

Orwell's "Smelly Little Orthodoxies": Absolutism and the Crisis of Our Time
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With the historical triumph of modernity in the West, who could have possibly foreseen the tsunami-like resurgence of religion as a force in the political life of our times? Radical jihadists are breaching the wall separating church and state with unimaginable barbarism. Even in the United States, the formidable political power of conservative evangelical Christians has liberals scrambling to assure voters that they, too, are born again. Yet this breach is also producing a backlash. All those of good will denounce the despicable actions of the "new totalitarians;" surprisingly, however, even evangelicals are now denounced from a more tolerant Christian perspective as "American fascists."¹ And a growing number of readers are drawn to the works of the "new atheists," including Christopher Hitchens, until recently Orwell's champion and author of *God Is Not Great*. Although Hitchens recently proclaimed Orwell's irrelevance for our time, that judgment stands premature. Orwell continues to matter today, for he condemned not only totalitarianism but all forms of absolutism, all those "smelly little orthodoxies," both secular and religious, that close men's minds.²

Orwell came to understand that the totalitarian monster of his time emerged from the abyss created by a profound spiritual crisis of the West. Humankind needed religion as a moral compass capable of guiding ethical behavior in the world. Moreover, only religion could furnish nothing less than a sense of meaning to life as well as death. At its best, Orwell recognized, the sacred sphere of religion therefore offered indispensable guidance to a life worth living. It alone provided a worthy ideal capable of fostering social unity, moral virtue, and sacrifice on behalf of a transcendent good beyond mere self-interest and materialism.

That noble ideal capable of eliciting the best in humankind had been compromised in the modern era, however, for several reasons. First, the Church had lost its moral authority by sanctifying the inequality of wealth typical of capitalist society and fascism. Organized religion had thus become a tool of the rich and powerful, not an institution capable of calling up our better nature. Equally as damning to Orwell was the demand made by the Church that all who believe must suspend rational, independent thought and submit to the dictates of orthodoxy as handed down by a ruling caste who presumed to speak for God. For Orwell, not only did this violate the

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intellectual's fidelity to truth independently arrived at, it entailed nothing short of the annihilation of the individual by the collective. Finally and most fundamentally, perhaps, Orwell pointed to the growing power of a new, secular religion of progress headed by its high priests, the intellectual and managerial class.

That religion of progress, composed historically of two rivals—capitalism and socialism—although not clothed in religious garb, trumpeted a dawning heaven on earth made possible by an ever burgeoning materialism. The capitalist version featured a cult of consumption and unquestioned faith in economic development, whatever the social cost. But even socialists made a cathedral of the machine and its attendant bureaucracy. Not only Stalinism but the utopian socialism of H.G. Wells equated moral growth with rising economic development while overlooking the need for struggle and meaning. Orwell, throughout his life unflinchingly devoted to democratic socialism, knew better. Men and women needed religion, not materialism, to make sense of life and death.

But which religion? Christianity, capitalism, socialism—each was compromised by an unholy alliance with materialism. Just as damning, all shared a dangerous, even murderous, inclination toward absolutism. How to find and then foster a religious outlook capable of promoting tolerance, social justice, and the life of virtue? That quest animated Orwell's life, and he came to live by a spiritual alternative to Christianity: the religion of Buddhism, which he combined with secular humanism. There he discovered an antidote to all the "smelly little orthodoxies" of both secular and religious absolutism. For at the core of Buddhism stood a commitment to tolerance, social justice, and virtue, all underpinned by love rather than power.

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Throughout his life George Orwell grappled with a dilemma. Abandoning his father's religion at the early age of fourteen, Orwell came to despise both the insinuation of religion with power and the annihilation of independent thought by the Church's demand for unquestioning obedience to its dogma. Yet he was also haunted at the same time by the moral vacuum created by the decay of Christian belief in Western culture. Indeed, for Orwell totalitarianism, with its

mountains of corpses, arose monstrosly from the abyss left by that religion's decay, and he spent much of his life searching for a substitute capable of uniting people in a moral community. Were he alive today, he would find it ironic, but not surprising, that we as desperately need a common ground because of the resurgence of religion in public life in our time.

His cynicism began when, attending St. Cyprians Public School as a scholarship boy looked down upon by the sons of privilege, young Eric Blair came to resent religion's identification of success with wealth rather than moral goodness or virtuous achievement. Reflecting upon his harrowing experience at St. Cyprians in "Such, Such Were the Joys," Orwell recalled how he had wondered how one could both love and fear God, given a religion in which the good and the possible never seemed to coincide? Indeed, he found it far easier to believe in the existence of Lucifer than a loving God who seemed to comfort the comfortable and afflict the afflicted.³

By the time he attended Eton College, from 1917 to 1921, Eric preferred the image of Christ as a flawed human being to that of the Son of God. Moreover, the Church's hypocrisy deeply rankled the young man. As an old classmate recalled after Orwell's death:

He would come into the room, cracking his fingers and grinning. "D'you know what? There are at least six masters on the staff who make a very good living out of the Crucifixion. It's worth over 2,000 [BP] between them. I've looked out what they get, as chaplains and so on. I reckon that must have been the most profitably-exploited event in history—and they all have to talk as if they wished it had never happened.⁴

The corruption of Christianity into a gospel of wealth repulsed Orwell again and again throughout his life. As a fiercely independent thinker committed to democratic socialism, Orwell despised the absolutism of religious dogma and its abuse as a justification for inequality. For the mature Orwell, Christianity was no more than a "lie, a semi-conscious device for keeping the rich rich and the poor poor. The poor were to be contented with their poverty, because it would all be made up to them in the world beyond the grave, usually pictured as something midway between Kew Gardens and a jeweller's shop. Ten thousand a year for me, two pounds a week for you, but we are all the children of God."⁵

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But it was in Burma, where he served as colonial policeman from 1922 to 1927, that he encountered a spiritual alternative whose influence would never leave him: the religion of Buddhism. As Roger Beadon, a Burma colleague, later remembered:

so whether he had a flair for...Eastern languages I don't know, but he could speak it extremely well because I'm told that before he left Burma he was able to go into a Hpongyi Kyuang which is one of those Burmese temples and converse in very high flown Burmese with the Hpongyis, or priests, and you've got to be able to speak very well to be able to do that. 6

Although Orwell never subscribed to any religion whole cloth, Buddhism's core principles informed his thought and life in a fashion entirely undetected by Orwell scholars. For Eric learned from those Hpongyis so long ago that the concept of the separate, autonomous self rooted in modern Western culture and seen as the innate "I" of identity in fact never existed. Possessing neither the independence nor the separation associated with the Western ego, the Buddhist notion of identity featured a kaleidoscopic relational self united with ancestors, family, friends, and culture. And this inherent interconnection of all being formed both a moral imperative as well as a modest vision of immortality: one must always place oneself imaginatively in the position of another and the separate self never dies because it doesn't exist. How different from the West. As Pankaj Mishra has recently contrasted:

From this feeling of an innate 'I' arises the autonomous Ego and the tendency to gratify and protect it—the tendency that dictates virtually all human activity. Perceiving itself as separate, the ego turns the world and other people into means for its gratification, giving rise to desire, pride, revulsions, anger and other emotions. The ego seeks to gratify and protect itself through desires.7

Power secures those desires, including claims to absolute Truth and rejection of tolerance.

By Buddhist lights, the imperial ego constituted the source of all suffering and conflict as it sought to impose its will on others. Buddhism thus offered an end to suffering here on earth through a rigorous therapy of nonattachment to the mirage of the ego and its desires. Moreover, the Buddha never claimed divine status. Rather, he was simply a man who had liberated himself from suffering and then shared his knowledge out of human compassion. Never claiming

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absolute Truth, the faith therefore offered a path to enlightenment, not ultimate authority demanding obedience to the Word by all.

Orwell always held fast to the Buddhist concept of the related self and its acceptance of death as final. “So long as man regards himself as an individual,” he wrote in a 1942 essay on T.S. Eliot, “his attitude towards death must be one of simple resentment.” Eliot’s “escape from individualism” took him into the waiting arms of the Anglican Church, a threshold Orwell could not bring himself to cross, however. “In theory it is still possible to be an orthodox religious believer without being intellectually crippled in the process,” but it is nevertheless “far from being easy, and in practice books by orthodox believers usually show the same cramped, blinkered outlook as the books by orthodox Stalinists or others who are mentally unfree,” Orwell wrote⁸

The problem arose in each case from the mistaken notion that “the Truth” had already been revealed to those few elites possessing privileged consciousness. The “totalitarian state,” Orwell pointed out, “is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible.” Whereas the Truth shifted according to the exigencies of political expediency for political absolutists (Soviet-German relations in World War II, for example), their religious counterparts held truth hostage to the demands of dogma as revealed by the church hierarchy. Absolutism thus explained both Communist Party tirades against nonconforming “petty-bourgeois individualists” as well as the Church’s condemnation of deviancy as heretical. In other words, absolutism, by its very nature, sought to annihilate the individual in the name of the collective. And as an intellectual, Orwell’s allegiance lay in an understanding of truth as rooted in fidelity toward facts and feelings by the autonomous writer rather than in allowing oneself to be used as an instrument of power. For Orwell, therefore, the attack on intellectual decency, typical not only of his time but ours as well, formed only part of a much larger war on the individual and the exercise of unfettered imagination which, “like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity.”⁹

Just as the Party demanded unquestioning obedience to the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism as revealed by Stalin, the Church demanded obedience to such rationally incoherent doctrines as

virgin birth, Christ's resurrection, and, most difficult for Orwell to swallow, eternal life after death. Buddhism never demanded the suspension of reason with the bribe of an afterlife. Indeed, Orwell came to see Christianity's Heaven as nothing short of a manifestation of hedonism, of the ego's self-interested aim of retreating from the painful struggles of life into a realm of eternal peace. For Orwell, contrarily, "death was the price of life," as a more modest but less intellectually crippling form of immortality presented itself in "working, breeding and dying instead of crippling [one's] faculties in the hope of obtaining a new lease of existence elsewhere."¹⁰ And so Orwell melded the most appealing aspects of Buddhism with the "much-derided 'Kingdom of Earth'," the concept of a society "in which men know they are mortal and are nevertheless willing to act as brothers." Acknowledging that "Brotherhood implies a common father," he nevertheless believed that a "sense of community" not centered on God remained possible. He looked for that new basis in the "half-conscious way" that humans realize that they are not fundamentally separate individuals but instead "only a cell in an everlasting body," only, that is, part of a transcendent collective that outlasts the dying self. Why else would men willingly sacrifice themselves in battle, for example? Orwell's answer: "All that this really means is that they are aware of some organism greater than themselves, stretching into the future and the past, within which they feel themselves to be immortal."¹¹

In December, 1936 the lanky, newly-married Brit arrived in Spain to fight fascism, his size 12 boots tossed over a shoulder. A fascist sniper shot Orwell through the throat on the Aragon front, but it was the anarchists' erstwhile allies, the communists, who attempted to hunt him down and kill him, all because Stalin sought to suppress the dissident Spanish Left. This betrayal led Orwell to realize that, despite their ideological differences, Hitler and Stalin had a great deal in common. Thus his Spanish experience formed the basis of his insight into the very nature of totalitarianism. And Orwell believed that the encroaching totalitarian darkness could be rolled back only if "we can reinstate the human belief in brotherhood, without the need for a 'next world' to give it meaning."¹² For not only was Christianity twisted to justify class oppression, not only did it strangle intellectual freedom, but it even lent itself to justifying Soviet tyranny. As he put it, the need for a next world to give brotherhood meaning "leads innocent people like the dean of Canterbury to imagine that they have discovered true Christianity in Soviet Russia. No doubt they are only the dupes of propaganda, but what makes them so willing

to be deceived is their knowledge that the kingdom of Heaven has somehow got to be brought on to the surface of the earth.” But, insisted Orwell, “we have got to be the children of God, even though the God of the Prayer Book no longer exists.”¹³

Yet, despite his revulsion with the hypocrisy of the Church, he was deeply, even painfully tormented by the waning power of religion in the West even to the end of his life. Not long before his death, his hopes of recovery fading, Orwell kept a brief journal in which he described his dreams of death as well as thoughts about suicide and women’s purportedly devouring sexuality, all subjects featuring the annihilation of the self. Among these fragments, all of which confirm that he indeed did not fear death, we find this exceedingly sharp comment upon Christianity:

Recently I was reading somewhere or other abt [sic] an Italian curio dealer who attempted to sell a 17th century crucifix to J.P. Morgan. It was not at first sight a particularly interesting work of art. But it turned out that the real point was that the crucifix took to pieces & inside it was concealed a stiletto. What a perfect symbol of the Christian religion.¹⁴

Orwell’s torment grew from the realization that, although Christianity was a “stiletto” plunged into the soul, the faith had nevertheless provided the moral foundation necessary to life together. As he wrote in 1944, “The real problem of our time is to restore the sense of absolute right and wrong when the belief it used to rest on—that is the belief in personal immortality—has been destroyed. This demands faith,” he continued, “which is a different thing from credulity.”¹⁵

Science, unquestioning faith in progress, the cult of consumption, ideology—all these formed the compound dry rotting the belief in an afterlife. Even though the next world was “in some sense ‘believed in’” by Christians, that belief simply failed to possess “the same actuality in people’s minds as it had a few centuries ago” so that “hardly anyone nowadays feels himself to be immortal.”¹⁶ In another article he criticized an angry reader for asserting with certainty that most people believe in “something” after death. The point missed by the reader, Orwell cautioned, was that “the belief, such as it is, hasn’t the actuality it had for our forefathers. Never, literally never in recent years, have I met anyone who gave me the impression of believing in the next world as firmly as he believed in the existence of, for instance, Australia. Belief in the next

world does not influence conduct as it would if it were genuine,” he continued. “With that endless existence beyond death to look forward to, how trivial our lives here would seem! Most Christians profess to believe in Hell. Yet have you ever met a Christian who seemed as afraid of Hell as he was of cancer?”¹⁷

Disbelief had resulted in hubris, the sinful propensity to play God and usurp His power. And the cult of progress underpinned both capitalism and undemocratic socialism. In a letter written in April, 1940, for example, Orwell praised Charles Dickens, who perhaps held the “most childish views on politics,” but who nevertheless possessed a “sound moral sense,” that would have enabled Dickens “to find his bearings in any political or economic milieu.” Orwell was truly frightened, however, by the modern intelligentsia’s “inability to see that human society must be based on common decency, whatever the political and economic forms may be.”¹⁸ But they believed all too readily that utopia was at hand simply because private property had been abolished by the Soviet state. And because Marx, under the influence of Darwin’s theory of evolution, had posited the superiority of the collectivist state, many left-wing intellectuals accepted Stalinism as the highest stage of human progress. If kulaks and other members of the petty bourgeoisie opposed collectivism, then they would be swept into the dustbin of history, sacrificial offerings to the god of progress.

This blind faith in progress indicated “the lack of a moral nose.” Dickens, on the other hand, and “without the slightest understanding of Socialism etc., would have seen at a glance that there is something wrong with a regime that needs a pyramid of corpses every few years.” Paraphrasing Nietzsche, Orwell told Humphrey House that “if you are all right inside you don’t have to be told that it is putrid. You can smell it—it stinks.” But so heady was the religion of progress that English intellectuals had “become infected with the inherently Marxist notion that if you make the necessary technical advance the moral advance will follow of itself.” And to his immense credit, Orwell recognized that capitalism, too, worshiped at the alter of progress. “I don’t believe that capitalism, as against feudalism, improved the actual quality of human life, and I don’t believe that Socialism in itself need work any real improvement either,” he counseled House. Recalling his stay in Morocco the previous year, Orwell wrote House that the Berber villagers he

had met in the Atlas Mountains, although perhaps a thousand years behind their European counterparts in terms of technology and material comforts, were in truth better off than the presumably more advanced Europeans. “We are physically inferior to them, for instance, and manifestly less happy. All we have done is to advance to a point at which we could make a real improvement in human life, but we shan’t do it without the recognition that common decency is necessary.”¹⁹

Common decency, to be sure, as well as a religious tradition liberated from obeisance to the cult of progress. As he wrote in 1946, “A question... seldom asked by anybody, is why we are on earth at all, and, leading out of this, what kind of lives we want to live.”²⁰ And again, both capitalists and socialists assumed that “all problems lapse when one’s belly is full.” For Orwell, however, the opposite was true: “It is when we have got away from drudgery and exploitation that we shall really start wondering about man’s destiny and the reasons for his existence.”²¹ These were, and remain, the central questions of human life, questions to which the religion of progress provides no answers.

Led by the utopian faith in progress, men’s pride had resulted not in heaven on earth so much as a fall into a “cesspool of barbed wire.” For in a world bereft of a moral standard capable of eliciting obedience, devotion, and self-scrutiny, humanity’s lust for power overwhelmed the moral life. “We are living in a nightmare because we have tried to set up an earthly paradise,” Orwell believed. “We believe in ‘progress,’ trusted to human leadership, rendered unto Caesar the things that are God’s....” The result: neither heaven nor utopia but the abyss. We have created instead the totalitarian world of “endless war and endless underfeeding for the sake of war, slave populations toiling behind barbed wire, women dragged shrieking to the block, cork-lined cellars where the executioner blows your brains out from behind. So it appears that amputation of the soul isn’t just a simple surgical job, like having your appendix out. The wound has a tendency to go septic.”²²

Totalitarians red and brown alike put aside the *Bible* for *The Prince* and worshipped power for its own sake. Moreover, even resistance became nearly impossible for “if death ends everything, it becomes much harder to believe that you can be in the right even if you are defeated,” Orwell

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believed. “Statesmen, nations, theories, causes, are judged almost inevitably by the test of material success. Supposing,” he continued, “that one can separate the two phenomena, I would say that the decay of the belief in personal immortality has been as important as the rise of machine civilization,” he concluded. Again, however, he did not want “the belief in life after death to return,” as we’ve seen, “and in any case it is not likely to return. What I do point out is that its disappearance has left a big hole, and we ought to take notice of the fact.”²³

Early on the morning of January 21, 1950, alone in his University College London Hospital room, Orwell drowned in a pool of blood unleashed by a massive hemorrhage in a tubercular lung. And although he never retracted his disbelief in the Christian Heaven, he would have known that he would achieve that more modest form of immortality sought by Buddhism. He would live on through his dearly beloved adopted son, Richard, and through his immense body of work that has become such an integral stream of thought in the world of culture “stretching into the past and future.” And thus death, the most terrible feature of which resides in the potential that we are forever forgotten as if we had not lived at all, would be transcended. He would be remembered, just as we remember him today.

Foreshadowing the social activism of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, the iconoclastic Orwell’s acknowledgment of interconnectedness manifested itself in a faith composed of a profound and selfless love of the world, for the surface of the earth, to use perhaps his most endearing phrase, as well as in a deep, abiding commitment to social justice whatever the personal cost. Recalling her friend’s rebellious attitude in 1956, Ruth Pitter dubbed Orwell’s love of the world his “blood-feud for joy.” He “had felt the loveliness of life so keenly that he couldn’t endure the evils which are always denying and frustrating it,” Pitter recalled. That blood-feud would never allow him “to let things go by default, as we nearly all do.” Rather than assuming a comfortable angle of repose in his personal life, Orwell “threw all his forces into the battle for truth regardless of the consequences” or the costs. “Once he was convinced that we had no business in Burma, out he came—never mind the sacrifice of his career. Time- serving in any form he hated and rejected with all his force,” she fondly remembered.²⁴

Two months after Orwell's death Sir Richard Rees offered his own tribute to his friend's "godless faith." Acknowledging but also failing to realize the full extent of Buddhism's influence on Orwell, Rees observed that nonattachment certainly did not preclude Orwell's love of the world:

To be unconcerned about what will happen to the world after your own death, to say 'It'll last my time,' was perhaps the greatest sin in his eyes. Against the doctrine of non-attachment he objected that it amounted to saying that if you keep quiet and do nothing you won't get hurt. To Orwell no advice could be more distasteful. To accept death as final was for him a test of intellectual honesty, to care passionately about the fate of mankind after your death was an ethical imperative. If this is not the best possible religious attitude, or rather, if it seems incomplete, it is nevertheless a noble one. And if the value of a religious attitude is to be judged by the behaviour of those who hold it, then the value of his was so great as to silence criticism.²⁵

Sadly, Orwell died thinking that he had failed to discover the answer to the question that haunted him, namely "Can we get men to behave decently toward each other even if they can no longer believe in God."²⁶ He never fully realized that the answer lay in his humanistic communitarianism, which owed so much to the Buddhist tradition, and in the very way he lived his life. And although the question for us has shifted radically, Orwell still speaks to us today. The problem now, of course, is that some among us believe most fervently in heaven and hell; ironically, however, none worries that he himself might well descend to the latter. No, hell the true believers reserve for the enemies of God or the enemies of Allah, while they know with certainty that eternal paradise shall be theirs, even if that means creating hell on earth.

But Orwell helps us to remind the true believers that we must all detach ourselves from the notion that we and we alone possess absolute Truth. Such delusions arise from the imperial ego and its pretensions to know and be all. None of us is a selfless instrument of divine Truth because we are all mere mortals, not God. Certainly we must fight evil just as Orwell fought fascism. But we must always remember that no mortal is immune from the ubiquitous desire to take God's place, particularly when we act in His name, for no human has God or Allah in his pocket. Being neither divine prophets nor saints, our motives must, by our very nature, represent a mixture of idealism compounded by the base alloys of self-righteousness and self-interest.

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If we can somehow bring ourselves to accept the limits of our mortality, if we can renounce the mirage of the disconnected, imperial ego with its claims to absolute Truth, whether religious or secular, and its drive for power, then perhaps we can clear a space for love to grow. And I believe that Orwell would agree: love offers the best hope of averting the very cataclysm that otherwise awaits us.

Endnotes

1. Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2006).
2. Ronald Aronson, "The New Atheists: Toward a Revival of Secular Humanism", *The Nation*, v. 284, n. 25, June 25, 2007, pp. 11-15. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007). Orwell's description of absolutism as "smelly little orthodoxies" appeared in his essay on Dickens in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940).
3. Orwell, "Such, Such Were the Joys," in Peter Davison, ed., *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), v. 19, n. 3409, pp. 353-87. The twenty volumes of Orwell's writings and related documents will be hereafter referred to as CW.
4. "George Orwell—Dark Side Out" by Tom Hopkinson may be found in Folder m/18, Orwell Archive, Special Collections, University College London, hereafter referred to as Archive.
5. Orwell, "Notes on the Way," CW, v.12, n. 604, pp. 121-127.
6. Beadon's recollection appears on p. 124, Folder 7, n.12, Archive.
7. Pankaj Mishra, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p. 183.
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11. Orwell, "Notes on the Way," Works, V. 12, n. 604, pp. 121-27.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid, p. 126.
14. CW, v.20, n. 3725, p. 204.
15. Orwell, "T.S. Eliot", p. 66.
16. CW, v. 16, n. 2425, p. 106.
17. CW, v. 16, n. 2452, p. 152.
18. CW, v. 12, n. 609, pp. 139-41.
19. Ibid., p. 141.
20. CW, v. 18, n. 2881, pp. 75-8.
21. CW, v. 16, n. 2429, pp. 112-13.

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22. Orwell, "Notes," pp. 124-25.

23. CW, v. 16, n. 2429, pp. 112-13.

24. Box 17, "Scripts of Recorded Interviews about Orwell," n.5, p.4, Archive. See Thich Nhat Hahn's *Being Peace* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996) and *No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002).

25. Box M, n.4b dated 15 March, 1950, Archive. Rees's comment on Buddhism's influence on Orwell is extracted from his *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 126.

26. CW, v. 20, n. 3629, p. 119.

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