

# The Freethinker

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A GREAT deal has been said during discussions concerning the present social revolution in sexual behaviour concerning bastardy and the statistics showing the rise in the number of illegitimate births. The statistical facts have been used a great deal by churchpeople to illustrate claims concerning a rising tide of immorality. As a result, there has been a tendency to censure the unmarried parents and to exhibit some signs of the social disapproval which is commonly shown towards the offspring. But one curious fact never seems to be discussed within church circles. It is the historical attitude towards bastardy in Western Christian civilisation and the somewhat complicated picture which emerges. By treating it purely as an issue arising out of sexual morality, the Churches too often forget that they are dealing with a question which is primarily legal and which has at its main import the social and legal status of the bastard child.

## Feudalism and Canon Law

As the canon law developed throughout the Middle Ages, the question of legitimacy was first and foremost one of inheritance. Feudalism formed the medieval economic order with its basic foundation in land possession and, within the feudal system, it was the heir-at-law who inherited the realty or property in land. The heir had to be traced upon intestacy, and this led to a complicated tracking down of eldest sons through the male succession. Firstly, descendants had to be sought by this means and, if the succession failed, the line was sought in ascendancy. In the end, the heir might prove to be somebody far removed from the intestate and possibly quite unknown to him. Tracing the heir upon intestacy was a complicated business and remained the law of England till 1925. Sometimes complications would arise through the lack of proof of the validity of a long past marriage or of the succession involved in a claim. The long forgotten novel by Samuel Warren, *Ten Thousand a Year*, turns upon this very point, as does the historical Tichborne case which convulsed England a century ago. Within the feudal system, the bastard had no legal place. He was a *filius nullius* and could not inherit upon an intestacy. The question of legitimacy became therefore one of primary importance and the bastard was a person of social disrepute, just because he was economically landless.

It is interesting that this social disreputability did not extend to a bastard who had been endowed by will with lands or wealth. He could take his place within society, and could even be nominated to a throne in an age when hereditary succession lacked the strictness of its later interpretation. A very good example was that of William, Duke of Normandy, a bastard who had been nominated to the throne of England by Edward the Confessor. As William the Conqueror, he seized the English throne, and the circumstances of his birth had no sort of bearing upon the regal issue. For the feudal order, the question was not so much one of moral order as of primogeniture, descent through the eldest male heir. The legalism im-

plied had little to do with Roman law but was the order of overlord and vassal which had originally taken shape among the Frankish barbarians. One of the most curious historical pictures is the manner in which the Middle Ages sought to weave together the Hebrew legends with the barbarian legal heritage. Thus, the sacramental view of marriage derived from Christian theology was something which had to be expounded in the strict terms of a feudal economic order springing from very different roots.

It must be recalled that the feudal economic order was interrelated to the canon law of the church and that the two things were not static but in process of development. Marriage itself presented problems at

## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

### *The Poor Bastard*

By F. H. AMPHLETT MICKLEWRIGHT

the formal level. For the medieval canonist, a marriage was contracted by two people freely taking each other as husband and wife for life with monogamous intentions, in the presence of witnesses. Despite a famous nineteenth century legal decision, *R. v. Millis*,\* it is by no means certain that the presence of an episcopally ordained priest was necessary. In essence, this forms the English common law view of a valid marriage which was only barred by statute as late as 1753 by Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act. Again there were extensive grounds for nullifying a marriage and a child of a nullified marriage was bastardised from its birth even though this might have taken place long before the pronouncement of the decree. It was undoubtedly the practical difficulties involved which led the canon lawyers to claim by the early thirteenth century, that a child born to parents who later married was thereby legitimised. This view might seem to be an act of mere justice but it roused the ire of the barons whose lands were held in terms of feudalism and primogeniture. For them, it suggested changes in the law which weakened the position of the baron claiming to be seised of land, and it must be recalled that the whole of medieval politico-economic life turned upon the issue of ownership, seisin and possession of land. It was the barons who resisted this legal innovation to the full, a point made by F. W. Maitland in his great work, *Canon Law in the Church of England*. Finally, in 1284 at the Council of Merton, the barons were able to block this suggested change in the law. In fact, it never became the law of England till 1926.

## Legitimation Acts

Subsequent legislation with regard to bastardy has been of two types. One set of laws has approached the whole question of legitimation. In 1926, a child was legitimised by statute at the marriage of the parents if they could in fact have married at the time of birth, and an illegitimate child was allowed under certain circumstances to inherit from its intestate mother. The Legitimation Act, 1959, extended this principle to children whose parents were not free to marry at the time of their birth. It is not without interest that both Acts passed through Parliament despite the misgivings of the Church of England, a fact which in itself shows how much of the history of the subject had been forgotten. The other set of statutory

changes fortified the position of the maintenance of the illegitimate child, whether it be in terms of an affiliation order made by the justices against the putative father, a matter closely related to the evolution of the Poor Laws, or the maintenance of an illegitimate child who has been received as a child of the family in the full legal sense of the term. Of course, these pieces of legislation had nothing to do with sexual morality but were merely concerned with the economic aspects of the upkeep of the child.

### Social Opprobrium

Again, the conception of the family had changed. The medieval view of the family persisted till much later, and was far nearer to a clan conception than anything else. This fact is underlined by the whole question of the tracing of the heir and the legal view of the family as a particular facet within a social order turning upon land holding. The high individualism ushered in by *laissez faire* economics looked upon each household as a separate and individual family and failed to relate the group to the possession of land. The arrival of a bastard child produced other economic and social complications, with the result that bastardy had the stress of nineteenth century social opprobrium laid upon it. The Churches were not slow to cash in upon the new situation and to talk in a moral manner totally unknown to the feudal period or even within aristocratic eighteenth century circles. Indeed, the well-known medieval bar against the ordination of an illegitimate son was not so much due to the moral question as to the fact that the *filii nullius* was outside the feudal order. The bastard daughter was of very minor concern in medieval eyes. As the feudal order was masculine in conception and women stood outside it, it was a matter of little moment that the bastard girl stood outside the law.

### Christian and Freethinker

Several facts stand forth clearly from this summary of the evolution of the law of England on the matter. The attitude towards the bastard arose historically out of feudal land holding, but the barbarian feudal theory of primogeniture could only strike root to the extent that it did through the approval of the Church. Later views of bastardy among Christians have usually been extremely cruel to the child and these moral attitudes have arisen as a legacy from the dead feudal past. For the utilitarian moralist, the whole question of marriage and legitimacy is one which turns upon its social usefulness. He is con-

\* *R. v. Millis* (1844), 10 Cl. and Fin. 534 (HL). This case is of considerable importance as it laid down that the presence of an episcopally ordained priest was necessary to establish the validity of a common law marriage in England and Ireland. It did not extend the principle to settled or conquered colonies or to other parts of the world where the local marriage customs were inappropriate. But as an historical point, it is commonly held that *R. v. Millis* was wrongly decided. Before the decree of the Council of Trent in 1563, no religious ceremony was necessary. A declaration by the parties was all that was necessary. "I take you as my wife (or husband)" made the marriage binding immediately whilst "I shall take you as my wife (or husband)" made the marriage binding upon consummation. The custom grew up of marriage in face of the Church after the publication of banns (unless these were dispensed by papal or episcopal licence) and with the consent of the parents of parties under 21 years of age. The marriage was contracted at the church door and followed by the nuptial mass in church. As P. M. Bromley points out (*Family Law*, pp. 35 *et seq.*), the common law favoured the growth of the custom on evidential grounds. Thus developed the rule that the wife was not dowable unless she was married at the church door and certain other proprietary rights may have been involved. Gradually, these common law motives were forgotten and the stress shifted to the priestly presence. Finally, it was demanded by the Council of Trent. But the Tridentine decrees did not extend to England, the breach with Rome having already taken place in 1535 and the common law position in England would seem to be governed by the older legal history.

cerned with the well-being of man within this world and not with any transcendent moral theory or sacramental theology of marriage. In an age which has sought to pare away by statute the whole difference between legitimacy and illegitimacy, the way should be open for further reforms of the law. Certainly, every step should be taken to project the social interests of the child born out of wedlock. Christian denunciations and threats can scarcely assist this end. It is for the Freethinker to recall the strange past history of the subject and to remind the Christian that, in view of this history, he would be well advised to leave the whole subject alone at the present time. His heritage of feudalism and feudal economic orders with their legal implications is as dead as the creed which gave to them a theological approval.

## Predictions

THIS month will see the opening of the fourth and final session of the Vatican Council, expected—as the *Evening News and Star* remarked (26/8/65)—to be "the most difficult and momentous". The 2,000 or more bishops have to clear eleven decrees for final publication, and clashes between the progressives and the conservatives are inevitable. The world is waiting, said the *News* for "the supreme legislative assembly of the world's 500 million Roman Catholics to give its last word on problems which involve both the Christian and non-Christian worlds". They range, the paper said, from reforming the Church's structure to the moral implications of nuclear warfare; from anti-Semitism to a modern interpretation of the Bible; from marriage and the family, to the position of the missionary in a post-colonial era.

In fact, the importance of the Council has been—and continues to be—vastly exaggerated, especially since the advent of Pope Paul. We have never claimed abnormal prophetic powers, but we confidently predict that if the world is waiting for any revolutionary pronouncements, it will be disappointed.

Equally confidently we predict—apropos another report in the *Evening News and Star*—that other people will see the sea serpent of "monstrous size" with a head like a turtle and a shiny black scale-covered body, that the wife of an American Army officer and nine others saw in Lake Garda, Italy. Future viewers have the advantage of the American lady's description to begin with. The "thing", Mrs. Camilla Finglet said, "raised its head above the surface and arched its neck when we started to shout a warning. It swam away like a snake, its body breaking water as it crested. It must have been at least 50 feet long". Mrs. Finglet apparently didn't mention whether it snorted fire from its nostrils. But it is clear from her description that she doesn't know how a snake swims.

## A REMINDER FOR SUNDAY

We remind readers that the ITV *Sunday Break* programme on September 12th will be a discussion between the Methodist Lord Soper (the Rev. Dr. Donald Soper) and our contributor F. H. Amphlett Micklewright, a member of the Executive Committee of the National Secular Society.

## MORALS WITHOUT RELIGION

and other essays

By MARGARET KNIGHT

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# Flight to the Stars

By F. A. RIDLEY

IF as the late Joseph McCabe once phrased it, the nineteenth century may be justly termed "the century of stupendous progress" on this planet, the twentieth century gives every indication of being equally so; progress we hasten to add of a cosmological and not a theological kind. For the sequence of extra-terrestrial events since the first Russian Sputnik went into orbit in 1957 would have appeared utterly incredible even as recently as Good Queen Victoria's "golden days". In earlier ages of faith, they would undoubtedly have been ascribed to the direct agency of the first space traveller from Heaven to Hell, "Old Nick" himself.

Since it is proverbial that the first step is the hardest and since the pioneer era of extra-terrestrial expansion now appears to be nearing its end, we may expect the closing decades of this century will witness expansion of mankind's contact with other worlds. For there is every prospect that such hitherto exclusively religious phrases as, say, heaven and earth, and/or the next world or even the descriptive adjective celestial, will come to acquire a cosmological, instead of an exclusively religious significance.

The almost illimitable prospects of mankind's future expansion in outer space, form the subject matter of a most remarkable book just published: *Flight to the Stars* by James Gordon Strong (Temple Press, 25s.). In the course of his inquiry, Mr. Strong, an engineer by profession, raises the whole vast question of (in the words of his sub-title) "the feasibility of inter-stellar flight". That human technical ingenuity is already upon the very edge of solving the elemental problems of interplanetary travel, seems nowadays to be, if not quite beyond doubt, at least as near to it as makes little difference.

With a whole battery of man-made satellites hurtling forever round the sun, with American Mariners taking actual photographs of Mars and Venus, our two nearest neighbours in space, and rockets metaphorically flying the Russian and American flags making direct hits on the moon, it is surely only a matter of a few years, or a few decades at most before actual physical human contacts are established with at least our closest neighbours in space.

As Rudyard Kipling wrote long ago, before space travel was ever heard of: "The wildest dreams of Clapham are the facts of Katmandu". So too, the then daring pioneer visions of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells are shortly due to be realised. For it is now an odds-on bet that human beings will make a landing on the moon within a decade (where they may well find that "distance lends enchantment" to the poetic Queen of Night) and on Mars and Venus (climate permitting) before the end of this century.

Most serious writers on cosmology, Mr. Strong among them, nowadays subscribe to such elementary propositions. But for him at least, the real problem only begins there: after planets, stars; when once the limits of our planetary system have been reached, what next? For the prospects of man being able to establish any permanent or profitable contacts within our solar system itself, appear to be very remote. For the inner planets are too hot (Mercury and Venus) and the outer planets (Jupiter and beyond), are too cold. Even Mars and the moon do not appear to be precisely designed for human habitation.

However, our solar system is probably one of innumerable solar systems. Can these alien suns ever be

contacted and, if so, will planets viable to man be found encircling them? Taking his own solar system as read—or conquered—can mankind go further? Will a flight to the stars ever be feasible? This is the problem our author sets out to consider with a combination of imaginative speculation and remarkable professional knowledge of actual and possible technical developments in space travel, from the already primitive Russian Sputniks to the giant star-ships that will—he believes—one day glide upon century-long voyages from star to star and from one planetary system to another.

This extremely interesting book combines audacious speculations with the most exact technical data. Its speculations are wide. But they do not go beyond the limits of our galaxy, the famous Milky Way. Intergalactic space is too much even for the most ambitious star-ship!

However, as there are something like 100 million stars (suns) inside our galaxy, a substantial proportion of which probably possess planetary systems of their own, there are plenty of unexplored continents for any future stellar Columbus. No galactic Alexander is ever likely to shed tears at the lack of available worlds to conquer!

Two evident assumptions are clearly cardinal to Mr. Strong's thesis: mankind must be capable one day of reaching the stars, and there must be planets somewhere in space upon which mankind can hope to settle. Mr. Strong answers both questions in the affirmative. Mankind's inventive genius will, he feels sure, eventually design star-ships as superior to the rudimentary space ships of today as, say, the giant ocean-going liners of today are to the archaic galleys with which the ancient Phoenicians first braved the terrors of the Atlantic. A diagram of such a hypothetical star-ship is included in the text.

I must confess that I am totally unable to criticise this highly specialised technical demonstration, but we must surely at least wish *bon voyage* to the first star-ship and to its intrepid crew, bound for our nearest stellar neighbour *Alpha Centauri* (in the Southern Cross) distant about 25 billions of miles. To reach this "close" stellar neighbour of ours, something approaching the speed of light would be necessary; but even such speeds, as our author seeks to demonstrate may eventually become attainable to man-made locomotion. Then all aboard for the Milky Way!

The most important, as well as the most enlightening of the many points discussed in *Flight to the Stars*, concerns the nature and distribution of life throughout the universe. Put briefly Mr. Strong produces considerable cosmological evidence to show not only that many stars besides our sun, possess planets, but that conscious life represents a fairly constant recurring phenomenon: in which connection he gives a detailed (and entirely materialistic) analysis of the cosmological causes of life; a demonstration which incidentally, entirely excludes any need for, or even possibility of, special creation or supernatural intervention. Though Mr. Strong does not directly raise philosophical questions, it seems clear that he (like Laplace in his famous reply to Napoleon) has no need for the theistic hypothesis.

Rather surprisingly, the author includes amongst the protagonists of space flight, no less a person than the Prophet Ezekiel who may have seen a vision of a space ship. We must confess that this is a new one on us! What sort of star-ship was Elijah's "chariot of fire?"

## This Believing World

WE THOUGHT we knew most of the fantastic sects Christianity is blessed with, but the *News of the World* (22/8/65) has just unearthed one that is new to us. It calls itself "The Brotherhood Church", and is distinguished by its obstinate refusal to register the birth of children, or to pay fines, tithes, or National Insurance. It is so popular that its members consist now of four adults and three children; but, like Mormonism and Christian Science, the sect can grow.

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THE SEVEN stalwarts believe in Jesus Christ of course, but reject most of the Old Testament, particularly "the non-sense about Adam and Eve". But as sin came into the world directly from Adam and Eve, and we can only be saved because Jesus died for all of us on the Cross, how can the wondrous and historical story of Adam and Eve be rejected? However, the sect believes in evolution, in spite of the fact that "our Lord" was not an evolutionist. But it regularly preaches the gospel. It's safer to be on the right side!

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SOME of the Apostles of Jesus remain obscure although every one of them has had a gospel devoted to him and his work. How many ordinary Christians know, for instance, that "doubting" Thomas is recorded as being a "twin" of Jesus? However we were intrigued to read in the London *Evening News* (21/8/65) that, although St. Bartholomew's Day has been celebrated in London for 700 years or so, all we know about him is his name. How did a relatively obscure apostle about whom "nothing for certain" is known become so popular? His "popular favour" eludes a "satisfactory explanation", we are told.

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THE *Evening News* has however obliged with a splendid explanation. It is that there is something "curiously attractive" in Bartholomew's "very obscurity" for it proves how marvellously well he worked for Jesus with no hope of reward. It is a reminder, the paper says "that much devoted work for Christ and his Church and people goes by unnoticed". This may be true in general, but in the case of St. Bartholomew the truth is simply that, as with all the Blessed Apostles and even Jesus himself, we are dealing with myths or legends. There is no evidence whatever that there was a St. Bartholomew.

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ONE OF the most extraordinary facts about the sacrament of marriage is that so few people appear to know that a marriage in church is *not* legal unless it is properly registered according to the law of the land. This goes for *all* marriages here, no matter what the religion of the bride and bridegroom. We read for example, that "scores of English girls" who married Arabs in a mosque now know that the "priest" was a retired butcher not registered to perform a marriage (*Sunday Mirror* 22/8/65), and therefore "they are not legally wed". But it is interesting to note that at least one lady appears not particularly worried about that. What does worry her is, "we are not entitled to maternity grants or sickness benefits".

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THE question whether women should be admitted to Holy Orders can only be authorised by the "Universal Church", declared Canon W. H. Barkwell of Boston, Lincs, in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* (25/8/65). Orders of the Church of England are not its own, the Canon said, "but those of the whole Church of God as it existed prior to the Reformation". And he viewed the consequences of

two bishops falling in love with each other and subsequently getting married as "too much for any Church to face". "How hideous", he concluded, "is any thought of maternity vestments!"

## Reply to an Agnostic

By GONZALO QUIOGUE

(Manila)

IN A LETTER to THE FREETHINKER of May 14th, 1965, captioned "Atheists and Agnostics", Michael R. Evans thought it "a great pity that atheism does not represent a logical point of view for, if it did, we could all be united under its banner."

If this is a valid argument, we can make the same charge against agnosticism or theism. If agnosticism represents a logical point of view, we could all be united under *its* banner. Mr. Evans's argument unwittingly threatens atheism, agnosticism and theism with total annihilation!

After spending some time as "a true member of the secular world", Mr. Evans had found one element "extremely disappointing", namely "the pathetic rivalry between the Atheists and the Agnostics". I suggest that this criticism of Atheists is making the situation more disappointing and more pathetic. But we must admit his good intention. He wants to enlighten Atheists and Theists. The Churches, he said, "rightly call their following a flock, for the latter are sheep-like in their acceptance of ideas which they cannot evaluate for themselves. Let us not have a flock of Atheists following some dogmatic philosophy which they feel too intelligent to reject."

From time to time some sheep-like Agnostics, who should know better, make a charge that atheism is dogmatic. They are mistaken. In formal and proper argument, only an affirmative proposition can be dogmatic, because such a proposition has the burden of proof. When it is not supported by proof it is dogmatic. So far, theism has not presented any valid proof of God acceptable to science and logic. Atheism cannot be dogmatic, because it represents a negative proposition: there is no God. It is not duty-bound to present proofs like the affirmative one. Atheism is simply denying the claim of the Theist that there is a God. To consider the existence of God in the unknown is to deal with nonsense. We can be sensible and rational only when we express ourselves in terms of and within the realm of present knowledge! The unknown is a flimsy refuge of Agnostics, fence-sitters, shirkers and other comfort-seekers — people who say: "Let George do it. I have more important matters on hand."

When we know that the entity called God was a mere invention of ignorant men in the past, why can't we reject this?

When we know that the principal traits of a so-called God, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving, cancel one another, why can't we admit that God is just a figment of the imagination? If there is such a "Being" He will end human miseries; for He is all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing — a "perfect Being".

How can atheism be dogmatic when the non-existence of God is self-evident?

"It is possible some sort of god is lurking in the unknown!" says an Agnostic. Hence he neither affirms nor denies God. His decision shall forever be dangling in the air, because the unknown, like the universe, nature and quantity, is infinite in space-time; although we are continually pushing back the boundaries of the unknown to enlarge our known world.

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**Notes and News**

WE LEARN with some dismay that as a result of "preliminary soundings" by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the International Humanist and Ethical Union, "the first formal discussion took place at Utrecht on July 16th" (*The Humanist*, September). The Roman Catholic Secretariat was represented by Professor J. B. Metz of Germany and Dr. L. C. Baas of Holland, and the IHEU by H. J. Blackham of the British Humanist Association, Tolbert H. McCarroll (American Humanist Association) and Professor J. P. van Praag (Dutch Humanist League). The meeting—we are informed—"explored the possibilities of a future international and official contact between the IHEU and the Roman Catholic Church". And another discussion is to take place at the end of the year.

WE ARE not in the least surprised that the Secretariat for Unbelievers should have sought this meeting: the Roman Catholic Church has a great deal to gain and nothing to lose by even a temporary ceasefire in its losing battle against freethought. But what can be the motives of the IHEU? It isn't in the position of the Polish Communists, having to govern a largely Catholic population; it isn't even a political party dependant upon the Catholic vote. It is—as we understand it—a propagandist organisation whose humanist philosophy and ethical principles are directly opposed to the theology and moral teaching of Rome. To put the question bluntly, what have Mr. Blackham, Mr. McCarroll and Professor van Praag intellectually in common with men who eat their God in church each Sunday? If—as we assume—the "preliminary soundings" were made by the Catholics, they should have been told quite simply that the respective positions were clear and

irreconcilable and that no amount of "dialogue" could reconcile them.

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SUCH a reply would not be dogmatic, but merely realistic: a recognition of the dogmatic nature of the Roman Catholic faith, and the reactionary nature of the Roman Catholic Church. It would not rule out co-operation between Humanists and individual Catholics on specific social issues (with Norman St. John Stevas, for instance, on abolition of the death penalty) or political support for a Catholic like Kennedy rather than a Quaker like Nixon.

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ANOTHER—it seems perpetual—source of astonishment is the naivety of non-religious writers on psychic subjects. *Swan on a Black Sea: A Study in Automatic Writing* (Routledge, 35s.) was described by the *Observer* reviewer Philip Toynbee (22/8/65) as "a very important book indeed and one which should be obligatory reading for all the many of us who cannot yet bring ourselves to believe that human beings experience anything at all after the death of their bodies". Whatever our preconceptions may be, Mr. Toynbee added "these scripts provide something solid and incontrovertible which cannot be explained away with the usual facility of the naturally incredulous. Over to you, Professor Ayer!" Well, we haven't read the book yet, though we've made a note of it. But it doesn't seem necessary to call on the aid of Professor Ayer to show one important—and possibly crucial—weakness in the "solid and incontrovertible" evidence. Marghanita Laski did this admirably in her review in the *New Statesman* (27/8/65).

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THE book which is introduced by that strong defender of ESP Professor C. D. Broad, recounts how an Irish medium, Geraldine Cummins succeeded on request in receiving nearly 40 scripts from Mrs. Combe-Tennant, herself a medium, who had "passed over" in 1956. Mrs. Combe-Tennant's sons have identified these scripts as undoubtedly emanating from their mother and the editing is, Miss Laski said, "very hot on evidential precautions" but it is "apparently believed that for someone to say in good faith that they have never read or heard something is sufficient proof that they have not . . .". Over to you Mr. Toynbee!

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OVER we go, in fact, for a final "give-away" quote from Mr. Toynbee's own article. "It is inconceivable", he wrote, that any of these parties could have combined to play a silly and pointless joke on the public". We assure him that it is far from inconceivable to anyone who has studied the history of spiritualism. So much for the solid and incontrovertible!

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HAVING criticised one use of religion in a road safety campaign (the little girl praying ". . . and keep us safe on the roads"), we readily concede the value of another. In the USA, according to an *Evening Standard* report, you can get a little statue of St. Christopher to put on your car dashboard. At 60 m.p.h. it lights up; at 70 a voice behind it says: "OK brother, you're on your own now". Putting religion to practical purposes, one might say.

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DESPITE all criticisms—of his vanity, his paternalism towards the native and the primitive conditions at Lambaréné—Albert Schweitzer was a remarkable man, and far from an orthodox Christian. He had always viewed Jesus as limited by the historical conditions of his time, though spiritually gifted. And his "reverence for life" was an essentially humanistic ethical concept.

# God on the Doorstep

By PHYLLIS K. GRAHAM

"WHAT would you do", a schoolboy was asked, "if you were alone in the house, and there was a ring at the bell, and when you went to open the door you found God standing on the doorstep?"

The boy hesitated, perplexed and embarrassed, as well he might be. Suddenly his eyes brightened.

"I'd ask him in", he said, cheerfully, civilised grace coming to the rescue, "take him up to the lounge, settle him by the cocktail cabinet and tell him to make himself at home. Then I'd cut down to the hall and 'phone the vicar".

Apocryphal or not (and I don't know which) the titbit has a mellowly Anglican flavour which could hardly be reproduced in any other milieu on earth. It savours so richly, maturely, of a certain tolerant, half respectful, half protective attitude towards a Deity shorn of his terrors and tactfully excused his peculiarities. A figure, in fact, so inextricably part of the Established-Order-of-Things that there is scarcely any incongruity in the idea of his appearing on a doorstep—provided, of course, that his car is at the gate and his card ready to hand, and there is no suspicion of concealed tracts about his suitably attired person.

Curious to think how different the answer might have sounded from another type of mind—or another kind of doorstep. The Visitor would probably have been an entirely other sort of god—which is odder still when you come to think of it.

For instance, one can imagine a Roman Catholic mind gravitating instantly to the Sacrament of Penance: confession before cocktails would be the order of precedence, if indeed the latter came into it at all. A saint might conceivably melt in ecstasy on the doorstep; but I suppose the rank-and-file reaction would be welcome tempered by awe, hurried examination of conscience, a beating of the breast and "Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof . . ." as the Divine Visitor is genuflected in. Of course, Catholics are accustomed to receiving visits from the Lord when the Sacrament is brought to the sick, and this would be the correct procedure, except that the honoured Guest would be conducted to the best parlour instead of the bedroom. But to arrive in a pyx, the priest's responsibility entirely, is obviously a different matter from appearing as an entity, seeking admission under its own steam as it were.

In spite of being tolerably well acquainted with both types, I cannot decide whether the Catholic instinct would be to fly for the priest or, initial awkwardness over, to seize the unique opportunity of a word or two in the Lord's ear without benefit of clergy. Maybe it would depend on temperament, degrees of sanctity or sin, even social status. Of one thing, however, I am certain: the Papal Visitor would present an entirely antithetic front from that displayed by the Gentleman of Canterbury. Or should I say, series of fronts, for both would be adept, in their opposing spheres at protean transformations depending on individual doorsteps. The three-in-one deity, moulder of our split-mind society, manifestly suffers from acute schizophrenia.

A series of recorded encounters with Freethinkers and Humanists would be enlightening—and entertaining! For instance, I can imagine a petulant onslaught from one I know, heard growling over the wheel as he drove home from a match at Sussex University between Mrs. Margaret

Knight and an RC female opponent: "I just can't take all this drivel about virgin births and immaculate conceptions. Why couldn't he have come out of a—*buttercup*?"

I must admit that I should never have connected "him" with anything idyllic. My preoccupation would certainly have been with the schizophrenia, and my first impulse would probably be to ring for the police. Long ago I decided that the boss of the universe, if he existed, must be the supreme example of the type of criminal we incarcerate in Broadmoor. Granted, the more intelligible side of his extraordinary personality displays artistic and mathematical powers of the loftiest order; which makes the problematical reverse all the more sinister, obnoxious and potentially dangerous. So, however benign and accommodating, even appealing, that apparition on my doorstep, I should simply regard him as a nasty piece of work and be on my guard against imminent psychopathic outbursts.

Second thoughts would show that dialling 999 would be futile as well as cowardly, for quite probably the police might be implicated in the lunacy, their job being law and order and the bolstering of public morals—which everyone knows cannot possibly be carried on without the patronage and assistance of the deity. And then, the first recoil of startled nerves over, I should—I hope—seize the opportunity of prodding the patient with a little depth-psychology of my own devising.

To do this in peace and quiet I suppose I should have to ask him in. The kitchenette I think. Its decor of homely normality might provide an antidote of sanity. It is true that as I usher in my Visitor I recall how many, many times in the past I have longed to get him at my mercy and give him the round of the kitchen. But now I am older, wiser, and much more psycho-analytical. I know you have to treat a nut case with kindness, gentle persistence and a great deal of cunning.

Assuming his semi-incognito allows him to take a little earthly refreshment, I should brew tea (my best Lapsang, to make a thorough job of it) and serve it accompanied by delicate dollops of well-placed flattery (*praise*, in scriptural terminology). These prudent attentions should quickly arouse the paranoic urge to divine self-expansion. The atmosphere propitious, my suave and diplomatic inquisition could begin.

But of course I shouldn't bait him with old stuff like Free Will and the Origin of Evil; this would merely irritate him and get us nowhere (which is all they ever have done to anybody). And as for that disreputable dogma of Original Sin, I suspect he's a little ashamed of it nowadays, and would rather not be reminded of the Original Rumpus and his subsequent unchristian revenge on the human race. Besides, what's original about sin? The subject would bore him desperately. (Remembering Jehovah's reactions to divine desperation I suppress an involuntary shudder and steer out to safety).

The best approach, I feel, would be the television interview technique. This would put him at once on the celebrity pedestal—where he would feel at home—and me on the level of deference with a permit for privileged impertinence. We could then dispense with mythology without offence to his sensitivity, and get down to a civilised discussion on modern topics.

Here a minor difficulty has to be settled: the manner of address. "Almighty God" sounds too pompous,

"Heavenly Father" somewhat affected, "Lord" is no good without the prefix "O"—too suggestive of profanity. I compromise on "Your Holiness", which seems to me respectful and stately, and moreover rolls easily—if cynically—off an ex-Papist tongue.

I make sure that his teacup is refilled, and just save myself from a false start . . . "Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin . . ." but remember in time that I am not entertaining Little Jesus. I stiffen to decorum and assume an expression of discreet but intelligent inquiry.

"Your Holiness, you have—ah—enjoyed a position of authority for an—er—unprecedented number of years. You must have seen many changes. If I may ask . . . What are your feelings in regard to the world situation at the present day, as compared with, say, the Aurignacian period and final ice-age, or—to come a little nearer home—the duration of the Thirty Years' War?"

The first reference is unfortunate: anything prior to 4004 BC is bound to be problematical. An ice curtain seems about to fall between us, but is happily dispelled by the second allusion, which sets the war-horse nostrils of the Lord of Hosts twitching with excitement. Delighted, if a trifle dismayed, I realise communication is on, and on with a vengeance. I have hit the jackpot with a leading question.

The ethics of good taste forbid me to report in direct speech the subsequent flow of eloquence from my Interviewee. I can only give here a brief summary, confining myself to the salient points, and tactfully omitting any reference to what must be excused as inevitably characteristic of paranoia in the more exalted stages.

His Holiness, it appears is not averse to a good scrap-up here and there among his creatures, even a free-for-all at decent intervals. In fact, as he reminds me with the faintest bat of an eyelid, the noble art itself was born in Heaven. (I'm sorry about the mythology but it's safer to humour him). Apparently (I gather) what really caused the first rift in the Sempiternal Jelly of Immutable Bliss, wherein he had been encased in supreme and undisturbed solitude from all eternity, was—astounding revelation!—the anticipatory thrill of Captain Lucifer's exploits in the Pan-Angelic War.

"It would seem, then, Your Holiness, that creation was created for the sake of, and for the purpose of—ah—should I say—*conflict*?"

I wish I could convey to the reader the ineffable *com-pôte* of expressions on the (temporarily unmasked) divine countenance. This is plainly a subject close to his heart (or whatever dynamo keeps divinity running) and a source of ecstatic exultation. It exposes, indeed, a feverish deistic obsession: the universe as a sort of pudding-bowl wherein the ingredients have to be continually mixed, pounded together and beaten up in a painful but purposeful pandemonium. Purposeful—? But does the divine chef have any real intention of making the pudding?

I venture to put this stupendous question—when I can get a word in—without the cloak of metaphor, but delicately. I don't want to provoke the Lord's wrath with indiscreet metaphysics.

Quite the contrary, however—it seems to amuse him. The august visage momentarily congeals in what on a less exalted surface, might almost be taken for a leer. With an air of coy condescension to the homely and vernacular, and a sly hint of mysteries yet to come, he assures me—and here, for this one exception, I permit myself to quote—that "the spooof of the pudding is in the beating".

I feel that he expects me to be astounded and confounded, but of course I am not. Too much dust dims

the shine of originality on *that* statement. We are already too familiar with the pudding-philosophy of the Lord's representatives. We hear it continually expounded in moronic dogmas that make fools of men; we see it implemented in policies that make them worse than jungle beasts. The Great Hoax of Humanity is no news to me. All the same it is the slightest bit unnerving to get confirmation straight from the horse's mouth.

And at this point I feel the old rage boiling dangerously near the surface. In another moment I shall empty what remains in the teapot over that fatuous mask of theocratic self-complacency and sadistic benevolence. I pull myself together with a superhuman effort. For I know that hot anger is as impotent as violent struggle with a bog, when the Object of wrath is nothing but the Muck of Ages . . . the slimy Deposit of uncounted centuries of mental sewage. Intelligence alone can properly survey the Horror. Only science can deal with it.

With forced calm and resolute politeness I prepare to terminate the interview.

"To recapitulate, then Your—Holiness . . . In reference to my opening question, may I conclude from your esteemed remarks that you consider the—ah—immediate aspect of the world situation—er—not greatly different from any facet upturned to your celestial gaze through the ages? In other words—if I may borrow your own charming metaphor—you see the pudding-theme as—how can I put it?—the paste that holds creation in a changeless lump of battered yet unbroken unity? The corporeal manifestation, shall we say, of a Gelatinous Absolute—?"

The answer is wordless and majestic. He has risen, a monolithic Figure blocking out the teacups, an august and aweful Presence obliterating every human detail of my homely kitchenette. The words, unspoken, boom around us like a ghostly bombardment . . .

*Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper . . .*

(The same yesterday today and for ever . . .)

But I am not to be cowed. I remain seated at my table, dispassionate and cold as a minister of justice.

"One last question, Your Holiness, if I may be permitted. In view of your—ah—venerable years, your long-protracted government of the universe, your unspeakable labours for mankind; and taking into account the problems of post-Darwin theology, and the heavy responsibilities of a thermonuclear age . . . have you—ah—considered the possibility—of—er—retirement?"

Do I see exposed at this moment the emotions of venerable Pontiffs who outstay their welcome, and already taste the acrid breath of the Curial vultures who crowd upon them?

I feel almost sorry for the poor wretch in spite of all the mischief due to his madness, for behind the mask of majesty he is very, very sick, and his days are numbered. As he sinks back in his chair in a deflated heap my voice takes on the soothing tones of a mother to an ailing child, and finally the hypnotic cadence of the professional persuader.

With consummate skill I lure his split mind back to the radiance of pre-existence, where all his horrible ideas are still in embryo and safely shut away from reality. Gradually, persistently, I impress on his warring Personalities the images of peace; with subliminal cunning I paint the advantages of Being encased in the Sempiternal Jelly of Immutable Bliss, the calamity of a universe as yet non-existent, and not so much as a puff of hydrogen cloud on the calm horizons of eternity.

And as he sinks deep, deep, deeper in that pre-natal slumber of undisturbed serenity, and ultimately sizzles out like mothwings in flame, I reflect, wistfully, on the

extreme desirability of some asylum beyond the known universe, where the lunatic gods of men could twitter, scheme and rage to an empty twilight. But how long would it take to clear away the last of their secret ammunition from the labyrinthine underworld of the Great Unconscious? Should we ever be truly free of the Shadow on the Threshold?

I make a fresh pot of tea to fortify my spirit, and remind myself how very, very recently man-son-of-ape emerged from the haunted thickets of the jungle. Poor chap, we must give him time—and a chance—to grow out of his ghosts.

And if he ever does—if in some unforeseeable future he steps, clean and free, beneath the lintel of uncluttered humanity—he will find no Shadow darkening his doorstep . . . but who knows what inconceivable reality may be drenching it with light?

## CORRESPONDENCE

### ORDINATION

Your correspondent, D. F. Harris, in your issue of August 13th, will not be alone in finding it incredible that the secretary of the Thomas Paine Society, while still retaining that office, has recently assumed ordination upon joining the Old Roman Catholic Church. Mr. Morrell is, of course, free to make his own assumptions, and to accept the limitations of his own mentality, but many—and especially many who respect the name and qualities of Thomas Paine—will find it difficult not to regard his defection as an absurdly unedifying *volte face*.

A. J. STATHAM.

### THE JESUS MYTH

Let me frankly admit that when I said on page 3 of my book, *Jesus—God, Man or Myth*, that if “there ever was an obscure individual about whom we know literally nothing”, I never

expected that a Christian-priest (THE FREETHINKER 27/8/65) would take this as meaning that I believed there *may* have been a Son of God performing miracles, going about Palestine “doing good”, crucified, and flying to Heaven without visible means of support. On the contrary indeed, I quoted on page 1, the exact words of Dupuis who “refused to examine” whether there was “a philosopher, or impostor, named Christ”, and as far as words have any meaning, I expressed my *complete unbelief* in an “obscure individual about whom we know literally nothing”. But 170 years ago, Dupuis was faced with the same Christian imbecilities we still have to face. For no self-respecting Christian will agree for a moment that Jesus is as mythical as Krishna or Ra or Wodin. And so we have to go on and on, repeating the same objection to Jesus and Christianity over and over again, with priests vainly trusting that they have answered us, knowing quite well that very few people would refer to this journal of ours. The Rev. C. Strother, FAES, is typical of his brothers in Christ.

H. CUTNER.

### NOT SO HOPELESS?

Some of your correspondents, such as Mr. R. Smith and Mr. A. Wright present, it seems, a rather hopeless case re the possible improvement of man's virtues and ethics. It is quite hopeless, obviously, when dependent upon the frailness of mere human scruples and his inept ability with logic or the most reasonable reasoning; when dependent upon his divine absolutes or some of his saintly agents, dictators or philosophers of renown—but maybe it is an adequate authority that is so direly needed.

Even the dumbest of beasts learns from past experiences. If “man is lord of himself” he has proved himself a damned poor teacher of himself, behaviourly, through past experiences. But maybe man's own historical and behavioural records, if properly presented as instruction, can, after all, furnish the most reliable authority for man's ethical conduct. “As ye sow, so shall ye reap.”

“For it is a curious fact, in the conflict between reason and authority, the conflict itself is a victory for reason. Authority is always on the road to defeat when it has to appeal either to force or to reason. It is secure only when it rests upon unquestioned habit”, (*American Inquisitors*, Walter Lippmann).

JOHN H. JONES, (Arkansas, USA).

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