

# The Freethinker

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I WAS INVITED earlier this month to speak at a mixed Grammar School in London on "An Atheist Looks at Christmas," and I willingly accepted. I don't know what the scholars expected: perhaps some of them imagined a 20th-century Scrooge. They could have been forgiven if they had, because — as we noted on December 11th — no less a person than the Canon of Southwark Cathedral had expressed pity for those who couldn't accept the "Good news of great joy to all people, for unto you is born a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." Non-acceptance of the glad tidings, thought the Canon, "means no real Christmas."

This is true, of course, in one sense. Atheists do not celebrate the Christ-mass.

On the other hand, how many people do in Britain? Possibly church attendances rise a little at Christmas time, but the bulk of the population remains away. (And I hazard that, of those who go specially, quite a lot do so because they like the carols and the decorations.) In fact, though, Christmas as we know it today has very little to do with Christ. I don't need to tell FREETHINKER readers that the Winter Solstice is a much older festival than Christianity and that the day and year of Jesus's birth (assuming he lived) are quite unknown.

## Christmas Cheer

The Rev. Canon H. W. Browning of Southwark may regard the birth of Christ as the centre of the Christmas celebrations, but his view is not shared by the laity. For the latter, Christmas means family reunion, exchange of gifts, a spirit of fellowship and good cheer. It has been said that Christmas in England owes more to Dickens than to Christ, and it would seem to be true. Christmas trees, holly and mistletoe owe nothing whatever to Christianity; nor do the turkey and plum pudding. And, with the possible exception of the penultimate (for quite a number of them are vegetarians) atheists will have these in their homes this weekend, precisely as will their Christian neighbours. Atheist teetotallers will naturally resist the appeal of the port and sherry, but then, so will theist abstainers.

Our children will hang their stockings and pull their crackers; and we will join them in their games. And a week or two ago (if the seeds of doubt have not yet sprouted) our youngsters will have confided their hopes and wishes in the ear of Santa Claus (by kind permission of Messrs. Selfridges Ltd., *et al.*).

## Santa Claus

Santa Claus, now! There's a figure to puzzle Christian and Atheist alike. For in Britain, at any rate, he bears no resemblance, except in name, with Saint Nicholas. As the Columbia Encyclopedia says, the saint is now unrecognisable and "the career and qualities attributed to Santa Claus are all recently acquired." The three balls of the pawnbroker have also been associated with St. Nicholas; I assume no Christian would think of debarring an atheist from patronising "uncle" on that account. Similarly, the Christian can lay no exclusive claim to Santa Claus because

of his etymological relation to St. Nicholas. Presumably the latter had very little to do with reindeers and sledges in Asia Minor, even accepting his historical existence. And this is far from certain. The earliest documentary "evidence," according to the Encyclopedia Britannica (9th edition) can be dated no earlier than the 9th century, and a church was dedicated to him in Constantinople in 560. He himself is said to have died shortly after the Council

of Nice in 325, yet he "is not mentioned among the Nicene fathers by any of the church historians of that or the succeeding century."

## Symbols and Services

Be that as it may, there can be no question that we northerners have evolved a Christmas quite devoid of

religious significance. The Saturnalian holly is used for decoration; the Druidic mistletoe for fun and games. Christmas cards are overwhelmingly secular in character. Indeed the devout Christian might well have difficulty in finding a religious card in his local shop, and they are rare in the sample books.

The BBC, of course, will provide Christmas services for a population that by and large doesn't want them, but even that bulwark of the Establishment will yield to the people's wishes by giving lots of light entertainment and plenty of fun. The emphasis, as in our Christmas cards, will be on merriment. The Queen, no doubt, will ask the blessing of God on "her" people, following the world-wide Commonwealth link-up, but the keynote of the programme will almost certainly be unity and fellowship, however incongruous that may sound to some Africans and West Indians.

Incongruity, anyway, is inevitable at Christmas — for the Christian. Messrs. F. W. Woolworth and Co. Ltd. will dutifully devote one window to an anything-but-new-born baby in a manger among the sheep and shepherds, but the many other windows will display a wide variety of unreligious objects. A few angels may decorate the windows of other stores, but the operative word is "decorate"; they will be designed for that purpose alone. And, as Thomas Traveller so delightfully shows on another page, commercial considerations are not entirely forgotten in the "world's most holy village," Oberammergau. Preachers of many denominations have, in fact, drawn attention to the incongruousness of the Christian Christmas, and deplored the unspiritual nature of many Christmas practices. But in vain. And I trust they will continue to do so in vain.

For, behind the feasting and carousing — which I am far from despising anyway — there is much to cherish about Christmas. Old friends remember each other, families are rejoined; there is a friendliness and cheerfulness that transcends all the commercialisation. This is the true spirit of Christmas, and it owes nothing to the gods of Christianity or any other religion. It is based in man; in his family life, in his interdependence. It is not a virgin and child that humanity loves most: it is a mother and child; not a holy family, but a human family. That is how it should be, and that it is how it is.

— VIEWS and OPINIONS —

## A Merry Christmas

By COLIN McCALL

## What is the Christian Case?—5

By H. CUTNER

AS THERE ARE STILL one or two points in Mr. Ashe's three replies to me which I have been unable to deal with, I trust readers will bear with me a little longer.

And first—the Dead Sea Scrolls. I have not read Gaster, but I have read many books and articles and reviews about them; and as far as I have read, I fail to see how anybody who knows a little about them and the Essenes could possibly imagine that they support the Christian case. If the dates given for them are only approximately correct, they annihilate the "uniqueness" of Jesus and Christianity. If the Scrolls or the Essenes or both were actually discussing "a Teacher of Righteousness" and "a Wicked Priest" somewhere around the year 100 B.C., then we have here once for all proof that the whole story of Jesus, and his Wicked Adversary the Devil, was simply *stolen* and written up again, as were the stories of the Virgin Birth and a "Saviour" who was "crucified" from similar stories in the Pagan world.

The truth is that this "battle" between the "Good" and the "Evil" was already a stock one, going through many phases ever since someone, possibly long before writing as such was known, "personified" the Sun and the wicked winter struggling for mastery—or day and night, or just winter and summer. What else is the famous fable of Pluto, Proserpina and Ceres? Or Osiris and Set? Or, for that matter—but merely told as an entertaining story—the struggle between Sherlock Holmes and his mortal enemy Professor Moriarty?

These "personifications" of aspects of Nature both in the Old and the New Testaments are very well known to students of allegory and symbolism; and we must give credit to the writers in the Bible who managed to endow "personifications" so brilliantly that nearly everybody who has read the Bible, including Mr. Ashe, actually believes in them as *history*. It is almost unbelievable!

To put all this in another way. I am convinced, as far as my own reading has taken me, that just as the Teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest of the Essenes are "myths", so are Jesus and all his famous Apostles—Peter, John, Paul, and the rest; and so is the story of the early Christian Church as given in the Book of Acts. In short, outside the New Testament and Church writers, there is not a line, anywhere about its particular heroes.

Of course, as soon as Dupuis and his followers began to write in this way, relegating Jesus as a God to the class of Attis or Jupiter—his story as a sheer fable—Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger were hastily trotted out and re-examined. It is the fashion among Christians now to declare that, after all, the modern fraudulent passages about Jesus in Josephus and in Tacitus are literally true; and that if Pliny examined Christians early in the second century, that proves there must have been a Jesus, the Son of God, who rose on the third day after being put to death by Pontius Pilate. Of course, if Pliny had examined Egyptians who believed in Osiris and his death at the hands of Set, this would *not* prove that Osiris and Set really lived—it would only prove that Egyptians then were credulous fools and mistaken. But the case of Jesus *must* be different.

Merely *saying* that Josephus and Tacitus mention Jesus is proof that he must have performed miracles, and must have arisen from the dead. Yet it is a fact that

Josephus, who gives a highly detailed account of the period in Palestine dealt with in Acts, knows *literally nothing* about the way Peter and Paul addressed the Jews in their synagogues, or made converts. He never mentions the death of Stephen or anything else in that sacred book. And there is a very good reason. None of the "acts" of the Apostles ever took place. (Incidentally the "acts" of the "Apostles" are mostly the acts of two of them only—Peter and Paul; and both speak exactly like each other.)

Mr. Ashe "disposes" of our case against the New Testament as history by in most cases simply *saying* so. As thus:

The manuscript authority is far better than it is for most books of the classical age. There are two or three doubtful passages (only doubtful, not proved spurious) . . .

Attempts to prove the writers historically wrong have also failed. Luke and Acts, in particular, came off creditably from the scrutiny of Sir William Ramsay. The difficulty over Quirinius (Luke 2, 2) has long since been disposed of.

Attempts to prove internal contradictions have failed likewise. There are great differences of interest and emphasis, but no contradictions. The Evangelists nowhere profess to be writing biographies in the modern sense . . .

And so on. Almost all these and similar statements have been the stock-in-trade of Christians for as long as I have read them—over 60 years—and they are repeated *ad lib* by other Christians as if no Freethinker had ever heard of them, or could possibly deal with them. Ramsay, for example, wrote a whole book to prove that Quirinius must have been twice governor of Syria, so that he could reconcile the chronology of Matthew with that of Luke. His whole thesis fell to bits because prior to A.D. 7, Judea was not a part of Syria. I cannot deal in this short article with Ramsay, but we hardly ever hear of him these days for a very good reason. The last thing Christians want to discuss is, "When was our Lord born?" Almost everybody, except Christian scholars, puts the date as A.D. 1, but the scholars know that it *must* have been before 4 B.C. The truth is that *no one knows* (except perhaps Mr. Ashe), but if Luke is the infallible authority, then the "Virgin Birth" must have been as late as A.D. 7. I agree, however, that we have reverent Humanists among us who are ready to make the date 20 B.C. or even 30 B.C.

It is quite amusing to find that "there is nothing un-Christian in the view that the Fourth Gospel is a working up of his (John's) reminiscences by an unknown hand." So long as you "believe", there is *nothing* "un-Christian" anywhere. At one time, all the Gospels were looked upon not only as veritable Biographies of the Son of the Living God, but as completely inspired by God the Father; and Mr. Ashe perhaps knows better than I how many books have been written to prove this. One of the most famous theologians of the 19th century, Dr. Tischendorf, in his *When were our Gospels Written?*—one of the best ever written from the Christian point of view—affirms that, "All the world knows that our Gospels are nothing else than biographies of Christ"; but then this was written about 100 years ago, and our whole conception of the sacred "biographies" which, in the interim, have been riddled to bits, has radically changed. We are *now* told that the Evangelists "nowhere" said so; and I note that in *The Gospels Today* by L. A. Garrard, M.A., Editor of the *Hibbert Journal*, we are told that the Jews "seem to have had little interest in biography", that "we no longer take it for granted" that the Gospels were written  
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# The Origins of Islam

By F. A. RIDLEY

AN IRISH ROMAN CATHOLIC NEWSPAPER recently made the rather surprising admission that Catholic missions in Africa are making very heavy weather in comparison with those of Catholicism's traditional rival since the days of the Crusades — Islam, the Unitarian creed of the "false" Prophet, Muhammed. Islam, it declares, is actually making five times as many converts in the Dark Continent amongst the Pagan Negro races.

Nor is this Muslim renaissance confined to Africa. It forms part of an international revival of Islam which has recently added to the map of world politics such contemporary states as Pakistan (i.e., The Land of the Pure, the Muslim "True Believers") and Indonesia; while the re-emergence of the Arab nations now embodied in the Arab League, has been sensational. In view of such events, one can hardly regard the religious evolution of Islam as something of academic or antiquarian interest only. It is probable that there are, or soon will be, more Muslim citizens of the British Commonwealth than there are Christians.

I recently stumbled upon a very interesting historical essay by that great French scholar and man of letters, Ernest Renan. M. Renan here turned his attention from his major subjects of study, Jewish and Christian origins, to direct a brief but penetrating glance at the life of the Founder of Islam, the self-styled Prophet of God, Muhammed. And more generally at the origins of the last of the great religions so far evolved in the sequential course of human history, Islam, the Arabian creed of submission to Allah, the unique God. The result of more modern attempts at religion-making would appear to indicate that the age of world religions is now over. It seems to be unlikely that the world will ever again witness a Jesus, a Muhammed, or a Manichaeus. As Renan indicates, Islam was not really a very original creed and, perhaps for this very reason, has worn better than other more pretentious ones. For, strictly speaking, Islam is "The Religion of the Book," i.e., the Koran, the Revelation dictated by the Supreme God, Allah, to his prophet Muhammed. For, though Islam is usually named after its Founder, the actual followers of this cult have never rated their Founding Prophet on anything like the level that orthodox Christians have evaluated Jesus Christ. For his followers, past and present, Muhammed represents the last and greatest of God's Prophets, but never God himself. While, for example, the founders, even quite recent founders of Hindu sects, such as Gandhi and Aurobindo are now included in the Hindu pantheon, no analogous elevation to godhead has ever befallen Muhammed. On the contrary, as M. Renan effectively demonstrates, in comparison with the lives and miraculous feats of other religious founders, there is almost a rationalistic restraint about the Muslim accounts of Muhammed's own life. There is, in fact, an almost complete absence of miracles. The Arabian Prophet neither rose from the dead nor was born of a virgin; he neither raised the dead, healed the sick, nor even cast out devils in New Testament style. In fact, apart from one single — and singularly bizarre — episode, Muhammed's life, at least as far as miracles were concerned, might almost have been that of an ancient Arabian precursor of "The Age of Reason." Thomas Paine, it may be recalled, was also a Deist who did not believe in miracles. A Muslim once told me that his co-religionists now regard Paine as almost a Muslim! Even the one miracle dubiously ascribed to him, but itself never an Islamic dogma — the Prophet's flight to Jerusalem from Mecca on the heavenly horse Al-Borak — was, we learn from Renan, a stumbling block

and an offence to many of the Prophet's own more rationalistic disciples. Nor, insists our author, has Islam ever made any attempt to give its Founder a supernatural affiliation like that of Jesus, Buddha or Krishna, or even attempted to gloss over the Prophet's poverty-stricken youth and his menial occupation in early manhood; of a camel-driver or more exactly, a commercial traveller — to use Renan's expression. Islam is, declares Renan, the most matter-of-fact and the least metaphysical of all the major religions. There is nothing in the Koran which in any way resembles the glittering pyramids of metaphysical subtleties that characterised Christian and Hindu doctors like Aquinas or Shankara. Islam much more resembles Judaism which, as our author demonstrates, was similarly Unitarian in belief. But Islam has the great advantage, for a would-be universal religion, that it is free from the binding dogma of the supernatural sanctity of a Chosen Race. Unlike Judaism, it is a cosmopolitan cult. There is, however, one concession to the Arabian "Chosen Race" theory — the Koran must always be recited in Arabic.

The more usual description of Muslim origins is that it started as a Jewish or Nestorian (Unitarian) Christian heresy. But while it is certain that both Jews and Nestorian Christians existed in Arabia, and that Muhammed came under their influence (he seems to have instructed his earliest converts to turn towards Jerusalem in prayer) Renan draws attention to an interesting but little-known aspect of Muslim origins about which it is to be hoped that modern research will add to our knowledge. According to him, there had been earlier Arabian religious reformers who had tried to develop the Unitarian cult of Allah by destroying the idol worship then rampant in Mecca, long prior to Muhammed (570-632). From one of these Arabian reformers, Waraka, about whom Muslim tradition has preserved the name (Waraka is alleged to have been related to Muhammed's first wife, Khadija) it seems to be possible that the future Prophet of Islam derived the rudiments of his creed, since the tradition represents Waraka as both a religious reformer before Muhammed and as a learned and much travelled man who was acquainted at first hand with the Christian and Jewish Scriptures. (Whether Muhammed could read or write is a moot and much disputed point.) In which case it may be more correct to describe Islam as an authentic Arabian reformation rather than, as is more usually done, as a Jewish or even Christian heresy. Muhammed, it may be pointed out, preserved several relics of Paganism — The Sacred Black Stone at Mecca and the Crescent Moon are both pagan survivals. However that may be, it is indisputable that the tenets of Islam are much closer to those of the Jewish Old Testament than to the Christian New Testament. However originated, I think that it would be quite accurate to describe the Koran, the alleged revelation of Islam as (much more accurately than the Christian New Testament) "The New Testament of Judaism" and perhaps Islam itself as "Jewish Catholicism," the Catholic Church of Judaism.

But however originally conceived, it appears indisputable that Islam, perhaps because it is the last of the world's great religions, has proved to be that one which has succeeded best — much better than Christianity — in reducing its system to the irreducible minimum of essential religious dogma without superfluous accretions or ambiguous metaphysical subtleties. For the actual dogmas of Islam are few and elemental. For which reason, the present writer would be inclined to back the survival-value of Islam

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## This Believing World

**Heartiest congratulations to the** British Medical Association which yielded immediately to an indignant protest on a birth control advertisement to appear in the 1960 edition of *Getting Married*. The protest was more than indignant, it was a very angry one, and came from a group of Roman Catholic doctors, and the advertisement was hurriedly omitted from the edition. The same group of Catholic doctors, we believe, succeeded in getting the whole edition withdrawn some months ago because their Church did not like any sex instruction to be given, and of course our Medical Association instantly and graciously gave in.

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**And on this question, Miss Sarah Jenkins** of *News Chronicle* has the temerity to say that she "has nothing but contempt for the British Medical Association who, for the second year running, have meekly given in to their Roman Catholic members"; and she puts forward the outrageous suggestion: What would happen if "all non-Catholic doctors" threatened to resign if the BMA did not accept the advertisement? Thank God, no member would dare to hurt the pious feelings of a Catholic doctor — not even if every medical member of the Church of Rome insisted on their absolute right in a difficult birth to destroy the mother to save the child. Protestant doctors must be taught, once for all, that the Head of the Christian Faith is the Pope and what he and his cardinals say they must obey. They will.

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**Relating her marvellous experiences,** Mrs. Estelle Roberts, described by *The People* as the "most amazing woman in the world," tells us how her "spirit guide," Red Cloud, brought in "the spirit" of Sir Morell Mackenzie, "a famous surgeon who had been dead for 36 years" to help in the "spirit-healing" cure by means of a spirit "operation." Since then, Sir Morell "has often come" to help in the "more difficult" cases of "spiritual healing." It seems extraordinary that his services are not constantly asked for by our hospitals which in this way could clear out dozens of patients every day and make room for the thousands of cases on a long waiting list.

★

**Why is this not done?** Why do we never get the services of such willing "spirit" surgeons regularly into our hospitals? Why do we only hear of these "miracles" of healing taking place only *years afterwards* under circumstances impossible to check? There is, of course, a positive reason. There is almost always a genuine *medical* answer to cures — and none of them comes from "spirits." And though there may be a very few cures not easily explained, no doctor with his reputation at stake would say they were the work of "spirits."

★

**Still continuing her experiences,** Mrs. Roberts dealt with "materialisations." It appears that "few have the special gift" of getting Spirit Guides to show themselves. Mrs. Roberts is one of the fortunate ones, for in 1934 she persuaded her Guide, Red Cloud, to appear before "17 level-headed witnesses . . . who stood inches from the great guide and chatted with him." Of course, though a full-blooded Indian, he spoke perfect English, cracked a lot of jokes "with a smiling face." and later, several of the "witnesses" were given some precious jewels, not "spirit" ones, but the real thing. It was, in fact, a habit

of Red Cloud to give such presents. What a pity that Red Cloud does not appear more often — preferably on a red cloud!

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**So Trafalgar Square is going to have a "nativity scene"** set up for Christmas, next to the Christmas tree. And to make it as realistic as possible, there will be, in addition to the familiar "crib" with Mary, and Jesus as the babe, a stable made by boys at an approved school. All the figures are realistic representations by a lady sculptress, and the whole affair is sponsored by the Inter-Church Aid and Refugee Service of the British Council of Churches and — of course — the Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields "as an offering to the World Refugee Year Campaign." Thus is a myth perpetuated, and no doubt the many children — and adults — who will see it, will believe that something like it actually took place. Children may not really believe in Father Christmas, but they are thus made to believe in the "Virgin" Birth.

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**And of course the Christian myths** are helped as far as possible by such films as "Ben Hur" now released, which was a "best seller" romance last century, and now is a "romantic" life of Jesus. In the film we are not allowed to see the face of "our Lord" — that would be too blasphemous (or should be say sacred?) for the vulgar to see, but this will not hurt the popularity of what is called by the producers "the most spectacular *entertainment* of all time." This phrase is no doubt true of the film — but fancy calling anything to do with the "life" of Christ "entertainment"!

### WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN CASE?

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to "give us a biography of Jesus." And Mr. Garrard quotes the Rev. Estlin Carpenter—"The Gospels are not so much lives of Jesus as apologies for Christianity . . . they do not fulfill the conditions of biography as we understand it. They are edifying narratives . . ." We certainly have come a long way from the great Dr. Tischendorf!

If there is anything now which Mr. Ashe can complain of which I have not discussed, or about which he would like me to deal more fully, I hope he will say so. In any case, I have written these few articles, not so much to convince Mr. Ashe that the Gospels are not really true, as to show in a small way how we view the Gospels and how little truth, if any at all, is in them.

But I fully agree with the Rev. Mr. Carpenter's judgment—they are not biographies, and they were meant to be "edifying narratives." Only I think that it would have helped a little more if he had told us in what way are they edifying?

### THE ORIGINS OF ISLAM

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against that of any other contemporary religion whatever. In view of the fierce competition of rival religions for a shrinking spiritual market, we incline to the view that our Catholic contemporary cited at the start of this article, along with the Church and creed that it represents, have only too much reason for their obvious alarm.

—NEXT WEEK—

RECOLLECTIONS OF A YOUNG ATHEIST

By CHRISTOPHER N. FINNEY

## THE FREETHINKER

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All articles and correspondence should be addressed to THE EDITOR at the above address and not to individuals. THE FREETHINKER can be obtained through any newsagent or will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates: One year, £1 15s.; half-year, 17s. 6d.; three months, 8s. 9d. (In U.S.A. and Canada: One year, \$5.00; half-year, \$2.50; three months, \$1.25.)

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### Lecture Notices, Etc.

#### OUTDOOR

- Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (The Mound).—Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. CRONAN and MURRAY.  
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.: Messrs. WOODCOCK, CORSAIR, SMITH, etc. Sunday, 8 p.m.: Messrs. WOODCOCK, MILLS, SMITH, etc.  
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.  
West London Branch N.S.S. (Marble Arch).—Meetings every Sunday, from 4 p.m.: Messrs. L. EBURY, J. W. BARKER, C. E. WOOD and D. TRIBE.

#### INDOOR

- Central London Branch N.S.S. ("The City of Hereford" Blandford Place, W.1) Sunday, December 27th, 7.15 p.m.: New Year Social.

### Notes and News

"YOU ENGLISH cannot know what Pushkin is for us," said the author of "Voice out of Russia" in *The Sunday Times* (6/12/59). "He is our pride, our hope and our love," he continued. "He is the Sun of our art, and without him there would have been neither Tolstoy nor Dostoevsky; for it was Pushkin who gave impetus to slumbering Russian thought, fertilised Russian culture and by his genius gave this culture its direction." We are pleased to announce that Adrian Pigott, author of *Freedom's Foe: the Vatican*, has written a series of articles on Pushkin specially for THE FREETHINKER, and that these will be published early in the New Year.

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ANOTHER NEW YEAR OFFERING will be the full text of Dr. Ronald Fletcher's paper to the Brussels Congress of the World Union of Freethinkers. This thoughtful paper was extremely well received, and we know it will be appreciated by our readers.

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IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE that Pope John XXIII's latest strengthening of the Curia brings the United States' membership of the Sacred College of Cardinals to the highest ever—six. The U.S. now ranks third in membership, behind Italy (31) and France (7), and ahead of Spain (5).

★

A FIRST PRINTING of 5,000 copies has nearly been sold out, and its success "may have something to do with its title," said *Time* (16/11/59) about the Italian theological work of 914 pages, *Il Peccato* (Sin), edited by Monsignor Pietro Palazzini. *Time's* report on the book mentions an article on films by the Rev. Salvatore Casals, who warns filmmakers to be careful to distinguish between evil and sin,

and to depict sin as something more than inconveniently illegal. Worst offenders, he says, are those modern films which ignore the existence of sin, but even family life is often dealt with "deceptively" — and therefore "sinfully" — on the screen. "Child-rearing is absent from many films, or reduced to a single child."

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WE HEAR THAT A CLERGYMAN, speaking in the BBC "Epilogue" recently referred to the "herrings and kippers caught off the coast of Scotland."

### Infallibility by Apostolic Succession

THE HOLY(!) ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH traces its so-called infallibility back through the Popes (and anti-Popes) to Peter, who, it says, was delegated by Jesus.

So let us see what we can learn (from the Christian records) about this infallibility of Peter and also about the infallibility of Jesus. Surely the arrogant Popes could not claim (let us say) a higher degree of infallibility than that displayed by Jesus and by Peter! On second thoughts I guess they would and have.

Jesus was wrong when he predicted the end of the world would come within the generation of those living about him. He had the simple ignorant people believing that the end of the world was just around the corner of the next block (Matt. 24: 33-35, Luke 6: 35).

Jesus instructed his followers and others not to charge interest on loans for that was wrong. There is no indication that Jesus had a banking account, or any money.

Jesus said (Matt. 6: 25-34) take no thought for the morrow. That was the pattern of his own life (according to the Book) and he had no place to lay his head. No home of his own and no possessions.

All who have followed that instruction walk or ride on asses as they did 2,000 years ago. They have not made any progress.

A prudent man seeks to protect himself against his needs in old age. A prudent man tries to provide for his wife and family and do all that is necessary to protect them.

Jesus urged men to abandon their wives and their families and follow him. He promised to all who did, big rewards up to one hundred fold. In many States of the U.S.A. such a deserter would be put in gaol as a lazy husband.

Jesus needed followers and so he made big promises to get them.

A perfect score in the error column. And papal infallibility stems from this!

[For other mistakes of Jesus, see *The Mistakes of Jesus* by William Floyd (1932), New York, The Freethought Press Association.]

Now, about Peter, the one who stands at the Pearly gates, and the one who has the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, so the Catholics say. Just what kind of a character did he display?

Peter, so the Christian story goes, double-crossed Jesus three times. Just before Jesus was put on trial, Peter denied being with Jesus and denied that he was his follower. (Matt. 26: 69-75).

In all fairness it would seem proper to assume that Peter did not want to be a dead hero!

Those are the sources of the so-called Papal Infallibility.

The lives of Peter and Jesus did not show any signs of infallibility, but they did show all the signs of the common errors of human flesh. The Popes are putting over their idea of Infallibility because the Protestants (and others) are unwilling to fight it out with the Roman Catholic Church.

T. T. PLUS.

## Reflections of a Rationalist

By F. S. HOUGHTON.

HOW CAN SINCERE and intelligent persons call themselves Christians? How can anyone accept the discoveries of science and yet retain his religion? The last two or three centuries have produced evidence upon evidence that the religions of the world are only a series of bad guesses at the secrets of the universe; each thinks his own guess true and his neighbour's false. Religion is born of primitive man's ignorance, and yet intelligent men still pin their faith to Hebrew folk lore as the religion for mankind; the idea is preposterous. How enormously world problems would be eased if the factor of religion could be eliminated!

Examine the argument that Christianity gives consolation and hope. Brahminism and Buddhism both have afforded consolation and hope to far more people than Christianity has ever done. Must one accept either of these religions as the true one? The hope held out by Mohammedanism is more definite and satisfying than that associated with Christianity. Ought one not therefore to become converts to that faith? No one denies that the Church has ministered comfort to millions. On the other hand the Church has ministered at least an equivalent amount of discomfort.

"I came not to send peace, but a sword" said Jesus; little dreaming what a ghastly truth he was uttering. As Christianity gathered strength it gathered arrogance. It displayed intolerance and cruelty. There is no more shameful page in history than the story of the early Church. The enmity of Christians to one another surpasses the fury of savage beasts. Wars of religion have always been cruel wars. History shows generations stumbling from one blood-stained fallacy to another, and the Christian fallacy is not the least blood-stained. Mankind can never achieve its highest potentialities till it has thrown off the incubus of religion.

The first stirrings of reason were the signal for the cruelties of battle and siege, of rack and faggot, so that the ministers of heaven were indistinguishable from emissaries of hell. We see in Ireland today religious strife embittering political discord. What religion in the world has such a record of strife and barbarity? Christianity has fought every advance of civilisation. Christianity has made many wars and prevented few, it has sanctioned and practised the most hideous cruelties, it has seldom interfered to forbid them. What can it place to its credit? The cleansing of prisons? The humanising of the penal code? The abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of the negro? No, political reforms were opposed by the Church. Progress has been made in spite of it. Has it done anything to promote the just distribution of wealth, and the produce of labour? The answer again is no!

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." The Bible established for fifteen hundred years the reality of witchcraft. The clergy denounced it with the emphasis of authority. Legislators enacted laws for the punishment of witchcraft. Astute judges, experienced in sifting evidence, condemned the accused. Tens of thousands of victims suffered the most agonising torments without exciting any compassion; they were mostly poor and ignorant. Seven thousand witches were burned at Treves, 600 by a single bishop at Bamberg, 900 in a single year in the bishopric of Wurzburg. At Toulouse 400 perished at a single execution. Remy, a judge at Nancy, burned 800 witches in 16 years. In Italy 1,000 were executed in a year at Como. In three months 48 were burned at Constance and 80 at Valery in Savoy. In 1670 70 persons were condemned in Sweden.

The Church of Rome strained every nerve to stimulate persecution. Pope Innocent III instituted the Inquisition. Inquisitors travelled all over Europe in search for victims; a large proportion of the condemned were women. Ecclesiastical tribunals condemned thousands to death, and countless bishops exerted their influence to multiply the victims. The existence of witchcraft formed part of the teaching of the Church and the persecution that raged was supported by the Church. Luther said "I would have no compassion on witches, I would burn them all." In Scotland the Reformed ministers exercised greater influence than in any other country and, where witch trials fell into their hands, the persecution was proportionately atrocious. Glanvill of the Anglican church and Baxter of the Puritans were the greatest persecutors. The executions in Massachusetts form one of the darkest pages in American history. The greatest religious leaders of the 18th century were among the supporters of the persecution. King James I wrote on the subject and ascribed his stormy passage from Dunkirk to witches. On his accession a law was enacted which subjected witches to death on first conviction even though they should have inflicted no injury on anyone. Prosecutions rapidly multiplied, especially in Lancashire. But James's efforts sink into insignificance beside those made during the Commonwealth. When the Puritans gained ascendancy, the superstition assumed a gigantic magnitude, more witches perishing in England then than in the period before and after.

The Church regards this life as merely preparatory to another and justifies injustice and oppression by reference to compensations in the life to come. It acquiesces in riches and poverty as part of the divine order. These principles are the backbone of Christianity. The teachings of Jesus and Paul are based on the insignificance of this life as compared with that to come. Meekness and docility will meet with their reward in the Kingdom of Heaven. One of the principal causes of the rapid growth of the Christian Church was the belief in the speedy end of the world. It was universally believed that the end of the world and the Kingdom of Heaven were at hand; it had been predicted by Jesus and the Apostles, and before that generation was extinguished. Tertullian said "Expect the greatest of all spectacles, the last and eternal judgment of the universe. How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult when I behold so many proud monarchs groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness, so many who persecuted the name of the Lord liquefying in fiercer flames than ever they kindled against the Christians, so many philosophers blushing in red-hot flames with their deluded scholars, so many celebrated poets trembling before the tribunal of Christ." But let us draw a veil over the rest of this infernal description.

Intellectual progress is the long struggle of man to emancipate himself. To primitive man the sun is a light revolving round the world; the moon and stars formed only to light his path. Strange diseases suggest demons; the terrific phenomena of nature inevitably impel him into superstition. Through centuries these superstitions have caused untold misery. Millions of prayers have been breathed to what we now know to be laws of nature.

### WITHOUT COMMENT

Mexico City, Wednesday.—The Mexican Supreme Court has confirmed 20-year prison terms for ten people sentenced for lynching a fellow villager because he left the Roman Catholic Church to become a Protestant.—B.U.P. *Evening News* (2/12/59).

# The World's Most Holy Village

By THOMAS TRAVELLER

(Concluded from page 403)

With the end of the Thirty Years' War, in 1648, Oberammergau's fortunes began to revive. The Passion Play began to attract visitors. After the third performance, the hospitable villagers resolved that in future "seats for the onlookers will be provided."

Oberammergau had long specialised in wood-carving, with special accent on religious souvenirs. Pedlars hawked the production throughout Europe. Everywhere, they proudly boasted of their home town's Passion Play — an added sales point for their wood-carvings. Prospering, they built up a flourishing export trade.

Rival villages and towns tried to cash in by running their own morality plays, complete with brisk business in souvenirs and additional entertainment for visitors. Some aspects of the trade led to banning of all Passion Plays throughout the Electorate. After much pleading, however, the villagers of Oberammergau were allowed to hold their 1780 Festival; for they were not as other men, interested only in commerce. Besides, they claimed exemption on account of priority in the field; all rival shows were branded as unworthy imitators.

By that time, admission fees were charged. There were first-class seats for nobility and gentry and second- and third-class. But times were difficult. In 1800, owing to successive occupation of Oberammergau by Austrian and then French troops, it was almost impossible for the public to reach the village.

True, during the Austrian occupation, a special performance was given for the troops; and, at General Grüne's command, guards were posted to stop any soldier from entering the theatre without payment. All the same, after the actors had been paid, the community made a loss on the season. So they were granted special permission to hold four repeat performances the following summer. Similarly, 1811's financial failure was retrieved by repeat performances in 1815.

From 1820 onwards, the Passion Play became really good box-office. In 1940, for instance, an open-air theatre built to hold an 8,000 audience was still too small, and repeat performances had to be given. The English began coming. Even more important, royalty arrived. In 1871, Queen Victoria herself appeared. After that, Oberammergau never looked back.

The atmosphere of Oberammergau is holy and pious. The men cultivate beards and soulful, other-worldly looks. Scenes from the Scriptures, in blue, red and gold, decorate hotels and souvenir-shops. Wood-carving prices seem astronomically high; but then so is the cost of living. If one's heart is set upon a "cute little angel," is seems blasphemous to haggle over the cost. The bearded proprietor is not a mere shopkeeper, but a man who probably has a big part in the Passion Play. He has the look of one who, mystically, has come close to the eternal. It is quite inconceivable that such a man would overcharge.

The angel output comes mostly from factories on the village outskirts. One such workshop employed some thirty men, women and apprentices. The owner was a master craftsman, aged about sixty, with the appearance of an Old Testament prophet. One knew instinctively that he was a good employer, never allowing Satan the chance to find some mischief still for idle hands to do. His workers carved non-stop — hardly halting as we crowded round, breathing down their necks to admire

their skill. They were paid on piece rates, the foreman explained; so much a dozen crosses; rather more for angels. An industrious worker, putting in extra hours, could earn very good wages — as much as seven pounds a week.

Even if no visitors came, the community insists that it would still perform the Passion Play in every tenth year. Agreed, a performance was due in 1940: but there were more urgent duties to occupy the villagers' attention, such as invading France and ridding the world of Poles and Jews. True, war and pestilence did not stop the first performance of the play in 1634; nor did it in 1800, when first Austrians and then the French occupied the village. But when the young men were away, saving the world from Jewry and Bolshevism, the middle-aged could hardly carry on the Play alone.

By 1950, however, the travel industry in Germany was functioning again; the time was ripe for the villagers to fulfil again their 300-year-old promise to God. Back from war and imprisonment, the younger men proved themselves peculiarly fit to assume the main burden of the Play. Some members of the cast, the *Times* pointed out, were former Nazis: but their political records were not thought to have been the governing consideration in the allocation of parts. Hitler was dead, gone and forgotten. In a spirit of Christian forgiveness, the villagers of Oberammergau were ready to overlook the hardships they had endured through Allied occupation, and were ready to welcome visitors. Especially if they were American.

Now — 1960 — the limelight again focusses upon the world's most holy village. It is good to know that God has so richly rewarded their prayers.

## CORRESPONDENCE

### ATHEISTS AND THEISTS

Some points in Mr. Bennett's article (27/11/59) made me furious. "The simple folk radiate an uncomplaining cheerfulness." How terrible if they do! If they are contented in their misery, they are just as the Church wants them to be — longing for pic in the sky when they die! I was a Catholic for 30 years of my life and my mind was torn with fears of sin, of hell and all its torments, of death and the last judgment and I found all around me the same. When in the convent, cold, hungry, repressed and so cowed, visitors would come in and say "Oh don't they look happy!" How we hated them for being so dense. I found religious people a miserable crowd. Have you ever seen one of them dying? In Spain, where I lived up in the mountains, I've heard rich people say as they watched the poor ragged peasants walking barefooted in the snow: "Ah yes! But they are so happy!" When I said "How would you like to see your children like that?" they would answer: "Oh, but that's different, that class of children don't feel the cold." Shaw said: "A man is happy when he is drunk, but you wouldn't have a man drunk all the time." Leave happiness for cats, man has forever. So Mr. Bennett would live happily in a land where everyone but himself felt the call of faith! I doubt it. Of course he'd be persecuted. Religious people always persecute such people. I am ostracised and snubbed by Protestants and Catholics and purposely left out when there is any kind of a social gathering. Who are more assertive than the Catholics? So I'm not going to "strew life with kindnesses for them" — they'd just lap them up and laugh at me. Mr. Bennett talks about living freely. The thoughts and actions of the religious man are all governed for him.

As our great 19th century writer, Eça de Queiroz, said: "All the life of a good Catholic, his thoughts, his ideas, his sentiments, his words, the employment of his day and his nights, his relations with his family and with his neighbours, the food he eats, the

clothes he wears and his amusements are regulated by the ecclesiastical authorities, counselled and ordered by the director of his conscience. The good Catholic has no powers of reasoning, no will, no judgment, no personal feelings; his priest thinks, wills, determines, feels for him. His only work in this world is to accept this direction, accept it without discussion; obey it no matter where it leads him. If it is contrary to his ideas, he must think his ideas are false."

N. F. (Lisbon).

### RELIGION OF CRIMINALS

Your issue of August 7th, 1959, made reference to Mr. McCall's efforts to obtain from the Home Office, figures showing religious beliefs of our criminals. Curiously enough, I myself had already been pursuing the same course, quite independently.

I had been actuated by reading that, in Dutch prisons, the lowest percentage of criminals called themselves "Of no religion." Also by a report in the *Ulster Protestant* of September, 1957, concerning the youthful delinquents of Liverpool. This city has a Romanist population of about 12 per cent. — yet it was they who provided the appalling percentage of 82 per cent. of the city's crime. (These figures so shocked the Liverpool RC's that they asked the Police not to publish any further detailed statistics.)

My first enquiry to the Home Office lay unanswered for three weeks — and I was then informed that the figures were "not available." I then requested the reason for this secrecy. This time there was a delay of only a fortnight before I received an evasive reply saying "As previously explained, the information you desire is not available from official sources." I then told them I would approach my M.P. (This resulted in an acknowledgment by return post!)

However, my M.P. got no satisfaction either; he was told by Mr. Butler's Private Secretary that it would not be in the Public Interest to publish the figures of the religious beliefs of offenders, which are regarded as confidential.

I am tempted to infer that religious bodies, (especially the guilty Roman Catholic Church), must have some influence in official circles in suppressing the truth. The official figures for New Zealand (provided by Mr. Bamford in your issue of December 11th, 1959) seem to confirm the fact that the less religious a person is, the less likely it is that he or she will "go inside."

ADRIAN PIGOTT.

### THOMAS PAINE

Before the Thomas Paine commemoration year is over, can you tell me where the remains of Paine now lie? You may be aware that he died in the U.S.A., the Americans refused to allow his burial in a cemetery, consequently he was buried in a field. William Cobbett dug up his bones and brought them to this country, and Byron summed up the Christian attitude in the following quatrain:

In digging up your bones Tom Paine,  
Will Cobbett has done well.  
He'll visit you on earth again —  
You'll visit him in hell.

ANONYMOUS WRITER.

[Moncure Conway wrote in his *Life of Thomas Paine*, "As to his bones, no man knows the place of their rest to this day." As far as we know this is still true.—Ed.]

### DETERMINISM AND FREE WILL

In reply to Mr. Meulen: if I understand the situation, science would have stated that A and B are related (or that A and X, X and Y, Y and B are related) and that they exist at different coordinates in space-time. As he implies, we do not know how energy travels and therefore we cannot say more than this. But if we are to admit spontaneous or random events, as Mr. Meulen suggests we should, it is difficult to see how order could be maintained in the system as, from our observations, it appears to be. It is true that we have no knowledge of the relationship between reality and the sentient impressions which it produces in us, and that therefore, what appears to be an ordered system may be nothing of the kind. But to be a rationalist is to believe that reliance upon such evidence is better than reliance upon emotional responses.

Mr. Meulen's discussion of the "How" and "Why" of events does not appear to be relevant to his conclusions. He says that

he feels he can choose and, in effect, that this is half of the reason why he believes it. To say that Man can choose is to suggest a causal relationship between his action and his will. Unlike Mr. Meulen, I see no reason to suppose that the will is not equally the effect of causal relationships with other events. I can assure anyone who is inclined to doubt it, that it is easily possible to lead a normal life while believing oneself to be (nearly!) a complex mechanism. The "worrying" is part of the mechanism, namely that part which searches by reasoning for all possible consequences of action and inevitably selects those responses which most nearly satisfy its success criteria. Unlike many people, I am not ashamed to think myself such a mechanism.

The real clue to Mr. Meulen's belief occurs in his last paragraph: he desires or sees dignity in Man. By "human dignity" I suppose he means self-esteem, though I do not understand why his self-esteem should suffer more from believing himself to be part of a vast mechanism, than from believing that he is a receiver for random events.

G. M. JONES.

### OBITUARY

Freethinkers all over Britain will join us in sending our deepest sympathy to Alphonso Samms, veteran National Secular Society lecturer in Sheffield, on the death of his wife at the age of 78.

Like her husband, Edith Samms was a Freethinker and member of the NSS. In all his many struggles, she was behind him and alongside him, and a great strength to him. In later years her health was bad; she was afflicted with blindness, and she leant heavily on her husband. A few months ago they celebrated their diamond wedding; sixty devoted, if rebellious years, that he will now look back on, smiling amidst his tears.

A secular service was conducted by the General Secretary of the National Secular Society at Sheffield Crematorium on Friday, December 11th.

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