

## *Shaw's Subversion of Biblical Language*

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Bernard Shaw was born to be a heretic. To say the least, his religious ideas were bound to be unusual: he was raised—formally—in the faith of the Church of England, which in Ireland was tantamount to being labeled “Protestant.” His father was a dipsomaniac whose regard for the Bible was, in his own words, that it was “the damndest parcel of lies ever written” (Pearson, 12). In addition, although Shaw’s mother was too stern to share his husband’s peculiar vein of humor against the Scripture, she indulged in a morally censorable—certainly not very Christian—*ménage à trois* with her singing teacher, George Vandeleur Lee. The family line contains other early influences that seem to have shaped Shaw’s impression about the effects of religion on people. For example, his mother’s brother (Uncle Walter) was reputed for having a sense of humor that “though barbarous in his blasphemous indecency, was Scriptural and Shakespearean in the elaboration and fantasy of its literary expression” (*Sixteen Self Sketches*, henceforth SSS, 15). Shaw himself seems to give his uncle’s religious flippancy some credit in his subsequent attitude, given that “his efforts were controlled, deliberate, fastidiously chosen and worded. But they were all the more effective in destroying all my incalculated childish reverence for the verbiage of religion, for its legends and personification and parables” (Pearson, 27). His father’s brother, Uncle Barney, was (together with Shaw’s own father, George) the paragon of the family anticlimactic sense of comedy: not because he was intentionally funny, but because he shifted from “a largely fuddled life until he was past fifty ... full of smoking and drinking” to his betrothal to a lady of “distinguished social

position and great piety." After this sudden and unexpected change in behavior and status, "the fantastic imagery of the Bible so gained on [Shaw's] uncle" that his sudden ascetic fit made him lose his mind to the point of committing suicide (Holroyd, 3). In all, "mockery of death and mockery of religion were appropriately set against the background of Mrs. Shaw's music, and punctuated by Mr. Shaw's drunken sprees" (Ohman, 75).

In view of all the above biographical data, it is hardly surprising that Bernard Shaw became methodically critical towards religion (especially Christianity) throughout his entire life. After an early phase in which agnosticism succeeded atheism in an attempt to reject "the old tribal idol called Jehovah" openly (SSS, 74), Shaw's reflections upon Christianity and its sources gave way to a broad religious eclecticism. He analyzed and, to a greater or lesser extent, entertained certain views he borrowed from many different "denominations." At different stages in his life, he called himself an atheist, a secularist, a Catholic, a vitalist, an evolutionist, and so on, sometimes simultaneously. Regardless of this mesmerizing chaos, Shaw never overlooked the importance that religion had for people's lives, and his own. Therefore, his critical views were only Shaw's peculiar way of aiming at the realization of God's will and of true belief, as proven by his search of a common religion for the British Empire and for the future of humankind. Of course, his irreverent attitude made him gain a hearing, as well as many detractors who could not see beyond the clouds of smoke of Shavian discourse. This everlasting state of affairs is best illustrated by the following anecdote (Elliot, 269–70): when asked, "Are you a Christian?" by a clergyman who had been listening to one of his speeches, Shaw responded, "Yes, but I often feel very lonely."

In stylistic terms, Shaw's critical stance towards religion heavily relied on his inexhaustible capacity for storing information on the most disparate topics, whose discourses also permeate his plays. Bernard Shaw was one of the most learned men of his generation—given his longevity, one should say his generations.<sup>1</sup> Despite leaving school at fifteen, his devotion to reading enabled him to accrue a vast scholarship on issues that many people had not even heard of at the time. That was part of Shaw's attitude towards life: his "hunger for knowledge was unappeasable. For more restless souls his trips abroad would have been tasks" (Pearson, 141). Not surprisingly, one of the areas of culture that Shaw was most keen on was religion. Not only did he have an ample command of biblical studies,<sup>2</sup> but he also reflected on the religious and otherwise spiritual dimensions of humankind.

In this essay I will state the fundamental religious values that shaped Shaw's spiritual beliefs, especially those on which Shaw was contrary to traditional religious convention. These controversial items of faith gained him a hearing as a polemicist who would systematically go against the universally

acknowledged conventions of Victorian times.<sup>3</sup> I will then go on to gauge the importance of these unorthodox aspects in conforming Shaw's religiosity, both as a man and as a playwright. These ideas will be illustrated with some examples from his plays, as well as from other supplementary materials, including his prefaces and other essays. These literary materials will facilitate the appraisal of how these ideas made their way into Shaw's dramatic art and, consequently, will allow us to come closer to the literary and stylistic (i.e., fictional) dimension of Shavian religion.

Perhaps the primary source of discontent for Shaw with traditional religion was the literal interpretation of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> Already in his childhood he "gave up the inculcated belief that the Bible was the literally inspired and dictated word of an omniscient and infallible anthropomorphic god" (SSS, 25–6), mainly because some of the events recorded therein were hard to reconcile with Shaw's common sense. Biblical literalism was discarded on more scientific grounds when the theory of evolution made the pre-Darwinian age "be regarded as a Dark Age in which men still believed that the book of Genesis was a standard scientific treatise" (*Complete Prefaces*, henceforth *CP*, 501). The disregard for the literal interpretation of the Bible was undoubtedly also linked to the unintelligible quality of some of its passages. Indeed, "Biblical idioms, figures of speech, and words, even when translated into English, have unfamiliar meanings" (Brake, 22), which is the vernacular equivalent of Shaw's "it will not do to read the gospels with a mind furnished only for the reception of, say, a biography of Goethe. You will not make sense of them" (*CP*, 550). This disparagement of the literal interpretation of the Bible grew stronger in view of the moral implications that it had for Christians, despite the plain evidence that "the word morality, if we met it in the Bible, would surprise us as much as the word telephone or motor car" (*CP*, 138). This is probably why Shaw was much fonder of the Gospel of John than of the Synoptic ones, especially because the former raises the question of whether we really understand the message of God's will, one of Shaw's crucial conceptions, as we shall see. This particular theological divergence in John's Gospel poses an intriguing intellectual challenge, as Smith (1044) points out:

If a fundamental question in the synoptic tradition is how one should understand and respond to God's will as expressed in the law, the fundamental question of the Fourth Gospel is whether one will understand and respond to Jesus as the definitive expression of God's will or revelation.

From the point of view of the didacticism in his plays, Shaw was aware that he had to initiate the promotion of his revolutionary ideas by attacking biblical language rather than religious institutions, because "our religious ideas and beliefs are largely fed and nourished by the gospels. Even regarding

the life and teachings of Jesus we entirely depend on the so-called history presented in the four narratives" (Pathak, 76). In his irreverent—though strictly logical—contempt for the traditional reading of the Bible, Shaw often resorts in his plays to the exploitation *ad absurdum* of biblical idiom, which reveals itself as an adroit technique for pinpointing the blatant misinterpretation of certain biblical passages.

The phrases of Scripture that Shaw manipulates most often are those of metaphoric nature, since they allow the audience to posit different interpretations for biblical discourse—whether literal or figurative—if the right cues are provided. Einsohn (110), for example, acknowledges the metaphor-based, multidimensional semantic potential underlying biblical discourse:

Words cannot fully encompass the absolute, the cosmic process that creates and supports life, but metaphors provide simulacra that approximate this extralinguistic reality. In brief, metaphors inaugurate semantically. Out of an initial cognitive impertinence, at the heart of metaphoric predication, comes new meaning, an expansive, innovative pertinence that posits Jesus as an archetype of the ineffable, eminently worthy of emulation. In a mysterious way, it is not we who use language to constitute the world. It is language — "the Word made flesh" — that constitutes us.

One of the most far-reaching examples of this kind in the plays of Bernard Shaw is the manipulation of the biblical phrase "turn the other cheek,"<sup>5</sup> which is completely disfigured in *Androcles and the Lion*, both in its physical and moral sense. From a strictly physical point of view, "turn the other cheek" no longer refers to submitting meekly to aggression by offering the other cheek to strike on. In the mouth of Lentulus, a young Roman who jeers at the Christian slaves, the phrase becomes a subtle insinuation, some sort of pick-up line to try on the beautiful Christian Lavinia. It particularly refers to the alternative offering of both cheeks when kissing as a gesture of salutation<sup>6</sup>:

LENTULUS [*indicating Lavinia, who is still looking towards the arches after the captain*]. That woman's got a figure. [*He walks past her, staring at her invitingly, but she is preoccupied and is not conscious of him*]. **Do you turn the other cheek when they kiss you?**

LAVINIA (starting) What?

LENTULUS. **Do you turn the other cheek when they kiss you, fascinating Christian?**

LAVINIA. Dont be foolish. (To Metellus, who has remained on her right, so that she is between them) Please dont let your friend behave like a cad before the soldiers. How are they to respect and obey patricians if they see them behaving like street boys? (Sharply to Lentulus) Pull yourself together, man. Hold your head up. Keep the corners of your mouth firm; and treat me respectfully. What do you take me for?

It must be said that, in Shavian terms, this sort of linguistic manipulation is one of the most irreverent ones, given the scarcity of any type of innuendo in Shaw's plays.

But it is the moral and philosophical side of the phrase that is disfigured the most, because the author is able to isolate an ethical contradiction in it: If one turns the other cheek out of fear, it is a nonsensical action for a Christian. If, on the contrary, one finds it comforting to suffocate anger, then the best you can do is strike others so that they can also sublimate their faith through martyrdom and penitence. The following scene exacerbates this paradoxical argument by assigning the role of the patient Christian to the massive Ferrovius, and that of the pagan who strikes to Lentulus:

LENTULUS. Haw! Good! [*Indicating the kneeling Ferrovius*]. **Is this one of the turn-the-other-cheek gentlemen, Centurion?**

CENTURION. Yes, sir. Lucky for you too, sir, if you want to take any liberties with him.

LENTULUS [*to Ferrovius*]. **You turn the other cheek when youre struck, I'm told.**

FERROVIUS [*slowly turning his great eyes on him*] Yes, by the grace of God, I do, NOW.

LENTULUS. Not that youre a coward, of course; but out of pure piety.

FERROVIUS. I fear God more than man; at least I try to.

LENTULUS. Lets see. [*He strikes him on the cheek*] [...]

FERROVIUS [*with the calm of a steam hammer*] I have not always been faithful. **The first man who struck me as you have just struck me** was a stronger man than you: he hit me harder than I expected. I was tempted and fell; and it was then that I first tasted bitter shame. I never had a happy moment after that until I had knelt and asked his forgiveness by his bedside in the hospital. [*Putting his hands on Lentulus's shoulders with paternal weight*]. But now I have learnt to resist with a strength that is not my own. I am not ashamed now, nor angry.

LENTULUS (uneasily) Er — good evening. [*He tries to move away*].

FERROVIUS [*gripping his shoulders*] Oh, do not harden your heart, young man. Come: try for yourself whether our way is not better than yours. **I will now strike you on one cheek; and you will turn the other** and learn how much better you will feel than if you gave way to the promptings of anger. [...]

LENTULUS. Let me go. Your religion forbids you to strike me.

FERROVIUS. **On the contrary, it commands me to strike you. How can you turn the other cheek, if you are not first struck on the one cheek?**

LENTULUS [*almost in tears*] But I'm convinced already that what you said is quite right. I apologize for striking you.

The manipulation of this biblical passage is Shaw's denunciation of the traditional reading of several passages of the Gospels in which Jesus does not respond to violence. The clear understanding that the conduct of Jesus cannot systematically be a role model for humans is the basis of Shaw's heresy:

Whether you accept his [Jesus's] belief in his divinity as fully as Simon Peter did, or reject it as a delusion which led him to submit to torture and sacrifice his life without resistance in the conviction that he would presently rise again in glory, you are equally bound to admit that, far from behaving like a coward or a sheep, he showed considerable physical fortitude in going through a cruel ordeal against which he could have defended himself as effectually as he cleared the moneychangers out of the temple. "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" is a snivelling modern invention, with no warrant in the gospels [CP: 549].

Another undisputable characteristic of the Shavian creed is its intense disdain for sectarian, orthodox religions. He rejects everything resembling a dogma, both in the sphere of religion and in that of science, which were the two sides of his Creative Evolution. Baker (236) readily underscores Shaw's dual skepticism:

Shaw's scientific religion strikes many as neither scientific nor religious because it is based on the logical denial of the most cherished dogmas of each belief system. He found his faith by rejecting two great orthodoxies and embracing what remained.

Shaw always rejects the faith of any established Church as a means to attain perfect communion with God, free from redundant middlemen. This feature is also prominent in Shaw's total heroine, the mystic and ascetic Joan, whose martyrdom is foreshadowed because she has never "in all her utterances said one word of the Church.... It is always God and herself." Nevertheless, as usual with the paradox-prone Shaw, his anti-sectarian discourse usually takes the form of the most dogmatic sermon. This stylistic peculiarity is substantial enough to define Shaw's approach to religious ideas, as Smith (xxiii) points out in his introduction to the *Religious Speeches of Bernard Shaw* (henceforth RS):

A section from almost any of his religious speeches could be placed in a sermon in almost any church without violating the sermon's context; yet there is no doubt that his utterances are truly heretical.

This principle represented an obvious distress to a great part of Shaw's audience, whose religious values were based on the assumption that there was only one true religion which meant salvation, all the rest leading to damnation. Thus *The Elder* goes over this disheartening conception in a play fittingly entitled *Too True to Be Good*:

"What must I do to be saved?" Nothing can save us from a perpetual headlong fall into a bottomless abyss but a solid footing of dogma; and we no sooner agree to that than we find that the only trustworthy dogma is that there is no dogma.

The eradication of dogmatism is one of the most important steps in the devel-

opment of the Shavian religion, since it represents the foundation of his universal faith. As a consequence, Shaw is obliged to be critical towards all religious denominations and their respective dogmas by means of a spiritual relativism that is mostly superficial—it cannot be forgotten that Shaw intended to spread *his* religion. That is the case of Burge's opinion on the code of belief of the Church of England in *Back to Methuselah*:

BURGE. Nonsense! That notion about the Church being unprogressive is one of those shibboleths that our party must drop. The Church is all right essentially. Get rid of the establishment; get rid of the bishops; get rid of the candlesticks; get rid of the 39 articles; and the Church of England is just as good as any other Church; and I don't care who hears me say so.

If one is to single out one Christian dogma that Shaw was particularly reluctant about, that is atonement. As he argued in the preface to *Androcles and the Lion*, there are two main characteristics that made it an antireligious concept. First, it is simply a very convenient notion that made Christianity terribly popular on the grounds that a single redeemer for all sins is a handy mechanism (CP, 553):

Nothing easier, nothing cheaper. The yoke is easy, the burden light. All you have to do when the redeemer is once found (or invented by the imagination) is to believe in the efficacy of the transaction, and you are saved. The rams and goats cease to bleed; the altars which ask for expensive gifts and continually renewed sacrifices are torn down; and the Church of the single redeemer and the single atonement rises on the ruins of the old temples, and becomes a single Church of the Christ.

At the same time, the ethical foundation of atonement is naturally disgraceful for a man like Shaw who aimed at fulfilling the Life Force, thus providing his own push towards perfection. In this sense, the rejection of atonement is the ultimate sign of self-realization (CP, 598):

Consequently, even if it were mentally possible for all of us to believe in the Atonement, we should have to cry off it, as we evidently have a right to do. Every man to whom salvation is offered has an inalienable natural right to say "No, thank you: I prefer to retain my full moral responsibility: it is not good for me to be able to load a scapegoat with my sins: I should be less careful how I committed them if I knew they would cost me nothing."

The obvious flaws that Shaw perceives in the theory of atonement could easily beget injustice in the process of salvation (or damnation) in the afterlife. That is what Don Juan tries to explain to the Old Woman (Doña Ana, one of Don Juan's former conquests) in the second scene of the third act of *Man and Superman*<sup>7</sup>:

THE OLD WOMAN. But I have sincerely repented; I have confessed.

DON JUAN. How much?

THE OLD WOMAN. More sins than I really committed. I loved confession.

DON JUAN. Ah, that is perhaps as bad as confessing too little. At all events, Senora, whether by oversight or intention, you are certainly damned, like myself; and there is nothing for it now but to make the best of it.

THE OLD WOMAN [*indignantly*] Oh! and I might have been so much wickeder! All my good deeds wasted! It is unjust.

DON JUAN. No: you were fully and clearly warned. For your bad deeds, vicarious atonement, mercy without justice. For your good deeds, justice without mercy. We have many good people here.

One can easily imagine that these words must have been a shock for audiences. If the difference between heaven and hell, good and evil, salvation and damnation, is only a matter of insignificant details, the whole religious system of values, which is based on the rightfulness of repayment for one's good deeds, automatically crumbles down.

Notwithstanding Shaw's rejection of dogmas in religion, what his works lack in theological orthodoxy, they make up for in structural ritualism, hence the detailed layout of his most religion-laden plays, given that "the performance in the theatre is the celebration in miniature of the mysterious working of the Life Force, in which the spectators participate as surely as the actors. In a word, it is ritual" (Smith, 203). For instance, one can draw several structural parallelisms between the most formal Christian ceremony (the Catholic mass) and Shaw's *Saint Joan*. Among others, there is the prayer over the gifts (hens lay eggs only when Joan is granted an interview with the Dauphin); also Joan's death is a conspicuous sacrifice, a dramatic sacrificing of the "daughter of God" for the salvation of her people. Finally, the forgiveness scene in which all the main characters kneel before Joan depicts the Catholic sacrament of penance.<sup>8</sup> This is all evidence supporting Shaw's idea of the magical properties of art (Kennedy, 50). And, of course, things like these made people spread rumors as to whether, like his friend G.K. Chesterton, Shaw would be received into the Catholic Church in his late years, to which he retorted that there was not "room in Rome for two Popes!" (Elliot, 272).

On the broader plane of religious denomination, "mysticism" is perhaps the most popular epithet to label Shaw's beliefs. In fact, he acknowledged his mystical ideas on several occasions, to the extent of stating: "As for my own position, I am and always have been, a mystic" (RS, 33). In this, he claims to follow the teachings of Jesus himself, since "He did not mean to establish a church. He meant practically he was one of the prophets. What he was dealing with was mysticism" (RS, 79). What mysticism really means for Shaw is that religion cannot be detached from the earthly issues of the population. As a



result, his other intellectual and philosophical interests had to be intertwined with his religious ideas.

In calling himself a mystic, Shaw was emphasizing what he regarded as the heart of his belief, the part that was beyond reason. But hearts do not live by themselves; they need bones and muscle and digestive systems and all sorts of less poetic support systems. The mystical part of Shaw's religion is its reason for existing; it is life and hope and purpose, but it must not be mere wishful thinking or a cowardly evasion of reality. It is an easy matter to develop a creed that is only a projection of the heart's desire, a castle in the air without foundation; it is a different chore to build such a faith on a solid basis of fact and to use it as a guide for living in a real and heartbreakingly imperfect world [Baker, 14].

Therefore, despite the deep theoretical implications that Shaw's religious ideas have had for men of letters and philosophers alike, Shaw is mostly concerned with the quotidian implications of religion for people's lives (emphasis added):

Shaw like an anatomist scientifically scrutinises the Bible with special investigations on the life and message of Jesus Christ, and critically examines the **practical effectiveness** of his teachings [Pathak, 75].

This is a simple consequence of Shaw's knack for mixing socialism and theology (Berst, "Some Necessary Repairs," 77). In fact, it is not at all uncommon for Shaw's "holy characters" to keep a very practical attitude regarding ordinary matters such as their bodily needs.<sup>9</sup> The beginning of Act II in *Buoyant Billions* epitomizes the attitude of those characters that are theoretically mystical or ascetic, and yet firmly seize whatever the world has to offer. On a lonely island, SHE is a "holy woman"—idolized by the indigenous savages who bring food and drink to her doorstep every day because they believe she has supernatural powers.

THE NATIVE. Yes, sir. And you no speak holy woman. Speak to her forbidden. She speak with great spirits only. Very strong magics. Put spell on you. Fetch gaters and rattlers with magic tunes on her pipe. Very unlucky speak to her. Very lucky bring her gifts.

However, the way SHE treats visitors is far removed from the ideal of hospitality and amiability that asceticism often suggests. Not at all inconsistently, her vocabulary contains certain hints of capitalist theory ("private property," "business"):

SHE. Now then. This clearance is private property. Whats your business?

HE. No business, dear lady. Treat me as a passing tramp.

SHE. Well, pass double quick. This isnt a doss house.

HE. No; but in this lonely place the arrival of any stranger must be a godsend. Besides, I am hungry and thirsty.

SHE. Most tramps are. Get out.

In addition, the “holy woman” acts selfishly by denying his guest some food at first. As SHE later explains, it is the duty of a “holy lady” to take care of the material before tackling the spiritual.

HE. Yes, holy lady; but what about your conscience? A hungry man asks you for food. Dare you throw him to the gaters and rattlers? How will that appear in the great day of reckoning?

SHE. Neither you nor I will matter much when that day comes, if it ever does. But you can eat my lunch to shut your mouth.

HE. Oh, thanks!

SHE. You need not look round for a tumbler and a knife and fork. Drink from the calabash: eat from your fingers.

HE. The simple life, eh? [*He attacks the meal*].

SHE. No. In the simple life you ring for the servants. Everything is done for you; and you learn nothing.

HE. And here you wait until that kindly native comes and feeds you, like Elijah's ravens. What do you learn from that?

SHE. You learn what nice people natives are. But you begin by trying to feed yourself and build your own shack. I have been through all that, and learnt what a helpless creature a civilized woman is.

In a strict sense, the only religious “sect” to which Shaw ever claimed to belong was that of Creative Evolution. This somewhat nebulous religious group claims that there is a driving force inside every individual (“The Life Force” or *Élan Vital*) that drives organisms towards ever greater complexity and perfection.<sup>10</sup> In the end, humans are nothing but the implements through which God's will is done because, as Shaw puts it:

I believe God, in the popular acceptance of the word, to be completely powerless. I do not believe that God has any hands or brain of our kind. What I know he has, or rather is, is will. But will is useless without hands and brain [RS, 6].<sup>11</sup>

This is one of the most crucial ideas to understand Shaw the philosopher (and the playwright), since Creative Evolution implies the eradication of the mechanical determinism of science and the animism of vitalists. He needs to believe the world is bound to go in the right direction, yet his beliefs are anchored in the hard facts of everyday life, much like in the case of his mysticism. Ohman (123) sees in this a synthesis of the sublime out of the ordinary:

Around him he sees women endowed with a mating instinct much more convincing than the lip service of the Victorians to sexual propriety. He finds artists imaging life in original and superior ways. He discovers social prophets (Jesus or Joan of Arc, for example) voicing doctrine for which there is no parentage in their milieu, hundreds or thousands of years before the average mind is ready to receive it. Such anomalies seem to him inexplicable by the ordinary laws of history, so he takes them as evidence of an extramaterial force.

Some of Shaw's characters experience the same sudden realization. They understand that the apparent futility of human endeavor is not such, because we are an essential part of a higher plan to fulfill the will of the Life Force. This is the definitely optimistic side of Shaw's beliefs, which greatly differ from his unconstructive pose as an agitator and reformer. Conrad, Lubin, and Burge, despite their disparate backgrounds, seem to share the same idea in Part II of *Back to Methuselah*:

CONRAD. It's no use arguing about it. It is now absolutely certain that the political and social problems raised by our civilization cannot be solved by mere human mushrooms who decay and die when they are just beginning to have a glimmer of the wisdom and knowledge needed for their own government.

LUBIN. Quite an interesting idea, Doctor. Extravagant. Fantastic. But quite interesting. When I was young I used to feel my human limitations very acutely.

BURGE. God knows I have often felt that I could not go on if it had not been for the sense that I was only an instrument in the hands of a Power above us.

CONRAD. I'm glad you both agree with us, and with one another.

The two politicians (Burge and Lubin) are consulting Conrad (a biologist), who claims that Creative Evolution will produce humans able to live 300 years by sheer force of will. It is not coincidental that these two characters discard the idea because of its impracticality, since there is no magic formula for longevity, but they have to rely on the strenuous effort of superior men who are willing to rise to the occasion. Franklyn, Conrad's brother, states this idea with persuasive precision:

FRANKLYN. Do not mistake mere idle fancies for the tremendous miracle-working force of Will nerved to creation by a conviction of Necessity. I tell you men capable of such willing, and realizing its necessity, will do it reluctantly, under inner compulsion, as all great efforts are made. They will hide what they are doing from themselves: they will take care not to know what they are doing. They will live three hundred years, not because they would like to, but because the soul deep down in them will know that they must, if the world is to be saved.

It is worth considering how distant these ideas of God's will and the Life Force are from the submissive and passive "Thy will be done" of the Lord's Prayer. Humankind is a vehicle for God's will, but they have a will of their own.

Shaw's unconventional religious ideas are not limited to philosophical discussion in his most argumentative plays. Another obvious vessel for heretical language in Shaw's plays is name symbolism. A wide range of characters are named after biblical characters, while others bear the name of theological concepts. Needless to say, it is not the mere mention of these names that adds up to the general stylistic effect of the plays, but the paradoxical features of the characters on whom the names are bestowed, especially when compared

to their homonymous alter-egos. The dramatic implementation of such powerful symbolism is possible because the expectations of the reader/audience vary when characters called Adam, Eve or Cain are on stage.

Take, for instance, Boanerges in *The Apple Cart*. The name was borrowed from the appellation that Jesus chose for his disciples John and James,<sup>12</sup> meaning "the sons of thunder," because of their impetuous and impulsive nature.<sup>13</sup> In the Bible, their zeal is particularly aimed at defending Jesus and attacking those who do not follow his teachings. Shaw's Boanerges also exhibits this violent behavior, to the extent that even the King's secretaries call him a "bull-roarer." However, his individualistic views on politics and lack of comradeship make him a conceited rowdy minister who prides in being a "self-made man." What is more, the spiritual dimension of this character ends with his symbolic name. From the start we are presented with a man that is visually associated with soviet communism (he enters the stage "dressed in a Russian blouse and peaked cap, which he keeps on"), and his convenient philosophical materialism is blatantly exposed in his first conversation with the king, early in the play:

BOANERGES. A soul, eh? You kings still believe in that, I suppose.

MAGNUS. I find the word convenient: it is short and familiar. But if you dislike being called a soul, let us say that you are animate matter as distinguished from inanimate.

BOANERGES [*not quite liking this*] I think I'd rather you called me a soul, you know, if you must call me anything at all. I know I have too much matter about me: the doctor says I ought to knock off a stone or two; but there's something more to me than beef. Call it a soul if you like; only not in a superstitious sense, if you understand me.

Despite the appropriateness of the name Boanerges, according to the self-assertive way in which the character behaves, it is clear that the religious dimension of its meaning is significantly far from true in the case of Bill Boanerges. In all, the paradoxical aspect of this particular symbolic name reveals itself as a useful framing device for the entire play, since the Shavian character echoes the biblical disciples in a deliberately distorted manner.

Other characters bear names, surnames or appellatives reflecting theological concepts, such as Paradise, Eudoxia (from the Greek for "good doctrine") or Domesday ("Doomsday"). Perhaps the character whose theological name is most closely connected to her role in the play is Epifania Fitzfassen, from *The Millionairess*. Epifania<sup>14</sup> is a version of the Greek word-loan for "manifestation" (i.e., "epiphany"), which is used in religious texts to denote the manifestation of the power of God.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, for example, one can mention the use of the Greek word ἐπιφάνεια (appearing) in the New Testament to refer to the second coming of Christ from heaven to earth. By



In Shaw's *The Millionairess* (1960, Dimitri De Grunwald, publicity shot courtesy Fox Lorber), Epifania (Sophia Loren) and Dr. Kabir (Peter Sellers) fall in love despite their religious differences, embodying the religious communion between different creeds that Shaw advocated for. From the 1960 film adaptation directed by Anthony Asquith.

extension, epiphany has come to mean any sudden realization of the essence of something that may have been previously neglected. Epifania Fitzfassen<sup>16</sup> is a superb dramatic example of the importance of epiphanies, both in religion and in other aspects of life. First, when she falls in love with an Egyptian doctor, she has a first-hand experience of the hard conditions that laborers have to endure, because she must keep herself for six months with thirty-five shillings as her only asset if she is to marry him. That is the first “epiphany” she experiences:

EPIFANIA. My pulse will never change: this is the love I crave for. I will marry you. Mr Sagamore: see about a special licence the moment you have got rid of Alastair.

THE DOCTOR. It is not possible. We are bound by our vows.

EPIFANIA. Well, have I not passed your mother's test? You shall have an accoun-

tant's certificate. I learned in the first half hour of my search for employment that the living wage for a single woman is five shillings a week. Before the end of the week I had made enough to support me for a hundred years. I did it honestly and legitimately. I explained the way in which it was done.

In addition, the man she has fallen in love with is a Muslim, and she quickly realizes (in a fit of Shavian relativism) that all religions are the same when it comes to practical matters. This second "epiphany" is consistent with the religious and philosophical principles that have been described so far:

EPIFANIA. I have to take the world as I find it.

THE DOCTOR. The wrath of Allah shall overtake those who leave the world no better than they found it.

EPIFANIA. I think Allah loves those who make money.

SAGAMORE. All the evidence is that way, certainly.

The previous example leads to a necessary final remark about Shaw's heretical opinions. Most often he is content to find fault in the Christian faith as a sort of touchstone for his "Religion of the Future." Sometimes, however, he looks up to other religions as a source for more reasonable forms of faith. Shaw's interest in non-Christian sources proves his ingrained determination to find a true religious faith that can serve mankind spiritually, and yet provide guidance through life's earthly tribulations. In the previous example, we have already seen the (Muslim) Egyptian doctor, only one of the many "pagan" characters that can be found in Shaw's plays, the opinions of whom often cast a helpful light on the deficiencies of Christianity and of Victorian morals in general. Another character that must be highlighted in this section is Sir Jafna (*On the Rocks*), whose monologue is a denunciation of the bigotry with which oriental perspectives were treated, and the narrow-mindedness of the insular Britons:

SIR JAFNA [*finding his tongue*] I am despised. I am called nigger by this dirty faced barbarian whose forefathers were naked savages worshipping acorns and mistletoe in the woods whilst my people were spreading the highest enlightenment yet reached by the human race from the temples of Brahma the thousandfold who is all the gods in one. This primitive savage dares to accuse me of imitating him: me, with the blood in my veins of conquerors who have swept through continents vaster than a million dogholes like this island of yours. They founded a civilization compared to which your little kingdom is no better than a concentration camp. What you have of religion came from the east; yet no Hindu, no Parsee, no Jain, would stoop to its crudities. Is there a mirror here? Look at your faces and look at the faces of my people in Ceylon, the cradle of the human race...

On some occasions the several advantages that can be adopted from those

other religions are spoken out for by Christian characters, even if in a futuristic scenario, as is the case in *Back to Methuselah*:

THE ELDERLY GENTLEMAN [*diplomatically interrupting his scandalized son-in-law*]  
 There can be no doubt, I am afraid, that by clinging too long to the obsolete features of the old pseudo-Christian Churches we allowed the Mahometans to get ahead of us at a very critical period of the development of the Eastern world. When the Mahometan Reformation took place, it left its followers with the enormous advantage of having the only established religion in the world in whose articles of faith any intelligent and educated person could believe.

There are times, nevertheless, when a direct defense of alien beliefs, such as Hinduism, is not only part of a religious argument, but the basis of a spiritual change for one of the characters. Thus recounts Keegan his experience with a dying "Hindoo" in *John Bull's Other Island*:

KEEGAN [*blandly*]. That is not quite what occurred. [*He collects himself for a serious utterance: they attend involuntarily*]. I heard that a black man was dying, and that the people were afraid to go near him. When I went to the place I found an elderly Hindoo, who told me one of those tales of unmerited misfortune, of cruel ill luck, of relentless persecution by destiny, which sometimes wither the commonplaces of consolation on the lips of a priest. But this man did not complain of his misfortunes. They were brought upon him, he said, by sins committed in a former existence. Then, without a word of comfort from me, he died with a clear-eyed resignation that my most earnest exhortations have rarely produced in a Christian, and left me sitting there by his bedside with the mystery of this world suddenly revealed to me.

In the previous examples, Shaw makes use of his characters to praise what he believes are two positive characteristics of Muslims and Hindi; i.e. sensible articles of faith and unbreakable resignation, respectively. It is relevant to remind the reader of the deficiencies that Shaw found in certain elements of the Christian doctrine, especially in the dogma of atonement. On the one hand, he complains that it is a nonsensical belief that is only accepted because of its convenience, hence the admiration for Muslim common sense. On the other, it deprives people of their natural accountability for their actions (sins), hence Shaw's commendation of the attitude of the Hindu, who can bear to be punished for actions committed in a former existence.

Notwithstanding Shaw's inbuilt critical attitude, it is also true that the passage from *John Bull's Other Island* indirectly portrays a recreation of the biblical "Parable of the Good Samaritan."<sup>17</sup> Although the Shavian Samaritan is not successful in that the Hindoo dies in the end, there is also a silver lining to the fact that fruitful contact between religions results in enormous improvement for spiritual understanding.<sup>18</sup>



In view of the interpretation offered above, some tentative conclusions can be drawn regarding Shaw's religious ideas. First, it almost goes without saying that Shaw gave religion a tremendous importance in both his dramatic and non-dramatic writings. His speeches, essays and prefaces encompass the bulk of his philosophical views on the subject, yet his plays exemplify in fiction the shocking and paradoxical dimension of his impious ideas. It must be borne in mind that, although many of Shaw's religious ideas—as expressed in his plays—are no longer shocking for contemporary audiences, the uproar his every word provoked and the response of critics and the censorship are very telling of the type of religious controversy he stirred. Furthermore, his religious unorthodoxy carried a synergic effect. For example, after he argued in a public lecture in 1909 that people admired and followed Jesus because they had a feeling that “a man who could raise people from the dead might possibly on sufficient provocation reverse the operation” (Shaw, *Religious Speeches*, 22), the very same year censors were eager to ban *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet*, despite being “a story of conversion, told with sincerity and depth of conviction” (Henderson, 400).

Despite the fact that his religious thoughts range from the unorthodox to the completely heretical, they were all aimed at the foundation of the one “true” religion. Shaw did not agree with any of the established religious ideas that existed in Victorian Britain. For example, he despised the discrimination of people on religious grounds, and he was consistently against any form of sectarianism. Furthermore, he believed that the very theory underlying the salvation of souls and life after death was unbelievable and unethical because it would not give people full responsibility for their acts. That is why he basically endorsed Creative Evolution, a form of mysticism in which God's will works through the actions and thoughts of humans. One is even tempted to say that certain megalomaniac aspects of Shaw's life and legacy are clearly at ease with a religion that envisions the permanent communion between the men and their maker.

Shaw's lack of agreement with the established religious ideals of his lifetime has philosophical roots, but it also bears stylistic fruit. In its most apparent manifestation, Shaw likes to distort biblical phrases, names and concepts in the text of his plays. This literary device is a direct way to stage his irreverent attitude towards conventional religiosity. On a subtler plane, the disfigurement of religious imagery brings about a conceptual shift that calls for an extensive logical debate. This stylistic strategy is fittingly used most often in Shaw's Discussion Plays as well as in his well-known religious plays.

In conclusion, whatever the viewpoint from which one looks at Shaw's works, the commonplace perception of the atheist, strictly rational playwright falls down flat like the walls of Jericho. Shaw was a religious man, no less than



he was a religious writer. He only happened to be a little ahead of his time, which explains his popular quip: "Christianity might be a good thing if anyone ever tried it."

## Notes

1. To gauge what Shaw's 96 years of age represented at the time, it suffices to say that the average life expectancy at birth for the population of the British Isles was estimated around 40 in the 1850s (Floud, 291; Hollis, 92). Even if the outrageous infant death rate is eliminated from the equation, it is worthy of note that midlife was said to start a little after 30, as many newspapers and magazines pointed out (Heath, 6).

2. Despite his zeal for learning (*Religious Speeches*, 103), "Shaw's Bible scholarship was sometimes faulty."

3. To assess the meaning of Shaw's ideas in his own lifetime, it is worth reminding the reader that "religion has probably never seemed so important, to so many people, as in Victorian England. It was part of every area of life, subsuming the political, educational, professional, social, familial" (Dennis and Skilton, 77). Exaggerated as this quotation may seem, most of the social, political, scientific and philosophical debates in Victorian England had a religious controversy behind them (consider, for example, Darwinism, socialism, agnosticism as opposed to atheism, or women's rights).

4. It is hardly surprising that Shaw should use the Bible as a source for his religious criticism. The Bible had much in common with other prominent institutions of his time (the British Empire, monarchy, democracy, Shakespeare's canonical status, and the like) that Shaw also critiqued. As Prickett (xi) puts it: "The Bible is the basic book of our civilization. It holds a unique and exclusive status not merely in terms of the religious history of the western world but also in literary history and even in what might be called our collective cultural psyche."

5. See Matthew 5:39 and Luke 6:39.

6. Emphasis has been added in all the extracts from Shaw's plays, highlighting the most relevant phrases.

7. *Don Juan in Hell*, sometimes played separately.

8. See Wetmore, *Catholic Theatre and Drama*, for further connections between drama and the Catholic faith.

9. Shaw is known for not displaying carnal encounters in his plays. In other words, he "avoids getting thick about love" (Berst, 112). Therefore, the bodily functions that these characters pivot around for the most part are eating, drinking and resting.

10. Shaw sees obvious evidence that the human race finds itself in a state of constant amelioration, and he expresses his view in his usual shocking words: "Just think about yourselves, ladies and gentlemen. I do not want to be uncomplimentary, but can you conceive God deliberately creating you if he could have created anything better?" (Shaw, *Religious Speeches*, 17).

11. The metaphor is particularly adept, given Shaw's denial of an anthropomorphic God. As usual, this idea was expressed in a particularly orthodox way to convey quite an unorthodox message in the preface to *Back to Methuselah*: "St John might say that 'God is spirit' as pointedly as he pleased; our Sovereign Lady Elizabeth might ratify the Article again and again; serious divines might feel as deeply as they could that a God with body, parts, and passions could be nothing but an anthropomorphic idol: no matter: people at large could not conceive a God who was not anthropomorphic: they stood by the Old Testament legends of a God whose parts had been seen by one of the patriarchs, and finally set up as against the Church a God who, far from being without body, parts, or passions, was composed of nothing else, and of very evil passions too" (CP, 518).

12. According to *Fausset's Bible Dictionary* (1878), Boanerges is "the Aramaic name given to James and John by Jesus. Hebrew beney regesh; Their fiery zeal appears in (Luke 9:54) their desiring the Lord's permission that they should command fire from heaven (like Elias) to consume the Samaritans who would not receive Him, "because His face was as though He would go to Jerusalem." Also in (Mark 9:38) their forbidding one casting out demons in Christ's name, because he followed not with them. Compare also their ambition for the highest place in Christ's kingdom, next Himself (Mark 9:35–41). Grace subsequently corrected this zeal without knowledge, making

James the willing martyr (Acts 12) and John the apostle of gentleness and love. Still the old zeal against perverters of the truth as it is in Jesus appears in 2 John 1:10–11; 3 John 1:10."

13. See Mark 3:17.

14. One finds it difficult not to mention Shaw's apology for a phonetic alphabet, given the spelling of the /f/ sound in Epifania's name. The importance of phonetics and spelling cannot be undermined, as they found their way into Shaw's will, where a generous allowance was set aside to publish his plays using his own forty-letter phonetic alphabet. Shaw's views on the advantages of "ootomatik speling" have been edited under the title *On Language* (1965).

15. It is also relevant to bring up that the word epiphany has particular connotations in literary terms, stemming from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which "sudden spiritual manifestations," whether trite or transcendental, are epiphanies to be recorded by the man of letters. For more information on Shaw's reading of Joyce, see Holroyd (598–600).

16. Epifania states her full name as Epifania Ognisanti ("all saints") di Parerga, which enhances the plausibility of religious symbolism in it.

17. Luke, 10:25–37.

18. Furthermore, a fraternal religious entente must avoid ill-meant superstition, lest we mistake a good Samaritan for the Devil, as Larry does just before Keegan recounts the tranquil death of the Hindoo: "LARRY. I am informed that when the devil came for the black heathen, he took off your head and turned it three times round before putting it on again; and that your head's been turned ever since."

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