

## 14. Heaven and Earth

*"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy"*

—Shakespeare: *Hamlet*

Remarkably, students of Bacon and Shakespeare have encountered precisely the same difficulty in determining the exact nature of their subject's religious beliefs. Indeed, the label 'atheist' has often been attached to these two names. Thus William Blake, who annotated his 1798 copy of Bacon's *Essays* with about 120 short comments, writes that in *Of Atheism* Bacon is really an atheist pretending to talk against atheism. He finds further praise of atheism in the essay *Of Superstition*, where Bacon writes: "Atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation, all which may be guides to an outward moral virtue, though religion were not". And Bacon continues: "...but superstition dismounts all these, and erecteth an absolute monarchy in the minds of men. Therefore atheism did never perturb states, for it makes men wary of themselves, as looking no further, and we see the times inclined to atheism (as the time of Augustus Caesar) were civil times". In other words, sensible and philosophical people, atheist or not, are peaceful and civil men in their society, rather than superstitious men inclined to righteous and often deadly warfare for their specific vision of Heaven.

Joseph de Maistre believed that Bacon's outward show of piety was insincere and that he used religious orthodoxy as a disguise to conceal his real atheism from the prying eyes of king James. More recently, in *Peace Among the Willows* (1968), Howard B. White argues that Bacon manipulates religious themes in order to subvert Christian ideas and transform them into a culturally acceptable justification for a preoccupation with a materialist outlook. According to White, Bacon's purpose is to transform the human quest from the search for the 'heavenly city' to the creation of the well-governed country, and to change the philosophical quest from an effort to understand God and His Creation to a pursuit to discover what humans can make of themselves. Many modern writers agree that Bacon manipulates religious language and concepts to conceal his secular agenda. At the very least, he is often regarded as an accidental atheist whose scientific secularism and insistence on the separation of philosophy and theology exiled God to the nether regions of faith and superstition.

As for the dramatist, R.M. Frye states that Shakespeare's plays are "pervasively secular" (*Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine*, 1963, p43). The philosopher George Santayana actually entitled a book chapter *The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare*, where he argued that the references to religious beliefs and ideas in the works are largely conventional, drawn from the society around him. There are few expressions of genuine religious piety or passion because Shakespeare, unlike Dante or Homer, had no vision of the place of human life in the universe. According to Santayana, "He depicts life in all its richness and variety, but leaves that life without a setting and consequently without a meaning". The nineteenth-century freethinker and agnostic Robert Ingersoll went further and extolled Shakespeare as a great infidel, "the sublimest man of the human race", who deemed all religions "simple phases of human thought, or the lack of thought". In the view of Peter Ackroyd in his 2005 biography of William, the "safest and most likely conclusion" is that "Shakespeare professed no particular faith". In the tragedies, "the religious imperatives of piety and consolation are withheld; these are worlds with no god" (*Shakespeare: the Biography*, 2006 Vintage edn. p447).

As a secular Humanist myself, I wish that these judgments were correct. There is, I shall argue, an essential Humanism that shines through the writings of Bacon-Shakespeare, but it is a Renaissance—Christian—Humanism, not the modern secular variety. And the key to Shakespeare's God lies in the tolerant, non-dogmatic Christianity of Francis Bacon.

### ***Bacon's Christianity***

Some critics have deduced Bacon's alleged religious indifference from his tendency to regard philosophy and theology as distinct. Thus in Aphorism 65 of the first book of *Novum Organum* he writes: "From the unwholesome mixture of things human and things divine there arises not only a fantastic philosophy but also a heretical religion. Very meet it is therefore that we be sober-minded, and give to faith that only which is faith's". In Bacon's view, theology should be drawn "from the word and oracles of God, not from the light of nature or the dictates of reason". Throughout his writings he insists on making a distinction between the book of God's Word, which is the basis of theology, and the book of God's works, which is the basis of philosophy. However, he did not imply that there need always be such a distinction; rather, he thought it important in his day because as they had developed they tended to obstruct each other. There was even a tendency to regard philosophy and religion as antithetical. For Bacon, however, "there is no such enmity between God's word and

His works" (*Advancement*). In another passage he implies that the deficiency lies in reason: "We ought not to draw down or submit the mysteries of God to our reason; but contrariwise to raise and advance our reason to the divine truth". This is what Hamlet means when he tells Horatio, the man of reason, that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in his philosophy.

The distinction between philosophy and theology for Bacon was clearly one of method and in a real sense only temporary. By keeping philosophy and religion separate for the time being, he believed he was serving both and for the same ultimate objective—the 'great instauration' of the dominion of man over the universe promised by God to Adam before the Fall. So, when the *Great Instauration* appeared in 1620 George Herbert, one of Bacon's close friends, hailed him as "*mundique et animarum sacerdos unicus*"—the alone-only priest of nature and men's souls. Bacon's Christianity is attested by other friends, including his chaplain Rawley. It is evidenced by the fact that he often submitted his works to religious men for criticism. It is also evident in Bacon's own words. The essay *Of Atheism* is surely clear enough:

"I had rather believe all the fables in the Legend, and the Talmud, and the Alcoran, than that this universal frame is without a mind. And therefore God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because his ordinary works convince it. It is true, that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth man's mind about to religion. For while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further; but when it beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and locked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity".

Bacon gave to Christianity more than an intellectual assent. His emotional commitment can be discerned in his missionary zeal, his meditations and prayers, his verse translations of eight of the *Psalms*, and his liberal use of biblical quotations and references. His whole mission of a Great Instauration is the fulfilment of a Biblical prophecy and a rediscovery of "the seal of God on things". The *New Atlantis* provides further corroboration. Bacon's utopian island is given the Hebrew name of Bensalem, Son of Peace; the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are the inspiration of the inhabitants; the central institution is called Solomon's House or the College of the Six Days Works; and Fathers of Solomon's House seem to be both scientists and priests. Indeed their spokesman says: "We have certain hymns and services we say daily, of laud and thanks to God for his marvellous works; and forms of prayer imploring his aid and blessing for the illumination of our labours, and the

turning of them into good and holy uses". As Farrington suggests, while it is a fact that Bacon laboured to distinguish the realms of faith and knowledge, "it is equally true that he thought one without the other useless" (*The Christianity of Francis Bacon*, in *Baconiana 165*, October 1965).

The mistaken notion of Bacon's religious indifference may also derive from his reluctance to participate in doctrinal controversy and the wide toleration which he conceded to dissidents from orthodox theological opinions. In 1609 he wrote: "Myself am like the miller of Huntingdon, was wont to pray for peace among the willows; for while the winds blew, the windmills wrought, and the water mill was less customed. So I see that controversies of religion must hinder the advancement of sciences". On a personal level, he had been brought up in a Puritan household in which his mother was an earnest and intolerant Calvinist. Bacon reacted against her religious arrogance, believing that the Puritans were aiming at a tyranny that would be far more cruel than the system they wanted to replace. However, in his paper on *The Controversies of the Church of England* (1589) he suggests that they may safely be tolerated for the work they did in education and preaching. Similarly, although he was also firmly against the tyranny of Rome, he was friendly to many Roman Catholics and shielded his friend Tobie Matthew from persecution when the latter adopted the Catholic faith.

In his essay on Bacon, Macaulay has this to say about his religious tolerance:

"He loved to dwell on the power of the Christian religion to effect much that the ancient philosophers could only promise. He loved to consider that religion as the bond of charity, the curb of evil passions, the consolation of the wretched, the support of the timid, the hope of the dying. But controversies on speculative points of theology seem to have engaged scarcely any portion of his attention. In what he wrote on Church Government he showed, as far as he dared, a tolerant and charitable spirit... He lived in an age in which disputes on the most subtle points of divinity excited an intense interest throughout Europe, and nowhere more than in England. He was placed in the very thick of the conflict. He was in power at the time of the Synod of Dort, and must for months have been daily deafened with talk about election, reprobation, and final perseverance. Yet we do not remember a line in his works from which it can be inferred that he was either a Calvinist or an Armenian".

So, far from being an atheist or an agnostic, Bacon was a deeply religious man who regarded his Christianity basically as a matter of faith and works rather than reason and argument. Moreover, it is particularly relevant for our purposes to emphasise that for him poetry, rather than

reason, was a means of communication between divinity and humanity. In the *De Augustinis* he writes:

"In matters of faith and religion our imagination raises itself above reason; not that divine illumination resides in the imagination; its seat being rather in the very citadel of the mind and understanding; but that the divine grace uses the motions of the imagination as an instrument of illumination, just as it uses the motions of the will as an instrument of virtue; which is the reason why religion ever sought access to the mind by similitudes, types, parables, visions, dreams".

### ***Shakespeare and Religion***

Turn to Shakespeare and we find an extensive use of the Bible. There is hardly a book in the Old or New Testament which is not represented at least by some chance word or phrase in one or other of the plays. Peter Milward cites numerous examples in *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (1973). Thus Adriana's speech on the ideal relationship between husband and wife in *The Comedy of Errors* (2:1) makes reference to *Psalms* 8, and her speech beginning 'How comes it now, my husband' (2:2) alludes to *Ephesians* 5. This passage is also used by Katherina in her speech on the duty of wives to their husbands in *The Taming of the Shrew* (5:2). Again, Portia's whole speech on mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* is a tissue of texts from the Old and New Testaments. The same applies to Isabella's similar speech in *Measure for Measure*, a play whose very title echoes Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew* 7:2). We could also note the frequent use of biblical language by the Fools in many of the plays, which is based on *1 Corinthians*, where Paul says: "The foolish things of the world hath God chosen, that He may confound the wise" (1:3). The abuse of the Bible by Shakespeare's villains, on the other hand, is, as Milward sees it, based on two of the dramatist's favourite texts—Jesus' warning against wolves in sheeps' clothing (*Matthew* 7:15) and Paul's warning against Satan who transforms himself into an angel of light (*2 Corinthians* 11:14).

It has often been claimed that, nevertheless, the great pessimistic speeches of Hamlet, Macbeth and Lear are in no way biblical. Macbeth's 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' speech about life being a 'tale told by an idiot... signifying nothing' seems to be a powerful expression of existential nihilism and nothing to do with Christianity. But this view is mistaken. 'Out, out brief candle' seems to be taken from Job 18:5-6: "The light of the wicked shall be quenched... and his candle shall be out out with him". From the *Psalms* come the references to 'dusty death' (*Psalms* 22:15—'dust of death'), a 'walking shadow' (*Psalms* 39:6—'every man

walketh in a vain show'; *Job* 8:9: "We are but of yesterday and are ignorant: for our days upon earth are but a shadow"), and 'a tale told by an idiot' (*Psalms* 90:9—"we spend our years as a tale that is told"; ). From the *Book of Job* comes Hamlet's 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' (*Job* 6:4; 41:28), 'a consummation devoutly to be wish'd' (*Job* 6:9-10), 'to die, to sleep' (*Job* 14:10, 12), 'the oppressor's wrong' (*Job* 3:18) and 'the undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns' (*Job* 7:9, 10:21, 16:22).

Of course, some of the works, particularly the last plays, have a pagan setting, but we should bear in mind the 1606 Act in restraint of 'abuses of players', by which any actor jestingly or profanely using the name of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost or the Trinity, was liable to a fine of £10. And in any case the playwright makes continued use of the Bible and Christianity in these plays. Since they look beyond death to resurrection and new life, they are surely expressing, at least in part, the Pauline ideal of the 'new man', the 'new creation', the 'new life' in Christ which the Christian first receives in baptism. Even Paulina's name in *The Winter's Tale* suggests St. Paul. Her words to the statue transform the appearance of death into the reality of life for both Hermione and Leontes:

*"Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him  
Dear life redeems you".*

In *The Tempest* Christian symbolism is superimposed on pagan myth. Prospero is God, Ferdinand, who 'dies' during the masque and then ascends to heaven, is a Christ figure, Miranda is the 'bride' of Christ and Caliban is the devil. Ariel is not only the pagan Hermes but also plays the part assigned in the Old Testament to the Angel of the Lord and in the New Testament to the Spirit. In the Gospel story it is the Spirit which descends upon Christ when he has risen from the baptismal water and which leads him up to wander in the wilderness. Similarly, it is Ariel in the play who brings the travellers out of the sea to wander in the maze of the "desolate isle". The dramatist has consciously woven together pagan and Christian mythology because, as Colin Still argues in *Shakespeare's Mystery Play* (1921), they share a "timeless theme", namely man's spiritual pilgrimage in which through redemption and rebirth he can reverse the Fall. It is the story of the upward struggle of the human spirit, individual or collective, out of the darkness of sin and error, into the light of wisdom and truth.

So, despite their secular appearance, the Shakespeare plays often conceal a deep undercurrent of religious meaning, a meaning which has been woven into the very fabric of the works in such an unobtrusive manner that some critics have been led to imagine that it is not even there. This meaning can also be easily missed because of the nature of its content. For

Shakespeare's Christianity is undogmatic and tolerant in the tradition of Erasmus and Renaissance Humanism—and Baconian to the core.

There is, for example, never any argument on points of theology. Philosophy and religion should be kept separate because:

*"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Hamlet).*

The supernatural cannot be fathomed, and therefore rational argument is useless: 'the rest is silence'. As Lafeu suggests in *All's Well that Ends Well*:

*"They say miracles are passed; and we have our philosophical  
persons to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless.  
Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into  
seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown  
fear" (2:3).*

This unknown fear must not be reasoned about but accepted as inevitable:

*"Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:  
Ripeness is all" (King Lear, 5:2).*

Shakespeare's treatment of the limits of reason is always presented in this supernatural context, as in Hippolyta's reference to "something of great constancy" and Bottom's dream in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Reason is vital in human affairs, provided it is inductive as well as deductive, but in matters of religion it is not enough. And, as we have seen, this is precisely the viewpoint of Francis Bacon.

### ***The Catholic Question***

The late 17th century Protestant clergyman Richard Davies, a chaplain at Oxford, asserted that "William Shakespeare died a papist" and, although the reliability of his testimony has been questioned, the Catholic connection has resurfaced from time to time ever since. We briefly alluded to it in Chapter 4 in reference to William's 'lost years'. A new wave was spearheaded by Ian Wilson in *Shakespeare: The Evidence* (1993), E.A.J. Honigmann in *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* (1998), and Park Honan in *Shakespeare: A Life* (1998), and was reinforced in biographies by Anthony Holden in *William Shakespeare: His life and Work* (1999), Michael Wood in *In Search of Shakespeare* (2003), Stephen Greenblatt in *Will in the World* (2004), Richard Wilson in *Secret Shakespeare* (2004), and Peter Ackroyd in *Shakespeare: The Biography* (2005). Whether these writers are simply repeating each other or making serious independent judgments

is difficult to say. Certainly, the pebbles of hard fact on the issue can be contrasted with the mountains of far-fetched speculation. It is not as if research is revealing any new fruits and I suspect it is merely a current fashion. Not so long ago biographers and critics were just as certain that Shakespeare was a fully-blown Anglican. Thus, for example, in *Shakespeare the Man* (1973) A.L. Rowse boldly asserts of William that "He was a conforming member of the Church into which he had been baptised, in which he was brought up and married, his children reared and in whose arms he was buried at the last".

The Catholic claim is bolstered by evidence which is highly circumstantial. Stratford was, in Michael Wood's phrase, a "stronghold of Catholicism"—which, of course, is why William apparently fled it to the even more friendly environment of Lancashire! William's father, who as alderman engaged in Protestant iconoclasm, arranging to have the local Catholic church ripped up and its icons and paintings removed, was later named in a list of Stratford citizens who had "obstinately" refused to go to church for Easter communion. Was he avoiding his creditors ("fear of process for debt"), or did his conscience compel him to keep away? Again, a tract was supposedly found in 1757 under the tiles of his Stratford house in Henley Street, promising to remain a Catholic in his heart. This was not actually written by John himself, since it is unlikely that he could write at all, but was a translation of Cardinal Borromeo's 'Last Will of the Soul', written in the 1570s, copies of which had been circulated all over Europe. Perhaps John Shakspeare put his mark on the copy. However, the original document has been 'lost' and in any case it is considered by most modern Shakespeare scholars to be a fabrication. Frank Kermode writes that the document was once in the hands of the late eighteenth-century Shakespearean pioneer Edmond Malone, but he came to doubt its authenticity. Malone himself stated: "It is highly improbable, indeed, that [John Shakespeare]... who held the situation of Bailiff of Stratford, should have been a Roman Catholick" (*Age of Shakespeare*, p30).

In 1606, Shakespeare's daughter Susannah was cited for failing to receive Anglican communion the previous Easter, as part of a crackdown on closet Catholics in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot the previous year. About a third of the others cited were known Catholics or Catholic sympathisers. But her case was dismissed when it came before a court, and the next year she married the very Protestant John Hall. Certainly, the Ardens, William's mother's family, were staunch Catholics, but generally we have to accept that it was period of transition when many were still adherents of the 'old religion' and others—perhaps William's father included—were frankly confused and split in their allegiance. Greenblatt

suggests that by the time he left school, William had acquired a double consciousness: "At certain moments—*Hamlet* is the greatest example—he seems at once Catholic, Protestant, and deeply skeptical of both" (*op. cit.*, p103). Of course, he is talking about the author here—whether the skepticism also applies to William is an entirely different matter.

Clare Asquith made a foray into this murky area in 2005 (*Shadowplay*). She argues that Shakespeare was a closet Catholic whose plays are riddled with hidden messages promoting the banned faith. Some of the alleged coded terminology is very tenuous indeed. Thus she tells us that love in Shakespeare is opposed to fickle lust. Very true and what we argued in the last chapter, but Asquith actually believes it is an analogy for allegiance to 'spiritual truth', i.e. the old faith, which is represented by the 'red rose'. To be 'sunburned' or 'tanned', as are heroines like Viola, Imogen and Portia, is to be close to God and so understood as a true Catholic. 'Dark', on the other hand, is the new Protestant religion, associated with black print and sober dress, and the 'tempest' is a widespread image for the Reformation upheaval in England, which explains the play's position at the beginning of the *First Folio*. Venus in the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* is Queen Elizabeth, pursuing, with rape in mind, a virginal Adonis, emblem of the Catholic Church, while *Romeo and Juliet* is a 'cautionary tale' for the Catholic 'resistance'.

All this fanciful Catholic speculation is premised on the supposition that William of Stratford wrote the Shakespeare plays. If we heed Ben Jonson's advice and look, not on his caricatured picture but his book, we find a writer who is neither militantly Protestant nor crypto-Catholic. Certainly, *King John* is an anti-papal play and *Henry VIII* treats the Protestant reformers, including Archbishop Cranmer, sympathetically. In *Julius Caesar* there are clear hints of similarities between the oppressive Rome of Caesar and the oppressive Rome of the papacy. On the other hand, Cassius is the Roman equivalent of the Puritans. Like them, he wants to overthrow 'Caesar' and return Rome to the purer days of the Republic. And he is a caricature of the Puritan in other ways as well: he has a lean and hungry look in contrast to the fat men who surround Caesar. He does not sleep, eats little, reads and thinks 'too much'. Significantly, he does not like games or plays, which would remind an Elizabethan audience of the Puritans. Thus Shakespeare seems to be expressing his sceptical opposition to both extreme Catholicism and extreme Protestantism, and he hints that extremism in religion is as ineffective as extremism in politics.

Greenblatt, though, is not really correct in citing *Hamlet* as a good example of this negative denominational capability. Yes, the ghost seems

to have returned from purgatory, but this is an imaginative device attached to a figure who harks back to an earlier, superstitious age—indeed a devilish figure of temptation—whereas Hamlet himself is a modern 'Protestant' sceptic who went to college at Wittenberg, the university of Martin Luther, makes reference to the Diet of Worms in a passage about Polonius's corpse, and reads the works of the heretic Bruno. Hamlet knows that death is a 'country' from which no traveller returns and that ghosts are a diabolic deception. He recognises the temptation but succumbs to it, and that is his tragedy. An English Protestant like Shakespeare, using the Geneva Bible and Reformation doctrine, would have understood purgatory as a 'Popish' tradition and serving the ghost as a dangerous error. As Empson puts it, "the official Protestant position was that all apparent Ghosts are devils trying to instigate sin; also that Purgatory does not exist, so that this Ghost in saying it has come from Purgatory must be lying" ('Hamlet' in *Essays on Shakespeare*, 1986, p111).

There are ultimately two crucial facts which clinch the matter. Nowhere—unless you believe Asquith's implausible allegories—does Shakespeare suggest or even hint at any error in the break with Rome, and nowhere does he indulge in any anti-royalist sentiment. On the contrary, his use of the Protestant Geneva Bible is evident in his innumerable scriptural references and his undoubted patriotism invites submission to the English Government rather than that of Rome. In short, Shakespeare the author does not question the religion of the state but shows respect to all, or nearly all, the sects. Here he was at one with Bacon.

### ***Tolerance***

Bacon's tolerance sprang from at least three desires: Christian unity, civil peace and intellectual freedom. "Religion being the chief band of human society, it is a happy thing when itself is well contained within the true band of unity" (*Of Unity in Religion*). The benefit of unity "towards those that are within the church is peace, which containeth infinite blessings" (ibid). For the same reason, he wished the church itself to be limited in power. Religious wars were in his view the most terrible of all political evils and the superstition on which they were based was even worse than atheism. His essay *Of Superstition* begins: "It is better to have no opinion of God at all than such an opinion as is unworthy of him". His intense dislike of blind religious fanaticism is apparent throughout his writings. The essay *Of Unity in Religion* ends with a clear charge of selfishness against religious zealots who suppress freedom of conscience: "It was a notable observation of a wise father, and no less ingenuously confessed: that those who held and persuaded pressure of conscience, were commonly

interested therein themselves for their own ends".

Turning to Shakespeare, we find that, even if he was a member of the Church of England, as most critics accepted until recently, other Christian churches are treated gently throughout the plays. We might note, though, that none of his few references to Puritanism is exactly approving, such as "I had as lief be a Brownist as a politician" in *Twelfth Night* (the Brownists were an extreme Puritan sect; and significantly Bacon also expressed his dislike of them in prose). Yet in Shakespeare there are none of the cheap insults of many contemporary dramatists, such as Ben Jonson.

On the Catholic side, it is noticeable that Shakespeare portrays ordinary monks and friars as benevolent, humble and unselfish. Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* is typical; indeed, here Shakespeare completely alters the bias of his source which indicted the friar as a meddler who was responsible for the young lovers' deaths. In a lecture on *Romeo and Juliet* Coleridge commented: "Friar Lawrence... enables me to remark upon the different manner in which Shakespeare has treated the priestly character, as compared with other writers. In Beaumont and Fletcher priests are represented as a vulgar mockery; and, as in others of their dramatic personages, the errors of a few are mistaken for the demeanour of the many; but in Shakespeare they always carry with them our love and respect".

It is also significant that Friar Lawrence recommends philosophy rather than theology as a comfort:

*"I'll give thee armour to keep off that word;  
Adversity's sweet milk, philosophy,  
To comfort thee, though thou art banished"* (3:3).

The notion of philosophy as adversity's comfort is characteristically Baconian, as is the idea that both promote good behaviour: "Prosperity doth best discover vice, but adversity doth best discover virtue" (*Of Adversity*).

The simplicity of heart and childlike piety of the lower clergy is often contrasted in Shakespeare with the selfish ambitions of cardinals and bishops. Cardinal Pandulph in *King John*, Cardinals Campeius and Wolsey in *Henry VIII*, and the Bishop of Carlisle and the Abbot of Westminster in *Richard II* are all examples. Moreover, if Lancaster's speech to the Archbishop of York in *Henry IV*, Part Two, is an expression of Shakespeare's own view, then it fully accords with that of Bacon:

*"My Lord of York, it better show'd with you  
When that your flock, assembled by the bell,  
Encircled you to hear with reverence  
Your exposition on the holy text*

*Than now to see you here an iron man,  
Cheering a rout of rebels with your drum,  
Turning the word to sword, and life to death...  
But you misuse the reverence of your place,  
Employ the countenance and grace of heav'n  
As a false favourite doth his prince's name,  
In deeds dishonourable. You have ta'en up,  
Under the counterfeited zeal of God,  
The subjects of His substitute, my father,  
And both against the peace of heaven and him  
Have here up-swarm'd them" (4:2).*

The similarity of these sentiments to those expressed by Bacon in, for example, the essay *Of Superstition*, is quite remarkable.

And what of non-Christian religions? The author of Shakespeare, like Bacon, was ahead of his times in the tolerance he showed towards people of other religions and races. Take *The Merchant of Venice*, in many respects the first anti-racist play. Although it is not entirely divested of traditional Christian anti-semitism, it does break new ground culturally. True, there is much about the greedy Jew Shylock to be deplored, not least his apparent willingness to kill his own daughter for the sake of a few ducats. But Shakespeare nevertheless creates him as a complex and human character, unlike Marlowe's Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, who is more simply a comic stage villain. Shylock's essential humanity is stressed in speeches like "Hath not a Jew eyes" (3:1) and "Suffrance is the badge of all our tribe" (1:3).

*The Merchant of Venice* was entered in the Stationers' Register in 1598. Curiously, in this very same year Francis Bacon found himself in financial difficulties and was actually seized and imprisoned at the instance of a Jewish creditor called Sympson. It was Bacon's brother Anthony who came to his assistance, and of course in the play itself Antonio figures as the generous brother. Are these circumstances mere coincidences, or did they offer the author inspiration?

### ***War and Peace***

Renaissance writers often split into opposing factions on the question of war or peace. One position, which might be called military or martial humanism, lionised an ideal of the prince or courtier as both soldier and scholar and regarded the warrior's activity as essential for individual achievement as well as for social order. The other position, which might be called irenic or pacifist humanism, saw the ideal prince or courtier as a

jurist and philosopher and criticised the military ethos as irreligious, immoral and impractical. From time to time the more pacifist view came to the fore, but Europe throughout the Middle Ages retained the underpinnings of a warrior culture and the paradigm of the Renaissance prince combined the virtues of the general and the scholar.

The debate was epitomised by Machiavelli and Erasmus. In *The Prince* (1513) Machiavelli views his ideal ruler as a soldier: "war is the only profession which befits one who commands". In *The Art of War* (1520) he observes that "since military institutions are completely corrupted and have, for a long period, diverged from ancient practices, bad opinions of them have arisen, causing the military life to be despised". He calls for "a rebirth of classical military skill through the imitation of ancient military institutions". This call was widely heeded by Machiavelli's own patron Lorenzo de Medici and by Elizabethan courtiers like Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh. Elizabethan drama also embodied this militaristic culture. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* edified contemporary audiences with gory spectacles.

Erasmus, on the other hand, ploughed a pacifist furrow, and in his *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), written as a handbook for the future Charles V, he advocates an "art of peace" rather than an "art of war". Power and authority, he insists, are distinct from force and the duty of a *Christian* prince is to avoid war and serve his people. To establish and maintain peace should be the goal of all princes, a goal achieved by the greatest spiritual and temporal leaders in history, Jesus and Augustus. In 1517 Erasmus returned to the theme in *The Complaint of Peace* (*Querela Pacis*), headed with the epigraph, "The Sum of All Religion is Peace and Unanimity". Here Erasmus directs his strongest invective against those who try to use religion as a justification for violence. War is conducted not for the benefit of the people but for the aggrandisement of princes and the alleged benefits never exceed the actual costs in lives, property and social upheaval. He imagines the ironies involved in a soldier reciting the Lord's Prayer when he is just about to cut his brother's throat. War for Erasmus is plainly incompatible with Christianity.

Bacon and Shakespeare reject both extreme positions. Bacon was certainly no pacifist. Indeed, in his essay *Of Empire* he seeks to justify the concept of a pre-emptive war against the doctrine of those medieval scholastics who held that war could be justified only in response to an act of aggression. He writes: "There is no question, but a just fear of an imminent danger, though there be no blow given, is a lawful cause of a war". In the unpublished *Advertisement Touching an Holy War* (1622), written in the form of a dialogue, he has Zebedaeus, one of the characters,

distinguish five cases of holy war. Specifically, Bacon was thinking of an Anglo-Spanish crusade against the Turks. He believed that Islamic religious fanatics were threatening to plunge Renaissance Europe into another Dark Age and that the enlightened nations should unite to defeat them. As early as 1607 in a speech he refers to the Ottoman family who ruled Turkey as "the terror of the world". And in 1617 he suggested that the projected marriage of Prince Charles to the infanta of Spain could be "the beginning and seed...of a holy war against the Turks" (*A Remembrance Additional to the Instructions of Sir John Digby*; in *Works*, VII, p4; XIV, p158).

The question is: how serious was he? The *Advertisement* is an imaginary dialogue in which one character, the courtier Pollio, calls a holy war "the rendezvous of cracked brains", anticipating Timon's words in the *Folio* play soon after about "bestly mad-brain'd war". Bacon also wrote: "Wars with their noise afright us". Some commentators argue that in the *Advertisement* he is not speaking of a real war but writing an allegory in which he is trying to initiate a spiritual war between science and religion, yet this ignores his earlier anti-Turkish remarks quoted above. And the fact is that at times Bacon was decidedly hawkish. Take the essay *Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates*. He writes:

"No body can be healthful without exercise, neither natural body nor politic; and, certainly, to a kingdom, or estate, a just and honourable war is the true exercise. A civil war, indeed, is like the heat of a fever; but a foreign war is like the heat of exercise, and serveth to keep the body in health; for in a slothful peace, both courages will effeminate and manners corrupt".

The 1625 edition of this essay makes more than one reference to the Turks. Bacon asserts: "for empire and greatness, it importeth most, that a nation do profess arms as their principal honour, study and occupation". He then lists the nations which held "the greatest empire in the world" and concludes: "The Turks have it at this day, though in great declination". Later, he says that it was the Battle of Lepanto that "arrested the greatness of the Turk", and also alludes in the *Advertisement* to "that famous and fortunate war by sea that ended in the victory of Lepanto" which "hath put a hook in the nostrils of the Ottoman to this day".

It is clear that Bacon's tolerance stopped short at the Turks, but remarkably the exact same is true in Shakespeare where, again and again, they appear as exemplars of 'unchristian' behaviour: "What! Think you we are Turks or infidels? Or that we would, against the form of law, Proceed thus rashly in the villain's death" (*Richard III*); "Wine loved I deeply, dice dearly, and in woman out-paramoured the Turk" (Edgar in *King Lear*); "Why, tis a boisterous and a cruel style, a style for challengers; why she

defies me, Like Turk to Christian" (Rosalind in *As You Like It*). In *Othello* the famous lines which the distraught hero utters are:

*"Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that  
Which Heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?"*

This is only one of several allusions to the Turks and their culture in the play. There are rumours of a Turkish invasion of Venice in Act 1. They are a menacing power offstage both here and at the beginning of the next act. Then a storm destroys much of the Turkish fleet but leaves the Venetians unscathed. Yet no sooner are the real Turks defeated than Iago seems to take their place. "Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk: You rise to play, and go to bed to work" (II.i.113-4). Othello, too, becomes infused with something of the Turkish ferocity and destructiveness. In his death speech he acknowledges that he has turned Turk:

*"And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog  
And smote him—thus".*

The Turks, their Ottoman Empire and their Islamic culture yield both the crisis that sets *Othello* in motion and layers of meaning which reinforce the play's themes and imagery. The deception, ferocity, and misogyny in the play all find expression as Turkish derivatives. Arguably, therefore, Shakespeare sets his play as a struggle between the liberal, enlightened Europeans and the savage, marauding Turks. Othello must wage an inner struggle between the two, and overcomes his sinister side, the Aleppine Turk— but only at the expense of his honour, his family and his life, the traditional sacrifices of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Now, here's the curious thing about *Othello*. Although it had been performed as early as 1604, it was not printed until 1622, the very year that Bacon wrote his *Advertisement Touching an Holy War*. I suggest that it was revised at this later date, so that Bacon and Shakespeare would seem to have written works at the same time revealing identical prejudices against the Turks and expressing the same view that Europeans represented the Enlightenment in opposition to Ottoman barbarism. But of course William of Stratford was not alive in 1622. If he wrote the version of *Othello* performed in 1604 then he expressed Bacon's opinions publicly before Bacon himself thought of doing so, but I suspect that many if not all the Turkish references were not in the play performed at court that year.

Although Bacon was not a pacifist and did openly advocate an energetic foreign policy calculated to distract people from internal problems, he did

not *like* war and was always anxious to insist that it should be conducted as humanely as possible. He strongly supported the need to ensure justice in the means of fighting as well as justice in the cause. In the *Advertisement* he is careful to have one of his speakers warn his fellows that the holiness of a war is no excuse for brutality, that Christians should not forget that others are men like themselves, that war is "the sentence of death upon many". We must not, he writes, make a Moloch of Christ "in sacrificing the blood of men to him in an unjust war". Moreover, we should stress that he was strongly opposed to civil war, which in the extract quoted above is "like the heat of a fever", and indeed his *Advertisement* was written partly as a means of uniting Crown and Parliament against a common enemy and so burying their growing conflict.

If we look at Shakespeare more closely, we find exactly the same ambivalences and qualifications towards war that exist in Bacon. The playwright generally believes that war is necessary for the protection of England against alien aggressors and for the defence of English interests overseas. However, when England becomes embroiled in civil war, Shakespeare demonstrates its destructive power and calamitous effects upon both sides and on the country as a whole. The audience is exhorted to be prepared to fight for or support England in external conflict but to view civil strife as the most pernicious of evils. Thus in *Henry VI* Warwick prophesies that the struggle "between the Red Rose and the White" will despatch "a thousand souls to death and deadly night" and Shakespeare marks the internecine struggle between the two houses with the imagery of slaughter.

The consequence of civil war is alluded to when the opposing sides of Lancaster and York confront each other in Parliament and threaten to turn the palace of Westminster itself into an abattoir "to make a shambles of the parliament house". After the two sides have met in battle, the kingdom is despoiled. Henry's realm is a "slaughter house, his subjects slain". The responsibility for this state of affairs belongs to those who take up arms for as Warwick says: "Who finds the heifer dead, and bleeding fresh, And sees fast by a butcher with an axe, But will suspect 'twas he that made the slaughter?"

King Henry exemplifies the victims of the slaughter in losing first his kingdom and then his life. Gloucester may be taken as symbolic of the kingdom which Henry will eventually lose and which he bemoans in terms of a calf which "the butcher takes away" ... "bearing it to the bloody slaughter-house". Henry's inactivity is responsible for much of the carnage, yet he claims he "can do nought" and bemoans the fact "with sad unhelpful tears". Even when he faces death, Henry pleads helplessness in saying:

*"So first the harmless sheep doth yield his fleece.  
And next his throat unto the butcher's knife" (III Henry VI 5:6).*

By linking Henry's inaction with the butchery imagery, Shakespeare makes him guilty by default of complicity in the struggle and thereby advocates the necessity of being vigorous in eliminating the causes of civil war.

In his essay on 'Shakespeare's Pacifism' (*Renaissance Quarterly*, Spring 1992), Steven Marx argues that Shakespeare supported war in his early writings but became a pacifist in the latter part of his career. I don't think it is as simple as that. Certainly, the first history tetralogy, *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, all written during the early 1590s, glorify militarism and violence but condemn civil war. In the late 1590s, in the second Henry tetralogy, the battlefield remains an arena of virtue, though there is now a recurrent critique of militaristic behaviour—as in Hotspur's exaggerated sense of martial honour and Falstaff's mocking of it. Yet, this does not render the author a pacifist. Henry IV says:

*"And, were these inward wars once out of hand,  
We would, dear lords, unto the Holy Land" (Henry IV, Part Two, 3: 1).*

In other words, Henry has a scheme to attack—yes, the Turks!—in order to quell civil conflict, and his dying advice to his son is to 'busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels' (*Henry IV, Part Two* 4:5). I suspect that this was Shakespeare's view at that time, which was about 1597-8.

*Henry V*, probably written a year later in 1599, is a key play here. Henry, who is in many ways Shakespeare's version of the Machiavellian 'Prince', is fastidious in establishing justification for the invasion of France and in receiving religious sanction. Since Augustine, Christians had developed the concept of a just war both in terms of legitimate aims—*jus ad bellum*—and legitimate conduct of fighting—*jus in bello*—and both are addressed by the king and the archbishop. Yet the actual reasons given are morally either dubious or ridiculous. In other words, it is the *appearance* of a moral argument that matters to the king, not the substance. Morality is presented as a cloak of public relations to dress up a political decision. In a world dominated by power relations, a leader is needed with Machiavellian skills of manipulating others into some form of collective action. That, in Shakespeare's view, is the reality of politics.

In his interesting book *1599* (2005) James Shapiro suggests that *Henry V* deliberately contains elements both pro-war and anti-war. He writes: "Shakespeare fills the play with competing, critical voices: the backroom whispers of self-interested churchmen, the grumblings of low-life conscripts, the blunt criticism of worthy soldiers who know that leaders

make promises they have no intention of keeping, the confessions of so-called traitors, the growing cynicism of a young boy off to the wars, the infighting among officers, the bitter curses of a returning soldier" (p104-5). Shapiro says that much of the play is composed of scenes in which opposing voices collide over the conduct of war. The debate about the war is the real story of the play. I suggest that Shakespeare intended to dramatise the conflict which often arises between politics and morality and he implies that in the 'modern' world of power relations the Machiavellian style of politics exemplified by Henry is necessary, even if it is, in the final analysis, immoral.

By the 1600s there was a change in Shakespeare's attitude. Marx suggests that the turning point is possibly *Troilus and Cressida*, written in 1602-3. Here Shakespeare mounts an attack on war heroes and the justification for war that he had earlier supported. Why? Part of the explanation lies in the change of monarch. *Troilus and Cressida* was entered in the Stationers' Register in 1603, the year that James I ascended the throne. The new king was a pacifist who had written *Basilikon Doron* (1599), a guidebook for princes dedicated to his son and modelled on Erasmus' work of 1516. Its frontispiece featured a picture of 'Pax' carrying an olive branch and treading on a figure of vanity staring in the mirror. James himself was partly reflecting the mood of the times. Thus in 1605 an anti-militarist satire was published in Spain, the country regarded as England's 'natural enemy'. It was called *Don Quixote*.

But there is another possible explanation for Shakespeare's growing pacifism. It lies in disillusionment with military heroics after the fall of the Earl of Essex. Frequent parallels have been made between Essex and Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida*, and it is relevant to note that as early as 1596 Bacon had warned Essex against the impression he was creating of a "martial greatness" and pointing out that "her Majesty loveth peace". Essex, of course, did not heed this warning, and may even have plotted to overthrow Elizabeth. It was here that Bacon's friendship with Essex ended, and here too that Shakespeare turned to writing about tragic flaws in military heroes whose demise is not caused by superior arms but by personal failures of insight, compassion and self-control attributable to an identity forged in battle. Othello, for example, though possessing the martial virtues of 'the plain soldier', lacks the learning necessary to exert self-mastery and leadership in civil society: "Rude am I in speech,/And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace... And little of the great world can I speak/More than pertains to feats of broils and battles" (1:3). It seems, then, that James's theory and practice of peace encouraged the playwright to move in the direction he was already heading.

In *Coriolanus*, for example, war is presented as violent and cruel, bought at the expense of others' misery and, following Erasmus, the dramatist traces the causes of political violence to psychological aggression. The work also depicts Rome's transformation from a warlike to a more pacific society. As Marx says, "In addition to mocking, criticising and analysing militarism, Coriolanus demonstrates the possibility of stemming the tides of war and civil strife set in motion by its excesses". The conversion and death of Coriolanus signal a positive rather than a negative outcome to the play because they usher in a peace between Volsicans and Romans and between patricians and plebs.

Shakespeare's last plays function very much as propaganda for peace. *Cymbeline* glorifies the reconciliation of Britain and Rome—implicitly of Protestant and Catholic—in a treaty embodying the peace of Augustus and the peace of Christ: "Never was a war did cease/Ere bloody hands were washed, with such a peace" (5:5). In *The Tempest* the Humanist Prospero finds that "the rarer action is/in virtue than in vengeance". In *Henry VIII*, probably Shakespeare's last play, the king is portrayed not as a warrior but a peacemaker, and at the end in Cranmer's prophecy we are told that in Elizabeth's days "every man shall eat in safety/Under his own vine what he plants, and sing/The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours" (5:5).

Marx overstates his case, and I venture to suggest that Shakespeare entered a pacifist phase after the Essex debacle which is reflected in the plays from about 1599 to 1613. Throughout this period Bacon also became preoccupied with the same theme, even if from about 1617 onwards he reverted to a more hawkish stance, certainly with regard to the Turks, and this is also reflected in *Othello*, first published in 1622. Bacon, however, often saw himself as a trumpeter: "Nor is mine a trumpet which summons and excites men to cut each other to pieces...but rather to make peace between themselves, and turning with united forces against the Nature of Things, to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, and extend the bounds of human empire, as far as God Almighty in his goodness may permit" (*De Augmentis*).

In his essay on *Shakespeare and Religion* Aldous Huxley states that "unlike Milton or Dante, Shakespeare had no ambition to be a systematic theologian or philosopher" (Show Magazine, 1964, reprinted in *Huxley and God: Essays*, 1992). The key word here is 'systematic'. There is no religious system; if anything, it is not the dogma of Christianity that interests the dramatist but its ethic—an ethic of freethought, tolerance and civil peace. This approach is Baconian to the core.