

# The FREETHINKER

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## FIRST THOMAS PAINE MEMORIAL LECTURE

### —EXTREMELY HIGH STANDARD

"Citizen Chairman and Citizens!" That was how a lecture opened on 23 May at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. The audience sat up, and remained enthralled during the whole of Dr. E. P. Thompson's masterly talk on "The Paineite Underground in England, 1796-1801". The democratic spirit of Dr. Thompson's keynote opening made the event of deep significance in today's world. The lasting quality of Thomas Paine's philosophy, based as it was on principle, helps to ensure this.

#### Lecture to be Biennial

The lecture came about through the generosity of two freethinkers, Jesse and Elizabeth Collins, who have endowed a lectureship at the University of East Anglia, which is situated not far from Thetford, where Paine was born and brought up. Under the endowment scheme a public lecture will be given every other year at the University, the subject and speaker being chosen by a small panel with representatives of the University and the Thomas Paine Society.

It is very satisfying to report that this, the first memorial lecture, has set an extremely high standard that delighted the audience, including the special guests, Mr. and Mrs. Collins. Dr. Thompson, using the method of quoting extensively from first-hand source material, as he did in his invaluable book, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), contrasted the radicalism of Paine's ideas in the mid-1790's with that of such a "safe" character as William Godwin (the Godwinians suffered nothing during the repressions of the period).

#### Paineites, Freethinkers and Republicans

The authorities of the time could not let Paine's ideas be debated—they had to drive them underground. Though Dr. Thompson pointed out that Norwich was one of the few places where suppression and intimidation by the "Church and King" crowd did not hold full sway.

The speaker gave copious fresh material on Paineite ideas and the routes they took in the political underground, adding that he had greatly understated this radical influence in his *Making of the English Working Class*. Paine's *Agrarian Justice* (1797), he continued, was only known to a few, while his *Age of Reason* (1794) provided the King's followers with ammunition to divide the reformers. The characteristic citizen—and the hard core of the London Corresponding Society, though, were freethinkers as well as Paineites.

#### Thomas Paine's Legacy

"The line," he said, "runs directly to Carlile, Watson and Bradlaugh," and the language of the wall-chalkings of the period showed that much trade unionism grew up from Paine's *Rights of Man*.

"Our society," ended Edward Thompson, "is not a product of his ideas." Paine would be shocked at the continuing existence of the monarchy, the House of Lords, the lack of equality, and at the system of hierarchy in modern Britain.

This brief, and selective, summary cannot convey the excitement of Dr. Thompson's lecture. But the University was wise enough to record it so that it may be borrowed from the library by students. In my youth I suffered turgid lessons that drove any feeling I may have had for history deep into the ground. My adult interest in Paine brought it out again. Historians like Edward Thompson show how to make their subject lively and important.

Thomas Paine, the East Anglian internationalist, who for too long has been kept below the surface by conformist historians, has been well served by this lecture and by those who made it possible.

CHRISTOPHER BRUNEL\*

\* Christopher Brunel is the Chairman (and a founder) of The Thomas Paine Society (*Ed.*).

#### RIGHTS OF WOMAN—IN ITALY

Recent statistics show that since the repeal last year of an old law, enacted during the Mussolini régime, which banned birth control, the sale of contraceptives in Italy has risen by some 80 per cent, and is continuing to increase. However, let no-one be complacent, for the recent electoral gains by the neo-fascist M.S.I. party, whose platform included repeal of Italy's new divorce law, mean that even these hard-won rights will need staunch defence in the months to come by those who truly honour the ideals of Garibaldi.



# PHARAOH OVER BLOOMSBURY

F. A. RIDLEY

On 29 March 1972, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth journeyed to the British Museum in Bloomsbury, and officially opened the unique Tutankhamun Exhibition now on show there. The following day, the Exhibition was thrown open to the general public. Pharaoh over Bloomsbury! Surely, "The Century of the Common Man" may be said to have arrived at last when people from every station and walk of life are admitted indiscriminately to gaze upon the divine features of the dead Pharaoh (18th Dynasty), the god-king of Egypt, who reigned over "Upper and Lower Egypt" about 3,000 years ago near the horizons of recorded history (circa 1360-1350 B.C.). One can already add that the "Common Man" appears to appreciate the honour, since vast crowds are queuing up all day waiting with the patience of Job, before being admitted to the divine presence. An amazing spectacle! I was talking the other day to one of the B.M. Library staff, who said that he had never seen anything like it during his long service at the Museum. Nor have I throughout the near half century that I have frequented the Library of the British Museum.

## Kings and Deities

To a student of comparative religion the Egyptian Pharaohs must always represent a subject of special interest, since they were not only themselves gods *ex officio*, but they were perhaps the first gods, and perhaps the first recorded type of super-human divinity. If one accepts, as I myself am inclined to, the sociological critique set out in Michael Bakunin's revolutionary classic *God and the State* and consequently hold that, as matter preceded spirit, so the state preceded the church, and the king preceded the god; it may well be that the Pharaohs, immemorial ancient kings of Egypt, as rulers of perhaps the oldest recorded empire, also represented the first gods. When, therefore, the visitors who are flocking to Bloomsbury to see the exhibition gaze upon the mummified features of this Pharaoh, they are actually gazing upon the features of a god; and of a god far older than the Hebrew Jehovah or the Norse Odin, and compared with the antiquity of whom, our modern gods represent mere novices in the cosmopolitan pantheon.

In fact this particular Pharaoh was not actually a very important god. He only reigned a short time, died young, and never apparently did anything of note except to die and get buried in a tomb that was accidentally discovered many centuries later. Downstairs in the Egyptian Gallery, one can observe the human effigies of much more important Pharaohs than of Tutankhamun: for example, his predecessor Akhenaton (the "First Heretic"), or the great conqueror Rameses II, or "The Serpent of the Nile"—Cleopatra, who was actually the last Pharaoh to reign in ancient Egypt. Tutankhamun's fame is entirely posthumous: like another later deity he has risen from the dead, not now after three days, but after thirty-three centuries. His life beyond the grave is, at least free from the furore that he is causing at present, much more notable than was his obscure earthly existence. Then, a Pharaoh quitted Egypt; now, a god arrives in Bloomsbury!

## A Galaxy of Gods

However, our Pharaoh is not, by a long way, the first notable arrival at the British Museum. He is not even the first god! Since Gandhi, now duly worshipped as a *bona*

*fide* Hindu deity in India, once worked in the Reading Room of the British Museum. So too, did President Kenyatta of Kenya, recently host to the Queen, but once allegedly worshipped as "the God of the Mau-Mau"! It so happens that I have met Kenyatta, and even drunk beer with him. Can any Christian say the same of his deity? Lenin also worked in the Reading Room, under the pseudonym of Jacob Richter; and the mummified corpse of Lenin reputedly draws even larger crowds at the Lenin Mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square than does Tutankhamun at present in London.

The *ka* (ghost) of our Egyptian Pharaoh may even encounter deities of, shall we say, a more conventional character within the precincts of the British Museum, since we recall that a century or so back, a then famous Russian theologian, Vladimir Soloviev (now revered as a pioneer of ecumenical Christianity), while engaged in research in the Reading Room, actually saw the Trinity in person, all three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the B.M.! He was so overcome that he promptly hurried off to Egypt, perhaps to remind the still immured Tutankhamun of the biblical text, "Out of Egypt have I called my son," a text that another former reader in the British Museum, Gerald Massey, regarded as the key with which to unlock the secret of Christian origins. But, reverting to Soloviev's vision, since this took place some time in the 1870s when Karl Marx was still resident in the Reading Room, it surely represents an awe-inspiring thought that, when the Holy Trinity appeared in person in the Reading Room of the British Museum, Christ and "Anti-Christ" were actually in the same room!

## Three Thousand Years After

Meanwhile, Tutankhamun goes marching on, successively to Cairo, Paris, and London. In London, whatever may be the truth about the "Common Man", that anonymous hero is now flocking in his thousands to gaze reverently upon the divine relics of the only god he is ever likely to see. It is also much to be hoped that the allged "Curse of Tutankhamun" does not turn out to be true, otherwise this Egyptian plague will far surpass all its Biblical predecessors, and produce a mortality in the Metropolis to rival that of the devastating plague of 1665. But, whatever the consequences, upon his return to Egypt our Pharaoh will be able to reassure his ghostly predecessors that the hallowed institution of kingship, of which they were the effective founders, is still held in deep reverence amongst our Western democracies. It is not, after all, every day that a god visits Bloomsbury! Nowadays, Her Majesty may perhaps reflect that in say, another three thousand years, history may have come full circle: the mortal remains of a (by then) long extinct English monarch may be drawing equally large Egyptian crowds at "The English Exhibition" at the Cairo Museum in 5,000 A.D.

## ROADS TO FREEDOM

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# WALT WHITMAN'S DEMOCRACY

ERIC GLASGOW

One of the literary landmarks of the 1870s was the publication of Walt Whitman's collection of essays entitled *Democratic Vistas* (1871). It is a book which is often neglected, even by those who read Whitman, since it is generally overshadowed by his better known works such as *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and *Specimen Days* (1882). Nevertheless, *Democratic Vistas* emerges as a book whose importance, relating both to Walt Whitman himself and the nature of the American political dream, far transcends its diminutive size.

"The poet of democracy"<sup>1</sup> is one brief and composite assessment of Whitman. But it was surely a version of democracy which was peculiarly American, drawn from the bloody struggles of the American Civil War (1861-1865), created by the soul-searching which inevitably accompanied that conflict, and rooted in the conditions of the American experience and opportunity. Perhaps, indeed, that is why it becomes so peculiarly interesting for British readers, whose notions of democracy—unless they are wildly fanciful and unrealistic—must be much more limited. Britons need to keep in mind the profound differences between the British and the American ways of life and their respective political possibilities. I have never thought that there is anything to be gained by trying to discount the differences between Great Britain and the U.S.A. Nevertheless, there is also much gain in any perceptive appreciation of the theory, as well as the practice, of the American experience of democracy; and at least one individualistic aspect of that theory comes clearly across in Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*.

## The American Political Experiment

It is perhaps best to see in *Democratic Vistas* Walt Whitman's fears for the purity and the safety of the American political experiment, which had been rooted in the American war of independence (1775-1783), the American Constitution of 1787, and the early tensions between the rival versions of democracy, from that of Thomas Jefferson to the "frontier" approach of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln. In the land of Patrick Henry, Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun it was easy, and probably also inevitable, for political thinkers, tired of consuming urbanity and sophistication, to appeal for some return to the grass roots of the American dream of democracy. One finds that in Henry Thoreau (1817-1862), especially in his *Walden*, and (although more deviously) in the novels of Mark Twain; also in the literary works of Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving, both of whom were strong supporters of Andrew Jackson's brusque and determined "frontier" ways.

In that respect Walt Whitman readily falls in with the whole pattern of the American version of democracy. It was, of course, a very spacious and expansive democracy, constantly opening out into the vast territories of the American West, from Oregon to California and Texas. But, especially in *Democratic Vistas* it did indicate the need to discover and to re-activate the lost notions of democracy, and to set aside the concealing feudalism of the past, if the U.S.A. were not to become a most dreadful and devastating political failure. Walt Whitman believed the United States must recover its old ideals of democracy

and individualism, which he did not consider to be incompatible: it must also discard the incipient corruptions of aristocracy, privilege and power, and "the growth of cankerous wealth during the post-Civil War period."<sup>2</sup> If such aims were achieved Whitman could see, even in 1871 when the war was barely out of sight, a great future for his country.

Despite the huge gulf of possibility and practice between the United States and Great Britain a century ago, it is not difficult to accept the value of Walt Whitman's pronouncements, and their urgent relevance for his country at one of the turning points in its history. His own literary renaissance came in the thick of the Civil War—during the publication of the various editions of *Leaves of Grass* between 1855 and 1876—and its very point and impetus was derived directly from the experiences of that tragic conflict. *Democratic Vistas* came as a direct literary product of the dislocation and the turmoil of the unsuccessful rebellion of the South; and it must be judged accordingly.

## Uncouth but Effective

It must also be judged as a literary as well as a political document. Although it represents the rather ragged and uncouth factor in American political thinking, induced by her over-riding sense of space, vitality and youth, it is also a very memorable and effective piece of literature, and an eloquent plea for the cultural independence of the United States in the development of "a truly national indigenous literature."<sup>3</sup> Hence *Democratic Vistas* is still a noteworthy sample of American experiment and hope in literature, just as it is of the American political dream. Its value remains as an indication of the American view of democracy—based upon the ideas and prospects of the expanding "frontier"—and of the American explosion in literature which later produced such classics as *Democracy* (1880), by Henry Adams, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), and Henry James's earliest novels—such as *The American* (1877). Even Henry James did not completely disown his debt to the less tutored and more spontaneous genius of Walt Whitman, whose *Democratic Vistas* recalls another and less involved stage in the long history of Anglo-American relations.

## NOTES.

<sup>1</sup> NEVINS, Allan, & COMMAGER, H. S. 1942. *America: the Story of a Free People*: p. 429.

<sup>2</sup> HART, J. D. [ed.] 1941. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*: p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> HART, *loc. cit.*

## WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

The *Freethinker* is obtainable at the following addresses.

**London:** Collets, 66 Charing Cross Road, WC2; Housmans, 5 Caledonian Road, King's Cross, N1; Freedom Press, 84b Whitechapel High Street (Angel Alley), E1; Rationalist Press Association, 88 Islington High Street, N1; Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1; Freethinker Bookshop, 103 Borough High Street, SE1. **Glasgow:** Clyde Books, 292 High Street. **Manchester:** Grass Roots Bookshop, 271 Upper Brook Street, 13. **Brighton:** Unicorn Bookshop, 50 Gloucester Road, (near Brighton Station).

National Secular Society. Details of membership and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High St., London, SE1. Telephone 01-407 2717. Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the NSS.

Freethought books and pamphlets (new). Send for list to G. W. Foote & Co. Ltd., 103 Borough High Street, London, SE1.

Humanist Postal Book Service (secondhand books bought and sold). For information or catalogue send 5p stamp to Kit Mout, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

Humanist Holidays. Details of future activities from Marjorie Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey. Telephone: 01-642 8796.

## EVENTS

Ashurstwood Abbey Secular Humanism Centre (founded by Jean Straker), between East Grinstead and Forest Row, Sussex. Telephone: Forest Row 2589. Meeting every Sunday, 3 p.m.

National Secular Society, Brighton Belle Hotel, Brighton. Sunday, 11 June, 10.15 a.m.: Annual General Meeting (members only; admission by 1972 membership card). 1 p.m.: luncheon with Brighton and Hove Humanist Group—speakers: George Vale, G. N. Deodhekar and Barbara Smoker—cost 75p (book through N.S.S. Head Office, 103 Borough High Street, London SE1 1NL).

Socialist Medical Association, Central Hall, Westminster. Saturday, 10 June, 2.30 p.m.: Mrs. Renée Short, "Private Practice—Who Wins?"

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 11 June, 11 a.m.: Dr. Stanislav Velinsky, "From Humanist Beliefs to a Humanist Philosophy"; 3 p.m.: Dr. Tom Cavalier-Smith, Dr. Peter Draper and Peter Cadogan, "People First."

Welwyn Garden City Humanist Group, Backhouse Room, Hand-side Lane, Welwyn. Saturday, 10 June, 8 p.m.: informal discussion meeting.

# NEWS

## DIVORCED VICAR

Despite episcopal disapproval, attempted sabotage and nasty anonymous notes from embittered old Grundies, the Rev. Philip English (rector of Dorridge, Warwickshire) was remarried on 29 May to Mrs. Jill Jennings.

We disagree with one delightful wellwisher who prophesied "heartache and chaos" for the new couple; and instead we wish Mr. and Mrs. English a long and very happy life together.

## HERNIA STRANGULATED

Our sympathies to John Mulcahy, editor of the Irish fortnightly, *Hibernia*, who had to go to press recently without the paper's usual back-page satire corner, "Hernia."

According to Peter Dunn of the *Sunday Times*'s "Private Ear" column, "Hernia" was on this occasion to be devoted to the fictitious retirement of Pope Paul "written in 'George Best: I Quit' style." Alas, the devout members of the Irish Graphical Society were not amused and refused to set the article! By the sound of things, when Jack Lynch's Dáil Committee get round to drafting this new, with-it, secular Irish constitution we have been hearing rumours about, they will have to get it printed in England or Belfast!

## FIFTY YEARS AGO

"It should never be forgotten, we ought never to let it be forgotten, that Bottomley's most colossal fraud was perpetrated under the shelter of religion and patriotism. The first, in a civilised society, nearly always covers credulity or roguery, or both. The latter is so often a shield for knavery or self-seeking that it requires the most careful scrutiny if it is to be the medium of good . . . Putting patriotism on one side, it may be noted that just as Bottomley used religion as a means of achieving his ends, and just as those who knew better remained silent and used him to gain their ends, so we have today innumerable frauds carried on in this country in the name of and under the cloak of religion against which no effective protest is ever made, and concerning which no warning is ever given to the public."

—Chapman Cohen (on the downfall of Horatio Bottomley) in *The Freethinker*, 11 June 1922.

## "LEFT WING" HYMN BOOK

According to David Fletcher of the *Daily Telegraph*: Mr. Kenneth Johnson, a governor of Kidbrooke School, Blackheath, has cast doubts upon the suitability of the school hymn book, *New Life*, as he claimed that it contained "Left-wing propaganda." Mr. Johnson further alleged that the religious provisions of the 1944 Education Act were being used to introduce "politically slanted documents" into the school syllabus.

We offer no opinion as to whether *New Life* is, or is not, left-wing in outlook, but the case is yet another demonstration of the absurdity of this section of the present Education Act. As long as we have compulsory R.I. lessons, in which Christianity is taught in an accepting, non-critical fashion, the use of "slanted documents" (and even more slanted teaching) is unavoidable. Whether one



# AND NOTES

regards the slant as "political" or "religious" rather depends upon one's personal opinions on these subjects; certainly in many cases religious and political attitudes are very closed linked, and the Bible has been used (in varying interpretations) as a political textbook by some of its devotees for generations!

## ...OR NOT TO CIRCUMCISE

The learned members of the Australian Pediatric Association are, it appears, scalpels drawn at each other over a row which has blown up over whether or not boy babies should be circumcised. Last year, so the *Melbourne Truth* informs us, the A.P.A. passed a resolution recommending "that new-born male infants should *not*, as a routine, be circumcised." Among the letters of complaint sent to the *Australian Medical Journal* came the following:

... I am convinced that when God made his covenant with Abraham and ordered this peculiar and embarrassing mark of identification of His chosen people He regarded it as a health law as well as a ceremonial act.

I am equally convinced that the unnatural edict of the A.P.A. is Satanic in origin. The only part of the male body which has ever been ordered by our Creator to be removed is the male foreskin.

—So, if any of our readers "Down Under" happen to come across a column of little demons brandishing placards and toasting forks on the streets of Melbourne, not to worry! It is just the Friends of the Foreskin demonstrating for their cause!

## A TEMPTING OFFER ?

The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge is currently advertising for an editor "to develop one section of their mainly religious lists." Essential qualifications for the post are, apparently, "editorial experience, enthusiasm, and creative ability." The reward may be great in heaven, but on earth a "competitive salary and pension scheme" are also offered. Thus far we have successfully resisted the temptation to renege.

## TEN YEAR CHURCH SENTENCE

Almost anything can happen in the United States these days, and usually does. A recent report by Henry Miller in the *Daily Telegraph* (27 May) has described how, after her boyfriend had "beaten her almost to death" Eartha Lee Griffith (of Orlando, Florida) shot him and subsequently pleaded guilty to murder. The judge gave her a choice between ten years' imprisonment or being released on probation provided she goes to church every Sunday for the next decade. Judge Edwards, who conceded that he himself was not a regular church-goer, thought that his association with people who go to church would be "beneficial" to Miss Griffith.

If such a sentence had been passed by a Greek or Spanish court it would hardly be remarkable (except, perhaps for relative leniency in those cases), but that a sentence of this type can be passed in an allegedly secular state is almost as scandalous as it is hypocritical.

## QUICK CHANGE

A Dominican chapel, in Lille, France, and built only in 1963, is being converted (in more ways than one) into a Moslem mosque.

## DEATH WISH

We were highly amused to read in the *Catholic Herald* of 26 May a letter from one of those "positive," "religious" humanists, desperately dissociating himself from the sort of dreadful, old-fashioned, "negative" rationalism served up by (apparently) *New Humanist* and (certainly) *The Freethinker*. The letter referred, by way of authority, to "the late Sir Julian Huxley."

What Sir Julian must think of this (he is very much alive) we do not know, but suspect that "O Lord, deliver me from my friends!" would not be too wide of the mark.

## NINETY YEARS AGO

By the death of Garibaldi, not Italy alone, but the liberty-loving people of every clime under the sun, have lost one of the bravest and most valiant champions that have ever lived . . . In freeing Italy from her vile despotism, he struck a blow at the enemy everywhere, and wherever there was a people oppressed, in Garibaldi was to be found a chivalrous crusader of liberty . . . He was a personification of reawakened Europe, "loving the Republic but hating the priesthood."

Many of our readers will regret to hear that Mr. James Thomson ("B.V.") died on Saturday evening, June 3rd, through the rupture of a blood vessel . . . He was trained for a schoolmaster in the army, and it was while occupying that post that he became acquainted with Mr. Bradlaugh . . . Many of his later poems . . . were originally published in the *National Reformer*, the *Secularist*, and the *Liberal* . . . He may, indeed, be called the poet of Pessimism, to which, in "The City of Dreadful Night" he gave the finest and firmest expression . . . His remains have been interred in the same grave with those of Austin Holyoake, at Highgate Cemetery.

—From *The Freethinker*, 11 June 1882.

## THE LATE DUKE OF WINDSOR

The death of the Duke of Windsor brought many tributes and comments from even some of the most dedicated left-wingers and republicans, perhaps because he preferred human emotions and feelings to court protocol; and the woman he loved to the dogmas of the Church of England.

We reprint below a comment on the abdication of King Edward VIII written by Bayard Simmons, the first "suffragent." It appeared in a little anthology of Simmons's poetry, *Fanfare for Freethought* (1938).

## TO DR. LANG, ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

Your Christian Church, ever the bitter foe

Of all the beauty and the joy of life,  
Now comes between King Edward and his wife,  
And drives him forth, the Church's power to show.  
Your Church, which brings this much-loved monarch low,  
Was born in ignorance and lives by strife;  
Where charity should dwell rancour is rife;  
To Love and Life your Creed still answers, No!

Yet not for ever shall this infamy

Darken the aspirations of mankind,  
And turn the milk of human kindness sour;  
The poet and the prophet both foresee  
The downfall of the Church's leaders blind,  
When Life and Love return to rule and power.

BAYARD SIMMONS (1936).



## BOOKS

**QUESTION 5.** Edited by Hector Hawton. Pemberton Publishing Co. Ltd., £1.25 (25p paperback).

*Question* is an annual of intellectual standing which, in fact, questions many of the common assumptions of humanists and others. It helps to prevent the language we use from degenerating into a tissue of meaningless clichés. Thus Paul Kurtz sets himself the task of defining humanism itself, and manages to reduce that blanket phrase to something like intelligibility. Liberalism and rationalism also need, and get, the dissector's knife, while Professor Hutten examines current attitudes to science and rationality in contemporary anti-establishment counter-culture movements.

Freethinkers will also find much to interest them in J. S. L. Gilmour's "Some Freethinkers and their Writings," while Colin Cambell inquires whether belief in God makes much difference to the way people behave, after all. Some may think that the actual belief is usually a very superficial thing anyway, but that religious attitudes, learnt in childhood, are much deeper, less conscious and tend to continue in adulthood when the belief in God has been outgrown. This, in my view, is the real danger of religion, but it would no doubt be much more difficult to investigate in a sociological way.

While one appreciates the contributions that these writers have made, it is to my mind a drawback that practically all of them are members of university staffs. This gives, here and there, a slight whiff of the cloister. Academic subjects, academically pursued, are of limited interest. The nature of God is one of these, with the discussion of the differences between reductionist and traditional theism. Is this not putting rational methods to the service of an irrational idea, and is it worth it?

However the bulk of the writing here is astute and stimulating, and concerned with real problems of thought and behaviour.

MERLE TOLFREE

**THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF JESUS** by Haim Cohn. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, £3.50.

This book, written by a Justice of the Supreme Court of Israel, is an interesting supplement to the important work on the same topic by two recently deceased scholars, Paul Winter and S. G. F. Brandon. All three give cogent evidence that, before the composition of the gospels, Christian tradition blamed Pilate for Jesus' death, and that the evangelists, who blame the Jews instead, avoid the earlier tradition only at the cost of introducing implausibilities and worse into their narratives (e.g. the betrayal by Judas, the incongruities of the Sanhedrin trial, the Barabbas incident, and the fantastic behaviour of Pilate). Whether one accepts the earlier tradition as historically true (as Cohn does), or regards it (as I do) as a stage that was itself preceded by yet other traditions about Jesus which did not link him with Pilate's Palestine, one will find that Cohn presents a well-thought-out and well documented case.

Cohn is passionately anxious to show that the Jews are not guilty of deicide, and that the centuries of Christian

## FREETHINKER

persecution of them on this ground is sheer prejudice. Such motivation need not impair the value of a scholar's work. The driving force may well make his brain work all the harder to penetrate the truth. But with Cohn the impelling force degenerates into mere bias when he represents the Jews as trying to *save* Jesus from Pilate. Let us recall what the gospels say. Matthew and Mark allege that Jesus was both tried and sentenced by the Sanhedrin; Luke that he was tried but not sentenced by that body; John that he did not appear before it at all. Cohn agrees with the many scholars who reject the historicity of the Sanhedrin trial, but he does not accept John's version that the court did not meet at all. He posits a meeting—not because there is any real evidence for it, but because it constitutes a concession to the view which makes the Jews responsible for Jesus' death. He is thus "assuming the burden of an 'admission against interest:'" the meeting "is an assumption against us" (pp. 95-96). Having certificated the meeting as historical on the ground that it is not in his "interest" that it should be historical, he proceeds to argue that it could have had only one purpose, namely "to prevent the crucifixion of a Jew by the Romans, . . . of a Jew who was loved as a worker of miracles, healer of the sick, consoler and redeemer of the poor and persecuted, castigat<sup>r</sup> of corruption, and . . . sworn enemy of the rich" (p. 76). To believe this is take for granted the truth of a very great deal of the gospel accounts which Cohn elsewhere finds so unreliable.

What the Sanhedrin attempted was, in Cohn's view, to persuade Jesus not to plead guilty when brought before Pilate. But when he insisted that he was the Christ, it was obvious that the Romans were bound to condemn him for setting himself up as a king; whereupon the High Priest rent his clothes—in grief at the failure of his rescue bid, according to Cohn, even though Mark and Matthew (the only gospels which record the incident at all) attribute the rending to indignation at the blasphemy of Jesus' claim. Cohn shows that, from the Jewish standpoint, the claim was not blasphemous at all, and that "the easiest way to unravel the riddle, as with most problems arising out of the Gospel reports, is to dismiss the whole incident of the rending of the High Priest's garments as unhistorical" (p. 133). But this he declines to do, and throughout he implies that to deny the basic historicity of the gospel story is too cheap a method, is a mere "simple expedient" which betrays "reluctance to grapple with the difficulties presented by the gospel inconsistencies" (pp. xxi-xxii). Here again is evidence of an attitude that is scarcely scientific. The scientist holds that the true explanation is the simplest one which will account for all the relevant facts. Whether in any instance it will turn out to be simple or complicated depends on the instance under investigation, and one cannot, in advance of inquiry, prescribe a certain level of complexity. Furthermore, although it is a simple matter to say that the gospels are all untrue, it is in fact far from simple to explain how, in that case, they came to be composed. Theorists who explain Christianity without positing a historical Jesus are normally accused of introducing unnecessary complexities, not of over-simplification. Cohn stresses that, in order to transfer the responsibility for Jesus' death from Pilate to the Jews, the evangelists wrote accounts "that are so unrealistic and so unhistorical as to verge on the ridiculous" (p. 189). Yet we are to regard



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the earlier tradition (that Pilate was to blame)—a tradition which survives only in the evangelists' grotesque adaptation of it—as a perfectly reliable historical record.

Cohn concedes (with an honesty and fairness that is a striking feature of his whole book) that "the most compelling argument" against his theory is that it finds no support in the Jewish sources. "A meeting of the Sanhedrin at the Passover for the purpose of rescuing a young Jewish messianic aspirant and popular preacher from trial and crucifixion by the Romans, would—or so it might be assumed—have in all probability been reported" (p. 297). Yet "no talmudic record" survives, nor is there anything to the point in Josephus (pp. 308, 316). Tacitus wrote so late that his account may well be no more than an uncritical repetition of the Christian view that Christ was crucified under Pilate. "The sum total of non-Christian sources on the trial and crucifixion of Jesus is thus nil" (p. 318).

Cohn therefore tries to extract the truth from the Christian documents, and some of the critical principles he uses in handling these are open to objection. He assumes, without inquiry, that the epistle ascribed in the New Testament canon to one James was written by "James the eldest brother of Jesus, . . . an eyewitness of what happened after Jesus' trial" (p. 253). I should like to know what in the epistle justifies this view, which is rejected by the majority of Christian commentators. He also holds that, if all four evangelists agree on a particular matter, "one might presume that they had a satisfactory and conclusive source" (p. xix). In truth, the fact that in many points they agree loses its value as corroborative evidence when it is recognised that parallel passages in the first three gospels are often verbally identical, and must therefore have been copied either from one another or from a common source. Again, Cohn says: "A tradition reported in an earlier Gospel which the later evangelists, or any of them, saw fit to dismiss by contradiction or exclusion as untrue or unreliable may well be viewed with suspicion." Theologians and rationalists alike have often worked on the very opposite principle—that an unedifying statement in an early gospel which a later evangelist has tried to tone down or suppress, has a strong claim to authenticity. Cohn not infrequently bases his own reconstruction of events on a conviction that a certain episode rings true or could not have been invented. For instance, whereas in the first three gospels Jesus is arrested by a Jewish mob, John assigns the task to a Roman cohort, commanded by a tribune. Cohn is convinced that John would "never have invented" such a tradition (p. 78). But it has long been clear to scholars that John introduces all manner of details for the purpose of stressing Jesus' divine power, and his story of the Roman arrest gives him the splendid opportunity to allege that a whole cohort of armed soldiers fell to the ground at the majesty of the appearance of the unarmed Jesus.

The merits of this book lie in the painstaking and lucid analysis and comparison of the gospel narratives, and in the author's ability (because of his specialised knowledge of law) to set them against Jewish and Roman legal practice of the day. It is an informative work which embodies years of patient study.

G. A. WELLS

# LETTERS

## British Justice: Not So Divine

The recent comments by Claud Watson and Henry Meulen on capital punishment (*Freethinker* letters, 27 May) describing British justice as "humane" and "divine" are surely sweeping statements. A Mr. Bill Fletcher, who spent about thirty years in prison, gave a television interview in which he stated that one of his convictions was eight years' penal servitude for stealing 9d [4p]. The judge who dished this out described him as "a menace to society." Mr. Fletcher has recently published a book of this title.

Incidentally, the law in France gives a jury the right to disagree with a sentence and to dispute it if they think it too severe.

Further, heavy borstal sentences have been given by "humane" and "divine" guardians of the law for the most trivial offences. One ex-borstal boy wrote a book called *Who's Been Stealing My Porridge?* He got five years for his first offence—stealing two Eccles cakes.

How can Messrs. Watson and Meulen overlook the many cases of gross miscarriage of justice, police intimidation, fabrication of evidence, and so on, all of which can be read in lengthy press reports of recent vintage? I sincerely hope that these correspondents do not have the bad luck to fall into the hands of these dispensers of humane, divine justice: they are likely to emerge from such an ordeal sadder and wiser men, believe me.

J. H. MORTEN.

The following comments refer, point by point, to Henry Meulen's letter of 27 May.

(1) The implied analogy between wrongful conviction while using the death penalty and "the considerable risk" of somebody being killed while using motor transport would seem desperately far-fetched, to say the least. The difference between deliberately and accidentally killing someone is, surely, quite sufficient to rule the analogy out of court. (Incidentally, "divine" justice would seem generally less than humane in the judgment of "sinners").

(2) That "almost every condemned man appealed against the (death) sentence" does not *prove* that the death penalty is a deterrent. Evidently, the condemned men had not been deterred from doing that for which they were condemned.

(3) If, in former days, when there was hanging for minor offences, and the "great majority of offenders escaped punishment," they evidently were not deterred by the punishment which they escaped.

(4) The belief that execution is better than "a prolonged torture" of being kept in prison, implies that the former has *less* claim as a deterrent—although the latter is more costly in terms of cash.

(5) When referring to a man who returns to prison again and again for the same serious offence, Mr. Meulen is presumably not to be taken literally when writing "I would hang him"—even though the man to be hanged was obviously mentally *healthy*.

CHARLES BYASS.

## Nationalism, Marxism and War

Charles Doran (letters, 27 May) says: "As I pointed out in my first letter, Colonel Repington admitted . . . that Asquith's government plotted the First World War . . . as the only means of standing up to Germany as a trade rival." The Colonel does not admit this. In my letter of 28 April I gave quotations from the Colonel's book *The First World War 1914-18* (the book mentioned in Mr. Doran's first letter) showing that the Colonel was concerned with the national power of Germany in general and her military power in particular. But Mr. Doran turns a blind eye to these quotations.

In my letter in the 15 April issue I questioned whether Repington's book was called "The First World War" since it was written long before the Second. Now I've seen the book and it really is called *The First World War*. You would have thought Mr. Doran would have mentioned that in his letters of 29 April and 27 May, but he did not. Query—has Mr. Doran ever really seen the book?

Mr. Sloan's "scientific" remarks about armament manufacturers (*Freethinker* letters, 27 May) are out of date like most of Marxism. George Thayer in his book *The War Business* shows that today it is national governments that cause most of the trouble as regards arms selling. He says, "The two decades between World Wars I and II . . . saw the impetus for arms trading shift from the private manufacturers to national governments."

The main cause of war is national sovereignty. The remedy is world government.

I. S. Low.



**Christianity and Marxism**

Nor that the rhetorical gibberish of Philip Hinchliff has momentarily stopped oozing, perhaps we can haul out of the glutinous mass a few of the more solidified lumps for examination and enlightenment. In writing "Marxism and Christianity," it would appear, he considers that by making comparisons between the two he has produced some amazing kind of revelation, as though he were explaining the similarities of the male and female anatomy.

It is truly amazing how many persons writing about dialectical materialism do so, not from a position of knowledge, but from one of ignorance. We find in so many of the Establishment's books of reference, articles written on atheism, materialism and other secular activities by non-secularists, and the unwary tend to absorb this contamination and consider themselves mentally liberated. It is highly significant that the basic building blocks of Mr. Hinchliff's concepts consist of such theologically loaded words as belief, faith, and even his "reason" seems to carry the burden.

However, to be more precise: religion does *not* "very often subscribe to dualism"; any person with a working knowledge of philosophy understands, that it *is* dualism. Further, such statements as "it is impossible to *prove* [my italics] that the tortuous workings of Marxist dialectic can ever bring about the communist revolution . . ." are absurd. In the first place, proof (of anything) can never be ascertained between any two minds intending to reject, hence our necessity for a third party. Secondly, proof requires the elimination of all possible alternatives, to remove doubt. And thirdly, which is more relevant here, it is axiomatic that the termination of an unfinished process lies in the future.

A profound maxim in current circulation declares: "If you don't know—*learn*. If you do—*teach*." Mr. Hinchliff has yet to prove his capacity for the former. TREVOR MORGAN.

**Religion in Britain Today**

The editor of *The Freethinker*, in commenting on Mr. Brown's letter (27 May), should not be so pessimistic. A survey conducted for the I.T.A. by Opinion Research Centre and published by the I.T.A. in 1970 (*Religion in Britain and Northern Ireland*) showed that 22 per cent of Britons denied membership of any church. The report commented on the increase since 1964 when a survey conducted by Gallup Poll for A.B.C. Television produced a figure of 6 per cent.

Perhaps even more interesting is the response to a question on the existence of God. In the I.T.A. survey 19 per cent of the population were atheist or agnostic in belief whilst a further 30 per cent were unsure of their belief. The survey gives much other useful information on attitudes to belief and to religious broadcasting. The report commented that the real audience for present religious television is composed in Britain predominantly of the more pious and elderly female viewers. The report is available from I.T.A. at 37½p. KENNETH FURNESS,

*General Secretary, British Humanist Association.*

You ask for information as to membership of religious bodies. As there are no precise methods of calculating this I suggest Public Opinion polls are as good as anything. In December 1947 and February 1957 the Gallup Poll examined the prevalence of belief in Britain in life after death. In the first poll, more than 25 per cent categorically answered "No," but in 1957 the "noes" had declined to 17 per cent. If we take these figures as the absolute minimum of non-believers, then, although the number was declining, it is hard to believe that "nearly 100 per cent" by 1965 were saying that they belonged to a religious denomination—unless of course they simply said "C. of E." as a matter of convenience.

Moreover, in Bryan Wilson's *Religion in Secular Society*, about which I wrote in the *Humanist* in February 1967, he referred to weekly churchgoing in Britain as having fallen from 40 per cent to 14 per cent of the population between the mid-nineteenth century and today. He gave the following interesting comparative figures for Britain and the U.S.A.:

	Percentage of Population	
	G.B.	U.S.A.
Church membership	21.6%	57%
Weekly churchgoing	14%	43%
Able to name the four gospels	61%	35%

I think Alan Brown may rest assured that the B.B.C. Survey must have been based on some very loaded questions.

PAT SLOAN.

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