

## **1881-1971: THE FREETHINKER'S 90 YEARS OF STRUGGLE AGAINST SUPERSTITION**

Ninety years ago G. W. Foote launched the *Freethinker* which, after four monthly issues, became and has remained a weekly publication. During the nineteenth century many freethought journals were started and, with a few notable exceptions, quickly passed into oblivion and were soon forgotten. But none of them caused such a commotion in the ranks of the faithful as the *Freethinker*. One reason for this was the fact that the *Freethinker* did not just argue against Christianity. Certainly there were plenty of serious articles, but these were interspersed with irreverent commentary, jokes and cartoons which treated the Deity and his offspring as figures of fun. The *Freethinker* caused horrified consternation amongst pious Victorians, and soon became a target for every Bible-thumping evangelical and political opportunist. It was boycotted by wholesalers, and overworked policemen unlawfully visited newsagents and warned them against selling the paper. We publish below a policy statement from the May, 1881, issue. Those principles remain the *Freethinker's* guidelines for, although much progress has been achieved since that time, we are still battling against the (mainly Christian) advocates of censorship; the Roman Catholic Church continues to vigorously oppose contraception; our Sunday laws remain a source of frustration and hilarity; children are subjected to religious indoctrination in schools and the Churches enjoy unwarranted privileges and status in our national life.

### **The Freethinker, May 1881**

Our Principles are purely and exclusively Secular; by which we mean such principles of human thought and action as the most critical investigation shows to be *true*: and the widest, longest, and most enlightened experience demonstrates to be useful to human society. All other principles we may be ready to weigh and to discuss; but we shall not adopt them until Freethought and experience warrant them as true and useful.

Infallibility we do not claim for ourselves, but only for truth. And as we are fully convinced that all other claims to infallibility, whether on the part of persons, books or institutions, are nought but shams; that all "revelations" are false and also useless; that all false and useless things are real nuisances and hindrances to human advancement and happiness; we shall attack all such to the uttermost of our power.

Our principles belong entirely to the regions known and becoming known to man. What we know, others may know. We have no occult or mysterious sources of information, no profound secrets to hide from vulgar view. No Gods, angels, spirits or devils have ever spoken to us. Indeed, we have not the remotest conception of what they are like nor who they are. We know only their names, as we know the names of fairies, pixies, peri, and goblins. Michael and Gabriel are no better known to us than Puck or Odin; Satan is as great a stranger as Pluto; and Jehovah as empty a name as Jupiter. Heaven is unknown

to us, and so are Purgatory and Hell. The separate existence of the "soul" and the "future life" are to us inconceivable; and we believe that Christians are just as ignorant respecting them as we.

Since we regard all theological doctrines as sheer superstition, we cannot draw any principles of thought or action therefrom. For us the "verities" of Christianity are all fables. Regarded as legitimate objects of thought, of hope, fear, and reverence, we ignore them; and merely attack and ridicule them as monstrous myths which have filled the world with fantastic hopes and horrible fears; have lent themselves as instruments and sanctions of the worst form of cruelty and tyranny; have roused the world to most unnatural strife; drenched the earth with seas of blood; and burnt the noblest of mankind to ashes for daring to think and speak as reason dictated.

Shaking off all theological prejudices, we turn to nature as expounded by science; to human society in its necessary elements and workings. From these we draw all our principles, freely availing ourselves of all that the world's Workers and Thinkers have secured and exhibited for the use of man. Whatever there is in human life which experience shows to be good and useful, that we adopt, and shall strive to elaborate and illustrate it, to render it better known, and more useful still. Whatever we may evolve by Freethought, from present or future materials and elements, which may be of use to man, that also we shall recommend: as we shall all of the same description found and exhibited by others.

## LOOKING BACK

PETER CROMMELIN

The author of this article is a former Roman Catholic priest. After his ordination in June 1930, he was an assistant priest at Walworth, London, for seven years. He then served in a number of parishes in Kent and Surrey, and was parish priest of Battle, Sussex, when he left the Church in 1956.

The only achievement in my life, that gives me complete satisfaction has been the liberation of one person (myself) from a religious faith that dominated my life for more than half a century. As a result of this liberation I now derive infinitely more pleasure from the words "I do not believe" than I ever gained from the words "I believe" in the recitation of the Creed. Moreover I no longer feel any sense of moral obligation to waste precious time by going to Mass. In the consideration of ethical or moral questions I no longer feel any moral obligation to pay any serious attention to what the Bible teaches or to what the Pope teaches or to what anyone teaches unless the human wisdom of the teaching can be demonstrated by the argument of human experience. I can now testify from my own experience that a total loss of religious faith does not cause any personal misery to the loser. Nor does such a loss lead inevitably to moral anarchy. It simply tends to make one more careful and thoughtful before praising human action as good or condemning it as evil. The fact that there is no Supreme Good (if it is a fact) does not lead logically to the conclusion that nothing can be called good or bad in human behaviour. I do not believe that I was a bad man simply because I accepted the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church, but I do believe that I became a much better man when I stopped serving what must inevitably come to be regarded as a dead faith and a totally lost cause.

### Childhood Indoctrination

Looking back into my own past enables me to see very clearly that my life as a Roman Catholic priest was necessary to the making of one particular freethinker who is very much on the side of the atheist in the rejection of all false gods. I define an atheist, not as a person who asserts dogmatically that there is no god, but as one who militantly rejects all gods that are known to be false by a philosophic analysis of the evidence offered for their existence. According to such an analysis the Christian god has no better right to be accorded a real existence than has the god of any other religious faith.

There was nothing miraculous or supernatural in the faith that bound me for longer than I care to remember to the Roman Catholic Church. The faith that dominated me was simply the product of my own failure to evolve a philosophy of my own in time to resist effectively the process of religious indoctrination to which I was subjected as a child. I had a natural tendency to metaphysical thinking and this tendency was undoubtedly exploited by those who had been given the task of teaching me religions in my early years.

As a matter of fact my own parents were entirely responsible for my becoming a Roman Catholic. With the best of intentions they inflicted a grave injury to my mind from which I have recovered only in my old age. I have

lived a crippled life in consequence of a perfectly human relationship to my parents who were good and loving parents exceeding their natural rights and duties only in the matter of religion. The fact that I responded as well as I did to religious instruction does not mean that I could not have responded equally well to a very different kind of educational process if my parents had been humanists in their intellectual outlook. I wish they had been. My father was intellectually and morally capable of the best kind of humanism. He became a distinguished astronomer, made significant contributions to astronomical science, and was for a time the president of the Royal Astronomical Society. Yet for some reason that still remains a mystery to me, he chose to cultivate a private life of religious piety and devotion that really was quite incompatible with Copernican and post-Copernican astronomy. Unfortunately for me I was not clever enough to follow my father in his astronomical work, and made the disastrous error of trying to follow him in his religious life. In consequence of this error my life has been far less useful to the community than it ought to have been.

### Religious Absurdities

The *Freethinker* has been freely thinking for 90 years. For a weekly journal to keep going for so long a period simply and solely because it always has something to say that is worth saying must be a unique achievement in the history of English journalism. I have been a regular reader of the *Freethinker* for the last ten years. It has helped considerably in the gradual formation of that humanist character that has completely extinguished the Roman Catholic priest who was for a long time a false claimant to my personal identity. I, in the character of that priest, celebrated Mass thousands of times before coming to the final conclusion that there is no such thing as "transubstantiation". The same priest heard thousands of "confessions" before reaching the conclusion that there is no such thing as "sin". Most of what is called "sin" is just human nature asserting itself against the absurdities of religious dogma. I do not deny that there is such a thing as moral error, and there is a deplorable amount of utterly confused thinking. But sin as such as a product of religious imagination and has no reality outside that. Since my defection from the priesthood and the Church, reading the *Freethinker* has helped me to form rational opinions in such matters as marriage, contraception, abortion, euthanasia. Long may it continue to stimulate free discussion in all matters of human interest or concern.

## SEX EDUCATION — THE ERRONEOUS ZONE

MAURICE HILL and

MICHAEL LLOYD-JONES

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# THE DRUG "REVELATION"

MARGARET KNIGHT

Some three years ago Paul McCartney of the Beatles was reported as saying "God is in everything. God is in the space between us. God is in the table in front of you. It just happens I realise all this through weed (LSD). It could have been through anything else". Alice Bacon, at that time Minister of State for the Home Office, expressed herself as "horrified" by this and similar proclamations; and she added, to clinch the indictment, that "the Beatles' manager, also, was in favour of hallucinatory drugs"—which perhaps implied rather more than she meant.

But the "drug revelation" certainly poses a problem. One of the main arguments for theism has always been the argument from immediate intuition, based on the fact that many people have had experiences—recognisably similar in nature, despite the widely differing backgrounds of those who have them—in which they feel that they are directly aware of, or in communication with, some divine Reality. These experiences, for those who have them, are wholly compelling. No rational argument can shake the conviction they produce, since the believer (adapting Hume's argument on miracles) can always say that it is more likely that the arguments are fallacious than that an experience so direct and overwhelming was in fact illusory. As the psychologist Jung said in his last television interview, "I don't need to believe—I know".

But it is now evident that similar apparently revelatory experiences can be obtained through drugs, and moreover through drugs that can produce personality degeneration, breakdown and death. What are religious believers—and indeed people in general—to make of this embarrassing fact?

In considering possible answers to this question, I shall employ three convenient blanket terms. "Transcendental" to cover all experiences, usually of an ecstatic and/or mystical nature, that are felt to relate to a reality beyond normal experience; "chemical" for transcendental experiences that are induced by drugs; and "natural" for similar experiences that occur spontaneously, or that arise from such methods as prayer, meditation or the contemplation of natural beauty.

## Three Attitudes

Given the existence of the two types of experience, similar in nature but differing in origin, three attitudes seem to be possible. It can be said (a) that the chemical experiences invalidate the natural experiences, in so far as any claim to revelation is concerned; or (b) that the natural experiences authenticate the claims to revelation made for the drug experiences. Opposed to both these positions is the view presumably held by most religious believers that (c) natural transcendental experiences are genuinely revelatory, whereas chemical experiences are illusory.

View (a) involves no intellectual difficulty, and is more or less taken for granted in secularist circles. It does not imply that transcendental experiences are worthless. Indeed, the evanescent rapture they sometimes involve may, in itself, be among the most valuable of human experiences, comparable with, though more intense than, those produced by great art or music—though obviously these experiences may be bought at too high a cost. But what view (a) denies is that the experiences are in any way revelatory

—that they give information about the nature of the universe or the existence of God.

Many, including the present writer, who have enjoyed a degree of ecstatic experience through Wordsworthian communings with nature, have begun by regarding the experiences as revelatory and then reluctantly changed their view. Lowes Dickinson gave a moving description of the process in a letter quoted in E. M. Forster's *Life*:

I remember after a long day's walk supping out of doors and realising what so often I have felt before and since, the perfection of happiness given by physical and emotional well-being, a happiness which the young, and even the older, are apt to interpret, as I did then, as somehow revealing the nature of the Universe. Alas, it is but a little moment, casually permitted to one of the little creatures meaninglessly produced in a world indifferent either to their happiness or their misery. (p 68.)

View (b), which holds that both chemical and natural experience can be revelatory, is in general unacceptable to secularists, and presumably to most Christians also though for a different reason, since it is hard to suppose that an omnipotent Being would adopt such a curious technique for revealing himself. However, it is possible to hold what might be termed a modernist form of view (b), in which both natural and chemical experiences are held to provide, if not evidence for theism, at least intimations of some genuine reality inaccessible to normal consciousness. Even this view is one which few secularists will be disposed to take seriously. But as protagonists of the open mind we should not, I feel, dismiss it out of hand without at least looking at the case that has been put for it by some far from negligible thinkers.

## Mystical Experiences

Outstanding among such thinkers were William James (who lived before the days of mescaline but who had similar revelatory experiences through inhaling nitrous oxide) and, in our own time, Aldous Huxley. Both were writers of the first rank, and both succeeded in the near-impossible task of conveying in words something of the nature of the mystical experience. Here, for example, is Aldous Huxley on the state of *participation mystique* attained on his first experiment with mescaline. He was looking at three flowers—a carnation, an iris and a rose—that had been pushed hastily into a vase with no attempt at formal arrangement.

I was not looking now at an unusual flower arrangement. I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence . . . a bunch of flowers shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged . . . My eyes travelled from the rose to the carnation, and from that feathery incandescence to the smooth scrolls of sentient amethyst which were the iris. The Beatific Vision, *Sat Chit Ananda*, Being-Awareness-Bliss—for the first time I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to. (*The Doors of Perception*, pp 17-18.)

Before continuing, it may be well to emphasise that Huxley was in no sense an addict or an irresponsible dabbler. His published correspondence (*Letters of Aldous Huxley*, Chatto and Windus, 1969) shows that from 1953, the year of his first experiment, until his death ten years later, he took mescaline or LSD at most some 20 times, usually under the supervision of a psychiatrist friend who

(Continued on back page)

## FREETHINKER

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The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Editor or the Board.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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.

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

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## EVENTS

Humanist Holidays. Summer Centre in the Lake District is now full. Youth camp being planned for 24 July until 1 August in Salop. Details: Marjorie Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey (telephone 642 8796).

London Young Humanists, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W8, Sunday, 16 May, 7.30 p.m. Hugh Jenkins, MP: "Communications".

The Progressive League. Spring Holiday Conference: "The Arts in Society". Lodge Hall, Pullborough, Sussex. Details from Ernest Seeley, 38 Primrose Gardens, London, NW3.

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1, Sunday, 16 May, 11 a.m. John Lewis: "Did Jesus Really Exist?"

Worthing Humanist Group, Burlington Hotel, The Pier (West), Worthing, Sunday, 23 May, 5.30 p.m. Tea party and Annual General Meeting.

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## RELIGION AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Lord Soper's May Day article in *Tribune* was quite remarkable, for whereas some of the more scatterbrained Christian Socialists will go as far as saying that Jesus was the first/greatest/only Socialist, his name was not even mentioned in the Methodist leader's piece. Nevertheless Lord Soper strongly implied that the growth and development of the Labour movement in Britain owes much to religion, and it is a pity that a man of his idealism, compassion and influence should be trying to whitewash the record of Christianity, organised and unorganised, whose influence in Britain and elsewhere has usually been mounted against forces working for reform and social progress. For, whatever Lord Soper and Left-wing Christians choose to think, those Christians who have stood out for such ideals, were defying not only the churches as institutions, but the majority of their fellow church members. Progressive Christians were a minority in the nineteenth century, they were in a minority when the Labour Party and the trade unions were being established, and they were a minority when Canon Collins was leading the vast Aldermaston marches.

Today we hear less of the once familiar claim that Christianity destroyed slavery. Even the saintly Wilberforce occupies a less exalted position since more students of social history know of his work to create and defend the notorious Combination Laws. True, he spoke eloquently against negro slavery (his eloquence increased as the breeding, buying and selling of slaves became a less attractive economic undertaking), but his concern for the slaves in Britain's mines, mills and fields was less marked. In his *Practical View of the System of Christianity* Wilberforce echoed the sentiments of the churches when he advised the working people "that their more lowly path has been allotted them by the hand of God; that it is their part faithfully to discharge its duties and contentedly to bear its inconveniences". The "inconveniences" include appalling living conditions, starvation and illiteracy.

Although it is often pointed out that the early Christian preached to the poor and lowly (there is little evidence to suggest that anyone else would listen to them), in modern times the churches have preached at the poor and in defence of the rich and powerful. The Christian churches played a largely obstructive and reactionary role during the formative period of the British Labour movement. During the last decade of the eighteenth, and the first two decades of the nineteenth centuries, the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the manufacturing class took place. Its wealth was derived from cotton, iron and coal, and the inhuman exploitation of the working people. Any action by the workers to improve their lot was suppressed with ferocity, and the Combination Laws meant the practical enslavement of the English working class for a quarter of a century.

During this period there was an unprecedented upsurge in Christian activity. This was encouraged by Parliament which, in 1820, granted over a million pounds for the building of churches, and during a period of 20 years

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subsidised the salaries of clergymen by a similar amount. It may have been a coincidence that during this time the most vociferous opponents to reform were the clergy, particularly the bishops who used their membership of the House of Lords with great effect. Contrary to popular belief, it was not just the Church of England which fought those who were working for the establishment of democratic rights. In 1824 Cobbett wrote: "The bitterest foes in England have been, and are, the Methodists . . . The friends of freedom have found fault, and justly found fault, with the main body of the established clergy . . . but, hostile to freedom as the established clergy have been, their hostility has been nothing in point of virulence compared with that of these ruffian sectaries". The Methodists were strongly opposed to reform, and John Wesley himself outlined the sect's attitude to the civil power: "None of us shall speak lightly or irreverently of the Government under which we live. The oracles of God command us to be subject to the higher powers, and that Honour the King is thus connected with the fear of God". Early Methodist references to the Chartists and reformers were highly critical, and Wesleyan preachers resolved in 1839 to exclude any Methodist who jointed the Chartists.

Of course there were individuals who were better than their creed and whose compassion was stronger than their superstition. But they usually stood alone, and support for the Chartists, trade unions and the Labour Party in its early days, was the exception rather than the rule so far as Christians were concerned. Social upheavals, the dissolution of an empire, two world wars and the rapid secularisation of society have brought about an atmosphere in which hostility between the churches and the Labour movement is less marked. But to claim that the Labour movement in Britain—or indeed in most countries—grew up in anything but independence of the churches, and in most cases despite bitter opposition from them, is flying in the face of history.

## A MESSAGE

These days when the chairman of a weekly has a special announcement to make it usually concerns change to a monthly or disappearance altogether. On this occasion however I am happy to be greeting an anniversary: the 90th birthday of the *Freethinker*. At a time of rising prices, changing reading habits and other difficulties, this is a considerable achievement for a limited circulation periodical.

Much of the credit must go to the paper's founder, G. W. Foote, for getting the formula right and inspiring his successors with traditions of fearless exposure and forthright language. Foote was also a master of English irony and I hope this legacy has also stayed alive. If Bradlaugh was the great organising genius of the movement, Foote was its great master of prose. Of all those founders that magazines recall at their masthead no one more deserves this position than he.

Those qualities of iconoclasm and straight talk that have characterised the paper down the years have not made it popular outside (and often inside) the movement; but I

like to think that it continues to give news and comment of abiding interest for *cognoscenti* of today and social historians of tomorrow. I owe a personal debt to such nineteenth-century publications which were profuse then but have few successors today. Indeed, despite the underground Press, I think the *Freethinker* is the sole survivor in this *genre*.

I am very pleased that the editor on this birthday should be William McIlroy, who for seven years worked so hard and so successfully as secretary of the National Secular Society. Since taking over the editorship he has shown the same qualities and the paper's topicality, range and readability have achieved a standard of which Foote himself might have been proud. He has also worked extremely hard in finding a galaxy of distinguished contributors—people of a status who, frankly, would not have contributed in the days of Foote or of his worthy successor, Chapman Cohen—and new outlets for promotion. If this latter work has not yet achieved the success it deserves I hope that all subscribers and other readers will now resolve to play their part in gaining this end. No doubt I am biased, but I am convinced that no paper and editor better deserve to succeed.

DAVID TRIBE,

Chairman, G. W. Foote & Co, Ltd.

## TITHES

The *Freethinker's* voice was not the only one that was raised last week in protest against the continuance of tithe collection by the Anglican Church in some areas. The *Church Times* published a letter from a reader who told how he spent Easter with a relative on a Worcestershire farm. On returning from church he was shown "a peremptorily phrased letter" which informed his host that his corn rent, payable to the Church authorities, was to be increased. In the true spirit of Christian generosity they offered the farmer an alternative arrangement: he could pay a lump sum and be relieved of further annual payments.

The *Church Times* correspondent asked "is it not time that such levies be abolished? As an Anglican I am ashamed to find that, as a body, we are being unwillingly subsidised by people whose opinion of the Church is not improved by such payments and who in many cases may worship in other churches or not at all".

This particular Anglican is obviously more democratic and sensitive than the Church of England as a whole. And unfortunately the collection of tithes is only a minor abuse when compared to the other substantial privileges resulting from Church Establishment.

## THE RIGHTS OF OLD PEOPLE

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## BOOKS

### DIVINE DISOBEDIENCE: PROFILES IN CATHOLIC

**RADICALISM** by Francine Du Plessis-Gray.

Hamish Hamilton, £3.

The image traditionally presented by the Roman Catholic Church to the non-Catholic public is in general that of a homogeneous undifferentiated mass; monolithic in its ecclesiastical organisation and rigidly dogmatic in its ideological make-up. That this hitherto widely accepted thesis does not invariably conform with the current facts has been repeatedly emphasised by events in the last few years, notably since the brief but eventful reign of the reforming Pope John XXIII, and the Second Vatican Council which he convened in order "to let in a breath of fresh air" into a still largely medieval church confronted with totally different problems of the contemporary world. During the past decade, a whole series of manifestations of what may be generally termed liberal Catholicism has undermined the traditional structure of the cosmopolitan church.

Francine du Plessis-Gray vividly portrays how this crisis is not confined to Rome nor to the controversial problems of specifically theological technique, but extends perhaps even more decisively, to moral and political problems upon which morality impinges. For in this very sincere and readable narrative she both presents and comments upon the case histories of a number of Catholics, both clerical and lay (including bishops and Jesuits), in relation principally to the war in Vietnam, and upon the current relationship between the ethical teaching of Catholicism and the problems engendered by war in the nuclear age. The main problem posed by this book is how far, if at all, the institution of war can, in an era of possible nuclear destruction, be reconciled with Christian ethics, or indeed, with human survival itself.

The traditional critical view of the Roman Catholic Church as the main stronghold of superstition is obviously not held by Rome herself. Quite the contrary! She claims to be the only organ of complete rationalism in the world; and to have a definitive and correct answer to all the major problems of human existence in, above (and below!) this world. This includes the institution of war that has played so important a role in the chequered annals of this imperfect world. The Church of Rome, following on this point its greatest thinkers since St Augustine of Hippo, teaches that the only type of war to be regarded as morally justifiable is what it terms a "just war"; that is, a war that conforms to certain moral presuppositions. It must not be a war of aggression. Essential conditions are carefully laid down and systematically defined in the moral theology of the RC Church. Here, the problem at issue is: does the present war in Vietnam conform with these essential conditions? If not, what attitude should Catholics take towards it?

An increasingly large number of Americans, particularly those liable to service in Vietnam, have taken up a negative stand on the moral issues involved. They include many Catholics, especially several leading clerics. To Catholics, the problem of war is a "moral" as well as a political problem, and as such is regulated by divine law. Their

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refusal to regard the current imperialist "crusade against Communism" as falling within the prescribed limits of a "just war", is consequently a religious act described in the book's title as *Divine Disobedience*. The greater part of this well-documented narrative is taken up with individual acts of resistance, personal and collective, to the Vietnam war by American Catholics who regard the Pentagon adventure as being essentially an unjust war, and culminating in the public burning of draft notices—certainly more commendable than burning heretics! The subsequent legal proceedings taken by the US Government also figure largely in this book. Many interesting personalities flit through its pages: the Jesuit Daniel Berrigan and his outspoken clerical brother, Phillip. The "grilling" of Monsignor Ilyitch a leading dissident priest within the precincts of the Vatican itself, shows that the spirit of the Inquisition is still far from extinct in Rome. These dissenters are largely unknown in this country, but they appear to represent many courageous conscientious objectors who refuse to render to the American Caesar what they hold as forbidden by God. This resistance movement appears to have originated in the radical circle around the old *Catholic Worker* that in pre-Vietnam days attempted to create an anti-war radical Catholic movement in the USA. An intriguing side-glance is thrown southward upon the even more acute problems of Catholic radicals in predominantly Catholic Latin America. In the lands of the conquistadors, unlike the USA, the Church has to face a strong political anti-clerical movement typified in its most extreme form by the Mexican governor who named his two sons Lucifer and Lenin! Mexican Catholicism is correspondingly reactionary, though by a paradoxical antithesis, a Mexican bishop was one of the leaders of the reforming party in Vatican II.

The individual American conscientious objectors, whose "Divine Disobedience" occupies most of this book, are quite unknown in Britain. (The only American conscientious objector against military service in Vietnam to secure worldwide publicity is not a Catholic but a Black Muslim, Mahomet Ali, and that for reasons only remotely connected with religion!) Consequently the most interesting sections of this narrative of religious dissent appear as such, and much of the book falls under this category. This book exposes current dilemma, not only inside American Catholicism but universally, that confronts the great conservative Church of Rome, now suddenly and dramatically confronted with the unprecedented problems of our modern epoch of revolutionary activity in every sphere of human existence. As the (presumably Catholic) author admits, prior to Vatican II American Catholicism as typified by Cardinal Spellman, was predominantly reactionary in both social and religious spheres. American Catholicism was conservative, capitalistic, and violently anti-communist. Can all this be changed in time to avoid decline and perhaps dissolution? Is "the revolutionary Church" a viable proposition? Can Rome disentangle herself from our visibly disintegrating capitalist civilisation, in more leisurely ages she succeeded in dissociating herself from the successive epochs of chattel slavery and feudalism? That is the ultimate question; the final and decisive test, not in the next world but in this one, of Papal Infallibility! This book ends by admitting that the present omens are not at all favourable. But evidently the Roman mystique has not

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yet exhausted its power: liberal Catholics still hope against hope that Roman Catholicism can and will finally emerge into the light of a new and more progressive era. One imagines, they must be praying for the happy death of Pope Paul and for the speedy election of a more liberal successor.

I found *Divine Disobedience* a very readable and interesting book; its implications are often important and far-reaching. It draws forcible attention to a remarkable, though still underground, movement in what we have come to regard as the most immovable of contemporary Christian organisations; a fascinating example of the present working of historical dialectics in the traditional religious sphere.

F. A. RIDLEY

## CLASS INEQUALITY AND POLITICAL ORDER

by Frank Parkin. MacGibbon and Kee, £2.25.

The main purpose of this book is to compare social stratification in western and in communist countries. The author, a lecturer in the University of Kent, has chosen a good subject and done his homework well. The product is a thoughtful and reasonably impartial study. It would have attracted many readers who are not sociologists if the author had mastered not only his material but also the art of writing plain English, with a minimum of abstract nouns used as adjectives. Why on earth must sociologists write in a jargon which cuts them off from ordinary, civilised readers? Older sociologists, such as R. M. MacIver and L. T. Hobhouse, wrote in an attractive and not a repulsive style.

Religion is among various aspects of the class structure of our society which Mr Parkin discusses. Among the classes lower down the social scale, religion often presents a system of meaning alternative to that in the current secular world, and one in which the scale of secular priorities is dissolved and reversed. Radical movements try to raise the expectations of the working class and then to change the economic order in accordance with those expectations. Religious institutions seek a similar kind of *rapprochement*, but by lowering the material and social desires of the subordinate class to conform to the existing set of rewards. The role of religion is reconciling men to their lot by the symbolic transformation of the world as hitherto been crucial in the pre-industrial societies of Asia and Africa; and is to this day not negligible in western Europe.

"Commitment to a single faith", says Mr Parkin, "becomes a sophisticated means of social control, in so far as the manipulation of religious sanctions is generally the prerogative of those who support existing arrangements of power and privilege. When this faith also entails the con-

viction that earthly suffering is but an interlude before a heavenly reversal of fortunes, then its political implications are indeed formidable".

In advanced industrial societies the relationship between religion and inequality is complex. The author perceives that the dominant middle class clings to orthodox beliefs, while the "lower orders" tend to turn to fancy denominations or sects less respectable socially. Some of our best historians, such as Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson have suggested that the absence of revolutionary upheavals in nineteenth-century Britain is partly explained by the spread of Methodism among the working class. This is still a matter open to debate; but it is a good thing that contemporary sociologists have begun to probe the relationship between religion and radicalism.

Religion is, however, not one of the factors holding back progress in eastern Europe. Whether the re-emergence of class differences is such a factor is debatable—Mr Parkin cautiously rejects the view that classes are found to a similar extent in both eastern and western Europe. For one thing, in the socialist countries there can be no inheritance of property within the family and so privilege is not passed on to the next generation. Yet unequal incomes and rewards do persist in eastern Europe and it seems uncertain, from the best reports available, whether or not this trend is diminishing. Whatever the truth of the matter, we should not represent the visible inequalities in terms of the traditional class models of our own type of society. It seems more plausible to trace unequal opportunities to membership of the ruling party which makes political reliability the acid test.

JOHN GILD

## FREETHINKER FUND

There was an encouraging increase in donations to the Fund during April, and we are confident that many readers and friends will be sending a 90th birthday present and thus ensure a record total in May. We are using the May issues for a promotion campaign, with advertisements in the Press and introductory copies to potential readers. The recent increases in postal and advertising charges were a blow, and we depend more than ever on the Fund to make ends meet. But with the support and goodwill of everyone who values a weekly freethinking journal which is always ready to do battle with the forces of repression, indoctrination and superstition, the *Freethinker* will be celebrating its centenary ten years hence.

We hope your name will be on the next list of contributors, and we express warmest thanks to the following:

C. Byass, £1.50; R. Brownlee, £1.70; S. Clowes, £1; Mr Collins, £1; L. R. Chrismer, £1.80; W. H. Dobson, 20p; Mr Elliott, 55p; Mrs E. M. Graham, £1.35; E. Greaves, £2; D. Harper, £1.70; S. P. Harvey, £2.45; E. Henderson, £1.45; N. Leverett, £1; T. Marino, 82p; Mrs W. Mawson, £1; H. Nash, 50p; W. C. Parry, 46p; J. F. Porter, £2.45; S. G. Salter, 31p; R. H. Scott, £3.50; W. R. Stevenson, £2.20; A. E. Smith, £1.45; G. Swan, 20p; J. S. Wright, £1. Already acknowledged: £21.73; total to date: £53.32.

## THE DRUG "REVELATION"

(Continued from page 155)

was conducting research into the changes in consciousness produced by drugs. His earlier experiences were all of the predominantly aesthetic type just described, but as time went on they acquired an increasingly revelatory character, leading him eventually towards a form of mystical pantheism. Some will attribute this to developing insight, others to the weakening of his critical powers through illness. But whichever explanation is true, there can be no doubt that in his later years Huxley had, and recorded, a number of experiences basically similar to those which provoked Paul McCartney's profession of faith. Thus he wrote (I am here telescoping quotations from two letters, one to Father Thomas Merton and one to Victoria Ocampo):

Later experiences helped me to understand many of the obscure utterances to be found in the writings of the mystics, Christian and Oriental. . . . A transcendence of the ordinary subject-object relationship. A transcendence of the fear of death. A sense of solidarity with the world and its spiritual principle and the conviction that in spite of pain, evil and all the rest, everything is somehow all right. (One understands such phrases as 'Yea, though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him' . . .). Finally, an understanding, not intellectual . . . an understanding with the entire organism, of the affirmation that God is Love. . . . The words are embarrassingly silly and, on the level of average consciousness, untrue. But when we are on the higher level, they are seen to stand for the primordial Fact, of which the consciousness is now a part. (*Letters*, pp 863, 802.)

William James under nitrous oxide enjoyed similar experiences, though he was more tentative about their implications. He wrote:

Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but *one of the species*, the nobler and better one, *is itself the genus, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself*. This is a dark saying, I know, when thus expressed in terms of common logic, but I cannot wholly escape from its authority. I feel as if it must mean something, something like what the Hegelian philosophy means, if one could only lay hold of it more clearly. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear; to me the living sense of its reality only comes in the artificial mystic state of mind. (*Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp 388, 389.)

**No Convincing Explanation**

No-one has yet convincingly "explained" the mystic revelation, but both James and Huxley proffered tentative explanations which, it is interesting to note, have a good deal in common. James wrote:

One conclusion forced upon my mind . . . is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their fields of application and adaption. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded." (*Op. cit.*, p 388.)

Huxley went further and was disposed to accept the hypothesis advanced by Bergson that the primary function of the brain and nervous system is precisely to exclude

these "other forms of consciousness". The brain, as he put in a letter to Humphry Osmond:

. . . acts as a utilitarian device for limiting, and making selections from, the enormous possible world of consciousness, and for canalising experience into biologically profitable channels. Disease, mescaline, emotional shock, aesthetic experience and mystical enlightenment have the power, each in its different way and in varying degrees, to inhibit the functions of the normal self and its ordinary brain activity, thus permitting the "other world" to rise into consciousness. (*Letters*, p 668.)

The suggestion that the "other world" of the drug-taker is in any sense real would be completely ruled out by the third of the possible views already outlined, which asserts that natural transcendental experiences may provide genuine intimations of some higher reality, but chemical experiences can produce only hallucination. If this view is to be defended effectively, its adherents will have to show that natural and chemical experiences differ, not only in origin, but in some intrinsic, qualitative way which makes it reasonable to put them in different categories. To say that chemical experiences are hallucinatory because they are chemical is to beg the question. (One recalls William James' comment on a parallel argument about "feverish fancies"—"for aught we know to the contrary, 103 degrees or 104 degrees Fahrenheit might be a much more favourable temperature for truths to germinate and sprout in, than the more ordinary blood-heat of 97 or 98 degrees" (*Op. cit.*, p 15).)

**Experimentation**

Is there in fact any qualitative difference between natural and chemical experiences? At present we simply do not know, and the only way to find out would be to interrogate, and perhaps experiment with, people who have had both types—clearly a formidable task. So far as I am aware, the only relevant case on record was reported by Huxley. In the letter to Father Thomas Merton already quoted he wrote:

A friend of mine, saved from alcoholism . . . by a spontaneous theophany which changed his life as completely as St Paul was changed by this theophany on the road to Damascus, has taken lysergic acid two or three times and affirms that his experience under the drug is identical with the spontaneous experience which changed his life—the only difference being that the spontaneous experience did not last as long as the chemically induced one. (*Letters*, p 864.)

Huxley added "there is obviously a field here for serious and reverent experimentation". To use a current Americanism, he can say that again!

Finally, one small but possibly significant fact may be mentioned. Huxley reported (*Letters*, p 813) that the only people who did not experience any changes of consciousness after taking LSD or mescaline were psychoanalysts. From this fact he drew conclusions unfavourable to psychoanalysis; but of course other interpretations are possible.

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