

# The Freethinker

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Address to the International Freethought Congress held at Brussels September 4th-8th 1959 in the Great Hall of the University of Brussels. Translated by C. Bradlaugh Bonner.

I HAVE CHOSEN AS MY SUBJECT a problem which is often overlooked, save from a metaphysical point of view, and which I think should be surveyed with care from our standpoint, i.e., that we should not allow preconceptions to bias our judgment. Man does not live by bread alone; once the physical requirements of living are satisfied — or even before they may — be completely gratified — other needs appear which make equally important demands. Among these is the need for psychological equilibrium. As living becomes more complex, so the need for such a condition of stability makes itself more and more felt. Today I would go so far as to say that the realisation of such an equilibrium has become the supreme need of our species. The interior conflicts from which we suffer reflect the social conflicts of the world in which we live. By interaction, the social conflicts seem to gain support from the mental contradictions they produce in us. It must, then, be a study for the scientist to discover some way of assuring to humanity a better and more lasting equilibrium between mind and milieu than is commonly enjoyed.

That the psychological state is the result of a multitude of factors renders it out of the question to enter into a detailed analysis in the half hour allotted to me. I must therefore choose from the many; and I would suggest that peace of mind and heart results primarily from what I shall call, for lack of a better term, "interior coherence," "harmony" or "concord."

## Harmony

This may have a negative aspect, indicative of the absence of factors likely to disturb, perhaps profoundly, a person's mind and being. Our first pre-occupation will then be to avoid or to resolve any such conflict and for this freethinking plays the supreme part, not merely as a guide in research, but, note it well, as a preventative remedy against the worst troubles we are likely to meet. The habit of thinking freely, without any preconception or prejudice is, I submit, for us a primary requirement in the production of this interior coherence, this psychic homogeneity which we consider necessary. It is not the sole requisite, but is an essential one, unless we admit that interior harmony can be obtained by the total extinction of the power to reason, allowing the individual to accept a position of utter submission to some dogma as supreme in all domains. Such submission has brought peace of mind and of spirit in the past, and may do so today; a peace of torpor and stagnation such as reigned in the Middle Ages. Blessed was he who asked no questions at all; blessed he who, having asked, accepted without demur the answer given by his superior! The Free Mind, however, cannot accept such a position of submission, which isolates one from actuality. The Freethinker must find peace by being in harmony with

the real world. Hence the choice between Submission and Rebellion. Is it too much to say that, whereas a contemplative man can find refuge in submission, the man of action, that is intellectual action, will be found in rebellion? The interior harmony which may result will be on different planes, say that of the monk prostrate in contemplation of his own insignificance and weakness as compared with that of the scientist scrutinising boldly and clearly all that comes

his way. These are extremes. I wish to consider the unstable, mixed and confused situation of those who endeavour to pay homage to irreconcilable ideologies. Many of our fellows are satisfied as following a path of least resistance: to keep reason and faith apart, each

with its share to which the other has no access. A poor plan for it leads to anguish. This attempt to keep the things of the mind in water-tight compartments may not be the only source of mental anguish; it is assuredly one. Here we trespass on the domain of the psychiatrist. We will recall the case of Pascal, who was one of those who sought to keep faith and reason apart. To imply that Pascal was the first to indulge in this quality is to do him too much honour. There were other wise men of his time and before it. These were, it would seem, more philosophical than many a scientist of today, and unable often to halt their thinking before they perceived the incompatibility between faith and science. Pascal has the merit of having defined the problem and expressed his solution with marvellous lucidity and elegance. We should not, today, allow ourselves to look down on Pascal and his contemporaries because they abandoned a large domain of possible knowledge to faith; we should praise them for claiming a place, however small, for reason — a veritable conquest! The contest has always been hard fought. Faith has gained short-term victories, which the progress of knowledge has later reversed. The conflict between the scientist and an authority claiming the power to regiment him does not concern his mind, save perhaps for those scientists who belong to religious orders, such as Teilhard de Chardin, or again biologists in the more puerile of the United States. But interior conflict is a different matter, in which the scientist himself is indoctrinated with a religion which is opposed to scientific thinking to such a degree that he fears to trespass, with his "miserable" reason, in domains where divine light alone may shine. Pascal knew this shuddering humility and Ampère, too, to give only one other example.

## Disequilibrium

The disequilibrium resulting from the co-existence in one mind, of two incompatible modes of thinking — even if there has been no competition between them in any particular matter and hence no open conflict — raises psychological disturbances all the more severe, as the individual in question is pre-occupied with scientific problems. Such a disequilibrium betrays itself as an uneasy conscience. His conscience is not troubled as was his predecessor's, who wondered whether he was right to probe into God's cre-

— VIEWS and OPINIONS —

## Psychological Stability in Man Today

By PROFESSOR ERNEST KAHANE

(Secretary of the Union Rationaliste, Professor of Biochemistry at the University of Montpellier, France.)

ation. Such a one could apply to his father confessor and obtain direction, or absolution if need were. The religious scientist of today, for whom the forms and rites of religion have lost much of their importance, is troubled in a different manner; his religion loses much of its anaesthetic power and can no longer offer the same degree of consolation. Such a scientist must rely solely on his own resources for the solution of his difficulties. He will find that to retain this co-existence of incompatibilities he will be impelled to resort to endless exhausting acrobatics of the mind, to irrevocable anguish, or to intellectual torpor. Not one of these is worthy of a man of probity. One of the incompatibles must give way. Rare is he today who will yield the palm to religion; on the contrary the need of homogeneity and of intellectual discipline requires him to abandon religion. He does not abandon it to replace it with an unthinking adoration of science, but as a requisite of scientific reasoning.

The problem is much to the fore today. To fancy that there can be an intellectual conciliation with the spirit of religion and with those who cling at all costs to it seems to me a dramatic error. This urge to conciliate, based on a most pernicious agnosticism, is not only charged with dangers in the field of action, dangers exemplified by the profit gained by the clerical parties in the realm of education, but must bring about a "confusion worse confounded" in the intellectual field. This game of appeasement has already lasted too long. Daily, new problems are added to the old, for scientific knowledge does not loiter in its progress. How are they solved? By temporary patchwork, a patchwork of prejudice, self-interest and emotion, put together in a hurry, since solutions must be found. Such solutions give rise to further problems, and the accumulation threatens to crush humanity. Alone scientific thinking, free thinking, will help us to avoid, if they can be avoided, the consequences of rule-of-thumb, or worse still, of heated passion.

Trust in scientific thinking, essential to the interior coherence we desire, is more than a simple safeguard; it may give a chance of survival to mankind.

To claim that the passing of mysticism, and the termination of all supernatural dogmas and convictions, would remove every obstacle to our mental equilibrium, is to make too great a claim; it overlooks the complexities of the human ego and the resources of idealism which has never been driven from one position, but found a new one.

#### Contradictions

I repeat that to obtain mental equilibrium, as I understand it, there is required in the first place, complete liberty of thought and a strict system of reasoning. This must not limit us to those things only which can be demonstrated, to physical science alone; but must be extended to art, emotion and action. This I emphasise, not for you who listen to me here, but for those our adversaries who seek to attack us wherever they may.

Contradictions do not trouble the true Rationalist. Why should they? What appears to be in contradiction is either a myth or true; if the former, what then? If the latter, it is part of the natural world about us and further investigation will reveal the solution. It is then no mystery; just another problem for the scientific student to solve, just as he has been solving such problems for many a long year. A little patience, a little perseverance, and the day will come when we shall know the answer.

Do not listen to all this talk of limits to scientific knowledge: Auguste Comte drew up a list of them, which we have found most simple to overstep. Since when few adversaries of science dare say "This you can never know." Yet there are those who say to us "Cobbler, keep to your

last!" These may even be our friends, pretending that to science belong problems of existence, but elsewhere the problems are of "spiritual" values.

Rector Dr. Janne in his address of welcome to this International Congress insisted on the difference in principle which lies between a scientific truth and a belief in a judgment of values. This is most important and should be thought over with the greatest care. The difference to me appears so important that I should have no confidence in those who regard such a belief in a judgment of values, not merely as a possible truth among other such, but as The Truth, with capital letters.

Conciliatory though I may be, I can admit no conciliation here.

#### *Between truth and error there can be no compromise*

Before Magendie it was thought impossible to study scientifically physiological phenomena; then the mystery was transferred to psychology till Claude Bernard demonstrated that it was a science.

The Good and the Beautiful: are they beyond scientific investigation? Have we not already taken steps towards some solution? The emotion given me in listening to masterpieces of Bach and Beethoven is no more a mystery than the synthesis of proteins by living things. I go far in my pride as a man capable of knowledge. Never will inexhaustible nature be completely known. What nature reserves for us to study, no one can foresee completely. Nor can I imagine in what order nature's secrets will be revealed. So ignorant am I, that I feel deep astonishment at the knowledge of those who prepare a list of things we can never know. In face of the unknown I preserve my freedom of thought and shall not admit the unknown is unknowable. Between the known and the unknown there is continuity, just as there is continuity between the past and the future. The future is of the same order as the past, which it will eventually become. What I do not know is of the same nature as what I know; it is *potential* knowledge.

On the tranquil basis of this certitude I build my psychological equilibrium — the untroubled peace of mind and heart which I derive from the free exercise of a thought which accepts no fetter.

## Sicily

IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE that degrading conditions exist in many Roman Catholic countries; however, a BBC talk on Sunday, January 10th, following recent books on the subject, drew attention to the horrible state of affairs in Sicily today. Unemployment, crime, prostitution, disease, ignorance, and illiteracy and banditry flourish in this priest-ridden island.

"The Holy Church" does nothing to improve things, and it has been left to the civilian, Danilo Dolci from Trieste to organise a mission to try to alleviate the social scandals existing.

The attitude of the Church is to sermonise the wretched people with such platitudes as "God loves the poor; you are very poor indeed, so God loves you very much." Birth control is stubbornly forbidden, which has resulted in crowded slums and the prevalence of stealing by fathers who are driven to desperation by their family conditions.

For generations, the simple Sicilians have attended prayers for rain, with priests conducting chants in Latin — which is "Greek" to the villagers. Dolci and his supporters have erected motor pumps by the river, to irrigate the land. Needless to say, these pumps have proved more effective than the chants of the clerics.

A. P.

# Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)—Poet and Pioneer

By ADRIAN PIGOTT

A YOUNG NOBLEMAN who was bold enough to denounce Serfdom in Czarist days must have been a man of unusual courage. As he was also intrepid enough to advocate Atheism in a priest-ridden country, our admiration for his courage increases. Additionally, (transcending the foregoing), this surprising young man was one of the world's greatest poets (as well as being a master of prose and a fine playwright). Here, then, is a personality of immense interest to everyone concerned with rational progress.

He lived in an age of brilliant young men, all of whom died early; Shelley, Byron, Keats and Schubert were his contemporaries. Pushkin died at 37, the longest lived of that wonderful quintet.

## Background

In 1799, to Captain Sergei Pushkin of the Imperial Guard and his wife there was born in Moscow their famous son, Alexander Sergeivitch.

The parents were wealthy aristocrats, with a pedigree going back 600 years, and they owned big estates and a thousand serfs. The Captain and his wife led frivolous lives in the top Society of Moscow, leaving their children to the care of French tutors. At this time, French influence was the fashion, so Captain Pushkin bought a collection of books by French authors such as Rousseau and Voltaire. (Not that the Captain troubled to read the books himself; the remarkable thing is that his precocious eight year old son did read them!) At this early age, Alexander spoke French fluently, and he was endowed with a prodigious memory and also such a great love of reading that he sometimes spent much of the night reading in the library, imbibing modern Western ideas. Another valuable factor in the development of the young genius was his nurse Arina. She was an illiterate serf, but she happened to know innumerable fairy-stories and folk-lore tales to which Alexander used to listen greedily. This humble nurse unconsciously forged a link to attract a young aristocrat towards the Common People. She affords an example of how a perfectly insignificant person can (given certain unusual circumstances) have an important influence for good. In this case, a talented and sensitive boy (who must have felt keenly the neglect shown by his pleasure-seeking parents) found consolation and interest in the folk-stories and legends related to him by his illiterate but lovable nurse. She is immortalised in three poems in which he praised her merits; because, in his later days of Adversity, she stood by him, while his parents failed him time after time.

## Student Days

In 1811, Czar Alexander I, (who had liberal ideas), decided to set up a high class college, "The Lyceum", for "a few young men chosen from members of the great families, to assume high positions in the State". The Lyceum was established in one of the imperial palaces at St. Petersburg. The thirty students of the first term were personally selected by the Czar, and the opening of this exclusive establishment took place with all due pomp and ceremony. Each of the students was presented to the Czar; others in attendance were two Empresses, the Minister of Education and the Archbishop who solemnly sprinkled the scholars with holy water. Nobody in that august assembly could have foreseen that one of the smaller boys who underwent this unedifying experience would become Russia's leading poet; and, as an enemy of Slavery, he would attain the heroic stature of Lincoln and Wilberforce. Furthermore, by his advocacy of Liberty, that he would

become a contributing influence on the abolition of Czarism in 1917. And that, in the 20th century the Lyceum would be called "Pushkin".

A few days after the Academy started, the pupils received the unwelcome news that they were to be kept "cribbed, cabined and confined" in the grounds, and were to have no holidays at all. So for six years, they never saw the outside world.

This proved to be a blessing in disguise, because the boys were driven to such diversions as Discussion Groups, storytelling circles and experiments in Literature. Tinging many of their eager exchanges of views was their admiration of the French Revolution. Several of the young idealists hoped for an emulation of this in Russia, and so to improve the sad social conditions then existing. Among the most daring and original spirits at these discussions was Alexander Pushkin, already steeped in Voltaire and Byron. One of his school reports stated "He has no religious beliefs". His talent for Poetry developed.

## Early Politics and Social Reform

In June, 1817 the course at the Lyceum ended; Pushkin passed the examination and was appointed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a Junior Secretary. So lax was Government life in those days that his position was only a nominal one and did not involve much work, and he pursued a gay life of dissipation in the capital.

Many young army officers had just returned in triumph from victory celebrations in Paris, and they had interesting stories to tell Pushkin and his student friends who, for the first time, heard first-hand information about the new liberal regimes in the West. Alexander and his friends contrasted these improvements with the Slavery, frauds and the Secret Police of Russia.

Secret Societies grew up, formed by the young idealists burning for Reforms. Pushkin, the mouthpiece of the reformers, became increasingly audacious. His *Ode to Liberty* created a stir, and his caustic epigrams about the failure of the Government came to the notice of the Chief of Police.

His indignation began to grow at the evils of Serfdom. This was an iniquitous system under which the peasants belonged to the land where they lived—and, consequently, to the landlord. These poor human cattle were entirely at the disposal of the local squire, who could sell them, ill-treat them, or order them to marry other serfs as he pleased. "Baptised property" was an ironical term for them.

Here are two specimens of advertisements in Russian newspapers of the day:

"Barber for sale, also beds and a quilt."

"For sale; girl of sixteen (exemplary conduct), also a parrot and a slightly used carriage."

Serfs were not allowed to possess more than 5 roubles in money nor to leave their native area. In 1825, Russia's population was 49 millions, of whom 36 millions were in this terrible condition.

When he was twenty, Pushkin wrote one of his loveliest and most influential poems, *The Village*. At the start, he describes lyrically the beauties of the peaceful countryside and the virtues of the worthy industrious peasants. Then he dramatically changes his tune to one of indignation.

But, suddenly, my mind with anguish fills

Amid these flowering fields and hills.

He goes on to describe the appalling ignorance, dirt and

(Continued on next page)

## This Believing World

At last — we learn from the "Irish Independent" — the wonderful "prophecies" of Fatima are to be given to an astonished world. The sole survivor of the three children who, at the age of eight or thereabouts, saw "our Lady" at Fatima in Portugal, is Sister Maria Dolores, and she wrote them all out to be read during 1960. The "revelations" are to be made now by the Bishop of Leiria. Among the astounding prophecies is the complete conversion of Russia to the Faith; though Sister Maria takes good care to add if Russia is not converted, then there will be nothing but wars and persecutions against the Church. You pay your money and takes your choice.

Unfortunately the Bishop of Leiria has issued an "official" denial that anybody really knows what the prophecies are except himself, and he won't tell. So now we all have to wait trembling lest "our Lady" has doomed us all to be wiped out by nuclear weapons — for, of course, she knew all about them in 1917 when she first appeared to the children — or whether we shall all troop happily back to "the Faith." Though some of us won't anyway!

A marvellous picture of "The Last Supper" is being painted by a Mr. Andrew Vicari who has found ideal models in a number of football players. Christ will really be a former Welsh Rugby captain, and a Soccer star the Disciple Jesus loved — John. The famous comedian Harry Secombe will also pose for a Disciple and 53-year-old Wing Commander Powell is to be poor old Judas. We expect the resulting picture will not exactly rival that of Leonardo da Vinci — but it might easily outshine any of those by the late Stanley Spencer. But perhaps Mr. Vicari will also furnish Jesus with a straw "boater."

Backed by the powerful voice of the Precious Word of God, and the Revelation made to Joseph by God Almighty himself, the Mormons are very gradually re-introducing polygamy which actually was banned in Utah about 100 years ago. In any case, banned or not, there were at least — according to the *Daily Express* — 20,000 fervent polygamous Mormons in Utah only four years ago, and the number is gradually increasing. One of the courageous husbands insists that "Polygamy is a law of God given to the Mormon Church. Most believers in it are sincere — there are some scoundrels and some fanatics, but our principle is good." Two questions — will there now be a rush to Utah, and what do the ladies, especially those who are never taken into account by male Mormons, think of it?

Writing in the "Daily Express," the famous actor, Orson Welles, explains why, during the present outbreak of anti-Semitism and Nazi championship, he has no wish to play Shylock. He has nothing but contempt for the present-day Nazis and their anti-Semitic friends — as he ought to have; but it cannot be too strongly urged that almost all the obscene and cowardly scum who are behind the outbreak are thorough believing Christians, inoculated with their hatred by the Christian Churches never ceasing to play up "the greatest crime in all history," the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jews.

So long as this story, which some of our greatest Free-thinkers believe to be quite mythical, forms the basis of films and plays and broadcasts all over the world on every possible occasion, but particularly at Easter, this ceaseless stirring up of the foulest of vile passions by "true" religion will always give us anti-Semitism in its worst forms. The

picture of Shylock invariably held the stage when he was depicted as a ferocious monster. But actually Shylock was never meant by Shakespeare to be quite the monster expected by the average audience.

Quite a most interesting discussion on religious "unity" took place on the ITV programme recently, and a verbatim report published as a pamphlet would or should prove how very very far the Churches are apart. The three disputants were Father Taylor of the Catholic Missionary Society, the Rev. K. Woolcombe, an Anglican chaplain, and the Rev. D. Soper representing the Methodists. Of these, Fr. Taylor had no difficulty in proving that a "divine" Church like his could not possibly be divided. It was founded by "our Lord" himself. Mr. Woolcombe and Dr. Donald Soper would not of course agree that the Roman Church was "undivided," and they both gave reasons why it was utterly impossible for their Churches to re-enter the Roman fold. "Unity" according to these redoubtable exponents was as far away as possible.

### ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

(Continued from page 35)

illiteracy prevailing and the cruelty of the landlords.

Heartless and lawless

Here a race of masters thrives.

The young villagers were sent up from their hovels to the luxurious manor house; the lads to become lackeys, cooks and gardeners for the squire. The girls were less fortunate—

Afraid to nourish hope

Or answer Love's sweet call,

The tender maiden flowers—

To serve the lust of some base criminal.

He ended the poem with these stirring words,

Friends! Shall I ever see our native land arise

And Serfdom vanish at a Czar's command?

And—over our free Fatherland—

A rosy dawn illuminate the skies?

Wilberforce, Lincoln and Lenin did live to see the elimination of the social evils against which they strove. Unhappily, Pushkin did not live till 1861 when Serfdom was abolished.

However, his eloquent writings played an invaluable part in drawing attention to the scandals and in rallying public opinion.

His poems about social injustices filtered down among the down-trodden masses, and they became familiar to every Russian who was able to read. In faraway hamlets, farms and barracks, there were groups of under-privileged persons eagerly listening to an occasional reader who was able to recite the magic words of Hope written by this young man of twenty in St. Petersburg. At this early age he was the literary idol of his countrymen (except for Court Officials, Police and reactionary nobles.)

Without any doubt, he was the most precocious young man who has ever lived. If Shakespeare had died at twenty, we should know nothing whatever about him. The same applies to Leonardo da Vinci, Beethoven, Newton, Nelson, Dickens—and any other immortal. Yet at twenty Pushkin was leavening the minds of millions of Russians by the wizardry of his pen and the nobility of his ideas. And it is very much to his credit that he was an aristocrat who stood to lose a good deal if the social reforms which he advocated should ever materialise. He was that "rara avis" a nobleman who behaved like a noble man.

(To be continued)

—NEXT WEEK—

EXIT THE 39 ARTICLES?

By F. A. RIDLEY

# 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.)

Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 41 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1. Details of membership of the National Secular Society may be obtained from the General Secretary, 41 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1. Members and visitors are welcome during normal office hours. Inquiries regarding Secular Funeral Services should also be made to the General Secretary, N.S.S.

## 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.  
Marble Arch 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.  
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

- Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (Midland Institute Cinema, Paradise Street.) Sunday, January 31st, 6.45 p.m.: F. J. CORINA, "A Tape-Recorded Documentary on Charles Bradlaugh."  
Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics Institute) Lecture every Sunday, 7 p.m.  
Central London Branch N.S.S. ("The City of Hereford" Blandford Place, W.1.) Sunday, January 31st, 7.15 p.m.: A. MELTZER, "The Significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls."  
Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1) Tuesday, February 2nd, 7.15 p.m.: A. D. HOWELL SMITH, B.A. "The Future of the Ethical Movement."  
Leicester Secular Society (75 Humberstone Gate.) Sunday, January 31st, 6.30 p.m.: FILM, "The Door to Freedom" (Leicester Spastics Society.)  
Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Wheatsheaf Hotel, High Street.) Sunday, January 31st, 7 p.m.: G. H. MILLS, "You Can Fool Some of the People . . ."  
Marble Arch Branch N.S.S. (Carpenters' Arms, Seymour Place, off Edgware Road, 3 mins. Marble Arch Station) Sunday, January 31st, 7.30 p.m.: DAVID TRIBE, "Ethics and Education."  
Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Co-operative Education Centre, Broad Street.) Sunday, January 31st, 2.30 p.m.: Rev. W. H. Wragg, (Baptist) A Lecture.  
South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1.) Sunday, January 31st, 11 a.m.: H. LEVY, M.A. "The Moral Quandary of Scientist and Citizen."

## Notes and News

IT WILL BE RECALLED that our December 4th, 1959, issue contained a short appeal from a Spanish Teacher that President Eisenhower should not visit Generalissimo Franco as planned. A copy of the appeal was sent to the Public Relations Officer at the U.S. Embassy in London, with a covering letter dated December 3rd. It was too much to expect that the trip should be called off, although we have evidence that the Embassy received other protests from Spanish liberals and progressives. But we confess we did expect at least an acknowledgment. None has been received to date, and we think there has been time.

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WE HAVE HESITATED A LONG TIME before writing about a man whose courage and cheerfulness under terrible circumstances have amazed and thrilled us. Robert McK. Campbell, of Edinburgh had his left leg amputated above

## The Freethinker Sustentation Fund

PREVIOUSLY acknowledged: £43 14s. 5d; C. E. Ratcliffe, £1; F. McVeigh, 5s; J. Bellamy, £1 1s; T. Benton, 10s; F. R. Wise, 5s; C. Coates, £1; A. F. van der Merwe 3s; Anon, 1s. 2d; M. W. B. £1 15s.; Total to date January 22nd, 1960, £49 14s. 7d.

the knee in May, 1957, at the age of 80. Towards the end of the following year, the infection had spread to his right leg, and this, too, was amputated above the knee. With the help of a wheelchair and the devoted care of his wife, Mr. Campbell not only keeps going, but is generally in good spirits. His great interest is Freethought, and he is a member of both Edinburgh and Glasgow branches of the National Secular Society, whose Secretaries, Mr. W. Cronan and Mr. J. Barrowman, visit him whenever they can. Mr. Cronan recently referred to Mr. Campbell's alertness and enthusiasm for Freethought, while he himself last month told us that THE FREETHINKER was a "weekly treat" for him. We send our warmest greetings to a man who is a great credit and example to the Freethought movement.

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WE MAY REST ASSURED THAT, however objectively the BBC may set out to treat a subject like death, religion (in some form) will have the last word. So it was in the "Lifeline" programme on January 6th. Four people recounted their feelings as well as they could, on occasions when death seemed imminent. Only one said anything about religion: all said they felt no pain; one said he regarded bullet holes in one arm with detachment (though his other, more badly wounded arm, felt as if it were in a hole). Apparently purely on the basis of this "detachment" — which must have been experienced by many people when they have injured themselves and is in no way peculiar to dying moments — the BBC's psychiatrist, Dr. Stafford Clark, suggested that at the "moment of truth" the mind becomes detached from the body. This attempt to support immortality was quite unjustified. As Mr. Maurice Richardson remarked (*The Observer*, 10/1/60), "I could not see that there was any real evidence for Dr. Stafford Clark's suggestion . . ."

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DR. BILLY GRAHAM is visiting Ghana in February — in the words of Lieut. R. C. K. Hewlett — "to do some soul-winning." Lieut. Hewlett, Secretary of the Ghana Rationalist Group, intends to "do battle" with Graham in the Press and by distributing handbills and literature. The National Secular Society and the Pioneer Press are helping in this connection, and Lieut. Hewlett has also enlisted support in America and New Zealand. The New Zealand Rationalist Association should be particularly helpful, as it was most successful in its own campaign against Graham.

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READERS WILL HAVE NOTICED the change in name of West London Branch to Marble Arch Branch of the National Secular Society. This was agreed at the Annual General Meeting of the Branch on January 16th and approved by the N.S.S. Executive on January 20th. The change was proposed because the Branch's main activities are centred on the Marble Arch area (where, of course, the Hyde Park meetings take place) and the membership is drawn from different parts of London. No sooner had it a new name than the Branch embarked on a new venture; lectures and discussions every Sunday evening at the Carpenters' Arms, Seymour Place, London, W.1. This is a comfortable little public-house, just off the Edgware Road and three minutes' walk from Marble Arch Station. The first meeting (January 24th) addressed by Mr. Len Ebury was very well attended and was notable for a friendly atmosphere which the Branch intends to maintain. All visitors are welcome.

# Perpetuating a Myth

By H. CUTNER

FOR THE CLERGYMEN of all denominations, that is, of all the sects which divide "true" Christianity at the moment, Christmas provides a period of intense Fundamentalist propaganda. Our national newspapers give space to reports of sermons, devout worshippers, and packed churches, which help to perpetuate the myth not only of "our Lord" himself, but also that the people of these islands may be a little apathetic during the rest of the year, but at Christmas . . . ! At Christmas, the Babe of Bethlehem is trotted out in all his glory, complete with stable, adoring animals, and the Wise Men of the East, and the whole world is asked to look at God revealing himself in the humble guise of a human Babe with an adoring Virgin Mother, to take his place as "one of us" when he has grown up, to give us a Divine Example of how we must live — the way, in fact, God himself lives up in Heaven, as a guide for all races.

Some of us once thought that with the critical spirit so highly developed last century, this naïve portrait of childish credulity might have passed for ever by this time. It has come back literally packed again with what we once called infantile Fundamentalism. The Churches indeed never have had it so good. They have completely captured the two greatest propagandist mediums in the history of publicity — the BBC and ITV — and, if there are any dissentients in their programmes the iron hand of religious censorship has had very little difficulty, figuratively speaking, in annihilating them.

As some readers may remember, I used to count the number of various religious broadcasts given by the two pious publicity firms named, but there is now really no need. Whether listeners and viewers reverently attend to the drivel meted out to them or switch off, is difficult to find out. Perhaps most people carefully switch programmes so as to miss the religious ones — or perhaps they are tempted to listen because some favourite hymn or carol will be sung. But whether the people want it or not, the Churches take no chances. The Babe of Bethlehem, complete with Crib, Wise Men, Adoring Animals, and of course, his Virgin Mother, *must* at this time be the centre of attraction; and any question of the truth of this story sternly suppressed. Freethought has very little chance these days in the face of this mass advertising of Oriental myths.

Moreover, every clerical writer who can enlarge on the Babe, etc., in any journal is given not only a good fee, but almost unlimited space so long as he insists on the truth of these Oriental fables. Out of dozens I have looked at (I could hardly read them!) there is one by the Rev. D. Greeves which I defy any other Fundamentalist to beat for sheer, hopeless nonsense. It is on page 13 of the *TV Times* for Christmas week, and here is a specimen of what it contains: —

The real significance of Christmas is that Christ was born. Crowded audiences sing not only about Nellie's boy friend but also about Mary's Boy Child.

How can it have come about that a Baby was born and the world has never been the same since?

It was the beginning of the world's salvation.

What makes the Baby different from all others . . . ? He is the Son of God.

Jesus is "God with us."

Jesus is the living image of the invisible God.

And so on. This kind of thing, enlarged, expanded with synonyms — that is, repeating the same kind of trash over and over again in slightly different words — is considered by our editors just what the public wants to lap up in huge gulps. The readers of *TV Times* must want it, its editor

thinks, and he *must* give them what they want.

If some of them protest and tell him that Mr. Greeves has about as much knowledge of history as the average Jehovah's Witness, they are, of course, ignored. And it would be useless to point out to him and to Mr. Greeves, that the period *after* the Coming of Christ is actually called by Christians *the Dark Ages*; and as far as we can gather from contemporary sources the appellation is an underestimate. For sheer Christian brutality, ferocity, and unmitigated intolerance, backed up by foul murder and torture, there is no period in history which equals the Dark Ages. The Christian crimes committed for over 1,000 years after the supposed coming of Christ against, in most cases, helpless people, prove what liars Christian can be when they talk of the Babe of Bethlehem ushering in an age of mercy, justice and beauty. The "Reformation" really meant an attempt at *civilising* the then Christian Churches — all of whom, be it noted, were following the Babe of Bethlehem, and making handsome profits out of him. And after the Reformation came a struggle between the rival Christian Churches which almost repeated the bestial crimes of the Dark Ages. If the Churches are at last behaving themselves, it is not because of the Babe of Bethlehem, but because of the advancement of Science and the progress of Economics. Jesus in fact has got about as much to do with our Welfare State as he had to do with potatoes.

But it is not only the Babe of Bethlehem who can command space in our national journals. Here we have "television's astronomer," Mr. Patrick Moore, in *John Bull* dealing "scientifically" with — what do you think? — the Star of Bethlehem! It seems incredible.

The Star of Bethlehem is of the same genre as the Lamp of Aladdin. It is a pure, undiluted, fairy story. The Wise Men of the East, the Magi — that is the "magicians" — could have come straight out of the *Arabian Nights*. The fact that the marvellous "Star" is *only* mentioned by Matthew — even Mr. Moore, who so solemnly and reverently discusses it, admits "our information is decidedly scanty about it" — should have made it "decidedly" suspect; but not at all, it is in Holy Writ, and therefore *must* be true. So Mr. Moore befogs his readers with many suggestions. It might have been Venus, or a comet, or two meteors, or Jupiter and Saturn, or a "nova," or a "supernova," or Halley's Comet, or one "which has escaped the records"; and "if you reject" all these, then "we come back to the wise men's idea that the star was divine." In other words, the story is literally true, Wise Men and all; and if you won't accept the "astronomical" suggestions, then you must believe that "God" did it. God, in fact, sent a "Star in the East" with "Wise Men" complete. The story is given in His Precious Word, and it must be "Gospel" truth. The London Planetarium likewise devoted its Christmas shows to the Star of Bethlehem! And this is the pitiable stuff we get from an astronomer!

The truth is that celestial phenomena nearly always accompanied the birth of some of the Pagan Gods or Saviours. It would take too long to go into this now, but many of our Freethought writers have gone deeply into the question; and one of them, the ex-Rev. Robert Taylor in his *Devil's Pulpit* devoted three brilliant chapters on the "Star of Bethlehem." Nobody with any pretention to scholarship, writing on the famous Star, could possibly ignore what he had to say in this once-famous work.

But it is interesting to note how Luke differs from Matthew in describing what happened at the "Virgin

Birth." Matthew says that the "star" stood in the heavens above" the Babe, but Luke knows nothing at all of this. He says an "angelic" choir appeared, and sang praises to God. Matthew's "Wise Men" are *not* mentioned by Luke. He claims that only "neighbouring shepherds" came. Justin Martyr, however, denied that the Wise Men came from the "East" — that is, from Persia or India. He says they came from Arabia — from the South.

But would it be too much to expect that the average Christian bothers himself with any factual data whatever? He is apathetic towards the religion of Christ almost all the year round, but when Christmas and Easter come along there is plenty of opportunity for some good old secular feasts, and he is ready to swallow all the Christian myths at the same time he gorges on turkey and Xmas pudding, or hot cross buns and Easter eggs. And it makes him feel that, after all, he is in touch with God Almighty — sometimes. On this and on his ignorance and apathy, Christianity is thus perpetuated.

Should we, as Freethinkers, enjoy our Christmas holiday? Of course: it is a purely Pagan one, and has been celebrated for countless centuries in many parts of the world by people who knew nothing about the Babe of Bethlehem. It marked the time when the "glorious Sun" made the day begin to grow longer. There was almost universal rejoicing when the "Light of the World" once again slowly but surely ushered in a bounteous Spring and all it implied in the way of warmth and abundant crops. And Jesus and most Gods are merely "personifications" of the Sun.

## Rome or Reason?

BIRTH CONTROL is one of the central issues of our time. It may well be *the* central issue of the future. And, as so often before, it will involve a fight between Rome and Reason. Speaking at the "War on Want" exhibition in London on January 19th, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool compared advocates of birth control with Goering. The latter preferred guns to butter; we were asked to prefer prevention of life to life, said Dr. Heenan. "Pity those who are dying for lack of food, not those who are being born for lack of contraceptives," he added, apparently seeing no connection between the two — or not wanting to!

It is appropriate to recall the pioneering work of Freethinkers in spreading birth control knowledge, as in so many other fields, and readers may be interested in the letter addressed to the British Medical Association by the General Secretary of the National Secular Society, after the BMA publication, the *Family Doctor*, had refused to accept an advertisement from the Family Planning Association. And, of course, the reply.

The Secretary,  
British Medical Association,  
Tavistock House,  
London, W.C.1.

18th December, 1959.

Dear Sir,

I want, on behalf of the National Secular Society, to register the strongest possible protest against your refusal to accept an advertisement from the Family Planning Association for inclusion in the *Family Doctor*.

Of course, we quite realise that the BMA has the right to decide what shall and what shall not go into the *Family Doctor*. What we deplore is that it should be so easily influenced — or would blackmailed be the better term? — by Roman Catholics. After all, they are still a very small section of our population and, I hazard, of the BMA itself. Let them by all means have freedom to advocate their views on birth control as other subjects, but do not let them dictate what shall be advertised in your periodical. If they are frightened that their own devotees might heed a Family Planning advert., we cannot help that: it is a reflection on their own teaching. But the idea that they should say "no advert: we don't approve" is intolerable.

You will see that our Society was founded by Charles Bradlaugh. You will understand, then, how strongly we feel about this matter: our founders risked imprisonment to spread birth control knowledge — to make it safe for you to do so. Now you panic because a minority Church says "No." We trust that you will reverse your decision.

Yours faithfully,  
COLIN MCCALL, *Secretary*,  
National Secular Society.

Colin McCall, Esq.,  
Secretary,  
National Secular Society,  
41 Gray's Inn Road,  
London, W.C.1.

21st December, 1959.

Dear Sir,

I am writing to acknowledge your letter of the 18th December about my Council's decision not to accept an advertisement from the Family Planning Association for inclusion in our publication *Family Doctor*.

The contents of your letter have been noted, but I would point out that the facts are not as set out in your letter.

Yours faithfully,  
D. P. STEVENSON, *Secretary*.  
British Medical Association.

## CORRESPONDENCE

### MADAME BLAVATSKY AND MRS. BESANT

I have just read with considerable interest, Mr. Cutner's review of John Symonds's *Madame Blavatsky* in your issue of November 13th, 1959. It may perhaps interest some of your readers to know that in going through my father's papers, I came across the letter which I quote in full below:—

As a young man, my father, Edward Pease, together with Frank Podmore, Havelock Ellis, and others, founded the Fabian Society; and he was also closely associated with Frederick Myers and the Society for Psychical Research. About this time he was very friendly with Annie Besant, as the letter shows, and incidentally he was an uncompromising atheist. As he once wrote, "I am convinced that religion in all its forms is the greatest curse which has ever afflicted humanity."

Of Madame Blavatsky he wrote: "I only saw her once, at the house of F. Myers in Cambridge, where I Sunday lunched with her, heard her talk, watched her smoke endless cigarettes, rolled for her by a disciple, and eat, *I think*, a good solid meat meal . . . Blavatsky was an enormous stout woman with a huge face and skin the colour of a toad's. That at any rate is how I recollect her . . . I did not perceive any of that magnetic attraction which she evidently possessed."

NICOLAS A. PEASE.

Here is the letter:—

19 Avenue Road,  
Regents Park, N.W.  
June 29, '89.

Dear Mr. Pease,

I borrowed the two S.P.R. reports from Mr. Podmore, before I joined the Theosophical Society. The whole matter turns on the evidence of the Coulombs, needy persons bribed by Christian missionaries. If one believed the report, Mme. Blavatsky must unite the most extraordinary ability with the most stupendous stupidity, and must have destroyed all comfort in life for no object. I put aside, as too absurd for comment, Mr. Hodgson's Russian spy mare's nest.

I do not believe that any truthful person who *knows* Mme. Blavatsky can for a moment believe that she is "a fraud." She has honoured me by admitting me to her intimacy, and her good faith. I am certain she is the least vain and the most unselfish person I have met, and as frank about herself as a child. Of course, she has plenty of enemies, and among them many who have gone to her hoping to acquire "magical" powers, and who are angry because they cannot in a moment understand and do everything.

Nor do I believe a word as to her "shady character." I have heard too much slander about myself to believe it readily of another woman when it is unsupported by proof.

Of clairvoyance I know enough, apart from Madame Blavatsky with whom I have not discussed it, to know that it does occur.

I am sure that you mean kindly, but I am equally sure that you are wrong, and that you are adding to the weight of non-proven and ungenerous suspicion against a really great and good woman.

Sincerely yours,  
ANNIE BESANT.

**JOHN OSBORNE'S TV PLAY**

My attention has been drawn to your article in your issue of January 15th.

In order to anticipate protest from those acquainted with historical facts, I should like to say now that my play is based very loosely on the actual trial of Holyoake, and I have not hesitated to invent incidents and change facts where it suited my purpose. In other words, the play is a work of imagination rather than one of historical accuracy. I have used Holyoake's own account where it suited my dramatic purpose and ignored it when it did not.

I just thought I would like to make this clear.

JOHN OSBORNE.

**IRELAND IN CONTRADICTION**

I was sorry that, from my short article entitled "Conversion of England," you deleted the one passage that epitomises for me the social condition of Roman Catholic countries:—

"Unhappy is the land that cares more for the souls than the bodies of its children; it becomes a byword among nations for its poverty, ignorance and superstition."

This is the picture presented to me, as I read my weekly *Sligo Champion*, so contrary to that presented by Mr. Bennett in *THE FREETHINKER* some time ago, of the happy, simple, pious folk of Eire.

EVA EBURY.

**MR. BENNETT**

I would first like to reply to Mr. Bennett when he asks if I have unhappy memories of a childhood and early adulthood darkened by religious bondage. The answer is: No! My mother (my father having died when I was ten years of age) was what was then known as a "God-fearing woman," but I attended Sunday school if and when I felt so inclined and so far as church is concerned I have not been more than six times during my life — all in my "teens." I was "converted" by Mr. and Mrs. Ebury at Tower Hill some years ago.

I do not for one moment think any atheist lumps all believers into the two classes mentioned by Mr. Bennett — either knaves or fools — he (the atheist) adds another — the misinformed — and it is mainly for this third class that I, personally, advocate atheist militancy.

If Mr. Bennett has had experience of open-air meetings such as are held at Tower Hill or Hyde Park he will know that few preachers — lay or otherwise — have the slightest hesitation in expounding the Christian doctrine and laying claims that all the "good" deeds and words — no matter how impossible — of Jesus (although they always omit the bad or doubtful ones) together with all the miracles and the rest of the nonsense are true or actually occurred. I ask Mr. Bennett am I, as an atheist, expected to stand meekly by while such preachers convert the uninformed portion of their audience into either knaves or fools?

Again, has Mr. Bennett never attended a meeting of the National Secular Society when these "good and kind" Christians have done their best to defend their God quite militantly, and threatened "hell fire" to the speaker?

Although I am sorry to say it, Mr. Bennett appears to me to be at best a very reverent agnostic.

C. STANLEY.

G. I. Bennett's genteel attitude satisfies me no more than P. G. Roy's pugnacity. He says he despises hypocrisy and is distressed by intolerance, yet he seeks to defend the "poor parish priest" who endeavours to "impart a faith" to people in a "religious environment." Well, of course we can all feel kindly towards Christians of that (most inaccurate) description. No doubt even P. G. Roy has a place in his heart for Quakers — but many of us recognise Mr. Bennett's "poor parish priest" as a *secure, university-educated, two-timer* who is *paid to coerce children into a pretence in an officially Christian society which metes out severe penalties to those who don't conform.* This is intolerance. Mr. Bennett should find it intolerable.

Granted, people like Scott, Huddleston and Collins, who offend even their own "followers" with their humanitarian zeal, are difficult to criticise. However, they are foolish in adhering to the Established Church — and many of the other clergymen are knaves.

ERNIE CROSSWELL.

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**OBITUARY**

VIOLET ELIZABETH FOWLER, who has died at the age of 72 after an illness of many months, was a staunch Freethinker, like her husband who died 15 years ago. A charming personality, she devoted much of her spare time to the help of the old, and she was loved and respected in Hampstead Garden Suburb, where she lived. At her request, a Secular Service was conducted at Golders Green Crematorium by the General Secretary of the National Secular Society.

THE DEATH OF THE "SAGE OF PECKHAM," William Margrie, at the age of 82, has removed one of the picturesque figures from our midst who, for 50 years or so, "waged war on smugness" as one of our national dailies said. Mr. Margrie did his best to place Peckham on the map, so to speak, often indignantly claiming that London historians were more inclined to favour the North against the South. His London Explorers' Club was, in its way, a great success, which he ran with enthusiasm and knowledge for many pre-war years. He loved to explore London's many out-of-the-way and mostly now-forgotten places of historical and antiquarian interest. The present writer knew him well — he drew the illustrations to Margrie's *Roses and Kippers*, an exhilarating story of a school based on his own experiences as a Governor of a school. Among the many things he violently opposed was "anti-Stratfordianism" — but he had many other "antis" as well. Margrie never ceased his "mental fight," dreaming for a "Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land."

H. CUTNER.

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