

The Freethinker

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AN ANONYMOUS correspondent from Manchester sent me some months ago some very pertinent remarks on the problem of our Calendar, and it is a pity that the question of chronology is not better known. We can pick up any encyclopedia and find it packed with absolutely precise dates as if, say 2,000 years ago or more, calendars were carefully kept and handed down to our historians and biographers. For example, I find it most amusing to read the precise dates given to all sorts of people in "classical" times by dear old Lempriere or William Smith. We never or rarely question these dates—there they are, in a book, and like the "miracles" of Jesus are Gospel truth.

An American reader recently wrote that he had got in touch with the Encyclopedia Britannica to find out the origin of our "A.D." and "B.C.," which is not at all clear from its articles on "Eras" and "Chronology". The answer provided by the Encyclopedia was merely a copy as far as I could see from other encyclopedias—repeated *ad lib* by Christian writers, and for which there is not a particle of evidence. They always tell us that the Christian era was settled by Dionysius Exiguus somewhere about the year 525 A.D.; and the constant repetition of this statement has so fixed it that nobody—except determined sceptics like myself—now ever question it.

Anno Domini?

In the reply sent to our American reader, the EB quotes *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History* by C. R. Cheney, published by the Royal Historical Society in 1945. The quotation is worth repeating:—

The use for dating purposes of the Christian year (*annus domini*, etc.), arose somewhat unexpectedly through the compilation of a table for calculating the date of Easter made by the monk Dionysius Exiguus in A.D. 525. This was intended to continue to A.D. 626, the Easter table then in use, of which the cycle would end in 531. Dionysius, a Scythian by birth, but living in Rome and *morabusomino romanus*, constructed a list of years calculated not from the prevailing era of Diocletian, the pagan emperor, but from the Incarnation of our Lord . . . Dionysius himself had had no thought of establishing a new era, but now his device was adopted for chronological purposes by Bede and even, it is possible, in a few instances before Bede . . .

The result was (we are further told) that the "new era" became recognised in England by the eighth century and except in Spain, "Christians reckoned from A.D. 1". The EB also quotes *The Romance of the Calendar* by P. W. Wilson much to the same effect, but Mr. Wilson admits that the use of the words "Anno Domini" began "quite late", in fact, as late as 1219. Moreover, "The Christian era, as we know it, emerged out of much medieval complexity".

So much for "A.D.", but the EB sadly admits that "the origin of the abbreviation B.C. is even more obscure". It tries to find out when "B.C." came into general use and admits that even as late as 1780, J. C. Gatterer, a German historian, dated events before Christ as "years of the world". To put the matter bluntly, a lot of our chron-

ology as well as the speculations of our chronologers are just so much nonsense.

For example, who is Dionysius Exiguus? Of course our encyclopedists have a ready answer, but they produce no *evidence*. Lempriere tells us that "he was a Scythian monk of the sixth century who became an abbot at Rome". His authorities—as I expected—are *not* contemporaries, but a religious historian named Cave and Hutton, an 18th century mathematician. Cave was a 17th century writer but, according to the Schaff-Hertzog Encyclopedia, "uncritical"; while Hutton was the author of a mathematical dictionary. And it is highly probable that many or most of our modern encyclopedias have just "uncritically"

—VIEWS and OPINIONS—

On Chronology

By H. CUTNER

followed Lempriere.

The EB does however mention F. F. Arbuthnot's *Mysteries of Chronology*—actually, for Christianity, a very dangerous authority. For Arbuthnot, who wrote at the beginning of this century, played havoc with almost all our conceptions of chronology. He accepted nothing uncritically, but severely criticised many "authorities".

The Incarnation?

In the quotation by Cheney given above, he tells us that Dionysius constructed a chronological list from "the Incarnation of our Lord". But how did the monk know this particular date? Or to put the question in another way, who is the authority for the statement? This we are not given, but are supposed to accept it on his—Mr. Cheney's—authority. The truth really is that we know so little of Dionysius that it is extremely doubtful if he ever lived at all. In any case, how could he have made the "Incarnation of our Lord" the year 1 when, if the truth is in Matthew, it must be B.C. 4, or in Luke, it must be 7 A.D.?

One of the most influential—and fairest—of Fundamentalist theological dictionaries is Buck's which had great vogue last century, and it admits in its article on "the Nativity of Christ" that "the exact year of Christ's birth is not agreed on by chronologers". For the record it gives,

The Egyptians placed it in January; Wagenseil, in February; Bochart, in March; some, mentioned by Cleinent of Alexandria, in April; others in May; Epiphanius speaks of some who placed it in June, and of others who supposed it to have been in July; Wagenseil, who was not sure of February, fixed it probably in August; Lightfoot, on the 15th of September; Scaliger, Casaubon, and Calvisius, in October; others in November, and the Latin Church, in December.

When Was Jesus Born?

Moreover, the Rev. C. Buck himself admits that the we do *not* know "the season of the year, the month, and the day" when Jesus was born. This should dispose of Mr. Cheney's statement that Dionysius based his era from the "Incarnation date", for nobody knows when this occurred. In other words, Mr. Cheney just copied what he saw in some encyclopedia, and his reference is quite worthless.

Of course, Mr. Buck, as a good Christian, believed that Jesus was born even if we do not know the date; so he

settled the question by going to Galatians (4, 4). It took place in "the fulness of time"!!

We can of course also go to Irenaeus who told us that Jesus died "an old man" and, as readers will have noted, my reference to this in these columns not long ago brought in a—more or less—acrimonious discussion, as if I were responsible for Irenaeus. The real point to note is that if Irenaeus is right, there could have been no "crucifixion" under Pontius Pilate—an event which has undeniably been a Godsend to the Christian Faith. And, according to this particular passage, it never happened!

In spite of Dionysius, most of the encyclopedias I have consulted admit that constructing an "era" out of the hopelessly confused "histories" which have come down to us is practically impossible. The Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia admits that any attempt to do so from the Old Testament "presents difficulties which can hardly ever be overcome". It continues,

Every scholar who tries comes to a different result. The [Benedictine] *L'art de verifier les dates* gives no less than a hundred and eight different views; and the two extremes differ no less than two thousand years from each other. Julius Africanus counts, from the Creation to Christ, 5,500 years; Eusebius, Bede, and the Roman martyrologium, 5,199; Scaliger and Calvisius, 3,950; Kepler and Petavius, 3984; Ussher, 4,004, etc.

Many of our more precise dates of events in the past in the absence of real evidence can be taken with "a grain of

Catholicism and Birth Control

THAT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH opposes birth control—and its ostensible reasons for so doing—are common knowledge. Less well-known are its real motives.

To most intelligent non-Catholics, birth control is as natural, hygienic and necessary as washing one's hands. The Catholic Church does not agree and there is therefore a dangerous tendency to regard all Catholics as simply misguided persons, who are in the wrong through ignorance, superstition, lack of intelligence, weak reasoning, adherence to error, benightedness, or, at the worst, sheer cussedness. Such failings are common among the riff-raff which the Catholic broom sweeps up in most countries, but they are certainly not characteristics of the Catholic hierarchy, the higher clergy, and the middle and upper-class Catholics. These latter are intelligent—and being intelligent, are quite well aware that the arguments in favour of organised birth control are unanswerable. Yet they oppose them. Why?

The real reason, studied in all its aspects by the Vatican, is that universally-encouraged birth control means the end of Catholicism.

All life is the avoidance of death and the search for oblivion of our final end. The means used to attain this oblivion vary widely, ranging from the masochistic pleasure of scourging oneself and ruminating things to come to the hedonistic enjoyment of pleasure as an end in itself. But for each and every human being on this planet, happiness presupposes a sufficiency of material possessions, a sense of personal service to one's fellows, and liberty of thought and action commensurate with obligations to one's neighbours. When these conditions are realised, humanity substitutes reality for unhealthy morbid theological speculation: moral exhortations become completely superfluous. Obviously, in such conditions, the Catholic hierarchy would be completely dissolved, the curable back into normal life and the incurable into the criminal asylum.

Overpopulation guards against this ever happening. There is obviously an upper limit to the capacity of the earth to support happy human life, and this limit has been

salt". But the way Dionysius is bandied about as the great and unassailable chronologer of the Christian era is quite amusing. What does F. F. Arbuthnot (he was a great friend of Sir Richard Burton the famous Orientalist, by the way) say about him.

Dionysius A Legend?

He calls the story "a legend", but cannot trace when it was first invented. The Benedictines refer to it in their great work *L'art de verifier les dates* without comment, though one Benedictine, Father O'Lezipont, "expressed grave doubts concerning" Dionysius in 1754. Arbuthnot gives what he calls a "great probability". That is,

the date of the Christian era was fixed on astronomical calculations connected with the lunar, solar, and paschal cycles. The two former, of 19 and 28 years multiplied together give 532, a date coinciding with the alleged discovery or invention of Dionysius Exiguus.

Of course, there may have been a monk called Dionysius, and he may have tried to introduce some kind of "era" out of the confusion about it which then existed. On the other hand, the early Christians were masters of the art of fraud and forgery—for example, the unbelievable drivel they have invented about "Christian martyrs", most of whom, if not all, are sheer inventions. Personally, the more I study Christian "history", the less I believe it. In fact, not until the art of printing fixed contemporary events for us, can anything coming from Christian sources really be trusted. And this is true in particular of "chronology".

reached and passed. The greater human numbers, the more intricate, difficult, unsatisfying and violent becomes the basic theme of human life. Earning a living is imperative for 99.99 per cent of humanity, and overpopulation ensures that this task will either allow no time, or will so condition the worker, that he will be unable to see the absurd foundation stones on which mankind has totteringly reared itself. Instead, the resultant friction, competition, discord and strife effectively impede the discovery and exchange of opinion—dangerous to Catholicism. *This*, (not solicitude for the welfare of children—a million of which would be sacrificed tomorrow to keep its structure intact) is the real motive of the religious opposition to birth-control.

F.W.

PEACE EFFORTS

THAT INDEFATIGABLE FIGHTER FOR PEACE and for the complete abolition of nuclear weapons Mrs. Tacchi-Morris, has a long article in the *Somerset County Gazette* for June 4th, describing her experiences in Paris during the Summit Conference "that never was". Delegates sent by various Societies numbered hundreds, all busy with "statements, resolutions, and signatures" against any form of nuclear war and they made "seven visits to Embassies of the Great Powers", while "petitions were handed in to Mr. Macmillan's private secretary". Every effort was made by the delegates to ensure that the Summit Conference would be a success, and there is no doubt that they, like nearly everybody in and outside Paris, were bitterly disappointed. An excellent photograph of some of the delegates was published in the *Bristol Evening News* with Mrs. Tacchi-Morris well in the centre of the group for Taunton; and altogether on their determined efforts to abolish not only nuclear weapons but war. She and her father are staunch members of the National Secular Society.

THE FIRST DETERGENT?

The Milk Grotto, where tradition has it that some drops of the Virgin's milk, while she suckled Her Child, fell upon the rock and turned it white.—*Extract from Visitors' Guide Book to Jerusalem.*

Did Herod Murder the Babies?

By Dr. J. V. DUHIG

I DO NOT BELIEVE that Jesus ever existed as a figure of historical fact. But if, for the sake of discussion, we assume that he did, we face a very complicated chronological problem about the year of his alleged birth. In your issue of 8/4/60, Mr. West raises the question in his comments on the alleged mass murder of children as reported in Matthew. Now Herod the Great was actually a wise and beneficent ruler but he is said to have ordered the massacre. He died in 4 B.C., that is, 4 years before Jesus was born, if we adhere rigidly to the Christian chronology. But Luke, Chapter 3, says Mary was with child about the time of the first taxation, 7 A.D. If the Herod story is true Jesus must have been born about 5 B.C. If Luke is right, the date would have been not earlier than 7 A.D., so that the birth of Jesus could have occurred at any time over 12 or 13 years. This is typical of the sloppy literary and historical ethics of the evangelists, and is almost in itself proof of the falsity of their stuff. And this is in the "infallible" Bible every word of which is "literally true".

Mr. West is surprisingly correct, possibly without consciously knowing it, in suggesting that the massacre was a rehash of an Old Testament event.

In a most remarkable book which I have just read, *Les Origines Sociales du Christianisme*, by the late Professor Prosper Alfaric, Professor of the History of Religions, University of Strasbourg (L'Union Rationaliste, Paris, 1959), the author shows how time and again Old Testament texts, prophecies, incidents, etc., have been woven into New Testament narratives, on the principle, apparently, that if the prophecies did not actually come true, they should have. (And we may note, in passing, that Professor Alfaric was formerly a Roman Catholic priest who left the Church, as did Renan, Loisy, Turmel in the great French Freethought tradition.) Many sects in Palestine, but notably the Essenes, looked forward to a Messiah, a saviour. This person became a legend, and the ritual celebration of his advent was at first frequent, then annual, by a routine which grew out of the Adonis, Attis, Osiris types of ritual. From being just a hope, it became a conviction of fact. In the Greek translation of the contemporary scriptures, the legendary saviour foretold in the Old Testament, a Joshua, became Jesus. In the history of Christianity, Alfaric can find no specific account of Jesus, of his birth, death, crucifixion etc., all is legend. And on his evidence Alfaric tried hard enough.

He says (p. 10), "In the Jewish People's hope of liberation (from the Romans), one of their great ancestors above all haunted their imagination. This was Joshua, in Hebrew Jehoshua whom the Greek translation of the Bible called Iesous or Jesus in English. He had completed the work of Moses and assured the triumph of Israel. His name meant Jahveh the Saviour" (my translation).

The Christian religion is a direct lineal extension of Palestinian Messianism, a hope and belief, derived from the Old Testament, in the advent of an anointed person, the anointed saviour. The Hebrew Messiah is, in Greek, Christos, that is, the Christ, the Anointed, representing an idea shared alike by Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes and Greek converts. Alfaric shows that such an advent was insensibly, in time, transformed from a hope into a belief that it had occurred. As he says (p. 360) "The evangelists transfer to the field of facts the visions of the prophets, in forms as figurative as theirs but like them

incoherent and scrappy. Their illusory precision fails to hide the startling gaps, and their chronology is as inconsistent as their geography: all move in a milieu of unreality. If the theologians obstinately deny this, the historians, their minds unclouded by religious prejudice find themselves more and more in agreement: some conclude that the Christ is pure myth" (my translation). Alfaric shows that Christianity won out over the other sects—notably Mithraism, but in that case only by a whisker—because its central message was directed to the poor, the meek, the miserable, the oppressed; that a scapegoat god would raise them up, take on himself their load of sin and, *by his death*, discharge it for them. To us this is a loathsome doctrine, but to them it was a most soothing flattery. But the promised Messiah never came; his train broke down or something, and all the rival preachers, Paul included—and they were very numerous in Palestine—admitted they had never seen Jesus. In fact, nobody else ever did either, but the conviction of his advent was so deeply embedded in the minds of the converts, that it became a living reality. Alfaric's 5th and 6th Chapters on all this are fascinating. When he gets to evidence on an actual Jesus, he finds there is none.

This is a most interesting book, striking in its massive and meticulous scholarship. It maintains the standard of French Biblical scholarship, as noteworthy in the matter of scientific and humanist distinction as any in the world, which reached a peak as high as or higher than any other extant. It is the third volume of Professor Alfaric's work designed to complete the 7 volumes of Renan's *Les Origines du Christianisme* (1863-83) and it is worthy of the great master himself. The book runs to 373 pages of text and 11 of index. Each of the 11 Chapters ends with notes amounting in all to 577, 90 per cent being Biblical texts. There are 4 maps of the Mediterranean geography of primitive Christianity.

One of the interesting phases of the book is the news that Anti-Semitism, a major Christian vice, among many others, actually started amongst the Essenes and Greek converts, centred about Antioch, before or about the start of the 1st Century A.D. Judging by its subsequent history, Anti-Semitism is an integral part of the Christian faith. Its basis now is that the Jews rejected and killed Jesus. As the gentleman never existed, this racial vice has no *raison d'être*. What the Jews rejected was the Essene version of the Biblical teaching, that of the Old Testament, which to the Jews represented the Law. And I presume they had as much right to their opinion as did their opponents. The deplorable fact remains, however, that sectarian bitterness resulted, in the case of the Jews, in the slaughter of millions of innocent people of their race, an act foreshadowed by the total extermination of the inhabitants of Béziers during the campaign of massacre against the Albigenses by Pope Innocent (sic) the Tenth. In the Catholic community I happen to know this vice is rampant.

Now nobody can hope or pretend to be an authentic Biblical scholar who has not read, and digested, this scholarly book. And until it is effectively refuted, no Pope, Cardinal, Bishop, Parson or Priest will be entitled to be heard dishing out the routine "Come-to-Jesus" drivel. To me it is conclusive on the non-historicity of Jesus. Most of the New Testament is pious legend, in large part hopelessly self-contradictory. I have already remarked on the total

(Continued on next page)

This Believing World

A Canadian evangelist with two most famous names in history—he is called John Jesus—was actually not allowed the other week to land in England, and was sent back to Canada. No reason has been given by the authorities for this very un-Christian act. We could have understood it had a gentleman with a name, say, like Mr. Paine Bradlaugh Voltaire wanted to come here for the express purpose of converting not only all England to Freethought but the Royal Family as well; but a Mr. John Jesus . . . words fail us!

★
So after 300 years, that typical anti-Semitic Passion Play, performed before millions of people at Oberammergau, is to be re-written—and this in spite of the fact that the officials producing the play are literally convinced that “the Jews” did crucify “our Lord”, and therefore all Jews in 1960—black, brown, and white Jews—are all still responsible for the dreadful crime.

★
In actual fact the Precious Word insists that it was a Roman judge who ordered it, and Roman soldiers who performed the Crucifixion—but, as the obstinate Jews ever since have refused to accept Jesus as their Saviour, Christians have always blamed them for the Crucifixion, and rejoiced in violent anti-Semitism. But the only evidence for the Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus is in the four Gospels and nowhere else. And anybody who believes the Gospels will believe anything. The Oberammergau actors are no doubt very angry that their violent anti-Semitism will be toned down in the new representation which, however, will not be for ten years. Perhaps after all, by then a new Nazi Party will have taken over in Germany, and the dear old play will be restored with, if anything, more violent anti-Semitism than ever.

★
In the meantime it is interesting to note that a correspondent to *Psychic News* wants Spiritualistic audiences to be told that “the birth and death accounts of the Master Jesus are complete fabrications”, that “Jesus was never crucified”, that he lived “to a ripe old age”, and that “he did not leave a word of writing behind”. He also insists that the Gospels “are mostly conjecture and very unreliable”, and that they were written “many years after the events”, and “were altered hundreds of times”.

★
As for “the figure of a man nailed to a Cross”, the story “is preposterously crude, totally untrue, and utterly repulsive!” He considers the whole story was taken from an Egyptian play “enacted 1,700 years before Jesus was born”, and the early Church Fathers “turned a symbolic play about the Seasons into historic persons”, and bolstered up “one untruth with a thousand lies!” We shudder to think what Christian Spiritualists will think of this devastating criticism—which by the way will shock and horrify some of our reverent Humanists and Rationalists as well. Good Christians everywhere however will never, never, give up such “historical truths” as the Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus. It is just impossible that the despised early Jews may after all have been right!

★
During the Dark and Middle Ages anybody who tried to interfere with Holy Relics or steal them was immediately struck dead by God Almighty; but somehow or other, the Lord is far too busy listening to the millions of prayers by the faithful to repeat such drastic punishment these days. A gunman recently stole two Crucifixion relics from their owner in New Jersey, and even though they were insured for 70,000 dollars, got away with them. The relics were a

splinter from the Cross, and a thorn from the Crown of Thorns, and they had been duly authenticated by Pope Benedict XIV. Yet God did nothing about it this time, and the sacrilegious thief got away with the sacred swag scot free. We think the Lord should be sternly rebuked for his leniency towards a thief. Has he forgotten those wonderful Dark Ages?

“THE PLAIN VIEW”

The Plain View (2s. 6d.; 11/4, post free for 4 issues, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W.8), is edited by H. J. Blackham, and boasts a Lordly advisory panel consisting of Earl Russell, Lord Chorley and Baroness Wootton. Those who expect appropriate quality will not, I think, be disappointed.

In the 1960 Summer number, the emphasis is sociological, the three main articles dealing with Japan, “Euthanasia Yesterday and Tomorrow” and “Sex Laws in Modern England”. In the last one, F. H. Amphlett Micklewright contrasts the Pauline Christian tradition (“There is amazingly little about sex-activity in the teaching of Jesus, whilst His moral teaching as a whole was severely conditioned by His belief that the end of the world was at hand”) which has, “At no time . . . been able to overcome its own internal difficulties and the strange contradictions of theory and practice”, with the “fundamentally rational and utilitarian” one of humanism, “seeking both individual and social happiness in the world of the here and now”. Reform of the sex laws in the light of sociology and psychology are long overdue, and Mr. Micklewright sees it clearly as “one of the next steps which a progressive and constructive humanism must undertake”.

Mr. Blackham’s address to the Euthanasia Society on March 31st, 1960, is, as one would expect, carefully reasoned and impressive. Treatment of human life as such, or of life as such, is, he points out, “as superstitious as any irrational religious fear”. “Safeguards are all very well, but an absolute is the best safeguard after all”, runs the argument. “If the dyke is breached, a flood; and the dyke is an absolute principle . . . Allow the principle of discrimination, and the flood is out . . .” The “thin end of the wedge” argument, says Mr. Blackham, “is not mere obstruction to a proposal that is disliked; it is rather a real dread roused by a proposal whose merits are otherwise appreciated, a dread of cheapening the value of human life by allowing exceptions to its absolute sacredness”. The absolute principle, he adds epigrammatically, “is the standard device of the philosophic conservative of a liberal cast”. The best answer to the argument is “to acknowledge that the wedge may reasonably be driven deeper than the [Euthanasia] Society proposes, but not deeper than the limit set by the purpose it serves”.

In the longest article, Richard Clements gives us a “sociological sketch” of Japan—and we all surely want to know more about this country today? Many facts may be familiar: the mountainous country, density of population, and so on. Most of us will know something of St. Francis Xavier. But Mr. Clements brings, I wager, quite a lot that is new to all but the student of Japanese affairs. Obviously an essay of seventeen pages can only be a “sketch”, but this one may well send us to the more detailed pictures of Japanese history and culture referred to in Mr. Clements’s notes. C.McC.

DID HEROD MURDER THE BABIES?

(Concluded from page 203)

confusion of Christian sources about the date of the Birth of Jesus.

Somebody should make arrangements to have at least this one of Alfarc’s three volumes translated into English immediately. The need to add its high scholarship to our present knowledge of Christian mythology is urgent. The former volumes, *De la Foi à la Raison* (1955) and *À l’Ecole de la Raison* (1956), can be had from the publishers, L’Union Rationaliste, 24 Rue des Grands-Augustins, Paris.

As time and research go on, we realise more and more what an impudent and contemptible swindle the Christian religion is. It has been kept alive by force, fraud and crime; let us kill it with humane scholarship.

In reply to our primary question, the answer undoubtedly is this: There never was a Massacre of the Innocents because there never was a Jesus Christ.

N.B. I hope soon to be able to give THE FREETHINKER a condensed translation of Alfarc’s last chapter, “From Jewish Messianism to the Christian Church”.

THE FREETHINKER

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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.

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

Merseyside Branch N.S.S. (Pierhead).—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.; Sundays, 7.30 p.m.

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead).—Every Sunday, noon: Messrs. L. EBURY and A. ARTHUR.

INDOOR

North Staffordshire Humanist Group (Guildhall, High Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme).—Friday, June 24th, 7.15 p.m. A Discussion.

Southend Humanist Group (12 Cedar Road, Thundersley, Essex).—Saturday, June 25th, 7.30 p.m. A Discussion.

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq., W.C.1), Sunday, June 26th, 11 a.m.: J LEWIS, Ph.D., "The Soul of Man under Socialism".

Notes and News

MR. F. A. RIDLEY, President of the National Secular Society recently spoke to the Poale Zion (Jewish Young Socialists) at Stoke Newington and, although he strongly attacked religious Zionism, was asked to speak again sometime. The Secretary of the N.S.S., Mr. Colin McCall will speak to the New Jewish Society at Bedford House, 108 Baker Street, London, W.1, on Wednesday, July 6th.

★

THE BISHOP OF SALFORD, the Rt. Rev. G. A. Beck, gave clear indication that he wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than full State-support for Roman Catholic schools, when he opened St. Gregory's R.C. Secondary School at Farnworth, Lancs, on June 4th. Harmony between home and school was an important educational principle, he said. "We are the one community in this country trying to put this important educational principle into practice and we are the one community being penalised for doing so." Which set us wondering how long it will be before a British Government increases the denominational schools grant from 75 to 100 per cent. Perhaps when that happens the Unitarians will re-join the Secular Education League, but

The Freethinker Sustentation Fund

PREVIOUSLY ACKNOWLEDGED, £134 5s. 6d.; N. Cluett, 1s. 3d.; Miss D. G. Davies, £2 2s.; Wm. Scarlett, Jr., 10s.; J.A., 5s. 6d.; Wm. Collins, 7s. 6d.; H. W. Day, 5s.; J. J. Ravell, 2s. 6d.; "Pius John 23", £1 13s. 8d.. Total to date June 17th, 1960. £139 12s. 11d.

it is probably too much to hope that the Labour Party will return to its Secular education policy.

★

LEICESTER SECULAR SOCIETY now has its own film projector, and it intends to include more films in its future programmes. This is because the occasional film shows in the past have proved very popular. We hear, too, that youth activities at the Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, now include a mixed club, the Charles Bradlaugh Youth Club. Incidentally Mr. C. H. Hammersley, lively Secretary of Leicester succeeded in getting a report of the National Secular Society Conference in the *Leicester Chronicle* for June 10th.

★

M.P.s WERE NOT VERY COMMON in H.M. prisons, wrote Peter Baker in the *Sunday Graphic* (12/6/60). What did "startle" him, though, "was the very large number of priests, clergymen and church officials serving sentence". At one time, while I was at Wormwood Scrubs, said Mr. Baker, "we had a canon, nine vicars, a priest, a lay reader, seven lay preachers, a cathedral choirmaster, and countless minor church people". "A sobering thought . . ." he added. We hope so.

★

The Daily Record (6/6/60) contained a number of letters from Glaswegians testifying to the power of prayer and in some cases giving the actual form of prayer used. "J.Y." has "no fear of the future". He just says, "Lord you know I need your help. I trust you". S. Taylor lost a good job and couldn't keep up his hire purchase payments, but he prayed and won the *Daily Record* Show Girl Contest. Mrs. Stewart's mother prayed when her son was missing in the First World War and, of course, he was saved. Dare we remind Mrs. Stewart (presumably her mother is now dead) that many other mothers prayed less successfully? And may we point out to Kathleen Bush that though she owes a neighbour "a debt of gratitude" she can never repay, for praying when Mrs. Bush had a bad haemorrhage after childbirth, it was a doctor "who was able to do what was necessary"?

★

ANOTHER GLASGOW PAPER, the *Evening Citizen*, runs what it calls "The Churchman's Page" and, on June 11th, the Rev. Tom Allan had something to say about atheists. "It is only when we really understand the plight that men are in when they try to live without God that our evangelism will be what it should be", he wrote. And he told a story from *Alcoholics Anonymous* magazine. "A middle-aged play-boy dropped dead one night in a New York night club. A doctor called to the scene examined the formally-dressed body, then questioned the members of the party. He was told the name, age and occupation of the deceased. 'What was his religion?' the doctor asked next . . . 'He was an atheist', someone finally replied. The doctor looked down again at the white tie and tails. 'What a pity he remarked. 'All dressed up and no place to go.' Yes indeed: and no place to go to either!

—NEXT WEEK—

MORAL REARMAMENT

By F. A. RIDLEY

Men, Gods and Fear

By EVA EBURY

PHILOSOPHERS OF GREECE AND ROME argued the question: Did fear create the gods, or did the gods create fear? There are both anthropologists and philosophers today who claim that religion arose from the need of primitive man for "a barrier against fear." This concept asserts a purely natural origin for the god-idea, and is accepted by many Free-thinkers. Nevertheless, it is avidly seized upon by the religious and embellished to justify the propagation of lies, under the specious plea that supernatural father-fancies are necessary to ensure mental stability in modern society.

"Fear created the gods," religion, "a barrier against fear." To primitive man, the propositions are as disputable today as they were 2,000 years ago. They are based on the assumption, firstly, that fear was an evil to early man; secondly, that a supernatural agency could provide a barrier against natural evils.

Fear is a necessary evolution in the animal kingdom for the survival of the species; it evolved, as any other of the protective characteristics of animals, and the evolution of fear carried with it the evolution of methods of defence against the things feared. A "barrier against fear" would have meant certain destruction during the million years of man's early struggle. Fear is the necessary weapon of inquisitive man, who only survived among animals stronger, faster, tougher and hairier than he because fear and experience had become related in memory and conscious action to a greater degree than ever before. Man had become equipped to anticipate danger and prepare against it.

Homo sapiens was not a stranger to the destructive forces of nature; he did not emerge into an unknown world. He hid from the storm with the creatures of the forest, and found his shelter under the same rocks. When the sun broke through after the storm, it was the same for him as for the beasts and the birds, all chatter and noise and busyness. Man's animal ancestry had equipped him for his struggle for survival; thunder, lightning and fierce animals were necessary and natural fears.

Religion introduced the supernatural fear, against which there is no natural defence. Man, the brainiest of all the animals, had himself created a danger against which he could find no protection. A creature of his own imagination dominated him, enslaved him, took his first born, and first fruits and the best and loveliest of all his works of art. Man could not run from that, kill it, argue with it; he could only fear.

Gods dwell where men would be most frightened to believe they dwelt . . . in the vault above our heads, whence comes our help or our undoing, the brightness of the sun, moon and stars, or the rumble of thunder, the gentle rain, or the crushing thunder-bolt. Thus, in my opinion, did a man first persuade mortals that there was a race of Gods.

So said Critias, in his play, *Sisyphus*, explaining the origin of religion as an act of a shrewd legislator to place a supernatural policeman in the sky.

Fear is the deadliest weapon of the priest. After preparing man's mind with dread of the supernatural, he invented an eternity; a celestial law-court, with the god its judge and the priests its jury. The last turn of the rack had been given. Wretched man, who had overcome all his natural enemies by strategy and cunning and had struggled from the crouching denizen of a cave to erectness of posture and wealth of possessions, had become a prey of "terror-speaking tales of the seer." As Lucretius wrote:—

If men saw there was a fixed limit to their woes, they would be able in some way to withstand the religious scruples and

threatenings of the seers. As it is, there is no way, no means of resisting since they must fear after death, everlasting pains.

Pagan philosophers discussed origins of religion and priestcraft. Perhaps we cannot yet answer the questions, but we understand more today of early man. We know, by inference, that primitive man had no religion. Language, communication of ideas, communal morals and codes and the ability to support parasitism in a tribe were necessary before priestcraft could arise. Language only evolved as the inherited noises of animal type became inadequate with the use of communal tools. The communication of ideas was impossible until language had advanced beyond the naming and distinguishing of objects to the distinguishing of the functions of objects. This would be the age of primitive animism; movement and life appeared synonymous.

"Take heed to thyself that thou forsake not the Levite as long as thou livest upon the land." So the priests of Jahveh instituted priestcraft amongst the Semites, and thus was the parasite class instituted for the Jew, as it had been for the peoples around.

Our ancient philosophers understood well the purpose of religion, if not its origin. Polybius (166 BC) asserts:—

What the rest of mankind deride, is the foundation of Roman greatness, namely superstition. This element has been introduced into every aspect of their private and public life, with every artifice to awe the imagination, in a degree, which could not be improved upon. Many, possibly, will be at a loss to understand this; but my view is that it has been done to impress the masses. If it were possible to have a state in which all the citizens were philosophers, perhaps we might dispense with this sort of thing. But the masses in every State are unstable, full of lawless desires, of irrational anger, and violent passion. All that can be done then, is to hold them in check by fears of the unseen and other shams of the same sort. It was not for nothing, but with deliberate design, that the men of old introduced to the masses notions about the gods, and concepts of the after-life.

What a modern ring these arguments have!

No, despite the assertions of modern anthropologists and philosophers, religion has never played a beneficial part in man's existence. Its role today is the role it has always had, to produce the fear that it pretends to assuage, and to use that fear to prevent the economic and mental progress of man. Religion, priestcraft, the rule of mental and physical authority must go, before man can become master of his environment and arbiter of his own future. We shall not start much further forward mentally than our ancient philosophers, but we are equipped today with better tools and have the power within our hands to make a saner and more prosperous world.

One more quotation from an old master, Lucian, born 120 AD, by the Euphrates, writing of Alexander the oracemonger, and the riches he had gained by the sale of his oracles to the superstitious people of Italy and the East. He describes the opposition that the Epicureans began to organise against Alexander, and how he, in his hate, and in true religious fashion, had burned the most famous of the books of Epicurus, and cast its ashes into the sea, saying "The dotard's maxims to the flames be given." Lucian then makes this comment:—

The fellow had no conception of the blessings conferred by that book upon its readers, of the peace, tranquility, and independence of mind it produces, of the protection it gives against terrors, phantoms, and marvels, vain hopes and inordinate desires, of the judgment and candour that it fosters, or of its true purging of the spirit, not with torches and squills and such rubbish, but with right reason, truth and frankness. Epicurus was a secularist, and happiness was his moral guide.

Our Modern Anabaptists

By F. A. RIDLEY

DURING APRIL OF THIS YEAR I was able to make the acquaintance of a remarkable religious and sociological experiment. I was, in fact, able to see a relic of the age of the Reformation now domiciled in England's green and pleasant countryside. For I visited Upper Bromdon Farm, near Bridgnorth, Shropshire, now the English headquarters of the Bruderhof, an originally German Christian and Communistic sect that dates back to the Anabaptists of the 16th century; whose famous "Kingdom" of Munster (1534-5) made a European sensation in its day. It has the honour of being mentioned in the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England as their contemporary representatives of Christian Socialism. By a fortunate coincidence, Mr. Stanley Fletcher, who showed us round, used to be a well-known speaker in Hyde Park prior to the war, where I well remember him. Much of the factual material that follows is due to Brother Fletcher and his colleagues, who received our party most hospitably. The Bruderhof, or Society of Brothers, were founded in their present form in Berlin in 1920 by Arnold Eberhard. They claim to represent the original uncorrupted Christianity of the New Testament and to be in historic succession to such earlier Utopian Christian sects as the Anabaptists and the Hutterians with whom they recently amalgamated, an offshoot of the Bohemian Hussites who established their first Bruderhof as far back as 1528 at the height of the German Reformation. (The English Bruderhof recently photographed in the British Museum and then translated a famous 16th century Anabaptist *Confession of Faith*.) They accuse the orthodox Churches of being corrupted by worldly compromises. Under the Hitler regime, to which both their Communism and Pacifism were abhorrent, the Bruderhof were expelled from Germany by the Gestapo, after which exodus, they then settled at Ashton Keyes in Wiltshire. But not for long! For "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" still pursued them. By an ironic paradox, having been expelled by the Nazi regime from Germany in 1936, they found themselves vehemently suspected in Britain of being agents of the very regime which had expelled them. As a result, the Bruderhof had to move again—this time to the remote and backward South American Republic of Paraguay. In Paraguay, which has a long tradition of socialistic experiments both religious and secular ever since the days when the Jesuits established a collectivist Republic there (during the 17th and 18th centuries), the Bruderhof have been established since 1942. Their international headquarters are now at Primavera, north by 200 miles of the capital, Asuncion. They appear to have prospered, and their settlement contains some 700 Brothers and Sisters plus their offspring. For the Bruderhof do not practice celibacy but encourage family life, no doubt with a view to the future of their movement. In England, three Brothers (including Mr. Fletcher) remained as caretakers at Ashton Keyes. Here, they succeeded in getting the colony going again with mainly English recruits. After the war, they moved to Upper Bromdon Farm, high up amongst the hills, in a country immortalised by the greatest English poet of the present century, A. E. Housman in his *Shropshire Lad* and *Last Poems*. At Bromdon, the population is rather more than one hundred. The Bruderhof have recently opened a new branch at Gerrards Cross, near London, and have also returned to their land of origin, Germany. But their cosmopolitan headquarters still remain at Primavera, where their medical and agricultural work appears to be

much appreciated by the still backward Indian Republic. (The everyday language spoken in Paraguay is still that of the Guarani Indians, whom the Jesuits originally converted—and exploited.) There appears to be a free exchange of personnel between Paraguay and Europe. My informant, Mr. Fletcher, had lived in Paraguay for several years.

The above constitutes a brief outline of the evolution, to date, of the sect. Now a word as to their way of life today. The branches of the Bruderhof tree are apparently autonomous in their internal administration, and they practice a strictly Communistic way of life; not, it may be added, a species of State (or community) capitalism, but (in their internal affairs at least), complete Communism. The most obvious example of this is represented by the complete absence of money; all the Brothers and Sisters take everything they want from a common store. Money, the apostolic "root of all evil", strikes no roots here—so far at any rate! All differences in the community, including presumably, any disputes over the allocation of goods, is democratically resolved by the whole Bruderhof sitting as a kind of General Purposes Committee. Work is obligatory on all; it appears to consist mostly of farm work, but the Brothers also export produce for the outside (capitalistic) market, and for this purpose money is used for extra-communal transactions. The education of the young is conducted partly in a school on the premises and partly in the local schools at Bridgnorth. Special arrangements exist for married life, including, it appears, some degree of privacy. Upper Bromdon Farm is situated on high ground commanding a fine view of the countryside. The life there appeared to me to be hard but healthy, and the living arrangements efficient, but tending to be Spartan in their frugality. It did not strike me during my brief visit that Communism practised by the Bruderhof corresponds with the Communism of the "Age of Plenty" as advocated by Kropotkin in *Mutual Aid* and *The Conquest of Bread*, and other classics of Anarchist Communism, to the general type of which, the Bruderhof settlements appear to conform. In his book, *Communism and Co-operative Colonies*, the French sociologist, Charles Gide, made the interesting suggestion that in a still future reaction against our over-centralised industrial civilisation, there may come about an extensive revival of Communistic colonies, whether of the sectarian (and unorthodox, presumably Unitarian?) type represented by the Bruderhof or of a purely secular socialist or anarchist type. At present, and be that as it may, the Brothers at Bromdon (and Gerrards Cross) appear to be the only society of this kind to be domiciled in Britain. Since I was assured they welcome publicity (and also potential recruits), I conclude with the relevant suggestion that readers of THE FREETHINKER interested in such matters, might take a trip to Bridgnorth and see our modern Anabaptists for themselves.

CORRESPONDENCE

STOICISM

Mr. G. I. Bennett's idea of Stoicism is very peculiar. The Greek school of Stoics stood for the repression of all joyful emotions, they condemned all pleasure, and advised the Greek masses to be indifferent to all pain, and to be contented in whatever station of life it had pleased the gods to place them. In return, they offered the slaves immortality in summerland. The Stoics, mostly composed of elderly, played-out wealthy playboys, wore silk underclothing, but covered it over with sackcloth, so

as to give a look of ascetism. That old Russian humbug and brilliant writer, Leo Tolstoy, copied them by doing the same thing. The religious sect known as the "Stoics", dined and drank of the best, and as a matter of fact, the Christian religion copied many of the superstitions of the Greeks, but destroyed Greek art and literature with a fanatical frenzy. The glory that was Greece, does not lie in its religion, nor its politics, nor in the humbugs who called themselves "Stoics". They were the equivalent of those purveyors of misery, the Lord's Day Observance Society.

PAUL VARNEY.

TACITUS AND JESUS

Mr. E. M. Kingston has a perfect right to believe what he likes—especially on "the genuineness of the passage in Tacitus's *Annals*"; but when he says, "there is no evidence *whatever* that it is not genuine", he should be prepared to meet the arguments given by Robert Taylor, J. M. Robertson, W. B. Smith, Arthur Drews, and C. F. Dupuis among many others, all of whom have devoted many pages to a reasoned discussion on the problem.

Perhaps as a start he should begin with the "bibliography" of the *Annals*—that is, when was the book written, how was it transmitted, from which manuscript or manuscripts it was first printed and translated, giving us the necessary dates and full details? I am sure all readers of this journal who do not believe that Jesus really lived, and many who do, will be very grateful for the information.

H. CUTNER.

THE CROSS

The study of words is full of pitfalls. Words extend and change their meanings. Certainly *stauros* originally meant a stake. The Greeks did not practise crucifixion. The Romans did, and writers in Greek used *stauros* as the equivalent of *crux*, of which there were several forms. The *crux immissa* was clearly the one on which the author of the New Testament and subsequent Christian writers believed that Jesus was crucified. This and other types of crosses were very familiar instruments of execution until Constantine I forbade crucifixions.

I have seen the *graffito* of Alexamenos adorning an ass-headed god, almost certainly a Pagan caricature of Jesus. The theory of "guiding lines" for a draughtsman will not do. Why are there none for Alexamenos? The central figure has arms extended to suggest crucifixion, and the upper end of the cross-post, which is *not* a simple line, extends a little beyond the victim's neck.

A. D. HOWELL SMITH

[This correspondence is now closed.—ED.]

THE MATERIALIST AND DEATH

Mr. R. Smith's letter criticising "scientific materialism" (THE FREETHINKER, June 3rd) epitomises the attitude of the average Christian believer and many "humanists" towards the notion that our world is explainable scientifically without regard to supernaturalism. The "fear of death" to which he refers is incomprehensible to me, since I for one do not possess it, except in the sense that at present I would prefer to go on living (a preference which may change when I become old and senile!); it seems to me that the actual process of dying is relatively painless in most cases, and besides, death can be considered as an ultimate solace, since not only our joys and happinesses, but also our miseries and despairs, die with us when our organs cease to function. As for the "fear of growing old", this is natural enough, but one feels that one ought not to fear what is inevitable, but accept it philosophically. (We may, indeed, as Shelley suggested, be born again with "new souls"; although as a speculation bearing on personal immortality in the *Christian* sense this idea is neither here nor there, and affords little or no satisfaction to the thwarted believer yearning for a redress of his grievances.) But the main inadequacy in Mr. Smith's argument is his assumption that the function of an hypothesis such as determinism (the word "materialism" is out of date) ought to be to make us more happy! Our happiness is irrelevant to this hypothesis; we ought to draw our happiness from sources independent of science *per se*. A man can be happy or unhappy either believing or not believing this or any other like hypothesis—it just does not set itself up as a comforter. On the other hand, there is more comfort to be gained from feeling you are right than there is from fearing you are wrong. Further, to talk of a "mere" criticism of Christian belief is a cheap jibe, as is also the suggestion that when one becomes "philosophically mature" the criticism wears off. Materialists have arrived at their conclusions after profound and sincere thought, and there is no evidence to suggest that the human mind improves with the advance of old age. Doubtless Mr. Smith defines "philosophical maturity" as the state attained by those who have ceased to criticise religion and have sunk into a passive submission to the accepted authoritarian views. Such men as Bertrand Russell and Sir Julian Huxley, who have not ceased to criticise religion (both destructively and constructively) throughout long lives, make a mockery of this claim.

The final sentence of Mr. Smith's letter is even more extraordinary, since he questions whether determinists really believe what they say, or whether (perhaps like Zeno or Bishop Berkeley) they put forward theories in which they do not really believe in order to confound the wise. Speaking for myself, I would never say anything I did not really believe. As to the "satisfaction" to be gained from a belief in materialism, although there is a satisfaction of a genuine sort to be gained from it, nevertheless one should look for "satisfaction" elsewhere; and surely, there is precious little satisfaction to be gained from a half-hearted belief in a view of life which is patently not true, and which conflicts with the known facts.

NICHOLAS TOON.

THE EXODUS

If after all my quotations Mr. R. W. Morrell still clings to the queer idea that the priestly authors of the O.T. cared a hoot for "historical (Egyptian) documents"—which in the case of Exodus were conspicuous for their absence—he is beyond argument.

But—as the preceding letter in your issue of June 17th proves—there are even among your readers what friend Cutner calls the "Reverent Rationalists" who are unable to rid themselves of their ingrained respect for Holy Writ as, at least, *the* authentic and true record of ancient history.

Their furious barking cannot prevent the momentous progress of the Myth Theory as the only logical conclusion. P. G. ROY.

WORST CRIME?

It seems to me that Mr. Dent's criticism of my article "Suicide" consists chiefly of irrelevancies. Whether my attitude is pessimistic or paranoiac, or if I talk nonsense about the death-wish, exaggerate Maugham's talents, or think that there are worse things than the Nazis or Inquisition—all these things are side issues to my main theme. I am well content to be called a pessimist when I am able to claim the intellectual company of the great Sophocles, however humble a position I may occupy in the circle of the devotees of the Athenian seer, who thought that it is better not to be born.

As for the Inquisition, etc.; political and religious prisoners *could* recant: there is no *possible* escape for hopeless cases imprisoned in institutions who would, given the chance, voluntarily end their lives. That the pitiful victims of incurable afflictions are cold-bloodedly preserved and dictated to by fellow mortals enjoying fair health is about the vilest crime conceivable.

In spite of the Nazis and Inquisition I still do not hesitate to head the murky records of human crime with this studied policy of forcing people to live whose wish is to die.

ALAN O. SNOOK.

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