

# The Freethinker

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IN THE OLDEST—and perhaps greatest — poem in European literature, the *Iliad*, the gods are represented as taking an active part in the military operations that centred around Troy. Gods, as well as human heroes, fought hand-to-hand in the epic fray beneath the walls of Troy. Today, some 3,000 years later, physically conducted duels between rival deities have long since gone out of fashion. Nowadays, the gods themselves have divested their celestial attributes from a corporeal frame. Notwithstanding, the gods of our epoch though (officially) "without bodies, parts or passions", still carry on a never-ending species of inter-necine celestial war. The hordes of missionaries, whether Catholic, Protestant, Mormon or Muslim, represent the invading armies of aggressor gods in this species of spiritual war; a spiritual combat that until quite recent times, was waged with terrestrial arms also, not perhaps by the gods themselves as in Homeric times, but by the embattled armies of earthly crusaders. For the moment, however, a peaceful mood appears to prevail on Mount Olympus, or wherever present day rival deities congregate. Their never-ending struggle for celestial supremacy and monopoly is waged on earth by relatively peaceful means of religious propaganda alone.

**Islam Over Africa**

In the hard pressed and visibly shrinking religious world of 1960, the two major supernatural creeds that still contend, not only for survival but even—rather optimistically—for supremacy, are indisputably Christianity and Islam. These two ancient rivals, the creed of Muhammed and of the divinely-dictated Koran and that of the Holy (but most un-mathematical) Trinity, still remain the major protagonists in the field of supernatural religion. Their terrestrial combat still rages unceasingly, not only against their older enemies, such "survivals and new arrivals" as Atheism, Materialism, and now "godless Bolshevism" and Marxism, but equally against each other. Nor does the fact that armed crusades have gone out of fashion prevent the contemporary propagandists of the "one true faith" (both of them!) from pursuing their historical vendetta with unabated violence and, it may be added, for far vaster stakes than the limited geography of earlier ages afforded. At the present moment, the major clash between them appears to be over Africa, that immemorial "dark" Continent, now emerging apparently for the first time in its history into the light of cosmopolitan day. In which connection the present writer may reasonably claim the status of an at least, minor prophet, for writing many years ago in another capacity, I predicted that just as what has been termed the "Revolt of Asia" dominated the first half of the 20th century, so the sequential revolt of Africa would come to fill the stage during its second half; as is now happening. For Africa is, in 1960 *et seq.*, the one remaining Continent that is mostly virgin soil from the point of view of religion. According to a recent computation, out of a total indigenous population of about 230

millions (the computation appears to be approximate rather than accurate) some sixty millions are Muslims (mostly in North and West Africa) whilst Christianity (indigenous since Roman times in Ethiopia, but elsewhere imported from Europe) has to be content with some 21,000,000 (*cf. Daily Express, 7/10/60*). However, both are minorities in the vast African Continent (which is about the same size as the moon). According to the authority quoted above, the large majority of the inhabitants are still Pagan and, as such, potential converts for the two great theistic creeds, Islam and Christianity. Most of these still Pagan tribes are in the primitive stage of animism or fetishism, wherein "the

## — VIEWS and OPINIONS —

### *Africa at the Religious Cross Roads*

By F. A. RIDLEY

heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone". If one assumes—as the general course of religious history entitles one to assume—that religious evolution follows (often reluctantly) in the wake of social progress, this primitive fetishism will not long be able to resist the spectacularly rapid impact of African social and intellectual progress. A primitive cult like animism, whilst the natural expression of prehistoric society, cannot co-exist for long with a modern industrial society such as Africa is now fast becoming. The witch doctor and his kind are on the way out. The decisive question now is, who and what will take their place?

#### **The Struggle for Africa**

There are three major ideological contenders for the sceptre of the departing witch doctor in probable order of contemporary strength: Islam, Christianity and Atheism; the last-named a recent comer but, by all contents a rapidly increasing one chiefly in Communist or leftist nationalist circles, *e.g.* my valued friend, the late George Padmore, the most brilliant African leader of his generation and the real brains behind Dr. Nkrumah and the creation of the State of Ghana, was a convinced Atheist who regularly read *THE FREETHINKER* and whilst living here, lectured to National Secular Society Branches. However, while the African future belongs (or so we hope) to a rationalistic outlook, at present the two great conservative religions Islam and Christianity, both probably possess greater contemporary power. At present, the balance of power is apparently tilted towards Mecca, according to the *Daily Express* (the property of that devout Christian the Venerable Lord Beaverbrook). Islam is attacking all along the line. From its spiritual headquarters, the classic Muslim University of Al-Azhar at Cairo, a legion of missionaries are spreading the glorious message of the Koran throughout Africa, where several new Muslim states (in particular the recent creation of the predominantly Muslim State of Nigeria, the most populous in Africa) must have greatly strengthened the influence of "God's Holy Word"—*i.e.* the Koran, not the Bible. So confident of ultimate success are the Muslims that there are in existence already, schemes to establish Arabic, God's own language (the one in which the Koran was written and in



which alone it can be recited by orthodox Muslims) as the Pan-African language for the entire Continent after the final exit of the Europeans. The language good enough for Allah is surely good enough for Africa too!

#### A White Man's Religion

One of the major planks in the Muslim propaganda arsenal is the traditional association, so often noted during the colonialist era, between Christian missionaries and gunboats. Presumably the apartheid power of South African Christianity lends weight to this propaganda, and, as might be expected in a Continent newly released from Colonial subjugation, this line of argument seems to be highly effective. (No doubt the Muslims themselves do not recall the horrors of the slave trade in which Arab slave traders and Christian sea captains alike participated). Even the *Express* has to admit that in addition, Islam has three major assets in its African venture: (a) "It is a simple and direct faith, calling for belief in one supreme Power".

[No metaphysical Trinity—F.A.R.]; (b) "It makes allowance for human nature particularly in such matters as polygamy which has been practised by African tribes for centuries"; (c) "It is regarded as the faith with no sense of colour bar or racial prejudice: Islam has been called a social system as well as a religion—a social system that gives the believer a conviction of equality with all other believers". Armed with such formidable assets in a newly-emancipated continent, Islam advances resolutely towards the conquest of Pan-Africa.

#### "Out of Africa"

Nineteen centuries ago, the Roman author Seneca, made the prophetic comment: "Out of Africa something new is always appearing". Will Africa be the first Continent to part company with the gods—all gods? Will Continental Atheism be the "new thing" long ago predicted by Seneca? At present it does not appear at all unlikely, once the Islamic offensive has spent its present force.

## More On "A Subject of Scandal and Concern"

JOHN OSBORNE'S TV play, *A Subject of Scandal and Concern*, has certainly caused a good deal of discussion, and for that alone, the author and the BBC must be thanked, for the greater part of the British public had probably never heard of George Jacob Holyoake before November 6th. Now, through the play itself or through radio and press controversy, his name and his prosecution for blasphemy are common knowledge.

John Ennis wrote in *Reynolds News* (13/11/60) that the staff of that paper had been revering Holyoake for years "without knowing a thing about him except that he had a photograph taken wearing a white beard and looking patriarchal and a bit stuffy". Mr. Osborne's play induced Mr. Ennis to look up *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life* and the result was a most interesting article, from which we reproduce the following:

When he went into the dock, Holyoake asked the jailer, a surly, pockmarked man named Ogden, to pass him his box of books and papers. Ogden refused. Holyoake went on quietly demanding his box until Ogden began to feel silly and gave in. Next the prisoner kept judge and jury waiting 20 minutes while he spread out his books and papers until the dock looked like a pamphlet stall. Only then did Holyoake step forward and say: "I plead not guilty".

His defence, he admitted later, "lacked prudence". He spoke for nine hours and fifteen minutes. At the end he expected a 12-months sentence, but was given six, which he considered reasonable in the circumstances.

A prison visitor brought him a couple of religious books, which he promised to read. He kept his promise (Holyoake would never lie)—and wrote a couple of pamphlets refuting the books' arguments.

Visiting magistrates, Holyoake said afterwards, "became a serious trouble to me". The magistrates asked him to wear prison dress. Holyoake was careful never to say "I won't do it" to any order, knowing that he could be forced and thus made to look foolish. So he said: "I do not wish to do so". He added that if they decided to compel him they would have to dress him every morning. He never wore prison clothing. He did not wish to go to the church either, and told them they would have to carry him. Craftily, he suggested being allowed into the church for the sermon only. "It may have some newness of thought instructive to me". The Chaplain, he noted, "was not displeased".

He never went to church.

Holyoake was editor of a paper called *The Oracle of Reason*. He wrote his articles in complete darkness in his cell. He did this by sticking pins along the edges of a book cover and running parallel threads between them; he slid paper under the threads and they served as lines to write between.

When he got out of prison, Holyoake began saving money for a special purpose. He needed the fare from his Birmingham home to Cheltenham. When he had enough, back he

went to this dangerous town. And there he repeated the very words that had sent him to jail. He did so on the ground that as he had paid a price for free speech, he had bought the right to indulge in it.

"This was not good law," he commented. "But it was good defiance."

*The Glasgow Herald* (14/11/60) published a letter from that stalwart Freethinker, Dr. Henry G. Farmer (an occasional contributor to this paper since the days of G. W. Foote, though often under a pseudonym). Dr. Farmer criticised the play on production and factual grounds. These latter are of particular interest and, here again, we quote without comment:

The play was factually wrong. To mention one point, the inarticulation or impediment of speech in Holyoake was certainly not observable in the man that I knew in the opening years of the century. Secondly, although the concluding church scene was a half suggestion that Holyoake recanted, the facts are that as soon as Holyoake left prison for blasphemy he started a freethought journal called *The Movement* (1843), followed by another, *The Reasoner* (1846-61), and actually died an atheist. Incidentally, Charles Newman, a brother of the famous Cardinal Newman, actually contributed to the latter journal. . . . Lastly, the statement (twice in the play) that Charles Southwell, the friend of Holyoake, then in Bristol prison for blasphemy, had died in prison after making a recantation of his anti-religious opinions is not true. As soon as Southwell was released from prison he started a freethought journal called *The Lancashire Beacon* (1843), and published a book entitled *Christianity Proved Idolatry*. Southwell died in New Zealand in 1860.

#### THE KINGDOM OF THE MIND

I dreamed of a land which no man hath found,  
A land where all are free;  
Where one's highest aims are lost in sight,  
Where the blind of heart do see  
And methought as I dreamed of the souls who dared,  
Who did from bondage flee;  
Of the truly valiant names to earth unknown,  
Yet the same stuff as we.  
By these the world is cleansed, made new again,  
And hope a verdant tree;  
These are the brave, illustrious sons of men —  
Their hope, our only plea.  
For all who would true freedom find,  
Quest not in words, or schemes, but in the mind.

—FRANCIS ANGOLD.

#### —NEXT WEEK—

#### ROME'S CHAIR OF ATHEISM

By F. A. RIDLEY



# "Weekend" Reports a Miracle

By COLIN McCALL

THE NOVEMBER 16th-20th issue of *Weekend* (which many people no doubt bought for its "demure, appealing" cover picture of Sophia Loren) contained as its "Special Report" the story of "My 30-Minute Miracle" by Margery Steven. From past experience Freethinkers well know what to expect, and it is, in fact, the mixture as before. Briefly summed up for us by *Weekend*, it is "From tragic cripple to busy housewife . . . in half an hour". Or, slightly more explanatorily: "For years her mother nursed her. Then, one morning, Margery walked again. And now, in her garden, she finds time to reflect on the wonders of life". Between killing slugs and green fly, no doubt! But why be content with even *Weekend's* summaries when the lady, Mrs. Margery Steven, 40-year-old wife of a progress planner, has told the story herself. Let us go to the original narrative—or as near as we can get through this magazine medium (it is, remember, a "Special Report", so presumably *Weekend* at least edited the autobiography).

Mrs. Steven certainly seems to get a delight out of talking about herself. She protests, of course, that she is nothing; indeed, that "Time and Margery Steven are nothing"; she is "only the instrument of God", and all the usual stuff; but she protests too much. Like all who think themselves instruments of God, she is really very conceited. And this is painfully apparent in the article. It has to be written in the first person, I know, but need we be told that when she addressed a congregation of 500 at The People's Church, Clapham Common, London, and sat on the same platform as six "well-known" ministers, "I had no notes, had never spoken in public before. Yet at the end of my story, people came up and congratulated me, not only on my recovery, but on my talk" Or, "I have always been an active person. Looking after people seems to have been my vocation"?

Now Mrs. Steven is back at work: "doing the job I love. Nursing the sick". And she is "spending every spare moment of my life telling others about it". What a bore she must be! But in this, again, she is no different from all the other egotists who feel compelled to tell the world (if it will listen) that they were physical and/or spiritual invalids until they were specially healed by God and/or Jesus Christ. And, like them, she never questions the methods of a deity who paralyses and partially blinds a person for 5½ years, then miraculously cures her.

Of the alleged "miracle", there is little that can be said. The "evidence" in *Weekend* consists of two photographs, with the commentary included in my first paragraph. The first picture shows a woman in a bath chair with another woman by her side, presumably Mrs. Steven and her mother; the second has Mrs. Steven in her garden (not, I would say, reflecting on the "wonders of life" so much as posing for *Weekend's* cameraman and trying to look the "bustling radiant woman" she thinks she is). No dates are given, and there is no indication whatever (in the photograph itself) of the severity or nature of Mrs. Steven's complaint. There is also (in addition to a portrait and a picture of pilgrims at Lourdes) a small, special panel headed, "The Doctor's Verdict", which reads:

"I attended her throughout her illness; which I diagnosed as multiple sclerosis. Her condition steadily deteriorated over a period of five years until she became quite helpless. During the earlier part of the year, until July, her speech became affected also, and she was lapsing into long spells of unconsciousness.

"When I examined her the day after her recovery, I could discover no trace of this disease."

This is set in typewriter type, as though it were a facsimile of the unnamed doctor's typed statement. In fact, it can't be, because of the inverted commas. These would not appear in any original statement, but only in a quotation from an original. Such an original, may exist, but it is a pity *Weekend* didn't reproduce it instead of this. The first sentence, however, does sound genuine, and it should be noted that the doctor only says that *he* diagnosed multiple sclerosis. He makes no reference to a second or specialist opinion.

It is true Mrs. Steven says that "Specialists have been unable to reconcile a lifetime's experience with what happened to me . . .", but this is far too vague to be of value. Moreover, it immediately follows this: "My cure was not man's work. It was the work of my Creator. Doctors accept this". I think it will be agreed that a few names would not come amiss here, even if the BMA might not approve. But the purpose of doctors in relation to Mrs. Steven would seem to be to confirm her own conclusions. The quoted verdict was a mere formality for she tells us she was doing private nursing when the first symptoms attacked her, and she "knew only too well what they foretold". Her doctor ("a good friend who has given me so much encouragement") "*confirmed my belief*" (my italics).

What is lacking in Mrs. Steven's story, as with all such stories, is exact medical data. We learn (from her) that for 5½ years she was "as helpless as a baby". But is this precisely true? I have just quoted her own reference to "first symptoms" and her doctor's report that her condition "steadily deteriorated". Elsewhere, Mrs. Steven says:

At first, I became generally out of sorts. Then I lost the power of a leg. This was multiple sclerosis—the creeping paralysis for which there is no known cure. I became more and more helpless. At one stage I had to give up the child's plastic feeding bowl from which I fed myself and let my mother spoon-feed me.

From which I conclude that she can't have been "helpless as a baby" all the time. How vague it is, though. We don't know when she lost the power of her leg; we don't know whether the inability to feed herself persisted or was only temporary. And these things are important for, as I understand it, sclerosis can appear for variable periods and then subside, though it often leaves damage to fibres.

However, on February 4th this year, Mrs. Steven had a dream and awoke to hear God saying (in his quaintly archaic English) "Tarry a little longer", and "exactly five months to the day" after her dream the expected happened: "Suddenly, I felt a warm glow encircle my whole body", and so on. But precisely when did her friend, the unnamed doctor, examine her and diagnose multiple sclerosis (or confirm her own diagnosis)? What other opinions did he obtain; what tests were carried out? Was there any variation from time to time: any local improvement? How long before he examined her and pronounced her cured (July 5th) had he last seen her and examined her? Which other doctors had examined her both before and after the cure (and how long before and after)? Were there any conflicting opinions; any other possible diagnoses? Could it have been psychosomatic (sclerosis is a disease of the nervous system and its causes are obscure, I believe)? These are the kinds of question that need answering. In short we need a full

(Concluded on next page)



## This Believing World

A cutting from a Trinidad journal has just reached us and it proves how difficult—nay, almost impossible—it is to catch and scotch a genuine Christian lie. It turns up in all sorts of guises and is merely a variation of the death-bed “conversion” of Thomas Paine almost always depicted as screaming for a Bible for one hand, a bottle of brandy for the other, and for Jesus for the third. In the *Trinidad Guardian* we get the story transferred to Rudyard Kipling—of all people! That Kipling may not have been an ardent Christian may be true, but that when he was ill he yelled, “I want Christ—I want Christ—nothing can suffice me now but Christ!” is told only by Father Peyton; who can now join the throng of similar retailers of the same kind of Christian lies.

★

A team of American archaeologists, according to the *Daily Express*, has just found “proof” that the story of Abimelech, as related in Judges 9, 45-57, is literally true. Among his other crimes, Abimelech (we are told) “roasted” 1000 men and women alive—just 1000, neither more nor less—and slaughtered 70 of his *brothers*. The team date their “evidence” about the year 1150 BC, though the Bible gives it as “cir. 1209”; but that is a small matter. For what exactly is the proof that Abimelech did anything of the kind?

★

It appears that the team have been “sensationally successful” in their work. They have confirmed the truth of the story by unearthing “fragments of pottery” which they have analysed. Thus, the silly story is “confirmed” by a *fragment* of pottery, Judges must be true, and God’s Precious Word absolutely vindicated. Archaeologists discover traces of Ur of the Chaldees—therefore the story of Abraham in every particular must be true; or they dig round the Red Sea—therefore the Exodus must have happened. Most, if not all, of the stories in Judges are just *fiction*. Where did the writer (or writers) get his facts from?

★

Some solid Anglo-Catholic in the “*Daily Telegraph*” pointed out the other day that—more or less—one of the words strongly objected to by his fellow believers is “Protestant”. He was of course quite right. The Church of England, though ostensibly Protestant, never if it can help it uses the word. It is “Catholic”, and not Protestant and that is one reason why it prefers to have as little as possible to do with Protestant sects like Baptists or Calvinists. The Church of England is however *broadly* “Catholic”—that is, it allows a diversity of views among its members, and if they like to call themselves Protestant, they can do so.

★

All the same, the word is almost as hateful to a deeply sincere Anglo-Catholic as the “four-lettered” word given such wide publicity in a recent trial. A letter written to the *Daily Telegraph* by Lady Playfair is actually headed “Yet Another Dirty Word”. She feels that “Protestant” is fast becoming one, and asks, “Are Protestants on the run?” Well, the villagers in Gresham, Norfolk, have boycotted the services in their parish church because the rector insists on burning incense, and having statues of the Virgin and numerous crucifixes and similar High Church and Catholic ornaments all over it. A church council has had them removed, the rector has had to go, and it is hoped that “true” Protestantism will now bring back the congregation. But what a scream is all this on the question of true Christianity!

★

The religious expert of the “*Daily Telegraph*” is Dr. Matthews, Dean of St. Paul’s, and, dealing with “memorials”

he says, “the idea of a memorial is Biblical”—and this in spite of the numerous memorials which India and Egypt have left for us. However, we noticed that among the memorials mentioned in the Bible, he cites Josh. 4, 7—about twelve stones from the bed of the river Jordan being erected as “a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever”. So they must be still there for with the Lord “for ever” means for ever.

★

Dr. Matthews tells us that the greatest calamity that the Israelites could imagine was to be “forgotten by God”, and the highest blessing, “The Lord has been mindful of us”. Well, where are the memorial stones? Or does their disappearance, in spite of the fact that they were to be there for ever, prove that the Lord made a mistake?

## “WEEKEND” REPORTS A MIRACLE

(Concluded from page 387)

medical history of Mrs. Steven, and we need to have it critically examined by an expert (as Dr. D. J. West examined his *Eleven Lourdes Miracles*). And a doctor who said—as Mrs. Steven cites hers as saying—“This is God and your faith”, needs to have his diagnoses of illnesses and cures checked by someone.

As for Mrs. Steven, she obviously comes from an emotionally religious environment. She celebrated her cure by going to the piano and singing (to her speechless parents) “I clasp the Hand of Love Divine”. They in turn, after a morning’s speechlessness, found their voices at lunchtime and exclaimed “over and over again”, “God has given us back our daughter”. “Nothing from the earth did this”, were her husband’s first words when he came home. None of them, nor their doctor, seems to have been in any doubt that it was a miracle.

It came as no surprise to Mrs. Steven herself. She had never been afraid, knowing that God would cure her “in His own good time if He had a purpose” for her, and she was content to wait 25 years if need be (she tells us this twice). That He had a purpose for her could hardly be doubted because, “since I was a small girl, I have always had a sense of walking with my hand in God’s”. Mrs. Steven, in her own eyes, at any rate, is quite an important woman for, while she was ill, not only did her own vicar lead prayer services for her, but “others”—“Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Salvationists—joined in at their own churches”. “It made no difference what group they belonged to”, she continues, for “God has no labels”. But, in my irreverent way, I couldn’t help smiling when I read immediately after that she “got steadily worse”. It will be remembered that “with the aid of medicine Candide’s illness became serious”. For “medicine”, substitute “prayer” in Mrs. Steven’s case. Until July 4th, of course, when God specially chose her for his thirty-minute miracle.

So much for the tale of yet another faith cure. Not the least disservice that magazines like *Weekend* do to the cause of enlightenment is the publicising of such hopelessly vague and unsubstantiated (not to say pretentious) stories as this by Margery Steven; stories which we have no means of checking and which they apparently never bother to check or submit to experts. It is only possible to indicate the imprecision and to challenge the interpretation. This I have tried to do, not to impugn Mrs. Steven’s sincerity, but because I believe her to be misguided. The “Tears, Tempers and Tantrums” article about Miss Loren may be tripe, but it is far less harmful than “My 30-Minute Miracle”.



# THE FREETHINKER

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TELEPHONE: HOP 2717

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## Lecture Notices, Etc.

### OUTDOOR

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

London (Tower Hill).—Every Thursday, 12—2 p.m.: Messrs. J. W. BARKER and L. EBURY.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Platt Fields).—Every Sunday, 3 p.m.: MESSRS. MILLS and WOODCOCK. (Thursday lunchtimes, THE FREETHINKER on sale, Piccadilly, near Queen Victoria statue.)

Marble Arch Branch N.S.S. (Marble Arch). — Meetings every Sunday, from 4 p.m.; MESSRS. L. EBURY, J. W. BARKER, C. E. WOOD, D. TRIBE and J. P. MURACCIOLE.

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.

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square, Nottingham).—Every Friday, 1 p.m., Every Sunday, 6.30 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY

### INDOOR

Birmingham Branch NSS (Midland Institute Cinema, Paradise Street), Sunday, December 4th, 6.45 p.m.: A MURIE, "Myth in Politics".

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1), Tuesday, December 6th, 7.15 p.m.: J. HUTTON HYND, "The Relativity of Our Reasoning".

Leicester Secular Society (75 Humberstone Gate), Sunday, December 4th, 6.30 p.m.: R. HARRE, M.A., "How Far Is Theology Scientific?"

Marble Arch Branch NSS (The Carpenters' Arms, Seymour Place, Edgware Road), Sunday, December 4th, 7.15 p.m.: D. JOSEPH, "Holy Relics".

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Co-operative Educational Centre, Broad Street), Sunday, December 4th, 2.30 p.m.: REV. A. G. B. PARSONS, T.D., "The Church and Teenagers".

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1), Sunday, December 4th, 11 a.m.: W. E. SWINTON, Ph.D., "Is There A Scientific Ethic?"

Young Humanists (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1), Monday, December 5th, 7 p.m.: D. H. TRIBE, "Humanism and Politics".

## Notes and News

MR. F. A. RIDLEY'S Views and Opinions article this week calls to mind a statement from the General Secretary of the Natural Religion of Africa Mission of Aba, Nigeria, founded in 1948 and dedicated to "The God of Love, Truth, Wisdom and Justice". It appeared in the August-September issue of the American *Free Mind*, and read as follows:—

[The] Christian Religion in the form doled out to us here is no more satisfying. In fact, it makes less sense progressively. "We feel that our people need something less exotic and more universally binding among men, at least in Africa. We therefore volunteer ourselves at all risk and at all cost by Oath and Allegiance to liberate the suffering humanity especially in our Fatherland, Africa, where 80% are so chloroformed by foreign Christian Religion that there is no unity, no love and no racial feeling. " . . . At this age of capitalism where bribery is applied to support a Religion which destroys the happiness and unity of the 80% of the Africans, we therefore need the support and co-operation of our sympathisers and well-wishers in order to combat this threadbare Religion".

Mr. P. G. Roy, who first drew our attention to the statement, remarked that the part he found particularly amusing was the African censure of Christianity as not being good enough for them, even though it may be valued by white men.

NEXT WEEK will be a proud week for THE FREETHINKER, for we shall be publishing a stirring and, we believe important personal testament: the first in English by a valiant Spanish Freethinker, Gabriel Coca Medina, who escaped with his wife from his native land a few months ago and has been granted political asylum in Britain. Mr. Medina tells us in his article that he will be "passionately proud" if we publish his article, "The Spanish Tragedy", but the pride as we have said, is ours.

FREETHINKERS who visit the lovely Wye Valley will be interested to learn of an Arts and Crafts Centre at Ross-on-Wye, set up by Mr. and Mrs. Peter de la Cherois Crommelin in the Old Jail House, New Street, perhaps one of the oldest inhabited buildings in Herefordshire. Mr. Crommelin, a member of the National Secular Society, was for 21 years a Roman Catholic priest, but he left the Church in 1956 "because by that time I had become sure and certain that I had outlived my capacity to accept the authority of the Roman or any other Church. I could no longer endure the conflict between my own mind and what I was bound to assert and preach as a Catholic priest". The break meant loss of job, security and status, and he and his wife have put all they have into the Centre. We wish them every success.

A COPY OF Mr. H. Cutner's book, *A Short History of Sex Worship* (Watts & Co.) ordered from the Pioneer Press by a resident of Co. Waterford, has been seized by the Irish Customs and Excise Department at Cork, because it allegedly contravenes Section 42 of the Customs Consolidation Act, 1876. A letter of protest was sent by the Pioneer Press to the Customs and Excise Department pointing out that the book "is in no way an erotic or salacious book; it is a serious and objective factual study of an important subject, and we ask you to release the copy in question". A reply from the Irish Office of Revenue Commissioners stated that *A Short History of Sex Worship* was "made the subject of a Prohibition Order by the Censorship of Publications Board on February 13th, 1942, and its importation into this country is, therefore, prohibited".

WE HOPE THAT Mr. C. E. Wood, whose services on the National Secular Society platform at Hyde Park are so very much appreciated, will forgive us getting his initials wrong on November 11th. We mixed him up with another Marble Arch Branch member. When we heard him the other week however, he was unmistakably himself and we again say that we hope to listen to him for many years to come.

MARBLE ARCH BRANCH, which organises the indoor meetings at the Carpenters' Arms, Seymour Place, as well as the outdoor ones in Hyde Park, has arranged an interesting syllabus for the new year, but will hold no meeting on Christmas Day. At the meeting on November 20th on "Danilo Dolci's Work in Sicily", the collection was donated to the Danilo Dolci Committee, whose Secretary Mr. Robin Dixon was the speaker. All who admire Dolci, incidentally, should turn to page 391 for the first instalment of Adrian Pigott's exposure of "The Scandal of Sicily".



# Odium Theologicum

By ALAN O. SNOOK

WHAT, I ASK, is gained, when humanists expend so much time, energy and—in at least one case—temper, trying to convert Christians to a more intelligent view of life in this vale of tears? Those Christians who have lapsed into a state of indifferentism could't care less, to coin a phrase; the remainder, who stick to their tenets like barnacles, are impervious to reason.

So where do we go from here—or there. I crave the reader's indulgence whilst I give an illustration.

A regular contributor to the dear old lamented *News Chronicle*, one, Laurence Easterbrook, could, until lately be read most Saturdays with considerable enjoyment by those readers interested in the rural scene. Now Mr. Easterbrook is a farmer. He has admitted that he is not an orthodox Christian, and has, I gather, little patience with articles and creeds. However, Laurence believes in God. Perambulating his sequestered vale he sees God in nature: in the good earth; in seedtime and harvest; in trees, flowers and grass, and behind every hay-rick, barn and pig-sty.

All right. So far, so good. But when dear old Laurence belabours the reader at more than some length a protest is called for. Thus:—

Mr. Easterbrook's articles make pleasant reading, but will he please desist from seeing Deity in every blade of grass?—

ALAN O. SNOOK, Bournemouth.

Back comes the inevitable reply:—

The Deity is in every blade of grass and thank God there are people like Mr. Easterbrook who realise it. Can Mr. Alan O. Snook make a blade of grass? Or does he know any human being who can?—E. J. JENKINS, Trowbridge.

See what I mean, chaps?

And now, Dr. Billy Graham, the world's No. 1 medicine man.

Proceeding like a Roman emperor on a triumphal tour, Dr. Billy Graham delivers stern judgments in London and gracious commendations in Moscow.

Meanwhile, four of his white countrymen escape the death penalty for raping a Negress at gun and dagger point, while Negroes are executed for rape as a matter of course.

May a humble observer suggest that citizen Graham exercises his brilliant mind in cleaning up the foul moral atmosphere of God's own country—before saving the rest of us?—ALAN O. SNOOK, Bournemouth.

Unfortunately I have mislaid the reply to the above effort, which my friend the editor of the *News Chronicle* published two days later. However, I remember the gist of it. The writer earnestly requested me to listen-in to Radio Luxembourg at a certain hour, when I should hear something to my advantage from the lips of the world's cleverest mountebank, Dr. Billy Graham—though the writer did not describe the reverend doctor in those precise words.

A few days later the following appeared in the *News Chronicle* under the heading "Billy Graham climbs down":

Billy Graham yesterday climbed down on his criticism of morals in London's parks, saying: "I think Britain is one of the most moral countries in the world".

The American evangelist, returning home after a six-month tour abroad, added: "I think man is the same the world over, and what we saw in London certainly goes on in the United States and elsewhere".

Far be it from me to claim that my gunnery caused the American Wesley's volte-face. However, there 'tis.

The French revolutionaries having abolished God over a century and half ago, and Mr. Hector Hawton having given the *coup de grâce* to Christian superstition in his *Thinker's Handbook*, why, I ask, do atheists, agnostics and others outside the pale continue to waste precious time disputing

with the princes of the Church and their followers? A few, a very few modern churchmen merit our respect: Father Huddleston, Michael Scott, the late Bishop Barnes—even the versatile Dr. Soper, with his Protestant underworld, pious noises in peculiar places, and his snowballs in hell. But what of the average parson? On the rare occasions when I attend church, and listen in silent wonder to the strangely garbed figure aloof in his pulpit, certain words invariably occur to me: *Dulce est desipere in loco!*

And now to another matter.

I always read Mr. Archibald Robertson's articles with great interest, but I am beginning to feel concern for his health. Archie and I have at least one thing in common: we are both in imminent danger of an apoplectic fit every time a Christian appears on the distant horizon. Our hackles rise, and we prepare for instant battle. Alas, is it worth it? These Christians, these believers in witch-doctors and medicine-men, in brief, parsons: is it not obvious that one can make more impression on the Bastille with one's own finger nails than on the devotees of the pale Galilean? The holy forces arrayed against us are too powerful, based as they are on the crass ignorance and stupidity of the average human being. In Churchillian phrase—never were so many deceived for so long by so few.

I have been carrying on a thirty years war, single-handed, against the serried ranks of the world's believers! Against Rome, Canterbury, and the entire bench of bishops (shades of Cromwell!); against the Methodist Conference and the Congregational Union; Jehovah's Witnesses, the Salvation Army and the Plymouth Brethren; the Seventh Day Adventists and the First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Church of Christ, Scientist; the Independents, Brownists, Baptists, Quakers, Presbyterians; against Confucians, Taoists, Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, Animists, Shintoists and Jews—the lot—including the United States No. 1 glamour boy.

I admit defeat.

I suggest, with respect, that Mr. Robertson follows my example. This is my farewell appearance on the anti-superstition platform. I am sick of warmed-up cabbage—*crambe repetita!* I shall tend my garden and watch wild birds. If comrade Robertson shudders at the prospect of weeding, pruning and manuring, let him concentrate on the avian world. Here he will find more intelligence, beauty and genius than in the whole world of humanity. He will, for instance, find that a long tailed tit's nest is a work of art surpassing Salisbury Cathedral in architecture, beauty and utility. In the silence of great woods and moorlands, on the lonely shore and the high hills, far from the haunts of men—and women, especially women—will be found the peace which passeth all understanding. The wild song of the stormcock, the lovely call of the curlew, the distant cawing of rooks or the ethereal song of the nightingale—all this avian music is balm to the souls of the sick at heart, to the world-weary, and to those who desire escape from the futile welter of humanity.

Then what is man's so brittle life?—

The humming of the bees that pass!

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# The Scandal of Sicily—1

By ADRIAN PIGOTT

WHEREVER ROMAN CATHOLICISM PREDOMINATES, squalor and illiteracy generally prevail. Sicily provides a glaring example of the handicaps which the unfortunate victims of the Vatican have to endure. These conditions would not be tolerated for a single day in civilised countries, but the Roman Catholic clerics seem indifferent to the earthly sufferings of their flock. Romanist clergy live in comfortable conditions ("I'm all right Jack!"), and they tell their unfortunate victims that all will be well in the "next world"—if they meekly obey Holy Mother Church.

There is no excuse whatever for the poverty and distress of the unlucky Sicilians, whose island has a good geographical position and is reasonably fertile. Under the Caesars, Sicily flourished and culture abounded. In pleasant contrast, in nearby Malta there are today none of the degradations experienced by the unfortunate Sicilians who, cut off from the outside world, fall an easy prey to the superstition and ignorance purveyed by priestcraft—and suffer from chronic unemployment, appalling destitution and a high incidence of crime and disease.

In 1958 a panel of British visitors (which included Aldous Huxley), came to the island to investigate. Among their actions, they used to put elementary general knowledge questions to the Sicilians whom they met casually in the streets or parks or on farms. Here are some of the ludicrous answers they received:—

"The King of Italy lives in Rome"

(He had been removed 12 years previously).

"Mussolini rules over Italy"

(He had been removed 14 years previously).

"Winston Churchill is a sort of tomato"; Germany won the war"; "Anthony Eden is the King of Egypt"; "United States is an island near England".

The Church does not encourage education, knowing full well that, if its poor dupes in Sicily or Latin America should become literate, this would mean disaster to the Vatican. The astute Italian Cardinals have never forgotten the lesson of the revival of Learning 450 years ago, which contributed to the Reformation; and the Vatican cannot afford to have a repetition of this disaster.

The visiting panel inspected some of the slums of Palermo, the capital, and Mr. Huxley said he considered that they were as terrible as those he had seen in Cairo or Calcutta. The streets are narrow, and contain many dark alley-ways only a yard wide. Smells and flies abound, and civilised standards of health and decency simply do not exist. The British visitors saw a naked child squat down and relieve nature in an alley, passing a long tape-worm in the process.

The panel examined three slum colonies in Palermo, and interviewed the inmates.

In the first one the following dreadful facts were revealed—Number of rooms 91; Lavatories 1; Rooms with a water tap 14; Rooms with electric light 49; Persons accommodated 576. It follows that 90 rooms had no other form of sanitation than a communal bucket: or else the people use the open drain which runs through the alley. ("But the nicer men go to the railway line" was the pathetic remark made by one poor simple woman who was questioned by the panel.) At night, the children sleep on the floor on rugs, mats and bundles of rags. Cockroaches, bugs and fleas are very much in evidence and they contribute towards the spreading of disease. (Over half the children have internal parasites.) The average number of persons per room is six, and one tiny room

accommodated three married couples. Of the 91 floors, 79 were of cracked tiles, 2 of earth and only 19 were in good condition.

In the second area which the panel examined, they found the following appalling conditions—Number of rooms 31 (4 had no windows; 8 had a mere slit in the walls; 1 overlooked a heap of human excrement on the railway lines). Families accommodated 35; Persons accommodated 144; Lavatories 0; Rooms with a water tap 0; Rooms with electric light 11.

Only three married couples were literate in this miserable colony and the majority of the children did not attend school, but remained all day exposed to the filth and contamination of their disgusting surroundings. 12% of the inmates had some form of T.B., 10% of them have had typhus.

Slum area number 3 produced even more shocking results.

Number of homes 100; Rooms 100; Families accommodated 115; Lavatories 0 (!); Water taps 18; Rooms in decent condition 13; Average persons in a room 7; 17 rooms had 8 inmates; 6 rooms had 13 inmates. And one unusually ghastly one had as many as 17!

Just try to imagine the dreadful scenes and noises which must be going on in this hell-upon-earth. In one corner, a person may be dying, in another corner a baby may be being born into this Tale of Misery. (One baby in eleven dies at birth in Palermo.) The noises of crying children mingled with the sighs and groans of the diseased—amid the bedlam of a dozen Italians shouting to make themselves heard in the chaos. The smells of cookery mix with the stench of the sanitary buckets. Some of the adults are quarrelling and arguing before the children in this confined space. (This accounts for the fact that many Palermo children are quite foul-mouthed at the age of 10.) Other adults are on the floor among the cockroaches, unashamedly making love in varying degrees of intensity—also in full view of the children.

The witches in *Macbeth* used to "hover through the foul and filthy air", but far stronger adjectives have to be applied to the atmosphere prevailing in this Sicilian inferno of disease and disgrace.

To add to the irony of the position, there is a grandiose church nearby, whose bells intrude their noise upon the 17 unfortunates who share this disgraceful apartment. In our civilised country an average moderately placed family (consisting of father, mother and two children) occupy a home with probably 4 or 5 rooms and certainly a lavatory. In Palermo *eight persons living in a single room is commonplace*. The large number of churches which abound seem to be very poor compensation.

In this disgraceful area, the panel found that 30% of the men are constantly in and out of prison. ("When the children cry for food, we are driven to go out to steal") was a remark made to the panel by an unemployed father.) In addition to the usual parasitic diseases there have recently occurred in this tenement 7 cases of meningitis; 42 cases of typhus; 105 cases of T.B. Only 13 of the married couples are literate.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

## THE EXODUS

I do not propose taking up more of your valuable space by jiggling with Mr. Morrell around his ever-shifting arguments; what had to be said, has been stated already time and time again. If his main contention is the possibility of a grain of truth in the story of Exodus, then I have dealt with this too. If in 99 parts of water there is one part of alcohol, this for all practical purposes is water (or fiction) and not brandy (or reality). Ergo, our story must not be taught and taken as a landmark in ancient history. *Quod erat demonstrandum.* P. G. ROY.

[This subject has perhaps taken up enough of our "valuable space" and we therefore close it.—Ed.]

## EXAMPLES PLEASE

Mr. L. C. Warren (25/11/60) says that "some Insurance policies offer them [Christian Scientists] particularly favourable terms in similar fashion to Vegetarians". I have never come across this in the case of either Christian Scientists or Vegetarians. Will Mr. Warren please give us examples? B. M. STANGER.

## NOT WELLS

In THE FREETHINKER dated October 14th, Mr. Nicholas Toon credits H. G. Wells with the lines, "I have warmed my hands at the fire of life, and am ready to depart". In the November 18th issue, that painstaking writer Mr. G. I. Bennett, quoting

## Christmas Cards

In response to many requests, we are offering two kinds of Christmas cards for sale, one of which is illustrated below. The size is 5" x 4" when folded, and it is printed in red and green. The greeting inside reads "Here's Wishing You a Helluva Good Time". The price together with envelopes and post paid to your address is 6/- per dozen. A second design, price 5/- per dozen, was illustrated last week.

Please order from *The Freethinker* office as soon as possible as supplies are limited.



Warmest  
Greetings

Mr. Toon, repeats them.

The quotation is incomplete, and H. G. Wells was not the author. It should read: "I warmed both hands before the fire of life; it sinks, and I am ready to depart", and it is part of lines written by Walter Savage Landor. H. IRVING.

## CURIOSITIES

Mr. F. A. Ridley's "Freethought in an Age of Conformity" is thought-provoking and valuable, but it contains some curiosities, e.g. "It appears to be an historic law that every age recoils sharply against the influence of its immediate predecessor". This is a completely valueless generalisation, as anyone who tries to define an "age" will see. Earlier Mr. Ridley has spoken of "the precise era between 1789 and 1914", suggesting that he measures history by wars and revolutions, but the most noticeable feature of history, indeed of human evolution as a whole is that it is not precise. We divide it up to suit our own convenience—and prejudices—but the process is continuous. *Process, note, not progress.* ROBERT DENT.

## HAPPY UNBELIEVERS

I have been enjoying the correspondence between Mrs. Ebury and Father Paris. But one passage from Father Paris's letter in your paper of November 18th stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb.

"I think it is impossible to find happiness in 'a purposeless, wasteful, painful universe'. So mankind is doomed to failure and despair—. We are, therefore, in a universe where only idiots can possibly be happy, where ignorance is bliss."

Come, Father, are you so out of touch with life that you have never met a happy unbeliever? Have you not met a happy man who is an unbeliever and yet no idiot? Do you not know that there are millions of men and women who live happy lives, unconcerned with the reason for the existence of the Cosmos? I have met some of them, if you have not; people of intelligence, whose happiness comes from loving and tending to the needs of their families, yet who care not whether Jehovah, Allah, Zeus or blind Chance created the Universe. Are they idiots because they are happy through doing what they consider to be their duty? Happiness is a state of mind, which can be achieved in a hundred ways, without bothering about the "purpose" of existence. I know Atheists who are the happiest of men; I know Christians who are the most miserable

If this is your teaching, I pity your flock. H. A. ROGERSON.

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