

# The Freethinker

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Founded 1881 by G. W. Foote

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IN THE 4TH CENTURY of the present era, after a bitter struggle of conflicting religious and political ideologies at present still very imperfectly analysed, Christianity emerged victorious. Having taken over the effective control of the by then decrepit Roman Empire, the new religious cult proceeded promptly to exterminate all rival religious cults in the interests of its own "jealous God" and exclusive totalitarianism. A mausoleum of dead deities from the Persian Mithras to the Greek Apollo, soon bore witness to the success of the Catholic Church in establishing its totalitarian ascendancy over the succeeding Ages of Faith. Even today, the magnitude of that revolution in European

ideology is still scarcely realised. But recent and current events enable us to apprehend its historic significance with an almost contemporary vividness. For the rise and world expansion of Communism of the Marxist-Leninist vintage presents, despite the very different phraseology with which it cloaks its ideology, many striking similarities with the earlier rise of Christianity from obscurity to eventual world power. Irrespective of the truth or falsehood of either Christianity or Communism, these two creeds represent probably the two most powerful ideologies that the human race has ever evolved for its religious and/or political guidance. As such, even a brief comparison may not be without interest, particularly at this present time, when Communism as a world-creed appears to be undergoing a process of evolutionary change not at all dissimilar to that undergone by Christianity itself during preceding ages.

## Paul and Lenin

One primary and fundamental fact is obviously common to both Christianity and Communism, considered as historic creeds. Both started in one part of the world and ended up in another. Whatever theory of Christian origins one may accept—and there are many open to the critical inquirer—one thing is at least quite certain: how- ever and wherever it may have developed subsequently, Christianity first began as some kind of a Jewish heresy upon the fringe of what was then orthodox Judaism. Its founders had no idea at all that what they were beginning was eventually destined to evolve into a new, non-Jewish and cosmopolitan religion; still less that they were actually founding what eventually turned out to be the most anti-Semitic of all recorded creeds.

Whether historical Christianity be held to have been an individual or a collective creation, or whether it started in Palestine (as depicted in the Gospels), or in the Jewish ghettos of Levantine cities (as others have since alleged), one thing at least is quite certain about the Galilean sect that later—and by a quite unforeseen process—was to develop into the anti-Jewish and cosmopolitan Catholic Church. It regarded itself as a legitimate offspring of Judaism and presumably visualised its own future as expanding amongst the Jews and geographically mainly in the East. It was as an Oriental cult that Christianity first

arrived at Rome, and it is as an Oriental cult that the earliest Roman secular writers like Tacitus, Pliny and Suetonius (who first recorded its appearance) evidently regarded it. However, things did not work out that way; the originally Eastern creed eventually failed in its birth-place, the East, where it was unable to displace Judaism and where it was eventually itself expelled by that other former Jewish heresy, Islam. Contrarily, Christianity met with a presumably quite unexpected success in the European West.

Christianity will go down in the annals of comparative religion as primarily a European religion. By what precise means this religious revolution was effected still seems to be veiled in obscurity; an obscurity probably deliberately encouraged by the Church. But traditionally, it is linked with the name and fame of the author of the (Gnostic) Epistles of Paul, a justifiable connection, perhaps, since echoes of the embittered controversies which eventually transformed Christianity from its original role as a Jewish heresy into its historical role as a cosmopolitan world-religion can certainly be detected in these Pauline Epistles. In this sense one can perhaps affirm that, whilst Jesus (or his impersonators) started Christianity as an Oriental sect whose future lay within the primarily Oriental terrain of Judaism, Paul (or his impersonators), transformed later Christianity into the Western, primarily European, religion known to history. Both geographically and culturally, this general evolution of Christianity was East-West.

## Opposite Direction

Conversely, in modern times, the historic direction of Communism has been precisely in the opposite direction. For Communism originated theoretically with Karl Marx and his contemporaries in the Library of the British Museum in London; whilst as a revolutionary political movement it originated in the slums of Paris, London and other Western cities—the modern Communist equivalents of the ancient Christian catacombs in Rome. Yet historically, the Western proletariat, the advent of whose political ascendancy formed the practical basis of 19th century Communism, has so far failed to materialise in Western Europe and in America where Marx himself and the early Marxists had confidently anticipated it. Contrarily, and within this present century, Communism has moved East, and is now apparently firmly established in lands like Russia, China and Eastern Europe, where again the 19th century Marxists certainly did not expect it to triumph. In this parallel evolution, West-East to the earlier migration of Christianity East-West, Lenin, the dynamic leader and theoretician of 20th century Communism, played an historic role generically similar to that which Christian tradition assigns to Paul.

## Christian Heresies and Communist Schisms

It is not, however, only in their manner of origin that Christianity and Communism present markedly similar aspects. Both have evolved, and are evolving in a gener-

## VIEWES and OPINIONS

### Christianity and Communism

By F. A. RIDLEY

ally similar manner. For Christianity has long since been split into three major divisions (the "Unity" of the Universal [Catholic] Church has long been a myth), Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and the Greek Orthodox Church. The present, apparently fast-developing split between Russia and China, each disputing furiously over questions of theoretical orthodoxy and each claiming to be "the one true Church" of Marx and Lenin, also bears a marked resemblance to the embittered controversies over both theological orthodoxy and secular jurisdiction, that raged for centuries between Roman and Byzantine Christianity during the Middle Ages; controversies that finally and directly led to the creation of the Western Holy Roman Empire (800 AD). Shall we also witness a Chinese "Charlemagne" assuming the imperial mantle in open defiance of the orthodox Russian heirs of Lenin?

Nor are recognisable analogies with the Protestant Reformation lacking in the present-day Communist international camp, since the old Communist International (dissolved by Stalin) ceased to exercise its former unifying doctrinal authority. The "national" Communism that seems nowadays to be spreading, also bears marked affinities to the national Churches which, to the horror of the Vatican, made their appearance through the Europe of the 16th century. (Perhaps one can aptly describe Marshal Tito, the original nationalist heretic, the instigator of National Communism in Yugoslavia [1948], as the Henry VIII of Communism!) Along further with national Communism

goes "revisionism", the political heresy that accompanies such deviations from Russian political orthodoxy. However, the early cast-iron unity that characterised medieval Roman and papal Christianity, would appear to have vanished at the Reformation. Despite the talk of reunion at the Vatican Council, the traditional unity of Christendom appears to have gone for good and all. It is beginning to look as if something very similar is beginning to happen in the Communist world. When the iron hand of the medieval papacy was withdrawn the "Universal Church" decomposed into rival Churches. And, now that the iron hand of Stalin (the Communist Pope Hildebrand) backed by overwhelming Russian military power has gone, it looks increasingly as if similarly centrifugal tendencies will end by disintegrating the one true Church of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. Already we have a Chinese "anti-pope" and a Yugoslav Henry Tudor, and perhaps Communist Luthers and Calvins are in the offing!

All ideologies tend perhaps to follow a certain pattern and neither Christianity nor Communism appears to constitute any exception. For in the case of both these powerful creeds, they have pursued courses unforeseen by their original founders. That the influence of Christianity upon the evolution of mankind has certainly been very great is something that can hardly be disputed even by the most hostile critic. That Communism will have similar effects appears at present to be very probable. But precisely how and where, must be left to the future to answer.

## The Meaning of God

By G. L. SIMONS

AN INVESTIGATION of the meaning of words is often thought to be less interesting than an argument using these words when the question of meaning has been settled. But since the main difference between the religious and the non-religious consists in one affirming what the other denies, it is important occasionally to spend a little time on an investigation of the concept which concerns them both. Religious folk believe in God; non-religious folk do not. Religious folk seem to have several different concepts of the god in which they believe, but the atheist has no qualms about rejecting the lot.

The arguments between believers and disbelievers are so fervent, so heated and often so intransigent, that a disinterested observer would be sure to conclude that the word "god" meant the same to all the disputants who used it, and moreover had a clear, unambiguous and straightforward meaning. The actual situation seems less simple.

The notion of God has changed through the centuries. It is thought (by certain people) that God is changeless, that his eternal essence of being (whatever this means) is one, immutable, transcendent and the rest. But viewed historically the concept of God, if not he himself, has undergone change after change. It also becomes apparent how the prevailing character of the deity corresponded to the prevailing social circumstances, and the characters of the religious disciples.

Passive people had passive gods; noble people had noble gods; fierce people had fierce gods. Men with a passion for war imbued their gods with fire and anger; men with a love of mathematics devised a calculating deity; men afraid of persecution created a protective god to whom they could turn; men with a love of the abstract devised a metaphysical god whose qualities were unknowable; men with a gentle disposition created kindly gods who loved and forgave. A comforting god grew out

of an oppressive age; a warlike god grew out of a tempestuous age; a reflective god grew out of thoughtful times. The character of the deity (or deities) in any religion evolves as the temperaments of the disciples change. And in this sense God is truly fashioned in man's image.

It is apparent that God (or the gods—the following remarks are intended to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to polytheism as well as monotheism) is viewed as a person (albeit of a somewhat rarefied variety). His disciples may appeal to him, placate him, earn his favour or be punished by him. Religious folk are few who believe in an impersonal god or one who is bored by the pitiful spectacle of human life. It appears necessary to religious people not only to believe in a god but also to believe that he has a character understandable (to a certain extent) in human terms. Thus gods are variously said to be just, loving, forgiving, etc., although an insistence on the nature of these attributes adds to the mystery for the believer and the frustration of the unbeliever. But the logical justification for assigning attributes (of either the finite or infinite variety) to a deity appears to be non-existent.

Either the existence of God can be deduced from an observation of the world or it can not. If it can be deduced from observation then, since we are arguing from the empirical, our conclusion must also be empirical in nature. It is impossible to argue from the empirical to the non-empirical. This means that if God can be deduced from nature, he must be subject to natural law, and in particular (as Bertrand Russell somewhere remarked) to the second law of thermodynamics which states that the entropy in the world is increasing, i.e. the universe slowly but surely "running down". If on the other hand God cannot be deduced from an observation of nature then we can know nothing of him. I reject the validity of the mystical way of knowing which transcends the limits of sense.

(Concluded on page 20)

# Biochemical Breakthroughs

By J. A. MILLAR

BIOCHEMISTRY IS a comparatively new science and to the Materialist at least, one of the most fascinating and rewarding fields for study. Several major breakthroughs in knowledge have been made in recent years, and even at the present moment research is going ahead in a number of directions that promise truly momentous rewards in terms of the addition of several priceless gems of basic knowledge to the "one true study"; that of man by man. In particular, concerning the origins and possibly the nature of life on this and other planets, and the real nature of memory and ideas.

According to Isaac Asimov, the American biochemist, "An individual cell is potentially immortal. Given sufficient food and safety, it will grow and divide forever". (*The Wellsprings of Life*, p. 72), and it is certainly a fact that no life-form exists which is not the progeny of a previously existing life-form, and that there is an unbroken chain extending back to the time of the origin of life on this planet.

Is life immortal? This question now seems capable of an answer, providing it is possible to agree upon a suitable definition of the meaning of the word "life" in the specific sense. When a cell divides, are we to consider the two cells as the original life form only *in toto*, as two new individuals, or as two separate forms of the original, each equal to and identifiable with the other? Even granting the materialistic concept that life and matter are inseparable, it would appear that life is immortal, if it is considered valid to postulate that the *actual* material content, from a specific point of view, does not have to be eternally present in order to regard a life form as being a specific individual. Were this not so, no human being could be said to exist as an individual throughout the course of his or her own lifetime, since it is an undoubted scientific fact that the whole of the material human organism completely renews itself during our "lifetime".

Granted then that *all* matter does not have to be common in order for an individual to be considered the "same", we must be logically consistent and regard the divided cell as being the "same", provided other things are equal—i.e., that of the actual physical structure of the cell nucleus remains in the same pattern as before (when the cell will obviously not take on "new" individual characteristics) the "life-form" may therefore be said to be the same, although the individual will be a new one. From this we conclude that life is quite definitely potentially immortal here on earth, always providing it can survive (perhaps by cosmic emigration) the long-term hazard of the inevitability of the destruction of our solar system and the more immediate hazard of the nuclear weapon.

In 1952 an American chemist, S. L. Miller, simulated a calculated approximation to the earth's primordial atmosphere in the laboratory—a mixture of water, ammonia, methane and hydrogen—with a powerful electrical discharge taking the place of the ultraviolet light radiation which, in the absence of an ozone formation, would have beaten down continually upon this earth from the sun. After only a week he found that *organic* compounds had been created—including "some of the the simpler amino acids". The importance of this can hardly be overstated, since Emil Fischer and his successors have now proved that all life is built up out of L-amino acids.

Then, in 1953, the Nobel prizewinners, F. H. C. Crick and J. D. Watson, using X-ray diffraction data, deduced

that molecules of nucleic acids consist of two nucleotide strands arranged in the form of a helix about a common axis and linked together by a weak hydrogen bond. It is important to note that this hydrogen bond is only one-twentieth as strong as that which usually holds atoms together within a molecule, because this enables the two nucleotide strands to separate *without requiring more energy than the cell can easily supply*. When this occurs, we are tolerably certain that each strand of nucleic acid attracts to itself its mirror image and thus reproduces itself automatically.

It is, further, known that memory is definitely seated within the nucleic acid which constitutes the nucleus of all life cells, and it is now fairly well established that hereditary "memory" patterns are based on the precise build-up of the nucleic acid molecule, Meischer, the discoverer of nucleic acids, having shown that chromosomes are nucleoprotein in nature. Recent research tends to show also that transient memory may be electro-chemical and it is known that this is conveyed from cell to cell via the RNA (ribonucleic acid), whilst more permanent memories are within the DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid).

All these substances have been synthesised and in 1956 Kornberg produced an identical DNA molecule using natural DNA as a mold. By 1958 V. G. Allfry and A. E. Mirsky had proved that protein is manufactured in living organisms by cell nucleic acid, whilst in 1961 scientists in England and America succeeded in demonstrating the chemical and electro-chemical basis of memory as an *automatic* function of DNA and RNA and that intelligence relies primarily on the correct functioning in proper proportions of four chemicals which act on nerves as a sort of battery producing electrical stimuli which may or may not modify the structure of RNA and perhaps ultimately DNA.

The above is a very much oversimplified account of some results of comparatively recent research, indicating that life is in essence purely material, insofar as we have any conception what matter is—which we have not—and that all "mental" processes are physically-based.

## Baskerville

Stranger, beneath this stone, in *unconsecrated* ground, a friend to the liberties of mankind directed his body to be inurn'd. May the example contribute to emancipate thy mind from the idle fears of *Superstition* and the wicked arts of Priesthood. **THUS THE EPITAPH** of the famous English type designer and printer, John Baskerville (1706-75), as quoted by T. W. White in *The Age of Scandal*, recently issued in Penguin paperback (4s. 6d.) appropriately set in Baskerville.

Baskerville became printer to Cambridge University in 1758, and after his death most of his types were bought by Beaumarchais, author of the comedies *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, which formed the basis of the Rossini and Mozart operas, and also publisher of the 70-volume edition of Voltaire—in Baskerville.

The Federation of London Anarchists & Freedom Press will hold

## An Anarchist (SWINGIN') Ball

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## This Believing World

After the intense adulation given to the Babe of Nazareth and the Holy Manger—though Matthew says it was *not* a manger but a house—at Christmas-time, it is rather surprising that they haven't followed it all up with "thank God services" for plunging whole countries in the icy grip of one of the worst winters in living memory. It is rather ironical. With the aid of TV and the radio, it was one long paean of praise for the Wonderful Babe. And then, immediately after . . . ?

★

Immediately after came deep freezes, unending snow for days, dreadful cold, and all the miseries which these bring to millions of people. Why? Have we not been told how God looks after little birds? Or perhaps something has gone wrong with the Design Argument which proves beyond a shadow of doubt the munificence of the Lord towards his creation. In any case, we do not expect it to be all carefully explained by the Archbishop of Canterbury—or even by Dr. Heenan.

★

Looking ahead of the news, Mr. Douglas Clark gave a series of "predictions" in the *Daily Express* (December 28th), and strange to say, neither "our Lord" nor his Heavenly Father, nor the Churches were once referred to. That all-important topic, "Unity" (of the Churches) was completely ignored.

★

We note that the Archbishop of York, in the *Sunday Pictorial* (December 12th, 1962), thinks that parents were "deeply wrong" if all they did at Christmas was to fill their children's stockings with presents. What they must give their children, he insisted, was Faith—though we have an idea that if that is all the kiddies got, they would feel like lynching Father Christmas. "Nevertheless", added Dr. Coggan "as a nation we should still count our blessings this Christmas". And why? "Think of the millions of child skeletons all over the world who were born to die in hopeless hunger". But surely one of the most repeated teachings of the Christian world is that we "should increase and multiply" and that God provides abundant food for every human being born?

★

For the record, we should thank the *Daily Mail* (November 27th) for giving us a new version of the Lord's Prayer, probably the most celebrated and the most reverent of all the teachings of Jesus. After centuries of work by Roman Catholic missionaries in New Guinea (and 2,000,000 of the inhabitants speak English) they have, we are happy to say, produced this:—

"Fader bilong mifelo, you stop long heven; Ol i santum nem belong yu; Kingdom bilong yu i kam; Ol i hirim tok bilong yu long graun olsem long heven."

There will be joy in high heaven when this prayer is wafted above as the veritable words of Christ Jesus.

### NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY 57th ANNUAL DINNER

Followed by Dancing

Guests of Honour: MR. & MRS. F. A. HORNIBROOK

SATURDAY, MARCH 2nd, 1963

at The Pavlovs Arms, Page Street, London, S.W.1

RECEPTION 6 p.m.

DINNER 6.30 p.m.

Vegetarians catered for

Evening Dress Optional

TICKETS 21/- from the Sec., 103 Borough High Street, S.E.1

## THE MEANING OF GOD

(Concluded from page 18)

This sort of reasoning is clearly fatal to any attempt to establish the existence of a transcendent being about whom anything can be known. It can also be shown that the same form of reasoning can be legitimately applied to any attempt to assign attributes to a deity.

For most religious purposes God is regarded as a person (of a unique kind). For religious purposes this is inevitable. For if God is to judge, save, forgive, condemn (and the state-of-affairs is to be reasonable) then God must have a moral outlook which has meaning for human beings. However, as soon as the rationalist becomes interested he is piously assured that the personal attributes of God are such as to be outside the realm of science. But to suggest that God has recognisable qualities which in principle defy scientific investigation is an impossible position to maintain. For if God has recognisable attributes, they must resemble (to some extent) human attributes, although of a much sublimer nature. If then human attributes are within the bounds of scientific investigation so too must the recognisable attributes of a deity (although to a lesser extent). If the religious person then suggests that it is precisely because the attributes of God are so sublime that they are outside the limits of science he is suggesting that there is not only a difference in degree between human and divine attributes but also a difference in kind. If this is so the attributes of God are not recognisable, and no one has any grounds for maintaining that God has the slightest interest in human beings.

Hence if God exists he is either amenable to scientific investigation or we can know nothing of him. In either case the outlook seems a little bleak for our religious brethren. They wish to believe in a transcendent being who is interested in them, but are driven logically to consideration of an empirical deity, or a transcendent one about whom nothing can be known. As I have indicated, alternative considerations can only lead to contradiction. Consideration of the empirical deity possibility lands the religious thinker inside the terms of reference of orthodox scientific procedure, which do not allow him to establish the existence of things which are merely emotionally desirable. Consideration of the transcendent being possibility (about whom nothing can be known) soon indicates that all arguments that try to establish the existence of such a being are doomed to failure before they start—merely because they attempt to argue from the empirical to the non-empirical, which is logically illegitimate.

To maintain belief in God, religious people have been forced by the progress of science to maintain the existence of a being who grows perceptibly more and more abstract. Only in this way can such a being be secure from the analytical approach of the modern philosopher and scientist. But this security is only purchased at the expense of meaning. The transcendent being who cannot be investigated scientifically is a meaningless entity, a mere metaphysical shadow of the deities of old.

In Greek times the position was simpler. The courageous scientist could climb Olympus and look for himself. Perhaps some did, which may be why free thinkers and rationalists appeared in ancient Greece—Epicurus, Democritus, Anaxagoras, etc. But today the scene is more obscure. Religious folk can only enable God to continue existing by sacrificing all his recognisable attributes (and with them the meaning of "God"). But what a desiccated deity is this with none of the anger of Jehovah, the wisdom of Athene or the fire of Thor. He may just as well not exist.

**THE FREETHINKER**

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Details of membership of the National Secular Society may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, S.E.1.

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

**Lecture Notices, Etc.****OUTDOOR**

Edinburgh Branch 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**

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Tuesday, January 22nd, 7.30 p.m.: MRS. B. REED. "The Baha'i Faith in Principle and Practice" (illustrated with lantern slides).

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate). Sunday, January, 20th, 6.30 p.m.: R. V. WALTON, "A Visit to the Soviet Union".

Marble Arch Branch NSS (The Carpenter's Arms, Seymour Place, London, W.1), Sunday, January 20th, 7.30 p.m.: D. J. MCCONALOGUE, "Pious Frauds".

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Sunday, January 20th, 11 a.m.: H. J. BLACKHAM, "The Ethics of Existentialism".

**Notes and News**

THE ANNUAL DINNER of the National Secular Society will be held this year on Saturday, March 2nd, and the Guests of Honour will be Mr. and Mrs. F. A. Hornibrook. No two people are more respected in the Society than Fred and Nina Hornibrook, and we are sure that many of their friends will be present to pay tribute to them at the Paviour Arms, Page Street, Westminster. The occasion will also be notable as the first National Secular Society Dinner with a lady chairman, Mrs. E. Venton, Vice-President of the Society. Tickets one guinea, will be obtainable from the Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, London, S.E.1.

ON DECEMBER 19TH, 1962, the Holy Office in Rome advised the Bishop of Haarlem (Netherlands) to dismiss a Jesuit priest from his post as chaplain to Catholic students at Amsterdam University. The priest, Father J. van Kilsdonk, had criticised the Roman Curia in a speech in Rotterdam on September 30th, as "a closed and carefully selected group which rejects any interference from outside". And he had referred to "a silent loss of faith of hundreds every year" which he alleged was due to "spiritual terrorism which these Christians read into the language of the Roman Curia". After the Bishop had been in touch with Cardinal Ottaviani, secretary of the Holy Office, it was announced on January 2nd, that the Holy Office "maintains its objections to the way in which

Father van Kilsdonk opposed the Roman Curia", but that further measures would be left to the local bishop, and "the Bishop of Haarlem will not dismiss Father van Kilsdonk as student chaplain".

COMMENTING ON the announcement, the Rotterdam correspondent of *The Guardian* (3/1/63) said that it "may signify that the Roman Catholic authorities now fully realise their grip on the growing population is lessening and that the Vatican has agreed—although reluctantly—that political organisations are losing their religious alignment". It is only since the war that the formerly non-religious Socialist Party has admitted Roman Catholics, and in 1954 the Church ordered Catholics not to read Socialist papers and not to be members of a Socialist party. "The Church, however, had to withdraw gradually because of public pressure".

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE, ITV interviewer in the series "I Believe", apparently received a number of letters asking what he believed and in the *Daily Herald* (8/1/63) he told "of his faith". Actually, Mr. Muggeridge didn't tell us very much, except that he has "a deep abiding conviction that life is more than its phenomenon" and that man cannot live by bread alone. He mentioned nothing about a God, but talked of the universe (and himself) existing "to fulfil a purpose which transcends mortal circumstances"—a purpose, moreover, that is "benevolent". "Curiously enough", said Mr. Muggeridge, "the less people believe, the more they tend to be interested in beliefs. The irreligious, it would seem, brood incessantly on religious faith, as the sick do on health". That latter sentence is quite untrue, and the former one inexact. What we would say is, that the religious and the irreligious are interested in religion (obviously in different ways), while the majority of people are indifferent.

MR. CYRIL CANNON of West Wickham, Kent, set himself the task, in November 1961, of copying the New Testament of the New English Bible in copperplate handwriting. Now he has finished it, in 580 hours, using 848 pages of foolscap, and he is going to have it bound. But "I am not a deeply religious man", said Mr. Cannon (*Daily Telegraph*, 7/1/63), and he told a TV interviewer on January 7th that, though the new version had increased his understanding of the Pauline epistles, it had not improved his estimation of Paul.

THE DEATH of Bonar Thompson, the man in the black hat, on January 6th at the age of 74, removes a genuine "character" from the Hyde Park scene. Not that Speakers' Corner itself has very much character left since it was excavated to make way for the all-important motor car and deposited some distance away.

BLATANT AS EVER, it seems, the Catholic Directory for 1963 (Burns and Oates, 21s.) claims an increase of 66,500 in the number of Roman Catholics in England and Wales, making a total of 3,726,000. The world's Roman Catholic population is given as 550,357,000, an increase of 22,714,000. No losses are noted.

THE BBC late night Saturday satirical show, "That Was the Week That Was" (or "TWTWTW"), has been constantly in the news since we mentioned it in these columns. Now we learn that a long-playing record is to be made of selected sketches (*Daily Mirror*, 7/1/63) and that it will include one in which an army officer effectively combines religious instruction with battle orders.

# Witchcraft in England

By MARGARET McILROY

In *The Dark World of Witches* (Robert Hale Ltd., London, 21s.), Eric Maple has given us a most interesting and informative account of the history of witchcraft and witch persecutions in England. It is a book which will clear up many misconceptions. It will be of value to the serious student of history and anthropology, while the many histories of individual witches should appeal to a very wide public. Critics of the historical record of Christianity also will find plenty of material.

Mr. Maple shows that the belief in witchcraft is as old as mankind. To the primitive mind storm and sickness are due not to physical causes but to the malevolence of a human agent—the witch. The witch is naturally a universal object of terror and hatred, being blamed for all the ills which afflict humanity. Small wonder that one of the primitive religious documents incorporated in the Bible contains the injunction: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live".

Small wonder also that the witch-doctor—society's protector against the witch—has always enjoyed a position of immense power. From him have developed both priests and kings. His magical powers used for the benefit of the community, ward off witchcraft. He detects criminals. He, by a combination of herbs, psychology and magic, treats the sick—sometimes very skilfully—and if he cannot cure his patient he may maintain his prestige, and perhaps eliminate a rival, by naming the "witch" responsible for the patient's death.

These beliefs, which we connect with savages in the most backward parts of the world, were general among English country people well into the reign of Queen Victoria. This is the background Mr. Maple gives for his terrible story of the execution for the crime of witchcraft of perhaps a thousand people in England between 1566 and 1684. (Other estimates give a much bigger number of deaths.) Most of those convicted were probably named by a witch-doctor, or cunning man, as they were called in England, as a result of a patient complaining of being bewitched.

Doubtless this pointing out of witches had continued, with consequences of varying unpleasantness to those named, through countless ages. Nothing in this gloomy story, however, can equal the horror of the period when the Christian Churches led a hysterical campaign against the wretched witches. During the period of the Reformation, while Catholic and Protestant were persecuting each other, each turned their bitterest hatred, and perpetrated their worst cruelties upon witches. The Catholic record is the worse, because the Catholic Church had already, in the Inquisition, perfected a machine whose efficiency in securing convictions could not be equalled.

Compared to the horror in Europe, a thousand or so executions in England seem a minor affair. English witches were fortunate. Burning was not the penalty for witchcraft, but for treason or petty-treason (the murder of a husband or an employer). Convicted witches therefore were almost always hanged. Torture was not allowed under English Common Law, though there were ways round this restriction. Some elements of a fair trial remained, and persons accused of witchcraft were sometimes acquitted.

However, the scales of justice were always weighted against the witch. How indeed could one disprove the charge, if an hysterical, and possibly epileptic neighbour

accused one of bewitching him, and promptly fell down in a fit whenever one passed? Malicious charges might be disproved, as when a "bewitched" person vomiting pins was found to have a large supply in his pocket; but if a mentally sick person brought the charge in good faith, the alleged witch had little chance.

There may be considerable controversy about Mr. Maple's interpretation of witchcraft, as it totally rejects the view of Dr. Margaret Murray. According to Dr. Murray, the witch was an adherent of a pre-Christian religion, organised in a coven, celebrating at the sabbath the ancient feasts, obeying a black-garbed "Devil" who was a modern representative of the corn-kings of antiquity. If Dr. Murray is correct in giving this as the origin of witch rituals, one must conclude that little genuine witchcraft survived into the seventeenth century, when most of the dismal events described by Mr. Maple took place. Mr. Maple's witch is a pitiable, but not usually likable, old creature, whose sharp tongue and ugly face induce the neighbours to project their fears onto her. Her traditional appearance, "her stumbling gait and long, pointed chin" are symptoms of a disease caused by starvation. This figure seems closer to the facts that emerge from most English witch trials than does Dr. Murray's picture of martyred priestesses.

There are more indications that the victims of continental witch trials organised by the Inquisition were members of a genuine religious minority. Dr. Murray appears to accept all the confessions as genuine: whereas Mr. Maple considers that the movement existed only in the minds of the Inquisitors, who, with their usual efficiency in torture, extorted any confessions they asked for. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere between these two views. There may well have been survivals of old religious practices, but many victims of the Inquisition may have confessed falsely to taking part in them. As the property of convicted witches was confiscated, there was plenty of motive for false accusations.

The reader may reflect how fortunate England was at the Reformation. The Elizabethan religious settlement was made by people whose primary interest was not religion but politics. The Church of England was designed to unite as far as possible people of different religious opinions under the Crown, and it had no use for the murderous fanaticism either of Catholic Inquisitors in Spain and France, or of the Calvinist Covenanters in Scotland. Suspected witches as well as religious reformers benefited.

The period of the Civil War and the Commonwealth, when religious feeling ran high and Calvinist Presbyterianism was strong, was the worst time for English witches. It is no accident that it was during the Civil War that the notorious witch finder Matthew Hopkins operated in England. He was responsible for sixty-eight hangings and one burning, and probably an even larger number of victims died of ill-treatment in prison. However, his activities were soon made the subject of a parliamentary commission, and such horrors never became normal in England. In Calvinist Scotland there were many witch finders of the Hopkins type, but fortunately Cromwell prevented the Presbyterians from coming to power in England, and during his occupation of Scotland the persecution was halted there.

History books have always tended to concentrate on

the doings of kings and statesmen, and though recently more has been written about the material conditions of life of the people, Eric Maple's book is still one of a very few to give us some idea of how the minds of our forefathers were furnished. It may be salutary for us to consider how

much the outlook of our own not very remote ancestors resembled the outlook of the primitive savage.

This is a book which should appeal to everyone except the very squeamish. Illustrations of contemporary pictures of witches give an additional interest.

## Bayard Simmons

(1882—1963)

IT WAS APPROPRIATE that the funeral of Thomas Bayard Simmons, on January 12th, should have taken place at Croydon, where he was born and brought up (where he was living during the last war and had been badly injured in the bombing, receiving 22 wounds that required stitching); and where he died on January 9th, 1963. From the window of his last home he looked on to the site of his first, and at a tree which, like himself, had survived the assault of the German planes.

Yet there was nothing narrow or confined about Bayard Simmons's life. This deceptively quiet and gentle man had wide interests, great ideals and firm resolution. He had actively supported all the best causes of his time, including the struggle for woman's suffrage. He was a member of the Men's Political Union, the counterpart of Mrs. Pankhurst's WSPU, and he was, in fact, the first man to go to prison for the Suffragettes. Bayard was justly proud of this honour, and wore his portcullis badge on all important occasions. He was a great friend of Lord and Lady Pethwick-Lawrence. He had also been a keen Fabian and member of the Independent Labour Party in his early days. For some time he was private secretary to H. G. Wells, and was a personal friend of Keir Hardy.

He had been a Freethinker virtually all his life. His father was a lay preacher in his youth, but once uttered "dangerous blasphemy" in the chapel and had to be drowned by the organist playing a Bach Fugue. At dinner that night, Thomas Frederick Simmons told his family that there was no God. Bayard, the eldest son, was 7 at the time.

Older readers of THE FREETHINKER will recall many of Bayard Simmons's verses published during the editorship of Chapman Cohen, and later collected into two volumes, *Minerva's Owl* and *The Pagoda of Untroubled Ease*. One poem, taken from the former collection is reprinted here and expresses his thoughts on death. After the death of Chapman Cohen, he was elected to the board of G. W. Foote and Co. Ltd., and for a time he served on the editorial committee of this paper. His learning and aesthetic appreciation were always at its service. In addition to his own writing, he did a great deal of translation, especially from the Russian.

Bayard Simmons also valued his life membership of the Leicester Secular Society, and I know I voice the feelings of that Society, as well as those of the National Secular Society and of his colleagues on the board of G. W. Foote and Co. Ltd., when I say how much his services, in turn, were appreciated. And our sadness at his death is lightened by the knowledge that he lived a long and full life, that he enjoyed his eightieth birthday surrounded by relatives and friends, and that, in his last days and his last hours, his beloved Valentina remained by his side as she had through so many years and through so many trials.

COLIN MCCALL.

### BALLADE OF OUR FINAL SLEEP

I

Well, yes, of course; we have to die one day,  
For death will call upon us soon or late;  
In the long run he always gets his way,  
And his arrival is as sure as Fate.  
Of his sad victim will his friends relate.  
When he has gone, like most of us, to hell,  
What time they of his many virtues prate,  
"After life's fitful fever he sleeps well."

II

You may remember seeing in a play—  
Perhaps by now a trifle out-of-date—  
A prince, called Hamlet, who was far from gay;  
His friends, no doubt, thought him an addle-pate;  
His uncle was of Denmark chief of state;  
But when, at last, by Hamlet's sword he fell,  
Did Hamlet say of one he learned to hate;  
"After life's fitful fever he sleeps well"?

III

But when I go, with face all ashen-grey,  
To meet Saint Peter, warden of the gate,  
I at his feet this humble plaint will lay,  
Whilst he surveys my almost empty slate,  
And with Saint Michael holds a tête-à-tête,  
"Let men of me in sober truth this tell,"  
"Now are his troubles ceased, crewhile so great,"  
"After life's fitful fever he sleeps well."

Envoi

Prince, when like other sinners you must pay,  
And in the lake of fiery brimstone yell,  
Perchance upon your tombstone men will say,  
"After life's fitful fever he sleeps well."

1925

BAYARD SIMMONS

## CORRESPONDENCE

### THE NEW YEAR

My friend Herbert Cutner did well in his excellent article (4/1/63) to inform readers that until 1751 New Year's Day was March 25th. I can give three examples of surprising ignorance in this regard.

In Salisbury Court, Fleet Street, there is, on the White Swan Tavern, a City Corporation plaque intimating that in a house on this site, Samuel Pepys was born. The dates given are 1632-1703. This is misleading. Pepys was born in February, so in our reckoning it was 1633. He is made to have lived until he was seventy-one, whereas he died at seventy. (For this reason, the Pepys Club, of which I was once a member, is restricted to this number.)

At the Charles Lamb Birthday Luncheon in 1961, the late Lord Birkett, made an excellent speech. He informed his audience that in 1951 the Middle Temple celebrated the 350th anniversary of the first performance of *Twelfth Night*, which was attended by Queen Elizabeth I. This perhaps first performance was in February, so in our reckoning was 1602. We owe this information to the diary of John Manningham, who was a student in the Middle Temple 1600/1. It was first published by the Camden Society in 1868, and Manningham did not mention the presence of Queen Elizabeth—an incredible omission if she was there.

When I saw the announcement of the 350th anniversary, I wrote to the Under Treasurer and pointed out that the performance was in 1602. I was told in reply that the error was admitted but that it was too late to rectify it. So Queen Elizabeth II went to Middle Temple Hall believing she was celebrating the

350th anniversary of the first performance of *Twelfth Night* at which Queen Elizabeth I had been present. In fact it was the 349th anniversary of a performance of *Twelfth Night* from which Queen Elizabeth I was absent!

I communicated the above fact to Lord Birkett. There was no reply. The cross-examiner did not like being cross-examined!

A few months ago the *Daily Telegraph* published a letter from a lady who thought she had discovered an error on the gravestone of Charles I in St. George's Chapel, Windsor. It was dated 1648, but he was executed in 1649. One would have thought that somebody in the editorial department of the paper would have known that what in our reckoning was 1649 was in the 17th century reckoning 1648. A reader who was better informed soon put the lady right.

WM. KENT (FSA).

#### CHARITY AND CHASTITY

In his letter (4/1/63), Mr. G. I. Bennett denounces premarital sexual intercourse, disapproves of Professor Carstairs and Mr. Cobell, and ranks chastity above charity. This is all highly contentious, particularly the last proposition. There is a great deal to be said for the theory that unmarried sowing of wild oats is a good prophylactic against the seven year itch. It is more unfortunate that he should find it necessary to observe that Mr. Cobell writes like a very young man. This certainly deserves the obvious rejoinder. But this is not the crux of the letter. The above views are not mischievous. They are intellectually as well as socially respectable. Mr. Bennett is perfectly entitled to hold them. Many agree with him. Indeed, I would myself agree that promiscuity may be a manifestation of neurosis.

The really mischievous things in the letter spring from a "psychological make-up" that I would describe as peculiarly Christian, were I not obliged to admit that the best Christians are at last outgrowing it. Basically this is a "blessed assurance" that he and a gallant little band of unnamed supporters are in sole possession of the truth, while the rest of the world has either continued in ancient error or fallen into a modern heresy. Mr. Bennett's truth has many nineteenth century British characteristics. It reminds one of the quip of the Anglican bishop: "The Church of Rome claims she is infallible; the Church of England says only that she is right". We find the bland jingoistic assumption that the heathen Chinese is peculiar and the primitive Samoans are simple barbarians. Untechnological their society may be, but from an anthropological viewpoint it is highly complex. Then there is a depressing preoccupation with the negative virtues, not always to be glorified by seeking to equate them with the admittedly desirable quality of restraint. What can be said of the life of a person whose sole claim to remembrance is the epitaph, "Ever a Virgin"?

But the really mischievous thing about Mr. Bennett's letter is its confounding of "morality" with a particular version of sexual morality, with the rider that anyone who pleads for tolerance is *ipso facto* immoral. Mr. Bennett is in fact no stranger to the fine defamatory art of branding a libertarian as a libertine. Justice, understanding, generosity, spontaneity, and compassion do not, it seems, obtrude in his ethical Valhalla. It is outrageous that he should indict modern freethought for "moral nihilism". The National Secular Society, as a member of the Humanist Council, places the very highest store on ethical values in an evolutionary society, to be adjudged by scientific principles. On a substratum of enduring moral "laws" like co-operation and integrity are built a wide range of secondary codes like those regulating sex. Everyone should know today that these secondary codes vary from society to society with changing historical, geographical, and economic circumstances, and within each society there is considerable biological variation about the norm. Those of us who are active in the propagation of freethought have quite enough to do coping with the misrepresentation of our enemies without having to deal with that of our supposed friends.

D. H. TRIBE.

I imagine that nobody would deny Mr. G. I. Bennett the right to equate his atheism, whatever he may mean by it, with views on sexual morality which are much the same as those held by the Christian Churches. But one is led to protest when he seeks to claim by implication that his views possess any special merit or authority. The Churches at least speak from within a logical theology and their sexual views are derived from it. Mr. Bennett seems to speak from within a violent prejudice and to overlook all reference to scientific and historical investigation.

In fact, there is no universal ethic in sex matters. Economic and social pressure have led differing societies to adopt differing solutions. Nor is it historical to claim that the accepted sex ethics of Christianity have been universally the same throughout. The ethic defended by Mr. Bennett is merely that evolved by the

Anglo-Saxon middle classes over the last two centuries and now in process of dissolution through the fading away of the particular economic and social pressures which brought these classes into being. With regard to the views of Atheists upon sex, there has been a revisionist attitude among many since the days of Richard Carlile. Indeed, Mr. Bennett's strictures bear a strange resemblance to those of the critics of Bradlaugh and the National Secular Society at the time of the *Fruits of Philosophy* trial and to the notorious slanders which were hurled at Bradlaugh in a pseudo-biography by those of his opponents who claimed to be Freethinkers.

It is this fact which underlines for me the further fact that the equation of "revisionist" views with "moral nihilism" is arrant nonsense. The fading away of older positions based upon theology opens the way for the rise of new moral positions, a fact clearly seen in the history of Bentham and the Utilitarians. Indeed, one may well question the right of the rigidity of the views espoused by Mr. Bennett to be labelled as "moral" and those of his opponents as "immoral" when judged by contemporary situations. Not only does such a claim raise serious philosophical difficulties, but it could be extended to a claim that divorce law reform, family planning, extra-marital or pre-marital relationships are alike *ipso facto* "immoral". One has only to turn to historians of the repute of Lecky, of Dorothy George, and of those who have dealt with the sexual life of Victorian England to see the very real misery caused by the enforcement of such views with the authority of the Churches. Mr. Bennett may feel that the propagation of these views today is so desirable that it would outweigh the problems both social and psychological which they create. But he has no right to demand that the Freethought movement should follow him. He complains of having to wage war on their behalf in THE FREETHINKER just as he sends up a frequent howl of woe that some Humanists and Freethinkers are militant over a wider sphere of activity, and does battle in the name of his own type of atheism against all Freethinkers who object to the movement at large being identified with conventional and traditional viewpoints for which the ideological grounds of authority have disappeared. In any case, I do wish that he would drop the debating method of Mr. Bennett *contra mundum* and would realise that there are other methods of discussion than the vulgarity of the *tu quoque*. It is possible in fact to debate such a matter as sexual relationships in a changing world without reference to Mr. Cobell's age!

F. H. AMPHLETT MICKLEWRIGHT.

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