

## THE PLEASANT PAINS OF MARTYRDOM

BY LEO MARKUN

IT is probable that men started to worship the gods because they feared and wished to propitiate them. Along with many other human traits, they endowed the gods with cruelty. If, as men came to believe, the earth was ruled by one or many divine beings, then earthquakes, storms, pestilences, and famines might well represent the cruel amusements of the ruling powers. This thought is expressed by the unfortunate Earl of Gloster in *King Lear*:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;  
They kill us for their sport.

In various anthropomorphic systems of theology, the gods are also represented as self-cruel. The supposed suffering of divinity has at times served as a model for voluntary self-tormenting on the part of men.

Among the followers of those religions that describe two contending gods, one of good and one of evil, there is a tendency to be particularly scrupulous about the prayers and offerings due to the malignant deity. Cruel gods as well as evil demons and spirits must have their wrath constantly appeased.

Whenever good and evil are supposed to be creations of the same deity, his ire and his mercy are variously emphasized according to the theologian's training and the nature of his algohedonia, or ability to derive pleasure from pain. In the popular Christianity of today, God is usually pictured as beneficent and quick to forgive evil. Yet we often find clergymen dwelling in their sermons upon divine bloodthirstiness. This is, of course, the chief stock in trade of the sensational evangelists. Consciously or not, they are actuated by the principle that an evil divinity receives more spontaneous sacrifice than a good one does.

To Jonathan Edwards, God appeared one "that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some other loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; His wrath toward you burns like fire." It is Gloster's figure: the divinity holding man in a cruel grip, as a boy holds a helpless insect. "To justify God's ways to man," some teachers of cruel theologies find themselves forced to say that mankind is inherently sinful.

The question why the omnipotent deity has put evil into the hearts of the men and women he has created is not easily answered. Its difficulty explains the origin of such dualistic religions as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. These teach that the benevolent deity is not all-powerful, but is constantly engaged in a struggle with a rival malefic god. A vague dualism is often to be found in contemporary Christian preaching.

The notion that God loves pain has preserved some of its old importance among us. The priests of ancient Phoenicia taught that at one time the god El himself, in a time of great peril, had taken his only son, dressed him in noble garments, set him upon an altar and with his own hands put him to death. A similar story is set forth in the Christian holy books.

Paul's doctrine of atonement still influences Catholic and Protestant theologies. This dogma, as ecclesiastical scholars have recently pointed out, appears to be based on the same theory that inspired the Phoenician priests to insist on human sacrifices. That is, a divinity needs to be appeased. According to the early Christian writers, "God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten son" to perish in order that human sinfulness might be forgiven. As among the Phoenicians, a benevolent god seeks out his own pain—for of course he shares that of his son—in order that his worshipers shall not be tormented, but shall have prosperity in this world or at least everlasting life in the next.

The most curious thing about the Pauline theology is that it appears to postulate an evil god whom Jehovah must thwart. This god or being appears in Christian writings as the Anti-Christ or the Devil. Marcion of Pontus, a Christian theologian and religious leader of the second century, taught that Jehovah is a bloodthirsty god against whom Jesus was sent by a higher deity.

The Old Testament furnishes several instances of parents willing to slay their children when called upon by God to do so. Abraham

does not hesitate when ordered to immolate Isaac. To be sure, a suitable substitute appears, making Isaac's death unnecessary. Jephtha, having conquered the Ammonites, fulfils his vow to burn for the Lord the first creature coming out of his house to greet him at his return. It chanced to be his only daughter. Jephtha grants her a respite of two months "to bewail her virginity" in the mountains, then sacrificing her to Jehovah.

Primitive men, because their imagination is limited and their nervous system perhaps somewhat blunt, do not fully appreciate the sufferings of others. But the men who lived in Phoenicia and Palestine two or three thousand years ago were not primitive, and it is impossible to deny the algohedonic elements in their human sacrifices.

At least as late as the second Christian century, the women of Phoenicia continued to worship their gods by delivering their first-born sons to the flames. Thus especially was Baal-Moloch honored, and his worship occasionally gained recruits from the favored children of Jehovah. Sexual excesses, acts of cruelty and of self-cruelty, were mingled in the rites of Moloch.

The Egyptians, too, turned away divine wrath by destroying human life. They honored fifty or sixty varieties of sacred animals, and above all the cat, the ibis, and the beetle. Whatever man killed one of the holy animals, even accidentally, was put to death.

Human sacrifices sometimes took place in Greece when commanded by an oracle. In Homeric days, prisoners of war were often put to death for religious reasons. Homer represents Achilles as sacrificing twelve Trojans upon the funeral pyre of Patroclus, first slaying them with the sword.

The Druid priests of ancient Britain and Gaul habitually sacrificed human beings to their gods. They preferred criminals or prisoners taken in battle, but at times they burnt innocent men belonging to their own tribes. On rare occasions, their noblemen, hoping to avert some great evil, offered themselves for the sacrifice. The Scandinavians celebrated similar rites every ninth year at Upsala in Sweden. The nine sacrifices were ordinarily slaves or prisoners, but in time of danger men of rank might, as with the Druids, be among the victims. We are told that a certain Earl Hakon of Norway, wishing to obtain a victory over a band of pirates, offered his son as a sacrifice.

When the great Mohammedan conqueror, Mahmoud of Ghizni, overran India, a similar propitiation of the gods failed to stop his iconoclastic procession. Jypaul, finding himself unable to defend his dominions by natural means, resolved to offer up his own life. He was burnt to death upon a funeral pyre.

There are many algohedonic elements in Christianity. The injunction to love one's enemy and, when struck, to turn the other cheek is clearly self-cruel. Militant Christianity, in the name of the Cross, has nevertheless spread death and desolation before it, even as Islam and other religions aspiring to conquer the world. According to the tenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus said:

"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I come not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall they be of his own household. . . And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth not after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

Although Christian teachers have dwelt much upon the crucifixion of Jesus and the vicarious atonement, they have not to this day entirely abandoned the doctrine of actual punishment in the next world. Apparently, human beings are so cruel that they do not feel the utmost penalties endurable on earth to be sufficient for those whom they fear or hate; therefore they threaten them with additional penalties beyond the grave.

Jonathan Edwards and other clergymen of his time took extreme pleasure in watching the weaker members of their congregations writhe and fall into hysterics over their descriptions of endless pains. Calvinism taught that very few would be so fortunate as to escape the wrath of the Almighty. The self-cruelty underlying such a doctrine is obvious.

A cruel and gloomy religion always postualtes a cruel divinity or divinities; it is for this reason that many Christians now find the theological doctrine that emphasizes the atonement on the cross insupportable. But, to the Christian martyrs, it was a great source of joy to consider that they were following in the path of the Master. Perhaps they too were helping to win salvation for many

by means of their sufferings. Bliss shone in their eyes despite the tortures to which they were subjected.

The very religions which furnish many willing martyrs are usually those which are ready to put non-believers to death if the occasion presents itself. This is but to say that cruelty and self-cruelty always go together and are to a certain extent interchangeable.

The sons of Islam were long distinguished by their willingness to give their lives for Allah and his prophet Mohammed. They felt assured that those who died fighting for their religion entered quickly into the delights of Paradise. They seemed anxious to send infidel dogs at once to Hell, though the payment of tribute sometimes lessened their ardor.

The fact that people have believed sufficiently in a cause to die for it has usually helped a great deal in gaining converts. The blood of the martyrs, it has been said, is the seed of the Church; but, with regard to such religions as Christianity and Mohammedanism, many more have died in resisting than in testifying. However important alghedonia may be among human beings, it is normally weaker than the life-preserving attitudes and habits.

Perhaps the Jews are as a class especially self-cruel. Where their persecutions are relaxed, the tendency to intermarry with their Gentile neighbors and to lose their ethnic individuality asserts itself. Many, probably most, descendants of the Hebrews who lived a century before the beginning of the Christian era are no longer known as Jews. Great numbers of them became attached to Christianity or Islam, or died in religious persecutions. It seems highly probable that converts to Judaism have done much to make up the losses. In some cases, martyrdom and danger must have been among the chief attractions. Now that religious dissent has become somewhat less hazardous than it has been, there seems to lurk more than a trace of the love of martyrdom in the change from Judaism to Zionism, from creed to nationality, as a unifying influence, that is going on among those who call themselves Jews. Nations, not churches, go to war in our time; and nations are somewhat more intolerant of nonconformity than churches.

Martyrologies have always been more influential than learned books of religious doctrine. What Protestant treatise on theology has counted for half so much in comforting the weak in spirit as

Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*? As to the importance of the passion of Jesus, that is amply attested by the popularity of the legends and pageants founded upon it as well as by the symbolic importance of the crucifix. The most familiar parts of the New Testament are undoubtedly those dealing with the death at Golgotha.

In the early persecutions of the Christians, political motives counted for much. To render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's meant more than merely to respect his coinage and to pay his taxes. It meant also to acknowledge his divinity. To deny that he was brother to the gods was to strike directly at his authority. Monarchs call themselves divine in order to establish their rule on something firmer than armed force or the consent of the people.

The Christians were seldom handed over to priests to be sacrificed to the gods. In the Roman Empire, it is said that they were sometimes thrown into the arena to furnish a pleasant bit of amusement. Legend has it, too, that the women were on occasion given to the brothel patrons rather than to the lions.

The priests of God did not execute the heretics who were condemned to death by the Holy Office of the Catholic Church. The fiction that the Church shed no blood was maintained throughout, men and women who were to be thrown living into the fire being first hypocritically (or formally) commended to the mercy of the secular arm. Cupidity was usually joined with religious bigotry in the modern Inquisition, for the confiscations enriched the monarchs of Spain and the inquisitors.

The burnings at the *autos-da-fé* were, then, criminal executions rather than offerings to God. Occasionally a Jewish martyr, familiar with the burning of animals as a religious rite, thought of his death as an immolation. One who was offered a pardon if he should consent to renounce his faith said he preferred to die as a sweet savor before the Lord.

We read of martyrs who "washed their hands fearlessly in the flames" and whose terrible pain seemed dissolved in the bliss of their mystical union with God. As Krafft-Ebing and other psychologists have said, the extreme ecstatic effects of love, religion, and pain are the same. It may be that the hand-washing martyrs enjoyed voluptuous pleasure; and some form of cruel joy, possibly tinged with sexual associations, came to such inquisitors as Torquemada and Arbues.

Cruelty is still, of course, occasionally manifested as religious as well as racial or national intolerance. Whatever is strange is always suspect to most people. The pleasure of humiliating was responsible for the badges and other indignities imposed upon the Jews in medieval Europe. In the dominions of the Seljuk Turk Alp Arslan, the Christians had to wear heavy iron collars. In Cairo under Al Hakem, the Jews were distinguished by wooden bells, the Christians by heavy wooden crosses which they had to carry in the streets.

The universal impulse toward cruelty is always seeking out occasions to manifest itself. A good cause that affords excuses for robbing and killing or at least for insulting and calumniating: what more can a cruel monarch or mob desire? That the Crusaders who went forth to regain the Holy Sepulchre for Christianity should murder Moorish and Jewish children and violate unbaptized maidens was perhaps to be expected; but they were almost as willing to rob, murder, and rape Christians. Having enlisted to shed blood, whose blood they poured out was of secondary importance.

At Lisbon in 1509, two thousand or more newly-converted Jews were massacred by a mob at the instigation of a Dominican preacher. If the desire to serve Christ was at the bottom of the medieval religious butcheries, how shall we account for the fact that these new sheep in the fold were bloodily destroyed? The answer is obviously that it is the nature of the wolf to eat sheep, and an excuse—as Aesop's fable teaches—can always be found.

Perhaps Christianity is a religion of mildness, but Christian persecutors have been no less cruel than those eager to advance the interests of other faiths. The history of the Jews since the conversion of Constantine contains ample illustrations of this statement. The Jews have, indeed, had comparatively few chances to retaliate; but, in the sixth century, when they had helped to capture Jerusalem for the Persian forces, they are said to have massacred ninety thousand Christians. In the recent persecutions of the Armenian Christians by the Turks, the greater power rather than the greater desire to inflict cruelty seems to have been on the side of the Mussulmans. Sheep can play the part of wolves well enough if provided with the proper teeth and claws.

The persecutions and sufferings of the primitive Christians have been greatly exaggerated, as Gibbon was one of the first to show. The chief reason for the pious lies was, no doubt, the desire to prove

a miraculous propagation; but the thrill of aliohedonia was also involved. Certainly many Christians were soon found willing to risk their lives in sectarian wars, and the iota differentiating the Homoiousians from the Homoiouians was responsible for much shedding of blood. Some of the theological distinctions over which battles were fought Gibbon professes himself unable to understand: we can hardly suppose that the peasants who lost their lives to prove that the two persons of the one substance of the godhead had one or two wills could have argued the matter very intelligibly by word of mouth.

An incident which took place in thirteenth-century France well illustrates the fact that religious persecutors care more to shed blood than to serve religion. The city of Beziers was captured in the crusade against the heretical Albigenses. There were many good Catholics among the inhabitants, and it was not easy to tell them apart from the accursed heretics. The Abbot of Ciseaux, leader of the expedition, was asked how the true believers might be recognized. "Kill all!" cried the zealous man of God. "The Almighty will know which belong to him." Accordingly, the massacre was complete. In other cities, too, there were joyous burnings; and heretical ladies were thrown into the wells of their own castles while the soldiery applauded.

It is not necessary to assemble here the statistics of the Inquisition, variously stated as they are according to the bias of historians. There is no doubt that many thousands of human beings were solemnly handed over to the mercy of the civil authorities and just as solemnly burnt alive. Thousands more were otherwise put to death or flogged, left to rot in the prisons of the Church, ruinously fined, or otherwise forcibly taught that heresy is obnoxious to God and his representatives on earth.

"In the love of Christ and his maid-mother," said the zealous Queen Isabella of Castile, "I have caused great misery, and have depopulated towns and districts, provinces and kingdoms." If such was the effect of love, we may easily believe that love and hate produce similar results.

The Protestants of the Reformation period were no more tolerant and no less cruel than the Catholics, though their attacks on papists were less picturesque and in general less organized than those di-



rected against heretics in the countries that adhered to the Roman Church.

Many martyrs have gone to their tortures joyfully because of their belief that they were thus entering into eternal bliss. This is not ordinarily the case with atheists, agnostics, and even deists who suffer for their opinions. Bacon, in his essay "Of Atheism," interprets this fact with strange logic to mean that their very martyrdom indicates a lack of sincerity in their professions of belief. He asks, "If they did truly think that there was no such thing as a God, why should they trouble themselves?" He does not explain why they should be willing to die for denying a divinity in whom they actually believe. The atheist martyrs have made a god of truth (truth as they saw it, naturally). They have shared with other martyrs strong passive aliohedonia.

Giordano Bruno, whose sole religion was the love of mankind, said, "The wise man fears not death; there may even be times when he seeks death, or at least goes peacefully forth to meet it." Like some other doubters of his time, Bruno was a monk. Believing in a pantheistic philosophy, he boldly proclaimed his belief. He persistently preserved the self-cruel courage of his convictions. Imprisoned and tortured for years, he refused to recant; and he did not wince from the flames when he was burnt at the stake in 1600.

There are men now living in North America who would gladly incarcerate or burn alive all persons whose views of infant baptism, Papal infallibility, the tariff, or Prohibition do not coincide with their own. We should permit Roger Bacon to proclaim freely that Aristotle made some mistakes—the crime, it seems, for which he was imprisoned by his superiors of the Franciscan order—because our views are not those of the thirteenth century, but we have inviolable taboos of our own. Woe unto him who neglects to honor them!

Bold inquirers are cruelly mocked, even physically abused. The churchmen are not the only persecutors. There are little men of science, unable to adjust their minds (or their habit-tracks) to new ideas, who are always ready to pounce upon original thinkers. The innovators in literature and the other arts, who open up new fields and therefore possess merit beyond the intrinsic worth of their own creations, are seldom sympathetically received.

Men of original genius must have a strong capacity for self-cruelty if they are to be successful. They must delight in the very attacks made upon them. Else they are liable to die heartbroken. Every age is one of persecution, because all the generations of man have been cruel. To the gods men and women make in their own images they are ever ready to sacrifice the heretics, the followers of other deities.