

**W.B.YEATS AS A PROPHETIC POET: AN INQUIRY INTO
HIS RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract

W.B.Yeats' early poetry is replete with themes which were not only melodious to ears but quite pictorial for imagination also, while his later poetry can be called more spiritual and religious. Yeats is one of those authors who questioned established systems tenaciously. His writing career witnessed experiments with different themes and he revised his writings frequently. While his position as a great poet rests secure, his beliefs and philosophy for poetic imagination have been criticized severely. His stature as a religious poet has been questioned by many. This paper inquires into his religious belief and philosophy with a focus on his poetry. His interest in Oriental philosophy and Occult Studies to his faith in Christianity will be probed into this paper.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Occult, Christianity, Religious philosophy and Prophetic poetry.*

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Yeats' early poetry shows how inquisitive he was about that power which governs this world and keeps it moving. His indulgence in different orders and schools of philosophy also shows his search for answers he kept introspecting. His famous phrase 'Unity of Being' was the only truth for him to believe and explore. Yeats' themes in early poetry were mainly metaphysical in nature although his faith in God was firm. But his skeptic nature made him inquire everything. In his later poetry, which he wrote in a mature style, most of the poems were spiritual in nature. His poetry became an accumulation of variety of topics he experimented with during his search for what makes the life of a human being revolve around the centre, 'The Unity of Being'. Yeats' poetical inquiry started from his searching the answers outside in the beginning and ended at finding it inside.

Yeats' religious belief can be called a combination of many cultures and practices. His faith in Christianity, his fascination for Oriental knowledge and his experiments with the Occult all these together can give us a glimpse of his religion. His indulgence with mediums has been approved by many scholars as Vernon Watkins observes-

Yeats did not rely for his poetry on knowledge; he relied on oracles. Just as his father, in a letter, said that he was himself always on the point of discovering the Premium Mobile of the universe, so Yeats at every moment was conscious of the distillation of knowledge in oracles, oracles which could, when he most needed it, give him "Unity of Being." An oracle depends upon a duality of All and Nothing, upon omniscience, upon total ignorance, upon that moment for which both are true, upon the Nothing from which all things flow. An oracle depends upon the entire state of things and that which set them in motion. Yeats consulted many oracles in search of what he called in speaking to me "a

belief which is moving," one which would correspond to the fullest life of the imagination and the deepest expression of a man's soul. (477-8)

His later poetry including *The Second Coming*, *Vacillation*, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Crazy Jane* poems can be taken as examples of his religious belief. 'Vacillation' being his most religious poem shall be taken first. The poem has been interpreted by many scholars and in most cases has been inspected closely although before that we have to find out how religious Yeats was or what was his religion? To quote Virginia Moore-

But Yeats has nothing to do with our time, may come the rejoinder. Through him you cannot take its pulse. His was a maverick religion. With fantastic notions as to the nature of man, doctrinally he was a "sport," a spontaneous deviation from type. (4)

While trying to find a system for his philosophy, style, objective or theme Yeats scholars have claimed to find out that Yeats was always antithetical whatever thought he created in one poem he contradicted in other. This self-debate ran parallel throughout his poetry. These lines from his poem "Vacillation" describe a lot-

The Soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.

The Heart. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?

The Soul. Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire?

The Heart. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!

The Soul. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.

The Heart. What theme had Homer but original sin? (72-77)

Here in the poem, the conversation shows how Yeats is split between his heart and soul, his conscience and the established norms to reach God, while he contradicts every suggestion or instruction of soul with a reason from his conscience. He admires the fate of those who followed strict religious lives and at the same time, he dares to think freely without any impact or fear of his own consequence.

The poem raises a vital question-'What is joy?'(10) While most of the scholars have commented on the form of poem as difficult and without connection, on a deeper level whole of the poem can be seen as an answer to the question. Yeats has answered the

question basically on two levels one is physical and second is spiritual; throughout the poem, we have found him 'Between extremities Man runs his course'(1-2) while in the end of the poem, through the conversation, he shows how artistic joy is more important than religious faith only. In the poem, he has nowhere condemned the religious feelings rather it is a debate where artistic joy wins over religious duties. He faced charges of paganism despite the fact that his poetic works render his religious sentiments and spirit in most of his projects especially his later works are quite abundant in religious imagery. To quote Vernon Watkins-

While it is easy to see how pagan, for all its religious imagery, is the early poetry of Yeats, and how Christian, for all its pagan imagery, the late, it is less easy to see how the transition was made from one to the other. In the early work the god seems to be annexed to the poem, in the late work it is the source of the poem's intensity. (488)

Yeats' early and later works also rest on his theory of antithesis; while his early work was more focused on music and aesthetic, his later work is full of spirituality. *Vacillation* is a poem which manifests all the aspects Yeats considers before revealing his own religious belief "joy". He cannot be accounted for having traditional religious belief but proves himself as a free thinker, rational and unique believer. He has sung many songs in praise of God but *Vacillation* is different. As is commented by Helen Vendler -

Yet those undoing's-of worldly ambition, of conventional domesticity, of aimless 'happiness,' of a tragic sense of remorse, of the desire for conquering fame, even of salvation-point Yeats toward the joy that ratifies necessity, in which all vacillation ceases. 'The meaning of all song' is 'Let all things pass away.' '*Vacillation*' is a very specialized poem of successive ordeals in the search for the wisdom that brings joy, --- Yeats strips himself of these overt identity-markers to be a poet not of his own time but of the company of poets, not of a specific life but (as we realize from all the mentions of his increasing age) of the attainment of that 'old experience' that Milton prophesied of his *Penseroso*. (167)

The poem explains how easy it is to be able to bless someone else when you feel a joy in your heart. The final lines give us the glimpse of his religion- which is to follow one's

heart without caring for resolute doctrines given by orthodox believers. As Yeats tells in 'Vacillation' "So get you gone, Von Hügel, though with blessings on your head" (12). The stanza sees the most famous conversation between the soul and the heart, while The Soul tries to teach The Heart traditional and orthodox ways to reach salvation, Yeats prefers the untraversed path to reach the same destination. He is not ready to accept the ritualistic ways suggested by Christian philosophers and thinkers.

'The Second Coming' is a poem which apparently stands powerfully in contrast with 'Vacillation' although a close inspection brings out the real picture. These two poems draw our attention on how contrary these two are in their thoughts, while at one place 'joy' is being discussed, in other, a dim picture of future shows his pessimistic spirit. He describes how society and civilization are going in the wrong direction. The poem is based on the declaration of Jesus Christ's return to earth to claim it as his kingdom. It is said that all the people who lead their lives in a right way or are righteous should not fear the second coming but the people who have not followed the Holy Spirit and are at fault will be punished. We can see in the 'Second Coming' by Yeats, he has reversed the proclamation as he is concerned with the 'anarchy' prevalent around us. 'The Second Coming' opens with lines –

TURNING and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (The Second Coming, 1-8)

The civilization which started with deep intensity of religion, has started turning out of control. Here Yeats has depicted that civilization and social order is amorphic as all the orders and systems are failing. The people, who are upright and truthful, are getting

doubtful while the wicked and sinners are having full belief in their actions and deeds. This world is drowned in violence and all the people with purity of heart are being suffocated as they are unable to fight with culpability in this world. The noble men have lost their faith and are overpowered by those who are blind to get that power which is needed to rule this world.

The second stanza of the poem can be called more religious in comparison to first but it gives humankind no hope to escape from extinction. The wrong doings of humankind has awakened a power which is quite opposite to the Christ. Here poet visualizes that a bestial creature which is the combination of a man and a lion is awoken and it is walking towards 'Bethlehem' to be born again.

The point to ponder over here is that Yeats presents a very bleak and dim picture of the future of humanity. The readers do not find any consolation or any way out of this problem rather they face a kind of prophecy which tells that human destiny is doomed here. One should contemplate the objective behind this poem. Yeats never claimed to be religious but his faith in God can never be questioned. Here we need to concentrate on Yeats' prophetic sentiments- in true human religion. One is concerned to follow the path laid by God which includes honest, law-abiding, ethical and virtuous men who can see the plan of God to run this world and bring salvation to noble men.

The Second Coming can be taken as a warning for humanity to mend its ways, and the underlying message of the poem is that we are heading towards our destruction because we have lost our track of righteousness which will bring havoc. The revelation at hand as indicated by Yeats is nothing other than 'the doomed future' because a bestial power is going to overtake this world. As John Unterecker Observes-

For "A Meditation in Time of Civil War," set as it is beneath "the old wind- broken tree," manages, in spite of its shortness, to recapitulate in wind and broken tree the disaster he had prophesied both in "The Second Coming" and in "A Prayer for My Daughter," and at the same time to suggest the prophet's consolation: he has seen into the essential pattern of

all things. Reality is in the Platonic forms (“One is animate”); mankind is the shadowy imitation, the “inanimate phantasy,” of the grand design. (168)

Yeats’ interest in mysticism leads him to read extensively during which he came across eastern philosophy; his readings introduced him to the esoteric studies which were in vogue at that age. Yeats cannot be criticized to follow his interest in occult alone as there were groups and societies actively experimenting with these studies. Supernatural, rebirth, spiritism and medium ship were few activities which kept many creative people not only engaged but they also achieved enough popularity because of them. Two prominent names which influenced Yeats thoroughly were Madam Blavatsky and MacGregor Mathers.

Yeats and Charles Johnston collaborated in starting a new society named ‘Dublin Hermetic Society’ where they discussed Theosophy. In his quest for knowledge, he got allured towards theosophy as is observed by M. M. Harper-

Yeats was dissatisfied with the materialism endorsed by discoveries in natural and applied science as well as the consolations and orthodoxies of mainstream Protestant Christianity. The Theosophical Society provided him with historical and cultural depth, the sense that his present- day acts, ideas, or images could be placed in the context of ancient and worldwide occult knowledge. Theosophy also stresses a highly elaborated doctrine of reincarnation, with the twin themes of a deterministic universe that moves souls through successive lives in a pre-ordained pattern, and a paradoxical freedom of the soul possible by means of spiritual evolution (Blavatsky’s replacement for Darwinian evolution, which she denounced). Yeats was drawn intellectually to this twinning of choice and chance, among other ideas. (153-54)

Yeats’ involvement in these societies made him preoccupied with Orientalism and he believed Theosophists deeply. The people he met at these societies and the theories he read made his inquiry more ruthless. He found a soul mate not only for life but in his beliefs as well when he got married, as his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees claimed to have conversations with spirits and they experimented with automatic writings. His experiments made him find connections between these two worlds and the philosophies he was continuously

scanning; the Occidental and the Oriental. One of his major poems 'Sailing to Byzantium' has all the traits which show how deeply he was indebted to the Indian Vedas and Upanishads. The poem is not overtly having Indian thoughts in it but on a close inspection, one can also find that the structure of the poem is revealing the procedure a soul goes through during life and after death. While the poem starts with a glimpse of this modern world where human beings are involved in procreation merely like animals and birds and have their lives revolving around sensual things, it is about old people. The poem reveals how old people should be more engrossed in soul and the spiritual journey rather than in sensuality. While physical and worldly desires are difficult to shun, it is also difficult to immerse yourself in spiritual ecstasy. This can be seen in these lines from 'Sailing to Byzantium' -

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress, --- (Sailing To Byzantium, 9-12)

He has talked about rebirth in the poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' as well- "---and gather me / Into the artifice of eternity."(23-24) He has observed that the soul doesn't die, it keeps moving in different forms life after life until it again meets the divine fire from which it started, (it's being a part of it)

While most of Yeats critics claim him to be anti-religious, Yeats has, time and again, proved them wrong. He was one of those truth seekers who exploited every aspect existing in this world in this inquiry of 'Ultimate Truth'. Spiritual and material can be seen at war in his most poems. He has given them both the strongest of his opinions and voice. On different occasions he could be seen going with the material world rather than spiritual; although here we have to believe the explicit reason that he did not believe in strict or conventional religion rather he believed in free thinking.

His religion did not recognize blind faith and mute resignation rather he gauged the conditions and minutely scrutinized what was happening around in the society. He never

followed religion in strict ways professed by religious institutions but most of his later poetry revolved around the religious scriptures. His scholarship of these scriptures was excellent and cannot be challenged. Yeats love for antithesis can be understood here as he exploited the repelling force between things but also showed that their coexistence is essential which he called 'Unity of Being'. While most of the scholars find only one spiritual path to reach God, Yeats believes in the combination of both, spiritual and physical. The philosophy can be seen in 'Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment'-

'LOVE is all
Unsatisfied
That cannot take the whole
Body and soul';
And that is what Jane said. (1-5)

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