Shakespeare and Religion

by Aldous Huxley

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A name that is a household word, and a word that is on everybody's lips. How simple and straightforward! But then the inquiring mind starts to ask questions. **Who precisely was Shakespeare?** And what are the sorts of phenomena to which we apply the words *religion* and *religious?*

Others abide our question. Thou art free.

We ask and ask. Thou smilest and art still.

True enough, the poet penned no memoirs; he merely left us Shakespeare's Complete Works. Whatever else he may have been, the author was a genius-of-all-trades, a human being who could do practically anything. Lyrics? The plays are full of lyrics. Sonnets? He left a whole volume of them. Narrative poems? When London was plague-ridden and the theaters, as hotbeds of contagion, had been closed, Shakespeare turned out two admirable specimens, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece.* And then consider his achievements as a dramatist. He could write realistically in the style of a dispassionate and often amused observer of contemporary life: he could dramatize biographies and historical chronicles; he could invent fairy stories and visionary fantasies; he could create (often out of the most unpromising raw material) huge tragic allegories of good and evil, in which almost superhuman figures live their lives and die their often sickening deaths. He could mingle sublimity with pathos, bitterness with joy and peace and love, intellectual subtlety with delirium and the cryptic utterances of inspired wisdom.

And what about "religion"? The word is used to designate things as different from one another as Satanism and satori, as fetish-worship and the enlightenment of a Buddha, as the vast politico-theologic of financial organizations known as churches and the intensely private visions of an ecstatic. A Quaker silence is religion, so is Verdi's *Requiem.* A sense of the blessed All-Rightness of the Universe is a religious experience and so is the sick soul's sense of self-loathing, of despair, of sin, in a world that is the scene of perpetual perishing and inevitable death.

Our many-faceted Shakespeare commented on religion in almost all its aspects. Here, for example, is what Shakespeare, the detached and amused observer of the Human Comedy, has to say about popular religion-religion as it is apprehended and practiced by the more ignorant and simple-minded members of his society. The passage I have chosen is taken from that marvelous scene from *Henry V* which the Hostess tells Bardolph of the passing of Sir John Falstaff.

BARDOLPH: Would I were with him,
wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell!

HOSTESS: Nay, sure, he's not in hell: he's in
Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. 'A made a finer end, and went away,
an it had been any christom child; 'a parted ev'n just between twelve and one, ev'n at the turning o' th' tide: for after I saw him fumble
with the sheets and play with flowers, and
smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was
but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a
pen, and 'a babbled of green fields. "How
now, Sir John!" quoth I, "what, man! be
o'good cheer." So 'a cried out "God, God,
God!" three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I
hoped there was no need to trouble himself
with any such thoughts yet.

"There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me," Lord Tennyson earnestly affirmed, "than in half the creeds." Samuel Butler was more interested in Falstaff, Bardolph, the Hostess, and all the rest of them- they were the products of an Age of Faith. For them, the Christian Scheme of Salvation was a self-evident truth, and in their minds the Last Judgment and Hell-fire were unquestionable realities. So was Abraham's bosom, or was it King Arthur's bosom? After all, what difference did it make? A bosom is a bosom, and both names began with A. Their appetite for faith was omnivorous and could swallow anything. All the same, "I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with such thoughts yet." The doubt in honest faith is deep indeed.

Honest faith in God, angels and saints implied a corresponding faith in the Devil, evil spirits and the witches, sorcerers and magicians who collaborated with them. Shakespeare lived in an age when preoccupation with the foul Fiend and his human allies was more than ordinarily intense. Vivid descriptions of witchcraft and rules for its repression had been set forth, in the last decade of the fifteenth century, by two learned Dominicans, Father Kramer and Father Sprenger, whose *Malleus Maleficarum or Hammer of Witches,* was to remain a standard textbook for nearly 200 years. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in Protestant and Catholic countries alike, incredible numbers of witches and sorcerers were arrested, tortured, hanged, or burned alive. Like the overwhelming majority of his contemporaries (including his sovereign lord, King James I, who was the author of a learned work on witchcraft), Shakespeare certainly believed in sorcery and the possibility of collaboration between human hearts and devils. But this faith was tempered by common sense and dispassionate observation. Thus Glendower claims that he can call spirits from "the vasty deep." "Why, so can I," says Hotspur "or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?" The vasty deep is alive with spirits, and it is possible to establish communications with them-possible, but, as a matter of observable fact, very difficult. Magic works, but is notoriously unreliable even in the hands of those who have contracted their souls away to the Devil.

Most late medieval and early modern writers are anti-clerical-playfully anti-clerical like Chaucer, who writes of the Friar, "there is none other incubus but he," or else savagely anti-clerical like Ulrich von Hutten or the Franco Sacchetti of the Trecento *Novelle. Shakespea*re, on the contrary, has no constant bias against the clergy. He knew, of course, that established churches and the regimes they support are great machines for consolidating power and acquiring wealth; he knew that gold

This yellow slave

Will knit and break religions; bless th' accurst;

Make the hoar leprosy adored; place thieves,

And give them title, knee, and approbation,

With senators on the bench . . .

The fact was obvious and deplorable, but he preferred not to harp on it.

Religion is not merely a complex of behavior-patterns and organizations. It is also a set of beliefs. What were Shakespeare's beliefs? The question is not an easy one to answer; for in the first place Shakespeare was a dramatist who made his characters express opinions which were appropriate to them, but which may not have been those of the poet. And anyhow did he himself have the same beliefs, without alteration or change or emphasis, throughout his life?

The poet's basic Christianity is very beautifully expressed in *Measure for Measure, where t*he genuinely saintly Isabella reminds Angelo, the self-righteous Pillar of Society, of the divine scheme of redemption and of the ethical consequences which ought to flow from its acceptance as an article of faith-ought to flow but, alas, generally do not flow!

Alas, alas!

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once;

And He that might the vantage best have took

Found out the remedy. How would you be,

If He, which is the top of judgement, should

But judge you as you are? O, think on that;

And mercy then will breathe within your lips,

Like man new-made.

These lines, I would say, express very clearly the essence of Shakespeare's Christianity. But the essence of Christianity can assume a wide variety of denominational forms. The Reverend Richard Davies, a clergyman who flourished toward the end of the seventeenth century, declared categorically that Shakespeare had "died a papist." There is no corroborative evidence of this, and it seems on the face of it unlikely; but almost anything is possible, especially on a death-bed. What is certain is that Shakespeare did not live a papist; for, if he had, he would have found himself in chronic and serious trouble with the law, and vehemently suspected of treason.... (The casuists of the Roman curia had let it be known that the assassination of the heretic Queen Elizabeth would not be a sin; on the contrary, it would be registered in the murderer's credit column as a merit.) There is, therefore, every reason to suppose that Shakespeare lived a member of the Church of England. However, the theology which finds expression in his plays is by no means consistently Protestant. Purgatory has no place in the Protestant world-picture, but in Hamlet and in *Measure for Measure the* existence of Purgatory is taken for granted.

I am thy *father's spirit,* says the Ghost to Hamlet,

Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,

And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,

Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature

Are burnt and purg'd away. But that I am forbid

To tell the secrets of my prison-house,

I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word

Would harrow up thy soul;

freeze thy young blood;

Make thy two eyes, like stars, start

from their spheres....

In *Measure for Measure,* Claudio gives utterance to the same fears. Death is terrible not only in its physical aspects, but also and above all because of the awful menace of Purgatory.

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;

To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;

This sensible warm motion to become

A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit

To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside

In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;

To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,

And blown with restless violence round about

The pendent world; or to be worse than worst

Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts

Imagine howling! 'tis too horrible!

The weariest and most loathed worldly life

That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment

Can lay on nature, is a. paradise

To what we fear of death.

In *King Lear, the poet* presents us with another world-picture that is neither Catholic nor Protestant. Purgatory exists, but not hereafter. Purgatory is here and now.

I am bound

Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears

Do scald like molten lead.....

Whatever else he may have been, Shakespeare was not a precursor of Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. Indeed, during the years of his artistic maturity-the years that witnessed the production of Hamlet, *Troilus and Cressida, Macbeth, Measure for Measure, and King Lear,* he would seem to have passed through a spiritual crisis that made any facile kind of positive thinking or positive feeling impossible. Other great writers have passed through similar crises-Dickens, for example, and Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy's negativism resulted in a religious conversion and a change of life. Dickens cured himself of despondency by plunging into amateur theatricals. **How Shakespeare managed his private life we do not know.**

All that we know is that if he did indeed go through a dark night of cosmic despair, he was poet enough to be able (in Wordsworth's words) to recollect the emotion in creative tranquility and to use his experience as the raw material of a succession of tragic dramas that were followed, during the last years of his professional career, by a series of romances, in which strange and improbable adventures are acted out in an atmosphere of acceptance, of forgiveness, of a conviction that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, God's in his heaven and all's right with the world. But on the way to the final serenity of *The Tempest,* what horrors must be faced, what miseries endured. Keats wrote of Shakespearian tragedy as being the record of "the fierce dispute between damnation and impassioned clay." But there is much more in these dramas than the classical battle between instinct and duty, between personal desires and the tradition-hallowed ideals of religion. The Shakespearian hero has to fight his ethical battles in a world that is intrinsically hostile. And this intrinsically hideous universe is shot through with moral evil-evil on the animal level, on the human level, on the supernatural level. Thus the "soiled fitchew" is the bestial caricature of womanhood; for in woman, "but to the girdle do the gods inherit, beneath is all the fiend's."

And men are capable of greater wickedness even than women. "Use every man after his desert, and who would 'scape whipping?" There is, no doubt, some kind of moral order. The good go to Heaven, the evil to Purgatory and Hell. And even here on earth it can sometimes be observed that "the gods are just and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us." But divine justice is tempered by divine malignity. "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods-they kill us for their sport." And to the effects of divine m'alignity must be added those of man's wickedness and stupidity, and the workings of a blind fate completely indifferent to human ideals and values. Sickness, decrepitude, death lie in wait for everyone.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,

To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player.

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more: it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

The speaker is Macbeth; but Macbeth as we know him is Shakespeare's creation, and it was Shakespeare who put the words of this summing up of the case against human life into Macbeth's mouth. Between the thought of the dramatist and of the *dramatis persona there mus*t have been if not an identity, at least an affinity.

Unlike Milton or Dante, Shakespeare had no ambition to be a systematic theologian or philosopher. He was not concerned to "justify the ways of God to Man" in terms of a set of metaphysical postulates and a network of logical ideas. He preferred to "hold the mirror up to nature." It was a many-faceted mirror that changed with the passage of time, and the nature it changed, reflected, and recorded was a pluralistic mystery. What he gives us is not a religious system; it is more like an anthology, a collection of different points of view, an assortment of commentaries on the human predicament offered by persons of dissimilar temperament and upbringing. Shakespeare's own religion can be inferred in many cases from hints dropped by his characters.

Interpreters of Shakespeare have divided his career into four sections-first, a time of the workshop during which the young playwright was busily engaged in perfecting his technique. The second, the time in the world when the mature technician was using his powers to dramatize history, assorted fiction, and biography. Third, the time in the depths, which is the period we have just been discussing, when Shakespeare produced the series of black, unhappy allegories from Hamlet to *Measure for Measure;* and finally the time on the heights. This time on the heights we must now consider.

In our religious context, what is the significance of these later plays? What are we to make of this description of Shakespeare's career? There is certainly a change of mood, there can be no doubt of this. A greater acceptance, a greater openness to the strange anomalies of life. But exactly what does this correspond to in the general history of religious experience? Let us take the case of *The Tempest,* by far the best known and most popular of these latest plays-what did Shakespeare mean by *The Tempest?* We presume that this was the last of his plays, but we cannot be absolutely sure of this, nor can we be sure of the fact that he himself had intended it to be the last. This makes it very difficult to accept the hypothesis that in *The Tempest* Shakespeare was giving a kind of symbolic account of his own career. For he is Prospero. Prospero is the enchanter, the creator of visionary poetry, and in the end after exercising his enchantment with extraordinary success, he goes back to his dukedom at Milan, resolved to throw his magic wand and his book of charms overboard and to live out the remainder of his life on the ordinary level of human experience. But after all, the return of the successful actor to his native place where he would live out the remainder of his life, a solid pillar of society, and the return of a deposed duke to his sovereignty, where he would have to exercise an almost godlike judgment over the destinies of his subjects-these things do not have much in common.

If indeed *The Tempest* was written as an allegory of Shakespeare's life, it was a far-fetched allegory, one which leaves us wondering why this great master of the art should have been unable to find something more suitable. But at the same time we have to remember that the fact that Prospero was an enchanter is a most disturbing one in relation to religion. Enchantment, the use of magic, has always occupied an ambiguous position in religion. Religion calls for opening up the self, the letting that which is more than the self flow through the organism and direct its activities. Magic, on the other hand, is an attempt to establish the complete mastery of the self over everything. It is a technological device making the self all-powerful and so imitating God. But in no religion has this kind of hubris or over weening pride been considered admirable, and although supernormal powers may manifest themselves spontaneously on the way toward enlightenment, yet all the Masters of the spiritual life have insisted that they are not important, and that they must, if the aspirant is to go forward, be abandoned.

Prospero, of course, knows this perfectly well and, in the very end of the play, does abandon these powers. But for the greater part of the play we are shown him as a magician-a white magician it is true, but a white magician capable of considerable malice toward the unfortunate Caliban. A white magician who is capable of using a great deal of ingenuity in the preparation of tricks to catch his enemies. He has had the insight into the ultimate nature of things and knows what must be done and

what must be left undone.

Our revels are now ended, these our actors,

As I foretold you, were all spirits, and

Are melted into air, into thin air;

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,

And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff

As dreams are made on; and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

Prospero is here enunciating the doctrine of **Maya**. The world is an illusion, but it is an illusion which we must take seriously, because it is real as far as it goes, and in those aspects of the reality which we are capable of apprehending. Our business is to wake up. We have to find ways in which to detect the whole of reality in the one illusory part which our self-centered consciousness permits us to see. We must not live thoughtlessly, taking our illusion for the complete reality, but at the same time we must not live too thoughtfully in the sense of trying to escape from the dream state. We must continually be on our watch for ways in which we may enlarge our consciousness. We must not attempt to live outside the world, which is given us, but we must somehow learn how to transform it and transfigure it. Too much "wisdom" is as bad as too little wisdom, and there must be no magic tricks. We must learn to come to reality without the enchanter's wand and his book of the words. One must find a way of being in this world while not being of it. A way of living in time without being completely swallowed up in time.

Hotspur, as he is dying, sums up the human predicament with a few memorable words:

But thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool;

And time, that takes survey of all the world,

Must have a stop.

We think we know who we are and what we ought to do about it, and yet our thought is conditioned and determined by the nature of our immediate experience as psychophysical organisms on this particular planet. Thought, in other words, is Life's fool. Thought is the slave of Life, and Life obviously is Time's fool inasmuch as it is changing from instant to instant, changing the outside and the inner world so that we never remain the same two instants together.

Thought is determined by life, and life is determined by passing time. But the dominion of time is not absolute, for "time must have a stop" in two senses, from the Christian point of view in which Shakespeare was writing. It must have a stop in the last judgment, and in the winding up of the universe. But on the way to this general consummation, it must have a stop in the individual mind, which must learn the regular cultivation of a mood of timelessness, of the sense of eternity.

We are all well on the way to an existential religion of mysticism. How many kinds of religion! How many kinds of Shakespeare!