

by Philip Jenkins

Shadow of Ecstasy

It's starting again. Almost 20 years ago, the federal government launched what became known as the "war on drugs," a radical experiment to suppress illegal drugs through harsh penal solutions. Among other things, this meant long prison sentences for the sale or possession of tiny quantities of controlled substances, sentences that are astonishingly severe by the standards of virtually all other advanced nations. Moreover, these sentences were imposed under strict federal and state guidelines that all but eliminated the discretion of individual judges. The drug war had other delightful features, including giving the Drug Enforcement Administration a major say over what medicines and anaesthetics could be prescribed by doctors or hospitals.

We now have more than enough perspective to declare the drug war an abject failure—nothing less than a catastrophe visited upon American society. The worst aspect of the whole affair is that there cannot literally be a war on drugs: Teams of agents do not take sharp sticks and punish rows of marijuana plants. Instead, the war is on people—American people—and overwhelmingly, the victims of antidrug campaigns are quite ordinary and fairly harmless individuals. Nevertheless, millions of lives have been destroyed in the name of the unattainable principle of social purity. The main beneficiaries of the drug war have been criminal-justice bureaucrats, especially prison administrators and employees. (Just look at the amazing clout of the prison guards' union in California state politics.) It beggars belief that a policy that shifts so much power into the hands of the state bureaucracy originated with politicians who would have described themselves as "conservatives."

At least we now know enough never to make the same mistakes again, right? Guess again. As in every example of state repression throughout history, the mere fact of eliminating the opposition does not slake the official thirst for blood. Time and again over the last 20 years, antidrug authorities have declared victory after victory, destroying this or that "cartel," seizing or killing supposed kingpins—often in circumstances of dubious legality—and alleged drug "epidemics" have appeared

and vanished. Drug usage in the United States has been reduced as far as it conceivably can be by a total war based on police and prisons. The statistics will not go lower. Most of the really serious drugs, especially heroin and cocaine, have been reduced to marginal dimensions, and we face nothing like the widespread experimentation of the 1960's and 70's. By any rational standard, we should be celebrating a famous victory, but of course we are not. Unlike real wars, the so-called drug war has no natural ending, no moment when the enemy fleet is destroyed or a capital city placed under occupation. When one phase ends, another begins. Since the collapse of the national panic over crack cocaine in the 1990's, the antidrug bureaucrats have lived in a state of deep concern and have had to strive ever harder to produce plausible new menaces to justify their continued existence. Some of their efforts have been simply ludicrous: Who remembers the drug methcathinone (CAT), which, for several months in 1993, was proclaimed to be the next national drug epidemic?

Happily, though, in the last two years, a solution has been found in the pharmaceutical MDMA, popularly known as "Ecstasy," which is now scheduled to be "the next crack cocaine." Many medical authorities have nothing but praise for MDMA, which, properly used, has enormous potential in psychiatric practice, to the extent that some have called it a "penicillin of the soul." It allows people to confront traumatic memories without fear, and the substance has basically no bad side effects, provided it is used with adequate ventilation and water. Tragically, though, in our present social environment, MDMA has other worrying features, since it makes people feel very happy, confident, and affectionate—so they use it recreationally. And any chemical that makes people feel good must, in this land of Carrie Nation, be a dangerous drug that demands suppression.

Since 1999, the antidrug agencies have steadily cultivated scare stories about Ecstasy that rely on the familiar rhetorical tactic of confusing the consequences of its legal prohibition with the effects of the substance itself. For instance, Ecstasy use literally *never* causes violence: At worst, it causes users



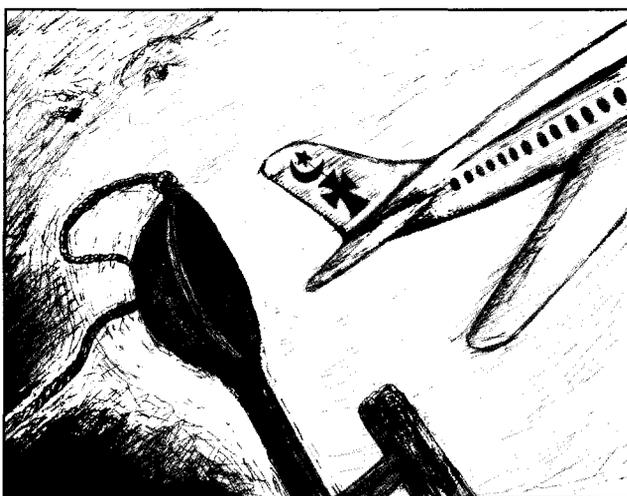
to grin in a silly fashion and declare undying love for all around them. Yet, when it is prohibited, people use it in clandestine settings where they can suffer from the deprivation of fresh air and water. Users can thus suffer and die, and the news stories declare that Ecstasy is a "killer drug," and "death to kids." Moreover, if the substance is illegal, then those seeking it must resort to underground channels to obtain supplies. This brings in organized-crime elements, who tend to kill one another to secure their market share. Thus, we find idiotic headlines like one that appeared in the *New York Times* this summer: "Violence Rises as Club Drug Spreads Out Into the Streets" (June 24). Armed with such misinformation about this "killer drug," legislators then leap into action, imposing draconian penalties for sale or possession. Under new federal sentencing guidelines, Ecstasy use is now penalized *five times* more severely than heroin use, in terms of the potential prison sentence. As a result, everyone is happy; especially the DEA agents, who don't have to find new jobs, and the prison officials, whose pensions are secure.

In 2000, I appeared before a committee of the U.S. House of Representatives that was holding hearings on Ecstasy and other so-called "club drugs." To say the least, I was in the minority among the witnesses—I was so surrounded by hostile cops and pols that I think I now have a much better sense of how General Custer felt. I concluded my presentation with a warning that, as Congress attempted to offer protection from Ecstasy, it would "enact new prohibitions and criminal justice-related policies which will result in causing more harm, more injury and death." Subsequent events make these dangers all the more likely. I would love to believe that there is still time to turn back. We do not have to continue down the road into the next phase of a never-ending drug war. c

Causes and Catapults

The Incarnation and Its Enemies

by Philip Jenkins



For over a thousand years, Western civilization was defined by the shifting religious frontier between Christianity and Islam, and the Muslim religion was the ultimate enemy. Whenever Western Christians wished to condemn a person or a movement, the obvious tactic was to compare it to Islam. When a medieval French king wanted to justify his bloody plunder of the order of Knights Templar, he claimed (falsely) that the knights worshiped a sinister pagan idol called Baphomet, a simple mangling of the name of “Mahomet.” In Stuart England, orthodox Christians faced a rationalist challenge from skeptical Deists, and they replied in the traditional manner by accusing their critics of being closet Muslims. As a piece of scholarly name-calling, it is difficult to beat Humphrey Prideaux’s *Life of Mahomet* (1697), more fully *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Display’d in the Life of Mahomet . . . Offered to the Consideration of the Deists of the Present Age*.

Anti-Muslim rhetoric is nothing new for Western society, but within the past century, some distinguished Christian thinkers have explored the full significance of that chasm between the Cross and the Crescent. After all, just looking at the countless wars between the two sides, there is remarkably little to choose between them in terms of the saints and villains each produced. Even in the era of the Crusades, it was the Muslims who produced, in Saladin, the true *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*. In modern times, it was the highly technological Christian states that inflicted the most horrendous brutalities upon their coreligionist neighbors. This question of distinctions troubled the great Anglican poet and theologian Charles Williams, who dealt with the war between Christians and pagans in his Arthurian epic cycle *The Region of the Summer Stars*. In one

poem (“The Prayers of the Pope”), the pope asks in his prayers: “Where is the difference between us? / What does the line along the rivers define? / Causes and catapults they have and we have, / And the death of a brave beauty is mutual everywhere.” Is it all just a matter of politics, of causes and catapults? Or of who has the most rifles, the best Cruise missiles?

As so often, the best answer to our theological dilemmas may be found in the work of G.K. Chesterton, that remarkable and many-sided writer who, as time goes on, increasingly looks like one of the most important minds of the 20th century. For Chesterton, Christians and Muslims were divided by one simple fact, namely, the Incarnation. The notion that God, the Creator of the Universe, had taken human form, had lived, and died, and was resurrected on earth, was not just one theological point among many: It was the rock upon which all subsequent doctrines and beliefs were founded, including such basic notions as human dignity. Incarnation was not just a truth, but The Truth. As Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy*, “having found the moral atmosphere of the Incarnation to be common sense, I then looked at the established intellectual arguments against the Incarnation and found them to be common nonsense.”

Christians believe in the fact of the Incarnation; Muslims do not; and, therefore, there can ultimately be no compromise between the two. Ideally, Christians and Muslims might well live together in harmony, exercise charity toward one another, and hold intelligent and thoughtful debates—in short, they might act like civilized human beings; but the two worldviews will always be utterly different, and it is absurd to pretend otherwise. There will also be insuperable obstacles to what is optimistically described as “interfaith dialogue,” since such a process can only advance by having one side abandon its most fundamental beliefs. Chesterton was appropriately amused at the notion that Christmas represented an amiable and uncontroversial face of Christianity, a happy ecumenical festival when those of differ-

Philip Jenkins is the author, most recently, of Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way (Oxford University Press).