

What I Believe

by J. B. PRIESTLEY



PICKING UP a volume of Ruskin, the other day at a friend's house, I was startled by the opening of its preface, which began: "Being now fifty-one years old, and little likely to change my mind hereafter on any important subject of thought (unless through weakness of age), I wish to publish. . . ."

I was startled, because in a very few years I shall be fifty-one, and it has never occurred to me that now I have made up my mind about everything of importance. On the contrary, I find myself moving rather swiftly in a kind of mid-channel of opinion. In my middle forties I find myself returning almost to the mood of eager inquiry that I remember from my early twenties.

Thus, at this present moment, in the middle of war and with the prospect of ruin just round the corner, I am still trying in my amateurish fashion to discover a satisfactory solution to what seem to me the two main problems of this life: the problem of Time, and the problem of the nature of the Self. I have been reading and thinking as hard as it is possible for a worried, busy man to do in wartime but I do not pretend to have made much of an advance

from the position I was in when I finished writing *Rain Upon Godskill*, to which I must refer the curious reader.

These are, of course, riddles of the Sphinx; and unfortunately, while they remain unsolved, I cannot in all honesty even pretend that my "credo" has sharp, fixed outlines. But I have certain convictions that I am not likely to lose, even during a world upheaval.

For example, I am absolutely convinced that, whatever man is, he is not merely the stupid animal, homeless and lost in a universe that is nothing but a vast, idiotic machine, that so many of our contemporaries imagine him to be. (It is the despair created by this barren outlook that is at the root of much of our present trouble.) There is in the universe a moral order, though it may be of a scope beyond our present conception. Man's highest aspirations, the dream of paradise that seems always to have haunted him, the sudden revelations of glory known to prophets and poets — these are not part of some pitiful illusion. The flashes of ecstasy most of us have experienced are glimpses of a fundamental reality. They are not self-deception but a sudden lifting of the veil of animal habit and custom. In the same way, the arts are not bits of luxury, almond icing on the cake of sensible existence — which is what stupid people imagine them to be — but revelations of reality. Even the world the ordinary man enjoys, when he does enjoy it, is largely a legacy from thinkers and artists of the past.

II

I AM NOT A MYSTIC, chiefly because I lack both the discipline and the sensitiveness that mysticism demands, but I believe the mystic is right when he tells us that what is real is not the outward show of things but the so-called "inner" (it probably should be "outer") world of feeling, imagination, and will. Much of our unhappy stumbling comes from the fact

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that we will not understand that this world of feeling, imagination, and will is not a mere shadow show, ghostly when compared with the world that science explains to us, but the enduring sphere in which our real life is passed. It is the world that science explains which is soon discovered to be merely spectral, though this does not mean that science has not its own magnificent uses. But much harm has been done by pseudoscientific "explanations" of religion, art, sex, and so on. And notice how so many writers of this kind first deny the values and then try to cheat them in through a little back door.

Politically I am unashamedly "pink," which seems to me a fine, healthy shade. That is, I believe that for highly organized industrial communities, such as ours in Britain, a moderate collectivism, some form of liberal socialism, is to be advocated. But I distrust all deification of the state and believe that a confusion between the state (which is a mere instrument and no more sacred than the Gas & Coke Company) and the community (which gives us all a fuller existence) has caused much of our present trouble. I dislike the purely economic view of life and distrust all its theorists. That is one reason why, though collectivism does not frighten me, I have a profound distrust of the Marxists, whose whole philosophical basis seems to me dangerously narrow.

I disagree with the verdict that democracy has been given a good trial and has failed. So far we have not had too much of it but not

enough of it. The fact that it may be noisy and untidy does not worry me at all. My own happy family is inclined to be noisy and untidy. Most prisons are quiet and neat. So thoroughgoing is my democracy that I dislike all cries for a leader, preferring my great men to be thinkers, artists, scientists. Great men of action are nearly always a curse to the community; power always corrupts; and we must especially beware — as we know now to our cost — those men who have enormous ambitions but no particular recognized talent. It is much better for the community that assemblies and committees of ordinary men should be allowed to argue and muddle a bit than that megalomaniacs, even though they may have a touch of genius, should impose their wills on populations of robots. This would be obvious if it were not for the trick, now very common, of pretending that the state is not a mere instrument but a superperson, whose will is that of the dictator who happens to have at his command the army of secret police.

Finally, I believe that we must never forget for an instant that what matters is not all the elaborate machinery of existence, which is merely a means to an end, but the state of human consciousness. Everything of real value is contained within it. The clues to the treasure house of life are to be found not outside ourselves but within ourselves. And it is time we stopped looking through a telescope for the kingdom of heaven, for we have been told where it is to be found.



The Forum Quiz

This quiz is planned to be a painless and amusing method of checking up on yourself, to find out how well-informed you are. It covers various fields of interest and should not be difficult for the average person. Counting four points for each question answered correctly, a good score on this quiz would be eighty. (Answers on inside back cover.)

1. Speaking of highway safety — the weather is blamed for lots of things, but how responsible is it for auto accidents? Most fatal crashes occur when the weather is:
(a) rainy (b) foggy (c) clear (d) snowy
2. And suppose you have an accident, such as smacking into a lamppost you thought was merely a Republican. The figures show that your car will probably have:
(a) a bottle of rum and a cutie in it
(b) bad brakes (c) defective steering
(d) a blown-out tire (e) no apparent defects
3. And now for Culture: How many million Americans go to the movies every week, to sit through a picture in which boy meets girl?
(a) 35,000,000 (b) 65,000,000 (c) 85,000,000
4. Think you know a lot about literature? Well, just tell us which author is coupled with the wrong best seller of its day:
(a) "Last Days of Pompeii" — Edward Bulwer-Lytton
(b) "Tale of Peter Rabbit" — Beatrix Potter
(c) "Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come" — Thomas Dixon
(d) "David Harum" — Edward Noyes Westcott
5. What is the line Hamlet speaks, when the grave digger hands him a skull, beginning, "Alas, poor Yorick"?
(a) "I knew him well; he was my father's jester."
(b) "I loved him, as a brother would."
(c) "I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest."
6. To know just what Joe Stalin is thinking these days is a difficult matter. Perhaps the only help may be found in his official handouts, which appear in the newspaper:
(a) Pravda (b) Trud (c) Izvestia
7. "Dear, dear," said Aunt Clytemnestra, looking up from the sports pages. "I wish I owned him. Why, he not only won the last Santa Anita Handicap but turned out to be the biggest money winner of all time," Auntie, of course was referring to the horse:
(a) Hardtack (b) Seabiscuit (c) Breadbasket
(d) Equipoise (e) War Admiral
8. No, King George did not elevate him to the British peerage. He elevated himself, and is known generally as "Lord Haw Haw of Zeesen." Every Englishman knows him as:
9. He lives in a two-room apartment, in a small hotel off Sixth Avenue in Manhattan, filled with books, dust, out-of-date furniture, and bottles of champagne. At night he goes to the theatre and then writes witty, often acid comments on the plays he sees, as America's best known critic:
(a) George Jean Nathan (b) Lewis Gannett
(c) Ward Morehouse (d) Sidney Whipple
10. In all probability you will have a hard time putting down this recent novel, once you start it. It begins:
Brrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!
An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room. A bed spring creaked. A woman's voice sang out impatiently:
"Bigger, shut that thing off!"
(a) "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," by Mark Mason
(b) "A Stricken Field," by Marjita Gellborn
(c) "How Green Was My Valley," by Richard Llewellyn
(d) "Native Son," by Richard Wright
11. Some say that in truth our public debt is now over the limit set by Congress, but at any rate it's very close to the official limit, which is:
(a) \$35,000,000,000 (b) \$45,000,000,000
(c) \$55,000,000,000
12. This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the man who wrote the passage below. It seems hard to realize today that Victorian reviewers once thought him barbarous, rude, and an author no decent person could possibly read.
Egdon Heath . . . was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature — neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony, as some persons who have long lived apart, solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities.
(a) George Moore (b) Thomas Hardy
(c) George Meredith
13. According to most armchair experts, the next theatre of land warfare will be in:
(a) the Balkans (b) Scandinavia
(c) Spain (d) the Rhine region