

# THE METAPHYSICIAN

BY JOHN McCLURE

HALTING with the crowd at the door of the temple, the dwarf Biogenes noted that the exhorter was perspiring profusely. He was a bull-necked apostle, with a very full paunch, and spoke loudly, spurning a good deal of spittle, but he seemed to know very well what he was talking about, which was the immortality of the soul. The crowd gaped, stirring uneasily, as he painted the future state. In paradise, he asserted, not without vehemence, we persist as indestructible souls, and there is no butcher but could wear his old apron in heaven. There was a gratified hush. "We are moonflowers and flatter ourselves we are amaranths," said the dwarf Biogenes.

"You speak like a student philosopher," said a small man at his elbow. "And you are enlightened. The theories of resurrection and personal continuity are pleasant to us because we are vain, but certainly the wise man would prefer that burial or burning be the end of him. He would desire his complete personal extinction, and hope earnestly that the soul of the world might accomplish something finer and handsomer and less ridiculous than he is, in its succeeding manifestations, which I am convinced is the case—."

"If we are to converse in this vein," said the dwarf Biogenes hastily, "we should leave here. Else we shall as likely as not be thrown into the galleys for impertinent remarks about the gods. But it is immaterial to me, I assure you, whether we are snuffed out or survive."

"We can continue the argument," said the small man, "anywhere they serve beer."

"You speak civilly," said the dwarf Biogenes.

When they found themselves, in no time, at the Three Fishes, the small man resumed:

"Your remark, which I vulgarly overheard, leads me to believe that you are a metaphysician."

"I am a basket-maker," said the dwarf Biogenes. "Those words escaped me because they sounded well. And though I believe I would become phosphorescent like the saints if I could discover suddenly an acceptable reason for being, or even merely what becomes of us after this period, I have ceased to worry over such matters, having done all that in my youth."

"I am a metaphysician," said the small man.

"I respect any man who enquires into the constitution of the universe," said the dwarf Biogenes. "I once took a fling at it myself. When I was young I engaged once for three days in a protracted argument in metaphysics, which was interrupted only to answer the calls of nature. I made a study of Hindustan, and examined all the works of Plotinus. I should have embraced the doctrine of metempsychosis, but for a horrible aversion to alligators. However, I lost faith in the profession as a practical asset. One metaphysician I knew, very clever in argument (he maintained that the astral body was subtle and could pass through a keyhole), haggled so minutely in purchasing that clerks in the market-stalls refused to traffic with him. Another, who contended that there was fluid flowing through all things, was a pauper the last time I saw him."

"You are no longer interested, then, in the problem of being?" said the metaphysician.

"I have ceased to fret about my doom or the world's," said the dwarf Biogenes. "It should be an hilarious play which has so merry a prologue as life, and who-the-devil imagined us was plainly out of his wits. We go through the motions like the androides, those human dolls, and nobody can fathom futurity. A ghost that appeared to a tailor in Antioch announced the imminent end of the world. Yet that was four hundred years ago and today I had salad for supper."

"Out of the original wan chaos came color and form," said the metaphysician. "We are entangled in time and space and must unravel them. You no longer seek truth?"

"Truth?" said Biogenes gingerly. "My tongue trembles when I attempt to pronounce it. I had rather enunciate 'truly rural' when liquored than to say the word 'veritas.' Next to the verb 'Logos,' this noun is the most awful of terms."

"Man is a reasonable creature," said the metaphysician. "These problems are soluble. Time and space can be traced to a misapprehension."

"Porphy Arsano denied the existence of motion," said the dwarf Biogenes, "but the world still wags. Also he denied the lapse of time. Now he walks with a cane, speaking sentimentally of his youth. Though he insisted that matter was strictly imaginary, one could never persuade him to bump his head into a post."

"He was wiser than you," said the metaphysician. "If you could peer about Cairo with a celestial eye, you would perceive that these structures waver."

"If you are attempting to reduce everything to those queer goblins which you call atoms—," said Biogenes.

"I have nothing to do with atoms!" cried the metaphysician. "They mean to me no more than beans. But the merest clown, in contemplating the phantasmagoria of consciousness and appearance, can discern in it an aloof reality, changing

color and shifting form with the inconsequence of dreams."

"Unrelenting law governs everything, they say in Hindustan, even mutability," said the dwarf Biogenes. "I can remember writing that in a book of penmanship."

"I meant," said the metaphysician, "that in our ignorant eyes this reality appears to fluctuate inconsequentially. However, as a matter of fact, nothing is real but It. Time and space are misapprehensions. All things are regulated, emerging from and returning to unity by the way of rhythm. The appearance is spookish, the reality everlasting. Our lives, which are pitiful affairs, also are controlled by unrelenting law. And we may, under the inexorable regime of Karma, by the most trivial acts, incur the most inconsequential and unexpected dooms. This possibility makes life uncertain and not a little adventurous. The woman in the moon was put there because she made butter on Sunday."

"I live honestly," said the dwarf Biogenes, "and that is the end of it. These speculations have ceased to amuse me."

"But we must have a lode-star," said the metaphysician. "We must believe something. As the rabble worships its gods under the form of snakes and bulls, and as the Nazarenes worship a beautiful child in a manger and His beautiful mother and Him executed for treason, the philosopher must hold fast to a formula."

"It is all the same," said the dwarf Biogenes, "whether we worship an intellectual concept or a cow, or a living dragon, as they did in Babylon. The regimen of our lives under the sway of vanity and passion will not differ. There are as many hairdressers, caterers, brokers and pimps in this city as in Nineveh."

"The true man," said the metaphysician, "should perceive the vanity of these professions, and of his own, and of the world in general."

"I agree with all your premises, and with those of the most respectable saints," said the dwarf Biogenes. "I merely do

not follow you necessarily to your conclusions, nor them to theirs. The vanity of life, as it is lived under the present circumstances, is, to my mind, axiomatic. And certainly it is nothing to be cocky about that we are agile and inventive vermin, clever at deduction and mathematics, and intricate in our amours. I agree that, like Presbyter Johannes, we should keep always in view, if we could afford it, a golden bowl filled with earth to remind us of mortality."

"But being endowed—queerly enough—with reason," said the metaphysician, "we can arrive at a solution of being. There can be no question that the soul of the world, in evolving Adam Kadmon (you and me) is arriving at self-consciousness. We travel, with ridiculous baggage, toward the apocalypse. And man, for all his vanities and absurdities, is therefore a majestic figure in the world."

"I do not deny to Adam Kadmon, of whom I have the honor to be a facet, a divine and angelical end," said the dwarf Biogenes. "And I admit the grandeur of his conceptions and the sublimity of his dreams. Indeed, if you enquire into his metaphysical content (which is quite similar to that of a goshawk), he is a very august and awful sort of sprite. The universe probably is only a dream of his. Nevertheless, at the same time, I refuse to admire him in his current manifestation. I am convinced that Adam Kadmon at this writing, whatever else he may be, is vain, foolish, selfish, cruel and lascivious, and I am not inclined to kiss the foot of the Lord Bishop of Toul."

"But have patience," said the metaphysician. "These absurd and lascivious monkeys will exterminate themselves, as they should, in the course of time. The human creature will be discarded, or will wear out, like an old pair of breeches. But the soul of the world will survive, and Adam Kadmon will then come into his own, existing only at large."

"He will have ceased to be Adam Kadmon," said the dwarf Biogenes, "and will

exist no more than a Platonic teapot or a quadratic conception."

"Not even so much," said the metaphysician. "All this will vanish like smoke. My investigations have made of me a stern absolutist. Time and space, I assure you, are figments of a crazed imagination. There is a mentality which functions not only through the soul of Adam Kadmon (though he lays claim to it, as to everything else), but through the souls of beasts and flowers, and in the hills and tides. This intellect is working out a problem in arithmetic. There is a positive series of numerals, and a negative, and in the solution, which is a long way off, these series will cancel each other, precisely as in algebra, accomplishing beautiful zero. Arrived there, this mentality will bask in the uncreated light."

"This water is too deep for me to wade in," said the dwarf Biogenes, affably. "You have followed the ghostly exegesis, which puzzled me in the beginning when I took up philosophy. I placed it in the category of improbabilities."

"Were it not for a woof of habit enshrouding you," said the metaphysician, "you would be aware of the ghost daily in every transaction. You would be aware, as are the most intelligent alchemists (in whose jargon spook is spelled 'energy') that a flat-iron is an apparition and a gravy-spoon a goblin. All appearances are illusory. And you can solve the problem of substance only with a ghostly formula. Some men would calm your fears about time and space with a fourth dimension, but the fourth dimension is as illusory as the first. We have made a mistake in arithmetic—we have sowed an error somewhere, and now we are reaping the whirlwind: corruption, death, struggle, distress, and futility. This problem has yet to be solved, and, though one cut one's throat a thousand times, one must return to it, recrossing the bridge of fools."

Here the metaphysician ceased talking, for his beer was all gone.

# A CHRISTIAN COUNTRY

BY WILLIAM SEAGLE

THE savage iconoclasts who take such delight in pointing out the truth that all men were not actually created free and equal, also, although on less frequent occasions, remark upon the hollow mockery which the colonial heresy hunts and expulsions make of Emerson's noble lines about Plymouth Rock and the Puritan Fathers. Curiously, however, these critics have apparently lost interest in the subsequent history of their country. They generally assume that once the First Amendment was appended to the Constitution complete religious equality was assured to all Americans, leaving them free to worship not only Christ, Jehovah, Buddha or Mohammed, but even Jupiter Ammon or the gods of Montezuma, or, infidel-like, not to worship God at all.

The rise of the Ku Klux Klan has, of late, given this subject a new interest, as has the spread of Fundamentalism, with its attempt to banish the heretical doctrine of evolution from the schools. The Klansmen, the guardians of pure Americanism, and of the divine right of the Nordic Blond, have suddenly set up the doctrine that this is a Christian country, and especially a Christian Protestant country, and intimated boldly that there is no room in it for Jews, Catholics and atheists. In reply, the stalwart exegetes of the Constitution have told them caustically to go read that ancient papyrus, and then sat back confidently to wait for the broadside to take effect. But the deplorable and ironic truth is that while the Kleagles, Grand Exalted Cyclopes, and Imperial Wizards may be completely wrong as to their anthropology there is the very greatest doubt that they

are wrong about the religious state of the Union.

I do not, of course, mean merely that discrimination exists in fact against Jews and Catholics. This, in other words, is not a dissertation that might, perhaps, be entitled: "Religious Liberty: Theory and Practice." The question is rather whether the Klan is not very near the truth in point of law when it insists that this is a Christian country, and especially a Christian Protestant country. The facts, indeed, sadly tarnish the idea that the American Commonwealth was the first state in the world to work a complete disassociation of church and state. The best that was actually achieved was a kind of qualified toleration at the hands of a composite majority of the Protestant faiths. The Klan, which is commonly conceived as a lawless body, substituting lynch law for due process, is not put to rout but supported in its contention to that effect by a respectable weight of legal authority, by constitutional and statutory provisions, and by judicial decisions which have the full force and dignity of law.

## II

The belief that the religious millennium was reached in America with the adoption of the Constitution is simply another tribute to the force of some of the personalities prominent in the early days of the Republic. The extreme heterodoxy of Jefferson is too well known to need comment. He has been the American Anti-Christ to generations of rural pastors, and his disciple, Madison, shares a great part of his obloquy.