

# The Freethinker

Volume LXXXII—No. 32

Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

Price Sixpence

SOME LITTLE TIME BACK, I was informed by a Continental friend that he was about to write a book on the intriguing theme of post-Christian religions. This subject is not only extremely interesting, but unusual. Perhaps the most interesting feature about it is the relative paucity of subject matter, which raises many further and far-reaching speculations. Why is it, for example, that the post-Christian religions of our day cut such a sorry figure in both quantity and quality, when compared with the luxurious crop of supernatural religions that originated between about 1000 BC and 1000 AD, the period that witnessed the evolution, or arbitrary creation, of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, not to mention such now extinct, but formerly cosmopolitan cults as Mithraism, Manichaeism and Druidism.

## Modern Religious Cults

Actually, if one essays to compose a list of religions that have originated in recent centuries, say, since the Reformation, it must be conceded that it will be neither long nor impressive. It would, indeed, be difficult to find any new cult that has appeared during recent centuries that could really be described as absolutely new or really original. Even what are probably the nearest approaches to original religious cults, the originally Persian cult of Bahaism (mid 19th century) and that indigenous "religion of the American Frontier", Mormonism (early 19th century) cannot be regarded as entirely new religious creations. For Bahaism originally started as an Islamic heresy, while Mormonism still claims to be an authentic 100 per cent American branch of Christianity. As, however, neither Islam nor Christianity nowadays recognises its unruly offspring, it is probably accurate to describe the religion founded by the Persian Baha as also the Mormon cult founded by Joseph Smith (in both cases with celestial assistance!) as *bona fide* post-Christian religions. For after all, in breaking away from the parent (Muslim and Christian) bodies, both the Persian and American cults only repeated the spiritual evolution of their parent religions, since it is indisputable that both Christianity and Islam originated as Jewish heresies. Bahaism and Mormonism, both today internationally expanded cults, are probably the most authentic examples of post-Christian religions, though actually, Bahai Modernism and Mormon Fundamentalism have little in common, beyond the accidental similarity that both their founders died violently at the hands of (respectively Christian and Muslim) outraged orthodoxy. Apart indeed, from these two cults, the list of post-Christian religions would appear to be scanty. Christian Science and Jehovah's Witnesses are perhaps American adaptations of Christian Fundamentalism rather than neo-religions, while upon a far higher intellectual plane, those bizarre French cults founded respectively by St. Simon and Auguste Comte, may perhaps be better described as parodies of religion rather than as religions, pure and simple: "Catholicism without Christianity", as

some wit (was it Ernest Renan?) once described them. Whether Spiritualism can be described as a *bona fide* religion, is doubtful, though if its claims to be such are conceded, one could query its present inclusion amongst post-Christian religions, since, in one form or another, spiritist cults are probably at least as old as any now recognisable historical religion. (Actually, most contemporary spiritist churches claim recognition as a form of spiritual Christianity).

The great political and social upheavals of modern times have not evolved permanent religious expressions, though there was of course, Robespierre's short-lived theistic cult of the Supreme Being (ultimately derived from Jean-Jacques Rousseau) at the height of the French Revolution, with Robespierre himself as its high priest. Whilst (as my learned friend Dr. Vildomec, demonstrated some years ago in this paper) the Nazi Reich also created a "neo Pagan" movement, the leading ideologist of which, Professor Haver (an ex-Lutheran missionary) advanced what at least purported to be a theological outline of this new creed. But how far this was merely a re-hash of the ancient Germanic cults of Odin and Thor, or of the still more ancient pre-historic Aryan cult of the Swastika, and whether it would have developed into an authentic personal cult of the Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler (perhaps as some reincarnation of "Our good old German God") had the Third Reich ultimately triumphed, we have no means of finding out.

## Survivals and New Arrivals

Here, clearly, we have a paradox that would appear to require some explanation. Why did religions increase and multiply in so remarkable a manner in earlier ages in the world's social and ideological evolution, whereas nowadays they make such rare and usually unimpressive appearances? For when compared with the indubitably great figures thrown up by say, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, the present day pioneers of would-be universal revelations like Joseph Smith and Father Divine cut a sorry, or even ludicrous figure. To compare say, St. Augustine or Shankara, with Mrs. Eddy (of Christian Science fame) or Judge Rutherford (the former Principal "Witness" for Jehovah) would merely provoke a smile. The explanation would appear to be not so much in the religions themselves as in intervening social evolution, and very particularly in the recent appearance of a scientifically-based culture. For, prior to the appearance in recent centuries of the first human civilisations to be based on science, it was still possible for religion to reconcile itself with, and even to control, its contemporary culture. Men like Thomas Aquinas, or Al-Ghazzali ("The Proof of Islam"—12th century) were abreast of the culture of their age. But who could say this today of the editors of *The Book of Mormon* or of the modern German prophets of the Swastika? One could generalise from the above, and say that, whilst in pre-scientific cultures religions ran *with* the stream, and their founders put to sea with a favourable

## — VIEWS and OPINIONS —

# Post-Christian Religions

By F. A. RIDLEY



breeze, today, would-be new religions make heavy weather from the start, precisely because they now sail *against* the stream. In point of fact, their successes are gained only in currently backward areas untouched by modern culture. Even today, the "survivals" still wear better than the new arrivals: e.g. the Church of Rome can still command more followers than the Church of Latter Day Saints.

### Has Religion a Future?

The answer to this question depends on material circumstances more than on spiritual forces. If, for example, the hopes of Victorian optimists for continuous future human progress (broadening down from precedent to precedent) are destined to be fulfilled, one must suppose that religion will continue to decline until it finally dies out in obscurity. If, however, society again meets with sharp regressions, as has often occurred before, then one must expect a revival of religion, since ages of fear are usually correspondingly religious. The Dark Ages, for example, made the fortune of the Catholic Church in the barbaric Europe that followed upon the end of the classical civilisation. It

was amongst the illiterate and hopeless masses of uprooted slaves that Christianity first became a mass-movement and not amongst the cultural ruling class of the Roman Empire. A modern religion might do the same or perhaps something even worse say, on the lines laid down by Mr. Aldous Huxley in his macabre story, *Ape and Essence*—an extremely grim (if unintentionally designated) picture of life in a devil-worshipping, sex-frustrated community, approximately situated in the ruins of Los Angeles after an atomic war. The cultural, including religious, possibilities of such a future social situation are incalculable and unpredictable. If defeat in the still pre-atomic first World War could produce Hitler, the concentration camps and the gas chambers, what might not an atomic debacle eventually produce? A post-Christian religion of a kind perhaps hitherto unimagined even by Aldous Huxley? In general, one must conclude that the future of religions, like that of their "onlie begetter", the human race itself, now lies no longer in the lap of the gods, but in the perhaps equally unpredictable lap of Science.

## Joseph Barker

By T. M. MOSLEY

THE DERBYSHIRE COLLIERY village where I lived some fifty-seven years ago was visited each year for a week by an able Methodist minister, who would preach twice on Sunday and give lectures on each of the remaining nights. He was the Rev. E. W. Bailey, possessor of a long beard (he told us he had been mistaken for Salvationist General Booth and Marxian Socialist H. M. Hyndman) and eloquent in his perorations. Two of his lectures that interested me were, "Social Systems that have been tried and found wanting" and "The Darkness and Dreariness of Infidelity." The first was a criticism of the Robert Owen experiments, while the other bore the sub-title, "Infidelity as seen through the eyes of the Rev. Joseph Barker." At that time I had just begun to read Robert Blatchford's *God and My Neighbour*, the writings of Joseph McCabe, the famous RPA reprints, *The Literary Guide*, and THE FREETHINKER, I had not then heard of Barker, but long afterwards I picked up his autobiography, *The Teachings of Experience: Lessons I have learnt through Life*, and recognised the source of Bailey's lecture so many years earlier.

Born in Bramley, Leeds, in 1806, Barker died in Omaha, U.S.A., in 1875, and his career was marked by drastic changes of opinion. He came of a Methodist family and was a local preacher at 20, then a "New Correction" minister. He became known as a vigorous controversialist followed the Owenite Social Missionaries around—and is reported to have broken up some of their branches—veered towards a sort of Unitarianism, and was challenged to defend his position by a member of his own denomination, Dr. W. Cooke. They met in a *ten nights'* debate at Newcastle-on-Tyne, before a capacity crowd and every night people came from enormous distances to attend.

The outcome was that Barker was expelled from his Church for what is now termed "modernism." Many Methodists followed him, and he started a Church of his own. He also took up politics and joined the Chartists. But it is amusing to learn that many of his colleagues boycotted him when he began to advocate total abstinence and non-smoking. This would be in the 1840s. (The Methodists I lived among for sixty years were champions of these two negative habits.) His Chartist activities

brought about his arrest and trial at Liverpool Assizes. Barker defended himself and was acquitted. Then, in 1851, he sailed for the U.S.A.

When he settled there he came to know many unbelievers, and was much influenced by a Freethought lecturer, Henry G. Wright who, "struck the first deadly blow at my belief in the supernatural inspiration of the Bible." Barker's Unitarianism gave way to atheism. He lived in Nebraska, and from there—in 1858—he wrote three letters to Holyoake that were printed in *The Reasoner* and then issued as pamphlets: "The Imperfections of the Bible," delivered at a convention in Salem; "Confessions of Joseph Barker"; and "How Did You Become an Infidel?" Reading these, it is amazing to realise that he was to go back to preaching Christianity.

Barker returned to England in 1860, at the time of the founding of the *National Reformer* and, as his atheistic reputation had preceded him, Bradlaugh invited him to become joint-editor of the paper. "It is difficult for us today," Bradlaugh's daughter later wrote of Barker, "having before us his whole public career, with its kaleidoscopic changes of front, to realise the enthusiasm which his name provoked in 1860." In September, Barker met Thomas Cooper in debate at Bradford, Cooper having gone back to the Church after a period of scepticism, and Leicester Secular Society printed extracts from Barker's speeches in a pamphlet, *What Atheism Can Say For Itself*. Here is one:

The question is whether there is a God, an all-perfect personal God. We say there is no proof of it, but proof to the contrary. It may be more agreeable to some to believe in an all-good God taking care of them, than to believe in taking care of themselves. But that which is most pleasant in these matters is not always most true. Our business is to try to find out the real state of things in this world, not how we can dream pleasant dreams, or please ourselves with the most delusive unrealities.

Barker's partnership with Bradlaugh only lasted a year, then at a special meeting of the shareholders of the *National Reformer*, Bradlaugh became sole editor. The readers had become confused at Barker's change of view. He referred later in his autobiography to a "filthy" book, written by a leading Secularist, being sent to him for review. It undermined the institution of marriage and

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# The Church and the Theatre

By EVA EBURY

SINCE THE DEAN OF CANTERBURY, George Bell, planned the festival of Canterbury plays and founded the Religious Drama Society, there has been an ever-increasing spate of religious drama, following in the wake of T. S. Eliot. The Church is, in fact, now embracing the child which it repudiated nineteen centuries ago, and is now claiming to have been its suckling nurse and loving foster parent. It would be well then to consider just what encouragement Christianity has given to the theatre. Pius XII, in his address to the Catholic Theatre Centre, 1945, said, "An old and rather widespread prejudice puts in opposition as if reciprocally hostile, the Church and the dramatic profession. That erroneous conception is unfounded and unfair." We shall see later just how erroneous, unfounded and unfair it is. The Encyclopedia Britannica, despite its careful Catholic pruning, has to admit that the Church was uncompromisingly hostile to drama, and that for centuries after the establishment of Christianity the dramatic art ceased to exist.

We all know the baneful effect of Puritanism on English drama and on English culture in general. When less than 80 years ago, Spurgeon, the great Wesleyan preacher, declared that a playgoer could not be a member of a Christian community, he was only voicing a common prejudice. Puritanism hated joy for its own sake, but long ago the early Saints, seeing the theatre under Court protection and recognising the power it had over the popular mind, fought it with religious venom. Under the same compelling fear, Walpole instituted the Censorship of the Stage in England, to prevent Fielding from using that media to explore parliamentary corruption. Strangely though, it was Charles II, patron of the Restoration drama, and lover of wit and bawdiness, who, by granting a monopoly to Drury Lane and Covent Garden, with the proviso to avoid entertainment that "doe containe much matter of prophanation and scurrility and promote those that serve as instruction in human life," wrecked the reborn hopes for the theatre.

So we have our Censor, our Examiner of Plays, or as G.B.S. calls him, "The Malvolio of St. James's Palace," responsible to nobody but the Queen and perhaps the obscurist unit in the imposing procession of court flunkies, who yet can, without a degree, without literary talent, make and unmake English drama. But harmful and omnipotent as this gentleman may appear to be, he does not, as the Catholic Church does, profess to exercise his censorship with supernatural guidance. His strictures, at two guineas a time, contain no supernatural vengeance; he does not even profess to speak with infallibility. The Pope gives his address to the Catholic Theatre Centres, Radio Announcers, Television Centres, to Critics, to Film Industries, and speaks of civil and ecclesiastical censorship. He calls to the women of Catholic Action to be ever vigilant for "one can hardly believe that writers, publishers, artists, managers and promoters of certain artistic and theatrical displays do not hesitate to sink to such low levels of corruption, converting the use of pen and art itself into tools of allurements and immorality." We know how Catholic Action works wherever it is allowed to rear its ugly head: the Hays Organisation in Hollywood: the attempt to ban *St. Joan* from the screen and the threats to G.B.S. to have all Roman Catholics forbidden to witness the film unless it underwent a Catholic Baptism with cuts and alterations.

It is the Jesuit influence, under cover of a passage in Aquinas, in which he considers that the profession of an actor might not be essentially sinful, that has nurtured a tolerance for the dramatic art in the Church. The stage door is no longer the "Porch of Hell," and we see the Pope in 1944 stating, in regard to theatres, dancing and amusement, that: "The fervour of the Christians in the first centuries made them inclined to profess their faith rather too openly than the opposite; so much so that at times their moral vigour surpassed the very limits of the reasonable measures demanded by the Spirit of the Gospel." He forgets the history of his Church which claims never to change. It anathematised the stage, and actors were regarded as prohibited persons. It is only 201 years ago that a French lawyer, Huerne de la Mothe, daring to write in defence of the profession of actors, had his work burnt by the executioners, and his name erased from the the list of advocates. An actor was a pariah — the doctrine of the Church was unequivocal and decisive on that point. All professional actors were pronounced necessarily excommunicate, even the sacraments of marriage, death and burial were refused them.

Philip II in the 16th Century and Philip IV in the 17th banished all actors from Spain, and the theatre at Cordova was destroyed by the fanatical followers of the miracle-working Father Passada. In France, the biting wit of Molière was sharpened by the incessant persecution of the Church, and of the tragic playwright Racine, Lecky says "His religious mind recoiled before the censure. He ceased to write for the stage when in the zenith of his powers, and an extraordinary epitaph, while recording his virtues, acknowledges that there was one stain on his memory — he had been a dramatic poet." The brilliant, gifted actress, Lecouvreur, was buried in a field for cattle, for she had not abjured the profession she had so adorned. The first great operatic composer, Lulli, had to burn his opera to obtain absolution.

Actors attempted to evade the inevitability of concubinage by renouncing their profession to receive the sacrament and returning to it when the ceremony of marriage was completed. The Archbishop of Paris consequently tightened the regulations and an officially signed paper was required to guarantee against a return to the stage. There is even the record of the suspension of a priest from his duties for having inadvertently performed the marriage ceremony for an actor. By French law, an actor was excluded from any form of public honour and employment and anyone who occupied any administrative position was prohibited from attending the theatre. Petitions were sent to the Pope to entreat him to relieve actors from the censures of Canon law, without avail. It was the French Revolutionists who, at a single stroke, removed all censures, prohibitions and disqualifications so that an actor became a man among men.

The early Church had fulminated against actors and the theatre. Tertullian, indeed, said that, "The Almighty can never pardon an actor, who, in defiance of evangelical assertion, endeavours by high-heeled boots to add a cubit to his stature, and who habitually falsifies his face." Circumstances and time, however, relaxed the censures of the Church, and the Renaissance Popes were inveterate addicts of the theatre. Then, to quote Lecky again, "When the teaching of Luther had thrilled through  
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## This Believing World

We are sorry to disagree with the Bishop of Southwell, Notts, in his diocesan letter recently, discussing the building of a modern church, he wrote, "if we offer the youngsters of today a sentimental Jesus in a children's corner, are we surprised if they find their hero in a spaceman, or a bloody minded gangster?" But we always thought that Jesus was the *greatest* of all spacemen, for did he not fly straight up to Heaven to sit beside God? Not even the most imaginative writer of space fiction has ever beaten that wonderful feat for his hero. As for "a bloody minded gangster", what would Jesus have done with a gun instead of a whip when he chased the "money changers" out of the temple? No, when it comes to being the "greatest" God that ever lived, Jesus can still hold his own in anything whatever!

★

The millions of readers who anxiously study their "astrological" fate every morning in their favourite newspaper will not be surprised to learn that an even greater addict is the Crown Prince of Sikhim, a Himalayan state, with a population of 160,000. He is certain that this year will be a "black" year for us all owing to the general influence of the planets. The prince, who is in London to get married (*Daily Express*, July 28th) seems particularly nervous about this black year "because of the position of one of the planets and the influence of one of the Deities . . . one of the fierce, angry Deities". At all events, we are happy to conclude from this that the prince is not, whatever else he may be, a blatant Atheist.

★

We note, not without amusement, that the *South London Press* (June 29th) has a leader headed "Pagans in Southwark"—though strangely these pagans are really in Deptford, and not in the Borough High Street. But the leader's writer is courageous enough to point out that "ours is a scientific age", and he does not appear to be too keen about "our official religion" (as he calls it) for it came "from the Middle East" and "faith" is "belief without evidence". Perhaps after all the writer does know Borough High Street.

★

On BBC TV the other Sunday we had a delightful talk on religion in prisons with Canon Carpenter and a lay man, Mr. Mervyn Turner, as the principal speakers. The chief thing which came out of this was that there did not appear to be any prisoners who were *not* more or less concerned with religion. Whether they all *really* were is a moot point, but no "unbelievers" were called upon to tell us what they thought about the one-time compulsory services. What exactly Mr. Turner (supposed to be an authority) meant in his rambling statements was certainly not apparent. But the real question remained unanswered—did Christianity as a *religion*—not as a *social* influence—in any way help any budding criminal not to commit a crime? And even the Canon could not answer that one.

★

Two ladies, Mrs. Montefiore, a typical housewife, with three daughters, and a college lecturer, Miss Williams, whose speciality is her knowledge of teenagers, have been chosen to work on the panel dealing with a revision of the Prayer Book formed by the Archbishop of Canterbury who wants the help of women—no doubt because, when all is said and done, they pray and sing hymns far more than men do these days. Mrs. Montefiore frankly confesses that "much of the 1662 Prayer Book is incomprehensible today . . . Some of it is complete gibberish" (*Daily Mail*, July 24th). Lots of people thought the same about the

Authorised Version of the Bible, and we cannot help wondering if she now reads the New English Bible instead and understands that?

★

But the part of the once beautiful reverend, and piously intoned Book of Common Prayer she most disliked is the baptism service—and we imagine many of the infants who had to go through this piece of crude superstition, if they could have spoken, would have heartily agreed with her. The good lady however is quite aware that "we shall have to tread carefully" for "many Anglicans" have a genuine love for the existing Prayer Book". Naturally. And this is one reason why their genuine love for the Authorised Version will prevent their use of the New English Bible in any of their churches.

★

Not to be outdone by the "Saturday Reflection" of the *London Evening News* and the weekly "one minute sermon" of the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* gives us every Saturday now an article by some writer or other, of the thrill, the joy, the exquisite happiness of going to church on Sunday. Often we are told that the writer is "a pretty poor performer as a Christian"—which can mean anything—but to sit in one's own parish church, oh, the marvellous wonder of it, to be in the Faith again, and to join that happy throng who once gave us all that tremendous experience when "there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" at Pentecost described so entrancingly in the Books of Acts.

### JOSEPH BARKER

(Concluded from page 250)

advocated free sexual licence, he alleged. He never named the book, but I think it was Drysdale's *Elements of Social Science*. If so, Barker sadly misrepresented the work.

He then started a paper of his own, *The Evangelical Reformer*, in which he began, he said, to re-examine all aspects of belief and unbelief. Finally, he returned to his old faith and became a preacher once more. Though challenged by secularists to debate, he refused. Yet he had been a fine debater. The late Canon Orr confessed, in a booklet, *From Unbelief to Faith*, that he had been disturbed when hearing Barker debate the Bible with the notorious Rev. Brewin Grant. There was no doubt in Orr's mind that Barker had the best of it. When Bradlaugh debated with the Rev. David King, the latter accused the founder of the National Secular Society of slandering opponents. Bradlaugh replied that he never called any opponent except "Joe Barker." Barker certainly deserved the censure, for he had described Bradlaugh as a "man more dangerous than a criminal, a deadlier foe to virtue and humanity than the vilest murderer that ever plotted or sinned against mankind."

Joseph Barker, then, was a strange man. According to Holyoake, "he had a great command of Saxon English and a poetic imagination; so that whatever side he adopted, and he adopted every side in turn, he presented it with a force of speech that commanded attention." When he died in Nebraska, the *Newcastle Chronicle* declared that, "Never since the days of William Cobbett have the people of England listened to a more trenchant, stirring and instructive speaker than Joseph Barker." In his last book, *Lessons I Have Learnt Through Life*, he expressed some melancholy sentiments about "his journey through the land of Doubt and back again." "Do not read infidel books"; "do not go to infidel lectures"; he advised Christians.



# THE FREETHINKER

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Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 103 Borough High Street, London, S.E.1. Details of membership of the National Secular Society may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, S.E.1. Inquiries regarding Bequests and Secular Funeral Services should also be made to the General Secretary, N.S.S.

## Lecture Notices, Etc.

### OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (The Mound).—Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. CRONAN, 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, J. A. MILLAR.  
(Tower Hill). Every Thursday, 12—2 p.m.: Messrs. J. W. BARKER and L. EBURY.  
Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Platt Fields), Sunday afternoons. (Car Park, Victoria Street), Sunday evenings.  
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.  
Glasgow Secular Society (Queen's Park Gates), Sunday, August 12th, 7.30 p.m.: J. DEMPSTER and J. W. TELFER.

### INDOOR

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (Midland Institute, Paradise Street), Sunday, August 12th, 6.45 p.m.: PETER MORGAN, "Get Out and Walk."

## Notes and News

WILL. National Secular Society members please note that Colin McCall, the General Secretary, will be on holiday until August 13th.

★

THE National Council for Civil Liberties has moved from New King's Road to 4 Camden High Street, London, N.W.1. Telephone, Euston 2544.

★

TALKING OF the BVM, we notice that there has been a controversy at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, New Brighton, Cheshire, where a statue of the Virgin "has the face of a food company director's mother" (*Sunday Express*, 15/7/62). It is one of the Stations of the Cross, and was presented to the church by Mr. William Gerrard Brabin in memory of his mother who, he says, "was truly a saint and a great benefactor of this church". "In fact," he added, "she and my father paid a large percentage of the cost of building it." Anyway, many of the greatest paintings of the Virgin have had human models. Sometimes they were wives, sometimes mistresses. Murillo's, as Somerset Maugham has said, are essentially Spanish peasants.

★

LONDONERS MIGHT like to make a note of Sunday, September 30th, when the South Place Ethical Society is organising a meeting in the evening in connection with the Freedom from Hunger campaign and the special contribution which the Humanist Council is making towards it. Details are not yet to hand, but the date is worth noting.

AN AUSTRALIAN-BORN composer, Malcolm Williamson, has been commissioned to compose an opera based on Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, to be produced at Sadler's Wells theatre next summer. *The Guardian* (19/7/62) contained an interesting profile by David Wainwright, from which we learn that Mr. Williamson became a Catholic at 21 and that "As a Catholic he respects Greene's Catholicism, because he finds it secular and aesthetic". But he finds it less easy to accept Greene's "light hearted approach to death", though "he suspects that this is a failure in his own orthodoxy, particularly as he also discovers himself sympathising these days with humanists and pacifists".

★

WE USED to be told as far back as fifty years ago, or more, that attacking the Bible was merely flogging a dead horse. Well, is it? Is the Bible quite as dead as that? Is it not the main topic often of the "serious" side of the radio and TV, the one undying and unquenchable work against which nothing can prevail? Have we really "unhorsed" it? The gentleman who wrote the article in the *Daily Express* (July 28th) exultingly declares that, after being "in the dreadful bitter desert of unbelief", how gladly will he now go to his "place in the pew". And this twaddle reaches perhaps ten millions of other Christians!

## THE CHURCH AND THE THEATRE

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Europe, a new spirit was infused into the Vatican, and the intellectualist and the art critic were replaced by men of saintly lives and persecuting zeal and a fierce contest between Church and theatre began." Plagues and droughts were attributed to the opera and the theatre and theologians again began to fulminate against them.

However, play-acting is in the very warp and woof of human nature. The Church again had to yield to the passion it could not suppress, and Benedict XIV gave permission, during a carnival in Rome, for a dramatic entertainment, though only with "extreme reluctance," not "with approval." The Church slowly learned the lesson of the ages, that anathemas are useless against the natural desires of the people. J. M. Wheeler (G. W. Foote's assistant editor of THE FREETHINKER) ends his essay on "Religious Dances" with words so delightful that I quote them in full, "Love of dancing lies deep in the blood. Many hear music with their feet. The Consistory of Cardinals once ordered that the fandango should be abolished and all dancers clapped into the dungeons of the Inquisition. One Cardinal suggested they should themselves first witness what they condemned. The suggestion was approved. Two famous dancers, with their musicians, were brought before the solemn conclave, and began their performance. The austerity of the pious divines was not proof against the charms of the seductive exhibition. As its successive fascinations were unfolded their ascetic faces lighted up. The godly men arose mechanically from their seats, their limbs involuntarily obeyed the spell of bewitching music, and before long the capers of the whole Consistory attested the merits of the fandango."

Yuri Gagarin's autobiography

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From the PIONEER PRESS



# Translating the Bible into English

By H. CUTNER

*The English Bible.* A History of Translations from the Earliest English Versions to the New English Bible, by F. F. Bruce, 1961. The Lutterworth Press, London, 25s. net.

PROFESSOR BRUCE is the Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the University of Manchester, and his very readable book gives all who are interested in the Bible a lively account of how it was translated into English. There have been many such works in the past, more than perhaps is thought—for example, the various histories by Westcott, Moulton, Loftie, Dore, all scholarly, but more or less out of date. Professor Bruce brings his history right up to the New English Bible.

One of the points which Freethinkers have often raised is why, if the Bible was meant by God Almighty for all to read, were its "original" languages Hebrew and Greek, and in consequence, why have translators found it such a tremendous task *correctly* to translate this wonderful work, unique because it comes from the Almighty himself? Was it not possible for God to make everything clear and undisputed? Professor Bruce, just like the other historians of the Bible, shirks the problem. He prefers to show how different were the various translations, and therefore how some are superior to others.

Let me give one clear example which does not depend altogether on the exact way the original was translated. If you take Exodus 20, 12 you can read "*Honour thy father and thy mother . . .*" This is declared to be a Commandment from the hand of God himself. Now turn to Luke 14, 26, and you will read, "*If any man come unto me and hate not his father and mother . . .*" The point here to remember is that all Christians insist that Jesus, who tells you to hate your parents, is really the same God who told you to honour them. This may require, not translators but textual critics to explain of course; but if the Bible came from a God who is infallible, why do we get such a glaring contradiction at all?

Professor Bruce gives us text after text from various translations for comparison, and it may well be that some of the texts are better translated in one version than in another. But does it matter? Does our "salvation" depend on a better translated text?

Or take what is called The Lord's Prayer—which is conspicuous because it never mentions either the Lord or God or Jesus. (Robert Taylor insisted that it was originally addressed to *Father Abraham!*) Both the Revised Version and the New English Bible omit the famous "*For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.*" Yet this "doxology" (as it is called) has been repeated millions of times for centuries far more reverently than even our National Anthem—if that were possible. There is nothing in the whole of the Bible we were always told, which so surely was uttered by "our Lord"—it bears the utmost stamp of authenticity, and yet we now know it is a forgery!

And how often have we been told that the sacred heart of Jesus always bled for his enemies, his persecutors, for did he not cry, "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do*"? (Luke 23, 34). Professor Bruce deals with this when he comes to Dean Burgon and his furious attack on the Revised Version; for it says "*Some ancient authorities omit*" the text. If the reader can get hold of Burgon's *The Revision Revised* (1883) he will see what that redoubtable controversialist thought of any attempt to correct the thousands of mistakes and blunders with which the Authorised Version is littered. For Burgon every

letter, every point, was divine in the AV—it was *in toto* the work of God himself.

Professor Bruce goes back to the Saxon paraphrases of the Bible which are still extant, and devotes long sections of his book to Wycliffe and his helpers, who gave us the first complete Bible in English—not the first *printed* Bible, be it noted. Wycliffe translated the Latin Vulgate, but it was William Tyndale who translated the New Testament from the Greek—though here Professor Bruce does not make very clear from what Greek manuscripts. We know of course that the Greek text compiled by Erasmus was made from very late MSS—he knew nothing of the Sinaiticus or Vaticanus Codices which form the basis of our Revised Version and, for that matter, the New English Bible as well, and which are dated the fourth century.

To talk about the "Western" text, or the "Alexandrian" text (or whatever name is now given to various types of texts), is for most people almost useless. Students who have to study these things may know, but the Churches when discussing translations of the Bible for popular reading take good care to say as little as possible about the manuscripts which were used for the translations.

As an example, I tried to find out what Professor Bruce had to say about the famous MS in Cambridge named D by scholars—the Codex Bezae. It is, as Sir Frederick Kenyon says in his *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, "undoubtedly the most curious, though certainly not the most trustworthy, manuscript of the New Testament at present known to us." It gives the text of the NT in Greek and Latin, but it differs in hundreds of places from the "received" text. It differs from our text of Acts in 600 places! But why? No one knows. No one can say with certainty whether the Latin is a translation of the Greek, or the Greek a translation of the Latin. Says Kenyon, "Striking evidence can be produced on both sides," but "the evidence for D, whether for the Greek or Latin texts, must be used with some caution . . ." And it should be added that something like this can be said of *all* the New Testament MSS—they must be used with caution.

As another example of how a text must be used with caution, take the famous story of "the Woman taken in adultery" which *must* be true because it is so like what Jesus would have said. It is actually *omitted* from the Revised Version with the note, "*Most ancient authorities omit John 7, 53-8. Those which contain it vary much from each other.*" What does Professor Bruce say about it? Nothing. If it is not God's Precious Word, what is it? And which is the correct text? Nobody knows.

Of course as to what is or what is not the Divine Text of the Bible—and as all genuine Christians would say at once it is the text which is the one infallibly inspired by Almighty God—Professor Bruce does not tell us. He does refer more than once to the "authentic" or "original" text, but he never tells us what this is, or where it can be found for a very good reason. Nobody knows.

The difficulties are made much more so because the New Testament, whenever it quotes the Old Testament, does not go to the "original" Hebrew, but to the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. Not that we know either what the "original" Hebrew is. Whatever it was, it was not the text used by the Septuagint translators, which is vastly different in hundreds of places. In fact,



all we know is that the Hebrew text was fixed by Jewish rabbis some time after 500 AD. All the rest is pure speculation.

Whether the "authors" (that is, the translators) of the Authorised Version really used the Hebrew text then current among the Jews is quite unknown. There were no Jews in England at the time, and it would be most interesting to learn how the translators managed to learn Hebrew—which, if they saw any in their day would probably have been "unpointed," that is, without vowels, and most difficult to read and understand. The various printed Bibles—Coverdale's Matthew's, the Geneva, the Great Bible, and others, depended on Wycliffe or Tyndale or Coverdale or Rogers, all of whom certainly used the Latin Vulgate version whatever else they used. Some (like Coverdale) depended on Luther's translation. As for the Vulgate itself, it has been "revised" again and again; and though it formed the basis of Mgr. Knox's English translation, he had to go to both the "original" Greek and Hebrew as well to find out what God actually said or meant.

All these points have been discussed over and over again in scholarly books on the English Bible, and it would require a dozen volumes like that of Professor Bruce, to clear up the difficulties they have aroused in pious Christian professors who have been so indoctrinated with various types of Fundamentalism that they will clutch at anything to help them find out which really is God's Word.

For the rest, Professor Bruce does tell us something of the many versions—by no means all—which have been published of the Bible in English. He does not like all; he damns Young's "Literal" version with faint praise. But he does mention an American version almost unknown in England—the Concordant Version based as far as possible on the Codex Sinaiticus, though it is also damned with faint praise.

But for any reader who knows little of the translation of the Bible into English, Professor Bruce's book provides an excellent introduction. At the same time, it is most unlikely to convert an unbeliever into a believer.

## Here's Richness

By COLIN McCALL

I FIRST became acquainted (perhaps enchanted is the better word) with Norman Douglas when I picked up a Penguin copy of *Siren Land* a good few years ago now. Then I hastily read all his books that I could: *Fountains in the Sand*, *Alone*, *They Went Together*, *Looking Back*, *Late Harvest* and, of course, the novel, *South Wind*. And I have since re-read most of them several times. One, however, eluded me, and it was considered by many to be his best. Now that I have read *Old Calabria* in the new Peregrine series (Penguin Books, 12s. 6d.) I am inclined to share that view. "If there is a better book of travel in English," said Professor R. M. Dawkins, "I do not know it."

But *Old Calabria* is more than a book of travel. As Mr. John Davenport says in his introduction: in Douglas, "The scholar, the scientist and the sceptic merge into the man who was a great lover of life, who could communicate his passion with a unique blend of high spirits and objectivity." The book is a communication of that passion for life, in a much healthier way than anything of Lawrence's; of that "unique blend." If this "corner of Magna Graecia is a severely parsimonious manifestation of nature, rocks and waters," Douglas saw those rocks and waters as "the stuff whereof man is made." "From these brown stones that seam the tranquil Ionian, from this gracious solitude, he can carve out, and bear away into the cheerful din of cities, the rudiments of something clean and veracious and wholly terrestrial—some tonic philosophy that shall foster sunny mischiefs and farewell regret."

It is a tribute to Douglas's greatness—and I believe he had greatness—that the effect of his book is akin to the effect of those very rocks and waters—and people—themselves. The above description applies to *Old Calabria* as well as *Old Calabria*. Indeed, Douglas's amazing classical and scientific learning illuminates the multifarious items his eye lights upon; he is able to uncover "the ever-changing layers of culture one encounters, their wondrous juxtaposition." And, aided by his delicious sense of humour, he is able perfectly—or as near perfectly as possible—to blend sympathetic and critical observation.

Of course, he could be angry. About the "torturing" of pines, for instance, "till they look like paint-brushes

that had been out all night." Or about the torturing of men, and with the enthusiastic connoisseurs who "dwell lovingly" upon the artistic quaintness of churches, but "forget the grovelling herd that reared them, with the lash at their backs," or the "gargoyle" type of humanity "that has since grown up under their shadow and influence."

He preferred "return to the sun and stars." Yet religion, as a human phenomenon, had a fascination for him, and a great deal of *Old Calabria* is devoted to it. He visited Sant' Angelo (where the Archangel Michael alighted "during his first flight to Western Europe") and entered the cave-sanctuary while divine service was taking place to the accompaniment of "cheerful operatic airs from an asthmatic organ." It was a weird scene, and "damply hot, as in an orchid-house." But "the aroma cannot be described as a floral emanation: it is the *bouquet*, rather, of thirteen centuries of unwashed and perspiring pilgrims." In places like this, Douglas tells us, "one understands the uses, and possibly the origin, of incense." And he muses that cave-worship is older than any god or devil. "It is the cult of feminine principle . . ." He sees a phallic pillar worn smooth by women wishing to become mothers and remarks that in England "pillars with contrary effect would be more popular among the fair sex."

He muses, too, on the "saccharine deterioration" of deities. He sees the Italian Madonna (and there is no doubt that she is *worshipped*) growing "more childishly smirking every day," while her Son "has doffed all the serious attributes of manhood and dwindled into something not much better than a doll." As for the "Creator of all things and the Holy Ghost," they have "evaporated"; they are "too intangible and non-human." The southern Italian Trinity, then, consists of Mother, Father (St. Joseph) and Child — with St. Anne "looming in the background," the grandmother being an important personage in the patriarchal family. But the religious observances of the people as a whole are a "jumble of contradictions and incongruities, lightly held and as lightly dismissed." The people are like little children, "so saturated with Bible stories and fairy tales that they cease to care whether a thing be true or false, if it only amuses for



the moment." The consequences of such innocence may, however, be far from amusing.

Saints, of course, abound, and Joseph of Copertino — the flying monk — has a chapter to himself. And if some of the incidents "may smack of childishness to a certain austere type of northern Puritan," who would not be "disposed to see the bright side of things" under the sunny sky of Italy? All the same, Douglas feels it would be disingenuous to slur over one little detail. St. Joseph was weak-minded. But has not the founder of his order, St. Francis himself, been accused of mental disorder because, "with touching humility," he undressed and "presented himself naked before his Creator?"

"What are we to conclude therefrom?" asks the ironic Norman Douglas. We can only conclude — as he intends us — by agreeing with the description of St. Francis as mentally disordered; agreeing with Douglas that the majority of these southern saints are "distinguished from the vulgar herd by idiosyncracies" which modern physicians term gynophobia, glossolalia and demonomania." There is a deplorable lack of originality in saints.

Demonology is widespread in the "toe" of Italy, oriental beliefs having commingled with those of the West. And there are dragons here, as everywhere else. They also get a chapter, and prompt the author to theorise on their origins. He believes the dragon to be the "personification of life within the earth — of that life which, being unknown and uncontrollable, is *eo ipso* hostile to man." Far-fetched? Douglas grants that it might be, but his argument is persuasive. Medieval dragons, of course, are absurd. But alas, "How many noble shapes acquired a tinge of absurdity in the Middle Ages!"

Douglas has often been called a pagan. In truth, he was an atheist and freethinker, but there were naturally many things about Paganism that he admired. It had vigour, beauty, love of life. By contrast, Christianity was weak and pitiful. The eunuch and the beggar were "the true Christian or Buddhist," while the much-boasted doctrine of loving and forgiving one's enemies was "based on sheer funk." Beauty he detected in a small Hellenistic statuette of Eros and Aphrodite. On the other hand, he aptly summed up many Byzantine productions as "more marvellous than beautiful."

Norman Douglas already saw that priests were becoming "mere decorative survivals . . . not taken seriously save in their match-making and money-lending capacities"; mostly good fellows who would rather (under the influence of Voltaire?) "cultivate their own potatoes than quarrel about vestments or the Trinity," but "violently acquisitive, of course, like most southerners."

Here, then, is something of *Old Calabria*. I have tried to capture something of its richness, its diversity, its humanity, as Norman Douglas so beautifully captured the spirit — the physical spirit, to be paradoxical — of the land itself. Something of that "wholly terrestrial," "tonic philosophy."

#### WITHOUT COMMENT

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