

# The Freethinker

Volume LXXXII—No. 4

Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

Price Sixpence

SOME YEARS BACK I reviewed in these columns, a learned book by a Persian scholar resident in this country, on the famous Arabian philosopher, Avicenna (979-1037), *Avicenna*, by Dr. Soheil M. Afnan, published by Allen and Unwin. In this comprehensive book, Dr. Afnan not only gives both a vivid sketch of the famous Arabian philosopher's life plus a competent outline of his main ideas, but also, in what is perhaps the most interesting part of his book, traces the posthumous influence exercised by Avicenna in subsequent Muslim and Christian philosophy. As I happened to read this book again recently, I will not apologise for returning to this fascinating theme.

## The Golden Age of Islam

It is well known that Islam, the creed popularly named after its founder, the Arabian prophet and religious reformer, Muhammed (570-632 AD), made a spectacular entry into the world by a series of astonishingly rapid military conquests during the 7th century; a startling expansion to which the slow growth of Christianity during its first centuries can supply no parallel. The early Arab conquerers were illiterate barbarians who "carried the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other" in the course of building up what a modern historian has aptly termed, "a co-operative of loot". Yet parallel with its phenomenally rapid initial expansion, the world of Islam itself, underwent an astonishingly rapid metamorphosis. As a direct result of the dynamic impact of the rude but vigorous Arab conquerers upon the ancient civilisations of the Middle East, a new cosmopolitan culture soon made its appearance. This Golden Age of Islam (as it may conveniently be described) lasted for several centuries until submerged in the East by hordes of Tartar and Turkish barbarians, and in the West by the resurgence of the hardly more civilised Christian Spaniards. This Muslim civilisation which flourished between the 8th and the 13th centuries, can probably be regarded as one of the world's major civilisations. Geographically its approximate extent was from the Indus to the Pyrenees, and its major centres of culture were Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordova, the capital of Muslim Spain. In these places were developed scientific and philosophical cultures which would certainly have astonished God's Holy Prophet, Muhammed (who may very well have been illiterate) as well as the early Arab conquerers whose cultural level does not seem to have risen far above naked barbarism.

## Avicenna and Muslim Philosophy

This nominally Muslim culture actually seems to have owed more to the Pagan culture of Ancient Greece than to the religious teachings enshrined in God's Holy Word, the infallible Koran. As Dr. Afnan indicates, the scientific culture of which Avicenna was the leading representative in the East, and Averroes (c.1130-1202) in the West, was initially based upon translations, often made by the Arabian philosophers themselves, of the scientific and philosophical works of the classical Greek philosophers,

in particular, of Plato and Aristotle. Whilst still paying lip-service to the dogmas of Islam, these bold Oriental thinkers developed a liberal, even at times a rationalist, critique which entitles them to be regarded as medieval freethinkers. For whilst continuing to use theological terminology (probably for prudential reasons, since Islam is an intolerant creed which proscribes, and at times actually inflicts the punishment of death by stoning for apostasy from its tenets) as both their Muslim and Christian critics were not slow to point out, the conclusions of Avicenna and Averroes effectively undermined the essential foundations of religious faith. Following Aristotle, these

VIEWS and OPINIONS

## Islam and Arabian Philosophy

By F. A. RIDLEY

nominally Muslim thinkers taught the eternity of the material universe, as also the existence of a universal soul: propositions logically destructive of the basic dogmas of the divine creation of the world and the personal immortality of the human soul common to both Christianity and Islam. In final analysis, the basic world-outlook of the great Muslim thinkers was pantheistic, in which respect they seem to have held a very similar outlook to that of such famous later European heretics as Spinoza and Giordano Bruno. To which species of heresy they added the further enormity in that they were the proponents of a species of allegorical "higher criticism" of God's Holy Word, the infallible Koran, in which according to all orthodox Muslims, there is neither ambiguity, error, nor any possible imperfection, since Muhammed was only, so to speak, the dictaphone who recorded *verbatim*, the *ipsissima verba* pronounced by the Divine Author, Allah Himself. (n.b. It must be remembered that Muslim orthodoxy regards Islam not as the religion of the man, Muhammed, but of the Koran, the Infallible Revelation of Allah.)

## Islam and Philosophy

It will be clear from the above, even in Dr. Afnan's restrained commentary, that these great Muslim philosophers were only, if we may so express it, Muslims by courtesy. Fortunately for them, they lived and wrote in the Golden Age of Islam. Presently came other ages when Islam resumed its early hostility to secular culture and when accordingly, the works of rationalising scholars like Avicenna fell into disfavour and neglect. For several centuries past, ever since the great theologian, Al Ghazali, "The Proof of Islam" (11th century), condemned philosophy as, *ipso facto*, heretical; orthodox Muslim theology has been rigidly confined within channels of pure scholasticism where (to quote Dean Inge's *bon mot*) "there are no problems to be solved, but only authorities to be consulted". In such an intellectual climate, the encyclopedic range and bold originality of thinkers like Avicenna, are doubly suspect. Today, that brilliant chapter in the annals of both human thought and Oriental culture, is definitely closed. Avicenna, Averroes and their kind are classed today by contemporary Muslim orthodoxy amongst the heretics, rather than amongst the teachers of Islam.



Indeed, as Dr. Afnan demonstrates, Muslim (*sic*) thinkers like Avicenna had actually more influence in the Christian West than in the Muslim East. Avicenna, for example, is expressly quoted by medieval authors as unlike each other as Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer and Roger Bacon. St. Thomas indeed, wrote his famous Apologia, *Contra Gentiles* (i.e. "Against the Pagans"), mainly against Averroes, and a still surviving fresco in a Dominican church depicts the "Angelic Doctor" trampling on a prostrate Moor, conspicuous by his turban, who appears to be Averroes. Chaucer expressly quotes Avicenna as an authority on medicine while, in his *Divine Comedy*, Dante places Avicenna in Limbo amongst those noble Pagans who lived in ignorance of Christ. Later, the influence

of these Muslim heretics on the rise of secular European philosophy at the Renaissance could have been considerable. For the undeniable tendency of medieval Arabian (or Persian?) philosophy was towards Pantheism, and has not Schopenhauer classically defined Pantheism as "an easy-going way of getting rid of God"? Indeed it would probably be true to say that in what was still a basically intolerant age, Atheism first entered European thought under the (theological) *nom de plume* of Pantheism. Today, when the world-wide expansion of science is bringing the non-Christian religions such as Islam also into the firing line of intellectual scepticism, the brilliant era of medieval Muslim philosophy so vividly depicted by Dr. Afnan, acquires an almost topical interest and significance.

## The New U.S. Speaker

JOHN W. McCORMACK of Massachusetts, a Roman Catholic, was recently elected Speaker of the United States House of Representatives in place of the late Sam Rayburn. The American magazine, *Church and State* anticipated Mr. McCormack's election and in December, 1961, printed a summary of his record and his views which, it said, were "of deep concern to every citizen at this moment". That concern, we believe, should not be confined to the USA, and we are therefore reprinting the article for the benefit of our readers.

The death of House Speaker Sam Rayburn has led to speculation as to his successor. The number one candidate by virtue of his position as Majority Leader of the House is John McCormack of Massachusetts. There are significant Church-State considerations involved in the proposed selection of Mr. McCormack.

Critics of Mr. McCormack raise questions about his long pro-Catholic legislative record. He has repeatedly gone far beyond the position taken by many Roman Catholics in Congress, and has sharply disagreed with President Kennedy himself in regard to many Roman Catholic issues.

McCormack fought desperately in 1952 against a House bill that would have permanently blocked the appointment of a Vatican ambassador by denying public funds for such an official. In 1948 he endorsed on the floor of the House a bitter attack on the Supreme Court for its decision in favour of the separation of Church and State in public education in the famous McCollum case.

McCormack's eloquent arguments for "liberty" and "unity" against Communism have supported undemocratic Roman Catholic regimes such as that of Franco in Spain. In 1950 he appeared at a House hearing on the partition of Ireland and argued vigorously in favour of the absorption of Protestant Northern Ireland into the predominantly Roman Catholic Irish Republic.

Others say that Mr. McCormack's use of his position to procure special favours for his Church would tend to reduce confidence in the official. One must, they say, distinguish between the "professional" Catholic and the "amateur" Catholic. Such observers invariably cite John McCormack as a *bone fide* example of the "professional".

Rep. McCormack's most recent service to his Church was his determined battle to defeat President Kennedy's school aid bill. In this fight Mr. McCormack literally followed the bishops' line. He did his best to get Roman Catholic aid into the bill. When this failed he conspicuously dragged his feet.

Mr. McCormack became the hero of his Church when he personally sponsored and drove through Congress a

series of bills which resulted in the payment of close to \$30,000,000 in frozen Japanese assets to Roman Catholic institutions in the Philippines. The House Leader loves to point out that he has obtained money for the Protestants, too. This claim is true. In the case of HR 6586 which Mr. McCormack slipped through Congress in its waning moments on July 27th, 1956, Protestant groups got about \$30,000 while Roman Catholic groups got more than \$8 million. Archbishop Santos of Manila was so delighted that he sent a congratulatory cable. These claims had repeatedly been rejected by the War Claims Commission, yet when the McCormack bill passed they were paid anyway. There have been several rounds of Philippine grants, all of them put through by Rep. McCormack with the frank exercise of his great power in the House. Latest figures showed grants to the Roman Catholic Church of \$24, 629,934 while Protestant Churches received \$4,062,718. Now there is a bill up for some more. Mr. McCormack's name is on it.

A special little bill providing nearly \$1 million for repairs to the Pope's summer palace reportedly damaged in World War II, was engineered by Rep. McCormack. Roman Catholic hospitals have been the particular objects of Mr. McCormack's largesse with the taxpayer's money. He put through special bills providing \$4 million for Providence Hospital and \$1,590,000 for Georgetown Hospital, both Roman Catholic. Rep. McCormack always insists on pointing out that he also got better than \$4 million for Sibley, a Methodist hospital. Proposals to donate surplus property abroad to Church groups have had the strong support of Rep. McCormack as well as the National Catholic Welfare Conference.

For those and other significant services to his Church as a member of Congress, Rep. McCormack has been repeatedly honoured. Perhaps his most conspicuous decoration was awarded by Pope Pius XII in April, 1957, when Mr. McCormack was invested with the rank of Knight Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great, with Star. The award was for "civil and military" service to the Vatican. Congress passed a special act in accordance with Art. 1, Sec. 9 of The Constitution in order to permit Rep. McCormack to receive this declaration from a "foreign power". Mr. McCormack is also a member of the Order of Malta, First Class, and recipient of the Peace Medal of the Third Order of St. Francis.

Rep. McCormack is known among his colleagues as "the Archbishop" because of his devotion to his Church's interests. One veteran observer commented: "Rep. McCormack has always operated in Congress on the theory that what was good for the Catholic Church was good for the country".



# Burns the Blasphemer

By H. GEORGE FARMER

It is a circumstance of fatal import in Burns' history that at this time he became involved in the religious quarrels of his district . . . At the tables of these free-minded clergy he learned more than was needful for him.

—Thomas Carlyle.

IT IS DIFFICULT to grasp the reasons for those regrets of the "Sage of Chelsea". Henley—far more apposite—pens a more tolerant line. "Being a Scot", says the latter, Burns was instinctively a theologian; being himself, he was inevitably liberal-minded; born a peasant of genius, and therefore a natural rebel, he could not choose but quarrel with the Kirk—especially as her hand was heavy on his friends and himself". Yet one cannot wholly agree with Henley in his explanation of Burns's heresies. Burns was not "the most anti-clerical" poet of Scotland merely out of spite, as Henley would have us believe. His letters and poems reveal that his anti-clericalism and scepticism were prompted by higher motives. He ridicules the Kirk's forms, pillories the clergy, and even scoffs at some of the most sacred doctrines of Christianity, but it is never the outcome of sheer delight in poking fun at religion, for behind it all Burns had a social purpose in view. It was his contempt for the sanctimonious hypocrites who were souring the life of the country. It was the common humanity surging within his breast that cried out against what he considered to be the monstrous injustice of the creed of Calvinism.

In spite of Carlyle's talk about what Burns learned at the tables of the liberal clergy—and certainly none of the clergy known to have been his friends could carry that label—we find that the poet was fairly-well versed in the *pros* and *cons* of the question at issue. He had been schooled strictly in the former, as the religious atmosphere of his home depicted in the *Cottar's Saturday Night* so well illustrates. As for the latter—Locke, Hume, Adam Smith, Spinoza, and his own "horse sense" had taught him much.

It may be admitted that he had little use for the clergy, and that terrible line in *Tam o' Shanter*, is certainly not milk for babes:

And priests' hearts, rotten, black as muck,  
Lay stinking, vile, in every neuk.

What makes that verse so acridly pungent is that it envisages what he saw on the Communion table at Alloway Kirk on that scarifying night ride. Scan the lines in the *Jolly Beggars* if you would further learn of Burns's heterodoxy:

A fig for those by law protected:  
Liberty's a glorious feast!

Courts for cowards were erected,  
Churches built to please the priest.

How he lashes the wrangling clergy in *The Kirk's Alarm*. What wondrous commingling of fun and satire. How deliciously it wafts into the ears, except to its miserable victims. The "unco' guid"—the rigidly righteous especially on Sundays—he hounds with a nine-tailed whip:

Sae pious and sae holy,  
Y've nought to do but mark and tell

Your neebour's fauts and folly.

Vain is the hope—as Burns would say—that trusts in mercy, truth, and justice. You may practice villainy underneath your cloak so long as you "stick to sound believing".

Learn three-mile prayers, and half-mile graces,  
Wi' well-spread looves, an' lang wry faces,

Grunt up a solemn, lengthened groan,  
And damn a' parties but you own;

I'll warrant then, ye're nae deceiver,  
A steady, sturdy, staunch believer.

With what irony he limns that smug complacent religiosity, with its eye on temporal advantage, in *Holy Willie's Prayer*:

"But, Lord, remember me and mine  
Wi mercies temp'ral and divine,  
That I for gear and grace may shine,  
Excell'd by name,  
An' a' the glory shall be thine,  
Amen, Amen."

Those shafts were intended to wing the sanctimonious.

But more serious questionings were to come when Burns attacked the Calvinist creed, and its iniquitous doctrine of future punishments. The iniquity of that teaching struck the warm-blooded, living, loving, impulsive, but humane Burns like a lash. He spurned such a dogma as he would the plague, and pilloried its followers in his prelude to *Holy Willie's Prayer*:

"O Thou, wha in the heavens dost dwell,  
Wha, as it pleases best thyself,  
Sends ane to heaven, and ten to hell,  
A' for thy glory,  
And no for ony guid or ill  
They've done afore thee."

Scott dubbed that poem as "a piece of satire more exquisitely severe than any which Burns afterwards wrote".

Nor did Burns believe that the dread of future punishment had moral sanction.

The fear o' hell's a hangman's whip  
To haud the wretch in order.

The poet admitted to Allan Cunningham that "every fair, unprejudiced inquirer must in some degree be a sceptic", and at best or worst—according to the reader's particular angle—Burns can only be credited or debited with being a Deist. Yet in spite of his unbelief in the Christian Church, he once claimed—to Mrs. Dunlop—that he was a religious man. One can even accept that admission, if one accepts *religio* in the Ciceronic interpretation as "scrupulously conscientious", just as the Secularist, Rationalist, or Humanist of today might claim. "Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn" was Burns's constant plaint. He was well aware of the different value of creed and conduct when he wrote:

Ye'll get the best of moral works  
'Mang black Gentoos and Pagan Turks,  
Or hunters wild on Penotaxi  
Wha never heard of orthodoxy.

Thus his protest against the Churches with their eyes on words not deeds. Burns had a saner ethical creed:

Whatever mitigates the woes, or increases the happiness of others, this is the criterion of goodness; and whatever injures society at large, or any individual in it, this is my measure of iniquity.

There are respectable mediocrities who glibly ask, "Yes, but what about Burns's own life! Why did he not follow his own precepts?" The reply is that a grain of copper does not make gold inferior to silver. Others, too immaculate to scan their fellow man gently, lament the tragedy of his life. Yet there are calamities in even the straightest of lives, but some of the best writings, the noblest thoughts, the most heroic actions, have been forged on the anvil of the human heart. And with Burns, to have spoken direct from the heart, whether it be the tender love song or the stirring call to freedom; to have scourged hypocrites and condemned tyranny; to have become the inspiration to thousands the world over, is something to have been worth living for, tragedy or no tragedy.



## This Believing World

A correspondent to "TV Times" (January 14th) is quite sure that "in years to come" women will "take over control of the world". One of his crushing arguments is that "many churches would close if their survival were to depend on the weaker sex, man". This should give heart to all parsons and particularly to Roman priests whose most faithful sheep have been in the past women. At all events, before they take over control of the world, we find it happily intriguing to learn that it looks as if the ladies are going to form a new Party—the Women's Christian Party. All the same, we cannot help wondering if the WCP will be forced to reconvert unbelieving man?

★  
**Lady Dowding who like her husband Lord Dowding** is a Spiritualist, is greatly worried at what happens to animals in Summerland? Do they have to suffer at the hands of Christians there anything like the cruelties practised upon them here? We share these apprehensions, and have often wondered what do the spirits of the millions of birds slaughtered at Christmas to make a Christlike feast think of it all? Surely any medium with an Indian Guide could get in touch with one of the birds, and give us firsthand information?

★  
**What a splash the Roman Church has always made** of converts from the Church of England! Rarely if ever did we hear of priests leaving the sheltering arms of the Vatican, and finding peace and happiness in the broader arms of the Established Church. But the *Facts and Figures About the Church of England*, just published, gives for 1958 no fewer than 3771 Romans who were converted though, of course, the Roman Church's figures for their converts are about four times as many. This is not surprising considering the great difference between the number of Catholics and the number of Protestants in the country.

★  
**But the report sadly acknowledges the continued** downward trend of our Sunday schools. The motor car is blamed for the fact that fewer than 144 per 1000 children attended in 1959—it was 303 in 1896—and the decline is becoming more evident every year. And finally, in spite of the Welfare State and the rise in incomes everywhere, "the extent of real income of the parishes has fallen". That may well be so, but what about the real income from the investments made by the Church Commissioners? They've never had it so good!

★  
**We always like to record the work of** "a confirmed atheist" who suddenly becomes a confirmed believer in something else as soon as he meets, say, with true Christianity or true Spiritualism. Our contemporary *Psychic News* (January 6th), tells us how much of "a wave length" the brain had of a person about to die who had strong religious beliefs. The confirmed atheist (whose name alas is not given) found out it was "55 times greater than that of any transmitting station in the world". Result—the confirmed but unknown atheist is no longer a confirmed atheist—though we are not told what he is now.

★  
**Christian temperance speakers took the floor** in ITV's "About Religion"—Protestants calling the enemy "Demon Drink" while Catholic priests who have to drink wine as a "Sacrament" allowed the Demon so long as drinking is in moderation. In any case "our Lord" gave a fillip to the drinking trade by miraculously producing plenty of good wine at the wedding feast at Cana. What do Protestant temperance orators have to say to that?

## The State of the State Church

LAST WEEK, in Notes and News, we spoke of "the fundamental failure of our established Church". It is only fair to report that *The Guardian* saw things rather differently after it had examined *Facts and Figures about the Church of England*, published by the Church Information Office and enlarged and brought up to date since its first publication in 1959. "The picture which emerges", said *The Guardian* (12/1/62), "is of an institution which is slowly and unevenly recovering after a long period of decline".

The first picture which emerges for us is that *Facts and Figures* is only "slowly and unevenly" being brought up to date. For some curious reason, ordination figures are given for 1961, whereas the latest for confirmation and Church day school pupils are for 1960, for Sunday school scholars 1959, and for Easter communicants, spending on overseas missions, infant baptisms, and bellringers and organists, 1958.

However, *The Guardian* listed "the more significant changes over the last [elastic] 10 years", as follows:

### UP

Confirmations.—190,000 in 1960; 142,000 in 1950.  
 Easter communicants.—2,248,000 in 1958; 1,878,000 in 1947.  
 Ordinations.—626 in 1961, the highest figure since 1912; 411 in 1951.

Spending on overseas missions.—3.4 per cent of parochial expenditure in 1958; 3.1 in 1950, but 8.9 per cent in 1908.

### DOWN

Infant baptisms.—579 per 1,000 live births in 1958; 631 per 1,000 in 1947.

Sunday school scholars.—144 per 1,000 population aged 3-14 in 1959; 177 in 1953.

(A table suggests that the decline is inversely related to the increase in the number of motor-cars licensed.)  
 Church day pupils.—12.8 per cent of total school population in 1960; 17 per cent in 1951.

(Corresponding Roman Catholic figures are 8.1 and 7.2 per cent.)

Bellringers and organists.—42,446 and 20,083 in 1958; 46,848 and 24,898 in 1956.

It also noted an increase in the number of Roman Catholics received into the Church of England, which is referred to in *This Believing World*. Another increase, that of church contributions to £18.5 millions a year, "in real terms is apparently some two thirds of what it was in 1908".

All in all, we see no reason to alter our verdict of "fundamental failure". In short, Sunday school can't compete with the motor-car.

### NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17TH, 1962. Present: Mr. F. A. Ridley (Chair), Mrs. Ebury, Mrs. Venton, Messrs. Barker, Cleaver, Corstorphine, Ebury, McIlroy, Mills, Shannon, the Treasurer (Mr. Griffiths) and the Secretary. Apologies from Messrs. Hornibrook, Johnson and Tribe. A letter was read from the Lord Chancellor in connection with the Appeal Court's awarding custody of a 9-year-old girl to her adulterous mother rather than her father, an atheist University lecturer. It was agreed to put the matter to the National Council for Civil Liberties. Kingston Branch financial statement was before the meeting and the Branch was complimented on its work. Minutes of the last two Humanist Council meetings were presented. A Humanist Group Action circular was noted. Correspondence from South Place Ethical Society and Mr. J. Blech was also read. A Marble Arch Branch resolution was supported, calling on the Portuguese Government to implement the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its overseas territories and to take immediate steps to prepare its colonial peoples for ultimate self-determination. Annual Dinner arrangements were considered. Mr. Ebury handed over the usual £5 monthly donation to the Building Fund on behalf of North London Branch. The next meeting was fixed for Wednesday, February 14th, 1962.



# THE FREETHINKER

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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 Branches—Kingston, Marble Arch, North London: (Marble Arch), Sundays, from 4 p.m. MESSRS. L. EBURY, J. W. BARKER, C. E. WOOD, D. H. TRIBE, J. P. MURACCIOLE. (Tower Hill). Every Thursday, 12—2 p.m.: Messrs. J. W. BARKER and L. EBURY.

Manchester Branch N.S.S.. Thursday lunchtimes, THE FREETHINKER on sale, Piccadilly, near Queen Victoria Statue.

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: L. EBURY.

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 N.S.S. (Midland Institute, Paradise Street). Sunday, January 28th, 6.45 p.m.: COLIN MCCALL, "Burns and the Hypocrites".

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Tuesday, January 30th, 7.30 p.m.: Dr. D. STARK MURRAY, "Smoking is Anti-Social! Fact or Fancy?"

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate), Sunday, January 28th, 6.30 p.m.: J. BURROWS, "Does the Roman Church Persecute Today?"

Marble Arch Branch N.S.S. (The Carpenter's Arms, Scymour Place, London, W.1), Sunday, January 28th, 7.15 p.m.: H. J. BLACKHAM, "Human Potentialities".

North Staffordshire Humanist Group (The Guildhall, High Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme), Friday, January 26th, 7.15 p.m.: A Meeting.

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Co-operative Education Centre, Broad Street), Sunday, January 28th, 2.30 p.m.: JOHN PECK, "The Common Market: A New Order in Europe?"

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Sunday, January 28th, 11 a.m.: LORD CHORLEY, "Voluntary Euthanasia".

West London Ethical Society (13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W.8), Sunday, January 28th, 6.30 p.m.: D. H. TRIBE, "Ethics and the United Nations".

## Notes and News

WE WERE doubly pleased at the quashing of the nine-months' prison sentence on George Clark of the Committee of 100. Pleased that Mr. Clark had escaped a vicious sentence and pleased that the Lord Chief Justice made it clear that it is wrong for a judge to prevent a witness giving evidence for refusing to take the oath. "It was quite clear", said Lord Parker, "that the witness was entitled to affirm" (*Daily Telegraph*, 13/1/62), and his evidence had been wrongly excluded from the jury by the Chairman of the London Sessions, Mr. Reginald Seaton. The witness, Mr. Trevor Hatton, had said he wished to affirm and Mr. Seaton quite justifiably asked him why. Then, as *The Guardian* (13/1/62) reported it:

Mr. Hatton replied: "I don't believe that the Bible tells the whole truth, and would rather affirm".

Mr. Seaton: "Do you believe in the New Testament? Do you think that it tells the truth?"

Mr. Hatton: Parts of it, yes.

Mr. Seaton: Which parts?

Mr. Hatton: Well I think the Synoptic Gospels mainly are true.

Mr. Seaton (to the court usher): Give him the New Testament and he can take the oath.

Mr. Hatton: Can I not affirm?

Mr. Seaton: No, you cannot. Take the oath.

Mr. Hatton: I am an agnostic, you see.

Mr. Seaton: You have told us you believe in some of the Bible. You can take the Bible and take the oath.

Mr. Hatton: I am not sure I agree.

Mr. Seaton: Don't argue. Take the oath.

Mr. Hatton: I am not willing to take the oath.

Mr. Seaton: Very well. Stand down.

We can only assume that Mr. Seaton allowed his religious prejudices to interfere with his legal training. He can now muse on the ironic fact that this provided the grounds for Mr. Clark's successful appeal.

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THE VATICAN NEWSPAPER *Osservatore Romano* has found the noted Jesuit preacher Father Riccardo Lombardi guilty of "hasty and incorrect" judgments on the Curia and hierarchy, of whose wonderful work he has failed to give the right impression (*The Sunday Times*, 14/1/62). Father Lombardi had suggested in a recent book that this year's Ecumenical Council should take action against "careerists" in the Curia, promote clergy on the basis of personal merit, and even get rid of Curia members if their work is not up to the mark. He also wanted bishops to simplify their dress and ways of living doing without some luxury cars and palaces and becoming more "sanctifiers than administrators".

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MR. R. J. CONDON of Ilford has drawn our attention to the modification of a restrictive covenant on about an acre of land in Stoneleigh Road, Ilford, to permit the building of a Roman Catholic Church, a presbytery and a car park for 40 cars. The Lands Tribunal sanctioned the building of the Church in November, despite the objections of 29 local residents, and tribunal member Mr. M. P. Hobbs explained: "Having inspected the land and the neighbourhood, I am satisfied that provided the use is limited to that explained by Father Cooney, the parish priest of St. Augustine's, Barkingside, in evidence, modification to permit a church, a presbytery and parking for cars would not injure anybody entitled to the benefit of the restrictions" (*Ilford Recorder*, 9/11/61). The restrictions allowed only private house development. Mr. Condon further informs us that "Ilford Council will sell the land, worth £8,000 to the Brentwood Roman Catholic Diocese for £2,000". This is a matter that concerns more than 29 residents of the estate.

★

G. W. FOOTE once described Sunday school as the place where Alfred and Angelina met to read the scriptures and flirt. Now, of course, they can meet elsewhere and the Sunday schools are empty. So, too, are the churches, so the Vicar of Sturminster Marshall, Dorset, the Rev. A. W. Mandall is going back to the old formula. The girls, he realises, are the key. "If they say they are going to Evensong, the boy friends will come too". And he adds that he has no objection to couples sitting at the back of the church holding hands (*The Guardian*, 15/1/62). It sounds simple enough, and no doubt is, if you can get the girls.

★

BOUND VOLUMES OF THE FREETHINKER for 1961 will soon be available at the same price as last year, 32s. post free, and should now be reserved. A few volumes for 1959 are still available at the reduced price of 21s.



# Christianity for Children

By COLIN McCALL

THE *British Trades Alphabet*, "a journal of educational projects from industry", is published annually and supplied free to schools. It takes its name from the rather artificial arrangement of full-page advertisements in alphabetical order, which alternate with articles on subjects like "Discovering the Past" or "The Arts". There are also competitions for children and offers of wall charts for teachers. As W. R. Grant of Scarborough said when sending me the 1961 edition, "it is really advertising matter in magazine form", and "for reading the text carefully the child is rewarded with a free offering". "Fair enough!" he commented. "Business is business". But he drew my attention to a particular article "on the biggest business of the lot". It is entitled, "Getting to know God", and is by Jeremy J. Bunting.

Mr. Bunting isn't known to me, but Mr. Grant describes him as a graduate of Oxbridge. Knowing Mr. Grant, I accept this, though I wouldn't have guessed it from reading the article, which is just about the worst I came across last year; and, come to think of it, I plough through a good deal of religious rubbish in twelve months!

The first sentence types it. "Have you ever asked yourself the question . . .?" Most readers will be able to supply the remaining words, the old familiar. "Where did I come from?" If you have, says Mr. Bunting, "you will know that there is only one answer possible and that answer is 'from God'." "The only other reply that people give to this question is", he continues, "'I don't know' and that is no answer at all".

My own response would be to ask Mr. Bunting to clarify his question. To see how it needs clarifying, one only has to ask what it means. Ostensibly it is a question about place. If you ask a person where he comes from you are generally asking about his previous habitat and perhaps his birthplace. In this sense the question can be clearly interpreted and answered. Less precisely, "where?" can mean "from what source?" or "in what circumstances or condition?", and it is in this way that the child's question, "Mummy, where did I come from?" is asked—and answered with varying degrees of prevarication. Strictly speaking it is a "how" question which would be better expressed in the form, "How did I originate?" or "How did I begin?" One doesn't, of course, quibble with a child for asking the question less precisely, and as Mr. Bunting is writing for schoolchildren it might be argued that one shouldn't be too hard on him. But I can't agree. The cases are quite different. In the one, the child is seeking information: in the other, Mr. Bunting is misleading his young readers.

I don't expect him to embark on a linguistic or philosophical argument, but a little clarification such as I have suggested, would be very helpful in its immediate context and as training. Once the schoolchild appreciated that "Where did I come from?" means "How did I begin?", he would see the question more clearly. And obviously Mr. Bunting's "only possible answer" ("From God") could no longer apply, "from —" being no answer to a "how" question, but only to a "where" (place) question. Instead of giving a vague (and invalid) answer to a vague question, Mr. Bunting would be forced into precision: he would have to answer the "How did I begin?" question with: "God made you".

One sees then, how important is the phrasing of the

question. As long as Mr. Bunting retains the vagueness of "Where did I come from?", he can get away with "from God", as a vague, and sort of ultimate, answer. Once the question is more accurately rephrased, he can't do so. "God made you" as an answer to "How did I begin?", would have to be set against the biological one of mother and father, ovum and sperm. Had he been fair to his child readers, Mr. Bunting would have presented this alternative, but of course he is not. His article is not genuinely educational but propagandist; not concerned with getting to know, but getting to know God. And everything depends upon the initial wangle. "As soon as you have realised that you come from God", Mr. Bunting goes on, "you will also have answered the question 'Why am I here?'" Before long you have not only "come from God" but are also "going to" Him, and are being told that you must therefore "act upon this fact" (my italics). Coming and going from God being established (!) as a "fact", and the reader having been sufficiently softened up, Mr. Bunting now feels free to express the former more straightforwardly as "God has created you".

From then on Mr. Bunting writes as though he were as omniscient as his god. He knows that God wants "to help you to come to know Him", but "He will never force you to begin the search or to keep it up because He has too much respect for you as a person", and so on. He even tells the children that, if they don't put all their effort and enthusiasm into their religion, "God will not have the chance to help" them. (Omnipotence is evidently not an attribute of Mr. Bunting's deity.) But he assures us that, "if we carry out our part we can be certain that God will keep His promise to help men to come to know Him" (my italics).

Mr. Bunting's certainty is, in fact, the certainty of the ignorant. This perhaps explains his description of "I don't know" as "no answer at all", when in fact it is a valid answer to many questions, and one particularly to be encouraged in children. "I don't know" is the only honest answer I could give to many questions that a child might ask me, and "we don't know" is the only honest answer to many more. But it wouldn't do for a Christian advocate to admit to children that he doesn't know anything about God.

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## The Virgin Birth and Other Things

By G. I. BENNETT

THE ARTICLE BY Mrs. Eva Ebury on "The Foster Father of the Son of God" re-focuses attention on the absurdity of the Christian story. That this story is accepted at all in our day and time proves that there are a good many people who never think for themselves in what pertains to religion. Artificial insemination aside, childbirth usually means that coitus has taken place. Until recent times, no woman in this world ever conceived without the intimate sexual agency of a man. If the biblical Jesus did in fact exist, he was as much a son of two parents as any of us. The idea of a God-man cannot be entertained for one moment. No authenticated account of the birth of a God-man has ever been recorded. It is contrary to and quite outside our human experience. Who would—or could—believe a pregnant girl who said that she had been fertilised by the Holy Spirit? We should, worldly-wise, wonder who the man was. "Poor girl!" we would say. "How does she expect to get away with bluff of that sort?" Or perhaps (if she was quite sincere in her protestations that she had been with no man) we should fear for her sanity and mental balance. But we should not believe her story.

Yet the Christian faith would have us believe something even more implausible and silly. It would have us suppose that Mary and Joseph, though married, lived with each other in virginal innocence and yet had a child, the mother of whom was Mary and the father God! If Joseph was the husband of a woman called Mary, then it is only reasonable to think that he exercised the functions of a husband, and the child that came along was—let us decently hope—the product of their mutual act. But perhaps, as some freethinking stalwarts assert, the whole thing is legendary. Perhaps there never was a Joseph or a Mary. And perhaps the child Jesus was an extraordinary fabrication of the human mind. But, one way or the other, does it matter very much? A more shadowy, indefinite, ill-defined, self-contradictory figure than Jesus it would be difficult to find in the whole gamut of history. And though I am a tolerant man, happy to live and let live, I consider it incredible that there should be men and women of intelligence who can seriously say that Jesus is an inspiration to them above and beyond all others. When I think of some of the great and noble human beings, whose names are enshrined for ever in the minds and hearts of men, I wonder at the quality of this inspiration.

We hear much about the "message" of the humble Galilean, but what the message is remains a matter for conjecture still. I can, in a way, admire the idealism of those who resolutely reject all but the ethical Jesus, seeing gentleness and love in all things as characteristic of him and befitting of his contemporary followers; but I am far from sure that the Master was this kind of man. Soldiers as well as pacifists, stop-at-nothing jingoists as well as would-be world citizens, dyed-in-the-wool capitalists as well as starry-eyed socialists, blasphemers as well as men of temperate and guarded speech, sinners as well as saints, men with a code of honour and men without, have died with his name on their lips. It seems to me that there are many tickets to Heaven, and which one you choose for yourself is entirely a matter of temperament and predilection.

Few there are, now, who believe in fire and brimstone; and that is one reason why the eschatological Jesus is becoming less and less popular. On the other hand, the

"gentle Jesus, meek and mild" is an emasculated conception; and he who can draw from it the imperative to "love all men" is, in trying to act upon it, imposing on himself a task impossible. Not all our fellows are lovable, or worthy of love. The most we can do is to meet all men in a spirit of good will, which our greater knowledge of them will subsequently enhance or diminish and perhaps extinguish. In all the wide world, though we may like many people in varying degrees, it is probable that we shall never love—really love—more than very few. This is as it should be. But aside from all controversy and all theology, the Golden Rule holds good. Never treat another as you would not be treated yourself. The world would be a much lovelier place if everyone sought to practise that high principle of living.

## The Retreat of Faith

By DENIS WATKINS

RELIGIOUS APOLOGISTS are desperately defending their faith, and the Roman Catholic Church has, in fact, appointed a priest to make a special study of atheism. Defence of religion is now mainly confined to metaphysics, which is quite a change from some of the methods followed in the past. For the first two hundred years, Christians pleaded for toleration because, they argued, belief was a personal experience and could not be enforced from without. Following the conversion of Constantine and the subsequent increase in their power, their attitude changed: everyone must, for his own sake, be forced to believe. Individual goodness, without religion, counted for nothing; a heretic was the worst kind of wrong-doer, and human-inflicted tortures, no matter how terrible, were preferable to his dying unrepentant and suffering everlasting torture. In the mid-thirteenth century, Pope Gregory helped the would-be converters by establishing the Inquisition; free inquiry was stifled.

The Renaissance was a gleam of hope. Schisms appeared in the monolithic structure of the Roman Church, and attacks were made on the sale of indulgences: the equivalent of selling an unlimited amount of nothing to gullible buyers. And the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, stoutly defended by the Church, collapsed before Copernicus and Galileo, despite condemnation and "recantations". In the eighteenth century, however, religion began to feel the real force of sceptical thought. The clergy acted quickly against unorthodox thinkers, and many an honest man suffered under the blasphemy laws, but the tide was turning. Men were escaping from the prevalent ignorance and superstition, though the openly critical remained vulnerable. Thomas Woolston, a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, was prosecuted for criticising the miracles of Jesus, and a severe fine was imposed by the court. Woolston, unable to pay, went to prison where he remained till he died. In France, Voltaire used his superb literary ability to attack the Church and its viciousness; his defence of the unfortunate Calas family became a *cause célèbre*. Jean Calas, a Huguenot, was accused of the murder of his son who had, in fact, committed suicide. As a result Calas, the victim of religious fanaticism was broken on the wheel, his arms, legs and hips smashed, and after two hours of agony he was finally killed by strangulation as an act of Christian mercy. As Voltaire said, "People who believe absurdities commit atrocities".

Thomas Paine, in *The Age of Reason*, committed the crime of providing an anti-religious book which could be understood by the ordinary people. While unbelief was



not uncommon among the upper classes, it was a different matter when the masses were incited to abandon the faith. Religion had long been regarded as a necessary tool of governments, and the ruling classes encouraged doctrines preaching the virtues of poverty and meekness as a means to earn heavenly reward. Without the promise of heaven, people might seek a more equitable division of the goods of this world. The developing sciences undermined religious authority and propagandists like Bradlaugh and Holyoake fearlessly attacked Christianity. They succeeded in stimulating people to think rather than to accept blindly, to demand rights from men rather than beg indulgences from God.

Today, atheism and agnosticism are so widespread that the Churches are faced with searching questions to an extent never before experienced. The rising level of education means that steadily increasing numbers of people are able to understand the works of the great Freethinkers. It is no longer sufficient for someone to mention God in order to create passive deference in an audience. Instead, the religious person in general company may be confronted with questions which he is unable to answer satisfactorily; challenged with ideas which are common currency among non-believers, Church leaders use popular means to reinforce the faith. Religious radio and television programmes adopt a broad-minded approach suggesting that the Church has nothing to fear from full inquiry into its doctrines and activities. At the same time care is taken to hand-pick the questioners and the broadmindedness does not extend to open argument with atheists. Until it does, protestations that the Church can deal satisfactorily with criticism cannot carry much weight. When books are published on questions which Christians may be called upon to answer, the questions are often so much more telling than the answers that the faith of any thinking person is not likely to be strengthened.

In fact, the history of religion is shameful; its beliefs absurd; and its position indefensible. In the light of modern thought religious arguments are so laboured that they impress only the most naive. Reason is advancing, and faith, ill-equipped to stand against it, is forced to retreat. Someone has truly said that if believers compromise much more, atheists will have no further points on which to take issue with them. The position is approaching where an exhortation to believe blindly, regardless of reason or logic, will be the only attitude left for the priests. Such a standpoint will be hopeless but the clergy should not complain. Two thousand years is a long enough time for any hoax.

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ANDREW MENICK,  
19831 Enadia Way, Canoga Park,  
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### PRIZE ESSAY

The Marx Memorial Library is offering a prize of £5 in books for the best essay on "Marxism and the Individual" to be submitted by March 14th, 1962. The essay, which should show

some knowledge of Marxist writing on the subject, should not exceed 800 words, and should be written or typed on one side of the page only. In judging the entries, the committee will be guided less by their literary merit than by the understanding and development of Marxist principles displayed.

ANDREW ROTHSTEIN, Marx Memorial Library,  
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### IMMIGRANTS

I am rather concerned about the increasing number of causes your paper has adopted during the past year, so much that almost any issue now I expect to read that THE FREETHINKER intends to support the Labour Party in the coming Spring elections.

One of these causes, the support of more and more coloured immigration is obviously inconsistent with your age-long campaign against the high Catholic birth rate.

The latter may be high judged by European standards but is surely dwarfed by that of the Afro-Asian peoples whose entry you want to encourage.

Also, it is more than likely that the social problems created by two peoples of vastly different breeding habits would be a greater threat than the Roman Catholic Church is to the promotion of freethought.

R. BOSSOMAIER.

[The General Secretary of the National Secular Society writes: *In protesting against the Immigrants Bill the Executive Committee of the NSS was not unaware of social problems arising from immigration, white or coloured. It opposed the Government Bill principally on grounds of its racialism—Ed.*]

### HOLY MEN

Jesus and his disciples, according to the Book, were parasites on society. As they went from place to place they secured bed and board, wherever possible, by coercion and threats of future destruction (Matt. 10, 13-15). They posed as holy men! Men who knew the will of God! They started a fashion and holy men through the centuries victimised the people.

N. E. S. WEST (USA)

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