEIROZ

[Editor's Note: October 4th is "World Day for Animals," the day dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi. We thought it appropriate, therefore, to print this story by the famous Portuguese writer, in a new special translation by Nan Flanagan.]

THE DIVINE FRANCIS OF ASSISI still lived in the fastnesses of the Mountains of Umbria when, through the length and breadth of Italy spread the fame of the life of sanctity of his friend and disciple, Friar Genebro.

Friar Genebro had in truth reached perfection in all the angelic virtues. By means of constant prayer he had uprooted from his soul the smallest vestige of sin, so becoming as clean and chaste as one of the celestial gardens watered by the Lord Himself. His penances during his 20 years in the cloister were so severe that he no more feared the Tempter; now with a shake of the sleeve of his habit, he repelled the most horrible or the most delicious temptation as easily as one would shake off a tiresome fly. His charity was not only poured over the miseries of the poor, but also over the sadnesses of the rich. In his humility he considered himself more lowly than the lowly worm. The fierce barons who from their dark towers crushed all Italy, reverently bent the knee to this barefooted friar. Pope Honorio kissed the wounds left by the chains with which he loaded his body.

At that time, angels with wings invisible but carrying staffs, still travelled this earth, and often when the friar was passing along a deserted road he met an angel of ineffable beauty who smiled at him. One day, as he was passing near the ruins of the ancient castle of Otofrid, he thought of his friend Egidio, who had been a novice with him in the seminary and had now retired to a cabin in the mountains to be nearer his God. As his friend's cabin was near the ruined castle, Friar Genebro decided to visit him. He crossed by the stepping stones to the other side of the stream. He began to climb a hill covered with leafy chestnut trees, and found the grass soothing to his blistered feet. Halfway up the hill he came on a swineherd in leathern apron, stretched out asleep under some blackberry bushes. As the friar drank from the stream, he drove away the flies from the rude face of the sleeper.

He then continued up the hill praising God for the water, the shade, the breeze, all so un hoped for. He passed a drove of pigs rooting in the ground and a crowd of rosy piglets running round their mother's teats. Friar Genebro thought of the wolves and lamented that the swineherd was sleeping, all unconscious of the danger to his pigs. At the top of the hill the ancient Lombardy castle, all covered with moss, stood out majestically against the blue sky. From the top of one of its pillars the head of a dragon looked out over the wild rose bushes. The hermit's hut was just visible behind a field of tall grain. Soon, Friar Genebro reached his friend's garden, with its sprigs of fluffy cabbages and sweet-smelling lavender. Egidio couldn't be far off because his watering-can and pruning fork were on the garden wall. Friar Genebro pushed open the door of rough planks. "Brother Egidio!" he called softly.

From the depths of the hut, more like the den of a wild beast than the home of a human being, came a prolonged moan.

"I'm here in this corner, dying." Friar Genebro, with sorrow in his heart, rushed to the corner to find the good hermit, wrapped in rags, lying on a bed of dried leaves; his once fat, rosy face so wasted; so like a piece of dried parchment. With infinite charity and tenderness, Friar Genebro embraced his old colleague.

"How long have you been like this, Brother Egidio?" "Praise be to God, only since yesterday! After taking a last look at the sun, I threw myself down on these leaves to die; but for months a terrible feeling of tiredness had come over me, so much so that I had the greatest difficulty in carrying the pitcher of water from the well."

"Well now, Brother, that God has sent me to you, is there anything I can do for your body, as with your life of virtue you have done everything to save your soul?"

Moaning, fumbling with the dried leaves as if they were sheets, the poor hermit murmured: "My good Brother, the one thing I long for on this earth is a piece of roast pork. Do you think it is a sinful temptation?"

Friar Genebro, full of pity for his brother monk, hastened to calm his conscience. "A sin? Certainly not! Didn't God himself order his disciples to eat the good things of the earth? When Father Silvestre had a longing for Muscatel grapes during a bad illness, didn't Francis Xavier pluck him a bunch and after blessing them, so that they became sweeter and juicier, hand them to the sick monk? So it's a bit of roast pork you fancy?" exclaimed the good Friar Genebro as he laughingly caressed the transparent hands of the hermit. "Be easy, dear Brother, I'll arrange that for you!"

Immediately, with eyes alight with charity and love, he grabbed the sharpened pruning fork from the garden wall and, tucking up the sleeves of his habit, he bounded down the hill with the lightness of a deer, elated at the performance of a service for the Lord. He found the pigs rooting under some chestnuts. Seizing a piglet by the snout to smother its cries, he cut off its left leg, then leaving the little animal falling down in a pool of its own blood, he ran back to the cabin and called excitedly from the door: "Here is the piece of meat Our Lord gave me for you. You remember from the seminary days what a good cook I am?" Then building a fire over two stones, he pulled up a stake supporting some beans and, with that and the blood-stained pruning fork, he arranged a spit to roast the pork. To give his friend a foretaste of the banquet he was preparing for him, he kept shouting in the cabin door: "The pork is already browning, Brother! The skin is crackling, my saint!" In the end, he entered the cabin with the steaming pork surrounded by fresh green lettuce. He tenderly propped up the old hermit, whose mouth watered at sight of the titbit. And, as his friend greedily tore the juicy meat asunder, Friar Genebro assured him that that day he had stuffed himself with chicken and drunk a litre of wine. It was a saintly lie because, since sunrise, he had only had a meagre plate of cabbage soup handed to him in charity at the gate of a farm.

Egidio, having eaten his fill, gave a deep sigh of satisfaction as he fell back on his bed of dried leaves. How well he felt now! Ah, how well he felt! Our Lord in his justice would pay his Brother Genebro for that piece of pork! He now felt his very soul strengthened for the fearful journey. The hermit crossed his hands over his breast; Friar Genebro knelt down, and together they ardently praised the Lord who from his high heavens succours all in need.

The good Genebro, having covered Egidio with the old torn blanket, and placed a pitcher of fresh water at his side, leaned over his friend and murmured: "My dear Brother in Christ, you can't die here all alone. I'll call at the nearest monastery and ask the abbot to send you a novice who will tend you lovingly in your affliction. May

God support you with His right hand!"

Egidio closed his eyes in sleep: or perhaps because his spirit, having paid that last debt to his body, had parted for all eternity.

Friar Genebro, having blessed the old man, took his stick and descended the hill. From across the ferns where the pigs were grazing he heard the cowherd sounding his horn in alarm and rage. Surely on awakening he had found the mutilated piglet. As he hastened his steps, Friar Genebro thought of the magnanimity of the Lord in permitting that man, made in his own image, could receive so much consolation from the leg of a piglet roasted between two stones.

(To be concluded)

CORRESPONDENCE

THE MONARCHY

I do not agree with Mr. Huxley.

His argument that the Monarchy should not be attacked by Secularists because a British sovereign reigns "by the will of the people" is one that could be applied equally well to the ecclesiastical rule of the English archbishop and the Established Episcopal Church. I would suggest that it is due to the ignorance or perhaps to the apathy of the people that both Monarchy and Established Church continue. For, let us make no mistake, that Church could not survive if the majority of citizens plainly and positively disowned it.

It is news to me that atheistic Secularism is "drenched in unpopularity" because of "politicians of one colour or another." If it is a fact (as I believe) that our Movement is not confined to one particular political outlook, then I do not myself see how politics can drench it in unpopularity.

Perhaps unlike Mr. Huxley, I suspect that much of the unpopularity attaching to Secularism arises out of the condition of theistic unbelief on which it is founded. Not that that is necessarily a matter for complaint by us. Some of the best causes in the world have, over long years, failed to win the acclamation of the public. I daresay that some never will. That is why we sadly speak of them as "lost causes". The duty of life, if I may so put it, is not to be popular but to be true to what we believe right and just, true to our principles, true to ourselves. But we should be fair even to those with whom we fundamentally disagree, and do not on that account impute to them—unless we know it to be so—unworthiness of motive. Unpopularity reaped through showing unfairness is altogether regrettable.

G. I. BENNETT.

VIVISECTION

It is all very well for Miss Barker (September 11th) and others to condemn vivisection. Admittedly many fallacious results have been obtained as a consequence of misinterpretation of experimental data, in a field where all factors are not controllable to the degree seen in physics or chemistry, but we cannot speculate until enough related facts are at our disposal. Bearing in mind the nature of the experiments, may I, as a layman, put this challenge?—Can you state in all honesty that we should have reached the stage we have in medicine and biology, without the experiments of physiologists like Sterling, Sherrington, Pavlov and Evans, and bacteriologists like Kock and Pasteur, to name but a few? Can the problems on which these men threw light be resolved without the aid of controlled experimental work? Should Maximow, in his study of inflammation, not have caused animal suffering but waited for the antivivisectionists to point out that empiricism is outdated; that it is an easy matter to forecast by

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reasoning power alone what would happen?

If we have not reached such a stage, it would be better to temper our emotions with the facts. Sentiment is a very important part of a person's character, but when it is allowed to obscure reason, one becomes little better in behaviour than those whose thinking is determined for them by authoritarian regimes which make capital out of fear.

N. MACIVER.

N.S.S. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23RD. Present: Messrs. Ebury (Chair), Alexander, Arthur, Barker, Cleaver, Corina, Corstorphine, Gordon, Hornbrook, Johnson, Plume, Mrs. Ebury, Mrs. Trask, Mrs. Venton, the Treasurer (Mr. Griffiths) and the Secretary. Mrs. Corina attended but, pending the checking of Bradford Branch membership, agreed not to vote. Apology for absence was received from Mr. Ridley. A report on search for new premises was given. New members were admitted to Birmingham, Central London, Dagenham, Merseyside, North London and Worthing Branches which, with Individual members made 12 in all. Secular Education League suggested questions to Parliamentary candidates were presented (these were printed in last week's FREETHINKER); Aberdeen Humanist Group's proposed survey of the secular-humanist movement was approved. Birmingham Branch request for speakers and Bradford Branch request for grant were met. A letter from the Secretary regarding a clerical threat to have Merseyside N.S.S. speakers removed from the pierhead was approved; a reply was awaited.

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