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Religion in Shakespeare's England

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Protestantism had been finally established as the national religion the year before Shakespeare was born. Hence, from his earliest days, he would be familiar with its rites and ceremonies. The images would have been torn from the church by the gentle river Avon, and the fires of the Marian martyrdom, as well as the burning of Marys and Johns, would be memories of the past. John Fox, the author of the "Acts and Monuments," had published the first volume of his history before the poet's birth, and he had been tutor to the children of Sir Thomas Lucy of Charlecote.

The accession of Elizabeth, November 17, 1558, had lifted a dark cloud from the country. Bells rang, bonfires lit up the sky, imprisoned priests and people experienced the throbbing of a new hope, and far-off exiles gathered themselves together to take ship for their old homes, bringing with them the leaven of the Genevan theology. More anticipations were indulged than could ever be realised. The picture of the time has all the light and darkness of a work of Rembrandt. The Protestants were strong in the large towns and the seaports, but, in the north, the ennobled families were nearly all Catholics, though the common people had espoused the cause of England against the encroachments of Rome.

Many churches were closed, and there were hundreds of parishes without incumbents, devoting the Sunday to sports and licentiousness. The windows of the sacred edifices were broken, the doors were unhinged, the walls in decay, the very roofs stripped of their lead. "The Book of God," says Stubbes, "was rent, ragged, and all be-torn." Aisles, naves, and chancels, were used for stabling horses. Armed men met in the churchyard, and wrangled, or shot pigeons with hand-guns. Pedlars sold their wares in the church porches during service. Morrice-dancers excited inattention and wantonness by their presence in costume, so as to be ready for the frolics which generally followed prayers. "Many there are," said Sandys, preaching before Elizabeth even after her reforms, "that hear not a sermon in seven years, I might say in seventeen." Several towns and cities were notoriously irreligious. In the city of York, according to Drake, the Reformation "went so far as almost to put an end to religion."

The friends of the new doctrine expected that all the evils of the time would be instantly remedied. But the work of reform was extremely gradual. Until a month after her accession, Elizabeth did not interfere. Camden has pithily described the successive steps:

"The 27th of December it was tolerated to have the Epistles and Gospels, the Ten Commandments, the Symbols, the Litany, and the



Lord's Prayer, in the vulgar tongue. The 22nd of March, the Parliament being assembled, the order of Edward VI was re-established, and by Act of the same the whole use of the Lord's Supper granted under both kinds. The 24th of June, by the authority of that which concerned the uniformity of public prayers and the administration of the Sacrament, the Sacrifice of the Mass was abolished, and the Liturgy in the English tongue more and more established. In the month of July the Oath of Allegiance was proposed to the Bishops and other persons; and in August images were thrown out of the temples and churches, and broken or burnt."

The fervour of the last part, carried out by the common people, filled the streets with bonfires and crowds. The proceedings in London are described as being "like the sacking of some hostile city." Vestments, Popish Bibles and books, ornaments, and rood-screens, were ruthlessly destroyed. The Articles, revised and reduced from forty-two to thirty-nine, the changes in them being chiefly of a Lutheran character, were sanctioned and published in 1563.

The dispossessed Catholics strove to regain their place and power by resorting to artifice and intrigue. Some remained in England sheltered in the houses of the nobles. Others fled the country, taking the pay of the monarchs who were hostile to England. The charms of a freebooter's life on the open seas overcame others. The more desperate plotted against Elizabeth's person, or for the elevation of Mary Queen of Scots to the English throne, even taking arms, as in Northumberland and Yorkshire, for her cause. Elizabeth herself wavered. She was fond of an imposing ritual.

Though she had been persecuted for her faith, she still leaned more to Rome than to Geneva. She restored the Carnival. At times it seemed as if little were required to make her a Catholic after the Pope's own heart. One of the matters which troubled her greatly was the marriage of the clergy. On her visit into Essex and Suffolk she found many of them had availed themselves of the altered law, and had given up celibacy. Accordingly she issued her injunction to Archbishop Parker against the marriages of deans and canons. Mr. Froude's picture of cathedral establishments is worth giving:

"Deans and canons, by the rules of their foundations, were directed to dine and keep hospitality in their common hall. Those among them who had married broke up into their separate houses, where, in spite of Elizabeth, they maintained their families. The unmarried 'tabled abroad at the ale-houses.' The singing men of the choir became the prebend's private servants, 'having the Church stipend for their wages.' The cathedral plate adorned the prebendal sideboards and dinner-

tables. The organ-pipes were melted into dishes for their kitchens; the organ-frames were carved into bedsteads, where the wives reposed beside their reverend lords; while the copes and vestments were coveted for their gilded embroidery, and were slit into gowns and bodices. Having children to provide for, and only a life-interest in their revenues, the chapter, like the bishops, cut down their woods, and worked their fines, their leases, their escheats and wardships, for the benefit of their own generation. Sharing their annual plunder, they ate and drank and enjoyed themselves while their opportunity remained; for the times were dangerous, 'and none could tell who should be after them.'"

The Protestant party was growing in strength, but the Queen manifested her dislike of their proceedings, at times, in a very irritating manner. It was considered disorderly for any State affairs to be mentioned from the pulpit. Subservient archbishops and bishops were instructed to admonish any clerks daring enough to discuss ecclesiastical changes and necessities. When Dean Nowell was preaching before Elizabeth at St. Paul's he rather "roughly handled" so un-Protestant a subject as images. The Queen got excited, and cried out from her seat, "To your text, Mr. Dean! Leave that; we have heard enough of that! To your subject." Of course the preacher was unable to proceed. The Queen and De Silva, the Spanish Ambassador, left in a hurry, and some of the Protestants present burst into tears.

In the southern churches the Protestant clergy held informal meetings for a service, in which preaching was the prominent feature. These meetings were known as "prophesyings," and afterwards as "Grindalising," because Archbishop Grindal had encouraged them in the north, and, when promoted to Canterbury, had addressed a remonstrance to the Queen on the subject, against her wish to cut down the number of preachers. For his freedom Grindal was sequestered. "We admit no man to the office," he had said, "that either professeth Papistry or Puritanism. Generally the graduates of the Universities are only admitted to be preachers, unless it be some few which have excellent gifts of knowledge in the Scriptures, joined with good utterance and godly persuasion."

In vain he assured her that they were loyal subjects, and that in the Catholic rebellion in the north "one poor parish in Yorkshire, which, by continual preaching, had been better instructed than the rest - Halifax, I mean - was ready to bring three or four thousand men into the field to serve against the said rebels." The prophesiers, sometimes termed lecturers, had to be restrained, as their sermons were often three hours in length. Modern statesmen would have judged it prudent to leave them liberty to weary out their hearers and themselves. But, as it was, when the preacher turned his hour-glass, saying,

"one glass more," the people murmured their delight, such was the eagerness of many of them to receive spiritual edification. There were objections, however, and worldly-wise Selden states them. "They ran away with the affections of the people, as well as with the bounty that should be bestowed on the minister."

Preaching at St. Paul's Cross in London was carefully regulated. When not a Londoner, the preacher was lodged in the Shunamites' House hard by. It was at this house that Richard Hooker asked the lady to find him a wife, and Mrs. Churchman successfully recommended her daughter Joan, whose peculiarities afterwards tortured the "judicious" mind of her husband, without preventing him from writing his exposition of ecclesiastical polity.

The services in the church were indeed uniform in certain externals, but they varied greatly, according to the amount of Protestantism in the bishop of the diocese, or the incumbent of the parish. Congregational singing was one of the conspicuous changes made by the reform-movement. Psalm-singing and heresy were both supposed to be of foreign origin. Free living and free thinking were common in Italy, and hence to be "Italianate," or "Italionated," was equivalent to being styled an atheist, a republican, or a worldling. To sing psalms was to be strongly Lutheran, but not Puritanic. According to Neale, the Puritans allowed congregational singing in a plain tune, but not of "tossing the psalms from one side to another, with intermingling of organs." Time and tune seem to have made the difference between the two schools of song.

The Puritans drawled their tunes and psalms, Geneva-fashion; the Protestants sang them in a lively and tossing style. The clown in the *Winter's Tale* was thus speaking ironically when he says of the singers coming to the sheep-shearing feast, "but one Puritan amongst them, and he sings psalms to hornpipes." The other Shakespearean reference to the services of the time is also put into the mouth of this privileged character. "Though honesty be no Puritan," says the clown to the Countess of Rousillon, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, "it will wear the surplice of humility over the black gown of a big heart." Considering how freely he touched the life of his time, it augurs either absolute indifference, or calm neutrality, on his part, that so little was said by Shakespeare that could be considered offensive to reasonable hearers, or that can now be tortured by sectaries into proof of his special leaning and faith. Besides the references just given two others may be quoted, if single passages mean anything. "I'll have thee burned," says Leontes to Paulina, in the *Winter's Tale*, one of his latest plays. She replies -

"I care not.
It is an heretic that makes the fire,
Not she which burns in it."

On the opposite side there is a slap at the Norwich divine, when Sir Andrew Aguecheek confesses, in *Twelfth Night*, he would "as lief be a Brownist as a politician."

Pews did not make their appearance in the parish churches until the reign of James I. They were then stuck about immediately under the pulpit, or anywhere, as may still be seen in some out-of-the-way village churches. The pews were of oak, and they were built in the first instance by the families sitting in them. "The faculty pew," intended for the medical men for the time being, appears, in one or two instances we have noticed, to have been constructed at the expense of the parish. Green baize from Norwich was used to line them, and hence some very suggestive entries in churchwardens' books for such interesting curative arts as "salting the fleas."

The Puritan movement received its highest expression in the allegorical poem of the "Fairy Queen." The Red Cross Knight is the Church militant, and when Arthur gives him the diamond-box, holding the water of life,

"The Red-cross Knight him gave
A book, wherein his Saviour's
testament
Was writ with golden letters, rich and
brave,
A work of wondrous grace, and able
souls to save."

Una is Elizabeth symbolised, and the scarlet-clad Duessa is Catholicism, as typified in Mary Queen of Scots. Puritanism, to his poetic mind, was simply the ideal religion invested with the grace of chivalry, and informed with a tender Platonism. It is not for us to write the history of this great movement. It welled up, like a fine spring, and ran its rippling way in many directions, not always as pure as its source, or to be recognised as coming from its original impulse. Earnest and intense religion could hardly be bright and cheerful when gaiety of heart was associated with fine clothing and loose manners. Hence it became poor in dress, plain in ceremony, austere in temper, and Calvinistic in theology.

It was a revolt against luxury and a certain intellectual effeminacy - preaching duty against pleasure, and the attractions of a life beyond the grave to compensate men for what they were required to surrender in sublunary things. It branched out in many forms. With the intellectual few it was purely philosophic. With the many it ran into Presbyterianism, Congregationalism, and other non-conforming varieties. Meetings were held in private houses. Wealthy persons sheltered its notable leaders, and endowed chapels and charities. The growing middle classes were charmed by it. It was healthy, vigorous, and pronounced. The Protestantism of Elizabeth was at best a compromise. The Puritans wanted a discernible change, an earnest ritual, powerful preaching, a New Testament Church. They were ready to suffer for their faith, and when James succeeded Elizabeth, they were haled to prison with painful care. Bishops grew bold and judges were severe.

Closely connected with religion was the new Poor Law. Settlement dates back, as Professor Stubbs shows, to the Statute of Labourers, and the Acts by which it was confirmed and amended. Henry

VIII compelled the respective parishes to keep their own poor. Edward VI had beggars branded with the letter V, and Elizabeth was severe as to "stalwart and valiant" mendicants, who flooded the country. No doubt the dissolution of the religious houses had made the question of pauperism more pressing. If the monks gave too little to the poor, still it was possible to say, as Selden did, that "now where XX. pound was yearly given to the poore, in more than c. places in Ingeland is not one meale's meate given."

Trade guilds had assisted in providing for their own poor. Compulsory alms were ordered by Elizabeth, and a three years' residence was made a settlement. But her two most notable reforms were the Act of 1575 and the final Act of 1601. The first ordered corporate towns to deliver wool, flax, and iron, to the overseers of the poor, "so that, when poore and needy, persons, willing to work, may be set on work." The second transformed the annual poor collection of the parish church into a fixed burden to be levied on the parish itself, and the churchwardens, who had hitherto had the care of the poor, were to be assisted by over-seers, nominated annually in Easter week, with power to elect a special body for large parishes. Support was to be provided for the disabled poor, and work for the rest. Entries of flax in the parish books are, in many instances, the only records of this change; the Poor-House, or Workhouse, being of later date.

Apparently, there are only two allusions in Shakespeare to such things. The "working-house of thought," in the chorus to the fifth act of *Henry V* is doubtful, because the play is usually dated before 1601. But the second is clear, and it has a touch of satire in it. *Pericles* was written after the "43rd of Elizabeth" that Carlyle so studiously reviles. The second fisherman drawing up his net in Act ii. scene I, says, "Help, master, help! here's a fish hangs in the net like a poor man's right in the law; 'twill hardly come out."

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