

The Freethinker

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FOR SOME YEARS there has been considerable discussion of the need for each man to commit himself firmly to some set of beliefs; to commit himself because this is necessary for making choices for individual and social action, and to give meaning to responsibility, if not to the whole of life. There is a different position, equally cogent, that can achieve these same goals, and in reaching them provides other consequences that make this position more attractive to me.

It is crucial to my discussion to distinguish several kinds of commitment. Each corresponds to the kind of belief that one commits himself to. Beliefs are of the following sorts: (1) those that are justified by sufficient evidence. I call these *rational* beliefs or knowledge because reasonable decisions about them can be made with the available sufficient evidence. (2) Beliefs that do not have sufficient evidence for or against them. Usually there is some evidence for and some against but not sufficient to settle the issue. I call these *arational* beliefs or opinions. (3) Beliefs that are imagined to be true but in fact sufficient evidence against them exists. Such beliefs I call *irrational*. They are what we ordinarily call superstitions. It is doubtful that a person would hold such a belief and also be aware of the sufficient evidence against it. What usually happens is that a person holds an irrational belief and is not aware of the evidence against it. There is a fourth sort of belief, distinct from these three, namely, those beliefs for which the question of evidence is totally irrelevant. Such beliefs have no evidence, not because we cannot know it but, rather because the question of evidence is not a part of their meaning. These I call *non-rational*.

Some examples may illustrate my abstract definitions: (1) most scientific beliefs are rational. Hence our concern with careful formulation, data and experimentation. (2) Many metaphysical and theological beliefs are arational; hence the continuing debate without their resolution. They make the very best subjects for philosophical discussions which can go on and on until people grow tired and go to bed. What fun or social function could a philosophical discussion serve if we could adjourn to a laboratory and settle the issue? (3) The beliefs of cults, quacks and witch doctors are usually irrational. We all have a few of our own so don't laugh and suppose it's only the other guy. (4) Non-rational beliefs are found in ethics, aesthetics, religion and matters of taste. But I do not hold that all beliefs in these areas are non-rational. There can be evidence relevant to many of them and in my view it is important to base these subjects on evidential beliefs.

This classification of beliefs destroys a false dichotomy that divides all beliefs into rational and irrational. Assuming the false dichotomy, the usual gambit is to show that evidence is insufficient among some contending beliefs and hence we're all on the same boat and one is as good as another. Then we are free to commit ourselves to any one and in order to act we must commit ourselves to some one. It is precisely this kind of commitment that I think

is mistaken and the way to eliminate it is to expose the false dichotomy it is based on.

By clarifying the different types of beliefs, it is possible to argue that one should commit himself to beliefs of one sort while refusing to commit himself to other sorts. But what sorts? The answer follows from a consideration of the consequences of a commitment. I mean the effects on the holder himself and the effects on others for whom the person so committed is responsible. For example, in a first degree murder trial persons on the jury must commit themselves to a belief of guilty or innocent. Vastly different consequences ensue from one or the other. I think it is clear that a commitment is justified only on a rational belief, that is, one for which there is sufficient evidence. Lacking this, no commitment should be nor need be made. By sufficient evidence I do not mean certain evidence. If we had to meet this demand no jury could commit itself to a decision.

My position is that the only justified and sane commitment to ask of men is with respect to a rational belief, one with sufficient evidence. For if we commit ourselves to any other sort of belief we are responsible for the consequences which we do not foresee. It is, I think, irresponsible to commit oneself to a responsibility whose consequences are not known.

The Will to Believe

William James in his classic essay¹ on this problem, "The Will to Believe", has a vivid description of this position.

The talk of believing by our volition seems, then, from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile. When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations; what patience and postponement, what choking down of preference, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar; how absolutely impersonal it stands in its vast augustness—then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smokewreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream! Can we wonder if those bred in the rugged and manly school of science should feel like spewing such subjectivism out of their mouths?

James does not accept this. He holds that we are justified in commitment to beliefs other than rational. So we must meet his arguments. He expressed his view in these words,

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open", is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.

¹ *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 1896, reprinted by permission of Paul R. Reynolds. The complete address is in *Essays on Faith and Morals*, New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1943.

— VIEWS and OPINIONS —

Commitment

— By PAUL F. SCHMIDT —

By a genuine option James means one that is living, forced and momentous. It is living as opposed to dead if both sides could be seriously entertained by you, that is, both have some appeal to you. To be a Christian or an Agnostic is living, while to be a Theosophist or a Manichean is dead. It is forced if you cannot avoid choosing one or the other, as is the case in any mutually exclusive alternatives. It is momentous if the option is unique, significant and irreversible. For example, the option we faced some years ago as to whether or not to promote research, design and test of the hydrogen bomb is genuine in James's sense. Both answers could be seriously entertained and make some appeal. No other alternative is available and in the light of the competitive world situation, at that time, it was unique, significant and irreversible. You may argue that it was not really unique and irreversible. We could change our mind. But given the context of world affairs at that time, most would agree that it was practically unique and irreversible. In addition to most options of this sort James held that religious choices were also genuine but evidence was insufficient and therefore we are justified in deciding them without evidence—by what he calls the *passional nature*.

There are a number of reasons why I cannot agree with James. First, I think that very few options are genuine in all respects. To prove this is a matter of dissecting individual cases, but in general I do not see why the choice to believe or disbelieve some religion is unique and irreversible even though significant. People do change their beliefs about many religious doctrines. James slips, I think, into equating momentous to merely significant, forgetting that it must also be unique and irreversible according to his own definition.

Ethical Options

Ethical decisions do not seem to me to be genuine *passional options* in his sense because we can design ethical systems that have evidence for rational decisions and therefore we need not have recourse to our *passional nature*. In systems where such evidence is lacking the proper move is not James's *passional decision* but rather to discard the system as inadequate. James asks us to allow any old systems and hence notice that we must act *passionally*. But this is not necessary. The way to avoid his *passional genuine option* is to show that a more basic option concerning the systems themselves is available. It is also the case that many people find themselves faced with making a *passional choice* because they have not taken the trouble to think through the basis of their ethical action beforehand. That's tough luck, but again the situation could be avoided.

Second, it seems to me that in moral and religious options, we need not equate making no decision with making a negative or positive decision as James does. If I am asked to accept or reject this moral or religious principle and live by it, by making no decision I indicate my unwillingness in the face of insufficient evidence to either live or not live by it. This is a third option.

Choice Without Commitment

It begins to look as if the class of commitments that are genuine options to be decided by our *passional nature* is very small. They consist of mutually exclusive individual overt acts that cannot be reversed and whose consequences cannot be foreseen with sufficient evidence. For example: "A person starts driving down a steep hill unknown to him; the brakes fail; when he tries to shift into low gear, the gears strip. He is then faced with the option of jumping out or staying in".² No decision is a

² C. J. Ducasse: *A Philosophical Scrutiny of Religion*, Ronald Press, 1953, p. 164. New York.

decision to stay in. He does not know the consequences of either choice so his *passional nature* must decide.

But does it make any sense to talk of commitment in such cases? A person doesn't commit himself to either side in the sense that commitment means to pledge, to bind, to give in trust, to freely choose and be responsible for. The poor man mentally flips a coin and gambles, or psychological disposition toward passive or active response decides. But surely such condition-response is not what we mean by commitment. If this is what some people mean by *passional commitment* their language is very misleading. Let us call a thing what it is: gambling, pure chance, or condition-response. If what James calls a *genuine passional option* is limited to such cases, as I have tried to show, then we have to conclude that he is wrong: commitments on a *passional basis* are not necessary.

I have distinguished different kinds of commitments with respect to different kinds of beliefs and argued that justified commitments be restricted to beliefs that have sufficient evidence since there is no necessity for commitments of the *passional sort*. Restriction of commitment to beliefs with sufficient evidence is the only intelligent position if we are to accept responsibility for our choice.

Tentative Commitment

There is another important perspective from which we can divide commitments. This relates not to the kind of belief involved but rather to the degree of probability of the belief. Some people feel that unless we can commit ourselves to a certainty, we lose the psychological force required for resolute, decisive action. Even if the belief cannot theoretically be established as certain we must commit ourselves as if it were. They argue that if what we commit ourselves to is thought of as only probable, we lose the basis for firm decisive action. Look at those men who have worked great changes in man's life. Wasn't their effectiveness due in part to their unshakable conviction that they were right? After you have weighed all the available evidence, the time comes for commitment, and this, they say, is an all or none affair. Unless you commit yourself this way or that, you cripple your ability to make decisions when decision is crucial for ongoing activity. We cannot wait till all the evidence is in for it probably never will be. Commitment is, for them, the psychological mechanism whereby they bridge the gap between lack of full evidence and the need for decisive action. Having learned to bridge the gap with commitment they soon forget the lack of evidence and manifest attitudes of certainty, tenacity and authority. The commitment without reservation is a delusion based on an erroneous view of knowledge.

If it is the case that reliable methods of knowing cannot yield certain conclusions, as seems to me clear from a study of ways of knowing, then why fool ourselves with commitments that function as if certain? Two kinds of commitments emerge: *tentative* and *tenacious*. A commitment is tentative when a person is ready to recognise other commitments as genuine possibilities and to change his own as the evidence shifts. This involves realising that what he thinks is true or good, and what he takes responsibility for, may be wrong. A commitment is tenacious when the insufficiency of evidence is cast aside as detrimental to successful behaviour, when genuine reservations are forgotten, when faith substitutes for evidence and people say: "we must trust in this or that" you can bet that tentative commitments are being cast out as detrimental to some particular principle.

But if knowledge is only probable, then tenacious commitments are delusions and create social and ideological

(Concluded on page 364)

The Jewish View of the Testament

By "AKIBA"

CONTROVERSY OVER the historicity of Jesus and the reliability of the New Testament, has been characterised, as Mr. F. A. Ridley has said, more by the degree of heat it has engendered than the amount of light it has shed. This is inevitable in a situation where the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of pastors, priests and Church officials is dependent on the perpetuation and propagation of a largely mythical account of what transpired nearly 2,000 years ago. It is a pity nevertheless, that sufficient attention has not been given to sources other than the immediate-Christian post-New Testament writings, for possible information about the origin of Christianity.

Two valuable books by a Unitarian scholar of great repute do provide the intelligent and informed critic of the Christian "story" with such new non-Christian sources. The author is R. Travers Herford—best known for his work on *The Pharisees*. His two other works—*Judaism in the New Testament Period* (published in 1928 by the Lindsey Press) and the earlier *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (published in 1903 by Williams and Norgate) have been sadly neglected by Christian and non-Christian scholars.

Travers Herford makes the general point referred to above, in his preface to *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, namely that: "The great host of books which have been written upon the early history of Christianity have, amidst all their differences, one characteristic in common. They are almost entirely based upon the study of Christian documents. This, of course, is natural, and no investigation which should neglect those documents would lead to results of any value. But the field of inquiry is not exhausted when the Christian literature has been thoroughly explored. There is a Jewish literature that also needs to be examined. Considering that historically, Christianity is an outgrowth from Judaism, and that the Judaism with which the origin of Christianity was contemporary was the Judaism not of the prophets but of the Rabbis, it is obvious that the Rabbinical literature must also be consulted if a thorough investigation into the origin of Christianity is to be made".

The Talmudists inherited from their forefathers a genius for allusion, for obscure remarks which only the initiated could understand. During long periods of persecution, great care had to be taken to conceal the hidden meaning of passages offensive to non-Jewish beliefs of the time. The Christian era brought about redoubled efforts by Christian missionaries and ecclesiastical authorities to expunge passages in the Talmud which were felt to be offensive to the Christian Establishment. The Talmudists, and the later Rabbinic commentators, had, therefore, to take extra precautions to bury any tradition that might possibly have a bearing on Jesus or Christianity under a thick layer of crossed (deliberately) historical references and allusions—to protect themselves from Christian inquisitors.

Travers Herford brings out some twenty passages on subjects ranging from the birth and parentage of Jesus to his trial and execution. All these passages taken together do tend to support the view of the historicity of a composite Jesus, as it were. Two quotations will illustrate the difficulty of deciphering the hidden meaning of certain Talmudic passages:—

b. *Sanh.* 106. Rabbi Johanan said concerning Balaam—an allusion to Jesus: "In the beginning a prophet, in the

end a deceiver". Rabbi Papa said, "This is that which they say, she was the descendant of princes and rulers, she played the harlot with carpenters".

The reference to Mary's playing the harlot with carpenters, is probably based on some obscure hearsay or gossip generated by persons interested in debunking the Messianic claims of the early Jewish-Christians. The passage is therefore not very interesting or informative.

However, this cannot be said of two other passages on the execution of Jesus.

b. *Sanh.* 43. And it is tradition: "On the eve of Pesach [Passover] they hung Jeshu [the Nazarene]. And the one went forth before him forty days (saying) '[Jeshu the Nazarene] goeth forth to be stoned, because he hath practised magic and deceived and led astray Israel. Anyone who knoweth ought in his favour, let him come and declare concerning him'. And they found naught in his favour. And they hung him on the eve of Pesach. Ulla says, 'Would it be supposed that [Jeshu the Nazarene] a revolutionary, had aught in his favour?' He was a deceiver, and the Merciful hath said (Deut. 13, 8), Thou shalt not spare, neither shalt thou conceal him! But it was different [with Jeshu the Nazarene] for he was near to the Kingdom".

It is significant that here there is no tradition of a crucifixion only of a stoning. The reference to Jeshu the Nazarene as being "near the Kingdom" is difficult and obscure in the extreme.

Another passage is more revealing from the same volume of *Sanhedrin*. It reads: "Rabbi Meyer used to say, What is the meaning of [Deut. 21, 23], For a curse of God is he that is hung? (It is like the case of) two brothers, twins, who resembled each other. One ruled over the whole world, the other took to robbery. After a time the one who took to robbery was caught, and they crucified him on a cross. And everyone who passed to and fro said 'It seems that the King is crucified'. Therefore it is said, A curse of God is he that is hung".

The parallel with the Barabbas story is interesting, but perhaps much more intriguing is the suggestion that it was Barabbas and not Jesus who was crucified, a sort of substitution hinted at in the statement that "It seems that the King is crucified". The persistence of the ancient Docetist heresy where Christ was not in fact, crucified but only his "umbra", a sort of phantasm (as Marcion explained it), tends to support the view that a tradition existed where not Christ but a substitute or a phantasm was crucified. The Barabbas story—the Hebrew name being son of the father—gives some weight to this line of argument.

R. Travers Herford's works together with his study of Judaism in the New Testament period have yet to be properly studied in the scheme of New Testament criticism and scholarship.

The general conclusions to which scholars appear to converge are the following: there was a historical Jesus, or more likely, there was a tradition based on the lives of a number of early Jewish preachers. Some of this is preserved in the Gospels. Another "Jesus", the Pauline Jesus, had nothing in common with the "rival" Jewish-Christian (Ebionite) tradition, which died out in Palestine before the end of the 3rd century. It is in this sense that the Christ of the present-day Christians can be safely said to be mythical. And in this sense alone.

This Believing World

There was a time when it was a holy disgrace to leave the Church, especially to throw overboard such a God-like vocation as being a nun or monk. Think of the way Rome treated poor Maria Monk during the days when her story proved such a best seller, and was read in Protestant homes all over England last century, or the vindictive way God's own Church treated Joseph McCabe after he had left it. Nowadays all that happens is that our national newspapers vie with each other in offering the highest fee for the story.

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Here we have "The People" printing the edifying (or is it unedifying?) story of Mr. Noel Collins, once Brother Matthew, a Dominican monk who spent four years in meditation and in the service of God and is now a grocer. He is still a thorough believer, but he could not stand the "discipline and humiliation" of being a monk. Some of his humiliations are very revealing, such as lying down on the floor of his cell with hands outstretched "in the Sign of the Cross". Roman Catholics are always ready to grovel before a priest, so we are not surprised at these kind of apostolic postures, which are about as holy as if they were done for a Zulu witch doctor. But we always thought that monks *enjoyed* doing them!

★

We always like to be told why people go to church, and therefore find the weekly article in the *Daily Express* on this subject most revealing. The latest (November 3rd) is by Frank Goldsworthy—whoever he is—and he enthralingly tells us that "there is no special reason" why he will be going to church the following day. Except that he "suddenly realised" that it was far too long since he last went to church "without a special reason". We just love Mr. Goldsworthy. He does not waste any time in dragging in "our Lord" and the way Jesus died on the Cross to save him and the world.

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In fact, he never mentions Jesus or the famous miracles or even any Christian "uplift" which we are so often told takes place as soon as one crosses the sacred threshold. This must have struck him also for, at the end of his particularly boring article, he admitted that he was going to church "to offer a prayer and maybe an apology". An apology to whom or to what? We are not told, but it ought to be to the *Express* readers.

★

Whether Almighty God forgives careless driving or not we have no means of knowing, but the Plymouth magistrates certainly do not. They fined the Rev. J. Jones £5 the other week for careless driving, though he protested that at the time he was humming the well-known anthem, *When God of old came down from Heaven*, and then, after a crash, he found himself in hospital with a fractured skull. It amazes us that the Lord does not look after his own, but there it is recorded—a very unspiritual fine of £5 and all through humming a hymn.

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Do pennies rain from heaven? The "Daily Sketch" (October 11th), thought so, for it reported that for some weeks past showers of coppers fell regularly outside a butcher's shop in Margate—the butcher himself collecting "five bob", though naturally nothing happened on a Sunday—probably because the shop was shut. Father Hull—of a nearby church—thinks the shower was meant for him and is probably "conscience money". We regret that his share so far was only *three-halfpence*.

Nobody knows of course when the birth of Jesus really took place, though it is accepted that December 25th is probably right because so many other gods, including Mithras, were born on that date. That being the case, it must be right for Jesus. But when was Jesus crucified? Well, nobody knows this either, so it has to be reckoned as a "solar" date and therefore moves about with the sun. Will the Vatican, however, agree to a "fixed" date like (we think) the Church of England? Nobody so far knows. Nor does anybody know what are the final views of all the other 229 Christian Churches. Even on such a little thing, there appears to be no unity.

COMMITMENT

(Concluded from page 362)

reluctance to change.

The consequences of tentative commitments, on the other hand, are not destructive but beneficial. They encourage continued inquiry and re-evaluation of the commitment. They allow for a change of position and shift in responsibility without a sense of guilt or loss of face. They eliminate head-on collisions between tenacious commitments hence they encourage calm, dispassionate disagreement. Tentative commitments imply that when we make a commitment it be so planned that we can shift our position in the light of new evidence. This allows us to change a commitment formerly thought correct and to partly right the injustice. For example: tentative commitment implies, I think, that capital punishment is wrong. For in capital punishment we commit ourselves to an irreversible decision that we cannot change with later evidence. We act as if we had certain knowledge and we do not. I suspect that a large part of the feeling of guilt stems from making irreversible decisions on the basis of tenacious commitments. Then one has to invoke outside help to remove the feeling of guilt and a lot of monkey-business may follow. Tentative commitment minimises this undesirable effect.

In addition to these advantages, tentative commitment performs all the tasks that tenacious commitment does. It enables one to make choices, fosters a sense of responsibility and gives meaning to life. As the changing pattern of history proceeds into the future, reasonable changes in commitments can keep step. So the quest for certainty in the realm of commitment should be given a decent burial. There is no basis for it in knowledge and we do not need it for action.

BBC BROADCAST

WE HAVE RECEIVED many requests for the printing of Colin McCall's defence of Atheism in the BBC "What's the Idea?" programme on October 31st, particularly from Northern and overseas readers who were unable to hear the programme. We are therefore negotiating with the BBC, and with Mr. McCall's two questioners, Father Anthony Kenny and John Wren-Lewis, for permission to publish the discussion.

Mr. McCall would again like to thank the many people who have written to him in connection with the broadcast and wishes to apologise for the inevitable delay in acknowledging the letters.

ECCLESIASTICAL COLLECTION

The Archbishop, immense semi-double flowers, deep purple, 4 ft.; The Bishop, huge rosy-purple blooms, 3 ft.; The Cardinal, deep rose-red, 3 ft.; The Dean, rich carmine-pink, large recurved flowers, 4 ft.; Moderator, large double deep violet-purple blooms; The Sexton, bright clear blue, 3 ft.; The Rector, claret-red, 3 ft.; Chorister, double pure white, 2½ ft. 2s. each; the collection of 8, labelled, for 15s.—Advert for Michaelmas Daisies, *Popular Gardening* (27/10/62).

THE FREETHINKER

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Inquiries regarding Bequests and Secular Funeral Services should also be made to the General Secretary, N.S.S.

Lecture Notices, Etc.

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch NSS (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 NSS (Car Park, Victoria Street), Sunday evenings.

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

North London Branch NSS (White Stone Pond, Hampstead).—Every Sunday, noon: L. EBURY

Nottingham Branch NSS (Old Market Square), every Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

INDOOR

Birmingham Branch NSS (Midland Institute, Paradise Street), Sunday, November 18th, 6.45 p.m.: DR. COLE (Birmingham College of Technology), "Genetics and Society".

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Tuesday, November 20th, 7.30 p.m.: DEBATE—PROF. A. D. MACDONALD and C. R. W. SLATTER, "Are Experiments on Live Animals Justifiable?"

Hornchurch Humanist Society (Red Cross Hall, Westland Ave.), Tuesday, November 20th, 7.45 p.m.: DAVID READ, "The Nature of the Universe", Part 1.

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate), Sunday, November 18th, 6.30 p.m.: B. HAYLETT, "Psychic Phenomena".

Marble Arch Branch NSS (The Carpenter's Arms, Seymour Place, London, W.1), Sunday, November 18th, 7.30 p.m.: LADY VIRGINIA FLEMMING, "Why Religion at School?"

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Sunday, November 18th, 11 a.m.: PROF. T. H. PEAR, "Can English become the International Language?"

Notes and News

PAUL F. SCHMIDT, Ph.D., author of our Views and Opinions this week, is Acting Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. "Commitment" first appeared in the American *Humanist* (Double issue 2/3, 1962), and is reprinted by kind permission of the editor, Dr. Gerald Wendt and of Dr. Schmidt himself.

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HUNDREDS OF SIGNATURES were collected at THE FREETHINKER bookshop for a petition of mercy for Mme. Suzanne Coipel-Vandepuit and her fellow-defendants in the thalidomide baby murder trial at Liège. As it was, the jury—moved by humanity and public opinion rather than strict legality—brought in verdicts of not guilty (a Belgian public opinion pole cited by the *Daily Herald* (5/11/62), revealed 94 per cent in favour of an acquittal). Instead of the petition, therefore, the National Secular Society addressed a letter of congratulation to the Belgian people through their Ambassador in London.

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THE FACT that humaneness is so often subordinated to a vicious creed is the worst of the many evil features of Roman Catholicism. And this has recently been exempli-

fied in connection with another thalidomide baby in the German village of Wald an der Alz, near the Austrian border. The people in this area, *Today* reported (10/11/62), "are great churchgoers . . . But it is religion which has made Wald an der Alz heartless". For over a year, the villagers have conducted a campaign of silence against Rudolf and Johanna Gross, because they have a crippled thalidomide baby girl, Hanni. The people "believe Hanni is a just punishment from God—because her parents do not go to church."

★

DID YOU imagine that the pain had been extracted from Purgatory? The Roman Catholic parishioners of St. Mungo's, Glasgow, can be under no such delusion. "There, in that state of suffering and torture", they were told in their *Bulletin* (Vol. 13, No. 9: Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost), "the Holy Souls pay the price of unforgiving venial sin. There, those souls are detained who have not fully paid the price of temporal punishment due to mortal sins that have already been forgiven . . . In that prison of fire they must suffer until, in Christ's own words, 'they have paid the last farthing'". For them, the *Bulletin* went on, "the day has passed and the night has come. They can no longer merit nor help themselves". But, thank God, the parishioners of St. Mungo's can help them: by prayers, masses and indulgences. "Just now, as you read this, some poor suffering soul waits for you to listen and to pray for them [*sic*]."

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"IN THE FLESH"—wrote Dee Wells in the *Daily Herald* (1/11/62)—the opening of Parliament by the Queen "has a second-act-pantomime-finale look about it that the telly cannot capture". And Miss Wells listed some of the features that TV doesn't reveal: "how absolutely demented the peeresses look at 10.15 a.m. in ball dresses and best quality Moss Bros. white fox"; "how much like Father Christmasses the peers look in their red robes and ermine"; etc. No one is honest about the adoration of the Royal Family, Miss Wells declared. The sophisticated make jokes about it; the unsophisticated pretend to scorn it, but "when the chips are down, everyone toes the line". "It's a pity", she concluded, "but it's a fact: no one can get to the moon, or even not so ambitiously far, in a Cinderella glass coach drawn by six dappled greys".

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THE SAME issue of the *Daily Herald* (1/11/62) reported a photograph of a ghost who was casting a shadow!

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THE REV. E. K. L. QUINE, vicar of Belgrave, Leicester, recently attacked the use by insurance companies of the phrase "act of God", in reference to natural calamity. "We have no grounds for making God the author of violence against those for whom Christ died" (*Leicester Mercury*, 26/10/62). To call such violence an act of God "amounts almost to blasphemy", said the vicar. But why? If God is the author of all, he must be the author of violence. That the phrase "act of God" should be dropped by insurance companies, we agree, but not for Mr. Quine's reason. It is outdated, like the religious belief that lies behind it.

★

HOW MANY golfers are there in the Freethought movement? Mr. J. F. Turner of Curbar, Derbyshire, who asks this question, wonders if there are sufficient to justify the holding of a competition and outing. If so, Mr. Turner is prepared to assist in the organising and has generously consented to present a prize. Will Freethinking golfers then, please write to Mr. Turner c/o this office? It isn't necessary to state handicaps at this stage!

Atheism—Its Nature and Value

By G. L. SIMONS

IT IS a popular trick in argument to exaggerate the claims of an opponent and then to attack the exaggerated version of his position. This form of distortion often characterises debate in the conflict between religious believer and unbeliever. But this form of misrepresentation is more useful to the religious than to the non-religious, since it is difficult to exaggerate the claims of religion.

The believer claims to have *absolute* knowledge, to be aware of an *absolute* morality, and to possess an *absolute* self which is "outside" space and time and which he calls his "soul". The unbeliever makes no such claims, preferring that his statements should have less arrogance and more meaning. He too claims to have knowledge, but defined in a way that admits of improvement. He too claims to possess a morality, but one which aims at human happiness, and which may be modified when social circumstances change. Of an absolute self he knows nothing. Of a feeling, thinking, mortal self he is fully aware.

Hence to exaggerate the claims of the unbeliever is to make them *akin* to a theology which, like all theologies, is bereft of intelligent caution and emotional sobriety. The religious believer rarely realises that by exaggerating the claims of the unbeliever to make them vulnerable they come to resemble a religion.

A further trick often employed by religious debaters consists in associating religious disbelief with some attribute that is universally unpopular. This is done so frequently that it is essential to define the creed of the unbeliever with care, to give the would-be distorters a hard time of it. The words "agnostic" and "atheist" are often used to denote a person who has no religious belief and who often believes that religious belief is unreasonable and evil. Both words however have been given emotional overtones which invest them with an unpleasant connotation when viewed unreflectingly.

The superficial critics of agnosticism claim that it is "fence-sitting", that agnostics lack the courage to opt for either religious belief or atheism, and suggest that the agnostic is a person who, lacking independent judgement, cannot make up his mind. The unthinking critics of atheism claim that it is dogmatic, based on unwarranted assumptions, that the atheist is out-of-date, immature and possessed of superficial judgment. Thus atheism is again made to resemble a theology, a religion in its own right, a dogma and a closed system. A statement of my own position may clarify the position of the unbeliever.

I believe that I am an agnostic since I hold that no knowledge is absolutely certain, that any hypothesis or notion *may* in the future be falsified, that to subscribe either to dogmatic belief in a god or to dogmatic belief that no god exists is equally foolhardy and irrational. On the other hand although I admit the remote possibility of the existence of a god, I think it no more likely than the existence of leprecons, which *may* exist, as may a god. I see no evidence whatsoever of the existence of either. To this extent I am a fervent atheist and I organise my philosophy accordingly. I would thus describe myself as an agnostic without diffidence, or an atheist without dogma. I positively do *not* believe in God, but I do not positively believe in "*Not-God*" since it seems that absolute knowledge is unattainable.

Religious people often gain ground when debating with an over-zealous atheist who gives his atheism the tincture of theology, making it just as irrational. It must be

remembered that the onus is on the religious person to establish what he considers to be objective truths. It is up to the atheist to question the assumptions, to criticise the arguments, to demonstrate the irrationality. The atheist must not be tricked into attempting to establish an alternative dogma—that it is logically impossible for any god to exist.

Thus conceived, atheism is secure; it has rationality and wisdom on its side. It is unwilling to claim absolute truth; but it claims that its definition of truth is the only reasonable one for human beings. And it is ever ready to attack irrationality and cruel moral principles held in the name of dogma. Atheism thus conceived is a philosophy of enlightenment, the hope of the future. For it is capable of inspiring a way of life.

Atheism uses the language of understanding, not of cruel condemnation. It does not insist with music and rhetoric that man is a miserable sinner, that he must grovel and debase himself to achieve salvation. Rather it tries to understand, to realise that when men do wrong it is not because they are born *wicked*, but because they are *human*, with human passion and human intelligence. And it does not debase this passion, detract from this intelligence. It fosters them, causes them to grow, uninhibited by the pious ramblings of remnants from a more ignorant age.

Some religious people say that atheism is empty, devoid of colour and aimless. Only to the poverty-stricken intelligence, the unimaginative soul who is content to cower in the darkness and believe that it is light, is atheism empty. Only to the man who has never sipped the heady wine of intellectual adventure, has never ventured outside the parochial camp of prejudice and pedantry, is atheism colourless. Only to the nervous soul who needs protection from the night, to the visionless who aspire to naught but death, to the doleful, the cowardly, the ignorant, is atheism aimless. But for those with insight, imagination and courage atheism inspires, purges and sets free. For the atheist accepts no authority to restrict his mental activity. No principle is too sacred to be investigated; no person too inviolate to be questioned; no creed too complete to be improved. Atheism liberates the mind as no other creed can liberate. By embracing it, men grow in stature; by denying it, fetter their intelligence and inhibit their emotions.

Religious creeds restrict man's development, create obsessions about sin, death and conscience. Religious creeds bind men to ancient cant, ancient superstition, ancient morality. Religious creeds cripple, impede, destroy intellect and imagination, aiming at the surrender of individuality, the creation of passive uniformity and unthinking obedience. But atheism fosters personality, encourages the growth of independent souls, who are courageous and unafraid to face reality. Atheism holds that humanity is important above all else, and is not prepared to sacrifice human happiness for some undetectable cosmic principle. Atheism values beauty, love and knowledge. Atheism is sanity.

All this I believe; for there is no inconsistency in holding thoughtful, undogmatic opinions with passion.

CHARITY

Convicts in a New York State prison who are aiming to collect 100,000 books of stamps to build a prison chapel—to be called St. Jude within the Walls—have met with a big response from charitable citizens who have sent them their stamps.

—Daily Herald (6/11/62).

Report from Austria

By OTTO WOLFGANG

THE OCTOBER ISSUE of the Austrian broadsheet *Der Kirchenfreie* deals mainly with the Vatican Council and the motives behind it. In a serial on the "Crisis of Christianity" a Vienna illustrated weekly quoted the theologian, Professor Karl Rahner, of Innsbruck, who on the occasion of the Catholic Conference in Salzburg, accused the hierarchy of soft-peddling in the face of modern problems and evading a decision that might clash with tradition. Theology can no longer attract students who, when entering the seminaries, have to leave their reason behind in the cloakroom. The mythical dogma of the Church no longer fits into modern life and is seen as petrified, an odd survival. Austria with hardly 6 million inhabitants has already $\frac{1}{4}$ million without denomination. Rudolf Bultmann—*Der Kirchenfreie* says—is not the only theologian suggesting that Christianity must be de-mythologised.

It also cites a letter in the liberal Swiss paper *Neue Züricher Zeitung* on April 7th, in which a Catholic complained about the puerile content of the Catholic press. So strong was the supporting response from Catholic circles that, a few days later in an editorial, the paper commented that Roman Catholics found it necessary to go to a liberal paper in order to vent grievances which could not be vented in their parochial press. This press, it said, is colourless, faceless, it carries unimportant trash only and is "guided", so that for the important news of the day the reader has to consult the secular press.

The widening discrepancy between faith and reality, says *Der Kirchenfreie*, prompted the Pope to call the Vatican Council, thereby raising high hopes in the hearts of non-Catholic Christians. But how far will these hopes be realised? The touchstone could be the question of the so-called "mixed-marriages", in which the non-Catholic partner has always been at a disadvantage. The Bishop of Munich asserted that only a minority, mainly German Protestants, wanted a compromise on the matter, and said that nothing could be done until the Protestants recognised marriage as a sacrament which cannot be dissolved. "Rome", he declared, "cannot deliver her faithful, without protection, to a non-Catholic partner".

Other suggestions for a more up-to-date footing of the Roman Catholic Church were: greater influence of the laity, more democracy within the hierarchy, rescinding of feudal survivals such as titles, orders, addresses and genuflections, change from the term "Father" to that of "Brother", simplification of the ceremonial, abolition of the *Index*, etc. Members of other Christian denominations, however, may come to the Council only as observers. They will not be allowed to attend all meetings and conferences, let alone have a right to vote or take part in the deliberations. In his Encyclical "*Ad Petri cathedram*" Pope John himself announced the aim of the Council to be a magnificent "*spectaculum*", a show that would so impress the heretical sects that they would ask to be allowed back into the fold.

And the Vatican mouthpiece, *Osservatore Romano*, dampened ideas of modernistic reform by pointing out that the Pope, in an address of October 25th, 1961, stressed that such changes would gravely transgress the sacred constitution given to Holy Church by her divine founder. "It cannot be the aim of the Congress to reform or reconstitute the Church, but merely to reconsider the didactic problems of our times in the light of the Gospels".

L'Osservatore Romano and Radio Vatican called the Stockholm doctors, who helped Mrs. Sherri Finkbine to get rid of a deformed foetus, "murderers and criminals". "Life is always sacred", they sanctimoniously declared.

The current issue of the Austrian broadsheet, *Der Freidenker*, asks the pertinent question whether the Church herself has "always" considered life "sacred". What for instance did she think of the lives of so-called "heretics" and "witches" who were tortured and then quartered or burned alive?

A foetus is not yet able to live independently of the mother; but all the other victims mentioned were, and yet the Church has never protested against the mass destruction of sacred life. She aided and abetted all these crimes when she could have uttered a word of horror. She did not excommunicate Hitler, nor did she tell the members of his *Reichswehr* that their oath of loyalty and obedience was null and void if they were required to commit crimes against humanity. This could have shortened the war and saved many victims.

Yet Catholic Moral Theology shrieks if unborn life is taken to prevent unnecessary suffering. It is despicable in the highest degree.

THEATRE

Stage Witchcraft

The next production at the Mermaid Theatre, London, will be *The Witch of Edmonton*, a 17th century murder story by Thomas Dekker, William Rowley and John Ford. It will be open on Wednesday, November 21st for five weeks, and will be directed by Bernard Miles, with settings by David Myerscough Jones. The play is based on the evidence at the trial of Elizabeth Sawyer, who was executed for witchcraft in 1621, and an extract from this evidence will be included in the Mermaid Theatre programme. During the 15th and 16th Centuries 30,000 people in England were executed for witchcraft; the total for the whole of Europe being 200,000. The idea of writing a play on this particular trial may well have been put forward by John Ford, who studied law before beginning his theatrical career. Thomas Dekker was well known, not only as a playwright but also as a pamphleteer of London life, particularly of the habits and haunts of thieves and vagabonds, while William Rowley had been a leading comedian with several theatrical companies of the day and was almost certainly responsible for the comic scenes in the play. The play is described as "a known true story . . . acted by the Prince's servants often at the Cock-Pit in Drury Lane, once at Court with singular applause". It was last performed in London by the Old Vic Company in 1936.

Incidentally, Londoners who have not seen the superb Royal Shakespeare Company's production of John Whiting's play *The Devils*, based on Aldous Huxley's *Devils of Loudon*, should note that this is definitely due to end its run at the Aldwych Theatre on December 8th.

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CORRESPONDENCE

TRYPHO

I feel compelled to make some comments on Mr. F. A. Ridley's article (2/11/62). My boyhood was spent in a small Jewish town in Lithuania, where we always referred to Jesus rather contemptuously as Yohuë-Pand'ra. I must confess I had no idea why at the time, but when I went to study the Talmud at the *Yeshiva* (Seminary) I realised that it had some connection with the section in Tractate Sabbath of the Babylonian Talmud known as *Toldoth Yeshuah*, the history of Joshua Ben Pandira. I then understood that this Joshua was confused with the Jesus of the Gospels. Historical perspective meant very little to us.

I do not think that the Rabbis of the Talmud ever heard of Jesus or Christianity until the end of the 1st century. They then dismissed it as another of those fringe sects, and Jesus as another of the numerous impostors or pseudo-Messiahs.

However, I must add a corrective to Mr. Ridley's contention about the non-historicity of Trypho—or more correctly, Tryphon. There is a Rabbi named Tarfon mentioned in the Talmud, and this is the Jewish way of spelling the name. He was a younger contemporary of the great Rabbi Akiba of the 2nd century, and belonged to a wealthy family. It was not at all uncommon among wealthy families to use Greek names. There was even a Rabbi named Aristobulus.

I agree with Mr. Ridley that the Jesus of the Gospels is a composite character, and that there is not sufficient evidence for or against a human Jesus. But what seems clear to me, especially since the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls is that a human Jesus was no necessity for the appearance and development of Christianity.

J. ROSSE.

THE REAL ISSUE?

So the Archbishop of Canterbury gives the National Secular Society a pat on the back because "there is a great deal of difference between people like you who accept moral principles and seek the truth and the completely materialist atheism derived from Marx". Just so! The Churches do not really fear atheism as such, for two reasons: 1. Atheism divorced from class politics can be a prolonged series of disputations between scholars in which, fortunately or unfortunately, the vast majority of people are not interested. 2. Because Atheism or any species of Free-thought as expounded by the National Secular Society is not necessarily opposed to bourgeois property relationship. Atheists can be Tory, Liberal, Labour or Communist. Tory, Liberal or Labour Atheism offers no challenge to the property basis of religion. Communist Atheism, on the contrary does just that! Hence the "holy hatred" against Godless Communism! The Archbishop of Canterbury has clarified the real issue. It has been said even in THE FREETHINKER: "The Church of England would sacrifice 38 of its 39 articles rather than 1% of its income"! This, alone, gives enlightenment to those who wish to understand the nature of the present world-wide conflict on the political and social fields. Some 40 years ago Bishop William Montgomery Browne in America posed this question when he, on becoming a Marxist, stated: "We must abolish God from the skies and Capitalists from the Earth". He knew that God and his Churches had an economic foundation! After all Christianity had no strength until Constantine gave it the solid foundation of, economic, political and military might. No religious or political idea can flourish without the commanding heights of economy at its service! A denial of this is a denial of materialist philosophy.

CHARLES DORAN.

LITTLE PROSPECT

Despite our indifferent reception, here in the North country, Mr. Colin McCall's defence of atheism made very interesting listening on the radio.

Of course, the problem of pain so-called is not a problem at all to the atheist but simply a fact of experience. Suffering of sentient creatures, in one form or another, is part of the natural economy. Ethics have no place in nature; they are peculiar only to man. Though it grieves us perhaps sorely, we live in a world of suffering, and for much of it there is none whom we atheists can condemn. Man-inflicted suffering is another thing, or pain that we are in a position to prevent.

It is natural for human beings to cast around for explanations. In our practical everyday lives we do this as a matter of common-sense routine, but we extend the practice to quite insoluble things. Although the problem fascinates the mind, I give it as my opinion that we shall never know the origin and meaning of the universe—if, in fact, origin and meaning it has. The ultimate source of matter and motion will ever, I submit, be a riddle into which it is profitless to inquire. With finite minds bounded by finite experiences we reach out to understand the infinite. Science can tell us so much and no more. As we are not supermen, so it

will always be. The human race, I hold, is one of nature's extraordinary experiments; but we are, set against the forbidding mightiness of the cosmos, insignificant beings indeed, individually and collectively.

Atheist though I am, I confess I am one of those not greatly impressed by man's technological achievements when his moral development and control over himself lag so far behind. To be master of his destiny man needs to be master of himself, and in the modern world I see very little prospect of this.

G. I. BENNETT.

RELIGIOUS AND SCIENTIFIC STAMPS

As a German-born Canadian I give special attention to the postage stamps on the letters I receive from West Germany. Unfortunately there are many stamps with pictures of religious people (a bishop, a saint, etc.) and of silly relics such as the "holy cloth" in Trier. Among the recent religious propaganda of the West German Postal Ministry is a stamp commemorating an anniversary of a Bible institute, and another one for a "Catholics' Day" on which one can read some nonsense about "belief" (not "knowledge") and "thanking" (not "thinking").

Recently, at the university, I received a scientific book from a research institute in the Soviet Union and saw a stamp for six kopeks with a picture which seemed familiar. When I deciphered the Russian letters, I read: "Robert Koch, German microbiologist".

Other German immigrants here, whom I told of this, thought that Germans must be ashamed that West Germany, on official stamps, gives the world the impression of a disturbing regression into the dark Middle Ages. The impression of reason and progress is made by the Russians, who commemorate scientific achievements and such people as the great German scientist and helper of mankind, Robert Koch, on their postage stamps which go all over the world.

C. H. BUBECK (Toronto).

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