

# Bernard Shaw's Theory of Religion and God

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**Abstract - This paper is an appraisal of how Shaw has expressed his views on God and religion, 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 , dramatic and personal problems in his early plays and later he introduced themes such as religion, youth, labour and capital etc. This paper depicts how Shaw as a practical mystic explains theory of religion and God.**

## I. SHAW, ESSENTIALLY RELIGIOUS

“Religiously the family background was Protestant” says Collins, “but Shaw early rejected the Christian faith “. Throughout his long career he warred so much on conventional religion that he has often been regarded as irreligious. Thus, when he was still young in a meeting of the Shelley Society, he declared himself as atheist, and he refused to attend the church even on Sundays. He regarded all conventional religious as dark wells or alleys out of which nobody can get any light. He was an intellectualist with a keen , penetrating mind who subjected all faiths , conventions and institutions to the search light of the reason, found them wanting and so could not believe in them. But this does not mean that he was a materialist, (one who banished all mind from the universe like Darwin) or an atheist, or an agnostic. As a matter of fact, he was a deeply religious man who substituted his own religion for the old religions. His religion has both a negative and a positive aspect; it is both constructive and destructive. He pulls down old idols and replaces them by new idols of his own. As St. Joan and Major Barbara are in essence religious dramas, and the word ‘God’ is constantly on the lips of the Maid, it would be worth why to examine his views on religion and god in some detail.

## II. REJECTION OF INSTITUTIONAL CHRISTIANITY

First of all it should be understood clearly that he is opposed to Christianity only in the institutional sense. The ritual, the dogma, the superstitious assertions of institutional Christianity is abhorrent to his sensitive mind. Otherwise, like a Christian or the devotee of any other religion, he is quite aware of a mind, sprit, god, moving through the universe. Thus, he declares in *The Intelligent Women's Guide*: “There is a mysterious something in us called a soul, which deliberates wickedness kills, and without which no material gain can make life bearable”. Thus, he approach to religion has as element of the mystical in it, it is very close to Christianity and quite different from that of science, which denies God, soul or mind or sees the universe as the change collection of the micro-organism. He did even 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 saintly mind “and religious rituals like baptism confirmation etc. To the ritual of modern science vaccination etc, (preface to St. Joan). We never find Shaw making a systematic attack on churches. He stands for rationalism and liberalism in religion rather than for the abolition of religion. As **Duffin** puts it “*Shaw would liberalize, modernize the churches, but not secularize or abolish them, unless they are disastrously reactionary*”.

## III. PLEA FOR LIBERALISM IN RELIGION

In other words, he advocates a sweeping away, a clearing off, of much superstitious stuff that at present encumbers religion. The religious dogmas and creeds have not changed with the times; they continue to teach doctrines which are no longer believed in, and this result in hypocrisy, sham and affectations. The churches move too slowly, and

their teaching even do not even approximate to the modern approach to truth. These are four corner-stones of Christina theology, the personality of God, the divine-nature of Christ, and Resurrection and the atonement through the Cross, and on all these four aspects of Christianity, Shaw has expressed himself with force and clarity. As regards the conception of God, he is entirely at one with Christianity, “in believing that the ultimate reality is a power which is expressed in ourselves as creature spirit”. Only Jesus called this power, “Heavenly Father”, and Shaw calls it “*Evolution, Elan Vital, Life Force*”, and by other names. As regards the Godhead of Christ, Shaw believes that he was the divine in the same sense in which all men are divine. As regards the Christian belief in the Resurrection of Christ and Miracles he dismisses is as merely of the nature of folk-lore, a mere superstitious, and as such of no consequences. It is the doctrine of atonement for sin by the Cross, which Shaw denounces most bluntly, and vehemently, “as a mean and impracticable evasion of responsibility”. It is logically impossible and morally undesirable for any but the sinner to bear the burden of sin. Sin can be atoned for only by the suffering of the sinner himself, and the abandonment of sin, and not by the suffering of anybody else. To say that it can be atoned for by the suffering of Christ or any other individual is an indirect incitement to sin.

#### IV. ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE CLERGY

As regards Church dignitaries, it is very rarely that he holds them up to scorn. He sees the priests as he sees other men, ‘creatures of flesh and blood, capable of dignity, but by no means immune from human failing of the worst type’. That is how Morell is viewed in *Candida*. With rare exceptions they are treated with sympathy and as attempt is every made to understand their point of view. In *St. Joan*, for example, there are a number of ecclesiastical characters and the dramatist has started 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 in no doubt. **Purdorn** rightly emphasizes that the painting of ecclesiastical characters is one of the strong points of Shaw.

#### V. FAITH IN SALVATION THROUGH THE TEACHING OF CHRIST

Though, through his criticism of institutional Christianity – scattered all over his pages – Shaw did much to expose its errors and sap its foundations, he is all in favour of the practical applications of the economic, political and social teachings of Christ. This is what he means when he asks in the *Preface to Androcles and the Lion*. “Why not give Christianity a trial?” The Bible expounds sound political theories and Shaw advocates their use in everyday life. He believed that the only way out of the miseries and sufferings of the present day of the world is through a practical application of the way pointed out by Christ. However, this practical application can result not through individual effort, but through state effort. Christ advocated a leveling down of the rich and leveling up of the poor, and this can be brought about through as elaborate state organization alone and, “all sorts of modern political measures”. The war, he believed, was a logical consequence of the utter neglect of the teachings of Christ. In 1922, he wrote, “there are probably more people now, who feel that Christ is the only hope for the world, than there ever were before in the real-life of men now living.

#### VI. CREATIVE EVOLUTION: SHAW’S RELIGION

Shaw’s criticism of Christianity shows that it is only the irrational and the superstitious which can he denounces. His search is for a more rational, more logical, and so more intellectually satisfying and more credible-creed, and such a creed in his theory of Creative Evolution. To quote **Duffin**, “*The Life Force, the Creative spirit of life, is Shaw’s God, and he would have us worship no other*”. As **Joad** puts it, Shaw’s God is the, “*Evolutionary appetite, which makes the wheels of the world go around*”. Creative Evolution is his religion, and through this religion he seeks to explain much that is imperfect in the world. For example, Shaw’s explanation that there is Evil and imperfection only because the Life Force is yet imperfect, is yet blundering forward, is much more plausible and convincing than the conventional Christian explanations, that evil, too, is the result of “the deliberate machinations, of omnipotent beneficence”, only we humans do not understand His ways.

## VII. RECOGNITION OF IMPERFECTION

Shaw's Life Force is creative; it is "vitality with a purpose" a ceaseless upward striving. Shaw's religion recognizes that the world at present is imperfect, but it also conveys the cheering message that it can be improved upon. The Life Force at present is pressing forward blindly through a process of trial and error, but in Man it has evolved a brain. It will continue to provide the creative energy, but it is man's part to co-operate with it and make its working conscious and intelligent. "It took millions of years to arrive at Man; it need take but a fraction of that time to proceed to the superman." The Life force employs certain chosen individuals as the instruments of its upward will, and then they become saints, like Joan.

## VIII. SHIFT IN FAVOUR OF CHRISTIANITY

In the end, we may mention that Shaw's attitude toward religion underwent a gradual change. He identified more and more the mystic element in Christianity with the mystic element in his own Evolutionary religions. The change in his outlook is so marked that it, says **Duffin**, "*amounts to a passage from the Everlasting No to the Everlasting Yea*". The early Shaw attacks Christianity and formulates a new religion; the later Shaw tries to reconcile the two.

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