

Charles Le Gai Eaton, Former British Diplomat (part 1 of 6)

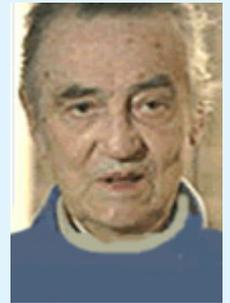
Description: The search for the truth of a philosopher and writer, faced with a constant internal struggle of harmonizing belief and action. Part 1: A secular childhood and a mention of Arabia.

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Published on 16 Jan 2006 - Last modified on 30 Apr 2006

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I was born in Switzerland of British parents, a child of war. At the time of my birth, the final peace treaty ending the first world war, the treaty with Turkey, was being signed close by in Lausanne. The greatest tempest which had changed the face of the world had temporarily exhausted itself, but its effects were everywhere apparent. Old certainties and the morality based upon them had been dealt a mortal blow. But my family background was stained with the blood of conflict. My father already 67 when I was born, had been born during the wars against Napoleon Bonaparte. Both had been soldiers....



Even so, I might at least have had a homeland. I had none. Although born in Switzerland, I was not Swiss. My mother had grown up in France and loved the French above all others, but I was not French. Was I English? I never felt so. My mother never tired of reminding me that the English were cold, stupid, and sexless without intellect and without culture. I did not want to be like them. So where-if anywhere-did I belong? It seems to me in retrospect, that this strange childhood was a good preparation for adherence to Islam. Wherever he may have been born and whatever his race, the Muslim's homeland is the Dar-ul-Islam, the House of Islam. His passport, here and in the Hereafter, is the simple confession of Faith, La ilaha ill-Allah. He does not expect - or should not expect - security or stability in this world and must always keep in mind the fact that death may take him tomorrow. He has no firm roots here in this fragile earth. His roots are above in that which alone endures.

But what of Christianity? If my father had any religious convictions he never expressed them, although - on his death bed, approaching 90 - he asked: 'Is there a happy place?' My upbringing was left entirely to my mother. By temperament, she was not, I think, irreligious, but she had grown up within a religious framework, and she was hostile to what is commonly called organized religion. Of one thing she was certain; her son must be left free to think for himself and never be forced to accept second-hand opinions. She was determined to protect me from having religion 'crammed down my throat'. She warned a succession of nursemaids who came and went in the house and accompanied us to France during the holidays that, if they ever mentioned religion to me, they would at once be dismissed. When I was five or six, however, her orders flouted by a young woman whose ambition it was to become a missionary in Arabia, saving the souls of those benighted people who were - she told me - lost in a pagan creed called 'moslemism'. This was the first I had heard of Arabia, and she drew me a map of that mysterious land.

One day she took me for a walk past Wandsworth Prison (we were living in Wandsworth Common at the time). I must have misbehaved some way, for she gripped me roughly by the arm, pointed to the prison gates and said: 'There's a red haired man in the sky who will shut you in there if you're naughty!' This was the first I had heard of 'God', and I did not like what I heard. For some reason I was afraid of men with red hair (as she must have known), and this particular one living above the clouds and dedicated to punishing naughty boys sounded very frightening. I asked my mother about him as soon as we got home. I do not remember what she said to comfort me, but the girl was promptly dismissed.

Eventually, much later than most children, I was sent to school or rather to a series of schools in England and in Switzerland before arriving, aged 14, at Charterhouse. Surely, with services in the school chapel and classes in 'Scripture', Christianity should have made some impact upon me? It made no impact at all, either upon me or upon my school friends. This does not seem to me surprising. Religion cannot survive, whole and effective when it is confined to one single compartment of life and education. Religion is either all or it is nothing; either it dwarfs all profane studies or it is dwarfed by them. Once or twice a week we were taught about the Bible just as we were instructed in other subjects in other classes. Religion, it was assumed had nothing to do with the more important studies which formed the backbone of our education. God did not interfere in historical events, He did not determine the phenomena we studied in science classes, He played no part in current events, and the world, governed entirely by chance, and by material forces, was to be understood without reference to anything that might -or might not -exist beyond its horizons. God was surplus to requirements....

And yet I needed to know the meaning of my own existence. Only those who, at some time in their lives, have been possessed by such a need can guess at its intensity, comparable to that of physical hunger or sexual desire. I did not see how I could put one foot in front of the other unless I understood where I was going and why. I could do nothing unless I understood what part my action played in the scheme of things. All I knew I knew was that I knew nothing - nothing, that is to say, of the slightest importance - and I was paralyzed by my ignorance as though immobilized in a dense fog.

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