

**WHAT WAS THE RELIGION OF
SHAKESPEARE? A LECTURE DELIVERED
BEFORE THE INDEPENDENT RELIGIOUS
SOCIETY, ORCHESTRA HALL, MICHIGAN
AVENUE AND ADAMS ST., CHICAGO,
ILLINOIS, SUNDAY, AT 11 A. M.**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649764952

What was the Religion of Shakespeare? A Lecture Delivered Before the Independent Religious Society, Orchestra Hall, Michigan Avenue and Adams St., Chicago, Illinois, Sunday, at 11 A. M. by M. M. Mangasarian

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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What was the Religion of Shakespeare?

It is by observing the frequency and emphasis with which certain views and expressions occur and reoccur in an author, and the consistency with which they are given the preference, that we may be able to generalize as to his philosophy or religion. As Shakespeare's works are neither a treatise on theology nor a manual of philosophy, our only means of discovering his attitude toward the problems of life and destiny is by reading, as it were, between the lines.

A great mind can neither sophisticate nor suppress its earnest convictions. This does not mean that anyone with earnest convictions must necessarily be a propagandist. To think and to let think, represents a state of mind which is entirely consistent, both with enthusiasm and toleration, if not with proselytism. We believe that Shakespeare has unmistakably expressed himself on the subject of religion, as he has on that of patriotism, for instance, but without any missionary zeal, which fact has led not a few students of his works to the conclusion that of all the great poets Shakespeare is the only one without a religion.

Green, in his *Short History of England*, writes, that "It is difficult to say whether Shakespeare had any religious faith or no." But this is not a fair way of stating the problem. If by "religious faith" Green means the Anglican, the Presbyterian, or the Unitarian faith, then it is true that we do not know to which of these he nominally belonged, and it does not much matter. But if he means that we have no means of knowing whether or not he accepted the Christian or any other

supernatural interpretation of the Universe, the allegation is not true, so far as we are able to judge. It is difficult to read any one of Shakespeare's tragedies without perceiving that its author is an anti-supernaturalist. In Shakespeare this world is all there is, and it is what men have made it. It is in terms of naturalism, pure and simple, that Shakespeare states the problem of human existence.

It is no objection to this to say that there are ghosts, witches, and apparitions on his stage, and that therefore he was a believer in the supernatural. We must not confound the machinery of the stage with the stage-master. Even Hamlet, when he exclaims that he sees his dead father and Horatio asks him "Where?" answers: "In my mind's eye;" which shows how little the appurtenances of the theatre of those times affected the atmosphere of the author's mind. This same Hamlet who in popular *parlance* has beheld his dead father "revisit the glimpses of the moon," declares in the language of his own sober thought, that the beyond is an "undiscovered country from whose bourne *no traveler returns*." And if Macbeth, unlike Hamlet, puts faith in the supernatural, he does so to his own hurt. But even Macbeth recovers his senses sufficiently to exclaim:

And' be these juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense;

and again:

Infected be the air whereon they ride;
And damned all those that trust them!

If it be objected that Shakespeare's hostility to the supernatural is confined to what might be called the *bogus* variety, and not to the kind that is true, we reply that there is no evidence in the plays that Shakespeare ever made such a distinction. Without anywhere intimating that he believed in one kind of the supernatural and not in another (the kind people believe in is generally their own, and the kind they deny, that

of somebody else), Shakespeare expresses his opinion of those who accept the supernatural in no uncertain way:—

Look how the world's poor people are amazed
At apparitions, signs, and prodigies,
Whereon with fearful eyes they long have gaz'd
Infusing them with dreadful prophecies.*

Having just told us that "It is difficult to say whether Shakespeare had any religious faith or no," Green intimates that Shakespeare was an agnostic, and probably a disciple of Montaigne. If he was an agnostic, it is not true that we do not know "whether he had any religious faith or no." We can be sure that he was without religious faith of any kind, using the word "religious" in the sense of the supernatural—if he preferred agnosticism to the creeds. He was an agnostic, it is to be supposed, because he could not conscientiously profess any of the "religious faiths" of his day.

But to be an agnostic does not mean to be without a religion; it only means to be without a revealed religion. This very agnosticism, as the expression of a courageous, honest and rational protest against revealed religions, is a religion—more manly, certainly, than the popular religions, because while the latter are imitative to a large extent, the former is unconstrained and personal.

Those who say unqualifiedly that Shakespeare had no religion, as Prof. Santayana of Harvard University, does, must mean by religion a recognition of the supernatural, which we submit is to make a partisan use *only* of the word religion. Wishing to prove the absence of religion in Shakespeare, Prof. Santayana writes: "If we were asked to select one monument of human civilization that should survive to some future age, or be transported to another planet to bear witness to the inhabitants thereof what we have been upon earth, we should probably choose the works of Shakespeare. In them we recognize the truest portrait and best memorial of man." After this magnificent tribute to the universality of Shakespeare,

*Venus and Adonis.

Prof. Santayana proceeds to qualify his statement by deploring what he calls "the absence of religion in Shakespeare." He fears that if Shakespeare were our sole interpreter, "the archaeologists of that future age, or the cosmographers of that other part of the heavens, after conscientious study of our Shakespearian autobiography, would misconceive our life in one important respect. They would hardly understand that man had had a religion." This fear is unfounded. It may surely be learned from Shakespeare that "man had had" many superstitions, and also that there was in our world the worship of the Good, the True and the Beautiful. Such a report would not leave the inhabitants of a strange planet in the dark as to whether or not "man had had a religion." Let us make this point a little clearer: In Shakespeare we find both the religion of superstition—addicted to the belief in ghosts, spirits, miracles, visions, and revelations past and present—and the religion of sense, namely, the elimination of the supernatural from human affairs, and the exalting of Goodness, Beauty, and Truth, with Truth as the greatest of the three, as the highest possible ideals of man. But, evidently, Prof. Santayana does not believe that it is possible to leave out the supernatural from religion and still have a religion. "But for Shakespeare, in the matter of religion," writes Santayana, "the choice lay between Christianity and nothing. He chose nothing." In our opinion Shakespeare chose something which was more in accord with the consensus of the competent, though opposed to the prejudices of the populace, namely: the rationalist attitude in the presence of life and death. And why is not this attitude as much entitled to be called a philosophy and a religion as the theological?

Would it not be unfair to say, for instance, that Tennyson's *The Coming Church of Humanity* is no church at all, because it is not after the fashion of orthodoxy:

I dreamed that stone by stone I reared a sacred fane,
A temple, neither pagod, mosque, nor church,
But loftier, simpler, always open-doored

To every breath from heaven; and truth and peace
And love and justice came and dwelt therein:

—or to contend that Goethe was profane and irreligious because the verse in which he sums up his philosophy omits all reference to the essentials of revealed religion?

In the Entire, the Good, the Beautiful resolve to live—
Wouldst fashion for thyself a seemly life.
Then fret not over what is past and gone;
And spite of all thou may'st have lost behind,
Yet act as if thy life were just begun.

The religion of not a few of the best minds has been of the above type; and surely, to a reasonable man the Catholic who denies that the Protestant is a Christian, or the Trinitarian who excommunicates the Unitarian is not more sectarian than the philosopher who denies that Goethe, Tennyson, Voltaire, or Shakespeare, had any religion at all because they did not have *his* religion.

The German critic, Gervinius, on the other hand, expresses the opinion that Shakespeare was silent on religion "because his platform was not a pulpit." But it was a very narrow view to take of religion, to intimate that outside the pulpit religion is an intruder. If religion is one's philosophy of life, it is at home everywhere, but if it is only one's beliefs concerning dogmas and rites, then the pulpit is its exclusive sphere. Shakespeare was silent on religion of the kind Gervinius has in mind, not because "his platform was not a pulpit," but because he had no such religion to express. A man's religion is his philosophy of life, in accordance with which he shapes his conduct and interprets human destiny, and surely Shakespeare was not without such a working-religion.

The position of W. J. Birch, the English parliamentarian who writes from the Christian standpoint, appears to us more consistent. He believes that Shakespeare was not at all silent on religion, in the Christian or supernatural sense of the word, but demonstrably antagonistic to it. He then produces passage after passage to show Shakespeare's positive dislike for

such fundamental tenets of revealed religion, as the doctrines of providence, the Fall of Man, the Holy Sacrament, the Word of God, Salvation, the Church, the Priesthood, etc. Birch denounces Shakespeare because he was not a Christian; because "not only the details, but the essentials, also, of Christianity are the themes of his flippancy." He infers further, from the companions of Shakespeare—Marlowe, Green, Raleigh, Beaumont and Fletcher; and from the books he read—Lucretius, Plutarch, Lucian, Montaigne and Bruno—that he could not have been a Christian, as no follower of Jesus Christ could take any interest in such profane writers.

Replying to those who quote the Will of Shakespeare to prove his piety, Birch says that the Will is not in the poet's handwriting; that the signature, alone, was his, the rest being the customary form of legal documents drawn by lawyers for such occasions. The real sympathies of Shakespeare, Mr. Birch thinks, may be inferred from such lines as the following:—

An idiot holds his hauble for a God. *

and again:

By that same God, *what God so'er it be,* *

--which seems to imply, according to this Christian critic of Shakespeare, that there are as many Gods as there are fancies.

The reason which Mr. Birch assigns for the indifference of Shakespeare's contemporaries to his works and fame was his non-Christian teachings, which made him rather an object of distrust and fear than of admiration. The world of his day was religious, says Mr. Birch, and, therefore, it was glad enough to forget Shakespeare and remember the men who had left monuments of piety behind. The opposition of the religious element is thus given as one of the reasons for the absence of any recognition of his genius and the oblivion to which he seems to have been condemned before a less pious

* Titus Andronicus.

or puritanic age discovered with ecstasy the wealth and glory of his thousand souls. Milton's joyous exclamation echoes the gratitude of the intellectual world:

Thou, in our love and astonishment
Hast found a life-long monument.

But the majority of the apologists of supernaturalism, appreciating the value of Shakespeare as an ally, have stoutly claimed him as a Christian believer. Bishop Wordsworth has written a voluminous work to show how much of the Bible there is in Shakespeare. Mr. George Brandies, with much justice, calls this pious bishop's book "unreadable." Another Christian interpreter of Shakespeare offers the following apology for the poet's seeming indifference to the tenets of orthodox religion: "Doubts have been entertained as to Shakespeare's religious belief, because *few* or *no* notices of it occur in his works. This ought to be attributed to a *tender* and *delicate reserve* about holy things, rather than to inattention or neglect."

The above shows how indispensable to the interests of Christian doctrine Shakespeare's approval of them had come to be regarded by the later Christians. His was too great and shining a name not to have it listed on their side, and so was invented "a tender and delicate reserve" on the part of the poet, to explain his open protests against their creeds, which they mildly call his failure to take "notice" of them.

Others, again, have written lengthy arguments to prove that the immortal poet was a devout Catholic, an orthodox Calvinist, a loyal Anglican, and so forth. The man who in his lifetime was associated with Marlowe and his school, and who was vehemently denounced by the exponents of religion in that day—the Puritans—is today hailed by the descendants of these same Puritans as the honor and glory of their faith. But this change of heart is a purely sentimental one. It is, as already intimated, the increasing *eclat* of Shakespeare's name and fame which has made him desirable as a coreligionist. Already, even Thomas Paine is being claimed as a fellow-