

The Freethinker

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Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

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WE RECENTLY LEARNED that the projected Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church called by Pope John XXIII, is due to meet on October 11th of this year. In ecclesiastical theory, this 1962 Council is not a new one, for its historic predecessor, the famous Vatican Council of 1869-1870, was never legally terminated but only officially prorogued on account of the virtual impossibility of continuing it in the Autumn of 1870 when the army of the newly-formed State of Italy forcibly occupied Rome and abolished the temporal power of the Papacy. In Vatican chronology, the forthcoming Vatican Council merely represents the continuation postponed by *force majeure* in 1870 of the original Vatican Council. It may be of interest to recall the actual procedure of that famous ecclesiastical gathering.

The Vatican Council 1869-70

Officially, the original Vatican Council sat (or talked) from December 8th, 1869, on which date it was formally opened by Pope Pius IX (1846-78) until the arrival of the Italian army of the anticlerical (though Catholic) House of Savoy at the gates of Rome in September 1870. Throughout this fairly lengthy period, the Council, which consisted of all Catholic bishops from all over the world, considered a wide variety of subjects, chiefly theological in character; but one subject stood out in particular, both in the measure of contemporary publicity which it received and in its practical importance for the future. This was the famous Dogma of Papal Infallibility which after long and particularly bitter controversy both inside the Council and in the outside world, was finally voted with only two dissenting voices, on July 18th, 1870. In returning to the study of this celebrated General Council, the first of its kind to be held since the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century, we are very fortunate to possess numerous contemporary accounts written from various points of view. Perhaps the most famous pen stirred into action by the heated controversies over Papal Infallibility was that of the devout Christian of the High Anglican persuasion, the famous Liberal statesman and four times Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone, who wrote a pamphlet in the course of which he declared that, in the light of the newly-proclaimed Dogma of Papal Infallibility, none of Queen Victoria's Catholic subjects could henceforth be trusted to observe their oath of allegiance to a Protestant monarch! However, perhaps the most valuable, as it certainly makes the most intriguing reading, is a day-by-day account of the proceedings of the Council published in 1873 under the *nom-de-plume* of "Pomponio Leto". (The original Pomponio Leto was a critical Italian scholar of the era of the Renaissance). It is clear from almost every page of the author's comprehensive volume that he was not only himself an active participant in the actual discussions inside the Council chamber, but was very much in the know when it came to recounting and to assessing the backstairs intrigues and behind the scenes

clerical manoeuvres by means of which the proponents of Papal Infallibility, in particular Archbishop (later Cardinal) Manning of Westminster (currently described as "The Devil of the Council") and the Jesuits (always the arch-champions of the Papacy), eventually succeeded in carrying through the famous dogma. Henceforth, the unique prerogative of infallibility was transferred from the General Council to which alone it had hitherto been regarded as belonging, to the Pope as such, independent of the Council. "Pomponio Leto", who was obviously a bitter, as well as a highly intelligent critic of the projected dogma, gives his readers an account as exhaustive as it is fascinating.

of the web of Tammany Hall-like manoeuvres by the agency of which it was finally decided that the individual Pope was thereafter and to all eternity the unique (as it were) transmitter through whose infallible agency the Holy Spirit alone addressed the human species upon this planet.

We doubt if any other ecclesiastical assembly has ever possessed so well-informed and lively a reporter as "Pomponio Leto". My own copy of this now probably rare volume bears no clue as to the personal identity of its so obviously well-informed author. However, the only copy of the English translation made in 1876 (and published by John Murray) now extant in the Library of the British Museum, includes a hand-written note that the author's real name was the Marquis Francesco Nobilivitelleschi, and adds the interesting piece of information that "Pomponio Leto" was included in the *Index Expurgatorius* on June 19th, 1876. The author is thus disclosed as a high official of the then Papal Court, who had immediate access to all the official—as well as apparently to most of the unofficial—transactions of the Council. (cf. "Pomponio Leto", *Eight Months at Rome during the Vatican Council, 1876.*)

Papal Infallibility

"Pomponio Leto" demonstrates with a wealth of factual detail, Papal Infallibility was eventually obtained by the Pope and his Jesuit-led supporters by means of a network of shady intrigues off-stage, which eventually prevailed over the more intellectual opposition of the ablest (chiefly French and German) Catholic scholars of the period, as well as over what had been up to that time, the unanimous teaching of the Catholic Church; viz. that the collective will of the Church as expressed in and by the Bishops assembled in a General Council, was superior to that of any individual within the Church. The Pope was only *Primus inter pares* amongst the Bishops and as such acted as President of the Council. Indeed, had not the famous German scholar, Adam Mohler gone on record with the—on Catholic principles—irrefutable remark that Papal Infallibility represented the quintessence of Protestantism? The (private) judgments of the Pope would then supersede the collective judgment of the Catholic Church! However, as "Pomponio Leto" effectively demonstrates,

— VIEWS and OPINIONS —

The First Vatican Council (1869-70)

By F. A. RIDLEY

the Papal big battalions of backwoods' bishops rode roughshod over both logic and learning. The chief result of the (First) Vatican Council was to create the first really totalitarian dictatorship of modern times; the first one to be entirely freed from any kind of constitutional limitation or restraint. In which precise connection it is relevant to note that however much publicity the forthcoming Vatican Council may get (and no doubt it will get a great deal) it can only be a kind of glorified ecclesiastical rubber stamp for the infallible decrees of Pope John. For surely no conceivable number of fallible voters at a council can adequately weigh against the one infallible Pope. What

the First Vatican Council (1869-70) actually did when viewed in historical perspective was to establish the *Fuhrer-prinzip* (in modern Fascist terminology): the unchallenged and unlimited authority of the elected leader, whether Pope, Fuhrer or Duce. When considered from this standpoint, the Vatican Council of 1870, along with its Dogma of Papal Infallibility, represented the birthplace of Fascism, of which the Jesuits were the effective pioneers and the Papal Dictatorship created in 1870, the most complete and absolute manifestation yet known. For Hitlers and Mussolinis come and go, but the Black International is still here!

A Note On Nazareth

READER C. A. MORRISON writes, "Would Mr. Cutner elaborate sometime on his statement that 'Outside the Gospels, there is literally no record of Nazareth anywhere'? Many think there was such a geographical and historical place and it was the home of Joseph and Mary". I am quite sure that "many think" all sorts of things in the Gospels are true, and it has been the work of Freethought in the past to make them think again.

Whether or not there was a Nazareth is a question of evidence, and the best and fullest article I know on the subject is that in the *Encyclopedia Biblica* written by one of the foremost scholars in the Church of England at the beginning of this century, Canon T. K. Cheyne. It is packed with his careful examination in detail of the evidence, and he shows that "No such town as Nazareth is mentioned in the OT, in Josephus, or in the Talmud". The modern "Nazareth" is called by the natives there "En-Nazira", and Cheyne says that "whether the earlier city occupied the same site is doubtful". In fact, Cheyne asks, "Was Nazareth originally the name of a town (or village) at all?" and he points out that "There are two NT passages which may well suggest a doubt". Mr. Morrison should read the whole article for details—it is far too long to quote here.

In any case, Cheyne claims that the true meaning of the word Nazareth "can hardly be made out". So I will give here one explanation from Dr. Milton Woolley's *The Career of Jesus Christ* (1877), a work based entirely on the Sun Myth Theory. He says of the word *Nazareth*, in claiming that it means the Zodiac,

That I am correct here let me refer the learned reader to Job 38, 32, where he will find *Mazaroth* translated "the twelve signs". . . . Both Gesenius and Fuerst agree upon the root. It is *Nazar*, the "m" being changed to "n", which is allowable in Hebrew . . . *Nazareth* then is the same as *Mazaroth* . . . the idea of their identity, I claim is original with me.

Readers should never forget that the *EB* in its article on "Names" claims that most, if not all, names in the Bible were "made up". This of course refers to the Greek and the Hebrew, not necessarily to our English translations. Personally, I agree with Dr. Woolley on the word *Nazareth*. I consider "the home of Mary and Joseph" to be nothing but a literary expression—no matter what "some think"—and that Mary and Joseph are "myths".

H. CUTNER.

WITHOUT COMMENT

Explaining the choirboys' absence, the Vicar, the Rev. W. Fifield, told the congregation: "This is one of the unfortunate consequences of television. Recently there was a television play in which choirboys went on strike".—*The Guardian* (12/3/62).

Translated by Nan Flanagan

WHEN I WAS IN LEIRIA, a beautiful Portuguese town, visitors were no longer allowed to visit the sacristy of the cathedral. This sacristy is the scene of an incident in a novel by Eça de Queiroz in which a priest dresses up his mistress in a cloak belonging to a statue of the Virgin. The novel, *The Sin of Father Amaro*, first appeared in Portugal in 1874; and, subsequently, educated tourists asked to be shown the sacristy. The priests were delighted at the visitors' interests, until they realised the true reason for their curiosity. Once the priests had had their attention drawn to the novel, they decided that the sacristy must no longer exist as far as outsiders are concerned!

But if the sacristy is shut, the book remains an open book; and it is now available to English readers, published by Max Reinhardt at 18s. in the most lively translation by Nan Flanagan.

The story is packed with lush-living clerics who appreciate dishes which are so fine they "might have been cooked in Holy water". Very soon one realises that when any crime is committed in the town, all one has to do is "cherchez la soutane". The young Amaro, to no surprise of his clerical colleagues, seduces a girl by telling her that white roses will spring up spontaneously from her grave as a celestial proof that a girl's virginity is not damaged by a priest's saintly arms. The girl becomes pregnant, and the priest arranges for the child to be strangled ("One more little angel for the heavenly choir"). The mother dies of a broken heart, and the priest is free to continue his ministrations to the ridiculous scruples of ridiculous old ladies who are experts at making paper frills for cakes. Amaro is also free to look around for another young lady who wants some more excitement than a perpetual contemplation of the toilette in which she should enter paradise.

It sounds crude, but the whole point of the book is the wonderful crudity of exuberance that simply lashes out with unmitigated gusto. It sweeps one along; and, in spite of all the grotesques, it always convinces one of the real basis for caricature and the real life of the Portuguese town where the Church would bring back the world to the darkness of the middle ages.

This book, then, really is—a god-almighty joke. Yes, it deserves to be the best-seller on the index!

OSWELL BLAKESTON.

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Connecticut Birth Control Laws

By COLIN McCALL

"I THINK THAT A Planned Parenthood Center is like a house of prostitution." That is the view of the public-spirited inhabitant of West Haven, Connecticut, USA, who was responsible for invoking the notorious Connecticut birth control laws when a birth control clinic was opened in New Haven by the Planned Parenthood League. He is James G. Morris, aged 42, father of five children and—need I add?—a Roman Catholic. He believes that the Center "is against the natural law, which says marital relations are for procreation and not entertainment"; he knows that it is against the state law, and he thinks that the state law is a good law (no doubt because it agrees with the "natural" law) which should be enforced. When the clinic was opened and no one else acted against it, he did, and he declares that "Every time they try to open a birth control clinic, I will force its closing, as long as the law is on the books".

It is just possible, though, that the laws won't be on the books very much longer. The clinic was, in fact, opened as a deliberate challenge to them, and Mr. Morris did precisely what Executive Director Mrs. Estelle T. Griswold and Medical Director Dr. C. Lee Buxton wanted, when he stirred the authorities into action. And it is perhaps significant that two American Roman Catholic papers, *Ave Maria* (a publication of the Congregation of the Holy Cross) and *The Sign* (published by the Passionist Fathers) have recently argued that a Catholic could favour repeal of the birth control laws in Connecticut and Massachusetts. "The fact that contraception is contrary to natural law", said *The Sign*, "is not in itself an argument for banning it by law. It is not the function of the state to prevent all evil or seek all good, but only to act in matters that affect the general welfare". The dubious reasoning need not concern us: it is the conclusion that is important.

The illustrated magazine, *Look* (January 30th, 1962) contained an article by Senior Editor Gereon Zimmermann on "Contraception and Commotion in Connecticut", to which I am indebted for most of my facts, including these details of the laws. Section 53-32, General Statutes of Connecticut, Revision of 1958 reads: "Use of drugs or instruments to prevent contraception. Any person who uses any drug, medicinal article or instrument for the purpose of preventing contraception shall be fined not less than fifty dollars or imprisoned not less than sixty days nor more than one year or be both fined and imprisoned". Then there is the accessories statute, Section 54-196, Revision of 1958: "Any person who assists, abets, counsels, causes, hires or commands another to commit any offense may be prosecuted and punished as if he were the principal offender".

"The law is so sweeping that it is unenforceable", says Mr. Zimmermann. "Consequently, any adult can buy a contraceptive in a drugstore almost anywhere in Connecticut without fear of arrest. Many doctors prescribe and fit their patients with contraceptive devices; their only inhibition is their knowledge that they are violating the law". And in the American Catholic weekly, *The Commonweal* (January 26th, 1962), Managing Editor James O'Gara tried to imagine how the *Look* article would strike him if he were not a Catholic (presumably the January 30th issue of *Look* was available before the 26th when *The Commonweal* appeared). Everyone concerned in the matter says that Catholic influence is prim-

arily what keeps the laws from being repealed, says Mr. O'Gara. "And why this should be so remains a mystery to me and to many other Catholics", he adds naively.

I have no doubt that he is sincere when he argues that "Catholic thinkers do not say that everything we believe to be immoral should therefore be a crime. Why then the determination to keep on the statute books laws which reflect more of a Protestant than a Catholic approach to morality and public law?" Or when he dismisses the argument that assent to repeal of the laws by Catholic leaders would give the impression that their official position on contraception had changed. I believe him when he says: "To me, as one Catholic, the Connecticut law is particularly odious, since it makes a crime of not only the dissemination but the use of contraceptive material. To put it bluntly, I want to keep the state out of the bedroom".

But Mr. O'Gara must be aware that his Church has an unequalled record for intolerance; that its motto has only been "live and let live" when circumstances permitted no other. And when he says that "The Catholic position on artificial contraception will never be popular", he must know that its unpopularity is not confined to non-Catholics; that, in fact, many Catholics defy it. If he doesn't, certainly many Roman Catholic leaders do. As "C.P." of Preston, Lancashire, admitted in a letter to the *Sunday Pictorial* (February 4th, 1962) which has already been reproduced in these columns (February 16th, 1962): "I practise birth control. And I reckon at least 90 per cent of Catholics do the same".

It doesn't matter whether the figure of 90 per cent is correct (obviously it can only be an estimate), the point is that many Catholics do use contraceptives, against the specific teaching of their Church. Mrs. James G. Morris may be content to spend her life and energy having and looking after children; having intercourse only for "procreation and not entertainment" (to use her husband's expression), but more and more Roman Catholic wives are rightly rebelling against this celibate-devised ruling that "if I can't enjoy sex then I shall see that you don't either". Mr. O'Gara wants to keep the state out of the bedroom. Today, for the first time in history, the priest is being kept out of the (Catholic) bedroom. And, as his frequent fulminations show, he isn't taking kindly to banishment from territory he had come to regard as rather specially his own. In these circumstances, the average lay priest is likely to favour retention of the laws that prevent open dissemination of birth control knowledge.

But, as I have indicated, more liberal—and foresighted—Roman Catholic opinion is for a repeal of the laws. As *Ave Maria* put it: "We would not say that the state never can pass laws such as this, but that it can be done only for the gravest of reasons and when the acts outlawed are manifestly against the common good. Error has no rights, it is true, but persons—or consciences—in error do. From these considerations, we feel that a Catholic can justifiably favour repeal of the contraceptive laws in Connecticut and Massachusetts or breathe happily if they are declared unconstitutional . . ." And the less erudite can always be reminded that the 1879 laws were not Catholic, but Protestant inspired—a legacy of Congregationalist Anthony Comstock, a "Savanarola with muttonchop whiskers", as Mr. Zimmermann vividly
(Concluded on next page)

This Believing World

The "self-sacrifices" one must make for Jesus during Lent have been attacked by the Rev. L. Matthews, Vicar of Copt Oak, Leicestershire, in his parish magazine. "Is it worth while" he asks, "giving up smoking and contracting a fearful bad temper so that you snarl at your wife, kick the cat up the chimney, and frighten the office boy to death?" For Jesus's sake of course it is. At least it always has been until even parsons are beginning to find that Lent is as foolish as fasting on Fridays. Were not the pleasures of flagellation and hair shirts once religiously endured by many pious Christians during Lent? And who indulges in these things today?

★

The latest cure for the deadly apathy which is immobilising so much true Christianity these days is suggested by the Rev. A. Hellicar, vicar of St. Mary Magdalene, Enfield. He wants—according to the London *Evening News* (March 1st), "teams of mobile clergy" responsible for "combined operations" who will soon bring the Message of Christ to the people. But as he admits there is an "acute shortage" of man power in the Church of England, how can he recruit these teams? This acute shortage of parsons and priests in the Churches is due to one thing. The Churches are being *found out*. Few young men in our scientific age can be made to believe in the Devils, Hell, and Angels, which make religion a farce even when taught by the Archbishop of Canterbury. People laugh at the idea of "eternal life". The Oriental superstitions promulgated 2000 years ago are now the subject of laughter even among the clergy.

★

The Christian sect known as "Plymouth Brethren" are of course a typical example of religion run mad—as the famous book by Sir Edmund Gosse read recently by the BBC as a serial must have shown listeners. But the fact that it can still "Torture a Family"—the heading of an article in *The People* (February 25th)—shows that it can survive Gosse's scathing exposure as well the incredible stupidity of its Christian followers.

★

It appears that you can be called up before some angry "elders" if you marry out of the sect—and be expelled if you persist. The parents of a young man who defied these impudent "elders" were told to kick their son out of their lives—"Like a death sentence" moaned the mother. Her daughter was told never to speak to her mother who was branded, "a fallen woman", and so on. No doubt these people, including the "elders", are all true Christians—but what an exposure! In any case, even if the "elders" are devoid of humour and humanity—what about these people who were terrified at their own Christianity? Why don't they get out?

★

An "automatist" named Jane Sherwood has been telling readers of *Psychic News* what life is like in the Spirit world—which for sheer twaddle could hardly be surpassed. It purports to be a "post-mortem journal" of "a famous 20th century figure", but it would make even an elder of the Plymouth Brethren laugh. We have read dozens of books about life in Summerland and they all present life almost exactly over there as here. The "eternal life" preached by Jesus is much the same—except that perhaps there are more sermons from Peter. Personally, we prefer the *Arabian Nights* for our light reading.

THEATRE

The Secret of the World

JOHN BERRY, who directs and co-stars with Miriam Karlin in *The Secret of the World* at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, London, was the director of Sartre's *Altona*, the best and most important play seen in London last year. As might be expected, then, *The Secret of the World* is a play with some substance. Ted Allen, its Canadian author, is no Sartre, but he isn't afraid to deal with important issues of today—as well as yesterday and tomorrow. And he deals with them in a thought-provoking way.

The play concerns the collapse of a Montreal Communist and trade union leader, brought about by Khrushchev's exposure of Stalin. A "true believer" ("I had an ideal, an image of the kind of world . . . To be a Communist was to be the most advanced kind of human being") he can't adjust himself to life without his faith. He thought he "knew what life was; why we were here; what a man was". Now he has "lost everything". He may find the secret of the world, but it takes a madman to do that, and Mr. Berry splendidly portrays the tragic collapse.

Miss Karlin, star of *Fings Aint Wot They Used T'Be* and *The Rag Trade* (TV), is equally good as the helpless but protesting wife. "I'm not asking You for anything", she says in a most individualistic prayer to God. "Just leave this family alone for a year". Then she comments as it thunders: "I guess He can't take a joke!" By the end she is substituting: "Why don't You quit and let somebody else take over? You've done a lousy job. You don't scare me any more". "What would you do", she asks her husband, "if you found out you were Jesus Christ? Would you become a Catholic?" But it is she who tells him that he can't have a perfect world—"You can only have it better". When her daughter cries "He was once my hero", it is Miss Karlin who adds the poignant, "He was once my husband".

And behind the hopeless family situation—hopeless even before the Khrushchev speech—with father devoting his time to politics, the daughter sympathetic: the son critical, doted on by the neglected mother; we get glimpses of a different past. "Didn't we love each other—or something?" says the demented man to his wife. Earlier he has said, "I love you very much even if I don't show it very much". There is surely more than a family significance in his wife's response: "Love me a little less and show it a little more".

C.McC.

CONNECTICUT BIRTH CONTROL LAWS

(Concluded from page 91)

describes him.

What, then, are the chances? It is hard to say. According to *Look*: "Observers of the struggle say that, while any repeal bill may get through the [state] House, it is doomed in the Senate, because its members are sensitive to their constituents who reside in the heavily Catholic cities. In 1960 about 46 per cent of the entire Connecticut population was Catholic". The hope is the Supreme Court, which refused to rule on the issue in cases before it in 1943 and again in 1961, when a majority of the judges held that there was "unreality" in the appeal, since there had been no *bona fide* conviction for many years. Now that, thank to Mr. Morris, the law has been invoked against Mrs. Griswold and Dr. Buxton, the matter is likely to come before the Supreme Court again. And this time, says Mr. O'Gara, "it is considered probable that the Connecticut law will be considered unconstitutional".

THE FREETHINKER

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Lecture Notices, Etc.

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- 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, March 25th, 6.45 p.m.: A LECTURE.
- Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Tuesday, March 27th, 7.30 p.m.: MRS. ROSE WARWICK, "Why Hunger in the Midst of Plenty?"
- Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate), Sunday, March 25th, 6.30 p.m.: RICHARD CLEMENTS, O.B.E., J.P., "The Humanist Frame and Its Critics".
- Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Wheatshaf Hotel, High Street), Sunday, March 25th, 7.30 p.m.: F. A. RIDLEY, "Atheism and Religion in 1962".
- Marble Arch Branch N.S.S. (The Carpenter's Arms, Seymour Place, London, W.1), Sunday March 25th, 7.15 p.m.: MAX MORRIS, "The Class System of Education".
- Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Co-operative Education Centre, Broad Street), Sunday, March 25th, 2.30 p.m.: H. DAVIS, J.P., "The Decline in Moral Standards".
- South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Sunday, March 25th, 11 a.m.: C. BRADLAUGH BONNER, *Jesus and Jerusalem: A New Analysis of Christian Origins* by George Ory.
- Tyneside Humanist Society (100 Pilgrim Street, Newcastle, 1), Wednesday, March 28th, 7.30 p.m.: DR. LANCE DOBSON, "An Education for Humanity by H. L. Elvin."

Notes and News

WE WERE VERY PLEASED to read D. H. Tribe's article, "Church Courts and Disestablishment", in *The Guardian* (23/2/62). "Many devout communicants feel that State influence on the Church is stultifying the spontaneity of its worship", said Mr. Tribe, while non-Anglicans "insist that the absurd anachronism of an Established Church, which even the nineteenth century had thought doomed, should be swept away with its accompanying endowments". Irish and Welsh disestablishments (1869 and 1914), as Mr. Tribe pointed out, provide excellent precedents.

★

READERS MAY RECALL some of the delightful translations of Portuguese stories that we have printed from time to time over the initials "N.F.". Now Nan Flanagan's trans-

lation of *The Sin of Father Amaro* by Eça de Queiroz, has been published by Max Reinhardt, has been very well received, and is selling like the proverbial hot cakes. Oswell Blakeston's review of this "Portuguese masterpiece"—as *The Observer* hailed it—appears in this issue, and we should like to add our own appreciation of the book and express our delight at its success. Nan has lived in Spain and Portugal for many years now, for health reasons, but she regularly keeps in touch by letter, and her periodic visits to London are occasions for happy reunions. We, like her many other English friends, look forward to them enormously.

★

ON MARCH 11TH, *The Sunday Times* printed a selection of letters prompted by Dr. Tom Margerison's introductory article (the week before) to a series, "What is Death?" The "Materialist view", as the paper headed it, was for once well represented. James L. Shepherd of Wanstead accused Dr. Margerison of becoming "strangely unscientific" in referring to an investigation by the National Institute for Medical Research into the possibility of "locking up" a man's soul for periods of years. "Has the NIMR yet found a man's 'soul' to be locked up?" asked Mr. Shepherd. Dr. B. Spearman of Shaftesbury wrote: "Dr. Tom Margerison asks: When does the soul leave the body? One would be glad to hear his opinion as to when the soul enters the body?" Belief in a future life is "simply wishful thinking", declared Major J. E. Barwis-Holliday of Burwash, Sussex, "because we cannot face the prospect of nothingness . . .". Physical death is an established fact, he said, "but not so spiritual death, for there is no conclusive evidence that the spirit exists". There can be no answer to the question "What is Death?" as far as consciousness is concerned, said the Major. "only that death is the cessation of bodily functions accompanied by chemical change and dissolution".

★

ANOTHER LETTER in the same paper—on "Hell in the Scriptures"—revealed the Rev. Leslie D. Weatherhead at his wildest. The "idea of Hell, 'as the modern man conceives it', arose with Jesus", he said, but it "would not be characteristic of Christ . . . to teach that God would torture people endlessly in Hell". So Dr. Weatherhead set about showing that the Gospel reports of his hellfire teaching were unreliable. "Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Even if we were certain of what He said, the best reporting we can get is in Greek and a Greek written down and coloured by the prejudices and limitations of the writer and not available in writing until half a century after the words were spoken".

★

BUT HOW DOES anybody know what was "characteristic of Christ", except through these prejudiced reports? It won't do to form an idea of Jesus Christ from the "nice" parts of the reports and then say the "nasty" parts are uncharacteristic and unreliable. Yet this is what Dr. Weatherhead is trying to get away with.

★

"A LITTLE SEPARATION is good for the soul", said Father Alfred Cole, priest at St. Matthew's Roman Catholic Church, West Norwood, London, justifying his suggestion that sweethearts should "cut down on courting during Lent" and "take a little less time to say goodnight" (*Daily Herald*, 12/3/62). The fifty-eight-year-old Father thinks there is "nothing sensational" about his proposal that the boy and girl could try meeting once a week—to go to church together. "It's just a matter of self-discipline", he said. And we are informed that he "chuckled".

Was Charles Dickens a Secularist?

By H. CUTNER

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY years ago was born Charles Dickens, destined to become not only one of the outstanding creative novelists in history, but also one of our greatest social reformers. Not even Emile Zola could surpass him in writing a great novel with a great didactic purpose.

Dickens was easily the most popular author as well, we have ever had, from the day when *The Pickwick Papers* burst upon a delighted reading public to the sad day of his death (1870)—all the more tragic for he was never writing better than in this, his last book, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, perhaps the greatest of all detective stories, and still unsolved. All his writing was done in what we call the Victorian Era, the era mostly of Protestant and Evangelistic Christianity which for sheer boredom, credulity, intolerance, and humbug, could never be beaten in any age. Charles Dickens was brought up in this environment, and lived his life through it, uninfluenced (I'm sorry to say) by the epoch-making work of Darwin, or for that matter, by the iconoclastic attacks on religion by a young man called Charles Bradlaugh, destined to become a famous and formidable anti-religious propagandist and later, a great M.P.

In his private life, as distinct from his writing life, Dickens simply followed the "faith" of his fathers, never or rarely questioning its truth. In that sense, he can be called a Christian, an unthinking one it is true, but still a Christian believing in the Bible, its Gods, and miracles, and of course in prayer. Whether he ever went on his knees at any time and reverently prayed has not, as far as I know, ever been proved by evidence, though he certainly advised one of his sons to do so. But what happened when he had to deal with genuine Christians in his books?

Here it must be admitted that Dickens forgot his own religious beliefs to give us a number of characters hated by all true Christians as "caricatures" and in the worst possible taste. Everybody, even in early Victorian England, had to laugh at the antics of Mr. Stiggins, the "Shepherd" in *Pickwick*—a cruel, but more or less true, picture of "evangelists" outside the Establishment who made at least a good living from pious fools, mostly women like Mrs. Weller. And there is the Rev. Mr. Chadband in *Bleak House* who was almost if not quite another Stiggins. Here is a specimen of his "preaching":

"My friends . . . Peace be on this house! On the master thereof, on the mistress thereof, on the young maidens, and on the young men! My friends, why do I wish for peace? Is it war? No. Is it strife? No. Is it lovely, and gentle, and beautiful, and pleasant and serene, and joyful? O yes! Therefore, my friends, I wish for peace, upon you and upon yours."

Did Dickens ever meet people like Stiggins and Chadband and Mrs. Jellyby—the lady who had a passion for the welfare of the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, and none at all for her own family whom she kept in a state of ignorance and dirt? I certainly think he did, and his extraordinary memory for people and places and for the kind of things they said which he could produce so faithfully has given us a number of characters, all good Christians of course, but for whom he had nothing but the greatest contempt.

My old friend William Kent has, in my opinion, produced the best book on the problems so far written—*Dickens and Religion* (Watts and Co., 1930), and he has

with extraordinary patience and accuracy combed the famous novels in his search for Christians. But Dickens's own private beliefs were one thing, and writing about believers was quite another. Mr. Kent does not think that Dickens ever met any like those he caricatured.

I cannot help feeling [he writes] that if Dickens had met some of the people to be found in many little Bethels even today, he would have suspected them of some latent villainy quite inconceivable to them except in the heated atmosphere of a revival meeting, when they exaggerate their morbid symptoms, like those who testify to magnify the extent of their cure . . .

The truth is that Dickens did not like Dissenters, and he castigated them. Yet one suspects sometimes that his own language describing his own religion was not so far removed from Chadband's—though he evidently did not know it.

It is true that Dickens for a short while attended a Unitarian chapel but he never was a Unitarian. Did he go regularly to church with his wife and numerous children? I have found little evidence that he did, and certainly most of the books I have read about him—and I am a stout Dickensian—just leave religion out altogether. For example, the latest is one by J. B. Priestley, *Charles Dickens, A Pictorial Biography* (Thames and Hudson, 1961), and there isn't a word about his religious beliefs. Unless I have missed other references the only one I could find for God is when Mr. Priestley quotes Dickens talking about *Edwin Drood* to his daughter—"if, please God, I live to finish it". God here certainly let him down.

Forster, in his classic biography, has very little to say—though it is notable that he never refers to *Sunday Under Three Heads*—in which Dickens at twenty-four wrote a slashing attack on Sabbatarianism as outspoken as if he were as vigorous a Freethinker as G. W. Foote. Obviously, Forster did not share these views, and was afraid to call attention to the pamphlet for its irreligion. It has only rarely been reprinted, and is generally omitted in the complete works of Dickens.

The fact is that the religion of Dickens was a very nebulous affair when it came to advocating social reforms. As that great Dickensian, B. W. Matz, wrote in *The Bookman's* "extra number" of Dickens, "he was the advocate of all those who suffered, for the wrong of the world, and for holding up that wrong for all to see, by ridiculing some of its consequences, by showing some of the evils (at times enveloped in his matchless humour, at others irradiated by his rare pathos), he exhibited the undoubted iniquities in such a manner that there was nothing left to say in their defence . . ."

Dickens attacked the Poor Law administration as it was in his day; imprisonment for debt; the dreadful "schools" in Yorkshire for unwanted children; the ignorant nursing of our Mrs. Gamps; the terrible delays in law cases; our inhuman workhouses; these and dozens of other "abuses" of power and government badly needed his reforming spirit, and though he was by no means the only reformer, his powerful pen and pleas did much to help in their abolition.

And it was not only in his novels that his passionate pleas for reform can be found. He wrote dozens of articles in his magazines, *Household Words*, and *All the Year Round*, exposing the misery and injustice bad laws could cause. These magazines are no longer read—perhaps because they have done their work. And so it is

in his crusading zeal for reform that Charles Dickens can be rightly considered a Secularist. Rarely, if ever, did he "pass the buck" on to Almighty God, or "our blessed Lord" (as Dr. Soper would say). We had to accomplish the reforms *here and now*. God was a word to talk about perhaps, but he never appears to have done anything to mitigate present evils. That was our work on this earth. Not in Heaven. Thus, Dickens preached Secularism as fervently as any of Holyoake's followers.

Of course, he never went far enough because he was no student of economics as a science. If he never mentions Darwin, did he ever mention Malthus? Did he ever read or even know of William Godwin's *Political Justice* which advocated better government, and to which Malthus replied with his own masterpiece on the Population Problem? I doubt it. But we must not expect that a great creative novelist must also be a great economist, philosopher, and scientist. What Dickens did in the way of social reform alone adds to his fame as a very great novelist.

I have often wondered which of his thirteen major works is now considered his best? Bernard Shaw claimed that Dickens "was one of the greatest writers that ever lived", and that "there is no greatest book of Dickens"; they "form one great life work". Most of his admirers give the palm to *David Copperfield*, but *Bleak House*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and *Great Expectations* run very closely. William de Morgan plumped for *Our Mutual Friend*; but frankly, is there any humorous work greater than *Pickwick*?

For myself—I agree with Bernard Shaw.

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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY BUILDING FUND

Special announcement by the President of the North London Branch. The North London Branch, has this month, reached its target of £100 donation to the National Secular Society Building Fund, and with individual donations from Branch members, has in fact well exceeded this amount. On this occasion of handing over the 20th monthly £5 contribution I would like to make a statement.

When we, the, National Secular Society, had to vacate our rented offices in Gray's Inn Road, and seek and purchase premises of our own, it meant a great reduction in our capital resources. Despite this we have gained by the venture, for it is a grand thing to own our own building, bearing proudly the name of our illustrious founder.

Mrs. Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, concludes her inspiring biography of her father with these words. "It took close upon a hundred years to build a Memorial Hall to Thomas Paine, it remains to be seen how long it will take to erect one to the memory of Charles Bradlaugh". We have now achieved a "Bradlaugh House", and perhaps the other project will not remain forever impossible.

In all ages, everywhere, money and labour has been showered without stint, to build edifices to gods, for souls for the here-after. The time may be coming when men will understand our principles, and with their hopes and ideals fixed on this world, build their temples for the propagation of Freethought and Secularism.

For the present, and to ease in some measure the immediate financial strain, the Executive decided to inaugurate the Building Fund

The North London Branch, having attained a financial security unprecedented in Branch history, through the generosity of its members, felt that it should support the scheme wholeheartedly.

With its propaganda activities, the assistance of supporters at Tower Hill, and the cheerful help of our good comrade Mr. J. W. Barker of the Kingston Branch, all of whom I wish personally to thank, I feel certain that the Branch will try to maintain its monthly contributions.

In the past, our Branch had often to ask for financial assistance from the Executive Committee. This was never refused, and it therefore, gives us added pleasure to be able to return past favours.

It also makes us conscious of the needs of hard pressed Branches and of the fear that with its depleted capital, the Executive Committee might find it hard to extend that helping hand in the future.

I would therefore like to end this statement with a note of appeal to all who can, to contribute to the Building Fund, and help to make good some of the loss entailed in the acquisition of our premises.

LEN EBURY
(Vice-President, National Secular Society)

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14TH, 1962. Present: Mr. F. A. Ridley (Chair), Mrs. Ebury, Messrs. Barker, Corstorphine, Ebury, McIlroy, Mills, Shannon, the Treasurer (Mr. Griffiths) and the Secretary. Apologies were received from Messrs. Cleaver, Hornibrook, Johnson and Tribe. A report on possibilities of open air meetings in Basildon New Town was promising. North London Branch financial statement was read and the Branch congratulated. Mr. Ebury then handed over the usual monthly contribution of £5 to the Building Fund, thereby reaching the Branch's target of £100. The meeting passed a vote of thanks for this fine example. New members were admitted to Birmingham, Bradford, Kingston, Marble Arch and North London Branches which, with Individual Members made 19 in all. It was generally agreed that the Annual Dinner had been a success. Abortion Law Reform Association leaflets were before the meeting and would be sent to Branch Secretaries. A motion urging alteration of Adoption Laws was submitted to the National Council for Civil Liberties AGM. Mr. D. H. Tribe was nominated for the NCCL Executive Committee. It was arranged to protest to the Admiralty about Regulation 1953, Section 1827, which called on all officers and men "to exert their influence against all that tends to the disparagement of religion and the encouragement of vice and immorality". A suggested leaflet for distribution was approved. The President and Secretary were nominated to speak to Manchester Branch. An outing to Oakham on Whit Monday (the day after the Conference) was proposed. The Secretary was asked to approach the LCC to provide facilities for the storage of platforms in subways at Hyde Park. The next meeting was fixed for Wednesday, April 18th, 1962.

THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

"It is a hard thing to say. I wish it weren't true", said the Rev. Nelson Gray in the *Glasgow Evening Citizen* (10/3/62). But he did say it: that the Protestant Church is the "Sick Man" of Scotland. And he listed the symptoms. Religious observance in homes ("a fundamental of the Reformed Faith") is "now almost non-existent"; "even grace before meat has largely gone by the board". Religious instruction of the young is "pitifully inadequate". They get little at home and the Sunday schools reach only "a dwindling fraction" and then only for an hour a week. The situation in the day schools is "chaotic", while in the secondary schools "RI generally gets squeezed out altogether in the rush for Highers". "The churches, in general, betray an impoverished spiritual life", continued Mr. Gray, and while hundreds will turn out for a concert, only a handful will do so for prayer and Bible study. "Will our proud banners, too, go down in the dust?" asked this Angry Young (Clergy) Man. "Strong armies are on the march against us". But no, "Not if the Spirit of the Living God revives and heals us in a modern Reformation . . ." It may be a hard thing to say, but we don't hold out any hope of that.

The news that "Kirk ministers and elders are to join Roman Catholic clergy in discussions in a Glasgow convent next month" (*Scottish Daily Express*, 7/3/62), hardly presaged a "modern Reformation", and on Dr. Harry Thomson's view it was "a bad thing". "There can be no real meeting between ourselves and the Roman Catholics", said this minister, "unless the Roman Catholics are willing to become Protestants or Protestants are willing to become Roman Catholics. They are a contradiction in terms and there can be no compromise". Others were not so sure. "There is a wind of change blowing through the Vatican which we should all welcome", said the Rev. John Anderson. It "is a step in the right direction", said the Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Glasgow. But it was left to the Rt. Rev. Dom Columban Mulcahy, the Abbot responsible for arranging the meeting, to state the awful truth. "We Christians can't afford to be divided . . .", he said, "there are few enough of us as it is . . .".

CORRESPONDENCE

ETHICAL RELIGION

Mr. Micklewright may deplore my lack of "academic qualification and knowledge". But one doesn't prove anything by quoting a string of imposing names to support one's thesis. I could do the same. However, in published letter controversy I prefer to rely on a simple statement of my own position. What we get from Mr. Micklewright, it seems to me, is a plethora of words but very little solid thought.

On the question of sexual relationships he is intensely sore because I dispute his right to identify what I take to be his personal commitment (free love) with a movement like ours. He has of course the freedom to order his own life as he considers fit. But I wish he had the courage to say: "Yes, I practise free love and that's why I preach it". It would make things so much simpler!

I can appreciate Mr. Micklewright's difficulty in grasping how I manage to accommodate myself to secularism and ethical religion, since I think he understands neither. What they have immediately in common, as most of us know, is a complete independence of all theologies. And the Golden Rule, I say, is fundamental to them both—but isn't that where we came in?

G. I. BENNETT.

[This correspondence is now closed.—Ed.]

ATHEISM AND MORALITY

We are all quite well aware as to where atheists stand in regard to religion, but none of us knows for certain where atheists stand in regard to morals. Some of the questionable atheists have held that Christian ethics to be the true guide to a good life, while others prefer some of the Oriental, Greek, and Roman sages as guides to the good moral life. Most people, if they ever get

around to thinking about morality, come up with the notion that an act is moral if done because believed to be right, right according to conscience. The notion of conscience as the high authority seems to be at best an unquestioned assumption. Where does conscience get its authority? Where did you get your conscience? Is it not just the voice of custom speaking in and to the individual? I have heard eminent Christian preachers saying quite plainly that we all know deep down inside what is right and what is wrong, and therefore when we are sinning against God. This statement would no doubt be true if we were all born with the *a priori* knowledge of Christian ethics, but as this is not so we cannot accept this view. The Eskimo does not think it wrong deep down inside when he offers his wife to a friend. The idea of adultery is not inborn, we receive it from the society into which we are born. People who put forward that Christian ethics, or Buddhist ethics, or Stoic ethics, as the best guide to a good life, are often the last people who are prepared to live up to them. What we therefore need is a moral code in line with our nature, and not some religious ethical code which is against our nature.

R. SMITH.

CONFUCIUS

One man's boredom is another man's delight. Personally, I found Adrian Pigott's article on Confucius most interesting and full of information I had never previously found time to acquire.

REGINALD UNDERWOOD.

BOYISH "BLASPHEMY"

A short time ago a letter appeared in one of the local papers here written by a woman schoolteacher. In it she complained of the irreverence of one of her pupils. It appears that, during the parrot-like morning recitation of the Lord's Prayer, one of her pupils committed blasphemy. When the class came to the line "and give us this day our daily bread", one of the boys chimed in, "and make it fresh to the last slice!"

PETER BAIN
(Clydebank, Scotland).

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