

THE SECRET RELIGION OF JONATHAN SWIFT

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JONATHAN SWIFT, Dean of St. Patrick's, author of *Gulliver*, 18th-century politician and intriguer—such is the popular estimate of Swift. That he had a real religion is realized by few—but actually this was the case. He is still remembered in Dublin as the best Dean who ever held office, as a devoted churchman, and in the narrow, squalid streets of St. Patrick's liberty, as a patriot and benefactor of the poor.

This brief paper will attempt merely to estimate the man's personal faith, and to show something of Swift's prayer-life.

Samuel Butler wrote in *Hudibras* of his Puritan Knight-Errant,

" For his religion it was fit
To match his learning and his wit."

Of Swift this was very far from being the case. His religion was something very private, hidden away within himself, and very different in kind from the side of his nature which he chose to show to the world. And because of this reticence in religion Swift was often judged in religious matters only by his learning and his wit—which were in fact poles apart from the simple and straightforward creed which he believed devoutly and practised sincerely and quietly.

Swift made as little show of religion as possible, because he had an abnormally strong hatred and fear of hypocrisy in himself. It is rather curious that in his own life he would never allow any of the redeeming merits of hypocrisy which he pointed out in his *Project for the Advancement of Religion*. His customary public worship in London was attendance at the early Sacrament, because in that service he thought that he would make less parade of piety. He was reticent about his deepest thoughts, and it is quite remarkable how his correspondence deals almost entirely with mundane and superficial matters, and very rarely indeed touches on the spiritual side. In his desire to avoid appearing hypocritical he developed what was really an affectation of disclaiming all appearance of piety, lest the reality of his faith might be questioned. It had, of course, the opposite effect, that the reality of his faith was very seriously doubted by many people. He became what has been neatly described as "a hypocrite inverted." He developed a fear even of Church observances like Lent. "I wish you a merry Lent" was one of his greetings to Stella. He dined off a shoulder of mutton on the last day of Holy Week out of sheer defiance, just in order to show his superiority over hypocrisy. "I hate Lent; I hate different diets, and furrnity and butter and herb porridge; and sour, devout faces of people who only put on religion for seven weeks," he declared petulantly. And then, in unwitting contradiction to his rough show of religious matter of factness, he retired to bed early that same night in order that he might be prepared for attendance at Holy Communion at eight o'clock next morning—Easter Sunday.

It is a significant and little known aspect of Swift's religion, his sincere and devoted attention to Holy Communion. In a frigid and

unemotional age his love for the Church's central service was remarkable. He was a devout and regular communicant, and his devotion can in no way be estimated by his bitter attack on Transubstantiation in the *Tale of a Tub*. Indeed, it was due to Swift's insistence that St. Patrick's became and remained for more than a century the only church in Dublin at which there was a regular weekly Holy Communion Service.

He prayed, and he believed devoutly in the power of prayer. Very lovely is the spirit of devotion with which his Evening Prayer was charged. "The coming into Thy presence, the drawing near unto Thee, is the only means to be charged ourselves, to become like Thee in holiness and purity, to be followers of Thee as Thy dear children." Swift's sincerity of belief was recognized by the small circle of his more intimate acquaintances. When his very dear friend Sir Andrew Fountaine was seriously ill, it was Swift who was called in to pray at his bedside, as he told Stella in the Journal, "He has been very ill this week, and sent to me early this morning to have prayers, which, you know, is the last thing." And Sunday by Sunday, as Sir Andrew became convalescent, Swift came to pray with him. A week later he read prayers with "poor Mrs. Wesley," who was "very much out of order," instead of going to church.

As Archbishop Bernard observed, men and women do not seek such services from their friends, however brilliant and delightful in company, unless they are convinced of their sincerity.

Yet he kept his belief in prayer as discreetly hidden as he could. He did not object to telling his very worldly friend Bolingbroke that he went "every day once to prayers at St. Patrick's," but then he knew that those observances would pass as official prayers, and that no credit for piety could very well attach to him for the performance of his bare duty.

What he did not tell Bolingbroke, nor indeed, even Delaney, who was one of his closest friends, was the fact that he said family prayers nightly at home in the Deanery for his servants.

So fearful was Swift of giving away his true feelings, that actually Delaney had spent months living in the Deanery before he stumbled upon the existence of this carefully concealed custom.

Yet this habit of prayer was a regular thing and at a fixed hour every night in the Dean's own bed-chamber. "To which the servants regularly and silently resorted at the time appointed; without any notice from a bell, or audible call of any kind, except the striking of the clock."

Delaney sums up this curiously contradictory strain in Swift's character neatly, and one cannot but feel, correctly. "There was no vice in the world he so much abhorred as hypocrisy, and of consequence, nothing he dreaded so much as to be suspected of it. This naturally made him verge sometimes too much to the other extreme."

It was a trait which could only be known to sympathetic friends. The world probably thought Swift an atheist, as did Archbishop Sharp, who advised Queen Anne that it would never do to make a bishop

out of a man who had written a *Tale of a Tub*, and who did not even believe in Christianity. That inverted hypocrisy was probably unknown to the majority of his acquaintances, and it was too subtle a psychological trait to be explained to people who did not wish to believe in it. It was much easier to call him an atheist. It was much easier, like Thackeray, to laugh poor Delaney's defence to shreds with a little convenient inaccuracy and to sneer, "There was no need surely, why a Church dignitary should assemble his family privily in a crypt, as if he were afraid of heathen persecution." It was much easier and more convenient for his enemies to accept the obvious, and, like Jonathan Smedley, to nail up witty verses about the Dean's worldliness upon the Cathedral door.

"Hard to be plagued with Bible, still,
And Prayer Book before thee ;
Hadst thou not wit, to think at will
On some diverting story ? "

"Look down, St. Patrick, look, we pray,
On thine own church and steeple ;
Convert thy Dean, on this great day ;
Or else, God help the people ! "

"And now, where'er his deanship dies,
Upon his tomb be graven ;
A man of God here buried lies,
Who never thought of Heaven."

And indeed it must be accounted a fault with Swift that his contempt for mankind and its opinion was such, that he never exerted himself to correct this very obvious estimate.

Was it of himself that he thought when he wrote, "Some people take more care to hide their wisdom than their folly" ? The sentiment sums up his own failing very accurately.

The true religion of the man was only laid bare in moments of utmost extremity. With his friends he was the man of the world, the politician, the wit ; even to Stella he did not often reveal his deepest thoughts, if we are to judge by the *Journal*. But when the Stella he loved lay dying, the little girl whom he had taught to write, so that her hand became almost a duplicate of his own ; the Stella for whom he had bought a Bible and commended her for wanting to read it ; when she was ill, then we see behind the mask of pretence. There is a very wonderful spirit of devotion and of faith in the prayers which he composed for her and which he used at her bedside.

Here is an extract from one of the three which are preserved—almost too private and too sacred they are to dwell on in public.

"Lessen, O Lord, we beseech thee, her bodily Pains, or give her a double Strength of Mind to support them. And if thou wilt soon take her to thyself, turn our Thoughts rather upon that Felicity which we hope she shall enjoy, than upon that unspeakable Loss we shall endure. Let her Memory be ever dear unto us ; and the Example of her many Virtues, as far as human Infirmary will admit, our constant Imitation. Accept, O Lord, these Prayers, poured from the Bottom of our Hearts, in thy Mercy, and for the Merits of our Blessed Saviour. Amen."

One can see in these intimate thoughts something of Swift's trust in God as a God of Love. Dr. Johnson wrote of Swift's prayers a

remark which, if it was not spiteful, was entirely misjudged. He said, "The thoughts of death rushed upon him at this time. . . . It seems that his first recourse was to piety."

That is certainly untrue. His revealing *Thoughts on Religion*—one of the few writings which go really deep—speak of a trust in a God who is merciful and loving. "God's mercy is over all his works," he said, "but divines of all sorts lessen that mercy too much." And it is sure that through all his pain-racked life he did not fear death. He looked on death as a gateway to a fuller and greater life, and a month before Stella's death he could write to a bereaved mother to assure her that this world was but a preparation for a better one, "which you are taught to be certain that so innocent a person is now in possession of; so that she is an immense gainer, and you and her friends the only losers."

Death held no real terrors for him. "It is impossible," he wrote, "that any thing so natural, so necessary, and so universal as death, should ever have been designed by providence as an evil to mankind."

Perhaps after Stella's death it was what he would have wished for himself. There was an unbearable emptiness in his life when she was gone. There is something infinitely tragic in the way in which he sat down when he heard the news and began to write feverishly his pathetic little catalogue of her virtues, until his head ached and he could write no more. On the night of the funeral he was too ill to attend, and he moved from his study into another apartment, that he might not see the funeral lights in the church.

The next seventeen years were years of loneliness, forgetfulness, oblivion. And during those years he prayed; prayed still after he became too ill to attend daily service in the Cathedral, prayed until he could no longer remember anything of his devotions save "Our Father." In after years his faithful servant, Richard Brennan, told how he kept on saying that prayer until the very end!

It is not within the scope of this paper to do more than to indicate Swift's loving care for and building up of Laracor, his tiny country parish; his incessant pastoral work in his Dublin slum parish; his diligence in the preaching office, so admirably shown in his *Letter to a Young Gentleman*; his burning hatred of immorality and infidelity, set out with sparkling wit in the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*; his zeal for the beauty of his cathedral services, for his choir and clergy; his wonderful care for the fabric and beauty and economy of his great Gothic church.

Yet these all must be considered in order to arrive at a true estimate of the character of St. Patrick's Dean.

In his adopted country, Ireland, much of this is recognized. It is the object of these few pages to suggest thoughts which may give a more balanced picture of a fine churchman whose memory has long been under a cloud.

[It must be added here that these notes have been incorporated into the author's book: "Jonathan Swift, Dean and Pastor," and that they have been printed here by permission of the Editorial Secretary of S.P.C.K.]