

Bernard Shaw's Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

This paper is an appraisal of how Bernard Shaw, as an intellectualist, being religious in the board sense, formulated a personal philosophy of creative evolution based on secular theories and how Shaw focused on social, democratic and personal problems in his early plays and later he introduced themes such as religion, youth and age, labour and capital, etc. After a deep analysis of all his plays, this paper explains or depicts how Shaw was a practical mystic who saw no remedy in economic socialism or anything else other than developing ones spiritual life.

Keywords: Bernard Shaw, Religion, philosophy, spirituality, Evolution, realism, economic socialism

The first half of the nineteenth century was almost completely barren from the dramatic point of view. Some major poets and other creative writers tried drama, but their efforts never saw the stage. The condition of the professional theatres was in a deplorable state. The respectable middle classes believed it as a place of vice. The standards of the audience also remained low. The popular forms of the drama of the day were melodrama, forces and sentimental comedies, which had no literary qualities. They were poor in dialogue and negligible in characterization and relied for their success upon sensation, rapid action and spectacle. There were also poetic plays which were mere closet-plays, unfit for stage representation.

There was a significant development from romantic and historical themes to more realistic themes towards the middle of the century. This movement towards realism received considerable impetus from the work of T.W. Robertson, who introduced in his plays the idea of a serious theme underlying the humour, and character and dialogue of a more natural kind. He is inseparately connected with the modern revival of English drama. But he never entirely freed himself from the melodrama and sentimentalism prevalent at the time.

Bernard Shaw produced his first plays before the influence of Ibsen. Shaw used the serious drama for a consideration of social, domestic or personal problems. A period – so keenly aware of

social problems was an admirable time for the rise of the drama of ideas. The themes of the drama became the problems of religion, youth and age and labour and capital. In the history of the realistic prose drama, Ibsen and then Shaw, Galsworthy and Granville – Barker were of paramount importance, and they did much to create a tradition of natural dialogue. New psychological investigations increased the interest in character and distinct from plot, and the realistic drama aimed more and more at the impartial presentation of real life, contemporary rather than historical. Shaw's drama means a great deal to the English theatre from the literary point of view. Not only has he brought to the drama, "a new incisiveness of utterance and given what is virtually a new dramatic dialogue, but he has also provided a fresh principle of characterization" (Nicoll 54). The characters in the romantic plays were not so much stereotyped as framed on a false pattern. Shaw has shown men how to draw characters arrestingly and frequently dramatic:

"Instead of timid heroine, we find
intellectually daring women, instead of
strong heroes, men lacking power and
self-will, instead of fantastically model
clergy-men, ministers who feel more at
ease in buff coat and jack boots,
instead of impossible villains, men who
are themselves the tools of society" (P 93).

"Religiously, his family background was protestant" says Collins "but Shaw early rejected the Christian faith" (P 117.) Although he remained an atheist for the rest of his life, Shaw was in the broad sense religious, and he formulated a personal philosophy of creative evolution based on secular theories. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was a pervasive intellectual influence in the later part of the nineteenth century. Shaw saw the implications of Darwin's biological theory of evolution for religion, morality and psychology. He rejected the determinism of natural selection, because it endorsed ruthless competition in society, and because philosophically it denied the possibility of conscious willed intervention in the process of evolution. Instead, Shaw followed Samuel Butler, author of *The Way of All Flesh*, in postulating a will beyond the individual striving for the improvement of the species. Shaw also found support for the doctrine of creative evolution in the writings of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose position is the equivalent of Shaw's Life Force or Evolutionary Appetite.

The ideas of creative evolution contribute to Shaw's plays. In *Man and Superman*, the heroine Ann Whitefield is the instrument of the Life Force; her marriage to Jack Tanner fulfils the impersonal biological urge of the woman to reproduce and improve the species. Women in Shaw's plays often possess, restrictive gifts when they are associated with the Life Force: Mrs. George in *Getting Married* has visionary trances; *Major Barbara* is inspired by her faith; and Joan's voices are an expression of her evolutionary appetite. *Back to Methuselah* shows the emergence in the far distant future of a race of superior beings with visionary powers. This cycle of plays and their prefaces are Shaw's fullest statement of the ideas of creative evolution. As G.E. Brown puts it, "....

Shaw was not a Christian he is concerned with the subject of religious belief as it affects human conduct and as we might expect he sometimes looks at things from the point of view of a social reformer” (P 66) Shaw’s plays *Major Barbara*, *Androcles and the Lion* and *Saint Joan* follow this pattern Shaw believed that before man can spare time to afford to luxury of devoting thought to spiritual matters, he must be well fed and decently housed. So, it can be said that Shaw’s religion is centered on man.

Bernard Shaw was considered irreligious, for he was indifferent to conventional religion. Once in a meeting of the Shelley’s society, he declared that he was an atheist. He refused to go to church on Sundays. He believed conventional religions as dark well which cannot shower light to anyone. He was an intellectualist with a penetrating mind, subjecting all faiths, conventions and institutions to the search light of reason. He could not believe in them because he found them wanting. But he was not at all a materialist, an atheist or an agonistic. He was a deeply religious man who substituted his own religion for the old religions. His religions had both aspects; negative and positive, destructive and constructive. He pushes back the old ideas and replaces them by his own new ideas. In this respect, *St. Joan* and *Major Barbara* are religious dramas. The word “God” constantly appears in the lips of the Maid in *St. Joan*. His religious approach is different from science which denies God, soul or mind but close to Christianity. He sees the universe as the chance collection of microorganisms. He did not permit that the ideal state of the future, or the socialist state, should maintain churches or other places of worship for prayer and meditation. He preferred “the monkey gland mind” to “the Daintily mind” and religious rituals like Baptism, confirmation etc., to the ritual of modern science, vaccination etc. One can never find Shaw making any systematic attack on churches. He is for their modernization and not abolition. He stands for rationalism and liberation in religion rather than for the abolition of religion. He discards “the Christian belief in the Resurrection of Christ and Miracles as a mere superstition and as such of no consequence” (Brown 66).

Shaw vehemently and most bluntly denounces the doctrine of atonement of sin by the cross. To him, it is a mean and impracticable evasion of responsibility. It is logically impossible and morally undesirable for any but the sinner to bear the burden of his sin. When the sinner suffers himself, the sin can be atoned, not by the suffering of others. Shaw considers the saying ‘sin can be atoned by the suffering of Christ or any other man’ only as an indirect incitement to sin. It is very rarely that Shaw holds the church dignitaries to scorn. He considers the priests as creatures of flesh and blood like the common people. They are not immune from the human failing of the worst type. Morel is viewed in *Candida* in this way. Shaw treats them with sympathy and often makes an attempt to understand their point of view. There are a number of ecclesiastical characters in *Saint Joan* and the dramatist has stated their point of view clearly and impartially. Though they are responsible for the burning of the maid, their sincerity and honesty of purpose has been left no doubt. The chaplain in the play accepts his guilt saying:

O God, take away this sight from me!
O Christ, deliver me from this fire that
is consuming. She cried to Thee in the

midst of it. Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!
She is in Thy bosom; and I am in hell for evermore” (SJ 166)

Christian religion has practical applications and Shaw is in favour of the economic, social and political teachings of Christ though he exposes its errors through his criticism of institutional Christianity. In Preface to *Androcles and the Lion*, he asks, “why not give Christianity a trial?” (Androcles and the Lion 9). Shaw advocates the use of sound political theories of the *Bible* in everyday life. He believed that the only way out of the miseries and sufferings of the present-day world is through a practical application of the way pointed out by Christ. This practical application cannot result through individual effort but through state effort. Christ was a kind of socialist and he advocated a leveling down of the rich and leveling up of the poor. Only through social organization, this can be brought about. He believed that the war occurs where there is a total neglect of the teachings of Christ. Shaw denounces only the irrational and superstitions of Christianity. His theory of creative Evolution is his search for a more rational, more logical, and so more intellectually satisfying and more credible creed. Maurice Colburne says;

“Behind every fight is a faith, and the
Faith behind Shaw’s fight is a fervent
Belief in what he calls creative
Evolution” (Colbourne 264)

This can be briefly regarded as ‘Shaw’s creed’. There is a spiritual power in the universe and Shaw calls it the ‘Life Force’. ‘Creative Evolution’ appeals to Shaw as a religion because he finds it intellectually credible. The plays *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan* and *Androcles and the Lion* deal with the subject of religious belief and he looks of things as a social Reformer. Shaw does discuss his theory of creative Evolution in *Back to Methuselah*.

Shaw discusses a number of burning social problem in *Major Barbara*. It throws light on his views on a number of subjects, religion and its role as an instrument of social reform, the evil of poverty and its eradication, the value and significance of money, education, contemporary political and social organizations, the correlation of virtue and wickedness, crime and punishment etc., are treated, some merely in passing and some more thoroughly with Shaw’s usual trenchancy. In *Major Barbara*, Shaw has shed light on Christian religion in its more militant aspects. This is done through a presentation of the day to day working of the Salvation Army:

“The play, which has a basically respectful
attitude towards the social work being
done at that time by the Salvation Army,
turns sour in its implicit condemnation
of a society that organises itself in such
a way as to make such work necessary
and there is no doubt that many of the

original audience were offended by what they took to be a condemnation of the Salvation Army” (Brown 67).

Its different characteristics have been stressed through different characters, earnestness and ecstasy through *Major Barbara*, its innocence and courage through Jenny Hill, its practical good sense through Mrs. Baines and its exuberance through Adolphus Cusins. Religion and religious people were considered dull and cheerless, and so he has stressed the exuberance and gaiety of the Salvationists. The Salvation Army preached and gave charity food and shelter – to the poor and wretched. Shaw declared that the food and shelter, even though given out of the pure hearted compassion and Christian fellowship, became in practice, a bribe which led those who received it into a hypocritical pretence of religious conversation in order that they might get the bare necessities of life in this world and the promise of eternal bliss in heaven hereafter. They embraced or pretended to embrace Christianity because they were getting some material benefit here and the expectation of endless benefit to come. Shaw called this as mean bargaining with God. According to Shaw, this is the Army’s Central weakness. It encourages hypocritical and false confession like those of Snobby Price and by suggesting that a criminal act may be undone by confession. So, poverty must be eradicated first, and religion and salvation in the real sense come afterwards. Shaw condemns poverty as the worst of crimes and the greatest of social evils. He also shows its evil consequences. In Act II, which occurs in the Hamlet Street, shelter of the Salvation Army clearly brings out the fact that the poor are not only dirty and diseased, they are also hypocritical and dishonest.

The play *Major Barbara* ends on a rising note with the themes of religion and social reform closely connected once again. Barbara indicates that people are put on the earth to be useful and she recognises that her father was right when she challenged her to try to save his well-fed workers:

“I have got rid of the bribe of breed.
I have got rid of the bribe of heaven.
Let God’s work be done for its own sake:
the work he had to create us to do
because it cannot be done except
by living men and women” (Barbara 107).

Major Barbara is a great religious play, an expression of Shaw’s realism and not of pessimism. In the words of Harold Bloom,

“Nothing is got for nothing and Shaw makes Barbara pay the price for his extravagant triumph of the religion of Power” (P 18).

Shaw has subjected religion to the search light of reason, exposed its many weaknesses, made his readers think, and thus paved the way for religious and social reform. He has focused on Shaw and affectations which at present war religion and its total dependence on capitalists, like Bodger and under shaft, so that by having a look at the worst, one may find a way to the better. The Central theme of *Androcles the Lion* is that men must have something worth dying for to make life worth living, in other words, an end outside oneself - a religious objective is essential for decent existence. Shaw regarded religion as something to inspire people to strive for a better world – world where everyone would be able to use his individual aptitudes to the full for the common good, unhampered by any forms of class or racial restrictions. Shaw was not concerned with the theological creed or dogma of any particular religion, and his view on Christianity implies clearly that he regarded Jesus as a social reformer and that the main lesson of the New Testament is concerned with modes of god conduct rather than religious observance and ceremonies. *Androcles and the Lion* is a picture of Christians thrown to the lions by the Romans for the sake of their faith and how simple faith saves them” (Purdum 111). While Androcles, a humble Greek tailor turned Christian, is journeying through a jungle in Africa accompanied by his Shrewish wife Megaera, he encounters a savage lion with a wounded paw, from which Androcles extracts a large thorn. Later, Androcles is seized with a number of other Christians and brought to Rome to be thrown to the beasts. Androcles is thrown to the lion because the audience must be denied all pleasure, but the tailor finds himself face to face with his jungle friend, who saves his life. The Emperor is so amazed that he pardons Androcles, together with the other prisoners. Of the three main Christian characters who remain at the end of the play, only Androcles seems to keep his belief unchanged. *Androcles and the Lion* is the most amusing of Shaw’s religious plays, while both *Major Barbara* and *Blanco Posnet*, through comic in parts, were essentially serious dramas. The play is important for the light it casts on Shaw’s attitude towards religion. The very long ‘Preface’ to the play deals in stimulating fashion with Shaw’s thought on the Gospels, but one can get some idea of his beliefs from an examination of the conduct of Lavinia, Androcles, Sphintho and Ferrerious in the play itself. Those who have positive attitudes are rewarded, even though their conduct may not be specifically Christian. Ferocious, for instance, acts according to his nature, and decides that he ‘must serve the Gods that are, not the God that will be (Brown 86). To some extent he remains one of under shaft in *Major Barbara* in that both man Shaw seems to be approving of any positive belief so as long as it is strongly held.

Shaw is concerned with the question of Christian belief and its effect upon those who believe in *Saint Joan*. His primary interest is in showing the differences between Joan’s idea of Christianity and that of the Church, and he makes the print in his preface that, given the situation at the time in which Joan lived, the church had no option but to deliver her up for burning as a heretic since she would not do as the church told her. The alternative was to allow her unprecedented religious freedom and in spite of all she had done to free her country from England’s invasion, this was unthinkable. What Shaw does incomparably is to present the most notable warrior Saint in the Christian Calendar in the triple role,” as the first martyr to Protestantism; as an apostle of nationalism; and as a pioneer of realism in warfare” (Ward 59). Joan, at bottom, declaring herself a faithful daughter of the Church, is a puritan, like Shaw himself affirming her own life impulse, her unshakable, her even tyrannical will to live, by accepting death itself. Joan has great resemblances to

Jesus. She listens to the voices of the blessed saints, Catherine and Margaret, who speak to her every day. Joan's battle cry:

“Who is for God and His Maid? Her last words before she is put off stage. His ways are not your ways. He wills that I go through the fire to His bosom; for whom I am His child, and you are fit that I should live among you. This is my last word to you” (Joan 96).

Makes it clear that Joan is a substitute for Jesus of Nazareth. To conclude, Shaw was a practical mystic who saw no remedy in economic socialism or anything else unless one developed his spiritual life. He wants the religion to be realised, not on a vague hour or every Sunday, but every day, vitally every hour of the week. He presents and justifies his religion as a force in the social institutions.

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