

# The Freethinker

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JUDGING FROM the odd, often adverse and sometimes suspiciously perverse criticisms of avowed Freethought, frequently made by those who manifestly pride themselves upon their own free thinking, there must still be a good deal of misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what the term Freethinker properly stands for. In the first place the Freethinker is not, as some seem to think he ought to be, a free-for-all thinker gazing with benign freedom in every direction at once. He is to the best of his ability a rational thinker. But it by no means follows that everybody who would claim to be a rational thinker is a Freethinker. Welding the two words free thinker into one and giving the result a capital letter entails more than a merely nominal significance.

A similar type of difference exists between the professed Humanist and those who regard themselves as what one of them has called a humanist of sorts. For instance, the sort called Christian humanist, (whatever such an ambiguity may be supposed to imply) can no more be a Humanist than a Humanist can be a Christian. Christianity and Humanism are oil and water. They won't mix. Some of their principles and objectives may seem much the same, but any attempt to present them as interchangeable can lead only to confusion. Christians and Humanists as such are necessarily in opposite and hostile camps.

## All-embracing

Christian and Freethinker are even more decidedly at variance. It is another matter with Freethinker and Humanist. To a large extent they really are interchangeable. It is fairly safe to say that all professed Freethinkers look upon themselves as Humanists in the more deliberate sense, though it is not quite so certain that all professed Humanists would consent to being called Freethinkers. For Freethinkers are uncompromising atheists, which perhaps cannot be strictly said of some Humanists. Owing to the limitations and inadequacies of language, it is no more possible to provide a brief and absolutely watertight definition of Freethinker than it is of any similar abstraction. But Freethinker stands quite sturdily among its synonyms, of which there is a considerable list, ranging from the outright but not necessarily dogmatic atheist to the more nebulous but not necessarily more tolerant Humanist. Freethinker can be reasonably said to embrace them all: unbeliever, infidel, agnostic, sceptic, secularist, rationalist and the rest. No doubt these anti-religious terms convey varying shades of difference, but the differences are of emphasis rather than essence. They cannot be compared to the bitter feuds that have constantly riven the Christian denominations, for all their hypocritical fulsomeness about letting brotherly love continue—separated brotherly love it seems under present-day exigencies—when it often needs a miraculously tinted pair of spectacles to see that brotherly love has ever begun.

## Christianity and Christ

The assumption that whatever is humane in the Christian religion is fundamentally exclusive to it, that

whatever is good in humanity is due to Christian influence, is plain nonsense. Human goodness and Christianity are no more identical and inseparable than are wickedness and atheism. In fact it would need no great dialectic to maintain that Christianity in itself has no relation whatever to human goodness whereas atheism is veritably begotten by it. Those excellencies of human character of which Christianity smugly claims to be the unique sponsor,

flourished long before Christ was born or thought of, just as they still do in spheres that will have no truck with any religion. First and last the Christian religion is simply what distinguishes it from other religions. And that is, specific belief in the semi-

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

## Freethinker, Humanist and Christian

By REGINALD UNDERWOOD

mythical, New Testament god-man Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as Christianity apart from Christ and all his supernatural connotations. There is no such thing as a Christian who rejects them. When this belief with which Christianity is so indissolubly bound up, which it is entirely dependent on and from which it take its name, eventually collapses, Christianity will be finished.

## Abominations

What evidentially might be called an added essential of the Christian religion, is not its humanity, but the unspeakable inhumanity that has so dominated its vile record and will go on doing so wherever some types of Christians can get the upper hand. As Gertrude E. Roberts has pertinently reminded us, such good as the Christian Church can be said to have done, is immeasurably outweighed by the evil it has wrought. And that is where and why the Freethinker comes in. Whatever else may be said, it is the abominations powered by religious superstition which the Freethinker has consistently sought and still seeks to overthrow. For in spite of those over-optimistic secularists who fondly suggest that religion is about played out, there is any amount of evidence that its evil power is still rampantly active. *Ecrasez l'infâme* is as urgently necessary today as it ever was.

## Sophistries

It is most unlikely that any Freethinker would object to being called an atheist. But he might well jib at too rash a definition of atheist. However overwhelming one's disbelief in God may be, however, irrefutable it may seem, it is unwise to lay down categorically that no kind of God is in existence. As G. L. Simons rightly insists, it is virtually impossible to uphold so final a pronouncement. It is one of those things of which we may be sure but cannot be certain. We do not know and cannot say. The elementary question, How do you know? immediately unsettles the certainty and plunges us into a morass of hair-splitting sophistries that are hardly worth bothering about, since their influence on every-day practical affairs is nil and on philosophical speculation negligible.

## Offence against Reason

But it is surely possible, permissible and even desirable for the Freethinker to contend that we do know the orthodox Christianised God to be non-existent. We can



amend Voltaire and say that since God has been invented it is unnecessary for him to exist. Here, we are on ground where it is not only theoretical belief but factual evidence that is overwhelming and where the most ingeniously contrary casuistries ultimately strengthen the arguments they set out to refute. To say that we cannot literally know in this case amounts to proclaiming a negation of all intellectual knowledge. For to accept the Christian God is to accept what violates reason. It is to accept as one thing two things that are flatly contradictory. It is to accept that black is white. It is to accept that good and evil are perfectly compatible. If, humanly speaking that is not crass folly, nothing is. And if such folly is to be accepted on what is called faith, then we might as well give up thinking altogether. For it would be putting our faith in blindness through failure to recognise the blindness of faith. Kirkegaard—that genius to his partisans though to the less partisan more suggestive of what is said to be distantly akin to genius—was driven by reason to realise that faith was certainly not akin to reason, that his metaphysical vapourings made neither sense nor reason. He therefore quite reasonably, and as though it were something to be proud of, announced that Christianity was an offence against reason. He never dreamed that in so saying he was admitting a full concurrence with his Freethinking adversaries, or that he was entertaining them with the extraordinary spectacle of the fanatical theologian not merely agreeing to differ, but differing to agree.

#### Freedom

There is a sense in which no thinking can be wholly free or maybe impeccably clear. But the freer it can be the clearer it will be. Freedom, as everybody knows, is a tricky subject. But for commonsense purposes we can put it that Freethought is simply and essentially unvarnished truth-seeking in the service of a very real humanity. Religious thought is mostly the invention of highly varnished, so-called religious truths in the service of an invented God. Religious authority says don't think, do as you are told and you will do what is righteous. Freethought says think for yourself and do what is right. The Freethinker may frequently falter, sometimes fall short, occasionally be more pungent than cogent and at times, like everybody else, be too swayed by his prejudices. But he will be able and willing to detect, acknowledge and rectify his errors in a way impossible to a mind in religious blinkers. He becomes a Freethinker because he has thought his way to the conviction that religion is a snare and a delusion. He is bound by his freedom to frustrate the snare and expose the delusion. To blame him for doing so would be as clever as to blame the Christian for supporting the Church.

#### Hybrids

And when the Freethinker says religion he means religion. He does not mean such grotesque hybrids as Christian humanism, or religionless Christianity, or even what Julian Huxley calls religion without revelation. We might as well talk about religionless religion or God-fearing atheism. At the rate some of the ultra-modern intellectuals are going, we may shortly be expecting to hear of the new religion called atheism with its newfangled creed, "I don't believe . . .". All that sort of verbiage looks dangerously like deliberately transmogrifying the meanings of words to serve a distorted purpose. All it achieves—to talk in the same vain vein—is clear muddle-headedness. It is contradiction venerated as paradox. Religion is religion by virtue of its being Christian, by virtue of its alleged divine revelation, by virtue of whatever brand of supernaturalism it pretends to rest upon. Take these away and religion becomes irreligion.

#### Tolerance

The term Freethinker long ago came into use expressly to designate anyone rationally belligerent towards the superstition that sounds more impressive when called religion. To charge the Freethinker with being as intolerant towards religion as religion is towards the Freethinker is therefore pointless. It is also a gross exaggeration. For the Freethinker is more than tolerant as the Christian is not, in defending the free right of every man (Christians included) to think and speak for himself. Tolerance ends, as it must, when religion claims the right to cram its beliefs down everybody's throat on penalty of eternal or even temporal punishment for refusal. Or when religious interference obstructs social reform merely on grounds of religious dogma. As for the tedious accusation that Freethought is all negative and no positive, it is simply untrue. But destruction must precede construction and there is still so much to overcome and clear away that perhaps the Freethinker may seem to belong more to the demolition squad than to the more spectacular building operations. Never mind. If the Freethinker does only half as much to keep the home fires burning here as religion does to keep hell fire burning hereafter, there won't be too much to grumble about.

## American Educators would take Religion out of Christmas

THE PUBLIC (state) schools should eliminate the religious emphasis in their observances of Christmas, a committee of educators stated on August 22nd, according to an American Press report in the *Miami Herald* the following day. Instead, the committee said, Christmas should be presented as one of many contributions to the American heritage which has been created by many religions. In a report, *Religion in the Public Schools*, prepared for the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the educators also supported the Supreme Court ban on official prayers and required Bible reading in the public schools, and urged that high school baccalaureate services be left to individual churches and synagogues, with no school requirement for attendance.

School calendars, personnel policies and extracurricular activities, the report continued, should all be adapted to accommodate a diversity of religious backgrounds and practices. And it called for vastly improved instruction about religion "as one of the greatest influences in man's history."

"A public school whatever the feelings of its constituents, may not observe Christmas as though it were a church or combination of churches," the report said. The basic law seems clear, it added, that "under the [US] Constitution, the public schools may not sponsor a religious service . . . whether it be for a single or multi-denominational group. Neither may public schools support the Christian religions, Christian churches, nor distinctively Christian doctrines . . . The non-Christian is not a guest in a Christian school—he is a fellow citizen in a public school which includes a good many Christian members."

The educators recommended "the policy that encourages reasonable recognition of Christmas in the schools in the spirit of exposition of the differing rites and customs of families, cultures, and creeds—each with deep meaning for its adherents, and in sum revealing the many different religious, philosophical, and cultural practices and beliefs held by Americans."

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# A Materialist Approach to Time

By COLIN McCALL

"PHILOSOPHERS NOTORIOUSLY betray themselves in the last chapter," says Edmund Parsons as he approaches those fateful final pages of his newly-published materialistic discussion of duration, *Time Devoured* (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 21s.). We should not, he warns us, expect to find a shrine at the bottom of his garden. We don't; but he understandably finds it necessary to explain why a book written from an avowedly materialistic position admits parapsychological phenomena. His answer is: "they are admitted because they cannot be excluded." That is where he and I disagree.

It is not that Mr. Parsons is uncritical of parapsychology. He completely refuses to accept precognition, for instance, as being an impossibility as "knowledge of the future uninferable from present knowledge," and an absurdity "if it implies that the not-yet-existent somehow exists." Yet he considers that the strongest evidence for ESP comes from Dr. Soal's results with Shackleton and Mrs. Stewart, and from the Pearce-Pratt experiments at Duke University, North Carolina. Now Basil Shackleton's card-guessing "2½ seconds ahead of time" is generally hailed as the supreme example of precognition, and was certainly regarded as such by Dr. Soal himself. Precognition doesn't fit in with Mr. Parsons's conception of time — or with mine, I may add — and so it is out. But what can take its place as an ESP explanation of Shackleton? Mr. Parsons plumps for clairvoyance.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, he contemptuously dismisses C. E. M. Hansel's analysis of the Pratt-Pearce experiments because it falls back on "the disgraceful hypothesis of fraud." But there is nothing disgraceful about the hypothesis of fraud, nor is it an unscientific hypothesis, as Mr. Parsons seems to suggest. On the contrary, it is a perfectly valid explanation of certain aspects of human behaviour, not least in this field. And Mr. Hansel, in fact, suggested one or two ways in which the subject, Hubert Pearce, could have tricked the experimenter, Dr. J. G. Pratt, in their long-distance (100 yards) telepathic tests. One was by Pearce's leaving his room unknown to Dr. Pratt and observing the cards through a small hole in an easily-accessible ceiling trapdoor directly over the table at which the experimenter was sitting. Moreover, Mr. Hansel quoted statements that Pearce was "seen somewhere where he should not have been"; statements which "should be brought into the light and carefully examined" — but apparently haven't been! Mr. Parsons, in short, should be a little more sceptical of happenings at Duke University, which he himself calls "the last refuge of vitalistic biology." Mr. Hansel, by critical analyses of ESP experimental claims, has done much to further Mr. Parsons's own ideal: the illumination of the "last recesses" of superstition.

Before coming to those last twenty-five pages or so, Mr. Parsons has illuminated a very great deal that was in need of it; striving, in his own words, "to get things clear and to see them straight." The four-dimensional space-time continuum is not, he points out, a physical entity. "Time hypostatized as a fourth dimension is the metaphysical bastard of Einsteinian physics." Nor is space "curved." Curvature in the mathematical sense has nothing to do with the "shape" of space: it is not space that is curved — "as though space could be straight or curved!" — but the geometry of space.

Bertrand Russell once described philosophy as a mental

exercise upon simple statements to produce conclusions so paradoxical that no one will believe them. So it has been for some, but Mr. Parsons is not among them. He prefers the opposite view, that one of the tasks of philosophy is the resolution of "apparent paradoxes into statements so simple that every one will believe them." The defamation of words like "reality" and "existence" may suit those who wish to avoid the primary distinction between that which is and that which is not, but it doesn't help philosophy. We don't philosophise to exercise our wits, Mr. Parsons insists, but to get clear the world before us. Linguistic philosophy is no use for this purpose. "If you start with language you will never be able to get beyond language," and Mr. Parsons is rightly anxious to get to the real world.

A world of unconscious animals is conceivable, but it isn't the world we live in, and Mr. Parsons takes the common-sense view that consciousness gives us "direct knowledge of the world." None of the objections against this view is defensible.

Complaints that the act of consciousness is completed by the cortex and that neither the nerve-impulses transmitted to the brain from the sensitive periphery of the body nor the consequent excitation in the cortex itself bear any resemblance whatever to what is perceived, make one wonder how these people suppose consciousness *should* be accomplished. Are we expected to be flabbergasted because we see a tree without little tree-images travelling along our nerve-fibres and a little tree-shape impressing itself upon our brains as though consciousness ought to be achieved by somehow looking at *that*? Are we primitive Greeks? To argue that since what we see is totally unlike what goes on in our nervous system, that which we are looking at must be totally unlike what we see, is a mystifying non-sequitur.

It is the task of neurophysicists to tell us how we perceive the world. "So far, unfortunately, most of them have been doing their best to convince us that we never do."

The material world doesn't have to be proved: it is there. "Reality is not inferred; it invades us." Our acts of sensation can be valid or fallacious, but if they were always fallacious our position would be hopeless; that they are not always fallacious is proved by the success we have had in living — in understanding and modifying the world and, to some extent, ourselves. Active experience, as Mr. Parsons says, "teaches the rejection of that which illudes; the rest is reinforced by repetition to be realized as perception of a materially existing world." It is in living that we learn; the result of successful learning is efficient action "the penalties for failing to learn . . . are ineptitude, misery, schizophrenia and death . . . But always and everywhere the criteria of knowledge are the realities of the material world. They are the arbiters, not we."

Of course, the subjectivists trot out all the old quibbles: the straight stick appearing bent in the water, and so forth. Quibbles they veritably are. It is not two sticks that we see — a straight one out of the water and a bent one in — indeed, we don't really see a bent stick at all, but a straight one that has been made to appear distorted by immersion. We discover this in practice: not by contemplating the stick, but by taking it out of the water and putting it in again. There is, in short, no mystery of the bent stick. We can't deal with every quibble raised by the subjectivists but, fortunately, it isn't necessary to do so. "Once their starting point is realized as radically wrong,

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## This Believing World

One of the truly great qualities of Christianity is the way it manages to get its followers profoundly to disagree with each other. Striking examples of this are the reception accorded to Jehovah's Witnesses and the Moral Re-Armament Group. Most parsons can hardly conceal their utter contempt for the Witnesses and, as an example of what Christians think about MRA, consider the case of Miss Monica Furlong, the *Daily Mail's* theological expert. She thinks she "could forgive these people who claim a direct line to God, but . . .".

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As a start—and it's as well for people not to forget it—she quoted (*Daily Mail*, September 17th) the MRA's founder, Dr. Buchman, who thanked heaven for "a man like Adolf Hitler, who built a front line of defence against the antichrist of Communism." He even called Himmler "a great lad." It is claimed, however, that MRA's "Sharing, Guidance, Absolute Honesty, Purity, Love, and Unselfishness," all come directly from God, and Miss Furlong does not believe it. But how about her own belief? Does not that come from God through Jesus? No doubt she thinks this a much better creed than any coming from God direct. But is it not just as silly?

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A terrible thing ought to have happened to a bridegroom the other day. Though he was a "non-churchgoer," he wanted to be married in church—or his bride did. But the vicar, with sweet Christian charity, cut God out from the wedding service. It never of course made a scrap of difference—indeed, the bridegroom himself thought the "service was the best thing for both of us" (*Sunday Express*, September 20th). So everybody was happy—except perhaps the Lord himself. What did he think of the omission of his Precious Name?

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The "News of the World" devotes many columns to the work of Edward Fricker, the "well known" faith healer. In its issue for September 20th, we are given details of the way in which he has cured a number of famous people—actress Zena Marshall, pop singer Dave Clark, Mrs. Edmund Hockridge, organist Mike Smith, cookery expert Fanny Craddock, and others. Our trained but incompetent doctors all failed, whereas Mr. Fricker, with a deft touch here and there, completely cured their almost incurable ailments.

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It is of course impossible to test these cures, but one thing does stand out. What about the thousands of polio and spastic cases among poor little children for whom appeals for funds are regularly made? Surely curing these unfortunate babes would be possible for such a marvellous healer as Mr. Fricker who claims to be "unique"? If, as Mrs. Craddock insists, there are "forces which we do not fully understand," and Mr. Fricker is one of the human beings who "can transmit" them, why does the *News of the World* not send him to the clinics to cure the stricken children?

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And still they come. Not content with the 893 or so Christian sects of all kinds and shapes, we are pleased to learn that a Dr. G. Kelly has started another one (*Sunday Express*, September 20th). It is called the Christian Fellowship, and some clergy nearby are very angry that he is actually "luring" away believers from their own congregations with cakes. The vicar of Wivellscombe, the Rev. J. Chamberlain, thinks it "shocking and unfair." On the other hand, Dr. Kelly, who holds Bible and prayer

meetings twice a week, claims that "we have done our utmost not to clash with other churches." But alas, the new Christian sects always clash with the old ones.

## AMERICAN EDUCATORS WOULD TAKE RELIGION OUT OF CHRISTMAS

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In supporting the Supreme Court decision on prayers and Bible reading, the educators said that: "Along with government and all its agencies, the schools must be neutral in respect to the religious beliefs of its citizens . . . there is no threat to the individual, to religion, or to the common good in the removal of religious exercises from the schools."

In what the *Miami Herald* regarded as "an obvious reference to the proposed constitutional amendment to guarantee freedom to pray in public schools," the report quoted the statement by the late Justice Jackson of the US Supreme Court that: "The very purpose of the Bill of Rights was to withdraw certain subjects from the vicissitudes of political controversy, to place them beyond the reach of majorities . . . one's right to . . . freedom of worship . . . and other fundamental rights may not be submitted to a vote, they depend on the outcome of no elections."

In calling for better instruction about religion in the public high schools, the educators said the history of Western civilisation cannot be understood "without some understanding of the great religious and church influences reaching back to the earliest of recorded times." But little evidence was found that teachers in the secondary schools are "fully equipped and qualified to teach such courses." And, "Most inhibiting to the development of effective programmes is the scarcity of suitable material in usable form."

The report was prepared for the American Association of School Administrators as a guide to school superintendents and principals. The AASA is a department of the National Education Association.

## SUNDAY OBSERVANCE DEBATE

A motion "That the Sunday Observance Laws should be Abolished" was debated at the Alliance Hall, Westminster, on September 24th. The contestants were David Tribe, President of the National Secular Society, and Harold Legerton, Secretary of the Lord's Day Observance Society.

LDOS fundamentalists turned out in force to support their champion, and Mr. Tribe spoke against a barrage of "Blasphemy! 'May the Lord forgive you!' 'Pray for him!'"

The Sunday Observance Laws over the past few hundred years, he said, were specifically intended to enforce church attendance. Such laws were absurd in a society where nine-tenths of the population stayed away from church. "Our Sunday laws are the laughing-stock of the civilised world. The remedy is simple—sweep them away."

Mr. Legerton was quite sure that most people supported the ideas of the LDOS, despite the "wave of secularism now sweeping the country." He could not agree to a plebiscite. "The voice of the people is not the voice of God, and anyway few would bother to vote."

The audience participation was particularly lively. One section had lost God, but fortunately Mr. Legerton's supporters had found Him. The chairman, Canon Pearce-Higgins, had the final word. He said: "The two sides have been simply unable to get on each other's wave lengths. A great deal of heat has been generated, and very little light—but it has been a very interesting evening."

R. J. CONDON.

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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 J. W. BARKER, L. EBURY, J. A. MILLAR and C. E. WOOD.

(Tower Hill). Every Thursday, 12—2 p.m.: 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

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate), Sunday, October 11th, 6.30 p.m.: F. J. CORINA, "Lets All Hang Together".

Marble Arch Branch NSS (Carpenter's Arms, Seymour Place, London, W.1.), Sunday, October 11th, 7.30 p.m.: MARGARET McILROY, "Religion and the Rights of the Child".

Richmond and Twickenham Humanist Group (The Community Centre, Sheen Road, Richmond), Friday, October 16th, 8 p.m.: R. PERCHERON, "The Buddhist Path—A General View".

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Humanist Centre, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1.), Sunday, October 11th 11 a.m.: Dr. JOHN LEWIS, "Lord of the Flies—Is Man Evil by Nature?"

Tuesday, October 13th, 7.30 p.m.: REV. T. DALTON, "Is Modern Youth Religious?"

## Notes and News

ACCORDING TO A Reuter report on September 27th. Cardinal Wyszynski, the Primate of Poland, has been accused by the Communist Party newspaper, *Trybuna Ludu*, of whipping up fanaticism and distorting relations between church and state. There was no religious persecution, the paper declared, and nobody had been or would be punished for teaching religion; such penalties as had been imposed were for "non-observance of administrative regulations." The Cardinal's report on church-state relations sent to the Vatican in June, 1963, had, however, "become a source of propaganda, distorting the true picture in Poland." Meanwhile, reported *The Guardian* (28/9/64), a pastoral letter signed by the Cardinal and the Polish Episcopate alleging: "intimidation" and "pressure" by state officials, was read out in churches throughout the country.

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A TYPICALLY frank view of Christian unity was recently expressed in a pastoral letter by Bishop Pablo Gurpide of Bilbao. Catholics should "respect and love wholeheartedly" their "separated brethren," the Bishop said. But, he added—and we take our text from the American Roman Catholic paper, *The Advocate* (27/8/64)—"let us be well aware that non-Catholic Christian sects in general are not so much interested in [Christian] unity as in the right to propagandise in order

to win converts and to proselytise particularly in nations where there is religious unity." The Bishop could not agree with those who considered "civil equality for all religious groups as an ideal and duty of the state;" that could at most be applied in "a pluralistic society," not in one that possesses Catholic religious unity." A Catholic government, "the proper one for a Catholic country," can, the Bishop said, "prohibit for reasons of public interest, the public worship of dissidents, and even more so, their propaganda, even assuming their good faith or upright conscience." The italics are ours.

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NO WONDER, then, that Dom Chistopher Butler, the Abbott of Downside, should welcome the end of "Spanish and Italian domination of the Roman Catholic Church". It was quite plain, the Abbott said, that "they are not numerically nor intellectually strong enough to control the machinery any longer" (*The Guardian*, 5/10/64). He therefore considered it "frightfully necessary" to set up an international senate of bishops. "We've got to do this while enthusiasm is high", he said, "and before the dry rot sets in". But the senate should not sit permanently in Rome lest it become "Romanised".

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BENEDICT NIGHTINGALE, reviewing the book *A Life Full of Holes* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 21s.) in *The Guardian* (25/9/64) called it an "odd, disturbing story." It is the story of an uneducated North African Arab, Charhadi, "battered and humiliated by every kind of hostile circumstance," yet "oddly dignified." The dignity derives from Islam, from "the resignation to alien circumstances which that sombre religion teaches," a resignation which perpetuates corruption. Charhadi doesn't judge, he doesn't forgive, he simply accepts. "As Allah wills it" is the expression constantly on his lips, in face of cheating, lying, bestiality or murder. A terrible resignation.

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"IN MADRAS the bus station near the High Court is one of the most popular latrines. The traveller arrives; to pass the time he raises his dhoti, defecates in the gutter. The bus arrives; he boards it; the woman sweeper cleans up after him." So recounts V. S. Naipaul, the Trinidadian writer whose family left India two generations ago. "Indians defecate everywhere," Mr. Naipaul tells us in another disturbing book, *An Area of Darkness* (André Deutsch, 25s.). He also tells us of the holy men who wouldn't kill a fly—and wouldn't lift a finger to help a dying child. Religious resignation again.

★

A THIRD book in the news is Tom Driberg's *The Mystery of Moral Re-Armament* (Secker and Warburg, 35s.) which among many other interesting facts about MRA, gives the details of Frank Buchman's "I thank heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler," referred to in *This Believing World*. Bernard Levin's review of the book in the *New Statesman* (18/9/64) was in itself an exposure of the humbug and "criminal recklessness" of MRA. There would, Mr. Levin said, be a shoal of letters protesting about his article but making no attempt to refute it. In them "a limited number of points" would be made again and again, there would be charges that he led an impure life, and "therefore resent the witness of those who lead a cleanly and God-guided existence," others would hint that he was a communist. "Not only the same ideas, but in many cases the same phrases" would recur; some of the letters, though bearing different addresses, would have been typed on the same machine, others would bear identical addresses but the writers would "give no indication that they are aware of the existence of other people with similar ideas in their own houses."



# Calvin, Stalin and the Idea of Progress

By F. A. RIDLEY

IN A magnificent but unfortunately little-known book, the late Professor J. B. Bury, the eminent (Cambridge) historian and rationalist critic of Christianity, dealt at length with *The Idea of Progress* (the title of his book 1920). In the course of this survey, which I have always regarded as one of the very few authentic masterpieces to be published here within this present century, Bury surveys with encyclopedic erudition, the origins and ideological evolution of this "idea" which, according to him first originated in the 17th century, the era of Galileo and of a scientific revolution comparable in some ways to that of our own day. However, "the idea of progress" did not become the master idea in European thought until the period of such forward-looking thinkers as Voltaire, Diderot and their colleagues in the epoch-marking and epoch-making *Encyclopedia*. With the French Revolution itself largely inspired by these men and their work, the idea entered into its own and became the master-idea of the ensuing (19th) century, "the century of stupendous progress," as Joseph McCabe described it.

Will it always remain so? Will "progress" continue in this age of potential atomic suicide indefinitely? Already even when writing his book, a quarter of a century before the Bomb made its devastating appearance in 1945, Professor Bury seems to have had his doubts (he died in 1927).

It would presently appear from some criticisms of a recent article of mine on Calvin, criticisms which have recently appeared in the correspondence columns of THE FREETHINKER, that some of the correspondents either do not themselves believe in the idea of progress, or if they do, have at least a rather hazy idea as to what it actually implies. This apparent inability to grasp the full implications of the idea, came out very clearly in the criticisms of my aforesaid article on Calvin and Calvinism in relation to the Reformation, that tremendous upheaval which may be accurately said to have formed the effective watershed between medieval and modern times. Was Calvin a major figure in promoting the idea and fact of progress as I stated, or are my critics, Mr. Young and Mr. Smith (both appropriately natives of Scotland, an essentially Calvinist land) correct in denying my assertion. In order to sort out this interesting and important question, it would seem desirable to look into the problems involved rather more deeply. For merely glib assertions such as for example, the obvious one that because Calvin burned alive the Unitarian Servetus (1553), this *ipso facto* disqualifies him from being regarded as progressive or worth writing about in THE FREETHINKER, are altogether too summary and arbitrary for this species of historical investigation: one swallow does not make a summer either in natural or in human history.

It is, of course, quite clear — and I do not wish to deprive Messrs. Young and Smith of any use that they may wish to make of the admission — that Calvin himself, as for that matter, Luther, Loyola or any other of the leading protagonists or opponents of the Reformation, had no idea themselves at all that they were instruments of an undefinable something to be later described as "progress." No one had at that time. As Bury demonstrates with massive scholarship, the idea was entirely unknown to pre-modern ages, as perhaps even more completely to Christianity, for the only kind of progress recognised by Christian theology was the progress (if one can call it by such a

name) of the individual soul post mortem to another and a higher world. This world was only progressing (sic.) towards its end, towards the Day of Judgment! Calvin and Calvinists all held this view.

However, as Karl Marx tersely expressed it, "We do not judge people by what they think of themselves." The question with which we have to deal, is not whether Calvin himself and his followers (Knox, Cromwell, William of Orange, etc.) thought that they were discharging an historically progressive role, which they obviously did not (at least self-consciously), but whether from *our* point of view, from the point of view of the "idea of progress" as outlined, say, by J. B. Bury, they *were* in fact forwarding historical progress in their own epoch — that of the Reformation — and in such a manner that modern history taken as a whole has benefited from the religious revolution of which, I repeat, Calvin was the leading spokesman and Calvinism the dynamic and militant contemporary advance guard.

I say again that it was! That without Calvin and Calvinism there seems to be little room for doubt that the Reformation as such, would have failed and that the Jesuit Counter-Reformation would have reconquered Europe. There were times, as it was, particularly during the Thirty Years War, when it came within an ace of doing so. Would this really have made no difference then or to subsequent progress? The restoration of the Inquisition all over Europe with the consequent *auto-da-fe*, not of merely one Servetus burned in Calvinist Geneva but of *every* heretic everywhere and as a matter of course, as in medieval Europe. I do not think so. Messrs. Young and Smith should face up to the logic taught in Scottish Calvinist schools, for which Scotland is deservedly famous.

For they can only argue that Calvin and Calvinism were not historically progressive in their day and age if they are prepared to assert that it made no difference to progress then and subsequently whether the Reformation succeeded or failed, and that the restoration of the stagnant medieval theocracy which the Reformation overthrew would not have affected progress adversely. If my critics wish, they can make such assertions; in my opinion, and I am sure in that of any rationalist who has assimilated the idea of progress, and who knows anything about this period of Reformation versus Counter-Reformation, they are untrue and even historically ridiculous assertions. Objectively Calvinism represented an essential ingredient in, and prerequisite for, the subsequent evolution of the modern world.

Mr. Smith, not content with Calvin, then proceeds to drag in an authentic red herring in the person of Stalin. He wishes to know whether I would be prepared to write a commemorative article on Stalin presumably as a kind of modern sequel to my article on Calvin. Of course I would! Really, as Chapman Cohen often used relevantly to remind us, there are some questions that ought never to be asked, and this surely is one of them. For Stalin, and quite apart from any views that one may hold about him either personally or politically, has been without doubt one of the most powerful forces making for historical and social progress during this present century. Who could possibly deny this? Without Stalin's masterly work as organiser of the Russian Revolution, Hitler would certainly have conquered Russia and the Gestapo would probably still be the master of Europe, just as (to revert to my



earlier example) without Calvin and Calvinism, the Jesuits and the Inquisition would probably have reconquered Europe for the Vatican. Does Mr. Smith really think that either of these events would have forwarded either contemporary or subsequent progress?

Naturally I don't agree with everything that Stalin did any more than I do about Calvin, either with Calvin's elimination of his political opponents at the Moscow Trials. Incidentally, for Mr. Smith's information, I criticised Stalin's trials at the time they were actually held and not like some of Stalin's present critics, thirty years later. However, again one swallow does not make a summer. Stalin (as the authoritative recent book, *Eye Witnesses to the Russian Revolution*, expressly admits), was the organiser *par excellence* of the revolutionary regime, and present-day Russia bears the imprint of Stalin more than of any other man. In order to deny the progressive role of Stalin and therefore to disqualify him from the attention of Freethinkers, Mr. Smith would have to assert that the

scientific and atheistic Russia of today which, in final analysis is the creation of Stalin more than of anyone else, is in no way superior to the illiterate and superstitious Russia of pre-revolutionary days; an historical judgment so obviously and utterly ridiculous that it is difficult to believe that any educated person, let alone a professed Freethinker, could possibly endorse it. In any case, from a specifically Humanist point of view, it is surely not a matter of indifference that today, 1,000 millions of human beings officially profess atheism, the end-product of an historical process for which Stalin was so largely responsible. Some of us might even hold that such a fact is actually more important to Freethinkers in 1964 than such nowadays rather hoary chestnuts as, say, whether historically "the Jesus of history" was 100 per cent myth or only 50 per cent or whether Paul represented a man or a literary syndicate.

I would accordingly suggest that the idea of progress is forwarded by all sorts of people in all sorts of ways, including both Calvin and Stalin!

## Calvin A Scottish-New Zealand View

IN CONNECTION with the controversy following an article by F. A. Ridley, a New Zealand correspondent sends us some views recently expressed by the Scottish-born Professor Walter Murdoch. "Why do you dislike Calvin?" the Professor was asked. "Dislike him? I think him on the whole, one of the most detestable characters in history," was the reply.

His abhorrence, the Professor said, was not based on anything in Calvin's theology. "I have not read — I don't intend to read — his *Institutio*, the monumental book which was to be the foundation stone of what we call Calvinism. I suppose one ought to read it before daring to write a word about Calvin. But even to read a few chapters of it is to find oneself bowing to his intellectual power, his clear and close and relentless reasoning. We can detest him, but we can certainly not despise him."

"Let it be enough, for the moment, to say that at the core of his theology was a belief in the total depravity of the human race. The sin of Adam was the start, but we must on no account try to comfort ourselves by casting the blame on Adam; it is our own iniquity, not Adam's, that dooms us all, or almost all, to burn for all eternity in the flames of hell.

"I ought to know a little about Calvin, because I was born in a country which had once been deeply scarred by Calvin's gospel brought from Geneva to Scotland," the Professor continued. And he quoted Stevenson's picture of the Calvinist preacher:

Nae shauchlin' testimony here —  
We were damned, an' that was clear.  
I owned, wi' gratitude an' wonder,  
He was a pleasure to sit under.

But that was an exaggeration. "Calvin did not say we were all damned; almost all, but not quite all. There are a few among us — the elect — whom God, for some inscrutable reason, picked out for eternal bliss. All the rest are predestined to hell. Even the new-born baby is a sinner; its heart is black with evil; the everlasting fires are waiting for it."

Look at your baby's face, the Professor said, and "ask yourself what sort of theology it must have been that led a man to declare that every baby is reeking with sin; and

what sort of man it must have been who framed that doctrine."

But it was not because of his doctrines that Calvin was detestable; it was because of the way he put them into practice when he had the power to impose them on a whole community. The Professor had been in Geneva a few years ago and had seen the Calvin statue. He wondered how the Geneva citizens liked "this reminder of the days of their subjugation to the will of a dictator." He did not find it easy to believe that the city was once looked upon as gay, frivolous and even wicked.

"Calvin was known as an active and energetic reformer of people's morals. The clergy of Geneva invited him to come and reform Geneva. He came, and reformed it with a vengeance. He was an organiser of genius; within three years Geneva was a byword for its austere way of life. (Even today it is not a gay city.)

"He decided that the State must be subservient to the church in all particulars. He made the church the supreme authority, and himself the supreme authority in the church. He became an absolute dictator. Any opinion he disagreed with was a heresy; any behaviour he disapproved of was a misdemeanour.

"And heresies and misdemeanours alike might be punished with imprisonment, torture — Calvin is known to have approved of the torture chamber — and even death. He made laws about the most intimate details of people's private lives.

"You could not give your child any name you chose; it must, under pain of severe penalties, be called after someone in the Bible. (Two centuries after Calvin's time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva; you notice that he bore the names of two Apostles; the tradition still lingered.)

"Your clothes must be of certain sober colours. There was a rule for the kind of attire a woman might wear in bed at night. Your house might be entered at any hour, to see that you were keeping all the rules, by a member of the Consistory, a body set up by Calvin."

Professor Murdoch concluded with a reference to the burning of Servetus. "If I have any influence," wrote Calvin, "he will not leave here alive." And Servetus did not leave Geneva alive.



## A MATERIALIST APPROACH TO TIME

(Concluded from page 323)

the difficulties to which it gives rise may provide philosophical puzzles, but cannot be serious problems." And Mr. Parsons admirably summarises the materialist position on knowing.

What we know is limited by our senses, our instruments and our intellect. It is always partial knowledge, but the assertion that we do not know anything unless we know everything about it, is as sleeveless as the similar argument often deployed by sense-datum theorists, that we do not really see physical objects because we only see their surfaces in perspective. Things are known in so far as what they are is known; they are unknown in so far as what they also are is not known; but they are not wholly unknowable, although we can never know them for what they wholly are. No knowledge is complete; but some knowledge is certain.

"Ah!" the idealist will exclaim, "you don't perceive things as they are, but as they were — anything from a fraction of a second to millions of years ago." The materialist finds nothing particularly disturbing about this. Normally we never think about it as far as seeing is concerned. Vision is, as Mr. Parsons says, "so literally lightning-swift that its not being immediate really makes no difference, except to astronomers." If we are fired at from a distance we even have time to duck, provided we see the marksman; it is too late, however, if we hear the shot! And indeed we are accustomed to the fact that we never hear things immediately. Science fiction — avowed or unavowed — can, of course, play games with time, but the materialist position is perfectly plain: whatever exists does so now, independent of any observer.

All time-measurements are relative, as Mr. Parsons points out, "not merely to observers but to clocks themselves and to where those clocks materially are. That is why there are theories of relativity." But these are all theories about clocks. "They have much to tell us about time and its reckoning, and with it the reckoning of the present, but they have nothing to tell us about the present itself, which is no more relative to how it is reckoned than the universe is relative to how it is observed. The present is absolute . . . the future is never reached."

But what is the present? Before we can "rectify our squinted concept of time," we have to overcome the whole Platonist metaphysics that has so plagued western thought; we have to look beyond the substantivisation at the reality, "that which exists and changes, the universe itself." The present is seen, then as "the universal of all that is," the past as "the universal of all that is no longer," and the future "of all that is not yet." Moreover, if "something does not exist any longer or does not exist yet, it simply has no existence anywhere." And when we ask the age of the universe, the answer of so many thousands of millions of years is not a measurement of time, it is the speculative measurement of "the total theorizable continuity of past cosmic change."

Illumination there is in plenty in Mr. Parsons's book, and I hope I have reflected some of it here. Apart, in fact, from those final pages, *Time Devoured* might be regarded as a little classic of materialism.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

### EDUCATION AND ETHICS

Nigel Sinnott seems to be a man who thinks he has the answer to the education of children, but it is indeed very questionable whether the children would be any better if we were to adopt his views.

His freethought leads him to put his faith in some sort of ethical teaching which will improve mankind, while my freethought puts very little faith in ethical teaching.

I would have thought that the experience of thousands of years regarding ethics would be enough to shatter anyone's faith in ethical teaching, but it seems in THE FREETHINKER it is popular as well as being regarded as highly intelligent to think otherwise and therefore the truth has to take a backseat.

IAN FRASER.

[Truth and his self-appointed spokesman Mr. Fraser may have to sit in the back—not all can take the wheel—but at least the driver doesn't enforce silence.—ED.]

### SCIENTOLOGY

For some time past I have noticed references to Scientology and Ron Hubbard in THE FREETHINKER. Would your readers give me their opinions of this organisation? I am interested from the point of view that a person I know who is extremely shy and reserved is intending to take a course in Scientology to help combat this shyness.

R. P. WALL.

### THE "MATERIALISM" OF "PSYCHIC NEWS"

Mr. Maurice Barbanell in accusing you of "materialism" conveniently forgets his own position. When, having control of *Psychic News*, he took charge of its competitor, the *Two Worlds*, he himself was no altruist. They now run side by side; the former as a weekly paper and the latter a monthly magazine. Incidentally, the *Two Worlds* Publishing Co. Ltd., once had the unique distinction of having an other-worldly shareholder in the person of a spirit called "Nemo." We wonder how notices of meetings and dividends (if any) reached the "other side" in that Emma Hardinge Britten era.

COLIN FRANKLIN.

### ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

Please allow me to say that I enjoyed reading the two articles, one by Elizabeth Collins, and the other by F. A. Ridley, of the Church Councils. I feel, however, that insufficient stress is placed on the fact that the Catholic Church is desperately trying to adjust itself to the new trend of modern capitalism. This is seen more clearly in the encyclicals sent out by Popes John and Paul.

The famous *Rerum Novarum* issued by Pope Leo XIII, in 1891, harped on the virtues of the feudal period and emphasised the need for charity. It insisted on curbs being placed on the powers of the state. Recognising that the trend is in the direction of state-capitalism, and that many Christian Democrats have been attracted by it, the popes have toed the line.

There is no danger of the Lateran Treaty being torn up by either of the Italian political parties. Not only has the Communist Party expressed support for it, but in his last memorandum before he died, Togliatti, arguing that the Party must assist the move to the left among Catholics, had this to say: "For this purpose the old atheist propaganda is of no use." He went on to say that other ways of approach had to be found. "Otherwise," he said, "the hand we proffer to the Catholics will be regarded as pure expediency and almost as hypocrisy." How far he proposed to carry this is anybody's guess.

The popes have always based themselves on the situation in Italy. The agreement with Mussolini and support for his policy provided the best evidence of this. Now the Church needs allies and, for that reason, Protestants have ceased to be heretics. But it is now made clear that, unity or no unity, the Pope is going to retain his supremacy. He cannot do otherwise because, since 1870, papal infallibility is an unchangeable doctrine. If the Pope can win the support of non-Catholic Christians he will not be so closely tied to Italian politics now that the Communist Party does not endanger his position.

HARRY M'SHANE

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