

The Freethinker

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HAMLET ADVISED that Polonius should play the fool nowhere but in his own house, and someone should advise the parsons to play the fool nowhere but in their own pulpits. Immemorial usage will plead for them there, and to be hard upon them in that environment would be downright cruelty. But the case is altered when they go outside their own churches and challenge the world's attention. Criticism is then just, and sometime even necessary, as we take it to be in the present instance. We have read a volume of *Shakespeare Sermons*, preached in the Collegiate Church of Stratford-on-Avon, with far greater attention than it deserves; not because we had the slightest

pleasure in the task, but because we wished to be entirely fair to our intellectual opponents. Having perused the book in this spirit, we have no hesitation in saying that it is almost beneath contempt. We did not think it was possible to be so dull and vapid on such a subject. There is a magic in the very name of Shakespeare that should lift the heaviest soul, and quicken the steps of the dreariest plodder. But it fails to produce any such effect upon the clerical collaborators in this miserable abortion.

Ineptitude
Nothing could more decisively show the depth of ineptitude to which the modern pulpit has descended. "The brains are out" of Christianity, which is now living on its inherited spiritual capital. Its ministers remind one of Carlyle's "Dead Sea Apes", sitting round a fire that was kindled by others, without the ability to replenish it with fresh fuel. The fire is slowly but surely dying down, and they are already beginning to shiver. "Poor Tom's a-cold" might be the cry of every one of them. Certainly it might be the cry of the seven preachers who have sent forth these wretchedly feeble addresses on the mightiest genius of this planet; one whose radiant magnificence might "put a spirit of life in everything" that retained a spark of vitality.

Sacred Seven
Let these seven—it is a sacred number—be immortalised, even as the pedlars and drivellers were immortalised in the *Dunciad*, or as the prince of dullards was embalmed in *Mac Flecknoe*. Here they are in their own order of publication: Dr. G. F. Browne, Bishop of Bristol; Rev. R. S. de C. Laffan, rector of St. Stephen's, Walbrook, London; Rev. Alfred Ainger, Master of the Temple, and Canon of Bristol; Rev. Dr. A. Nicolson, vicar of St. Alban's, Leamington; Very Rev. C. W. Stubbs, Dean of Ely; Very Rev. F. W. Farrar, Dean of Canterbury; and Rev. George Arbuthnot, vicar of Stratford-on-Avon. The last, who is the most foolish of all, edits the volume, and contributes two sermons—all the others contributing one. Mr. Arbuthnot's second sermon is nearly all about Moses. Shakespeare has a look in at the finish, where his "patriotism" is hitched on to the doggerel of "God save the Queen", which is enough to make him turn in his grave; and where we are seriously informed—by a parson!—that to honour and obey the Queen and all in authority

under her is taught in "the fifth Commandment".

One preacher says that we may congratulate ourselves on the fact that, although Shakespeare sometimes uses words that cannot be spoken now, and even paints vice in startling colours, he never makes it victorious, and "on his pages virtue always triumphs". Is it possible, we ask for Shakespearean criticism to sink lower than this? The perpetual triumph of virtue is a falsehood of the pulpit.

IEWS AND OPINIONS

Sermons on Shakespeare

By G. W. FOOTE

It is not one of the truths of nature—or of Shakespeare. Such facile optimism was not for his sagacious intellect. Never for a moment did he pander to this weak delusion. Othello is caught in the toils, and kills himself after

slaying Desdemona; Hamlet is treacherously done to death after the sad ending of poor Ophelia; and Lear draws his last breath of torture upon the lips of the murdered Cordelia. Is *this* the triumph of virtue? Vice and crime do not escape their natural penalty, but virtue is too often involved in their doom. This is, indeed, the very essence of tragedy. Not the cheap tragedy of "good, improving" literature, but the tragedy of nature, the tragedy of Shakespeare; the tragedy that appals, that touches emotions too deep for tears, that clutches the heart in a spasm of pity and revolt, and prompts the terrible cry: —

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport.

No Compliment

"Shakespeare, the Prophet", is the title of the Rev. R. S. de C. Laffan's sermon. According to this preacher, Shakespeare "is supremely the prophet the forth-teller of human nature, and of human life". Dr. Stubbs also calls him "a prophet" as well as "a religious man". "My friends", the preacher cries, "I should not care to speak of him in this place at all if I did not think that he was both". Now, in the sense in which these gentlemen use the word "prophet", it is no great compliment to Shakespeare. They place him in the same category with Daniel, who interpreted a king's dreams; and with Jonah, who took a three days' trip on board a whale. Evidently it is these Old Testament characters, and not Shakespeare, that gain by this association. Calling him a "prophet" is giving them a friendly lift into good society.

Monstrous and Pitiful

Dr. Stubbs remarks how much Shakespeare has done "to humanise, nay, to Christianise mankind". One half of this remark is certainly true. Shakespeare, being the greatest of poets, has necessarily done much to humanise mankind. But no one ever said that he had done anything to Christianise mankind until Christianity, having become conscious of its weakness, began to seek patrons in the previously subordinate provinces of science, art, and literature. The champions of that faith go about like a press gang, and force every likely man into its service. Darwin himself, who rejected Christianity, and had no positive belief in God or in a future life, is actually claimed as a "Christian leader", by apologists like the Rev. John Clifford. And now they are claiming Shakespeare, after

six or seven generations of commentators have censured his irreligion and profanity. In one sense, of course, this is monstrous impudence, in another sense it is pitiful humility. "Methinks sometimes", says Sir Andrew Aguecheek, "I have no more wit than a Christian". And really he seems to have understood the species.

Dr. Nicholson, who gives the ambitious title of "The Man and the Poet" to his sermon, opens with a little dissertation on art that must have sounded rather oddly in a church. One expects to hear Moses and the prophets, and Jesus Christ and the Apostles, but not Hegel and Michelet. After all there is no necessity to show that Shakespeare was a supreme artist. It is known and admitted. Only the "moral teaching of the Poet", as Dr. Nicholson calls it, can have so much as an indirect relation to the purposes of the pulpit. On this point the saying of Dr. Johnson is quoted, that Shakespeare "seems to write without any moral purpose". Dr. Nicholson calls this an "amazing" judgment. But we believe that Dr. Johnson was quite right as he used those words. Shakespeare's moral lessons are like those of nature. They are indirect and implicit. Nature does not ruin a drunkard's liver in order to give the world a warning against drunkenness but the lesson is there if we have the wit to learn it. In the same way we can see what comes of jealousy in *Othello*, and what comes of reckless ambition in *Macbeth*; but most assuredly those dramas were not written for that didactic object. Shakespeare has no "moral teaching" in the pulpit sense of the words. In this respect Dr. Johnson was right, and Dr. Nicholson is wrong.

Moral Causation

Let us follow this preacher, however, and see what "moral teaching" he finds in the mighty dramatist. "With him," Dr. Nicholson says, "moral responsibility is a first axiom". But this may mean anything or nothing. No single word in the dictionary is more abused by orthodox writers than that same "responsibility". Nor is the matter much improved by the statement that "Man is endowed with a freedom of will, in relation to virtue and vice". You must tell us what you mean before you ask us to allow that this was the position of Shakespeare. As the theologians use the phrase "free will", there is not a trace of it in his dramas. Shakespeare was a moral causationist. He could not have been a great dramatist otherwise. Eliminate that element, and what you get is not drama, but melodrama. The development of the play must flow naturally and logically from the relationships and interactions of the characters in a common environment. Both the supernatural and the arbitrary are excluded. The law of cause and effect must obtain everywhere. We must perceive that everything has followed a strict necessity. The moment we see that this chain of fate has been broken, we recognise that we have been played with and deceived.

"Freedom of will" indeed! Yes, freedom to be oneself. That is the only freedom known to nature, and it was the only freedom known to Shakespeare. Nothing is more impressive in his great tragedies than the way in which good, bad, and indifferent are all swept along on one stream of doom—like a boatload of men, women, and children caught in the irresistible onrush of the river above the Falls of Niagara.

The Sonnets

Dr. Farrar's view is that, "So far as we can get any real light on the soul of Shakespeare, we must find it in the sonnets". But he must know—at least, he *should* know—that this is a much controverted question. Accord-

ing to Wordsworth, the most impersonal artist in all literature unlocked his heart with the sonnet key. Did he? sneered Browning; if so, he was so much the less Shakespeare. The giants differ, and the pigmy sets them all right. And the acme of the joke is that Dr. Farrar is such a sworn disciple of Browning! Indeed, he refers to his Master in this very sermon as the poet of our own day who was "most akin" to Shakespeare in "his varied and powerful genius". But what on earth, except his own dull piety, or his pious dullness, prompted him to quote this terrible sample?—

The acknowledgment of God in Christ,
Accepted by the reason, solves for thee
All problems in the world and out of it,
And has, so far, advanced thee to be wise.

This is Browning at his worst, the preachy Browning—the Browning with all the poetry gone out of him—the Browning that Dr. Farrar appreciates. This poor bald prose, cut into ten-syllable lengths, is treated by the puppeteer as "those strong words of Robert Browning". Yes, and he says that Shakespeare "would have subscribed to them with his whole heart". Oh, ye gods! And oh, ye little fishes! Shakespeare would have smiled at the sentiment, and groaned at the verse.

I am quite certain that Shakespeare was a Freethinker. I am sure that he smiled at all the creeds. They had no business with him, or he with them. He laughed at the Puritans; for the rest, the religious strife of his time passed by him like the scuffling of kites and crows. He dealt with what was older than religion and would outlive it: with human nature.

Future Life

What is the point of points in religion? A future life. Take that away, and all the rest drops of itself. It has been wittily said that God is only the dot to complete man's, "I". Man pretends to feel that God is necessary to account for his own presence on earth; but he really feels that God is necessary to guarantee his own presence in the world to come.

Now it is clear enough to me, at least, that Shakespeare did *not* believe in a future life. How curious it is, that he never drew a character who derived the slightest consolation from believing in a life beyond the grave; while, on the other hand, he drew several who looked upon it with absolute terror. He saw through the hypocrisies with which this subject is surrounded. One of his clownish ridicules one of his fine ladies who is mourning the death of her brother, whom she nevertheless believes to have gone to a better world. "The more fool you, Madam," he says, "to mourn for your brother being in heaven." A hit, a hit, a palpable hit! Only, for safety's sake, it had to be administered through a professional fool—who was sometimes, by nature and practice, a wiser man than his solemn neighbours.

"Death is the great divorcer for ever", said John Keats when his own end was almost in sight, and the chance-past of union with the woman of his heart: perhaps ought to say, in such a case, his soul. Shakespeare regarded death in the same way. But not in a spirit of pessimism or revolt. He knew that death might even come as a friend, and his favourite smiles for it are "rest" and "sleep". His greatest characters must have expressed his own thought. They differ in other respects: they are good or bad, morally speaking; but they resemble each other in certain powers of mind; and those powers of mind give them a common philosophy of life and death. Herein the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, Hamlet in *Macbeth*, and Prospero with Mark Antony; and Hamlet's last words are "The rest is silence".

Civilisation and Decay

By F. A. RIDLEY

CIVILISATION IS ABOUT ten thousand years old. Actual traces of extinct civilisations unveiled by modern archaeological research go back about five thousand years to the oldest surviving Egyptian and Mesopotamian monuments, but since creations, such as the pyramids, presuppose an already high degree of co-operative human organisation, one would be justified in allowing an earlier incubation period, probably equal in length to that of recorded civilisations themselves.

The phenomenon of civilisation, viewed from the standpoint of historical materialism, is equivalent to the era wittily summarised by Samuel Butler as that in which mankind "began to live beyond his income"; that is when human societies had accumulated a store of surplus value available for non-productive occupations! The whole available energies of primitive societies had to be devoted to the bare struggle for economic survival.

We must note that no single civilisation which existed at the dawn of recorded history still survives today. Even the oldest surviving cultures of China and India do not go back much beyond three thousand years and have, in this lengthy era, submitted to profound modifications and even transformations — particularly so in recent centuries. History is, after all, a vast graveyard strewn with human relics! Where, then, if anywhere, is to be found any basic determining "law" of civilisation and decay?

Gibbon's work has indelibly associated "decline and fall" with one particular European empire, the Roman. This unprecedentedly massive structure, which dominated the ancient Mediterranean for several centuries, also attracted the encyclopedic attention of several of the greatest of modern historians (Mommsen, Ferrero, Bury, etc.) — and many controversial explanations.

Gibbon, for example, pronounced his famous verdict "the triumph of barbarism and religion." In his vast canvas of decay, religion and, in particular, his *bete noire*, the Christian Church, figures largely as motivating cause of the long-drawn-out decline and fall of the empire of the seven hills. But much water has flowed under the bridges of the Tiber since Gibbon wrote, and other more terrestrial explanations for the slow decay of the Roman colossus have been propounded. For example, the debasement of the currency leading inevitably to the ultimate breakdown of social administration — Hans Delbrueck in *Numbers in History*.

This eminent German military historian holds that thanks to the hopeless unreliability of the financial structure of the later Caesars, military discipline broke down, leaving the undefended frontiers at the current mercy of the German barbarians, Rome's eventual conquerors. More recently another European historian, M. Henri Pirenne, has transferred the terrain of the Roman decline and fall from land to sea. In his remarkable book *Mohammed and Charlemagne* he advanced the novel theory that Roman civilisation actually survived its epoch of subjugation by the German barbarians, who sedulously continued it as far as they knew how, and that it was not until the definitive conquest of the Mediterranean sea — the mercantile base of all classical civilisation including that of the Roman Empire — by the Arab crusaders of Mohammed that the classical civilisation finally collapsed beyond recall.

There would appear to be much truth in these contentions, as well, no doubt, as in other theories. The causes

of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire were, no doubt, composite. Personally speaking, if I had to select its primary cause, I would infer that it lay in the prevailing institution of chattel-slavery, always and everywhere inimical to every species of technical innovation. At the commencement of the Christian era, Rome was apparently poised on the verge of an industrial revolution. What effectively prevented its ultimate fruition would appear to have been the "dead hand" of slavery, though, no doubt, Christianity, with its anti-scientific world outlook, also assisted in strangling the scientific evolution of classical antiquity (cf. my book *Spartacus*).

No ambiguity would seem to be present in the case of Rome's two modern successors as "world empires," Spain and England. The major causes can be summarised briefly with, at least, approximate accuracy. The Spanish empire (1500-1800), which was actually the first to be magniloquently described as "the empire on which the sun never sets," collapsed eventually due to two primary causes: Catholic religious bigotry which wasted in quixotic fashion vast resources on interminable religious wars against heretics and infidels, besides strangling all original thought in the dungeons and *autos-da-fé* the Inquisition, plus an economically unsound "robber economy" which based her material foundations on gold and silver torn from her American colonies, in lieu of developing more permanent bases for a viable economy. The sombre results, extended over several centuries, of this epoch of slow and inglorious decay as Karl Marx described it, has been powerfully narrated by T. H. Buckle.

As regards the still almost contemporary decline and fall of the English Empire — which began with Cromwell's first effective conquest of the British Isles and then went on to embrace the whole world (c.1650-1950)—the two major causes are surely to be found in (a) the loss of the economic world monopoly conferred upon Britain by the Industrial Revolution and (b) in the decline of naval power as the major belligerent arm in world politics. As Oswald Spengler concisely noted: "England, along with the heavy battleship, sinks into the past."

Apart from these European world empires, it would, no doubt, be very instructive, as well as interesting, to trace the operative causes in the case of such ancient oriental empires and cultures as the Chinese and Muslim. But it may be surmised that few western inquirers have the technically necessary linguistic attributes to do so.

Is history a science? Probably only potentially, for certainly the attempts so far made from Polybius to Arnold Toynbee, to reduce (or elevate?) universal history from an art (or philosophy?) to a *bona fide* science have not so far been conspicuously successful. Perhaps it is on the whole desirable that they never will be, since after all, history is and will probably always remain the most fascinating of all subjects, precisely because it is the most speculatively unpredictable.

CONGRATULATIONS

READERS, we know, will join us in sending congratulations and best wishes to the President of the World Union of Freethinkers, Charles Bradlaugh Bonner, and his wife Gabrielle, who celebrated their Golden Wedding on April 9th. Mr. and Mrs. Bonner met in Switzerland, where Mr. Bonner was pursuing his university studies prior to World War I.

This Believing World

As a special treat on Easter Sunday, the BBC gave us the Rev. A. Bridge discussing, with illustrations, the "portraits" of Jesus. As the portraits differed from each other a great deal, Mr. Bridge had a particularly difficult task. He found it quite impossible to reconcile the earliest portraits of Jesus, representing a beardless youth (and obviously Apollo) with the Saxon nobleman of Renaissance times, or the Victorian "gentle Jesus meek and mild" with the gaunt visage of modern "non-representational" artists like Graham Sutherland.

★

After blaming the Jews—in particular all living Jews—for the crucifixion of Jesus for at least 1700 years, the Churches are having second thoughts. After all, the Gospels indicate, if not very clearly, that it was the Romans who were the culprits. But the cry of "Who killed Christ?" still hurled at Jews will not easily cease, in spite of the two books by Paul Winter and Joseph Blinzler on the "Trial" of Jesus—reviewed by the way in the *Sunday Express* for March 29th. These two writers do their utmost to prove the Jews were not altogether the culprits.

★

Mr. Robert Pitman in this review agrees with the two authors, some of whose arguments he gives. He (and they) take for granted that the trial and condemnation of Jesus occurred more or less as the Gospels narrate, though not a word of contemporary evidence has ever been produced to support the accounts. Why, by the way, was a Roman-Jewish trial recorded in Greek? Still Jesus was crucified, and Mr. Pitman now thinks that "all mankind" is to blame.

★

The London "Evening News" (March 28th) concentrated its "Saturday Reflection" on the "Resurrection", which it described as "the consummation of all past history". The "concentrated power of evil was," said the *News*, "impotent against the love of God incarnate in Jesus Christ". Moreover, we must not forget that, "when the race of men will be delivered from the powers of evil" then, and then only, will "Christ's kingdom be triumphantly established". We expect that this favourite cliché, culled from countless Victorian tracts, will do duty yet a thousand times.

★

"So it happened to a Mother just 1931 years ago," exclaimed the Rev. M. Byrne in *The People* on March 29th. "Mother" is of course Mary, and at the Crucifixion she was "Numb, Stricken, Helpless". But she felt "John's strong arm about her shoulder". And later, she heard that Jesus was "risen", and this "was everything". Can anyone wonder why these stories, for which there never has been evidence, persist? Was it not Matthew Arnold who drew attention to them as, "*Behold a legend growing under your eyes!*"

★

The Church of England, according to the Rev. Arthur Beale, aims to make heaven safe for the middle class. The idea has been fostered in recent years that the Church should be governed by a synod, representing bishops, clergy and laity, he said (*Daily Telegraph*, April 1st), but at present the "working classes" had no more representation in the Church Assembly than in the Carlton Club.

The Jesus Christ Fable

YET ANOTHER book from the Union Rationaliste, Paris, demonstrating the incredibility of Jesus Christ. Its 366 pages set out with careful clarity and readability, the arguments current in France since Renan, and add the conclusions of the author. M. Fau studies the problem in two parts. The first half of his book is devoted to the question, Did Jesus exist? On this he is convinced "that nothing permits belief in the historical existence of Jesus." In dealing with the argument that martyrdom was a proof of Christ's existence, an argument given with authority by Pascal, M. Fau replies that, even if there were martyrs—and no Christian martyr of the first century is known for certain—martyrdom is a proof of faith, but not of the truth. He might have added that, among the Donatists for example, martyrdom was sought as one sure way of salvation. Hence the many Donatist martyrs at the hands of the orthodox Christians.

In the second half of his work M. Fau considers the origins of the Jesus myth. The elements from which it has been constructed were, he thinks, built up and built in slowly over a long period, and crystallised in the gospels somewhere between 140 and 180 AD. Four factors were at work: the pagan mysteries and syncretism, given a powerful impetus by the Alexandrine conquests; the expectation of a Jewish Messiah; the Essenes; the Neoplatonists and, generally the speculations derived from Hellenic philosophy. These currents met in the Diaspora: most strongly, in the opinion of M. Fau, in Syria, where the Christ mystery evolved into an Evangel to be preached to the people at large; and the preachers went forth from Antioch. In imperial Rome the new religion took on more definite forms, the Gnostics Marcion and Valentinus were expelled from the fold, and the message of the God-man disseminated.

The weak souls who cannot stand alone, but must lean on some fancied power, will always find a creed to suit them. The triumph of Christianity over the many rival creeds has been due to ruthless persecution.

C. BRADLAUGH BONNEK.

SHAKESPEARE AND PAINE COMMEMORATIONS

ON TUESDAY, May 19th, the National Secular Society will commemorate the quatercentenary of the birth of Shakespeare, with a meeting at the Alliance Hall, Westminster. David Tribe, the President of the Society, will speak on "Freethought and Humanism in Shakespeare" and excerpts from the plays will be read by the well-known stage and TV actress, Joan Miller. There will also be musical items, and the programme will be introduced by Richard Ainley. Mr. Ainley is a drama teacher, and son of the famous Shakespearean actor, Henry Ainley.

The NSS is also organising a coach party to Thetford on Sunday, June 7th, when the Thomas Paine statue is to be unveiled. The coach will leave central London at 9.45 a.m., returning at 9.30 p.m. The London visitors will join members of the Leicester Secular Society for tea. The cost will be £1 1s., which includes return fare and tea, and those intending to go are asked to book early through the Secretary of the National Secular Society, 103 Borough High Street, London, S.E.1.

WITHOUT COMMENT

A Danish Lutheran pastor, Harold Seebye, was suspended today for calling his bishop "a wretch" in an Easter sermon and adding: "Down with royalty, long live the revolution."

—The Guardian (4/4/64).

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

Lecture Notices, Etc.

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch 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, April 19th, 6.45 p.m.: R. L. KENNING, "God: Meaning, Nature, and Existence".
South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Sunday, April 19th, 11 a.m.: F. H. AMPLETT MICKLEWRIGHT, "Does the Magistrate Administer Justice?"
Wales and Western Branch NSS (Bute Town Community Centre, Cardiff), Thursday, April 23rd, 7.30 p.m.: Political Party Representatives, "Any Questions?"

Notes and News

"IRONICALLY," wrote Colin McCall last week, "Shakespeare's own quatercentenary will be celebrated with church services and pious panegyrics". Views and Opinions, this week, is a shortened version of a previous FREETHINKER editor's critical review of some "Sermons on Shakespeare" preached in Stratford-on-Avon more than half a century ago. In a sense we are looking backward for a foretaste of things to come, but G. W. Foote's article also deserves reprinting for its intrinsic merit.

★
"As you will see, Spanish Catholicism is to a large extent a myth." So writes the translator of the article on page 127 which recently appeared in Barcelona's main daily newspaper, *La Vanguardia*, referring to a poll carried out at Madrid University. The results of the poll were published in *Ecclesia*, the paper of the Spanish Church, and the only uncensored paper in Spain. Being a Spaniard, our translator must remain anonymous.

★
"PERHAPS some of you have inexact or repugnant concepts of religion," said the Pope in his Easter message; "perhaps your idea of faith is erroneous; it offends against intelligence, it shackles progress, humiliates man, brings sadness to his life" (*The Times*, 30/3/64). But, he went on, "perhaps some of you are more eager and therefore, without knowing it, more prepared to catch the gleam of the light". And the Pope made a special plea to those

who have no religion, or who are against religion, not to lie in the "gloom" of atheism, but to see that "they are labouring under the weight of irrational dogmas, of contradictory doubts that leave no peace, of absurdities without escape, of maledictions caused by despair and nothingness". Talk about the kettle calling the pot . . .!

★
THE *Daily Sketch* for Holy Week appropriately chose the subject of life after death for its "Focus on Fact" strip cartoon giving Gary Keane and Neville Randall their best opportunity since the notorious Lourdes series. Starting—for them—rather tentatively with a reference to "alleged" communications from the dead, Messrs. Keane and Randall soon found "corroboration" from doctors and nurses that "patients' faces at death light up with happiness" and "sometimes they call the name of a friend or relation who has died long since"; from Vivien Keddie of Wells, Somerset (do you mean to say you've never heard of her?) who "saw her dead mother smiling waiting to greet and help her"; from Mrs. Thelma Rowbotham of Gillingham, who "felt herself floating near the ceiling watching doctors and nurses attend her"; and from Mrs. Rebecca Schreiber of London who "felt herself flying over the sea to a cabin in the Queen Mary to comfort her seasick daughter". Corroboration indeed!

★
OUR CRAZY Lord's Day Observance Act (1932) allows dramatic recitals on Sundays, but not drama. So the two actors, Jack MacGowran and Patrick Magee, who participated in the Samuel Beckett symposium at the Criterion Theatre, London on April 5th, were not allowed to wear make-up, move or even inflect their voices dramatically. *The Observer* (5/4/64) drew attention to the absurd restrictions that John Calder, the organiser of the symposium, had to contend with. And it was good to see the point taken up on the BBC the same evening in *Dig This Rhubarb*.

★
AS FOR the Lord's Day Observance Society (yes, it does still exist), it found 1963 a "most distasteful and extraordinary year". The Queen (God bless her!) set a good example of churchgoing but "her husband and other members of her family continue their indulgence in Sunday sport"; Tottenham Hotspur supporters committed blasphemy by dressing up as angels when their team won the European Cup Winners' Cup; and the Beatles and bingo-organisers all wrongly plied their trade on Sundays. Moreover—Tories please note—Mr. Macmillan might still be Prime Minister if the nation's leaders had "not held political conferences or made journeys" on the Lord's Day. For further details we refer readers to the LDOS Annual Report.

★
THE Bishop of Woolwich has decided that the royalties from his best-selling *Honest to God* shall go to the promotion of Christian Initiatives Ltd., a newly-registered company of which Dr. Robinson, Mrs. Ruth Robinson, Miss Catherine C. Robinson and Marjorie Smith (secretary) comprise the council (*The Guardian*, 4/4/64). Income and property are to be applied solely towards the company's objects which are "to maintain, advance, and promote the Christian religion". It can hardly be said that the Bishop is entering a new business field, but we may be sure that his company won't lack salesmanship.

★
THE Vicar of St. Saviour's, Guildford, has, we note, solved the problem of fidgeting choirboys. He supplies them with comics which they read silently during the sermon (*Daily Express*, 6/4/64).

A Real-Property Meditation

By F. H. AMPHLETT MICKLEWRIGHT

THE STUDENT of law has not so far to progress in his studies before he comes across the whole subject of "real property." Stated briefly, this is the body of law which deals with land and that which is affixed to it. A series of complicated statutes have supplemented the common law, whilst some situations have been clarified latterly by the far-reaching property legislation of 1925. Behind the aridity of the lawbooks lies the whole story of social development, and it is not without interest to trace down the reforming statutes concerning land, some of which come from Medieval times. Their purpose is clear again and again. Real property conceptions grew up within the feudal order imposed upon England by William the Conqueror. Within this Norman system, church and state were at one, with the result that the Church came to occupy a predominant place in the social order. As a result, the rapacity of the ecclesiastical landholder grew apace. Reforming statute after reforming statute appears as the answer of a baronial interest seeking to safeguard its rights. Indeed, there were few landholding abuses of the time — ranging from the tying up of land in perpetuity to the enclosure of commons and the eviction of the peasantry — in which ecclesiastical landlords were not among the ringleaders. The actual situations as they appear in the contemporary records are lasting answer to the modern ecclesiastical apologists who idealise the Middle Ages and seek thereby to justify the temporal power of the Churches. The Middle Ages may indicate the source of an evolution which has finally borne fruit in the administration of capital assets of some £360 million by the Church Commissioners of England.

In a series of notoriously apologetic works, Cardinal Gasquet urged that the ecclesiastical corruptions arose with the admission of inferior men to holy orders after the Black Death and the resultant general depopulation. This disaster overtook English agriculture in 1349, and it is therefore not without interest to examine two statutes prior to this date. The statute, *Quia Emptores*, is sixty years earlier than the plague, having been enacted in 1289. Put briefly, it forbade subinfeudation, in other words the handing over of a feudal tenure to a third person. From henceforth, a change in the personality of the tenant had to be effected by substitution. The greater lords were pressing their advantages after Magna Carta and the period of Simon de Montfort. Subinfeudation meant that the feudal dues were lessened and the tenancy was removed by degrees from the actual lord. It is not without interest that the monks were among the prime movers in subinfeudation. Gradually, subinfeudated lands were brought under Church power and the secular lord was weakened in his economic status. It was only one of many processes which helped to create the vast ecclesiastical landholdings in Medieval England.

A year later, in 1290, came the statute of *Mortmain*. This interesting law forbade the handing over of land to religious houses. Where this had occurred, the land was taken permanently out of the workings of the feudal system and locked up in a perpetual holding. The tenant of the land was now never under age, never died and could never be attainted of treason or of felony. Under two statutes, one of 1279 and the other of 1290, land could not be conveyed to religious bodies without the licence of the Crown, but quite naturally, the religious orders found a way of getting around the law. The land

could be conveyed to a feoffee for the "use" of a religious house and statutes of 1392 and 1531 were aimed at this abuse of legal process.

Two important points arise with regard to Medieval England. The fact that the controversies over subinfeudation and *mortmain* commenced over half a century before the Black Death serves as a vivid reminder that the opposition to extensive ecclesiastical landholding was an opposition to abuses in no way generated by this disaster, but occasioned by the stranglehold which the Church had obtained upon the workings of the feudal system. The other is that these controversies shed a great deal of light upon the suppression of the monasteries and the anti-clerical aspects of the sixteenth century reformation. Medieval literature from Chaucer onwards is filled with protests of one kind or another against the ecclesiastical racketeering.

The Medieval village rested upon the manorial system, the head of the manor being its lord under the Crown. As Lord of the Manor, the holder of the tenure enjoyed extensive rights which included courts existing to enforce the local manorial customs and the copyhold tenure which sprang from them. The lord could likewise claim a number of feudal dues. One of the best known was the *heriot*, the due being the handing of the best head of cattle from the tenant's herd to the lord at the tenant's death. It is too often forgotten that with *heriot* was coupled the custom of *mortuary*, which handed the second best head from the herd to the rector. But the ecclesiastical extortion did not stop at this lesser point. In many cases, as in a large number of Middlesex manors, the lord was a religious house and the rector merely one of the monks who performed the parochial duties. Thus, both *heriot* and *mortuary* went into ecclesiastical hands.

It is not surprising to find that the results of the custom were a bugbear to the Medieval peasant, of that opposition to them was accompanied by a constant friction over the paying of tithe. Again and again, quotations may be found from Medieval preachers who threatened with eternal damnation the defaulter in tithe-paying. It is interesting that tithe, the tax of one-tenth of the produce of the land, was only finally commuted in 1936 after being translated into a money payment a century earlier, whilst copyhold with the attendant *heriot* lasted until legislation in 1922 put an end to it finally four years later. Thus did Medieval feudal concepts drift down the centuries and impose a lasting burden upon the English farmer. But it is also interesting that *Quia Emptores* was never repealed and that *mortmain* was repealed in the *Mortmain and Charitable Uses Act*, 1888 and 1891, now consolidated into the *Charities Act*, 1960. The maintaining of strict limitations upon gifts of land to charities by deed or will shows that in one important respect the lessons of the Middle Ages were never quite forgotten.

But, despite the reforming legislation which was enforced by baronial interests in the years after Magna Carta, vast Church landholdings had already been acquired. Not a little of these holdings escaped the confiscations of the reformation period and remained as ecclesiastical endowments. In these days, the equitable principle of "over-reaching" and the rights of tenants for life have enabled these lands to be translated into industrial holdings. The vast fortune administered by the Church Commissioners

of England has its origins in Medieval feudalism.

It is not without interest again to explore the historical environment, as was done by Dr. G. G. Coulton in his major work of research, *The Medieval Village*, a book bitterly denounced but never answered. The rapacity of the Church landlords is clear in every direction. They were among the foremost in extorting the feudal dues and in making use of the coercive sanctions of the manorial courts. The vast agricultural revolution contained in the movement for land enclosure found them among its main sponsors. In many cases, they were able to enforce the custom by which the lord of the manor controlled the marriages of his tenancy, so that a mixed marriage of bond and free might prove another means by which land could fall ultimately into the hands of the monks. Indeed, the famous phrase of Karl Marx, "the increasing misery of the proletariat," might be applied with justice to the medieval manor. It would be impossible to quote from the welter of evidence provided by Dr. Coulton; it must be taken as a whole. But the picture is an ample warning of the results of ecclesiastical rule with the applying of religious sanctions of threat and fear to the prevailing economic order. It provides the fullest answer to those who wish to return to the Middle Ages, whether they be of the order of commonplace Roman Catholic apologists, of so-called Catholic sociologists, or of "the muck and mysticism" school which has sought to see in this period of human degradation a model of the simple life.

Contemporary discussions today go far to suggest that land law cannot be left where it is. Long ago, Charles Bradlaugh saw the rise and development of land problems and publicised his conclusions in *The Land, The Labourers and the Coming Struggle*, linking the freethought movement with the Land and Labour League. Latter-day developments in housing problems or in town and country planning go far to suggest the need for a control of land and its use. Questions of tenure and freehold enter into the picture. A now historic political battlecry was "the land for the people." Perhaps a glance at one or two questions which arise out of a study of real property law provide the suggestion for at least one step in this direction.

The ecclesiastical holdings are still vast. They comprise the Medieval holdings derived from a society portrayed in no uncertain terms by Dr. Coulton. Likewise, they comprise not a few cases of land enclosure dating from the last great enclosure movement in the latter half of the reign of George III. Throughout the centuries, the common law penalised with severity the man who stole the goose from the common. But the thieves of the common from the goose still enjoy their spoils! Perhaps a more general movement for reform in land holding might be heralded in modern England by the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of England, and by the return of its huge fortune to the common people whose land was taken long ago and whose feudal labours produced the wealth which still exists in contemporary form. Not only would this be an act of elementary justice, but it would underline a point which the Medieval churchmen well understood. The strength of a Church does not lie in its spiritual resources but in its holdings of power within contemporary economics. The Medieval Church was powerful because it was rich in landholdings, and even reforming movements of the age before the Black Death could only mitigate this power. In modern England, the Church of England is immensely powerful, not because of its numbers or its spiritual life but because of its huge capital assets. It is a point which the Freethinker would do well to ponder and to counter-

The Students at the Universities in Spain

Very frequently the sociologist meets surprises in his work. Some social bodies, like some human bodies, suffer from hidden illnesses. It also happens sometimes that the disease which affects a community is due to causes which differ from those indicated by superficial observers. Very profound was the judgment of one of our greatest thinkers: "we Spaniards do not know what is the matter with us and this is precisely what is the matter with us."

A poll carried out at the Faculty of Science in Madrid has just revealed the religious attitude of our university students. And, in truth, many Spaniards have been surprised by the result. The young people who go to our high educational centres bother little — according to this poll published in *Ecclesia* — to increase their religious education. Only one fifth, for example, have read the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, despite the extraordinary repercussions of the great pontifical document in circles which are spiritually distant from the Vatican. And a high percentage of our students do not accept the fundamental dogmas of the Catholic religion.

Only 58.8 per cent of the men and 84.5 per cent of the women believe in the infallibility of the Pope when he solemnly speaks on matters of faith; 28 per cent of the male students and 10 per cent of the female students do not believe, or do not know, that Jesus is God, and atheists number 16 per cent of the male and 3 per cent of the female students.

This sociological radiography reveals rather similar results to those made at foreign educational centres. The fact that in this matter we coincide with other peoples in Europe and America is no consolation. But it is a fact to be borne in mind.

We must also try not to blame those who are not responsible. For a long time it was thought — and said privately and publicly — that the fault of the spiritual aberration of the young people lay with the teachers. The schools and universities have had — in this respect — a bad press in Spain. But now we find that, according to the poll of *Ecclesia*, only 21.8 per cent of the students who were educated by members of religious orders consider their religious education at high school to have been good, and 29.1 per cent declare it decidedly bad.

It therefore seems that the young Spaniards reach the universities with infirmities which are difficult to cure. In the lecture halls, where they attain full age, the fruits appear. The seed, though, was sown years before when the boy had not yet come in contact with the atmosphere of the universities.

Many interesting shades of opinion are revealed in this poll. Only on one point an overwhelming majority is observed. Almost 88 per cent of the male and 75 per cent of the female students believe that a nonconfessional state is preferable. Another curious detail to remember.

(Translated from the Barcelona daily, *La Vanguardia*, March 12th, 1964).

CORRESPONDENCE

DISCLAIMER

It comes as a delightful surprise to a writer who is usually denounced as an embittered cynic to be hailed as a starry-eyed idealist; but I must, regrettably, disclaim Mr. Cobell's tribute (*THE FREETHINKER*, April 3rd). I have had much to do with writing, lecturing and drawing up policy statements on Humanism and Secularism over a number of years, and have been most careful to exclude any pretensions to "altruism". Such claims tend to be either hypocritical or meaningless, in that sincere altruism is akin to masochism, an unconscious form of (per-

verted) self-centredness, and hence not "altruistic" at all. But I do not apologise for any of my statements on evolution or politics which your contributor finds soft-centred.

Man's original tribal orientation has gradually developed into national, imperial and power-bloc loyalties. The development has been slow because until recently warfare brought undoubted material advantages to survivors on the winning side; and, whatever the odds, men are gamblers ever. There are few examples in the animal kingdom of killing for its own sake. Almost invariably slaughter involves the destruction of prey from another species, or extreme forms of intraspecies rivalry. This is more usually resolved by chasing away into celibacy the vanquished in mating fights (e.g., male sea-lions) or establishing hierarchical relationships (e.g. pecking order among farmyard hens).

Freethinkers are not the only people to comprehend the dangers and futility of modern warfare with its weapons of mass-extermination and its disruption of existing international trade. Unless downright psychotic, the advocates of irrationalism are just as anxious to survive as rationalists. It is encouraging to observe that responsible Christians no longer talk about crusades, responsible Muslims about jihads, or responsible Communists about world revolution, in a military sense, but only in terms of ideology, psychology or economics. Now is the time to strengthen cultural relations, disarmament agreements and international organisations, so as to ritualise tensions between vested interests. For it is certain that if fallout and genetic effects of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons can be controlled, then nuclear war with rapid knockout of strategic cities and bases will be politically and militarily feasible. It is imperative that by then education in social awareness and world community, fostered by UN agencies and aid, will reveal war as economically, culturally and morally crippling.

In the meantime it cannot sufficiently be emphasised how dangerous is any theory of the "inevitability" of war, whether it involves Armageddon, the Dialectic, Malthusianism or constipation of the political commentator. I repeat what I said in "A Secularist Charter" (March 27): "Optimism, like pessimism, is self-propagating".

DAVID TRIBE.

A FURTHER REPLY TO CRITICS

Mr. Arran's well-intentioned article, "G. L. Simons verses G. L. Simons", is careless and confused. After failing to demonstrate an inconsistency in my position he clearly indicates one in his own.

My statement "God is a logical possibility" conflicts with nothing I have said on the subject. I agree that for the statement to have meaning "God" must have meaning; nowhere have I suggested that "God" is necessarily meaningless. Let me again draw Mr. Arran's attention to one of my quotations (*which he himself uses*):—"If religious terms are not capable of an empirical definition I suggest that these terms are meaningless". Far from indicating that religious terms are necessarily meaningless, this statement suggests how they can be *satisfactorily defined and used*, i.e., such terms have to be defined *empirically*. Whether a religious person or an atheist is doing the defining is quite irrelevant: the important point is that religious jargon is necessarily meaningless only when an attempt is made to define it in non-empirical language.

Having thus misunderstood my position Mr. Arran goes on to contradict himself. Let me draw his attention to two quotations from his article:— (1) "It is my opinion . . . that an atheist cannot make statements about God . . ." and (2) "My atheism is a 'belief' not a disbelief and I would define atheism as a 'belief in the non-existence of God'." Despite (1), (2) involves a definite statement about God, namely that he does not exist.

According to his *own* criteria, Mr. Arran is not entitled to make that statement. He cannot believe in the non-existence of something until he knows what it is of which he is believing the non-existence.

If "God" is meaningless to Mr. Arran he (Mr. Arran) is not entitled to believe in his (God's) non-existence. Consider the question "Do you believe in 'spolge-wortz'?" The only logical answer is "I cannot say until I know what 'spolge-wortz' is supposed to denote. I can believe in neither its existence or in its non-existence. The question is meaningless to me." This is the only possible approach open to Mr. Arran if he believes that the atheist cannot define "God". I, however, have always thought that the atheist could—in *empirical* terms.

Mr. Foreman's concept of the freethought attitude to physical research is a worthy one, and I share it. But not all freethinkers adopt Mr. Foreman's approach. As he must know, several writers in these columns have said quite categorically that telepathy and other ESP phenomena literally cannot exist. When this attitude prevails psychical research is regarded as a misguided waste of time. Mr. Foreman may not believe that this is so, but other freethinkers do.

Mr. Cobell's view of the future of human society is unnecessarily pessimistic. He confuses instinctive drives with the way in which these can be expressed in a social context. I do not think it is proved that aggressive tendencies are instinctive, and even if they are I have no doubt that in a rational society they could be more effectively sublimated into more social channels.

Human nature *does* change, according to the social framework through which instinctive responses are allowed to be expressed. There is a very little in human personality that could not be released in a socially beneficial way. That this be accomplished more satisfactorily than is done at present demands a widespread rational view of man and his place in society. This, amongst other things, is what the secularist is fighting for. I think there is nothing in science which gives us grounds for pessimism. Optimism is just as rational and more fruitful by far.

G. L. SIMONS

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