

# The Freethinker

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## Charles Bradlaugh

(1833-1891)

On Wednesday, November 8th, 1961, a London County Council plaque to Charles Bradlaugh, "Advocate of Freethought", is to be unveiled by Mr. Anthony Wedgwood Benn at 29 Turner Street, Stepney, London, E.1, the house in which Bradlaugh at one time lived. We reprint below J. M. Wheeler's "In Memoriam" tribute to the founder of the National Secular Society which appeared in THE FREETHINKER, February 8th, 1891.

A GREAT soldier of progress has fallen. To Freethinkers, some of whom have followed step by step his career for almost forty years, the sad news awakens emotion such as could be aroused by no other man. Few have been assailed by fiercer hate, or evoked more fervent devotion. On veterans who have fought by his side from the days when the stripling "Iconoclast" first became the terror of the Churches, the close of so glorious a career will come like the eclipse of light that filled their world with splendour. That he has fallen in an hour of victory, whose fruits he cannot reap, makes it more grievous. So firmly had he won his way against hosts of enemies, that, with his clear, cool head, anything seemed possible. We hoped to have seen him at the helm of affairs, removing the iniquity of State endowments of religion and directing the commonwealth. With his powerful frame, iron nerves, soldierly training, firm grip of life, and buoyant spirits, that could take a giant's task as 'twere a plaything, but a few years ago, we, knowing the extent of his ambition, yet felt he could achieve it. And now he is fallen, and our hopes frustrated.

We hold the late hours and worry of Parliamentary work, with consequent want of exercise, even more responsible than the strain of the fierce fightings through life. That was his element. Battle and work would not have killed him; bad hours and worry have. We have one consolation. Mr. Bradlaugh was not the man to wish to live disabled from serving the cause he loved. And who among his friends could bear to see so proud a ship a helpless wreck? Were he with us he would say, "Mourn not, but go on with my work". This we must do, though but in petty fashion, compared to him.

Mr. Bradlaugh was a man of a million. His career proves it. Self-taught, rising from the very foot to the top of the ladder, using all material, baffling all opposition, living down all calumny, turning enemies into admirers, the world was forced to see the Atheist was a remarkable man, though unsuspecting that just because of his strong

head and stout heart he was an Atheist. And now the lion is dead, how the asses bray!

Mr. Bradlaugh had the great qualities of a leader—eloquence, insight, dauntless energy, indomitable courage and force of character. In stormy meetings his commanding form and voice stood out in grandeur. A few words of his clear, deep thunder thrilled his auditors, impressing the unruliest that here was one greater than his words. Behind the orator was the man. He could raise or quell feelings as a skilful musician passes from grave to gay, from lively to severe. But he was best when intensest, displaying the depth of his own convictions, rousing enthusiasm, exposing sophistry, stirring superstition from its stupor, denouncing bigotry, corruption and oppression. As a debater he carried heavier guns than any man of his time, and his fire, majesty and force were equalled by his skill in detecting the weak points of an opponent's armour. No fallacy could deceive, no quibble baffle him. His head showed the powerful reasoner. With lucidity of argument he combined glowing vehemence of language which carried all before it.



Though so brilliant in oratory, Mr. Bradlaugh was as industrious and accurate as if these were the qualities on which he relied. "Thorough" was his motto. He had a passion for truth. Whatever he took up he made himself master of. He united the barrister's skill of presenting his case with the solicitor's pains in preparing it. Had the legal profession been open, he would soon have been at the top. As it was, he was the best lawyer in England, and many a poor man has profited by his ever-ready advice.

He had ambition, which if "the last infirmity of noble minds" is yet more truly as Milton says,

The spur that the clear spirit doth raise,  
To scorn delight and live laborious days.

But he had still more that sense of honour which makes ambition virtue. He could not be bought. His love for liberty and passion for progress never faltered, but re-

mained the guiding principle of his life. Though a statesman, knowing he must displease those he served, he was ever of the people and for the people, and from first to last he clung to the cause he knew to be right. To Emerson's essay on Self-Reliance, which he copied when too poor to buy the book, he ascribed the incentive of his career. Probably he needed this not. His nature was self-reliant. Like some proud oak he stood alone. He had the high spirit and generosity of a great nature. Imperious and unbending in the path of war, where he had found every man's hand against him, in private life he was most amiable. His power sprang from deep feeling, and the loss of his devoted eldest daughter and the defec-

tion of his dearest comrade fell upon his noble heart as his own death-knell.

This is not the place to estimate his work as a politician, a political economist, and far-seeing statesman. Nor has the time come to adequately summarise his services to our own cause. When the history of Freethought in England is written his will be a conspicuous place among its many heroes. Sufficient now to say he was our most brilliant leader, and to his courage we owe more than to any other man. With gratitude and admiration we lay our humble tribute at the grave of this brave soldier of the war of the liberation of humanity.

## Foote on Bradlaugh

The following tribute to Charles Bradlaugh was delivered at a Memorial Meeting held at the Hall of Science, London, on February 2nd, 1891. G. W. Foote was in the Chair, and other speakers included G. J. Holyoake, George Standring and Robert Forder.

IT FALLS TO MY LOT, as President of the National Secular Society, to close the speaking. This hammer passed from Mr. Bradlaugh's hands to mine. I hope to keep it for some time, and to hand it on to the next-elected president as stainless as I received it from him. I called Mr. Bradlaugh our old general. He is dead at the age of fifty-seven. It is young, as political life goes; his life was not a long one, measured by the ordinary standard. But we must remember he began his public life early. He was working for principles at an age when most young men are only weaving dreams. If we measure life by heartbeats, by thoughts, by wise words and bold deeds, he lived the life of many men.

What a life it was! What a great character! He seemed a compendium of many men and of many varieties of human power. When but a lad he became a Freethought orator. In his very youngest days, while he spoke as a Freethinker, he was also an ardent social reformer. He was a temperance lecturer even in the army, and when they sought to stop his tongue he knew how to use it and keep within the law. I remember him saying to me, "You know, Foote, I always cared for the condition of the people". I venture to say they never had a better friend.

He never sought plaudits by cheap claptrap. His mind was of that earnest cast, that he hated mere feather-brained talk. His tongue he used as a weapon for definite ends. As a social reformer he did a grand work in calling public attention to that great question of population, which thinking men are beginning to see lies behind all others, and may nullify all other reforms unless it is wisely dealt with.

He was a politician, as well as a Freethinker. His legal knowledge and his time were ever at the service of the people. The younger school of politicians have used harsh words of him which might easily be rebuked by the elder ones, who know what he had done in the past. He was not only a politician, he was a statesman. The fact that he commanded the respect even of bitter opponents proved his quality. It is so easy for prejudice to rise rampant against one who differs in opinion, but personal contact proves that human brotherhood is grander than all creeds and sectional differences.

He showed his sagacity and large heart in his care for the millions of India. That dominion comes to us as an historic legacy. Mr. Bradlaugh wished the Hindus to be governed justly, wisely, and with a view of their being educated up to the point when they may take their des-

tinies in their own hands. In this he showed a wise and statesmanlike foresight. At the Congress to which he went in India he showed that hatred of mere feather-brained talk of which I have spoken. I am not surprised that his death struck heavily at the heart of the best Hindu.

He was not only a statesman. He was a fighter. While wrongs have to be righted and freedom is trampled on, the fighter is necessary. Like the hero of Browning's poem, he could say, "I was ever a fighter", and like him he met his death as but "one fight more". He faced it with fortitude, with consideration for all about him, and died peacefully. Some day, when the time has ripened, we may see some grotesque story of his having returned to the creed of his youth. With such a man a change of the deliberate judgment of his maturity was impossible.

He was a Freethinker. After his resignation he said to me in his room: "My convictions are not light. When I lay there (pointing to his bed) and all was black, the thing that troubled me least was the conviction of my life. The Freethought party is a party I love". And he showed it by working, by fighting and sacrificing for us.

We now hear a remarkable chorus of appreciation. But we cannot forget the obloquy he suffered before he commanded the respect of his enemies. We remember how he was thrust from the precincts of the House of Commons like a taproom brawler. Those of us who saw that pale, resolute, coat-torn figure standing before the open door from which he was ejected, will never forget the scene to the last day of our lives. The House of Commons challenged him. He accepted the challenge with no light heart, but with a firm one. He fought year by year, and he won. He took his seat, he carried a Bill which prevented the possibility of such another scandal, and he induced the House to expunge from its books the unconstitutional resolution which excluded him. It seemed a poetically arranged drama that he should win the last fragment of victory in this great struggle, and then pay the debt of nature. Yet, by a sad, strange, irony, the news could not be told him. He died without knowing it. But we know it, and the world knows it. His motto of "Thorough" describes his victory in this tremendous conflict of one man, with right on his side, against the hosts of wrong.

The general public caught only glimpses of Mr. Bradlaugh's greatness. Too late it began to recognise the solid strength of his character. But the Freethought party knew him intimately and always appreciated his worth. It watched with hope his early efforts, it was associated with his later struggles, it stood by him unswervingly in the darkest hours of adversity, and it rejoiced at his triumph, which, though long-delayed, was brilliant and complete.

(Concluded on page 356)

# A Rational Approach to Mysticism

By J. P. MURACCIOLE

ALTHOUGH SOME WILL SAY that faith can be reconciled with reason, we know that ultimately it relies upon so-called personal experience of the Divinity. We will try in the present article to analyse this experience and suggest a possible explanation of the phenomenon of mysticism.

The Catholic definition of mysticism is: a religious tendency and desire of the human soul towards an intimate union with the Divinity (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York, 1914). Personally I would be inclined to consider the beatific state or "*unio mystica*" as a state of hypnosis, and the mystical personality as resulting from such experiences. The state of hypnosis could be defined as a special psychological state, resembling sleep only superficially and marked by a functioning of the individual, at a level of awareness other than the ordinary conscious state. In other words there are various states of consciousness, which can be achieved through various means—alcohol, drugs, psycho-physiological exercises, asceticism.

For many great writers and artists, inspiration is a special state of consciousness, or better, of reduced consciousness, which allows the tape-recorder of the subconscious to play back what it has accumulated and assimilated for a period of time.

This state, or perhaps a similar one, can be induced by the taking of drugs like mescaline (see Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*) or hashish. The latter was used by the Persian Sufis (Muslim Mystics), not only as a means of achieving some mystical experience but for some more practical purposes (see M. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins*).

The repetition of a refrain is a well-known technique for inducing self-hypnosis. Tennyson, we are told, used to repeat his own name in order to enter into mystical trances, and a similar result was achieved by the early Sufis by repeating the formula: Bhaga Govindam, Govindam, Govindam, Mudhamate.

This technique is also found among the Greek Orthodox mystics (the Hesychasts); it is the "Prayer of Jesus", and is normally accompanied by psycho-physiological exercises, a control of the respiration, so as to "facilitate the entry of the Spirit in the heart" (Nicephorus Gregoras). The same practices are advocated in "Raj" Yoga (see Ram Chandra, *Efficacy of Raj Yoga*).

The Braid method of hypnotism consists in fixing an object (preferably luminous) in order to create an optical strain and help make the eyelids heavy and induce hypnotic sleep. Such exercise is advised to the Hesychasts (that they should concentrate their attention on their navel), and it is very probably the method used, unconsciously, by St. John of the Cross, who was known to spend many hours of meditation in front of a crucifix. Finally we know that poor alimentation, fatigue and lack of sleep are very likely to modify the normal state of consciousness.

The extreme cold, the long nights, the intense solitude, the lack of vitamins would have influenced the nervous constitution of the Arctic population and provoked either mental illness or the Shamanist trance. (A. Ohlmarks, *Studien Zum Problem des Schamanismus*).

We have stated earlier that in the state of hypnosis, the level of awareness is different from the ordinary conscious state. We must add that this state is a state of dissolution, of confusion of the psychic functions. In other words the ability to think straight is reduced.

Most mystics regard their experience as the "blissful realisation of the unity of all things in oneself". In Zen Buddhism this unity (anata) is perceived in temporary enlightenments (Satori) and fully realised in the Nirvana (enlightenment). Aldous Huxley, under the influence of mescaline, realises that the Dharma-body is the hedge at the end of the garden (a Zen way of expressing the unity of all things).

Unity is the keynote of all mystics; through that union they claim to understand the meaning of their nonsensical propositions. When they have a Satori the Zen students realise what the Zen Master meant by "I walk on foot, and yet on the back of an ox I am riding" (Fudaishi).

St. Theresa in her mystical ecstasy suddenly understands the mystery of the Trinity: "a sublime knowledge is infused into the soul, imbuing it with a certainty of the truth that the Three are one substance . . ." (*Interior Castle*, VII, I. 9). (One might ask whether she would thus have understood the Trinity, if it had not been previously defined by the Ecumenical Councils.)

Nonsensical propositions are not only the privilege of Zen Buddhists. Meister Eckhart states in his 1st Defence that "Man was made in God's image and yet not in his image"; St. John of the Cross proclaims in his "Living Flame of Love":

He who shall overcome himself  
by the knowledge which knows nothing  
Will always rise, all science transcending.

A main difference between artificial modifiers of consciousness like alcohol or drugs, and psycho-physiological or ascetic practices, is that the former has only temporary effects, while the latter will leave the mystic in a certain state of obstruction which will not allow him to realise that he has only been through a prolonged nightmare, and he will remain convinced of the reality of his experience.

God visits the soul in a manner which prevents its doubting, when returning to itself, that He was within it . . .

(St. Theresa, *op. cit.* V.I.8.)

There is another side to mysticism that ought to be mentioned; what I would call the positive side. The Zen method is supposed to be applicable to certain arts or sports, like archery, fencing, flower arrangement, tea-making. In the same way Yoga is applied to physical exercises which have proved to be worthwhile practising, the Hatha-Yoga. It is my contention that such practices have nothing to do with the mystical experiences from which they are supposed to be derived. It is possible, though, that such practices might provide a congenial background for mystical states. (It is interesting to note the absence of any "positive" side among Christian mystics!)

Having, then, briefly analysed the characteristics of the hypnotic state and compared them with various forms of mysticism, it seems reasonable enough to suggest that the mystical experience is a patho-psychological illusion. However we must remember that similarity does not always mean identity.

## THE QUEEN'S SPEECH

THE QUEEN, it will be noted, put the right and proper seal on her speech at the opening of Parliament on October 31st. "My Lords and Members of the House of Commons," she said, "I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels."

## This Believing World

**Thank God for Lord Fisher of Lambeth**—he used to be our Archbishop of Canterbury—for he is doing the Lord's work in trying to bring about "Unity" in Christendom. He has just found out that Rome is no longer the "enemy" but an "ally" in this struggle for Unity, and how right he is! All Rome wants now is for the Church of England to acknowledge the Roman Church as the Head of all Christendom, to hand over all religious and secular power to the Vatican, and—hey presto, there will be Unity between the two Churches like a flash.

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**As Archbishop Heenan has repeatedly pointed out**, it is the Roman Church which has *all* the truth—direct from "our Lord" himself—so it simply cannot give in. To achieve Unity then, all that is needed is for Lord Fisher to advise his fellow Anglos to recognise Rome as the supreme Head of all Churches. If they agree the trick is done. What a marvellous little word is that "if".

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**Apart from the Virgin Mary**, the only other lady who insisted that she was about to give birth to a new Messiah was the famous Joanna Southcott (1750-1814) though—with regret we repeat it—what she thought was the new Messiah was really a form of dropsy from which she died. However, *The People* reported some while ago that a Mr. and Mrs. Steele were expecting "the greatest event the world has known for two thousand years"—the birth of "a Messiah". And this Messiah was to be the result of an "Immaculate Conception". What the happy couple meant was a "Virgin Birth", but even mothers of Messiahs can make mistakes.

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**In addition, Mrs. Steele looks upon herself** as the "spiritual bride" of George Bernard Shaw, whom she calls "Bernie", who is now writing a book using *her* hands, and who is the "guiding influence" in the coming Messiah. This Miracle Child is to be called Jasher, just as the other one in Isaiah was called Immanuel, though somehow or other the Prophecy went wrong, and he was called Jesus. Perhaps Jasher will follow suit. However, what's in a name? Christianity, whether in Unity or not, seems fated to breed this kind of pious Hope and Expectation.

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**Communism, declared the Bishop of Coventry recently**, is "a heresy of Christianity", which shows a distinct change of attitude on the part of Christians. Up to now, Communism was always equated with Atheism, and no Christian could possibly claim that Atheism was a heresy of Christianity. But what the Bishop wants is for Christians "to acquire the same passion, devotion, and willingness for sacrifice" that is found in Communists. Well, why not? There is nothing to stop them. But the real point at issue is would this self-sacrifice, etc., prove the truth of Christianity?

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**In any case, Mr. Khrushchev talking about** his 50-megaton bomb declared, "May God grant we shall never have to use it", according to reports of his speech. This does not look as if Mr. Khrushchev, though a Communist, is an Atheist. Perhaps after all, Communism is really a heresy of Christianity, just as, according to Rome, Protestantism is a heresy of true Christianity.

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**Pearson Phillips, in the "Daily Mail" (October 19th)**, dealing with an Italian priest, Padre Pio, says, "You either believe in miracles or you don't". He himself does not—that is, he does not believe in the miracles of Padre Pio; but

what about those of Christ Jesus? However, though the author of the book in which the miracles of Padre Pio are fully described, Maria Winowska, does her best to prove their authenticity, Mr. Phillips says "the effect of the book is to give exactly the opposite impression". In other words Miss Winowska "lamentably fails to convince us . . .".

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**Now this is exactly the impression many of us have** when reading the Gospel miracles. We feel that they are all examples of superstition and credulity, and can only be swallowed by people who cannot think. Is there an intelligent priest these days who can convince anybody brought up in our scientific age—the Space Age—that Jesus flew alive straight up to Heaven after he was put to death? Would Mr. Phillips be convinced if the story were told of Padre Pio?

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**The "Sunday Express" (October 22nd)**, tells us that Chief Mtwalo, who has ruled the Ngoni tribe for 65 years, became a Christian in his youth, and that it was not the British who conquered them "but the Bible". We believe this to be literally true—at least for most of the time. When the missionaries first came, they had the Bible and the tribe had the land. The missionaries told the tribe to pray to Almighty God on their knees and shut their eyes. They did so, and when they got up and opened their eyes, it was the tribe which had the Bible and the missionaries the land. We hope it did not take Chief Mtwalo 65 years to find this out.

### FOOTE ON BRADLAUGH

(Concluded from page 354)

Yes, it was the Freethought party to which he really belonged. It is the Freethought party which is most profoundly affected by his death. What to others is a public loss is to us a personal bereavement.

How many of us have sought—and never in vain—his counsel in perplexity and his assistance in distress! How many of us not only admired but loved him! But now his noble personality is gone from us for ever. In the days to come, when the old war with error and evil is waged afresh, we shall miss him where the standards reel, and the smoke is thick, and the fight is hot and deadly. We shall miss that strong arm, that wise counsel, that inspiring voice, and that indomitable courage which flamed like a beacon of hope in the night of other men's despair.

Yet we shall shed no idle tears over his tomb. The war in which he led us has still to be carried on. Could we have stood around our old general as he fell beneath the sword of Death, the invincible lord of all, we should have seen his outstretched finger and heard his cry of "Onward!" As we charge the serried ranks of superstition, his name will spring to our lips. He will live in our hearts, animate our courage, and nerve our arms. Not in metaphor, but in verity, he will fight in our midst. The old general will be with his soldiers in the days of battle. Nor will he cease to inspire the army of freedom when our own hearts are chilled by the touch of death, and others take the weapons from our nerveless hands. For we shall hand on to our successors the tradition of his genius, his wisdom, his magnanimity, and his fortitude; and thus, though dead, he will share in the struggle for the freedom, the welfare, and the dignity of mankind.

After Mr. Foote's speech a Hindu rose and begged to say a few words as to the way in which his fellow countrymen felt the blow of Mr. Bradlaugh's death. They had no friend like him, and they were bowed with sorrow.

# THE FREETHINKER

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## Lecture Notices, Etc.

### OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (The Mound).—Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. CRONAN, McRAE and MURRAY.

London Branches—Kingston, Marble Arch, North London: (Marble Arch), Sundays, from 4 p.m. MESSRS. L. EBURY, J. W. BARKER, C. E. WOOD, D. H. TRIBE, J. P. MURACCIOLE.

(Tower Hill). Every Thursday, 12—2 p.m.: Messrs. J. W. BARKER and L. EBURY.

Manchester Branch N.S.S.. Thursday lunchtimes, THE FREETHINKER on sale, Piccadilly, near Queen Victoria Statue. (Platt Fields), Sundays, 3 p.m.: Messrs. G. H. MILLS AND G. A. WOODCOCK

Merseyside Branch N.S.S. (Pierhead).—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.: Sundays, 7.30 p.m.

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead)—Every Sunday, noon: Messrs. L. EBURY and A. ARTHUR.

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square, Nottingham).—Every Friday, 1 p.m., Every Sunday, 6.30 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

### INDOOR

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Tuesday, November 14th, 7.30 p.m.: NORMAN J. HART, "One World—or None?"

East Surrey Humanist Group (Ruskin House Wellesley Road, West Croydon), Sunday, November 12th, 7.30 p.m.: D. H. TRIBE, "Humanism and Today's Problems".

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate), Sunday, November 12th, 6.30 p.m. B. HAYLETT, "The Sense of Guilt".

Marble Arch Branch, N.S.S. (Carpenters' Arms, Seymour Place, London, W.1), Sunday, November 12th, 7.15 p.m.: L. EBURY, "There is no God".

North Staffordshire Humanist Group (Guildhall, High Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme), Friday, November 10th, 7.15 p.m.: A Meeting.

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Co-operative Education Centre, Broad Street), Sunday, November 12th, 2.30 p.m.: PROF. S. LILLEY, M.Sc., Ph.D., "Einstein Made Easy".

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1), Sunday, November 12th, 11 a.m.: PROF. ALEX HADDOW, F.R.S., "Medicine, Science and War".

## Notes and News

IN HIS *Guardian* "Miscellany" column on October 27th, Michael Frayn considered the Church of England's attitude to hanging as expressed on BBC television by the Archbishop of Canterbury. "There must have been a great temptation to indulge in opinionated emotionalism of one sort or another which would have alienated half his listeners for a start", said Mr. Frayn, but Dr. Ramsey resisted it. "Some of us", he said, "hold that the death penalty is just retribution . . . On the other hand, there are within our Church those who hold no less strongly that the existence of the death penalty leads not to a strengthening but a weakening of the infinite value of human life". Now that, commented Mr. Frayn, is "what I call a strong moral lead based on good public relations". And then, after satirically developing this theme, Mr. Frayn summed up: "That's the stuff, you see. That's

the language people understand these days—dignified and authoritative, but coming down firmly on both sides of the question".

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ON ALGERIAN NATIONAL DAY, November 1st, in Paris, M. Jean-Paul Sartre and Mme. Simone de Beauvoir led a procession from the Sorbonne to the Place Maubert "in protest against racial violence and in favour of peace" (*The Guardian*, 2/11/61). Scarcely had the procession dispersed when a plastic bomb exploded. It was evidently intended for M. Sartre, and it had been placed against the pedestal of the statue of the great 16-century Free-thought martyr, Etienne Dolet. Two passers-by were injured.

★

"IF THE Family Planning Association thinks it can turn the clergy into agents for distributing its literature, then as far as I am concerned it had better think again." This is taken from the parish magazine of Holy Innocents' Church, Kingsbury, Middlesex and quoted by the *News of the World* (15/10/61). It was written by the vicar, the Rev. Gordon Girling, who had heard that couples going to vicars to put up the banns had been presented with books on birth control.

★

DR. SOLOMON SCHONFELD, presiding rabbi of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues had the distinction of performing the first circumcision "ceremony" in a British prison on Sunday, October 29th, and he found the Governor "very co-operative" (*The Guardian*, 30/10/61). A hospital ward in Brixton Prison was cleared for 25 minutes so that the week-old son of Mr. Szulin Schtraks (who is on remand in connection with an extradition case) could be "ceremonially circumcised according to the Jewish law in the presence of his father and ten other men". The ceremony could not be put off, the rabbi explained, "because it must take place on the eighth day".

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"I AM NOT a heartless woman, but anyone can have my next baby as long as it gets a good life", a woman told the *Daily Express* (25/10/61). The child, her eighth, was duly given to a childless couple while: "Her husband, an unemployed labourer, sat near by, silent. He is a Roman Catholic, she a Protestant. While she was in hospital he sat for an hour at her bedside pleading with her not to give the child away".

★

THIS WEEK, Mr. Anthony Wedgwood Benn, himself prevented from taking his seat in the House of Commons, is to unveil the London County Council plaque to Charles Bradlaugh, the founder of the National Secular Society. Bradlaugh died on January 30th, 1891 and, in our first two articles, G. W. Foote and J. M. Wheeler, editor and assistant editor, respectively, of THE FREETHINKER, convey something of the deep sense of loss that Freethinkers felt at the time. But they convey, too, the devotion, and the recognition of greatness. Readers will, we think, welcome this chance to look back those seventy years.

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ANOTHER EDITOR of THE FREETHINKER, and President of the National Secular Society, the late Chapman Cohen, once recorded a talk on "The Meaning and Value of Freethought". For a long time the old 78 r.p.m. record has been unavailable, but the Pioneer Press is now re-issuing the talk on a one-sided 7-inch 33 r.p.m. disc at a price of 18s. 6d. including postage and packing. The record provides a unique memento of Chapman Cohen, and will make a suitable Christmas present. Please order early.

# What is Islam?

By Dr. PADRAIG KRINKILL

THE TERM *Islam* means—etymologically—“submissiveness”, the verb *salima* meaning “to be safe, secure”. In a recent number of *Al-Islam*, a Pakistani newspaper which claims to be “An independent exponent of orthodox Islam”, we had an article entitled, “What is Islam?”, and this is what Khurshid Ahmad, a lecturer in the Urdu College at Karachi, had to say:

Islam is a religion without any mythology. Its teachings are simple and intelligible. It is free from superstitions and irrational beliefs. Unity of God, Prophethood of Muhammad, and the concept of life after death are the basic articles of its faith. They are based on reason and sound logic. All the teachings of Islam follow from these basic beliefs, and are simple and straightforward. There is no hierarchy of priests, no far-fetched abstractions, no complicated rites and rituals. Everybody is to directly approach the Book of God [i.e. the *Qur'an*] and translate its dictates into practice.

As a general statement there may be little to object to in that. Yet it is so indeterminate as to be on “all fours”—a delightful anagram in the physical sense—with Bernard Shaw’s nonsensical effusion that the “Islam of Muhammad would be acceptable to the Europe of tomorrow”! As Chapman Cohen so wisely observed, “Things can never be what they were”. Let us look for a moment at the theses of Khurshid Ahmad. He denies that there is any mythology in Islam. Unfortunately that term—even since “the glory that was Greece”—has ever meant a fable, generally of folk origin, registering man’s earliest attempts to explain some phenomenon, by appeal to the unseen. All sorts of mythical persons walked the slopes of Parnassus, and among musicians Orpheus, who tamed beasts with his lyre, as well as Timotheus, Terpander, and others who have been handed down in the tales of music and magic may have actually lived, but their theurgic accomplishments are sheer myths. The myth is as dominant in Islam as in any other religion, despite Khurshid Ahmad’s belief to the contrary. For example, does he accept: 1, the story of the thousand angelic horsemen led by the angel Gabriel at the battle of Badr? 2, the three thousand angels sent down from heaven to reinforce the Islamic host at Uhud? 3, the story of the angels who so crowded the room which housed the corpse of Sa’d ibn Mu’adh that the Prophet had no place to rest his torso? Then we have the tales of “Solomon and the Genii”, the “Adventures of Dhu’l-Qarnain”, and the folk-tale of “The Seven Sleepers”, all vouched for by Muhammad as “the truth and nothing but the truth”. If they are not to be classified as “auld wives’ tales”—to use a Scottish phrase—where are we to place them?

If the *Qur'an* is so “simple and straightforward”, how are we to account for the *Sunna* and *Shi’a* division in Islam, to say nothing of the various minor sects? It is true that there is no “hierarchy of priests” in Islam, but the *ulama* or learned classes actually held and still hold positions identical with hierarchy, whether as instruments of government or as private individuals. As for the non-existence of “far-fetched abstractions”, one has only to read—and digest if possible—the *Ihya' ulum al-din* of Al-Ghazali, the *Asrar al-tanzil* of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi or the *Nihayat al-iqdam* of Shahrastani to find out that when you subtract what is abstract from the whole your remainder is nothing! Despite the assurance of our lector, “rites and rituals” are extremely “complicated”. Even the genuflexions—*ruk'at*—at prayers differ in the four great sects—Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali—without going any further, and many a “heretic” is thus spotted immediately. So we see that Islam is little better

off than Christianity in its “vicissitude of sects”.

Khurshid Ahmad is right when he says that “Religion is something to be lived, and not an object of mere lip-praise and lip-service”. The *Qur'an* contains many noble and enduring sentiments: “Say to them: By whose order have you denied yourselves those amenities which God hath created for his people and those good things to eat which he hath made for you”. A Karl Marx before his time! But Muhammad, like Jesus, had reservations when he said: “The Muslim who lives in the midst of society and bears with patience the afflictions that come to him is better than the one who shuns society and cannot bear any wrong done to him”. That quadrates with “Woe unto ye rich” and “Blessed be ye poor” as uttered by Jesus. Sometimes Muhammad registered a laudable thought, but degraded it by a condition. The acquisition of knowledge was ever on his lips, but to qualify the reason for its attainment, showed the cloven hoof. He wrote: “Acquire knowledge, because he who acquires it in the way of the Lord performs an act of piety”. Again: “He who leaves his home in search of knowledge walks in the part of God”. At first glance, the sentence beginning: “God does not accept belief if it is not expressed in deed”, is a worthy utterance—if we read no further. Yet once more he spoils it by adding: “and does not accept deed if it does not conform to belief”.

In the *coda* of that article “What is Islam?”, Khurshid Ahmad quotes an English author so as to clinch his argument that it is the spiritual life, rather than the material, that matters. I quote *in extenso*:

We have to build a nobly proportioned outer structure, but we have neglected the essential requirement of an inner order: we have carefully designed, decorated and made clean the outside of the cup, but the inside was full of extortion and excess: we used our increasing knowledge and power to minister to the comforts of the body, but we left the spirit impoverished.

We are in the fullest agreement with that statement: more so because it was made by Lord Snell, formerly Harry Snell of the Secularist and Ethical movements who was, when I knew him, an Atheist!

## THE ROMAN CHURCH IN MALTA

IN A LETTER to *The Times* (10/10/61), Dom Mintoff, leader of the Malta Labour Party replied to a contention by the Jesuit Father J. Bernard that the Church-Labour Party dispute in Malta was a purely religious affair. Mr. Mintoff gave examples of direct political activity by the Archbishop of Malta, Sir Michael Gonzi, and summed up the present position as follows: “(1) Many priests refuse absolution to Labour supporters; (2) members of the National Executive are interdicted; (3) it is a mortal sin to read, sell, distribute Labour Party papers; (4) priests urge ‘good’ Catholics to break up Labour’s public meetings whilst Church bells are rung incessantly to drown the voices of Labour speakers; (5) Father Bernard and his ‘disinfecting’ team assiduously turn up with icons and consecrated statues in the same locality where Labour had held public meetings in order to hurl ‘religious’ diatribes against the Malta Labour Party”. Mr. Mintoff’s “mortal sin”, of course, is to want a secular Malta.

NEXT WEEK

THE UNITED FRONT AGAINST ATHEISM

By F. A. RIDLEY

# The Russian "League of the Godless"

By "AKIBA"

IT IS TOO EASILY FORGOTTEN that the USSR was once the home of the League of the Godless. Many years have passed since the inauguration of the first Five Year Plan (1928-1933), and the ideological materialist offensive against religion in its forms and guises. A small book, entitled *Religion in the USSR*, written by the then famous Emelyan Yaroslavsky, with an introduction by a British Communist, T. A. Jackson, gives a valuable picture of the type of anti-religious propaganda that was disseminated during those hard and bitter years.

Yaroslavsky was the leader of the League of the Godless, who regarded themselves as militant, proletarian atheists, and had no time for the "bourgeois" freethinkers and anti-clericals who "appeared sporadically through the whole life-history of capitalist society" (p. III, Introduction). And T. A. Jackson put the difference between the two schools of freethinkers even more sharply. "Proletarian Freethinking, as cultivated by the League of the Godless, is", he said "essentially part and parcel of the militant workers' class struggle, basically political and revolutionary from the start. The bourgeois 'freethinkers' in fact, fought for the completion of the work begun at the first great uprising of the bourgeois, the Protestant Reformation" (p. IV). Further in the Introduction, he writes: "*The revolutionary proletariat is not concerned with a merely paper war of the old style 'freethought' kind against religion-in-the-abstract; it is concerned with religion as a concrete social fact and force—with the Churches as part of the apparatus of the bourgeois State; with the priests as members of the ruling class and active political agents of the bourgeois order; with the Churches as centres of counter-revolutionary propaganda, as active foci of division in the ranks of the proletariat, with the church congregations as potential organisations for scab-herding and Fascist reaction*" (p. VI. Italics in original).

Strong, bold words! Looking back on this forced-march period of the USSR, it is easy to scoff at the gigantic efforts that were made by the Soviet government to "expropriate" religion in the land of Marxism. The efforts had almost a grotesque quality about them, but it would be unfair and hyper-critical to dismiss the words of the League of the Godless as simply worthless in concept and ham-fisted in execution.

Religion cannot be eliminated by decree, by ukase, or by a stroke of the pen. But the action of the Soviet Government on January 23rd, 1918, in issuing a decree disestablishing the Church from the State was a historic step in the right direction. Yaroslavsky quotes the Decrees of the Soviet government in the book, and the first four paragraphs make interesting reading:

Decree of the Soviet of Peoples' Commissars on the Separation of the Church from the State, dated January 23rd, 1918:

- (1) The Church is hereby separated from the State.
- (2) It is unlawful to pass any local law or issue any decree whatsoever within the territory of the Republics which will restrict or limit the liberty of conscience or grant any advantage or privilege whatsoever to any citizen on the basis of his religious profession.
- (3) Every citizen may profess any religion he desires or profess no religion; all laws disfranchising a citizen by reason of his profession or non-profession of faith are hereby repealed.
- (4) No proceedings of any State or other official public body shall be accompanied by any religious rites or ceremonies whatsoever (pp. 19-20).

A clean sweep with a powerful broom was thus made

with the centuries-old religious and ecclesiastical Establishment that had fastened itself on to the long-suffering Russian people. The Decrees did not ban religious propaganda, or persecute the Church, as was constantly alleged by critics of the Soviet Union. The Decrees were inspired by men whose whole life had been steeped in Marxist teachings. It was no less a person than Marx himself who ridiculed the stupidities of Blanqui, Duhring and Bakunin, who tried to fight religion by administrative methods. The effect of such methods was simply to strengthen religious resolution, not weaken it.

The book deals with such subjects as "The Crusades", "Communists and Religion", "The Power of the Church in Different Countries", "The Churches and Monasteries as Landlords"—to take just a few of the chapter headings. Its central thesis is that in the USSR militant atheism had become a mass movement as a result of the "epoch-making changes which are taking place in all branches of the national economy in the USSR, while it must necessarily be accompanied by correspondingly sharp changes in the ideology of the great masses" (p. 1).

The optimism of Yaroslavsky is nowhere shown more clearly than in his statement that "The Five Year Plan, which maps out our economic construction, is rivetted to another and concurrent Five Year Plan designed to tear up the roots of religion. The vast army of exploiters and priests of all the religious creeds all over the world realise that the day when the earth will tremble beneath their feet is advancing near" (p. 10).

Those parts of the book which are devoted to realising this apocalyptic end to religion are closely reasoned, and far removed from the crude caricatures that were drawn at the time of the campaign. Two extracts from the chapter on "What is Religion?" will give an idea of the tone of the anti-religious case:

The concept of the world from the religious viewpoint is incorrect; it is a mutilated understanding of the world and of the mutual relationships of men (pp. 28-29).

Religion acts as a bandage over the eyes of man, preventing him from seeing the world as it is (p. 29).

It is a pity that the League of the Godless was dissolved before it was able to fulfil its original objects. It did not fail because of the crudity of its methods or the administrative technique it employed—although both were present—it "failed" because it was arbitrarily dissolved by Stalin's government. Grotesque in parts, rough hewn in operation, the Five Year Plan for eradicating religion was nonetheless the first concentrated effort in human history by any state to make materialism the world outlook of its citizens.

As such, it should be treated with respect.

## Points from New Books

AFTER READING John Parris's *Under My Wing* (Arthur Barker, 21s.) with his backstage revelations about the stupidity and obscurantism of the judiciary, one may well feel the Law no longer protects us and that we are all on conditional liberty. Perhaps, as Mr. Parris says, the only real bulwark of liberty is the power of the Press. Anyway, his book is immensely challenging; and every citizen should read it—for his own protection.

One minor little note about Roman Catholics and their preposterous teachings about nullity in marriage may be of particular interest to freethinkers. The Catholic Church held that marriages within remote degrees of consanguinity were invalid; and this did not apply only to blood relationships, since the Church believed that to be a godparent

established a spiritual relationship which extended to remote relations of godparents. Then, as sexual relations were supposed to make man and woman one flesh, the same degrees of kindred applied to anybody with whom either party had ever had sexual intercourse.

In small countries, like Scotland, it was said that it was impossible for a member of the upper class to find anyone at all to marry who was outside the prohibited degrees. In England, as Pollock and Maitland put it: "Spouses who had quarrelled began to investigate their pedigrees and were unlucky if they could discover no *impedimentum dirimens*". Mr. Parris writes: "The effect, of course, was that the Church found it possible to hold that almost any marriage was invalid. Charlemagne was canonised (although it would read strangely to anybody with any knowledge of history, to see him described as St. Charlemagne); he, thanks to the good offices of the Pope, had nine wives".

One is indeed grateful to Mr. Parris for his vigorous castigation of all mock idols and institutions; and he becomes particularly a man after one's own heart when one learns that he hates, among other things, war, General Franco, the South African Government, the American way of life, and bishops!

There is a delightful short story in the October issue of *Evergreen Review* which I am sure would amuse most freethinkers. It is by René Daumal, the French poet, philosopher and novelist; and it tells of a curé who loses his temper during the catechism class. He calls the children out one by one and asks them, "Tell me, my child, what is God?" One answers that God is love, and another that he is our Saviour, and so on; although one or two lads attempt something more worthy: "God is the necessary being of whom one can deny everything", and "God is the absolutely free being of whom one can affirm everything". But, stupid or slick, each child receives an enormous biff on the head after his answer.

Finally, the last boy, in a flash of inspiration, cries out that God is a whack! He is spared, and the priest solemnly prays: "*Pater noster qui cueillait ses lis, a sans ses confitures tututuom, ayayayate gogototom, bababalz bz tata scut teterom titine et lisse, bz bz bz . . . amen*".

Lawrence Durrell is, I suppose, one of the most discussed writers of our time; and, as a general footnote, I would like to mention Alfred Perles's *My Friend Lawrence Durrell* (Scorpion Press, 15s.), an intimate study of the author of the famous "Alexandria Quartet" by a man who is himself an author of distinction.

OSWELL BLAKESTON.

## CORRESPONDENCE

### MR. EASTMAN

In his letter of October 27th, F. H. Eastman seems to confuse the role of THE FREETHINKER with that of the pamphlets. The person who seeks basic freethought opinions will find them in Chapman Cohen's "Pamphlets for the People" and in the writings of G. W. Foote, R. G. Ingersoll and others. J. G. GOODWINS.

I should like to support you in your reply to Mr. F. H. Eastman's criticism (27/10/61) and to compliment you on the interesting variety of articles you give us week by week: it must be no easy job, especially with voluntary contributors. THE FREETHINKER must never be allowed to degenerate into a mere continuous attack on religious fundamentalism.

GERALD FOULKES.

Mr. F. H. Eastman exaggerates, to say the least, when he writes: "All we have had is long articles on subjects far above the heads of the masses of people". For the most part, articles in THE FREETHINKER deal with subjects of general concern and can be understood by anybody willing to give those subjects just a little thought. Is this too much to ask of readers, or prospective readers of THE FREETHINKER? J. HARLAND.

I am glad that you have justified your title by publishing Mr. Eastman's letter. With him I feel that there is a great evil

to be fought. There are of course other matters for freethought—every other matter in fact—but they are cases for democratic decision: neither monarchy nor fascism for example are cases of fraud.

Today the get-together of those evil institutions the Churches and the slippery policy of evasion which they (perforce) pursue need more attention than the philosophy of Marx and others. As an instance of evasion we were recently treated on the radio to a sermon arguing that God could not explain himself more fully(!) since this would be beyond man's comprehension. That he could demonstrate his existence more clearly was not mentioned.

What the new generation (and many old 'uns) need is an exposition of facts—the number of universes, their age, distance, magnitude as determined so far; the age of the earth and of man; the credulity of the East (and later the West!); the hiatus of which Paul took advantage; the number of religions and their adherents; the history (and humour) of the selection of the Bible press-cuttings, their authorship and date; the dogmatic lies surrendered (with dates) by various branches of the "fellowship"; and finally the absurdity of the beliefs involved and of the praying and bell ringing to nobody!

This is old stuff to many but so are school books: instead of sin against a wind, let us teach sense versus stupidity for this Sunday school generation before they are brain-washed beyond reason.

Finally may I ask for a little more humour as an antidote to the unctuous treacle for "Lift up your hearts". There is much to be found in the "Liturgy and other Divine Offices of the Church" if you have a copy.

R. FLEMMING.

[Is that all?—Ed.]

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