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Christianity and Renaissance Spirit in the Elizabethan Age: A Scrutiny of Selected Works of William Shakespeare

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In the Christian world, Jesus Christ is the supreme figure. As far as the historical evidences regarding the accuracy of the gospels are concerned, there are myriad of opinions diverging independently in numerous directions. One of the reasons for this diversity is that the sermons and preaching of Jesus were preserved for several decades only in the form of oral literature. Also, there was a lapse of forty years or more between the crucifixion and the composition of the earliest gospel. The common people were illiterate and superstitious so the possibility of the additions on their part to the teaching of Christ may also not be denied. But in spite of all the diversions, one thing was common in all the times that the teachings of Christ inspired the common masses to have a firm faith in the positive aspects of human life. William Kingsland remarks in this regard that, "However irrational Christian dogmas may be in the light of our modern knowledge. . . they do if genuinely believed in, service to keep the average individual more or less on a straight path of moral rectitude, and they offer him a certain amount of comforting assurance that he is not a lost sinner"(Kingsland 12).

It was during the Anglo-Norman Period (1066 A.D. – 1350 A.D.) that England emerged as a nation. The French national epic *Chanson de Roland*, like its similar construction of *Beowulf* in the Anglo-Saxon period stirred the imagination of the masses. The monks, minstrels and the storytellers focused on the history of Bible, Seven Deadly Sins, etc. Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Welsh monk, wrote, *Regum Britannia*, a collection of local legends and tales in which the French, Celtic and English heroes like Roland, Arthur and Tristram prominently figured and tremendously appealed to masses.

Many of Shakespeare's plays are firmly ingrained in the understanding of life as enunciated in the tales and gospels of the Bible, the New Testament and the Old Testament. Christ is the central character in the Bible. Christ wanted his followers to uphold the contemporary socio-political system, "Render therefore all their dues tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour" (Hovey 275). At another place in the Bible, Christ says that, "The strong must bear with the weak"(The New Testament 238). Discussing about the craft of Shakespeare in this regard, G. Wilson Knight points out:

It is significant that Shakespeare continually sees the community as a body, an organism of which the individual is as a limb. The main subject of this creative works was the human interest. He did not exclude the fairies, ghosts and religious fanaticism from his plays yet he focused on the human beings. (Knight 71)

There are numerous opinions regarding the inclination of Shakespeare toward Christianity. But if we closely look at the works of the playwright, it becomes clear that he was a liberal Christian. In almost all his plays, we find references to Old and New Testament. For example in *The*

Comedy of Errors, when Adriana talks about an ideal relationship between a husband and a wife, the argument shows its origin to Psalm 8. Similarly her speech ‘How comes it now, my husband’ (Shakespeare 161), which is also used by Katharina in *The Taming of the Shrew* is reminiscent of Ephesians 5. The speech of Portia on mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* and Isabella’s similar speech in *Measure for Measure*, spring from Old and New Testament.

It may be noticed that in the later plays by Shakespeare, the reference to the Christian values is not direct. This change may be ascribed to the general atmosphere of the time as certain acts in Elizabethan era during early 1600 prevented artists using the name of the Holy Christ or Holy Ghost. But still, there are indirect references in the plays of the dramatist, which further strengthen our belief in his use of the doctrine. For example in *The Tempest*, Christian symbolism is superimposed on pagan myths. Ferdinand who dies and goes to heaven may be compared to Christ figure. Similarly Miranda is the bride of Christ and Caliban is comparable to the devil. Ariel in *The Tempest* plays the part similar to the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament and Spirit in the New Testament. Ariel performs the function similar to Spirit in the Gospel when he saves the travelers from the sea. Therefore this superimposition of Christian on Pagan makes the plays of the master look quite secular. But a careful analysis still shows a deeper undercurrent of the religious meanings in his works. The hints of the religion or Christian doctrines have been so subtle that some critics have even denied any such reference in his works.

Similarly, in *As You Like It*, we see common people as honest and loyal friends and servants to their masters. Adam is trusted and old servant of Orlando’s family. He is aware of the jealousy of his elder brother, Oliver Orlando. Krieger Elliot very aptly remarks, “Adam in *As You Like It*, for example, endorses the aristocratic ideal of a static social hierarchy” (Barnaby 386)

In *Measure for Measure* (1603) the sexual lapses are discussed with great care. The defaulting lovers are persuaded to correct themselves by marrying each other. There is a humanistic attitude towards bawd also. The theme of this play is that those who sit in the seats of judgment must not be ruthless, and should peep into their own hearts as to ascertain whether they themselves have been sinless or not. If not, they should not judge others very harshly. This is the message of Jesus Christ also who forgives a woman for her adultery and exhorts her to leave the sinful path in future. Isabella is quite restless about her brother’s fate. She pleads his case passionately in the court of Angelo. Isabella in fact, echoes the message of the New Testament, which says, “Blessed are merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Braker 87).

If we shift our focus from the influence of Christianity on the works of Shakespeare, we see that many of his works show the impact of Renaissance also. His works are solid proofs of his familiarity and knowledge of the classics. His works are infused with the teachings of great scholars of the time namely Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, Plautus, Cicero, Terence and Plutarch. In *Hamlet*, some of his speeches are indicative of this spirit of renaissance humanism.

“What a piece of work is a man!
How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and
moving how express and admirable! In action how like an
angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the
world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is
this quintessence of dust?” (*Hamlet* Act II, Scene II).

Therefore Hamlet in the beginning of the play is confused and disillusioned but matures as he grows. In the same way, Shakespeare also shows a marked maturity from his early tragedies to late romances, which give messages essentially steeped in renaissance spirit. Similarly in *The Tempest*, Prospero possesses the qualities of compassion, generosity, friendship, etc. Writing about this tendency of Shakespeare, Bernard D. Grebanier writes:

Shakespeare is perhaps the perfect expression of renaissance humanism. His profound sympathy for humanity enabled him to pierce to the very core of his characters; his unexcelled gifts as a poet made his men and women unforgettable creatures of flesh and blood. This may be said as much of the best of his earliest plays as of *The Tempest*, where Prospero is himself a kind of incarnation of the best of what the Renaissance had extended to mankind” (Grebanier 242).

Also, talking about the humanist connection of Shakespeare’s plays, Robin Headlam says that, “Repeatedly, they come back to those matters that concern Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*: ‘the properties of government’, ‘our city’s institutions’, ‘the terms for common justice’, ‘the nature of our people’” (Wells 27).

Therefore if we look at the common people in the aforementioned plays, they seem to be embodiments of the liberal Christian values enshrined in the Bible. They are gentle and kind to others. They are honest, loyal and great friends and servants. The Christ appears to be overbrimming with love and affection for the helpless and weak and so are the common people in the plays of Shakespeare. They are self-effacing and ready to undergo even great sufferings upholding higher values of life. Shakespeare too had a skeptical outlook towards certain things in life, but he did not go about providing remedies to these issues. Instead, he went for raising the issues and left things to the judgment of the people without being didactic.

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