

## **Concerning Blasphemy in General and the Rites of Eleusis in Particular**

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Pioneers, O Pioneers!

Whenever it occurs to anyone to cut a new canal of any kind, he will be well advised to look out for trouble. If it be the isthmus of Suez, the simple-minded engineer is apt to imagine that it is only a question of shifting so much sand; but before he can as much as strike the first pickax into the earth he finds that he is up against all kinds of interests, social, political, financial, and what-not. The same applied to the digging of canals in the human brain. When Simpson introduced chloroform, he thought it a matter for the physician; and found himself attacked from the pulpit. All his arguments proved useless; and we should probably be without chloroform to-day if some genius had not befriended him by discovering that God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep before He removed the rib of which Eve was made.

### **The Abuse of the Gutter**

Nowadays a movement has to be very well on the way to success before it is attacked by any responsible people. The first trouble comes from the gutter. Now the language of the gutter consists chiefly of meaningless abuse, and the principal catch-words, coming as they do from the mouths of men who never open them without a profane oath or a foul allusion, are those of blasphemy and immorality. The charge of insanity is frequently added when the new idea is just sufficiently easy to understand a little. There is another reason, too, for these three particular cries; these are the

charges which, if proved, can get the person into trouble, and at the same time which are in a sense true of everybody; for they all refer to a more or less arbitrary standard of normality. The old cry of "heresy" has naturally lost much of its force in a country nine-tenths of whose population are admittedly heretics; but immorality and insanity are today almost equally meaningless terms. The Censor permits musical comedy and forbids Oedipus Rex; and Mr Bernard Shaw brands the Censor as immoral for doing so. Most people of the educated classes will probably agree with him.

### **Insanity and Blasphemy**

As for insanity, it is simply a question of finding a Greek or Latin name for any given act. If I open the window, it is on account of claustrophobia; when I shut it again, it is an attack of agoraphobia. All the professors tell me that every form of emotion has its root in sex, and describe my fondness for pictures as if it were a peculiarly unnatural type of vice. It is even impossible for an architect to build a church spire without being told that he is reviving the worship of Priapus. Now, the only result of all this is that all these terms of abuse have become entirely meaningless, save as defined by law. There is still some meaning in the term "Forger," as used in general speech; but only because it has not yet occurred to any wiseacre to prove that all his political and religious opponents are forgers. This seems to me a pity. There is, undoubtedly, a forged passage in Tacitus and another in Petronius. Everyone who studies the classics is, therefore, a kind of accomplice in forgery. The charge of blasphemy is in all cases a particularly senseless one. It has been hurled in turn at Socrates, Euripides, Christ, El-Mansur, the Baab, and the Rev. R. J. Campbell.

## The Morality Red Herring

Legal blasphemy is, of course, an entirely different thing. In the recent notorious case where an agent of the Rationalist Press Association, Harry Boulter by name, was prosecuted, the question proved to be not a theological one at all. It was really this, "were the neighbours being annoyed?" "was the man's language coarse?" and the Judge and Joseph McCabe agreed that it was. But in modern times no one has ever been prosecuted in any civilized country for stating philosophic propositions, whatever may be their theological implications. We have no longer the Casuists of the Inquisition, who would take the trouble to argue from Bruno's propositions of the immanence of God that, if that were so, the doctrine of the Incarnation was untenable (and therefore he shall be burned). It is only the very narrowest religious sects that trouble to call Herbert Spencer an Atheist. What the man in the street means by Atheist is the militant Atheist, Bradlaugh or Foote; and it is a singular characteristic of the Odium Theologicum that, instead of arguing soberly concerning the proposition, which those worthies put forward, they always try to drag the red herring of morality across the track. Of all the stupid lies that men have ever invented, nothing is much sillier than the lie that one who does not believe in God must be equally a disbeliever in morality. As a matter of fact, in a country which pretends so hard to appear theistic as England, it requires the most astounding moral courage, a positive galaxy of virtues, for a man to stand up and say that he does not believe in God; as Dr Wace historically remarked, "it ought to be unpleasant for a man to say that he does not believe in Jesus;" and my dislike to Atheism is principally founded on the fact that so many of its exponents are always boring me about ethics. Some priceless idiot, who, I hope, will finish in the British Museum, remarked in a free-thinking paper the other day, that they need

not trouble to pull down the churches, "because they will always be so useful for sane and serious discussion of important ethical problems." Personally, I would rather go back to the times when the preacher preached by the hour-glass.

### **The Pot and the Kettle**

I have always been very amused, too, in this connection of blasphemy by the perusal of Christian Missionary journals, on which I was largely brought up. They are full from cover to cover of the most scandalous falsehoods about heathen gods, and the most senseless insults to them, insults penned by the grossly ignorant of our religious population. It is only in quite recent years that the English public have discovered that Buddha was not a God, and it was not the missionaries that found this out, but scholars of secular attainment. In America, particularly, the most incredible falsehoods are constantly circulated by the Missionary Societies even about the customs of the Hindoos. To read them, one would suppose that every crocodile in India was fed with babies as the first religious duty of every Indian mother; but, of course, it is most terribly wicked for the Hindoo to make fun of the deities of the American. For my part, who have lived half my life in "Christian" countries and half my life in "heathen" countries, I cannot see much to choose between the different religions. Their arguments consist, in the end, of passionate assertion, which is no argument at all.

### **Religion and Draw-Poker**

There is an excellent story—much better known in India than in England—of a missionary, who was explaining to the poor heathen how useless were his gods. "See!" said he, "I insult your idol, he is but of dead stone; he does not avenge himself, or punish me." "I

insult your God," replied the Hindoo, "he is invisible; he does not avenge himself, or punish me." "Ah!" said the missionary, "my God will punish you when you die;" and the poor Hindoo could only find the following pitiable answer: "So, when you die, will my idol punish you." It was from America, too, that I obtained the first principle of religion; which is that four to a flush are not as good as one small pair.

### **Orgies!**

Still I suppose it is useless to contest the popular view that anyone whom any fool chooses to call an Atheist is liable to conduct "orgies." Now, can anyone tell me what orgies are? No? Then I must reach down the Lexicon. *Orgia*, only used in the plural and connected with *Ergon* (work), means sacred rites, sacred worship practiced by the initiated at the sacred worship of Demeter at Eleusis, and also the rites of Bacchus. It also means any rites, or worship, or sacrifice, of any mysteries without any reference to religion; and *Orgazio* means, therefore, to celebrate Orgies, or ceremonies, or to celebrate any sacred rites. It is really a poor comment upon the celebration of sacred rites that the word should have come to mean something entirely different, as it does today. For the man in the street Orgie means a wild revel usually accompanied by drunkenness. I think it is almost time that someone took the word Orgie as a Battle Cry, and, having shown that the Eucharist is only one kind of orgie to restore the true enthusiasm (which is not of an alcoholic or sexual nature) among the laity; for it is no secret that the falling away of all nations from religion, which only a few blind-worms are fatuous enough to deny, is due to the fact that the fire no longer burns in the sacred lamp. Outside a few monasteries there is hardly any church of any sect whose members really expect anything to happen to them from attending public worship. If a new Saint Paul were to

journey to Damascus, the doctor would be called in and his heavenly vision diagnosed as epilepsy. If a new Mahomed came from his cave and announced himself a messenger of God, he would be thought a harmless lunatic. And that is the first stage of a religious propaganda.

### **The Stations of the Cross**

Now the real messenger of God can always be distinguished in a very simple way. He possesses a mysterious force which enables him to persist, heedless of the sneers and laughter of the populace. It then strikes the wiser people that he is dangerous; and they begin on the blasphemy and immorality tack. In the life of our Lord, this will be noticed. In the first place, there was just the contemptuous "he hath a devil," which was the equivalent of our "he's just a crank," but when it was found that this crank had adherents, men of force and eloquence like Peter, to say nothing of financial genius like Judas Iscariot, the cry was quickly changed into wild accusations of blasphemy and allegations of immorality. "He is a friend of publicans and sinners." A same Government only laughs at these ebullitions; and it is then the task of the Pharisees to prove to the Government that it is to its interest to suppress this dangerous upstart. They may succeed; and thought the Government is never for a moment blind to the fact that it is doing an injustice, the new Saviour is crucified. It is this final publicity of crucifixion (for advertisement is just as necessary in one age as another) that secures the full triumph to him whom his enemies fondly suppose to be their victim. Such is human blindness, that the messenger himself, his enemies, and the civil power, all of them do exactly the one thing which will defeat their ends. The messenger would never succeed at all if it were not that he is The Messenger, and it really matters very little what steps he may take to get the message delivered.

For all concerned are but pawns in the great game played by infinite wisdom and infinite power.

### **Orderly, Decorous Ceremonies**

It is, therefore, a negligible matter, this abuse, from whatever source it comes. It should waste my time if I were to prove that the rites of Eleusis, as now being performed at Caxton Hall, are orderly, decorous ceremonies. It is true that at times darkness prevails; so it does in some of Wagner's operas and in certain ceremonies of a mystical character which will occur to the minds of a large section of my male readers. There are, moreover, periods of profound silence, and I can quite understand that in such an age of talk as this, that seems a very suspicious circumstance!