

# The Freethinker

Volume LXXXII—No. 51

Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

Price Sixpence

## A Christmas Broadcast

By PROSPER ALFARIC (Translated by C. Bradlaugh Bonner)

ON THIS DAY Christians of many sorts celebrate the anniversary, as they believe, of the Nativity of Jesus during the night preceding the 25th of December. Early Christians did not know as much. Save for a few texts of a very doubtful quality, ecclesiastical literature of the first three centuries is perfectly silent on this important matter. Moreover the first attempts to fix dates for Jesus concerned other points in the liturgic years and met with acute scepticism. Clement of Alexandria, one of the most learned Christians of his time (c. 150-215), made fun of those wise men who tried to guess the day on which The Word became Flesh, and he notes that their rash reckonings varied from April 18th to May 29th (*Stromateis, Miscellanies, 1, 21*).

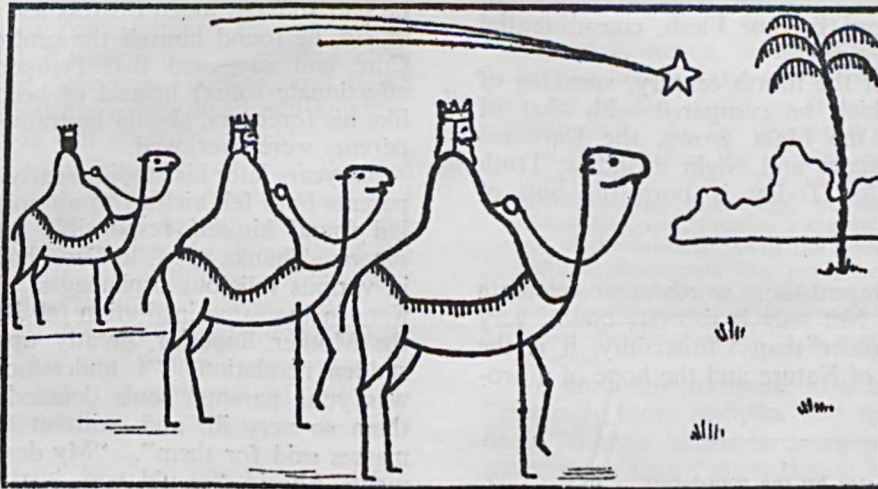
### Easter

The faith of the early Christians was focused on the death of their god, who in human form was sacrificed that men might be for ever blessed. This was placed at Easter, for that was the season when gods were sacrificed, e.g. Osiris, Attis, etc. Christians were, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2, 2, "not to know anything . . . save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" and, according to the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, like Melchisedek, "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life" (7, 3), who had been, as revealed to John on Patmos, the Lamb of God sacrificed for the salvation of the elect.

### Epiphany

A time came when men wondered how the god came down to man, and how he taught them the way to salvation. The answer was forthcoming in the Gospels. This divine apparition was termed in Greek an Epiphany (manifestation). Not a few ancient deities manifested themselves, and often these manifestations were celebrated by festival. The Christians were not to be behind the pagans, and began to celebrate the Epiphany of their divinity. This would seem to have been done first among the Gnostics, for it is first heard of among the followers of Basilides in Egypt. The Gnostics were numerous and active in the Orient, but not accepted in Rome. They joined to an excessive spiritualism a contempt for all material pleasures, and a marked anti-semitism, for they

repudiated Moses and the Prophets, in fact the whole Jewish Bible; whereas in second century Rome the Christians were largely of Jewish origin. When the gnostic Marcion came from Asia Minor to Rome to preach his doctrines, he was bitterly opposed and finally excommunicated in 144 AD. As the Gospel which he used was that



now allotted to Luke, an unknown hand added to that gospel interpolations to bring it into line with Catholic teaching. In particular were added the first two chapters, in which is related the birth of the Son of God, prepared by that of his forerunner John the Baptist and announced to the Virgin by the Archangel Gabriel, at Bethlehem, the cradle of the race of David, whose

kingdom the divine child was mystically to restore. About the same time the Gospel of St. Matthew was composed, which tells of the divine birth followed almost immediately by the arrival of the Magi.

### Christmas Day

In neither of these narratives is any date indicated. How then did it come about that December 25th was chosen? We know from precise texts that the worshippers of the Sun celebrated the Birth of the Sun on December 25th. A calendar of an astrologer, Antiochus, written in Lower Egypt about 200 AD, after giving much information as to the stars, refers to December 25th as "The Nativity of the Sun: light will increase". In fact this is the day of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, after which the days lengthen. It is not surprising, then, that men should have looked upon this date as one of peculiar importance, worthy of much feasting and jollity.

### Sun Worship

This cult of the Sun was very ancient and widespread. About 200 AD it took, particularly in Syria, new forms adapted to the developing civilisations. At Emesa (today Homs) north of Damascus, there was a celebrated temple served by an hereditary priesthood. A woman of this priestly family married the Emperor Septimius Severus, an African, and became Empress under the name of Julia Domna, doing what she could to advance the Sun cult. Her nephew, who became Emperor at the age of fourteen, was named Heliogabalus, or Elagabal, after the Sungod,



and each year he celebrated December 25th with the utmost splendour. After his murder, his cousin Alexander Severus, who succeeded him, endeavoured to bring all the Roman cults into line with that of the Sun, which was the Intermediary of the One and Only Supreme God, the Sovereign Master of Heaven. This "monotheism" was continued under the next dynasty, and the Emperor Aurelian consecrated a splendid temple on December 25th, 274. The Sun Mediator was also Mithras, the Persian deity, the Unconquered Champion against the Powers of Darkness, who was the god of the soldiers. Mithras, the Unconquered Sun, was the rival of Jesus Christ.

### Compromise

If you cannot destroy your enemy, compromise. The Early Fathers borrowed the titles of Mithras and gave them to their Christ. They also took over the Sunfeast, and the Nativity of the Sun was hailed as the Nativity of Jesus Christ. It is difficult to say just when December 25th became currently celebrated as the birthday of Christ, but it was probably during the reign of Constantine, who like his father was a worshipper of the Unconquered Sun all through his life, even when he professed belief in the Word become Flesh, consubstantial with the Father.

An Italian preacher of the fourth century, speaking of the Christian Noel, which he compared with that of Mithras, said "Today, the Light grows, the Darkness fades; the Day comes apace and Night dwindles; Truth triumphs over Error; for Today is born the Sun of Justice".

### Hope

We Freethinkers can repeat those words as we celebrate the 25th of December. Not only is this day one of very ancient solemnity, far older than Christianity, it is the moment of the renewal of Nature and the hope of a progress without end.

#### A few notes by the translator:

The Rev. Prof. E. O. James in *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals*, p. 229 says that, "the date of the Nativity was a matter of speculation in the opening centuries of the Christian era as no clear indication is given in the gospels when it occurred. Even the year is uncertain, leave alone the month and the day, and no reference exists to the observance of a festival to commemorate the event prior to the fourth century when, in the Philocalian calendar drawn up in Rome in 336, December 25th was set apart for the purpose. In Eastern Europe, January 6th, the Feast of the Epiphany was held in the first instance apparently to celebrate the Baptism of Christ. To this the commemoration of the Nativity was added, especially in Syria, by the middle of the fourth century. According to Usener (*Das Weihnachtsfest, Religions geschichtliche Untersuchungen*) Christmas was kept everywhere on January 6th until in 353 Pope Liberius transferred it to December 25th (the Mithraic *Natalis Solis Invicti*) . . . Between 424 and 456 Christmas was established, and, after being discarded, reappeared between 565 and 578".

Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia in Cyprus in 362 placed the birth of Christ thirteen days after the solstice on the Koreion, which was the day of the birth of Acon from the Virgin Kore. January 6th was celebrated as the birthday of Osiris in Alexandria (the centre of Serapis worship, who was commonly termed Chrestus).

January 5th was a Dionysiac festival.

The Philocalian calendar compiled by Furius Dionysius Philocalus, first edition in 336, second in 354.

Pope Leo the Great, c. 450, condemned Christmas as sun worship. So did St. Boniface nearly three centuries later.

The Emperor Constantine founded Mithraic basilicas throughout his life and was not baptised a Christian till on his deathbed.

## Prosper Alfaric

(May 21st, 1876—March 28th, 1955)

By C. BRADLAUGH BONNER

"THE HOUSE where I was born neighboured the parish church, to which I made my first outing in my mother's arms. Although scarcely able to open my eyes or utter weak wailings, I made there, by the great stone font, a strictly orthodox profession of Christian faith, through the intermediary of a godfather, and, in exchange, received on my innocent head—as yet untroubled by doubt—some drops of holy water to cleanse my soul from the sin of Adam. Somewhat later my mother carried me to the right side of the nave, consecrated to the Holy Virgin, where the women sat, so that I might take part in the sacred service. When I was able to walk I proudly accompanied my father to the left side of the nave, which is that of St. Joseph, where sit the men."

So wrote Prosper Alfaric in his autobiography *De La Foi à La Raison* ("From Faith to Reason"). When eleven years of age, on his return from confirmation, for which he had suffered much distress lest he should be in a state of sin, he found himself the centre of interest, for M. le Curé had suggested that Prosperou ("ou" being an affectionate suffix) instead of becoming a farm labourer like his forebears, should be trained as a priest. His pious parents were overjoyed.

Six years later his studies nearly came to an end, for his parents both fell victims to an epidemic of typhoid. The lad found himself responsible for his six brothers and sisters. Thanks to M. le Curé, however, they were placed in various religious orphanages. Two of his sisters who were in the same institution fell ill at the same time, and the Mother Superior, greatly upset, was restored by a sudden revelation. "I understood," she exclaimed, "it was your parents' souls demanding prayers that made them so very ill, and, without delay, I have had two masses said for them". "My dear, good parents," comments Alfaric, "would you, just to obtain prayers, have brought your two little daughters to the brink of the grave? What a strange idea!"

His studies continued with success, and he was eventually appointed Professor of Philosophy at the Bayeux Seminary. From Bayeux he went to Bordeaux, and from Bordeaux to Albi (which gave its name to the Albigenses). Conscientiously applying himself to a course of reading which included Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Kant and Herbert Spencer, he became interested in the ideas of Loisy, and eventually became a "Modernist", till in 1907 the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, i.e. the Inquisition, published a condemnation of Catholic Modernism "*Lamentabile sane exitu*". This led him to discuss his intellectual position with his brother and also with a boyhood friend who had become Canon of Algiers. The brother pointed out to him that he no longer had any faith, that he would lose belief in a god, and could no longer remain in the Church. The Canon was profoundly astonished, yet he told Alfaric, "what I wish to impress on you after the confidence you have made me is that, whatever may happen, I shall not only retain my high esteem for you, but all my friendship, and I shall follow with every sympathetic interest your difficult progress in the course you now plan to undertake".

And this was ever so. They remained the best of friends till the Canon's death. Alfaric had the gift of friendship, and a gentle, unshakable candour which brought in response a like honesty. So with the good wishes of his

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# Contemporary Observations of a Non-Christian

By COLIN McCALL

SOME TIME AGO, Gerhard Rausch, editor of the Dutch Freethought paper, *Bevrijden Denken*, recommended to me a book that he had read in the original German, and which had won a German literature award for outstanding treatment of a historico-cultural theme. *The Future of Unbelief*, by Gerhard Szczesny is now available in a translation by Edward B. Garside (Heinemann, 25s), and I am pleased in turn to recommend it to English readers.

Dr. Szczesny (pronounced Chesney) is Director of Special Programmes for Radio Bavaria, and the first paragraph of his "contemporary observations of a non-Christian" reflects the West German, rather than English social scene. There has not, he says, been "a renaissance of the Christian faith", but there has been "a revival of the secular currency and authority of Christianity". So much so, that, "The writings of a David Friedrich Strauss, a Ludwig Feuerbach or a Friedrich Nietzsche, if published today, in all likelihood would be greeted as a public scandal and give rise to parliamentary protest by all 'Christian' parties". But, if there is no specifically Christian party in English—or American—politics, and if the religious influence in social life is less direct and tangible, the old "world image" is still officially upheld.

In any case, Dr. Szczesny is concerned with Western civilisation as a whole, and with the psychological and social problems that we all face, consequent upon the failure of Christian theology to meet the demands of the times. The problem, for instance, of the "ersatz religions" of the objective kind, like Fascism, Nazism and Communism, developed to fill the gap caused by the breakdown of Christianity. Or the danger—aggravated by "popular tractarians"—that the collapse of religious ideology might be interpreted as a collapse of morality and humanity as well.

As may be inferred from its title, *The Future of Unbelief* is directed more to unbelievers than believers: to "those to whom 'unbelievingness' has become habitual, and from whom a return to Christianity can no longer be expected". The book is, the author says, only anti-Christian in so far as it contests the Christian allegation that the godless man is an inferior man, and the Christian claims to cultural or political dominion. In fact it is completely and unavoidably anti-Christian. Christianity is built on "the three pillars of unreason", God, immortality and free will; it is other-worldly. Christians, says Dr. Szczesny, "seek the conquest of the human, not its fulfilment". Christianity is therefore "diametrically opposed to the humanist concept, according to which mankind's task consists of an unremitting effort to preserve and advance the human factor". And no "Christian humanist" can ever eliminate this conflict. Man must either "find a new way to accommodate his existence to the Christian idea of faith, or rebuild his existence on a non-Christian basis".

As we read about it, says Dr. Szczesny, the history of Christianity's spread through the Mediterranean regions and Europe "seems remarkable indeed", for it is basically anti-objective; and in the long run it has proved incompatible with the European mentality, with its tendency systematically to investigate phenomena. Christianity derives from Judaism, but it was "in a sense, an involuntional event, a going back toward more primitive intuitions". With its borrowings from other religions, it "barbarised" Jewish monotheism, and it preached "an

idealistic morality which taxed mankind beyond its capacity". With its "world-blind and world-hostile" metaphysic, it smothered "Continental man's natural, world-directed inclination". But not completely. And now, "Neither the intellectual rear-guard of Christian revival, nor those who for political reasons make common cause with the Christian church, nor yet peasant elements as yet untouched by the enlightenment process will ever usher in a new medievalism".

Nor can Western man solve his problems by imbibing the "wisdom of the East". We have much to learn from Asia, but the concentration on "finding ways and means of escaping from existence" is not among the lessons of value. This has been responsible for the Asian neglect of the two great fields of Western accomplishment, science and history. In fact, says Dr. Szczesny, "philosophical speculation was pursued so intensively in Asia that no energy or interest was left for objective, physical investigation".

Human existence, in itself, has "meaning and value" to human beings—and certainly to humanists. We must face up to the world as it is, and it has no "other-worldliness". As Dr. Szczesny says:

A metaphysics can develop meaningfully only when a physics is present. The so-called Christian metaphysic is intellectualized mythology, or perhaps a kind of religious metapoetry, which makes a system of positive pronouncements out of the fabrications of the human fantasy. Since objective natural phenomena can never be incorporated into such a system, they become, in this frame of reference, mere objects, or exemplifications, of the absolute. But the physical, in fact, is not merely material; it is also the medium of the metaphysical.

We must also recognise man for what he is. Like all "relatively more complex and refined forms of matter", he is "forever bound to more primitive ones". He can never more than "approximate humanity since with him he carries all the baggage of his pre-humanity". But his specifically human tendencies are "a component of his total nature", and when he loses his humanity he becomes an "un-man, a monster, not an animal". You may call him a "sport" of nature, but then, what new species is not a sport of nature?

Dr. Szczesny rightly has no time for the Christian-evolutionary compromise that man is the "final goal" of nature. Nor, of course, for the animal-plus-soul conception, or any variant of Christian modernism which "hands over man's body to biology in order to have a free hand with his soul". Modern theology makes heroic efforts to accommodate itself to the latest scientific discoveries, but this is mere hocus-pocus. Theology is not a science but "a kind of poetizing, whose business it is to juggle unproved and unprovable speculations, all the while making believe that such speculations have the validity of chemical formulas". Theologians can let their imaginations run riot, as poets do, but when they make statements about the world, we have a right to ask for evidence. And we have a right to make it abundantly clear that, as far as the tripartite theme of God, immortality and free will is concerned, "the facts of the case are not at all what Christians claim them to be".

"Aliveness" and "character" are, as Dr. Szczesny says, "both a function of the elements out of which the organic and characteristics are made".

When the current supplying a magnetic field is shut off, there is no more magnetic field, only a mere formless and  
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## This Believing World

Although the Very Rev. Dr. George F. Macleod is described in the *TV Times* as a Presbyterian, he seemed rather dubious about considering himself one when he came under the searching questions of Mr. Malcolm Muggeridge in the TV "I Believe" programme. We found it quite amusing to see how, as a former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, he dodged some of the more serious aspects of Christian theology pressed by Mr. Muggeridge and, in consequence, he "passed the buck" (so to speak) to Jesus. In fact, Jesus was the great standby of Dr. Macleod, for he was brought in every time he found himself unable to answer anything.

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But the final point in all this was the way in which he plumped for Jesus as being Almighty God himself on earth. There was no doubt about it whatever. The Creator of the millions of mighty galaxies in the Universe came down from "Heaven" as a humble carpenter on our tiny Earth, not only for the sake of Dr. Macleod, but no doubt whatever also for the benefit of Mr. Muggeridge. No other religion but Dr. Macleod's could say as much as that.

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No fewer than 1,000 Church of England buildings have been erected since 1945 (according to the *Daily Mail*, December 4th) and another 1,000 are planned for the next ten years. The cost already has been £17,000,000, but instead of praising God about such a marvellous way of spending money, Miss Judith Scott, the General Secretary of the Council for the Care of Churches, said that in London "the buildings had been put up in haste and with insufficient thought", and she hoped that "future churches would not look like laundries or factories". This disquieting comment moves us to point out that factories and laundries at least provide far more useful or necessary services than churches. Who really wants new churches, anyway?

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As a good Anglo-Catholic, Tom Driberg, MP, views with disgust the "commercialisation" of such a sacred festival as Christmas. He stoutly protests against the "premature celebrations" in our shopping centres with their glaring lights and traffic jams—all with the object of making a little extra cash out of the birth of the Holy Babe of Nazareth. It is all very sad. A wonderful historical event like a Virgin-born Child, and God Almighty himself accompanied by a bevy of angels leaving the happy and sacred precincts of a glorious Heaven for a nasty-smelling Bethlehem to become the Saviour of the world. All this and much more is vulgarised by the greed for gain. Mr. Driberg's is a voice in the wilderness—thank Heaven!

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We always like to record the heavenly wisdom of the Archbishop of Canterbury, especially when he is dealing with secular subjects. He has discovered that if we go into the Common Market, we shall become "more and more European", and that does not mean merely "sharing in common trade and prosperity". Nothing so dreadfully materialistic. It means "asserting the spiritual principles and foundations upon which European civilisation has rested". This wise observation reminds us of Queen Victoria's profound belief that England's prosperity and greatness really rested on her undivided belief in the Holy Bible. In actual fact, Dr. Ramsey's "spiritual principles" would be sheer Roman Catholicism which is the—more or less—unshaken creed of France, Belgium, and Italy.

In the meantime, we find that a Baptist minister, the Rev. Gordon Skipp of Shoreham, has actually had the audacity to attack the Roman Church, insisting that it was the "mother of harlots" as the Precious Word tells us in Revelation 17, 5. Poor Mr. Skipp had then to sustain the whole weight of an attack by Shoreham's vicar, the Rev. G. Froggatt, who wrote, "It is almost beyond belief that anyone claiming to be a Christian minister could publicly damn a whole Church in this fashion", and further, to express his "abhorrence of Mr. Skipp's attitude". But has not the Baptist minister's attitude been one held by all Protestants since the Reformation? And after all, this attitude is sound Holy Writ, isn't it?

### PROSPER ALFARIC

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friends, though they remained in the Church, he left it for good. He contacted Loisy and Lévy-Bruhl and eventually, in 1919, was appointed to the chair of History of Religions at the then new University of Strasbourg. His writings brought upon him an *Excommunication vitandus* in 1933. At the same time he was awarded the Legion of Honour for distinguished services to the State—an odd coincidence.

During the last war the University was removed to Clermont Ferrand in the centre of France. With its end, Alfarcic retired to live in Paris. The French Rationalist Union was allotted a monthly broadcast, on Sunday mornings, and in 1949 one of these fell on December 25th. Hence Alfarcic's broadcast on Christmas; another fell near Easter and a third near Whitsun. On each occasion he gave a talk on the origin of the particular festival.

### CONTEMPORARY OBSERVATIONS OF A NON-CHRISTIAN

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unrelated mass of iron filings. The factor, similarly, that is lost when a human being dies is the specific imprint produced by the co-operative workings of his biological, psychological and intellectual tendencies, an imprint which in general is called "being alive". The belief that individuality resides in a soul which survives the death and decay of the body is just as unlikely as the assumption that some day the person will be resurrected in his entirety.

In short, man must be considered naturally. Anthropology must be rooted in biology, as biology is rooted in physics. It is not a return to religion that is needed, but "a rational insight into human nature". And, "Confronting a human being with ethical ideals which do not refine his naturalness but rather ascribe diabolism to it must in the end lead to resignation or to cynicism". It is quite impossible, Dr. Szczesny insists, "to effect a compromise between the idea that man is lost without the intervention of redeemers, prophets and priests and the conviction that man's fate lies in his own hands alone". For those who hold this latter conviction, *The Future of Unbelief*, though occasionally rather "heightened" in its language, is often a brilliant and altogether an indispensable book.

### THOMAS PAINE STATUE

WE LEARN from the (London) *Evening News* (5/12/62) that a statue of Thomas Paine is to be erected in his birthplace, Thetford, Norfolk, by the Thomas Paine Foundation of New York. We are seeking further details.

### A CHRISTMAS THOUGHT

It is fatally easy to sentimentalise the Christmas message and to forget that an ordinary stable with its dirt and smells was not the attractive birthplace that our crib scenes so often suggest.—The Rev. Geoffrey Springett, Vicar of Balderton, Notts (*Daily Express*, 10/12/62).



## THE FREETHINKER

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### 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. 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

North Staffordshire Humanist Group (Guildhall, High Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme), Friday, December 21st, 7.15 p.m.: A MEETING.

### Notes and News

ALTHOUGH WE haven't yet seen the Christmas numbers of the *Radio Times* and *TV Times*, we may be sure that they will contain references to December 25th as the birthday of Jesus Christ. We may be sure, too, that there will be broadcasts to celebrate it. We print a rather different—and we think more interesting—kind of Christmas broadcast. It was made by the late Professor Prosper Alfarcic in France on December 25th, 1949, and has been translated by the President of the World Union of Freethinkers, Charles Bradlaugh Bonner. The stick drawing of the Three Magi is taken from a current Spanish school textbook. ★

ON PAGE 406, we print a report by our very good friend and welcome contributor, Dr. Edward Roux, of a lecture at Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, by Professor A. S. Geyser, expelled for heresy from the University of Pretoria. This affords the opportunity to inform our readers that Dr. Roux recently became Professor of Botany at Witwatersrand, a promotion richly deserved if, in our opinion, too long delayed. Our heartiest congratulations to Professor Roux. We understand, incidentally, that Professor Geyser has accepted the invitation to address the South African Rationalist Association in the New Year. ★

SPEAKING AT a banquet in Stockholm City Hall, after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, John Steinbeck, American author of *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, etc., said that man had assumed "God-like power", and was "our greatest hazard and our only hope. Fearful and unprepared, we have assumed lordship over the life and death of the whole world and all living things" (*Daily Telegraph*, 11/12/62). "The danger and the glory and the choice rest finally in man", said Mr. Steinbeck, "The test of his perfectability is at hand. We must seek in ourselves for the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some Deity might have".

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DR. FRANCIS CRICK, Nobel Prize winner for Medicine, recently resigned his fellowship of Churchill College, Cambridge, because they planned to build a chapel (*The Observer*, 9/12/62). "Why should I support the propagation of error?" he asked. Later, when interviewed on BBC television, Dr. Crick was asked if he believed in God, and replied, "No, of course not". ★

★  
THOSE WHO have not yet seen the BBC programme, *That Was the Week That Was*, should make a point of switching on next Saturday at 10.50 p.m. They will see something quite new in television satire—a sort of *Private Eye* of the TV screen—and at times delightfully irreverent. One week three Bible epics were suggested for film producers on the Creation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, to be entitled, *God, Son of God* and *Son of God Returns*, while on December 8th, the close of the Vatican Council session inspired a rendering of *Arrivederci Roma* by a group of harmonising cardinals and bishops. ★

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A GENEROUS offer from a reader who wishes to remain anonymous, enables us again to draw attention to THE FREETHINKER SUSTENTATION FUND. Not only does he send us £10 towards the Fund, he writes: "If you can find 49 other people who would send a similar amount, I will let you have another £10. I hope you will succeed." We hope so, too, and we appeal to readers to do their best to help us earn this bonus. Needless to say, though, those unable to send £10 should not be deterred. Any amount is welcomed no matter how small. And it helps to ensure the continuance of the only weekly Freethought paper in English. ★

★  
ON NOVEMBER 2nd, we reported that Bolton, Lancashire, was not to have a Christmas crib in front of the town hall. That still remains true, but the Council has since been asked to reverse the Entertainments Committee's original decision, and there was "an outcry" when the Deputy Mayor ruled against it from the vocal "Ayes" and "Noes" and refused to take a vote by show of hands (*Bolton Evening News*, 8/11/62). The crib would have cost £140 and it was surely a sensible suggestion that the money could better be spent on giving 140 needy pensioners a £1 Christmas parcel. This was made by an "Unbeliever" writing to the *Bolton Evening News* two days later. ★

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F. A. RIDLEY'S Views and Opinions, "Mary versus Lucifer" (14/9/62) appeared in translation in the Dutch Freethought paper, *Bevrijdend Denken* on November 24th, while the September 30th issue of the Polish Freethought magazine, *Argumenty*, contained a translation of an article on the significance of funeral rites by our contributor P. G. Roy.

#### A SUGGESTION

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COMPLIMENTS OF THE SEASON



## THE AFRICAN FRONT:

# Professor Geysler and Biblical Authority

By E. R. ROUX

PROFESSOR A. S. GEYSER, expelled for heresy from the theological faculty of the University of Pretoria, has become the first occupant of the chair of divinity recently established at the University of the Witwatersrand. His formal lectures will not begin till next year, but in the meantime students at Witwatersrand had an opportunity to judge the quality of his thinking at a lecture, delivered under the auspices of the Student Christian Association on October 2nd, on the subject "The Authority of the Bible". It was obvious from the size of the audience and the attention with which staff and students listened, that our "heretic" has earned great sympathy and some admiration for the stand he has made in the cause of freedom of thought. At the same time many of the students were disappointed by the lecture.

One had the feeling after it was over that the speaker had never really come to grips with his subject. The statement that the Bible was the greatest revelation of evolution might have shocked a platteland Dutch Reformed Church gathering: it did not seem at all exciting to a university audience. The lecturer's only wisecrack was a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi, who had said, "We like Christianity, but we don't like Christians".

Geysler began by declaring that the Bible had no authority in itself: its authority was derived from God. Later he affirmed that we gain our knowledge of the authority of God by studying the Bible. At no time did he attempt to show that God existed, or to explain why, if he did exist, the Bible could be regarded as revealing his authority. Having himself produced this circular argument, he then made the extremely doubtful assertion that, while Greek thought moved in circles ("history repeats itself") modern Western thought preferred straight lines ("cause and effect, progress to a goal") and this unidirectional way of thinking—derived from the Bible. This did not seem convincing to those who know something of Greek dialectic and science.

All the great liberal movements of our civilisation, the speaker said, we learnt from the Bible. These included the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women, a fact which the "ladies present" would appreciate. Had the speaker displayed a more critical attitude to the Bible and exhibited a better knowledge of history he might have tried to explain why Christianity for a thousand years tolerated serfdom in Europe, why Bible-thumping non-conformist merchants in England grew fat on the slave trade, and why Bible thumpers in modern times in Memphis and Pretoria exclude non-Europeans from their universities and churches. He might have told us how the authority of God, so clearly expressed in the Bible ("Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live", Ex, 22, 18), was used to justify epidemics of witch-hunting, as a result of which thousands of poor old women were burnt at the stake.

The modern trend towards humanism and liberty is due to our increasing knowledge and understanding, such as found expression in the eighteenth century "Enlightenment", a secular movement largely opposed to religion. It was the great French Revolution which set the serfs and slaves free and allowed the Jews to emerge from their ghettos—a revolution inspired by freethinkers and atheists.

The Bible, said Professor Geysler, must not be regarded as a scientific textbook. Nor, may we remind him, should it be regarded as a textbook of liberal politics and sociology. In spite of what he said in this connection, it does not specifically oppose slavery or the subjugation of women. In fact citations can be made, even from the New Testament, in which the institution of slavery is taken for granted (Eph. 6, 5) and the subservience of women is specifically enjoined (Eph. 6, 22-23).

What has happened in fact is that Christians, as they became more civilised as the result of the influence of science and the humanities, re-interpreted the Scriptures to suit the new way of thinking. Liberal Christians have sought out those passages in the holy book which are compatible with humanitarianism, tolerance and democracy, and they have ignored those passages which preach racialism, intolerance and authoritarianism. Illiberal Christians have done the reverse. And what is true of scriptural interpretation is true also of ideas about God, who, of course, is made in man's image. Even the sayings attributed to Jesus can be used in this selective way. Thus his rantings against his religious opponents are no longer quoted by liberal Christians, many of whom, in any case, have ceased to believe in hell and eternal punishment. Instead, passages from the Sermon on the Mount are selected, which speak of returning good for evil.

If the Bible speaks with divine authority, why does it reveal so many contradictory voices, so that both Professor Geysler and his judges were able to quote it in support of their views? We feel that our Professor of Divinity has made a poor case for the Bible and for the benign authority of God. If he thinks he can do better, the South African Rationalist Association will gladly offer him a platform.

## Humanist School in Bechuanaland

THE TREASURER of the Humanist Council has received the following letter from the Swaneng Hill School Provisional Committee, Serowe, Bechuanaland:

Dear Mr. McCall,

We are writing to thank you very much indeed for your kind donation to our school project. Because of the rapid and generous response of people like yourselves, there is now every possibility that we will be in a position to open the school in February, 1963, with one or two classrooms. It will, we feel, be gratifying to you to know that a few more Bechuana boys will be able to make a start with a secondary education next year.

It is signed by the Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer of the Committee.

Mr. Patrick van Rensburg adds a letter of his own, saying that the South African work-campers are arriving now (December 3rd) and that, thanks to generous donors like the Humanist Council, "we can welcome them with an easy mind and with lots of equipment for them to start building with". Mr. van Rensburg says how encouraging is the thought that the Humanist Council has promised to raise more money.

Thanks to the response of British Freethinkers and Humanists it was possible to send a further £250 on December 17th.



# “Der Spiegel” Publisher’s Letter from Jail

By OTTO WOLFGANG

*A Few Guiding Notes.*—The clumsy attempt of the ultra-montane faction of the Bonn Government to gag its most outspoken critic, the weekly *Der Spiegel* (Europe’s most influential news magazine with more than ½ million circulation) has misfired. Enraged at having been exposed, for many years, as a rather dubious politician, Franz Joseph Strauss blundered into ordering the illegal arrest of Conrad Ahlers, the paper’s deputy editor, by the Franco police; whereupon Opposition Bundestag members asked: If it’s so easy to get a political suspect back to Germany, why are so many Nazi criminals still free in Spain and South America?

Speaking in the Bonn Parliament on November 9th, Chancellor Adenauer described publisher Rudolf Augstein (39) as a “man who makes money by committing treason”, although no definite charges have yet been lodged against him.

The *Spiegel* issue of November 21st, carries a “Letter-to-the-Editor” in reverse, i.e. a letter written by the imprisoned publisher to the readers. Having printed, on many occasions (such as during the Trier Holy Coat circus) rather outspoken comments on the humbug of organised religion, Augstein has been classified as a “dissenter” by the prison authorities; and when visited by a Protestant minister, he mentioned that no “spiritual” help had been asked for; yet if any were sent, it ought to have been the Roman Catholic Father. The pastor then inquired whether the prisoner would like to have a Bible, though it was a Luther Bible. This Augstein accepted. With nothing better to do, he now whiles away the time lying on his prison bed and reading the Old Testament.

## AUGSTEIN’S LETTER

“... This part of Scripture has on many occasions been held out to me as singular reading stuff for somebody who with a clean conscience is in jail. I think from my experience I can now explain why these old texts are so invigorating: the prisoner finds himself encompassed in that magical circle of mysterious crime and even less accountable deliverance, extending over so many generations. Your own case dims into insignificance, seeing that it’s nothing to do with justice; for nothing strikes you more in this part of the Scriptures than the utter absence of justice (unless it be a justice of the Adenauer kind). Just as he feels in his patriarchal whims, the old tribal god, Jahveh, orders, rewards, punishes and exterminates. Is it a result of our animal instincts, or due to 20 centuries of religious indoctrination that people can be happy amidst the growling of this divine despot, whose most striking characteristic is jealousy?”

Augstein then mentions a few examples of scriptural immorality which it is not necessary to enumerate for our readers, and he comments:

“How is it that, reading such smut, people can feel uplifted? . . . The Lord of the Scriptures, it seems, had no objection to polygamy. Solomon, his pet king, had 700 wives and 300 concubines whom he loved dearly. He obviously outdid Augustus of Saxony as well as Ibn Saud—and the Lord was properly proud of him”. The only fly in the ointment was that the women were foreigners, hence Jahveh decreed as punishment that the kingdom should be destroyed—not during the reign of the culprit, Solomon, but after his death. “A really Solomonian decision which is tantamount to sacrificing one’s Secretaries of State!”

Eventually the big key creaked in the lock of the prison door and in came the Roman Catholic Father, asking what he could do for the prisoner. Augstein thereupon showed him the passage Gen. 6, 1-2:

“And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men and that they were fair; and they took them wives”—of which connection sprung the “giants of yore, mighty tyrants and famous men”. The letter ends with these lines:

“I showed him the passage of the divine tyrants’ progeny and asked him if perhaps in such a way F. J. Strauss, my old chum . . .

“He promised to get a Roman Catholic Bible, fully annotated and with Vatican *imprimatur*. Then we are going to analyse the text of that passage I had pointed out.”

There is some hope, however, that by then the sinister figure of Herr Strauss will have been eclipsed.

## Religion and Pimples

DR. PETER REMNANT, Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia, caused a sensation recently when he spoke to a crowded auditorium of students at a lunch-hour lecture on why he didn’t believe in God.

If the Bible is the word of God, he said, then the best thing to do is to set to work to try to understand it. “But when I read the Bible, it seems just what you’d expect in the sacred writings of a primitive people: tribal history, somewhat arrogant, pseudo-science, moral exhortation, folk wisdom. And it is liberally spiced with miracles and marvels”.

According to *The Sun* (Vancouver, 20/11/62), gasps repeatedly rippled through the audience, and one student whispered, “I can’t believe it!”

But Dr. Remnant went on to say that he had often asked people why they believed in God. To some, he said, God is an invisible person, wise, powerful, good; a creator, a ruler of everything. Others believe in God because they were brought up to believe, because their parents believe and because their friends believe. “I find none of these arguments convincing”, he commented. “They represent nothing but [the] familiar human tendency to personify our own ignorance.”

The Professor told the students that he had been brought up a Christian. In his teens he had been troubled by pimples and girls, and he became “priggishly” religious. But when he got to first-year university he entirely got over religion and pimples. Theologians, he remarked, filled in the gaps of scientific explanation by God. After a certain point, they say: “Well that’s the way it is—we can’t really understand, because of the feebleness of the human mind—really God’s purposes and God’s nature are an impenetrable mystery”.

“A system of explanation which loses itself in a mystery isn’t a very good system of explanation”, said Dr. Remnant.

Some people, of course, say that reason is beside the point. They believe on faith, and faith alone. But, Dr. Remnant said, “I’m a person who attempts to proportion his own beliefs to the evidence. And I feel no temptation to join them”.



## OPPOSITION TO UN AID ON BIRTH CONTROL

A Reuter report from the United Nations, New York, on December 10th, said that France and Spain had opposed a proposal that the United Nations should provide technical assistance on birth control, and had called instead for a study of links between population growth and economic development.

M. Maurice Viaud, of France, introduced amendments in the economic committee to a draft resolution co-sponsored by Sweden, Denmark, and several Afro-Asian countries which states that population policy is clearly linked to economic progress.

The amendments, also co-sponsored by Lebanon and Liberia, would delete a paragraph of the draft resolution calling for UN "technical assistance, as requested by Governments, for national projects and programmes dealing with the problems of population".

The French delegate said that the General Assembly had no right to impose a collective UN view on the question of birth control, which risked violating certain consciences and disregarding certain laws.

Despite the opposition, however, the proposal was later accepted.

## CORRESPONDENCE

### THE MARY CELESTE

Your correspondent Mr. K. L. Kenning writes (7/12/62) that I appear to be wrong in retailing the only verified facts available from the official records. A once-famous editor has remarked, "Facts are sacred; fancy is free", a statement that embraced the many "solutions" to this exaggerated mystery—including that furnished by Rupert Furneaux. E. W. HENSTRIDGE.

[This correspondence is now closed.—Ed.]

### THE TULMUD

Permit me to point out how ludicrous are the frequent attempts to foist upon us passages in the Talmud as proofs for the historicity of Jesus. The collection of the material for the Babylonian Talmud did not begin before the composition of the gospels, that of the Palestinian Talmud even two centuries later; while the process of codification was not begun before the 5th century AD. There is only one complete copy extant of the Palestinian Talmud, printed in Venice in 1523/4 and kept in Leyden (Holland), and one of the Babylonian Talmud (the Munich Codex) from the 14th century, owing to extensive mass destruction by Christian fanatics. This in turn gave rise to many textual corruptions, in order to ward off the accusation of its being a blasphemous book. There does not exist, up to now, any Talmud edition free from the frequent blunders of copyists, or from interpolations, Bowdlerisations and misunderstandings.

In an article for the January issue of the *Monthly Record* of South Place Ethical Society I am going to present the scriptural texts from a somewhat unusual angle. P. G. ROY.

### THE CAPTIVE MIND

I wonder if any of your readers have ever come across Baron von Hügel's description of the religious mind in his *Mystical Element of Religion*, 4th impression, Vol. I page 46? I give the whole paragraph as it stands except that the emphases are my own:

"For Religion is ever, qua religion, authoritative and absolute. What constitutes religion is not simply to hold a view and to try to live a life, with respect to the Unseen and the Deity, as possibly or even certainly beautiful or true or good: but precisely that which is over and above this—the holding this view and this life proceed somehow from God Himself, so as to bind my innermost mind and conscience to unhesitating assent. Not simply that I think it, but that, in addition, I feel bound to think it, transforms a thought about God into a religious act."

In find these words on the absolute authoritarian nature of religious belief all the more impressive because they were written (1908) by an avowed mystic and by one who was in no sense a freethinker. How can anyone possessing the least intellectual independence subscribe to such mental slavery? Is it any wonder, indoctrinated as we are in childhood, that many of us find it very difficult to break out of this stranglehold of a religious way of thinking?

And—once having broken clear, we must always be on the alert that we are not captured by some equally enslaving philosophical or political dogma. THOMAS F. ADAMS.

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