Title: Putting faith in Tess: religion in Tess of the D'Urbervilles: Mark Asquith explores the religious scepticism which permeates one of Hardy's most popular novels

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The nineteenth century was a period of great religious upheaval in which a number of different movements undermined established beliefs. Utilitarianism (a humanist system popularised by Jeremy Bentham predicated on the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number), German Biblical scholarship (which treated the Bible as a historical document rather than God's word), and scientific study, all questioned the bases of religious faith. Paradoxically, one result of increasing spiritual doubt was an upsurge in religious activity. It was a period of religious movements as the established Anglican Church split into different factions seeking alternative means of adapting to the new conditions. The largest of these factions was the Evangelical movement, which proved very popular among the working classes as it offered a morally earnest attempt to bring religion back to the people unmediated by the established church. Essentially, it emphasised the absolute truth of the Bible, the centrality of the Fall and Original Sin, and redemption through faith alone rather than good works. At the other end of the religious spectrum the universities spawned the High Church Tractarian movement, which argued that the ceremony and ritual of the church were at the very heart of belief.

For writers and intellectuals religious doubt provided ample opportunity for introspection and soul-searching. The poet Alfred Tennyson, for example, attempted in his highly influential poem In Memoriam (1850) to use scientific inquiry to strengthen his faith and avoid the conclusion that man may be alone in a hostile universe. Even here, however, his attempts seem to falter as he appears unable to reconcile his vision of a benevolent god with 'Nature, red in tooth and claw'. Doubts turned to despair with the publication of two books that proved highly influential on the religious revival: On the Origin of Species (1859) by Charles Darwin, which replaced God with the process of 'Natural Selection', and Essays and Reviews (1860), a book written by churchmen who sought to treat Christ as a historical figure. The floodgates breached, the sixties and seventies witnessed an explosion of scholarly works that chipped away at the basis of faith. The most notable of these were Charles Lyell's Antiquity of Man (1863), which posited a world older than that suggested in the Genesis myth, and Darwin's Descent of Man (1871), which first hypothesised man's descent from the ape. The result was that by the 1870s anybody desiring to retain a traditional Bible-centred faith was forced to deny the evidence provided by increasingly persuasive scientific research and Biblical criticism.

Hardy's doubts
Thomas Hardy's biography offers a mirror of the Victorian experience as we move from his Evangelical fervour in the late 1850s through a period of doubt in the 1860s to an atheism that prompted the contemporary critic Edmund Gosse to ask why Hardy 'should rise up in the arable land of Wessex and shake his fist at his Creator?' Hardy's anger, however, was tinged with regret, because like Tennyson he feared the coldness and brutality of a world without a benevolent God. The poet Matthew Arnold records similar feelings in his poem 'Dover Beach' (1867), in which he places his speaker on a dark inhospitable beach listening with regret to a receding 'Sea of Faith'. In his late work 'The Impenitent', Hardy takes the same approach, placing the speaker of the poem outside a cathedral service, regretting that he 'knows not the ease' enjoyed by the congregation, since 'He who breathes Ali's Well to these/ Breathes no All's-Well to me'. Similarly, in 'God's Funeral' Hardy observes that though he is unable to share the present faith of those weeping over the passing of God, he nevertheless 'did not forget/That what was mourned for, I, too long had prized'. This nostalgia for faith pervades Tess of the D'Urbervilles, for despite his cynicism Angel is as alert as Hardy to the fact that without faith we are left with 'the chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilised races with the decline of belief in a beneficent Power'.

Hellenism and Hebraism

Although he regretted the passing of belief, Hardy's fiction is less positive about Christianity. Indeed, throughout his work Hardy is always careful to make a distinction between faith and the way that it is organised through religion. Many characters in the novels have a natural and profound spirituality, but it is not simply confined to Christian practices. In Hardy's Wessex Christianity fits easily with pagan ceremonies such as the 'Club Walking' because rural people, as the narrator notes in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, 'retain in their souls far more of the Pagan fantasy of their remote forefathers than of the systematised religion taught their race at later date'. For Hardy there is an energy and vitality about paganism that does not deny the existence of the sensuous in pursuit of the spiritual; it is Christianity that destroys this bond with its emphasis on repression and the transformation of sexual feelings into sin.

Hardy's thinking here was influenced by Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, which sought to exalt Hellenism (Classical culture) at the expense of Hebraism (Christianity). In Hardy's later novels the energy and spirit of the Pagan world are continually contrasted with a Christian world of repression. In Jude the Obscure, for example, Sue Bridehead continually characterises Christianity as a faith encoded in 'thou shalt not', seeing her sexual liberation with Jude as a return 'to Greek joyousness'. In Tess of the D'Urbervilles Angel continually attributes to Tess a spirituality which is pagan in its simplicity, a tendency which accords with his readiness to romanticise her as existing in a state of pastoral innocence. It is while in the classical Arcadia of Talbothays Dairy that Angel reflects that 'it might have resulted far better for mankind if Greece had been the source of the religion of modern civilisation, and not Palestine'.

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Anti-Christian sentiment

When we consider the way orthodox Christianity is presented in the novel, it is difficult not to agree with Angel's comments. During her darkest hour Tess finds no help from the church: the itinerant sign painter is described as 'the last grotesque phase of a creed which had served mankind well', his daubing merely offering a creed of abstinence and punishment. Her attempts to find solace in a church service are met with a gossiping band of parochialism which makes her feel uncomfortable--Hardy noting with a certain bitterness that 'it was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she'. And finally
we are guided to sympathy for Tess's home-baptism, and indeed the behaviour of the whole community in defying the charlsh priest and seeking to bury their infants in consecrated ground.

Hardy reserves his harshest criticism, however, for the Clare family--the kind of Christian family that should have helped Tess, but which, of course, ends up destroying her. Felix and Cuthbert are particularly insular products of Cambridge theological training who 'candidly recognised that there were a few unimportant scores of millions of outsiders in civilised society, persons who were neither University men nor churchmen; but they were to be tolerated rather than reckoned with and respected'. Academically isolated, misogynistic, snobbish, they are 'super-fine clerics' who have mistaken common humanity for theology, an error dramatised in the scene when they 'hound' Tess up the hill following her aborted trip to visit the family at Emmminster.

Old Mr Clare is an 'Evangelical of the Evangelicals' and although a good man (who might have sprung to help Tess in her hour of need), he is presented as earnest and austere with no hint of 'aesthetic, sensuous, pagan pleasure'. As a result of his limited horizons he is unable to conceive of Tess outside the limited description of the 'virtuous woman' prescribed by the Bible. He, like so many in the novel, lacks the imagination to envisage a real woman outside the compartments of the virtuous and the fallen. The emptiness of his Evangelicalism is exemplified in the conversion of Alec. Do we ever really believe in it? Even during our first glimpse of him preaching in the barn at Evershead, Hardy uses Alec's hereditary disposition to argue that his sermon just offered 'good new words in bad old notes'. Ironically, he also confuses the Cross in Hand (a place where wrong-doers were punished) with a 'devotional cross' and accordingly makes Tess swear on oath: symbolically, in the eyes of the church, she must be punished. Whereas he, of course, is exonerated due to his conversion--an injustice to which Tess draws attention in her scornful dismissal of those who 'take your fill of pleasure on earth by making the life of such as me bitter and black... when you have had enough of that, to think of securing your pleasure in heaven by becoming converted!'

Positivism: the religion of humanity

Another aspect of religion explored in the novel is that of positivism. Developed by the French philosopher Auguste Comte at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it offered a secular alternative to Christianity which replaced god with a scientific understanding of mankind. Comte argued that belief, whether in a society or an individual, evolved through three states: the theological (in which the unknown is explained by the invention of god); the metaphysical (which explains the unknown through more general philosophical theories); and the positive (which understands the scientific laws underpinning the universe). So influential was the thinking on Hardy's conception of Tess of the D'Urbervilles that the contemporary reviewer Frederic Harrison described the novel as 'a Positivist allegory or sermon', in which Angel acts as a positivist priest easing Tess from her primitive theological beliefs to a higher level. Essentially, although Angel admires the freshness of her primitive paganism, he also looks forward to 'an ethical system without any dogma' in which 'moral and intellectual training would appreciably, perhaps considerably, elevate... human nature'. In guiding her to this goal he becomes her priest, so that in times of trouble we are told that 'she tried to pray to God, but it was her husband who really had her supplication'.

Angel's limitations, however, indicate that Hardy was as sceptical of positivism as organised religion. In both The Return of the Native and Tess of the D'Urbervilles he warns of the dangers inherent in simply replacing one idealistic creed with another. In the former, ClymYeobright is the returning native who brings to Egdon Heath 'ethical systems popular at the time' in Paris with which he intends to raise the condition of the heath-dwellers. They, however, remain sceptical, and it is only after he has suffered
the death of his wife and mother that they congregate in the climactic final chapter to hear his ethical sermon on the heath. Significantly, though his congregation remains sceptical, its members take real lessons from the pathos of his suffering. Similarly, though he considers himself a humanist, Angel lacks common humanity and remains as insular as his brothers. It is the idealised Tess, 'a pure child of nature', who becomes the focus of his positivist idolatry, which is why his reaction to her seduction is so disproportionate. It takes the suffering of Brazil to make him question 'all the reasoned ethics of the philosophers' and reassess 'his own parochialism'. A strain of pity for the pain endured by mankind now tempers the 'iron' of his ethical standards, and an acknowledgement that the moral potential of Tess is more important than her past deeds.

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