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The
RELIGIOUS BELIEF
of
SHAKESPEARE

—
JOHN DONNAN
COUNTERMINE,
D.D.

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The Religious Belief of Shakespeare

“*I believed, and therefore have I spoken.*” Did Shakespeare believe? If he believed, did he speak? If he spoke, did he speak so as to be understood? Can we, from what he said, discover his religious belief? What is it to believe? What are the mental and spiritual faculties that are brought into exercise when a person believes?

Looking at the word believe in the light of a clear analysis, we discover that it has, first, a receptive capacity. “Christ came unto His own, and His own received Him not, but as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.”

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John 1 : 11, 12. Here the words believe and receive are used interchangeably. To receive is to believe. To believe is to receive. When a person believes, according to this analytical conception of the word, he receives something which he did not have before. A new element or force enters into his life which more or less influences him one way or another. Thus to believe on Christ is to receive Christ in His threefold office, as a prophet, priest, and king. Did Shakespeare do this? Did he receive Christ? What attitude did he take towards the Bible? The Bible is the great text-book of Christianity. Did he believe the Bible and thus receive Christ as his Prophet? Did he accept the Scriptural doctrine of the atonement, and thus receive Christ as his great High Priest? Did he bow to

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the authority of Christ's teachings and thus accept Him as his King? These questions, so important and interesting, we hope to answer in this discussion.

Looking again at the word believe, we discover, in the second place, that it has not only a receptive, but also an assimilating capacity. What a person believes and thereby receives, he assimilates. It enters in and becomes part of his thought and life. "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises : that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." 2 Peter 1 : 4. "Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure." 1 John 3 : 2, 3.

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Here is the assimilating process. It is gradual, constant, effective. "Changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." 2 Cor. 3: 18. Did Shakespeare have any such experience? Were his last days different from what were the days of his youth and young manhood? Did he grow more kind, attractive, loving, mellow? This is the way a Christian grows. Was Shakespeare a Christian? Read his last plays and see. Read "The Tempest," "Cymbeline," and "Winter's Tale." Here we see Shakespeare as we are always wont to see the true child of God. A deep seriousness has come over his life. He is a different man from what he was. He is living in retirement and hence pours out his soul in deeper, and if possible, more impressive religious tones.

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The third element which we find in the word believe is energy. Read the eleventh chapter of Hebrews and see how true this is. "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." 1 John 5:4. Did Shakespeare have faith? Did this mighty grace stir his soul and energize his life? "Faith without works is dead, being alone." Jas. 2: 17. "By their fruits ye shall know them." Matt. 7: 15. Judged by this rule did Shakespeare have faith? We shall see. But why ask these questions? What difference does it make to us whether Shakespeare was a believer or an agnostic? a Christian, or an infidel? Much every way, but chiefly because he was, first, a great man, a great thinker, a great logician, a great poet, a great dramatist. He had a wonderful mind. A deep, keen

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analytical power. He looked into the human heart, analyzed its contents and then portrayed them as they had never been portrayed before. Did Shakespeare do this as an agnostic, or skeptic, or as a believer? Did he do it with, or without a knowledge of the Bible? It is an admitted fact that the Bible is a wonderful delineator of human character. It probes and analyzes the heart as no other book ever did. How it searched the three thousand on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2 : 37. Like its divine author it knows what is in man and it reveals it. Not only so, but because of this deep insight into human lives and character, it becomes to the student who broods over its sacred pages an open window through which he looks down into the human soul. Did Shakespeare ever look through this

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window? Did he kindle his inspiration at this holy altar or at some other? This is an important question. We want to know where Shakespeare got his marvellous understanding of human nature. If he received it from a careful study of the Bible then we too can go to the same source and receive a like inspiration.

The timeliness and importance of the question before us are seen, secondly, in the fact that Shakespearean study is becoming so wide-spread in our schools as well as in our colleges and universities. If Shakespeare was an agnostic, if he had no faith in God or in the Word of God, it is high time that Christian fathers and mothers knew it. Certainly they do not want their children's minds filled with the thoughts and ideas of an atheist, or even a skeptic. If, however, on the

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other hand, Shakespeare was a believer on Christ, if he loved and studied the Bible, and drew his inspiration from it, then we and our children should know it, and conduct ourselves accordingly. So important is this question, it touches character and consequently influences destiny.

A third reason for investigating Shakespeare's belief is found in the fact that his belief touches and has to do directly with the true basis and vital forces of literature. This is an age of literature. Everybody reads, while there is no end to the books and magazines and newspapers that are being published. On what does all this literature rest? What are its vital forces? Are they Scriptural or anti-Scriptural? Christian or anti-Christian? Do they spring from an intelligent faith in God and a hearty

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acceptance of the Bible as His Word, or do they have some other source?

The age in which Shakespeare lived was an age of more or less toleration. "During the last years of Elizabeth's reign," says Gardiner, "the waves of external conflict lulled themselves to sleep." This was due in a large measure to the overthrow of the Spanish Armada. When that was destroyed, the enemy fled and England had peace, so there was no effort made to circumscribe the liberties of the people, especially in a religious and intellectual way. Men were left to think, and read, believe and publish very much as they saw fit.

It was secondly, an age of belief rather than of unbelief. While there was some controversy about church polity, there was none as to the deeper things of faith. There was no question

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as to the existence of God, or the immortality of the human soul, or the genuineness of the Bible as the Revelation of God's will and purpose concerning men. These great doctrines were regarded as forever settled by the vast majority of the people.

Thirdly, it was an age of Bible study. "England," says Greene, the historian, "became the people of a book, and that book was the Bible." Everybody was reading it and talking about it. It was the one great book of the people. They read it aloud in public and in private, on days of toil and days of recreation. To live in such an age, an age of religious toleration and faith and Bible study, was, to say the least, conducive to the formation of a strong religious character. Did Shakespeare have such a character? What was his attitude

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towards the Bible? Did he accept it as the Word of God? Shakespeare was not a religious writer. He did not turn the stage into a pulpit and deliver sermons. This was not his mission. He was a dramatist and wrote for the stage. We must keep this fact in mind if we would form a true estimate of his character. Looked at in the light of this thought, what can we learn about his religious belief?

“Take the entire range of English literature,” says Bishop Wordsworth, “put together our best authors, who have written upon subjects not professedly religious or theological, and we shall not find, I believe, in them all united, so much evidence of the Bible having been read and used, as we find in Shakespeare alone.” This is certainly a wide statement. One

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that fills the intelligent reader with the most delightful thoughts. The greatest of poets and dramatists, the man who fathomed the human heart to its lowest depths, was one of the greatest of Bible students. Again and again does Shakespeare refer to such Scriptural truths as the Mosaic account of the creation, the temptation and fall, and the history of Cain and Abel. He also refers to the flood, the book of Job, the history of Jacob, Pharaoh, Jephtha, Samson, David, Herod, Judas, Pilate, Barabbas, Nebuchadnezzar, and nearly all the other great historical characters in the Bible, as well as to such places and events as Golgotha, the giving of the manna, and the law of inheritance. He refers to these not in any flippant way, but with reverence and thoughtfulness. His reference to the greater light to rule the

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day and the lesser light to rule the night is very beautiful. In speaking of the Bible as a whole he sometimes calls it "God's Book," at other times "the Books of God," and then "The Word." The expression "God's Book" indicates Shakespeare's conception of the Bible as a divine revelation. It is God's Book in the double sense, first, that He is the author of it; and secondly, that it is a revelation of His character and will concerning men. The expression, "The Books of God," brings out the additional thought that this revelation, which God has been pleased to make of Himself, is a progressive revelation. It was not made to one man alone, but to a large number of men living at different times and under different circumstances. It is a Book composed of many Books. These Books are not

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separate. They do not stand apart but together. Hence he calls them "The Word," the one thought, the one revelation, the one divine life. Christ is the Word. The whole Book is about Him. He is its life, strength, and beauty. It is thus that Shakespeare conceived of the Bible. In his judgment, it has a most striking unity amid great diversities. It is one book composed of many books. God is its author, Christ its theme and centre, the Holy Ghost its inspiration and strength. If Shakespeare thus accepted the Bible as the Word of God, if he read and studied and gathered his inspiration from it, what about Christ? How did Shakespeare regard Him? How did he look upon His life, character, and death? Did he or did he not accept the doctrine of the atonement?

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In selecting different passages from the different plays of Shakespeare in answer to these questions, it is to be understood that while some of these passages may be taken from the mouths of other persons, Shakespeare put them there. They are his. They came from his own heart, and so express his own faith, touching the Christ and His work. This will appear most evident, I think, as we advance. Owing to our limited space we will have to be content with just one or two quotations from different plays. Take this from King Henry IV. "Those holy fields over whose acres walked those blessed feet, which, fourteen hundred years ago, were nailed for our advantage, on the bitter cross." Here we have Shakespeare's conception of the cross. He calls it the "bitter cross," and such it was

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both in its origin and in its effects. Think of the envy, jealousy, hate and awful bitterness there must have been in the mind, and heart, and soul of him who conceived of torturing and putting a fellow being to death in that way. Think of the bitterness of the individual who was about to be crucified. Put yourself in his place. Imagine that this awful death was soon to be yours. What anguish of soul and bitterness of spirit would under such circumstances take hold upon you. You could not help it. No man could help it. How bitter also must it have been to the women who stood near the cross. It was then that the sword entered Mary's heart. Luke 2 : 35. Bitter, inexpressibly bitter was the cross. In this quotation we have also Shakespeare's conception of Christ. He calls

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His soiled, dust covered, and blood-stained feet, "blessed feet." If Christ's feet were blessed, how about His hands, head, heart, and soul? Were they not also blessed? Of course they were. They must have been. It was the blessed Christ who was nailed to the bitter cross, not for His advantage, or because He was an evil-doer, but for our advantage, yours and mine. In using the word "our" Shakespeare put himself among those for whom Christ died. "He died for me," says Shakespeare, "as well as for you." For "our" advantage, mine as well as yours; yours as well as mine. Shakespeare did not believe in a limited atonement. He had a larger and shall we not say a more Scriptural conception of the death of Christ. In proof of this turn to King Richard II. "The world's ransom,

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www.libtool.com.cn” The angel had called Mary blessed, Luke 1 : 28, and so she is, but Mary was not the world’s ransom. She did not taste death for us. It was the blessed Christ who did this and He did it not merely for us but for the whole world. He is the world’s ransom. So Shakespeare conceived, and so the Bible teaches. Heb. 2 : 9. “ Oh, then my best blood turn to an infected jelly, and my name be yoked with his that did betray the Best.” We take this from Shakespeare’s “Winter’s Tale.” Herein he speaks of Christ as being “the Best.” There are other good men, but Christ is the Best, the chief among ten thousand, the one altogether lovely. If Christ be the best, Judas, in the judgment of Shakespeare, was the worst. To have your name yoked with his was to descend

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to the lowest degree of shame and ignominy. No man can go lower. Here he reaches the awful depths of sin and folly, disgrace and ruin.

“I charge you, you who hope to have redemption by Christ’s dear blood, shed for our grievous sins, that you depart, and lay no hand on me.” We find this in King Richard III. Shakespeare, like all the rest of us, had enemies. These enemies were not outside of the church, but within. They hoped for redemption by Christ’s dear blood. Shakespeare appeals to this. He makes it the basis of his charge, and in doing so he speaks of Christ’s blood as “dear blood shed for our grievous sins.” Notice again the word “our.” Shakespeare puts himself among the rest. It was for “our grievous sins” that this dear blood was shed. We have not only sinned,

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but we have grievously sinned. We have sinned against "the Best," and "the Best has shed His dear blood for our grievous sins." Could any thought be more Scriptural than this? Could any man, unless he was a believer, use such language? "Now by the death of Him that died for us all." King Henry VI. Here we have again the universality of the benefits of Christ's death. He died for all, and not only so but His death was a most solemn death. There was a significance in it not to be found in any other death. Hence Shakespeare appeals to it as being the most binding of all pledges. Turning to the Merchant of Venice we find these exceedingly important words touching the question before us. "Though justice be thy plea, consider this, that in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation." "By the

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deeds of the law no flesh shall be justified in His sight." Rom. 3 : 20. How perfectly do these two thoughts agree. The one is as Scriptural as the other. Shakespeare undoubtedly had the Apostle's statement in mind when he wrote this. "Alas, alas," says Shakespeare, in "Measure for Measure," "why all souls that were, were forfeit once, and He that might the advantage but have took, found out the remedy." Shall we not say the only remedy? Christ's soul was never forfeited. He alone of all men needed not to repent for He had never sinned. This was Shakespeare's idea. Christ was to him the one perfect man who needed not to repent, or to ask for pardon, or to be forgiven or regenerated. "He that might the advantage but have took, found out the remedy," the all sufficient remedy. Such are only a few of

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the passages that might be gathered from Shakespeare's plays, passages that show most clearly the way in which the greatest of dramatists regarded the Christ. He evidently looked upon Christ as the one perfect man. His life was absolutely perfect. His character without spot, His death an efficacious atonement for the sins of the whole world. If Shakespeare thus accepted and studied the Bible as the Word of God, if he believed on Christ, and accepted Him as his own Saviour as well as the Saviour of the world, how did he look upon his fellow man? "This is the state of man, to-day he puts forth the tender leaves of hope, to-morrow blossoms and bears his blushing honours thick upon him, the third day comes a frost, a killing frost." King Henry VIII. Here we have Shakespeare's conception of the

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weakness of man. He is a creature of only a few days. "What is your life?" asks the Apostle. "It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." James 4: 14. Put over against this conception of man's frailty, Shakespeare's conception of man's greatness. "What a piece of work is man: How noble in reason: How infinite in faculties: In form and moving how express and admirable: In action how like an angel: In apprehension how like a God." Hamlet. Who can read this statement without thinking of that of David, found in the eighth Psalm? "What is man that Thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that Thou visitest him? For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels (or as we have it in the Revised Version, lower than God) and

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hast crowned him with glory and honour.”

There are two sides to man. There is the earthly and the heavenly, the temporal and the eternal. Shakespeare fully recognized this fact. He also recognized the fact that man is a sinner, a conscious sinner. “My conscience has a thousand several tongues, and every tongue brings in a several tale, and every tale condemns me for a villain.” Richard III. “Conscience does make cowards of us all.” Hamlet. This is the way in which Shakespeare regarded man. “This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven.” Othello. The soul can be hurled from heaven. Shakespeare believed this, hence he says in King Henry VIII, “Press not the fallen man too far.” “Blow, blow thou winter wind. Thou art not so unkind

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as man's ingratitude." As you Like It.

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth is it to have a thankless child." King Lear. "A wretched soul, bruised with adversity." Comedy of Errors. Shakespeare believed that the soul may not only be wretched, but that it is wretched unless it has accepted Christ. Christ is the only remedy for the sin-sick soul. "Our doubts," he says, "are traitors and make us lose the great good we oft might win." Measure for Measure. "We know what we are, but we know not what we may be." Hamlet. How true is all this. How perfectly does it accord with what the Bible teaches concerning man and what we ourselves know of him. Man is a fallen being, and yet a being who through the riches of divine grace may be restored to the

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fellowship and image of God. "There's a divinity," says Shakespeare, "that shapes our ends rough hew them how we will." Hamlet. Shakespeare believed thus in an overruling Providence. God is on the throne. We can reach Him by the way of faith and prayer. A short time before his death, Shakespeare made his will. After the introduction he says, "I commit my soul into the hands of God, my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour, to be made partaker of life everlasting, and my body to the earth whereof it is made." Here as elsewhere Shakespeare speaks of himself as having a soul and a body. His soul through faith in Christ partakes of life everlasting. His body goes back to earth whence it came. God he regards as his

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Creator and Christ his only Saviour. Depending alone on the merits of Christ, he commends his soul to God. This is what David did. This is what Christ Himself did. This is what we all ought to do.

Christ is the only Saviour. He saves and saves unto the uttermost. Not only did Shakespeare believe and confess this again and again in his plays, as we have seen, but when he came down to death, as we must all come some of these days, he made this one article of his faith the comfort and strength of his soul. He died as he had lived, believing, not in his good works, but in Christ alone for his salvation.

Such being the faith and religious belief of Shakespeare, he being a diligent student of the Word, a follower of Christ, it becomes a great joy to us

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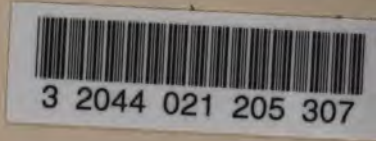
to know that a new interest is being taken in the study of his immortal works. Better carefully read Shakespeare and become perfectly acquainted with the force, strength, and beauty of the rich and pure English which he ever employs, than to waste your time and belittle your intellect by reading so much of the trash of the present hour.

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