

FREE THINKER

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LAW REFORM

It seems as though the next few months will bring important strides in law reform. For those of all progressive ideologies who have been agitating for years, such an attainment would be its own reward.

Lord Silkin's slightly amended Abortion Bill will reach its committee stage in the Lords on February 1. This will soon be followed in the Commons by Mr. Humphry Berkeley's bill to implement the Wolfenden Report's recommendation (1957) "That homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private be no longer a criminal offence." In the spring or early summer popular Secularist Lord (Ted) Willis hopes to bring in a bill to abolish virtually all the Sunday restrictions except those relating to racing with on-the-course betting and the service of writs. Sir Frank Soskice had been replaced as Home Secretary by Mr. Roy Jenkins, who in *Pursuit of Progress* (1953) said of the Labour Party: "It must be sufficiently radical and idealistic to command the enthusiastic loyalty of the political optimists, with their great faith in man's ability to improve his own social environment, who are the natural supporters of a party of the left." In 1959 he wrote *The Labour Case*, wherein he advocated reforms of laws relating to homosexuality, divorce, abortion, immigration, licensing and censorship. He is thought to have plans to bring these aspirations into effect. Meanwhile the six-man Law Commission pursues its monumental task of modernising the whole corpus of law.

Impressive as this array of proposals and personalities is, victory is by no means assured. Many attempts have in the past been made to implement the above reforms and been frustrated. Powerful interests, mainly ecclesiastical, have already begun their campaigns of opposition. The Lord's Day Observance Society, whose financial assets and contacts are by no means negligible, is talking again in terms of the million signatures it claims to have got in a petition against the Barlow bill. Home Office Under-Secretary Mr. George Thomas is a Welsh lay preacher with all that that implies in sabbatarianism and puritanism. The greatest manifestation of latterday Christian Unity was the defeat of Mr. Leo Absbe's proposals for "divorce by consent."

A person's views on ultimate reality do not necessarily determine his social attitudes. Some distinguished Catholics have advocated family planning, while Dr. Anne Biezanek has added abortion. The Bishop of Woolwich has supported *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and homosexual law reform. From the Church of England's Board for

Social Responsibility have come liberal studies on suicide, artificial insemination, sterilization, and more recently abortion and the legal status of illegitimate children. Though the Abortion Law Reform Association in its January newsletter points out that in some particulars "these Anglican authors and ALRA will probably be seen to part company" (and ALRA itself is a long way from the "abortion on demand" which some reformers would like to see), the Church proposals are most enlightened by ecclesiastical standards. On the other side there are some atheists who have a parlous hold on either freethought or liberalism. There is in America an allegedly secularist periodical which bizarrely combines anticlericalism with racism and anti-Semitism. But these things are newsworthy because they are typical.

In the *Fathers by Law* report the Anglican committee claims that humane treatment of the fatherless, however their status was caused, is in the mainstream of biblical tradition. If it serves to make a liberal position more palatable to the faithful, this expedient will have earned its keep. So that it would perhaps be both unkind and untimely to suggest that the biblical tradition has in fact been that of God's "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation." The brutal fact is that when Mrs. Mary Whitehouse of the Clean-Up-TV Campaign or Mr. Harold Legerton of the LDOS want to collect signatures on petitions to turn the clock back, they know exactly where to go to find them. Outside the door of church and chapel. Those with reactionary views on religion and philosophy not infrequently have reactionary views on everything else.

Not that there would be anything wrong with those views if they were operative only in their holders' private lives. Instead, they seek to impose these views and patterns of behaviour on others. In this they are in deadly opposition to what is the real heart of law reform — its championing of civil liberties and of the rights of the individual conscience. Whereas many existing laws are demonstrably causing suffering to millions, law reform will cause suffering to none save the man who rages at another's pleasure or convenience. In a liberal society there would be no pressure on prudes to discover Miss Fanny Hill's pleasures, sabbatarians to frolic on Sunday, teetotallers to tipple, Catholic women to abort their babies, or heterosexual males to go to bed with their bank managers.

It is often claimed that law reform is political suicide. Well-organised fanatical minorities can, in the delicately balanced state of modern politics, make and break governments. There is certainly some truth in this statement.

but nothing like what vested interests and moral cowards like to assert. Mr. Leo Abse is probably the MP most associated in the public mind with overall law reform. Yet throughout his years in the House, whatever the fortunes of the Labour Party, his majority has consistently, even spectacularly, risen. The impact that a zealous constituency member and an honest man can have on the electorate is greatly underrated.

In his period of office hitherto Mr. Wilson has pursued a policy described as pragmatic by his friends and vote-catching by his enemies. The great reforms promised or hinted at have so far failed to materialise in many, perhaps most, social fields. Sir Frank Soskice was an extraordinary choice as Home Secretary, the White Paper *Immigration from the Commonwealth* a shameful sop to racist reaction, failure to supply Government time for reform measures a disappointment to many. Vietnam, Aden, steel and other matters are beyond the scope of this

position entirely to Catholic Action, the Celtic Bible Belt assessment. Mr. Wilson seems to imagine he owes his and the big unions, themselves subject to the same influences.

The truth is that the Labour Administration is in power through the decision of the floating voter, a progressively more numerous animal who will select whoever seems to offer radical and dynamic government, who sees the country as needing a sociological revolution detached from ideologies, who has fallen away from the influence of the church. Labour governments are rarely thrown out of office because they have pursued radical social policies for which the electorate was unprepared. Rather is it because, rightly or wrongly, they are thought to be inflationary and union-dominated. If the socially-conscious floating voter is much longer denied the expectations of reform he legitimately holds, he will certainly vote with his pencil or his feet whenever the occasion arises.

THE FISHES HEAVEN

IN THE NOW long bygone age prior to 1914 (and all that!), Rupert Brooke published a poem entitled *The Fishes' Heaven*. The author, a Cambridge don and authority on the Elizabethan stage, was later to enjoy considerable but unhappily mostly posthumous celebrity as a result of his untimely, tragic death early in the First World War. As a result of this, and of some eloquent, though perhaps rather flamboyant, war poems written during the last year of his life, Brooke acquired a rather inflated poetic reputation. I seem to remember that in those far-off days a contemporary critic even compared him with Lord Byron, who also died in Greek waters. But this is surely to fit the young Edwardian soldier-poet with a hat several sizes too large for him. For as the late Chapman Cohen used to remark so aptly, the local grocer who interests himself in anthropology does not thereby automatically become a Sir James Frazer. Similarly, a few recitable volumes of verse do not automatically raise one to the level of the authentic masterpieces of the finest poetic literature in the modern world. For ironically enough (and no doubt by way of appropriate reaction), the traditionally English nation of shopkeepers has produced what is probably the finest body of poetic literature since the classical Greeks. In this impressive *corpus*, Rupert Brooke takes his place as a respectable minor poet who, like so many of his greater predecessors (Byron, Shelley, Keats, etc.), had the misfortune to die young.

Whilst probably the majority of critically-minded people may find that professedly patriotic poetry, whether written by Rudyard Kipling or by Rupert Brooke, tends to jar upon their critical faculty, yet satirical verse at least of a reasonably high standard tends to produce precisely contrary reactions. Rupert Brooke was himself responsible for at least one such poem which, if perhaps scarcely in the class of classical satire, is at least extremely readable and in particular likely to appeal to Freethinkers, if only for its bold and plausible parodies of conventional theological creeds. This poem is *The Fishes' Heaven*, written by Rupert Brooke shortly before the First World War. In this original and amusing parody of the Christian creeds, one surely hears the voice of an authentic

F. A. Ridley

Rationalist, one who has effectively seen through and brilliantly parodies the anthropomorphic geocentric outlook that lies behind human professions of faith, including, no doubt deliberately, the credal formulae of the Christian churches. For the Fish are unanimous in affirming their aquatic version of the argument from design.

This life cannot be all, they swear,
For how unpleasant if it were.

And if there is a future life, there must also surely be a creator to guarantee it, one naturally made in an image comprehensible to fish.

For there they trust there swimmeth One
Who swam e're rivers were begun:
Squamous of fishy form and mind,
Immense, omnipotent and kind.
And under the Almighty fin
The littlest fish may enter in.

In this fishy declaration of faith there is, then, a creator, naturally an authentic if gigantic fish. For deep-sea theologians, like their human counterparts on land, evidently make their god in their own image. For what would be the use of asking fish to adore a deity made in the form of a land animal, the appearance as well as the habits of which would be totally unfamiliar to any and every species of fish? Why, it might even *eat* fish. However, there is not much use or fun in having a god without simultaneously having a heaven in which to adore him and in which to receive a tangible *quid pro quo* in the form of everlasting bliss. Rupert Brooke's maritime theologians of course fully included and endorsed in their profession of faith this obvious truth.

For never fly conceals a hook,
Fish say, in that celestial brook;
But more than mundane weeds are there,
And mud immortally fair:
Immortal moths, unfading flies,
And the worm that never dies;
And in that heaven of all their wish
There shall be no more land, say fish.

Here, surely, in this fish-like declaration of faith, is an
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WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN

Maurice Jones

TO begin with, why should I be? I am asked to believe that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. . . . Implicit in the belief that God had a son must surely be acceptance of the Virgin Birth. This I cannot accept. All my sympathies are with Joseph. When the objection is raised that the Virgin Birth is a biological impossibility, some Christians point to parthenogenesis amongst the lower animals and say that what happens there can equally operate among human beings. Some go even further and say that it *has* happened among human beings and cite medical evidence in their support. To them I would reply: Then it is not a miracle, and all the other irregular progeny might equally claim to be sons or daughters of God.

The Greeks believed that their gods looked down from Olympia, desired a mortal woman, descended, and left her with a child that was half-god. Such stories the Christian dismisses with an indulgent smile as myths. But his own myth, no more likely to an impartial observer, assumes holy significance.

Much is made of the so-called historical evidence of the coming of the Messiah. It is clear, however, that the Jewish prophets were not speaking of this kind of Saviour. Their Christ was someone who would lead them out of the house of bondage; they wanted a happy land then, not far, far away. Which is why they rejected him — understandably.

The Jews were led to expect someone out of the House of David; but the Virgin Birth meant that Jesus was not related to David at all. He had no earthly father. Perhaps this is the same kind of mystery as the Holy Trinity.

Even Christ's teaching makes no particular appeal to me. He preaches universal love and tolerance, yet threatens the Jewish priests with all manner of blood-curdling torments in eternal perdition mainly, it seems, because they refused to accept him at his own valuation. A case of do as I say and not as I do, apparently.

He did not even teach right for its own sake. He promised that 'great will be your reward in Heaven'. No doubt this promised rule of the underdog in Paradise made a great appeal to the down-trodden, poverty-stricken people to whom he preached, a people who had known nothing but subjection all through their history. It must have satisfied their sense of poetic justice to think that they would one day be peering down with pious rectitude at their quondam masters as they toiled and sweated in Hell.

Does this sound like the voice of a loving God of infinite wisdom? It is from Luke 17, 29-30, and reads: "But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from Heaven and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be when the Son of man is revealed."

Or this, which concludes the parable of the unfaithful servant: "For I say unto you, that unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him. But those mine enemies which should not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me" (Luke 19, 26-7).

Am I right to detect a grim joy in this unhappy prophecy? It is from Luke 21, 22-4: "For these be the days of vengeance, that all things that are written may be fulfilled. But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be

great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive to all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled."

Healing the sick strikes me as a most arbitrary piece of showmanship. This distribution of therapeutic largesse depended far too much upon geographical advantage. Those who were lucky enough to be around were healed; for the millions who weren't it was just too bad. And why did Christ insist upon playing little games like telling the lucky ones to pop off to holy pools and wash themselves?

And in spite of the universality claimed for Christianity, Christ himself clearly regarded his mission as being exclusive to the Jewish people. Consider this quotation from Matthew 19, 28: "And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

And again Luke 19, 9: "And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house for as much as he also is a son of Abraham."

Even more conclusive is Christ's reaction to the plea of the woman of Canaan who cried unto him, saying: "Have mercy upon me O Lord, thou son of David; My daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and sought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. But he answered and said, I am not come but unto the lost sheep of Israel." Subsequently Christ designed to effect a cure, but he had surely made his position clear.

One would expect of a God entering the world of his creation a tremendous radiance of truth and knowledge; yet Christ naively entertained beliefs at which today even a schoolboy would scoff. He spoke of the stars dropping from Heaven at the day of judgement; he referred to the story of Noah and the Ark as one who obviously believed it and all its implications; he thought that mental derangement was caused by unclean spirits which were consignable to herds of swine and with which he could hold conversations. Luke, supposedly the most intelligent and best educated of the gospel writers, traced Christ's ancestry back to Adam, "the son of God".

Setting aside Christ, however, I cannot accept the popular concept of a deity. By this, I refer not to the possibility of a First Cause, or Life Force, or Original Substance, or whatever that which preceded life may be styled. Such an abstraction is too remote to concern me. I refer to a loving God who needs communion with the children of his creation and who cares personally for them: who marks the fall of the sparrow and numbers the hairs on a man's head.

The only "evidence" we have of the Judaeo-Christian God before Christ is contained in the Old Testament, which appears to be a hotch-potch of Jewish myth and history. We have Abraham entertaining the Angels of the Lord to breakfast; Moses having barefooted conversations with burning bushes; old gentlemen building arks; and much smiting with the sword and slaughtering of harmless domestic animals and heathens.

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THIS WORLD

Religion in Schools

IT IS sometimes still said — much less so than previously — that the only real opposition to religion in schools comes from a tiny band of faithful Secular Humanists, and that everybody else is either perfectly happy with or sublimely unconcerned about the present situation. There is, however, no evidence for this statement. Even the much-disputed figures cited by Dr. Ronald Goldman (*New Society*, 27 May, 1965), if extrapolated for the whole country, show five million people opposed to or doubtful about RI, and 15 million not wanting only Christianity. These are not numbers to be trifled with. As it happens, a good case can be made out to suggest both that the questions were status-loaded (i.e. likely to favour the *status quo*) and that most of the people questioned did not really understand what was involved by religion in schools. They could not be expected to know whether it was a systematic programme of Christian indoctrination designed by some Agreed Syllabuses to make more church members, or whether it was nothing but a few bible stories and parables, Christmas carols and talks about world faiths, criticism of laziness and untruthfulness and injunctions to obey parents. With full knowledge of the present situation, the results might have been very different.

The man or woman in the street who figures in a poll is not part of a cohesive body and whatever he or she says may go unheeded. But there is one substantial vehicle of opinion outside the Humanist movement which supports secular education. At the AGM of the National Council for Civil Liberties in April 1965, it was almost unanimously resolved: "This Annual General Meeting deplores the use of state-supported schools for religious indoctrination and wishes to support revision of public policy on religious education in schools particularly with regard to the removal of the compulsory Act of Worship and religious instruction on a purely Christian basis." Through affiliated organisations the Council represents 3½ million people, not all of whom may as individuals support secular education but who overwhelmingly support the main policy decisions of the council. This decision has been further strengthened by a long report on the National Secular Society statement, *Religion and Ethics in Schools*, in the NCCL January bulletin. Below is an extract:

"The form of compulsory religious instruction and religious worship in schools is based on the 1944 Education Act which declares that 'It shall be the duty of the local education authority . . . to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community by securing that efficient education shall . . . be available to meet the needs of the population.' In practice this has resulted in restrictions of freedom of thought, with both teachers and pupils being obliged to take part in religious assembly, or risk ostracism or dismissal. The conscience clause which allows a pupil or teacher to absent himself from religious worship and instruction is regarded as relating to a minority, when it is clearly established that throughout the country it is church attenders who are in the minority. Promotion to headship is virtually impossible for 'dissenters,' which is only one of the many reasons why the imposition of religious worship and instruction should not be continued. The methods of religious teaching used in school are a dis-

tortion of the national view towards religion, and in being compulsory it infringes freedom of thought and freedom of worship: two basic civil liberties. It cannot help in any way to prepare young people for an understanding either of a democratic society or of religious beliefs. Mr. Tribe suggests, among other recommendations, that a syllabus of social morality and citizenship should be introduced and that comparative religion and philosophy should be offered as a subject for senior students. ated generally when the subject of religious instruction is

"A new aspect of British society which is not appreciated generally when the subject of religious instruction is being considered is its multi-racial character. Many schools now have pupils who are Hindu or Muslim, and a misunderstanding of their religious beliefs is a strong factor in creating racial tensions. These children are necessarily excluded from 'religious instruction' if it is purely Christian, and their exclusion serves to emphasise racial divisions. Religious study including all major religions, and humanism, would help to create not only religious but social tolerance."

The publication *Teacher's World* has joined other journals in recognition of the fact that there is a nationwide "controversy" on this issue. It has invited Anglican Chaplain the Rev. G. W. Burningham, the Rev. D. Konstant, Educational Psychologist and Humanist Dr. James Hemming, and three headmasters respectively Anglican, Catholic and Humanist, to contribute. They have four questions to consider: (1) Should religion be taught in school at all? (2) Where and when should the Bible be introduced, particularly the Old Testament? (3) That children should be taught to evaluate the material presented to them and to have the right to reject, as well as accept, all or part of the religious instruction that they are given (4) That religious instruction should pay as much attention to the criteria of sound educational practice as any other subject in the curriculum.

The Glorious Company of the Apostles

Secular scholar of sacred things, Mr. John Allegro has said more on his theory that the names of the apostles are simply transliterations of the Aramaic words for Essene office-holders. He sees Judas Iscariot simply as the "man in charge of the wages," James and John Boanerges as "people expert in divination or those who have insight," Peter (Cephas) as "someone with the ability to read people's faces." According to this theory Jesus is not the son of a carpenter but "one who has the quality of a magician." A Palestinian Houdini, in fact.

Sex Instruction

Birmingham is to be congratulated on being the first authority in Britain to investigate the need for sex education in a systematic way. A working party has recommended that this should be given by specially chosen and trained teachers. It would include information on venereal diseases, promiscuity, adultery and illegitimacy. Even primary schools are felt to have a need in that the "powerful influence of mass media is making those young children sexually aware in a way previous generations have never been."

Misgivings Completely Allayed

The peace of God which passeth all understanding has always wrapped the Jesuit mission in Farm St. A more comprehensible peace has now joined it.

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FREETHINKER

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LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

Items for insertion in this column must reach THE FREETHINKER office at least ten days before the date of publication.

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch NSS (The Mound)—Sunday afternoon and evening: MESSRS. CRONAN, MCRAE and MURRAY.

Merseyside Branch NSS (Pierhead)—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.: Sundays, 3 p.m. and 7.30 p.m.

Nottingham Branch NSS (Old Market Square), every Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

INDOOR

Glasgow Secular Society (Central Halls, 25 Bath Street), Sunday, January 30th, 2.45 p.m.: HUGH MCDIARMID, "Burns".

Havering Humanist Society (Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane), Tuesday, February 1st, 8 p.m.: GODFREY LAGDEN, M.P. "The Political Scene."

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate), Sunday, January 30th, 6.30 p.m.: C. E. ROBINSON, "West Indians and the West Indies".

Marble Arch Branch NSS (Carpenters' Arms, Seymour Place, London, W.1), Sunday, January 30th, 7.30 p.m.: S. D. KUEBART "Luther".

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall Humanist Centre, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Sunday, January 30th, 11 a.m.: LORD SORENSEN "Parliament and the Peers"; Tuesday, February 1st, 7.30 p.m.: DAVID ZIFF, "Scientology—A New Definition of Ethics".

Worthing Humanist Group (Morelands Hotel, The Pier), Sunday, January 30th, 5.30 p.m.: ALBERT LODGE, "The Work of Amnesty International".

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THE FISHES HEAVEN

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authentic summary of what a fish, if capable of formulating a theology, would demand from his creator. This also surely is what a marine creature used only to water would regard as a desirable future life. Absurd? But is it really any more so than, say, the Happy Hunting Grounds of the Red Indian hunter or the Muslim Paradise with its celestial harem of houris (celestial concubines): or even (dare we say it?) than the Paradise depicted in such appropriate hymns as:

Whatever Lord we lend to Thee,
Repaid a thousandfold will be,
So gladly will we lend to Thee.

We do not really think that Rupert Brooke's aquatic theologians were any more unreasonable than their terrestrial counterparts, for in both cases their theology reflected their daily experience of life. But in this liquid theology we notice one significant omission: there is no Hell. Had this important detail been included, the fishes' hell would no doubt have been situated on land and no doubt the Devil would have been in human shape plus hook, line and sinker.

We were reminded of this notable poem of Rupert Brooke's by a recently published decree of the now defunct Vatican Council. Unlike some of the more technical decrees of this Church, this particular decree, duly signed and endorsed by Pope Paul, the Holy Father of Men (and henceforth of fish also), has evoked considerable comment in the popular press. We quote from a recent issue of our contemporary, *The Evening News*: "Roman Catholics will no longer have to abstain from meat on Fridays, according to an edict just issued by Pope Paul . . . Major fasting rules are to remain only for the religious orders . . . *Leaders of the fish industry in Britain were apprehensive last night*" (my italics, F.A.R.).

They are doing all they can to popularise fish and sales have been on the wane since the end of the war. "Friday is the big day at fish and chips shops. Fryers said last night that they were worried about a drop in their trade."

Upon reading the above, it occurs to us that this decision of the Vatican Council under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit (for what fish, at any rate, can possibly doubt that?) will effect important changes in theology, both human theology and the aquatic beliefs so fancifully portrayed by Rupert Brooke in *The Fishes' Heaven*.

For as regards fish, every Friday will now, surely, be a "Good Friday" in deep water theology. Whilst as regards the theology of the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church, there is now nothing to prevent St. Peter, the Founder of the Papacy, from henceforth becoming not only the Patron Saint of Fishermen, but equally of fish! Surely a major miracle if ever there was one!

NO COMMENT

"If the figures are accurate the time has come for Catholic "influence", USDAW machine, Radical Alliance, *Humber-side Voice*, T&GWU and CND to come together and work for a big increase in members and the return of Mr McNamara"—Chairman of Bideford Labour Party (*Tribune*, December 24).

THIS WORLD *continued*

In Jesuit *The Month* (January), Father Corbishley writes on "The Challenge of Humanism". The subject is the recent Home Service series "Enquiry into Humanism". Fr Corbishley tuned in with some trepidation. But not for long. "Half the time, in fact, one might have been listening to a number of Christians expounding their views on the moral life." It was all most encouraging and augurs well for the future. Nothing like Aristophanes on the Greek gods. "The great benefit which Christians ought to derive from listening to these conversations should be twofold. They should be encouraged to find in Humanism not a bogey to be dreaded but an ally to be accepted. Perhaps more important, they should be inspired to live more fully that good life to which, by their principles, they are committed. Any misgivings that the programme would prove somehow subversive ought to have been completely allayed."

All Roads Lead to Rome

The Archbishop of Canterbury is to visit Pope Paul on March 23. And why not? Since 1960 there has been a permanent Anglican representative in Rome. The Bishop of Ripon attended the Vatican Council, the Apostolic Delegate has worshipped in Westminster Abbey and a Jesuit preached there, the Secretariat for Christian Unity and an English Catholic ecumenical commission flourish, and Canterbury has a commission on Roman Catholic relations. It will all make everything much easier when Britain enters the Catholic-dominated Common Market. It won't take long to put the holy water stoups back in front of Westminster Abbey. They may still be there.

Information about Spain

It is often suggested that the Vatican is now so liberal that it should be recognised as an International Civil Rights Commission. What evidence is there for this optimistic appraisal? The presence of liberal Catholics is no new phenomenon. In 1905 Chapman Cohen wrote: "Outside the churches there are only too many who are ready to recognise every expression of liberal opinion as signs of an approach towards the freethought position

... Liberal thinking is not uncommon today" (*Free-thinker*, January 1). The liberalism of that day advanced so rapidly that since that time we have seen the outlawing of Modernism, the silencing of Teilhard de Chardin, the Dogma of the Bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, Concordats with Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, Catholic Action atrocities in Yugoslavia and Catholic-inspired dictatorships in a score of countries. Today, to be sure, we have the Schema on Religious Liberty. Is it a landmark in Vatican and world history, or is it simply, in response to international public opinion, a statement that coercion should not be brought in matters of religious belief? What passed without comment at the time was the fact that 200 or so of the Fathers would not accept even that modest contribution to libertarian thought. They still presumably believe in pious force, whether able to exert it or not.

Many of them no doubt come from Spain. Lest it be thought that the Spanish Hierarchy is systematically traduced by international Freethought, the following passage may be interesting. It comes from the *Spanish Evangelical Messenger* (December, 1965), organ of the Spanish Evangelical Mission, Netherlands.

HOW THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IS BEING INFORMED ABOUT SPAIN

We are quoting and annotating an article from *Catholic Standard*, Washington, July 8, 1965.

Quoted from the Catholic Standard

It seems that freedom of liberty is increasing in Spain.

In Catholic Spain, where the Reformation has practically never penetrated, and where Catholic is synonymous with patriot, the idea of freedom of religion begins to grow.

Stimulated and inspired by the Vatican Council, the Spanish Government is about to grant complete freedom of religion to Protestants.

Several churches are getting the legal permit.

Marriage difficulties are disappearing.

The import of many books is granted.

Several Protestant schools have been opened without the necessary permit.

Our annotations

The Reformation in Spain has been exterminated in blood and fire of the stakes by the Spanish Inquisition.

According to the Spanish bishops no more than about 15% of the Spanish people are practising the Catholic religion.

Under the pressure of the clergy the Spanish Government is about to promulgate a law whereby all evangelisation work is rigorously prohibited.

Some indeed, but by no means all. Moreover, the permission to open a church is granted only on the explicit condition that all church members renounce evangelisation work.

Marriages of ex-priests, legally contracted in a foreign country, are not recognised in Spain.

The import of Bibles is forbidden.

In resolution 1065 the Cabinet Minister of Education has prescribed that the priests have to investigate possibly heretical schools, and have to inform the authorities; the principals of heretical schools are forewarned that they are infringing Article 26 of the Treaty between the Spanish Government and the Pope of August 27, 1953. The Cabinet Minister repeats that the establishing of non-Catholic schools for elementary education is rigorously prohibited.

Freedom of religion is promoted by the Spanish Government.

The Spanish Catholic Action is of the opinion that veritable unity cannot be attained by compulsion, nor by coercive measures.

We need a revival among Catholics; therefore we have to have at heart the interests of Catholic Christians where they are a minority.

If the Church should not act in this way, we might be accused of insincerity and of taking ambiguous points of view, depending on which standpoint might be most profitable.

Freedom of religion is no Catholic dogma; it is a human right.

The Government is ready to grant mitigation, but the clergy insist on strong measures against growing Protestantism.

Too well we remember the raiding of church services by cudgelo-clubs of Catholic activists; as a consequence of the repercussions in foreign countries, such extravagances are now forbidden by the Government.

We need a revival among Christians, and we should have at heart the interests of true Christians in Spain where they are suppressed.

This article is a good specimen of such taking ambiguous points of view.

Sure; most elementary human rights are not recognised by the Catholic Church.

AGNOSTICISM — A ROADBLOCK

Gonzalo Quiogue (Manila)

WHEN an atheist is explaining to his audience why a supernatural and personal God does not exist, an agnostic pops up and says: "It is possible some sort of god exists in the unknown."

The agnostic has to be told that the unknown is as infinite as the universe; therefore he has to suspend forever his judgment on the God question; a fact that works like a roadblock for atheistic Humanists who are always striving for a better living for all of us here and now.

Another agnostic says: "If a supernatural and personal God does not exist, a natural God exists. Some people deify a dominant phase of the universe like evolution or a creative force in matter."

This second agnostic has to be told that everywhere and at all times there are characters who must have some sort of god to earn a living. Some people in India deify the human sexual organs, reasoning that these are literally the creators of human beings. Praying to the image (phallus) of the male organ is called phallic worship. Sun worshippers reason that without the heat and light of the sun there can be no life on Earth. Our planet will look like a huge snowball floating in space. They are correct. But no sane, sober and civilised person nowadays cares to pray to the sun; it is not a sentient, personal entity. Any natural "god" exists; but only near-nuts and oddballs give it serious attention.

When an atheist is explaining to his audience the scientific versions of the origins of life and the origin of the solar system, an agnostic stands up and says: "Nobody knows yet the origin of life and the origin of the solar system. An atheist should not be dogmatic and arrogant in explaining his atheism!"

This third agnostic, in effect, is an obscurant or an anti-intellectual. He probably wants everybody to become an agnostic like himself. We have to admit, however, that it is part of human nature to want others to follow one's own way of thinking. The trouble with this agnostic is not knowing too much, but knowing too little. And knowing too little, he looks askance at atheistic Humanists as making arrogant displays of scientific knowledge. He is rejecting the Story of Creation in the Bible, and yet he is also rejecting the scientific versions of the origin of life and the origin of the solar system. He is either a throw-

back to the dark ages or a super-super scientist who can know the infinity of space-time. He is possibly the one who is arrogant.

In what ways can the agnostic help Humanists in their efforts to lead us to better living? In no way at all. Because the very fact that the agnostic's judgment on the God question is suspended forever, his awkward and irrational attitude freezes him in inaction between those in the dark and those in the light.

WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN

Continued from page 27

Quite obviously this kind of thing is nothing more than a survival of primitive animism — which we now find faintly amusing — where fearful, ignorant savages left gifts to placate the spirits.

But then God had a wonderful idea. Having been quite content ruling over his created people by remote control and receiving graciously their little presents of burnt sheep and goats — and this for some 4,000 years — he suddenly decided that this state of affairs could continue no longer. His way was clear: he must have holy intercourse, allow the resulting offspring to live on earth for a while, and then have him killed in a particularly agonising way. This expedient, presumably, would make it possible for him to forgive the sins of all the other people he had created, but who weren't so special as this one.

And as the whole business was very similar to what had gone on in the old days — as a man had been substituted for a sheep — this man should be called the Lamb of God. Many Christians today consider the Old Testament largely mythical. What then happens to the New as a consummation of the Old?

(To be concluded next week)

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LETTERS

Paris Commune

HAVING GREAT RESPECT for THE FREETHINKER, which I first read as a boy some 45 years ago, I cannot refrain from penning some comments on the article by Mr C. Bradlaugh Bonner — "The Paris Commune of 1871".

First, I must say that the article showed much more sympathy with the Commune than Charles Bradlaugh did himself.

His fear of Socialism clouded his view of the tremendous events in Paris during the months of March, April and May of 1871.

This failure was a great pity. A man of his prodigious debating powers and physical courage could have helped the cause of the Commune immensely, in this country and abroad.

Bradlaugh ought to have been convinced, from its militant Republicanism and its secular complexion, that the Commune deserved his active support.

The article of C. Bradlaugh Bonner does not even mention the decree of the Commune on secular education. Worse, the article repeats the libel that the communards burned Paris.

It is true that buildings were fired by combatants, but only where it was a military necessity. The Versailles troops had, however, long before they entered Paris, bombarded from the fort of Mont Valérien the populated quarters of the city.

The statement that the *communeux* shot all their prisoners is not true. There is evidence that in the early days prisoners were placed on parole — their word of honour was deemed sufficient for this.

The shooting of the hostages was carried out after vain entreaties by the Commune for an exchange of prisoners, which would have saved the lives of *communeux* and anti-*communeux* alike, and after the Versailles had systematically executed their prisoners.

It was not the ferocity of the defenders of the Commune but rather their belief in the better side of their enemies showing itself that is apparent to any student of those epic days. During the last period of the fighting appeals were made to the Versailles soldiers as "frères". But all in vain.

Due credit to Charles Bradlaugh that he lectured and gave the proceeds to the refugees of the Commune in London. If only he could have had earlier the inspiration which I understand he later obtained from Mrs E. Llyn Linton's *The True History of Jonathan Davidson*. After reading this, it is said he was convinced of the justice of the Commune's cause.

For Freethinkers it is fitting to consider two quotations. The first is by E. Belfort Bax (friend and collaborator of William Morris): "The martyrs of the Commune who died, as one of them expressed it, pour la solidarité humaine, appealed to me as far nobler than any martyrs of the Christian creed have had to show. The Communist believed that his end at the hands of the Versailles soldiery meant the extinction of his personality, but a step, perhaps, towards the realisation of his ideal, and in this he faced death. The Christian martyr, on the other hand, we may presume was sincerely convinced according to the tenets of his faith that his death at the hands of the executioner opened for his personality the gates of a paradise of never-ending bliss."

The second is by another champion of the Commune, as each year Paris commemorates the event in May at Père Lachaise, bearing testimony to his prediction. Karl Marx wrote, on the fall of the Commune, "Its exterminators history has already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them."

There is much in common between the broad Freethought movement and Paris of the spring of 1871.

S. G. HUTCHINS

Prayer

IN the days when I believed in God, my prayers (which, during a period of unemployment, lasted for two hours and a quarter each day) were invariably followed by a quaint succession of the most weird, fantastic, phantasmagorical and extravagant illusions, *chimerae*, whims and fancies.

I would be apparently "guided" to do a thing and then, when I tried to do it, the material circumstances attendant upon the

success of my efforts would vanish into thin air. To coin a phrase of Marx's, "the whole superincumbent structure would be sprung into the air".

For instance, I was "guided" to take up missionary work, but after any amount of trouble and expense, I "came out the same door as in I went".

The Lord of Hosts, who ordered the slaughter of Amalekite babies — it is to be remembered that the Jews carried their god about with them in a box — never helped me in the matter of a career. (My heart went out to that bus conductor who wrote to you recently, because I am in unskilled work as well.)

The stoic Epictetus would, doubtless, have said that I was too concerned with externals, which are "independent of choice".

However that may be, I cannot but agree with the great philosopher Schopenhauer that "there are two things which make it impossible to believe that this world is the successful work of an all-wise, all-good, and, at the same time, all-powerful Being; firstly, the misery which abounds in it everywhere; and secondly, the obvious imperfection of its highest product, man, who is a burlesque of what he should be". (This was in spite of the fact that Schopenhauer was steeped in the Upanishads.)

However, though God does not, in my humble and perhaps worthless opinion, answer prayer (seeing that he does not exist), I have found that Jesus Christ most emphatically *does* answer prayer.

When I had a complete mental breakdown in 1960 He brought me back to health and strength, and helped me a lot.

I think that, in claiming to be the Son of God, He meant that He is the Son of Good.

JOHN SUTHERLAND

Penal Systems

YOUR MEMORANDUM on penal reform is particularly interesting to me, as I work part-time in that field. Needless to say, I agree with all your main points, but I felt I had to write in disagreement with your statement that little knowledge exists of the effect of our present penal system and little research is under way to increase this knowledge. A tremendous amount of research has been and is being done in this subject, and — to me, anyway — it seems that the world is full of criminologists, most of whom know very well how harmful our present penal system is to the criminal, to his dependants, and to society at large. The trouble is that this knowledge never seems to filter through to the judiciary — which is composed of amateurs and professional lawyers, instead of criminologists. It may be, too, that there is an inevitable block and personality defect in anyone who sets up to be a judge.

(Miss) BARBARA SMOKER

Celebration of Solstice

MILLIONS of people lost their faith in the Bible when science showed that man had not been specially created, but was a product of the evolution of animals. Not so the Church. After attacking Darwin by every means (fortunately his private life was impeccable!) the Church discovered how clever of God it was to arrange such a process; but anyhow, God created life from inanimate matter. Science has now shown, however, that matter is not inanimate; that the attraction and repulsion between atoms shows a sensitivity that is the essence of life; the rest is mere evolution. Does this worry the Church? Not a bit of it. All that is necessary, whether it conflicts with the Bible story or not, is to extend God's cleverness a little further in giving the veriest atom the precious gift of life.

A correspondent to *The Times* asks what would become of Christmas without Christ. It would be, he said, merely part of the dullest month of the year. How wrong he is. For thousands of years before Christ men rejoiced when the sun turned north again in December. They invented innumerable stories to dramatise the event. Christianity was one of these stories, and it has succeeded in obscuring the real significance of the December festival. The turn of the northern hemisphere towards the sun in December is a fact from which I derive more pleasure than I do from the objectionable story of an angry god who appeased his anger by killing his son.

HENRY MEULEN

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