

# The Freethinker

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DR. JOHN ROCK is a pious Catholic and an expert on sub-fertility and birth control, who played an important part in the development of the "pill". In his book *The Time Has Come*, sub-titled *A Catholic Doctor's Proposals to End the Battle Over Birth Control* (Longmans, 18s.), he expresses views which it would have been unthinkable for a reputable Catholic to voice only a few years ago.

Dr. Rock shows that there is a wide measure of agreement between the Churches on the family planning issue. The Catholic Church today agrees that parenthood should be "responsible", and people should regulate their families according to their circumstances. The official attitude of the Church is no longer that couples should have as many children as physically possible, although, as Dr. Rock regretfully points out, many Catholics do not seem to be aware of this change. The point at issue between Catholics and non-Catholics is now not family planning, but "natural" and "unnatural" methods of planning.

Dr. Rock argues that his pill is perfectly natural, as it consists of the ovulation-suppressing hormone, progesterone, which is normally produced by pregnant women. As intercourse takes place with no interference of any kind, and, as ovulation recommences immediately the administration of the pill stops, leaving fertility actually increased, Dr. Rock insists that this should not be included in the ban on artificial contraceptives.

### "Natural Law"

The chapter, "New Light on the Natural Law", contains an interesting account of the arguments of some modern American Catholic theologians. The traditional Catholic view is that "the Church's opposition to artificial methods of birth control derives from natural law", that this is equally binding on non-Catholics, and that "since natural law is immutable, the Church, as the divinely inspired exponent of God's law could not 'change' her position, even if all merely human perception saw it as unjust or harmful". However, Dr. Rock is able to quote Catholic professors who consider that, while natural law cannot change, the Church's understanding of it may develop!

The mode of existence which is 'natural' for man is to use his reasoning faculties to solve the problems with which a blind and irrational nature confronts him". On this interpretation "natural law" commands man to solve his population problem rationally, rather than to breed like the rabbit. It is interesting to see a Catholic theologian drawing exactly the same conclusions as Rationalists have frequently done about the reason for the Church's attitude. This is how Dr. Rock sums up the views of Dr. Flynn, a Catholic Professor of Ethics.

He finds that much of our thinking on the problem is coloured by the notion that sex is an evil to be justified only by the dedicated procreation of children. The degradation of sex derives from one of the oldest of heresies—the Manichean—and continues to distort our concept of sex and marriage despite the fact that both the Church and Aquinas fought vigorously against it . . . Prolonged continence between marriage partners involves both serious moral and psycho-

logical risks and as a normal marital practice would be of questionable prudence.

Who could put the point more clearly?

Moreover, says Dr. Rock, the doctrine that contraception is contrary to a universally-binding moral law does not mean that Catholics must use political power to prevent it. Here he quotes Thomas Aquinas: "Human law is now obliged to prohibit all the immoral acts from which

virtuous persons abstain, but only the most heinous, those from which the majority of men are able to abstain".

Of all Dr. Rock's recommendations, the one that he puts forward with most eagerness is that the US

Government should finance a vast programme of research to discover new methods of family planning. His main hope seems to lie in the perfecting of an accurate way of forecasting ovulation, so that the "safe period" method may be made really safe and easy to use. Particularly he has in mind the needs of the underdeveloped countries for methods much more simple and cheap than any now known.

### "The Universe" and "The Tablet"

Understandably, *The Time Has Come* has not received a warm welcome from official Catholicism, but the disapproval is significantly mild and amicable, and there have not been the bitter personal attacks that would certainly have been made on the author of such a book until recently. But his justification of the pill is completely rejected. *The Universe* complained that "abstinence and self-control are hardly mentioned in the book, and, as has been said, 'there's nothing like chastity to keep the birth-rate down'", and reiterated that "the Catholic attitude to birth control is based on the natural law—deducible from reason and bound up with the nature of things". On the other hand, *The Tablet* thought that, "His exposition of the Catholic view that man carries his own responsibility for parenthood is excellent, and reveals only too well how much of the conflict about contraception is based on misunderstanding. . . . This section of the book will do great good to Catholics as well as non-Catholics". This review spoke of "the wiser views that are beginning to prevail in Catholic circles" that the Church should not try to enforce its moral views by political means.

### The Changing Church

The "unchanging" Church can be seen to be changing rapidly. In fact no institution could pass through the twentieth century unaltered, and world events and world opinion have had a profound impact on all the Churches, from which the Roman Catholic Church is not exempt. Two generations back its emphasis on hell fire and damnation did not set Catholicism apart from other Christian sects in England. Today most Protestant Churches purvey a god of love, and have quite forgotten the god of wrath of their forefathers. There are signs that the Catholic Church too is becoming humanised at last. It has been hampered by its claim that it has always been directly

## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

### A Catholic Doctor on Birth Control

By MARGARET McILROY



inspired and therefore could never have been mistaken, and also by its monolithic and undemocratic structure, which make it far less responsive than other Churches to movements of public opinion. Its internationalism, too, has held it back, for the improvements in Christian attitudes have originated in advanced, democratic countries such as England, and English Catholics have been influenced by the moral backwardness of Ireland and Italy.

Belatedly, however, the facts of modern life have penetrated to the minds of the more intelligent Catholic clergy. They have at last noticed that there is a population problem. The social benefits resulting from smaller families are clearly visible. The time when the Church had all respectable opinion on its side when it fulminated against birth control is now past—and largely forgotten. Dr. Rock shows how non-Catholics in America have united to end the bans on the giving of birth control information in municipal hospitals and other public institutions, and he is well aware that the Church has succeeded merely in delaying progress at the expense of making itself look inhumane and ridiculous.

## Lord Boothby and the "Evening News"

EVERY SATURDAY, in place of a leader, the London *Evening News* gives us a religious "Saturday Reflection" by "a leading cleric of the Church of England", and on November 30th, this referred to the "utterly unpredictable" assassination of President Kennedy which "must have set many people ruminating on the mysteries of life and death". "The ways of God are past finding out", it said, but "the Biblical idea of the end of the world coming 'like a thief in the night' does not seem so fantastic as it did a generation ago, before the dawn of the nuclear age".

"That Christ will come again in majesty and bring human history to an end has never ceased to be an integral part of Christian belief", the "Reflection" went on. "When will that be? . . . the Gospel speaks of mysterious signs which will appear in earth—political commotions, wars and social upheavals", and "no one can be blind to the sobering fact that man has in his hands power to destroy all human life".

"Everything is under the judgment of God. So in these coming four weeks before Christmas the Advent worship of the Church will look forward both to the celebration of God's coming into His own creation—taking our nature upon Him as a helpless infant—and also to the second coming of Christ in the glory of His Kingship, at the end of all things. The solemn season . . . does not encourage wishful thinking about escape from the realities of life in this world. It does, however put them in the context of God's promises of abundant life in the world to come."

This was too much for Lord Boothby, who wrote the following letter to the paper, printed on December 2nd.:

SIR,

Are there no limits to the hypocrisy and cant which are expressed in our daily newspapers? It seems to me that, in your leading article entitled "A Saturday Reflection", you have passed them all. "Everything," you write, "is under the judgment of God."

Bertrand Russell has given the final answer to this rubbish: "For aught I know there may be a Being of infinite power who chooses that children should die of meningitis, and older people of cancer; these things occur, and occur as the result of evolution."

"If, therefore, evolution embodies a Divine Plan (God's judgment), these occurrences must also have been planned. I have been informed that suffering is sent as a purification for sin, but I find it difficult to think that a child of four or five years old can be sunk in such black depths of iniquity as to deserve the punishment that befalls not a few of the children whom our optimistic divines might see any day, if

The Catholic Church, then, has accepted, if somewhat belatedly, the principle of responsible parenthood—a great advance for it, and an advance which will probably take some time to reach parish priests in socially backward areas. Unfortunately for the Church, the acceptance of the principle only emphasises the absurdity of its ban on the most effective means of putting a policy of responsible (i.e. planned) parenthood into effect. To the non-Catholic, be he Protestant or Atheist, Catholic discussions on contraception and natural law would be laughable, were it not so sad to see men, often of high intellect, arguing over these barren concepts, while unwanted children are still being born into an unwelcoming world.

One may conclude that though the Roman Catholic Church may, with the progress of society, become less repulsive, it is not likely to become any less silly. The gap between the churchman who tests the rightness of a line of action by an appeal to traditions and texts attributed to Jesus, and the social scientist, who looks at the results of policies in terms of human life, remains unbridgeable, despite Dr. Rock's noble attempt at reconciliation.

they choose, suffering torments in children's hospitals.

"Again, I am told that though the child may not have sinned very deeply, he—or she—deserves to suffer on account of their parents' wickedness, I can only repeat that, if this is the Divine sense of justice, it differs from mine; and that I think mine superior. If indeed the world in which we live has been produced in accordance with a Plan, we shall have to reckon Nero a saint in comparison with the author of that Plan. Fortunately, however, the evidence of Divine Purpose is non-existent."

The truth, Sir, is that life, as such, has no meaning or purpose. All we can hope to do is to make the best of it.

And I hope you will have the guts to print this letter.

Yours faithfully,

BOOTHBY.

Letters flooded into the *Evening News* office and, judging by those published, most were from Christians. Of those received by Lord Boothby himself, however, 90 per cent, he reported, supported his views.

## A COURT OFFICER ON AFFIRMATION

Witness: "I have no religion."

Usher: "He wishes to affirm, Sir."

Magistrate: "Do you mean you have no religious beliefs whatever?"

Witness: "Yes."

Magistrate: "Were you never baptised?"

Witness: "Yes, but I was too young at the time to . . ."

Magistrate: "Does the Bible mean nothing to you?"

Witness: "Only as literature—or as an allegory."

Magistrate: "Very well" (curtly) "let him affirm."

That, said a court officer, signing himself "Justinian", in a letter to the *New Statesman* (13/12/63), is "not uncharacteristic" of a magistrates court. Indeed, sometimes the exchange "extends into a full dress theological inquisition". And, in the case of prosecutions following CND demonstrations, "where many of the witnesses are unbelievers, the political overtones of the trial can be supplemented by a feeling of religious persecution . . ."

This presumption of Christianity is, as "Justinian" said, "remote from present realities". The number of witnesses who answer "Er. C of E" to the usher's question, is a daring contrast to the estimate of 70 members per thousand "which the Church Information Office claims as Anglicans satisfying the minimum observances of the faith". "Justinian" therefore suggested the replacement of all forms of oath by the affirmation with, perhaps, the word "promise" instead of "affirm". This would, he said, "serve to remind the witness of the solemnity of the examination and at the same time provide a secure foundation for a possible charge of perjury".



# Major Bonaparte

By F. A. RIDLEY

ABOUT THE TURN of the century, that encyclopedic scholar, John McKinnon Robertson, wrote a remarkable essay entitled *The Economics of Genius*, in which he demonstrated by a comprehensive series of historical examples the close, indeed well-nigh inseparable association between outstanding achievement in various walks of life with a secure measure of man's worldly goods. With that vast sweep of erudition which his readers had learned to expect from him, Robertson demonstrated how, in at least the overwhelming majority of cases, men of genius who are now universally accepted as such in their various fields, had owed their ultimate recognition, either to the fact that they themselves belonged to the propertied classes, or else were able to attract their patronage. For original genius is rarely lucrative in the financial sense; often indeed not even self-supporting. The annals of literature, art and music are thronged with paupers and strewn with garrets, as indeed must always be the case when (as Karl Marx trenchantly expressed it) personal worth is reduced to exchange value.

For once we accept Robertson's critique, one must recognise that there can be few more futile or fallacious proverbs than that fatuously complacent one: "genius will out", irrespective of material (and/or psychological) circumstances. A Roman slave in the ancient silver mines of Sardinia might have been a super-Shakespeare, and a Negro serf on a West Indian plantation might have qualified intellectually for the role of a modern Plato (Plato himself, incidentally, was once sold as a slave and owed his liberation to the purest chance), but both would not withstanding, never have been heard of. It is extremely probable that the annals of history are strewn with "mute inglorious Miltons" with "Cromwells guiltless of their country's blood" as the poet Gray phrased it in his immortal *Elegy*. As a more modern author has neatly expressed it: "It is not enough to be the possessor of genius—the time and the man must conjoin: an Alexander the Great born into an age of profound peace, might scarce have troubled the world—a Newton grown up in a thieves' den might have devised little but a new and ingenious picklock". (cf. John Cleveland Cotton, *Diversions of Historical Thought*.)

"Napoleon on half-pay", prefixes a brilliant but apparently little-known, ironical short story by an American, Stephen Vincent Benet, which illustrates its thesis in a fascinatingly original manner. Briefly, our author's theme presupposes a Napoleon Bonaparte born some thirty years before his actual date of birth (August 15th, 1769)—under the *ancien régime* of the Bourbon monarchy, and who died—in itself a sufficient irony—on the very day (May 5th, 1789) that the *States-Général* met at Versailles for the purpose of inaugurating what was later to develop into the French Revolution. Now it is well known that prior to the French Revolution, all the higher posts in the French army were held exclusively by aristocrats.

In point of fact, a Corsican of modest bourgeois social origin like Napoleon, could not legally have risen above the rank of major in his chosen field, the Artillery. For that matter, most of his famous marshals, Massena, Goult, Ney, etc., who rose from the ranks after the Revolution, could not have risen above the modest rank of an NCO. It was the great Revolution which did away with exclusive aristocratic privilege and created "the career open to talent"—a beneficial achievement, incidentally, which far

outweighed the sensational theatricals of the Jacobin reign of terror.

Benet's thesis accordingly, rings true to historical fact for, had Napoleon been born only half a century earlier, he would almost certainly have been retired on half-pay as Major Bonaparte after fretting away his colossal military genius, not to mention his fantastically omnivorous intelligence under the incompetent direction of some aristocratic nincompoop.

(NB. A selection of Napoleon's *Table Talk* made by the late Louis Cohen, reveals Napoleon's fantastic versatility and encyclopedic intellectual range.)

All this comes out brilliantly in Benet's story appropriately entitled (after Gray's *Elegy*) *The Curfew Tolls*. A gouty old Anglo-Indian general taking the waters at an obscure French watering-place, strikes up an acquaintance with an odd character, one evidently in reduced circumstances who haunts the sea-front. A chance reading of the Celtic poet, Ossian, initially began the acquaintance, and it soon transpired that the local resident was a retired major of artillery in the French army, by name Napoleon Bonaparte, who had been prematurely retired and placed on half-pay for continually pestering the war office in Paris with iconoclastic memoranda on tactics and strategy which, so he continually assured his English interlocutor, would have altered the entire course of the military and political history of the 18th century, had his superiors had enough wit to grasp their import.

In particular, the Major aroused the fury of his newly-found English friend by vociferously declaring that, had he, Bonaparte, been in command in India during the decisive colonial struggle of the Seven Years War (1756-63) which finally gave England the effective mastery of the Asiatic sub-continent, he would have made short work of Clive, and would have definitively won for France an Asiatic empire far beyond the dreams of Alexander!

It may be recalled that when in exile at St. Helena, Napoleon made the historical declaration: "Your Europe is a molehill: great conquests and great empires are made only in the East". However, *revenons à nos moutons*: as it was (Benet's narrative continues), having been first nearly court-martialled by his military superiors for his revolutionary strategic criticisms of military affairs and then ignominiously captured by the English conquerors of India, Major Bonaparte eats out his heart in an obscure colonial command in the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius.

However, his flow of critical memoranda to Paris never ceases. Finally, an elaborate strategic blue print for the invasion of England (then at peace with France) provokes the intervention of the Paris War Office. The troublesome major is hurriedly recalled, placed on half-pay and relegated to the obscure French watering-place, there to spend the dolorous remainder of his frustrated existence pouring out his woes to any sympathetic acquaintance such as the Anglo-Indian General Estcourt.

For his part, the General regards the Major as scarcely sane, whilst Bonaparte's wife and family, to whom he is introduced, strike him as a tragi-comic set of shabby genteel adventurers and ladies of easy virtue. But he is willy-nilly impressed by the man's forceful personality and obviously profound military (and other) knowledge. In particular he is impressed by Major Napoleon's evidently wide knowledge of the English poets. Gray's *Elegy* is his

(Concluded on page 412)



## This Believing World

According to the London "Evening News" (December 6th) a middle-aged lady had the reputation of being easily Milan's most devout citizen, for "she went to Mass at least ten times a day". Some detectives thought it was time for *them* to become equally devout, and with the help of the Almighty, they discovered that she was "stealing handbags from churches all over the city". The really strange thing about this is not that a very religious lady could be such an impudent thief, but that the Lord did nothing whatever about it. He had to leave things to the "secular" arm.

★

What is the good of a bishop exorcising a ghost out of one house without making sure that it does not immediately find a new residence in another? The Bishop of Exeter, who thought he had settled the fate of "Albert" the spook who frightened a couple almost out of their wits some weeks ago, now finds him safely esconced in a neighbouring flat. We cannot help wondering if this is the fault of the Bishop, the ghost-shattering service he conducted, or—what is quite likely—the fault of "our Lord" who seems unable to keep ghosts from frightening his devout followers.

★

For almost all this century the various heads of Christian sects have been bitterly complaining that "ordinations" have been getting fewer and fewer, and that young men were not so readily discovering that their true "vocation" was untiring service to Almighty God. Not only was the industrial world more satisfying, it also provided them with more cash. However, at least in the Church of England, we are told by the Daily Telegraph (December 6th), ordinations are rising. For example, the number of men ordained this year was 653 as against 605 in 1962. And other figures show not a decline but a rise.

★

One cannot help wondering how any educated young man can reach a stage where he actually believes in miracles, devils, and angels, to say nothing of wholesale resurrections from the dead, even when guaranteed by the "Holy" Bible. What exactly can be his criterion of evidence? In any case, why are young clergy so afraid of meeting Free-thinkers in open debate? Perhaps one answer is that, even if helped by "our Lord", a communicant knows he hasn't a chance.

★

The recrudescence of Black Magic, whose devotees were once the most hated of all adversaries of Christianity, is bothering our saintly and revered religious leaders. In fact, we should not be surprised if witch-hunters were not once again organised to combat the evil. The witch-hunters of the Inquisition and of the Church of England did a fine job of work hunting out people who had some kind of intercourse with the Devil, and who were therefore responsible for all the plagues, tempests, floods, and volcanoes that inflicted our happy world a few centuries ago. That most, if not all the witches were completely innocent, didn't matter to the devout men of God who conducted the witch hunts.

★

In any case "The People" reported (December 8th) on "Black Magic in Battle at Altar", and all religious people will be sorry to learn that a 78-year-old vicar and his church-wardens were overwhelmed after a struggle with "evil" men found in his church at Westham, near Pevensey, Sussex. Instead of flying through the air on the customary broomsticks, the men apparently got away in a prosaic motor car.

The "witches" were reciting some kind of "mumbo-jumbo" in front of the altar, intensified by desecration of the altar cross, and the vicar believed that the gang were "definitely in league with the Devil". Well, who could know this better than a vicar? It is all heartbreaking, and we hope that the extra number of vicars crowding now into the Churches will provide a devastating antidote to Black Magic and the Devil, and prove that Almighty God cannot be mocked in this horrid way.

### MAJOR BONAPARTE

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favourite, and he never tires of repeating the lines: "hands that the rod of empire might have swayed", and "a Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood".

However, death soon cuts short the odd acquaintanceship and the General closes his narrative with much emotion by describing the major's passing with the words *Tête d'Armee* (Napoleon's actual last words) on his lips. He supervises his funeral with the inscription: "Here lies Napoleon Bonaparte, Major of the Royal Artillery of France. Born August 15th, 1737, at Ajaccio, Corsica. Died May 5th, 1789, at St. Philippe des Bains. Rest, perturbed spirit".

Speaking in his own person, General Estcourt adds this concluding reflection: "I had thought for some hours of excerpting the lines of Gray—the ones that still ring in my head. But on reflection they suit well enough, yet they seem too cruel to the dust".

This brilliant story (published in the second volume of the American edition of Benet's collected works), deserves to be read, if only for the masterly evocation of literary irony displayed by its author. But over and above the literary merit of *The Curfew Tolls*, the story illustrates in a strikingly poignant and powerful manner the recurring colossal and devastating irony of history. For is the proverb "genius will out" true, or even plausible? I do not think so. It seems extremely probable that on balance, many, perhaps most of the world's great men and women have lived and died in obscurity. That this could, and in many ages would have been the probable fate even of one of the world's greatest generals and also most universal intelligencies (as Napoleon undoubtedly was) is portrayed with delicious irony by Stephen Vincent Benet in this remarkable story, *The Curfew Tolls*.



Roy Nixon

"A funny thing happened to me on the way to the Monastery."  
Courtesy of What's On and Kingleo Studios Ltd.



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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**

Birmingham Branch NSS (Midland Institute, Paradise Street), Sunday, December 29th, 6.45 p.m.: P. D. MORGAN, "The Origins of Christmas".

**Notes and News**

THE POPE, according to *The Observer* (15/12/63), was to fly to the Holy Land in a jet plane lined with red. All the standard seats would be removed, and in the first-class compartment, the floor would be covered with a red carpet and the walls with red damask bearing the Papal seal. *The Sunday Times*, however, had different information. "At the Pope's express wish", it reported, "no adjustments are to be made to the interior of the Alitalia airliner . . . no red or purple velvet, no replacing of the ordinary grey-blue upholstered seats". There would, though, be a small portable altar at which the Pope could pray or celebrate Mass if he wished.

THERE HAS been a good deal of controversy about the Goya exhibition at the Royal Academy. The first thing that needs to be said is that any such collection of works by one of the greatest artists of all time must needs be impressive. At the same time, the critics are right: many of the disturbing, passionate, revolutionary works are missing; most of the *Disasters of War*, the *Caprichos*, nearly half of the *Proverbs*, as well as incomparable paintings of human suffering. Missing, too, are Goya's bitterest anti-clerical engravings. Most of the paintings, says the director of the Prado, "reflect the most immediately attractive side of the artist's work . . . it has not been possible to show many of those which reflect his darker moods". This is England's first Goya exhibition. It is, we repeat, impressive, but it is also as Geoffrey Grigson remarked in the *New Statesman*, "castrated". We hoped for Goya complete.

IN HER *Guardian* (13/12/63) review of *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*, by Arthur H. Nethercot (reviewed in these columns last week by H. Cutner), Marghanita Laski asked: "How . . . could Annie have been so relent-

lessly, so humourlessly silly? How could she think it possible, by occult means, to penetrate the make-up of chemical elements and then be outraged when the scientific world ignored her results? How could this one-time colleague of Bradlaugh not only believe but tell the world that in previous incarnations she had been Hypatia and Giordano Bruno, not to speak of being raped in Atlantis under the name of Herakles?" It is, of course, impossible to answer these questions. One can only agree with Miss Laski that Annie Besant's valuable "lives" were pre-theosophical, and "especially to be remembered when *Which* has just published its report on contraceptives, her work with Bradlaugh for birth-control".

SID CHAPLIN'S "Northern Accent" column in *The Guardian* (14/12/63) dealt with prophecy. The Rev. John Richardson of Bishopton, Co. Durham, can, it seems, forecast the number of births and weddings in his parish. If a ninth baby arrives before the end of the year, Mr. Richardson's record will be four years right out of the last five. And some of his parishioners believe that their vicar has "special powers because he once preached in the Kent church where the original Old Moore is buried". Mr. Chaplin accordingly took a glance at the 121st edition of *Old Moore's Almanac* "for the year of human redemption 1964". What he surprisingly omitted to report was (as we checked up only the other day) that *Old Moore* continually mentions the activities of President Kennedy in forecasts for 1964.

PREDICTION of a much more important kind was the subject of another article in the same issue of *The Guardian*. Science Correspondent John Maddox reported a suggestion (in the current issue of *Nature*) by Dr. F. D. Stacey, of the Meteorological Office Research Unit, for carrying out regular magnetic surveys in regions where earthquakes are frequent. The intensity of the magnetism associated with magnetic materials can be changed by applying pressure to them, and Dr. Stacey has been able to calculate the change in the pattern of magnetism that should follow an accumulation of pressure or stress in a body of magnetic rock. Such accumulations of stress precede the occurrence of an earthquake, and "it is proposed that the imminence of an earthquake should be made apparent by a characteristic change of the pattern of magnetic forces in the neighbourhood". Devices are available for measuring these changes, and Dr. Stacey thinks that signs of an earthquake will appear two months before the event. He therefore suggests that magnetic surveys of seismic areas should be carried out at intervals of about a week.

"EVEN SO the main ground for rejecting religious beliefs is not that people are better off without it but that there is no good reason for supposing it to be true." A. J. Ayer's comment on *Objections to Humanism* is apt. There is an air of unreality about the book, as there was about *Objections to Christian Belief*. The very idea of believers (either in Humanism or Christianity) stating the case against their belief and then—to some extent, at any rate—answering it, is unsatisfactory. Let us have straight debates between Humanists and Christians, by all means, but not this artificiality. Messrs. Constable, the publishers of both volumes, visualise "the end of the cold war between Christians and 'the men without God'", but Professor Ayer's remark (*New Statesman*, 6/12/63) indicates the impossibility of this. Of course there can and should be co-operation in many ways between Humanists and Christians, but we cannot and should not cease fighting to prevent the spreading of what we believe to be false.



# The Same Old Christmas!

By H. CUTNER

IT IS A FACT that Christmas comes but once a year but, as I look back over the years—and I can go back to Victorian days—the Babe of Nazareth (or Bethlehem) reigns supreme with his crib, his angels, and of course his virgin mother. Though (I suspect) educated Christians are not quite so sure about the angels or even the virgin birth.

What have we Freethinkers done about it? When I joined the Freethought party, we were publishing books and pamphlets proving—and I mean *proving*—that the whole story of the birth of Jesus was a re-hash of Pagan sun and other mythology, and that nobody knew when the Babe was born. We showed that the story of Joseph having a dream in which an angel told him that his wife Mary was going to have a baby conceived “of the Holy Ghost”, was sheer nonsense, that it was *not* prophesied in Isaiah, and that the Holy Ghost was as mythical as the genie of Aladdin’s lamp.

What effect did our books and lectures have? Judging by what priest and parson say on TV and the radio, I would answer practically none whatever. I was looking at what a very rabid Protestant, the Rev. A. Hislop, said of Christmas nearly 100 years ago in *The Two Babylons*, and it proves that as long ago as that there were a few Christian ministers not bamboozled by the Babe of Bethlehem and his “crib”. Most of the Christian *beliefs* about Christmas then, fervently believed in (as indeed they are now) he contended, were either of Roman or Babylonian origin. He said:

The festivals of Rome are innumerable; but five of the most important may be singled out for elucidation, viz., Christmas-day, Lady-day, Easter, the Nativity of St. John, and the Feast of the Assumption. Each and all of these can be proved to be Babylonian. And first, as to the festival in honour of the birth of Christ, or Christmas . . .

Hislop asked, why is it connected with December 25th as “there is not a word in the scripture about the precise day of his birth, or the time of the year he was born”? Hislop quotes a number of eminent Biblical scholars who agree with him—but even these, all true believers, have had no more effect than even the most blatant infidels. In fact, he says, it is admitted by the most learned and candid writers of all parties “that the day of our Lord’s birth cannot be determined”. Hislop goes even further: “*within the Christian Church* no such festival as Christmas was ever heard of *till the third century*, and that not till the *fourth century* was far advanced did it gain much observance”. (Hislop’s italics.)

The fact is that Christmas as a Pagan festival had been kept, as Hislop insists, “long before the fourth century by the *heathen*, at that precise time of the year in honour of the birth of the son of the Babylonian queen of heaven”, and naturally this date was adopted eventually by the heathen converts to Christianity as celebrating the birth of Jesus as well as their own Pagan “saviours”.

The Saxons, once established in England, also brought over many of their sacred festivals, one of them being “Yule-tide”, “Yule” meaning child. But to go over a good deal of the ground again with names of deities and their meanings would be tedious; though they all add up to prove that there were plenty of gods who were born on that day or near it.

Now the point I wish to make is that what Hislop said in *The Two Babylons* and also what the research of prominent Freethinkers found out, settled the fact that Christ-

mas was nothing but a Pagan festival taken over by the Christian Church when it was established. Many Biblical critics are inclined to think that the stories of the nativity of Jesus were additions to the primitive Gospels—that some such inventions were necessary, for the heathen converts had similar stories about their own, now discarded deities; and though they were ready to give up Mithras or Horus, for example, they were by no means ready to give up the joyous festivals held in their honour.

But in the course of centuries the story of the Babe of Bethlehem survived, and with it the holidays associated with his birth. And the Churches are now too involved in their propagation as part and parcel of Christianity to give them up. In short, we have the same old Christmas of our ancestors, or at least many of the rituals associated with it, and it is manifestly unfair to ask, let us say, the Bishop of Woolwich, or the Bishop of Southwark, to give up the traditional Christmas we all know so well—whatever they may privately think.

We Freethinkers are under no similar obligation. We have continually pointed out the silly contradictions in the Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus, and Christians have been unable to answer our criticisms. But you cannot abolish a festival which dates back many centuries before our era with a wave of the hand.

And this brings me finally to a point I raised many years ago in these columns. Should we as Freethinkers enjoy Christmas?

My answer then was as it is now: Of course! Why not? We at least know that Christmas is a purely Pagan festival in honour of a mythical deity, whether he is called Yule, Jesus or Mithras. We can put away work for once, and the cares of life if possible, and enjoy with our children parties and games and the greetings of our friends. What is wrong with, for a day or two, “eat drink and be merry”, I do not know.

## Moral Responsibility

By G. L. SIMONS

THE NOTION of moral responsibility is obviously highly relevant to secularism. This is because, in part, secularism is an ethical philosophy and any interpretation of ethics must involve the notion of responsibility. I think, however, that even among some secularists the notion is a confused one. The present article indicates what seems to me to be the only view of moral responsibility that is logically tenable.

Our idea of responsibility depends upon our attitude to free will. I have already written an article on free will. I will restate my conclusions without argument.

All events are caused or uncaused. Human choice is an event. If uncaused, it is free but ethically unimportant; if caused, it is predictable and can be given ethical significance. Science encourages us to search for the causes of human behaviour. It is therefore only realistic to work on the assumption that human choice is in principle predictable, and is governed by discoverable laws. The free will invoked by the theologian to justify revenge is logically illegitimate. The will may be said to be free when a person who is emotionally normal is able to make a rational decision. This in no way precludes the possibility that the decision in principle predictable. Indeed, the



modern computer has a decision facility; its choices depend upon manipulating incoming data according to a programme. This is also so with a human being—the incoming data are sensory impressions, the brain is programmed, partly by natural selection, partly by the past experience of the individual. Human choices and decisions made by a computer are logically identical.

A man may be said to be morally responsible when he habitually acts in a morally right way. (It is not necessary to define “morally right” here. The definition applies whatever our morality.) The extent to which a man is morally responsible is to be discovered by an observation of his behaviour. If he regularly violates a moral rule which we accept he is morally irresponsible; if he regularly conforms to an accepted morality he is morally responsible. It cannot be assumed that a man is responsible—this can only be determined by an examination of his behaviour. So much seems obvious, but if accepted, its ramifications are radical.

It is conventional to define moral responsibility in a different way. For example, sanity is used as a criterion of responsibility; the sane criminal is condemned whereas the insane criminal is, in a sense, excused. The sane man is said to be morally responsible whereas the insane man is not. But if what I have said above is true this distinction is quite unreasonable.

The insane man is said to be compulsively motivated, but all that is meant by this is that his insanity has caused his behaviour. It may also be said of the sane man that he is compulsively motivated, i.e. his sanity caused his behaviour. If the behaviour of each is acknowledged to be caused, the compulsion in each case is logically identical. The cause/effect relation is the same, the only difference being the type of motivation.

Hence it is nonsense to say that the sane man can “help” his behaviour and the insane man can not. There are not two types of causal relations. There is one type but it is embodied in various causes and effects. If, in some sense, the behaviour of the insane man is “inevitable” so is the behaviour of the sane man, since both are in principle predictable. Similarly it is nonsense to say that the sane man “could have acted differently” whereas the insane man could not. Each could have acted differently only if a causal element in the situation had been different. As things were they were each bound to act as they did. The effects of these views upon penal philosophy should be obvious.

Criminals (of either the sane or insane variety) do not incur “a debt to society” since they are caused, in one way or another, to behave as they do. This means that punishment for the sake of inflicting suffering is quite unjustified; similarly, praise and blame are confused notions if conceived in the conventional way. Their only justification is to act as causal elements in the human environment encouraging certain types of behaviour and discouraging others. Punishment and blame should only be used as deterrents; reward and praise should only be used as incentives.

The fact that the conventional distinction between the responsibility of the sane and the insane is logically confused does not of course imply that it is useless to investigate sanity and insanity. But the purpose of such an investigation would not be to determine responsibility. This would have already been done by an estimation of the moral rightness of the person's actions. Rather the purpose of such an investigation would be to discover the nature of the motivation so that this could be successfully countered and its effects made less likely in the future.

This means that penal action should be taken in the belief that suffering, in both the innocent and guilty, is a

bad thing. The criminal should be made to suffer as little as is consistent with the deterrent effect of his treatment. If it cannot be shown that particular treatment of criminals is likely to deter either the criminal (through reformation or fear) or potential criminals (through fear) then such treatment has no place in a rational penal philosophy. In short, if it cannot be shown that punishment is a deterrent it should be abandoned.

I hold that the above view of responsibility and punishment is the only one that is logically tenable. People who reject it either lack logical acumen or enjoy self-righteous revenge. But such people, often with religious tendencies, will not perpetually hold back reform. Logic has many powerful aspects, not least its capacity to foster a humane and compassionate morality.

## Points From New Books

HAKUIN ZENJI was born of comparatively humble parents in Japan in 1685, and he wrote stories in the vernacular style so that the peasants might glimpse some aspects of Zen Buddhism. A selection of Zenji's writings has now been translated by R. D. M. Shaw, DD, under the title of *The Embossed Tea Kettle and Other Stories* (Allen & Unwin, 28s.).

Personally, I feel I have been carried far enough to the horizons of Zen. Eugen Herrigel's *Zen In The Art Of Archery* (Routledge, 9s. 6d.) gave one the heart of the matter with admirable lucidity. Yet it is instructive for Rationalists to study other texts in so far as we are told that Zen is not mysticism. Our amusement, then, is to observe how simple notions like taking care of one's health can become mumbo-jumbo as remote as any mystical flight when they are elevated to the dignity of a religious “mystery”. Also it is good to be reminded how cleverly all religions protect themselves from criticism, even if they pretend they are not religions in the usual sense. The initiated sigh and say one cannot be expected to understand without faith, and the Zen men diligently maintain that for full initiation Zen must be lived and cannot be read. They place themselves beyond criticism, and at this point I am prepared to leave them.

For a good breezy cod of some of the contemporary mumbo-jumbo merchants, one should read John Symonds's new novel, *Light Over Water* (John Baker, 16s.). The story centres on a young journalist who comes under the influence of a female Yogi who lives in Clapham. The lady promises the young man that she will teach him how to levitate and revive corpses, but she also feels that an affair conducted entirely on the astral plane is not absolutely satisfactory. The young man then encounters a rich alchemist who demonstrates how cosily the bored can fill in their time and make themselves important in their own esteem by dabbling in “the mysteries”.

Here is Mr. Symonds writing about a conversation between the journalist and the alchemist:

“Isn't that merely mystification?” I said.

“No, not at all. That is the old objection raised against them [the alchemists], but it is groundless. I'll admit that their explanations are in the form of paradoxes, but one can get nearer to the truth by a paradox.”

“As in Zen,” I said.

“Yes!” he shouted. “Like throwing the pupil out of the window to bring enlightenment.”

So it's all great fun, in Mr. Symonds's romp and it reminds me of a true story about a lady who married a man who said he was a black magician. She told me that it was very convenient as her husband could make himself invisible and did not have to pay his fare on buses.

OSWELL BLAKESTON.



## CORRESPONDENCE

## SPIRITUALISM

May I submit for your consideration the following accounts of my "sittings" with a spiritualist medium, Mrs. Jessie Mason? The first occasion was in public and it was the first time that I had seen her in person. She gave as far as I was concerned four very evidential facts: (1) That I was brought up in an orphanage! (The Foundling Hospital, 1926-1934); (2) That I had been out to Egypt! (1940-1944 during World War II); (3) That I was a freelance as far as spiritualism is concerned! (I am not tied to any particular church or medium); (4) That I had visited Belgrave Square! (I had in fact been to 33 Belgrave Square, the Headquarters of the SAGB that very afternoon!)

In the private interview she gave two more evidential facts. (1) That I have a gun! (I have an air pistol or air gun!); (2) That I am a communist! (I do in fact hold a party card and am a reader of the *Daily Worker*!)

These are six facts which I know to be true, and to my mind, could not have been obtained by mere guess work!

As a reader of THE FREETHINKER I know of the attitude of the editorial staff to spiritualism in general, but I feel that if one is really "seeking truth" one should investigate the claims of the spiritualists with less adverse bias!

D. YEULETT.

*[We cannot shrug off our scepticism towards Spiritualism on the strength of Mr. Youlett's (to us) not very convincing letter. Does he really believe Mrs. Mason needed psychic powers to know that he had visited her sect's headquarters? However, we are perfectly prepared to test the lady if Mr. Youlett can arrange for us to do so. A small or large gathering will suit us and we propose to bring along a person known to us whose brief biography shall be in a sealed envelope. Mrs. Mason shall then be able to demonstrate her powers under our supervision and before a number of people selected by us or a public audience.—ED.]*

## DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

The Notes and News paragraph about the new US President, Lyndon B. Johnson, being a member of the Disciples of Christ, formed at the beginning of the century, is interesting.

This sect—which we here call Christadelphians—had an English representative, Robert Roberts, who lived in Birmingham and had a six-nights' debate with Charles Bradlaugh in 1876. It was held

on consecutive Thursday nights, three in Leicester and three in Birmingham, and the disputants each spoke for half-an-hour, and then for a quarter-of-an-hour asked each other questions in the Socratic way. I have a verbatim copy of the full debate. Robert Roberts also had some of his lectures published under the title, *Christendom Astray*, which is the sect's text-book. He died in 1898.

T. M. MOSLEY.

## THIS BELIEVING WORLD

"The Garden of Eden must be rescued somehow," you conclude in one of your "This Believing World" paragraphs (13/12/63). But surely you are taking the *Evening News* reporter (or sub-editor) too seriously. He is probably no more disturbed by the emergence of man 1,750,000 years ago than you are. His headline, "The Garden of Eden 'was in South Africa'" is no more indicative of his Biblical beliefs than is "Continuous creation" of those of Professor Fred Hoyle. It is just a catchy headline—no more.

Something really should be done about "This Believing World"; it strives to take us back half-a-century. No doubt many of your readers would like religion to have remained static for that time. It would make it easier to dispose of. But religion hasn't remained still; it has advanced, and you must do so too.

W. J. FENTON.

## OBITUARY

James Clarke a member of the National Secular Society, the Field Naturalists' Society, and the Footpaths' Preservation Society, died on December 4th aged 88. In his younger days Mr. Clarke played an active part in Trade Union affairs, and was a former President of Stockport branch of the Workers' Educational Association.

Mr. W. Collins, a friend of the deceased for over 30 years, paid the final tribute at Stockport Crematorium on December 9th. We extend our sympathy to Mr. Clarke's widow and two daughters.

Harry C. Cutting a member of Marble Arch Branch NSS died recently in hospital, after a long illness. For several years he was a familiar figure at Hyde Park where he sold freethought publications.

We extend deepest sympathy to his family.

## BOOKS FOR THE NEW YEAR

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