HARDY'S RELIGIOUS VIEWS

By

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I. A World without God

...the Monarch of our fashioning,
Who...now has ceased to be. ("God's Funeral")

In the world of Thomas Hardy, God "has ceased to be," or in other words, Hardy's world is, as J. Hillis Miller says, "a world without God." Of course, various gods appear in Hardy's novels and poems. In Tess of the d'Urbervilles, for instance, there is "the President of the Immortals" who ends "his sport with Tess" (Tess, LIX) when she is executed at the County Goal in Wintonchester. And there is "that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or...he was sleeping" (Tess, XI) when, at The Chase, Tess most needed the protection of her guardian angel.

When I say that Hardy's world is a Godless world, by "God" I do not mean such divine personages as these. I do mean "the providence" of Tess's "simple faith" (Ibid.). It may be that Hardy says, "Where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith?" because he intends to suggest that God could not be found anywhere by his heroine.

J. Hillis Miller says in his Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire:

Hardy's heroes have religious desires in a world which offers no satisfaction

(1) Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), p. 75.
for such desires. Their lives are spent in the attempt to find a substitute for God in a world without God. (p.114)

Tess’s life after she loses her faith, indeed, can be said to be spent struggling to find a substitute for God.

Evidently Tess’s sin when she is raped in The Chase by Alec d’Urberville is not of her own seeking. She is “more sinned against than sinning” (Tess, XXXV). Some few weeks after the night in The Chase, Tess leaves Alec. But on her way to her birth-place she is overtaken by Alec, her husband “in a physical sense” (Tess, LI), who is still attached to her. But then she says:

If I had gone for love o’you, if I had ever sincerely loved you, if I loved you still, I should not so loathe and hate myself for my weakness as I do now!...My eyes were dazed by you for a little, and that was all.” (Tess, XII)

Tess, who, as Izz says, “would lay down her life for” the man she loves (Tess, XL), resolutely refuses to be wife to a man she doesn’t love. Tess’s standpoint is quite the same as that of Susanna Bridehead, who, seeing a newly wedded couple, the pregnant wife apparently disliking the husband, says:

“And the other poor soul—to escape a nominal shame which was owing to the weakness of her character, degrading herself to the real shame of bondage to a tyrant who scorned her—a man whom to avoid for ever was her only chance of salvation... (Jude, V–iv)

Perhaps, like Mrs Twycott of “The Son’s Veto,” Tess knows at the bottom of her heart that she did not sin against God because she was seduced in The Chase, though conventionally she was very sinful indeed. But when she reads the phrase: “Thy damnation slumbereth not” (2 Pet. ii, 3) written in red paint on a stile–board, she is shocked.

(2) Shakespeare, King Lear. III, ii, 60.
Against the peaceful landscape, the pale, decaying tints of the copes, the blue air of the horizon, and the lichenèd stile-boards, these staring vermilion words shone forth. They seemed to shout themselves out and make the atmosphere ring. Some people might have cried ‘Alas, poor Theology!’ at the hideous defacement—the last grotesque phase of a creed which had served mankind well in its time. But the words entered Tess with accusatory horror. It was as if this man had known her recent history; yet he was a total stranger. (Tess, XII)

When the artisan writes “Thou shalt not commit (adultery)” (Exod. xx, 14), Tess murmurs contemptuously, “Pooh—I don’t believe God said such things!” (Tess, XII). These words from the Bible may give her accusatory horror, but they can never be the salvation of her soul.

The motto of Jude the Obscure: “The letter killeth” (2 Cor. iii, 6) suggests that in the world of Hardy, or at any rate in that of Jude the Obscure, there is no “spirit” which “giveth life.” Any creed, though it may have served mankind well in its time, has been dogmatized, and falsified, and has reached “the last grotesque phase”—the letter without the spirit. When Sue says that “people have no right to falsify the Bible” and hates such humbug as could attempt to plaster over with ecclesiastical abstractions such ecstatic, natural, human love as lies in that great and passionate song (Jude, III–iv)

and insists that

to explain such verses as this: “Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women?” by the note: “The Church professeth her faith” is supremely ridiculous (Ibid.), she can be said to act as spokesman of Hardy.

Like his heroines Hardy himself has “religious desires in a world which offers no satisfaction for such desires.” He sings in his poem “God-Forgotten” his dream of going to entreat God to help the Earth of the Human race, which God has almost forgotten. In the poet’s dream God dimly recalls “Some tiny sphere He built long back” and, informed that the sphere

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still exists, says:

"Dark, then, its life! For not a cry / Of aught it bears do I now hear; / Of its own act the threads were snapt whereby / Its plaints had reached mine ear..."

and He continues:

"Sore grieved am I that injury should be wrought / Even on so poor a thing [as the Human race's 'tainted ball']!"

and concludes His message by saying:

"Hence, Messengers! and straightway put an end / To what men undergo."

The poem ends with the following lines:

—Oh, childish thought!... Yet often comes to me / When trouble hovers nigh.

In the last grotesque phase of religion, man's prayers can never go to heaven, but are merely "words without thoughts," as Claudius says so well.

"The last grotesque phase" is perhaps most vividly shown in the baptism scene of Tess of the d'Urbervilles (XIV). After a long seclusion Tess, who was the victim of Alec in The Chase and gave birth to a child at home, has undertaken outdoor work in her native village. But then her baby, who has not been baptized, is suddenly taken seriously ill. Her darling is about to die without salvation. She asks her father if she may send for the parson, but her father, who wants to hide his family's scandal, declares that no parson should come inside his door prying into his affairs, and he locks the door. In her misery, Tess tosses about on the bed, thinking of the child consigned to the nethermost corner of hell, doubly doomed for lack of baptism and lack of legitimacy. At midnight she suddenly starts up and says to herself:

"Ah! perhaps baby can be saved! Perhaps it will be just the same!"

She awakens her younger sisters and brothers, and, with the children

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(3) Shakespeare, Hamlet, III, iii, 98.
awestricken at her dignified manner, she baptizes her baby.

The ecstasy of faith almost apotheosized her; it set upon her face a glowing irradiation, and brought a red spot into the middle of each cheek; while the miniature candle-flame inverted in her eye-pupils shone like a diamond. The children gazed up at her with more and more reverence, and no longer had a will for questioning. She did not look like Sissy to them now, but as a being large, towering, and awful—a divine personage with whom they had nothing in common.

At daybreak the baby breathes his last. Tess goes to the parson of the parish, and, having told the story of the baby’s illness and the extemporized ceremony, asks him whether it will be just the same for the baby as if the parson had baptized him. As a parson he is disposed to say no, but the “dignity” of Tess and the strange “tenderness” in her voice affect his “nobler impulses” and make him say yes. Hardy says:

The man and the ecclesiastic fought within him, and the victory fell to the man.

Yet, when she asks him whether he will give her baby a Christian burial, the vicar says, “Ah—that’s another matter,” and refuses to bury him. She appeals and appeals, and at last, when she asks him, “Will it be just the same? Don’t for God’s sake speak as saint to sinner, but as you yourself to me myself!” the vicar, somewhat moved, affirms the truth of her statement. So the baby is buried in that corner of the churchyard where unbaptized infants, suicides, and others are laid, and Tess offers flowers in a little jar of water for her baby’s soul.

What matter was it that on the outside of the jar the eye of mere observation noted the words ‘Keelwell’s Marmalade’? The eye of maternal affection did not see them in its vision of higher things.

Such is the baptism scene, which was first published in The Fortnightly Review under the title of “The Midnight Baptism: A Study in Christianity”. This “study” reveals Hardy’s religious views. In the fight within the parson, “the ecclesiastic” is only the letter that killeth, and “the man” is the spirit
that giveth life. It is Tess’s “dignity” and “tenderness” that affect the “nobler impulses”—or “higher things” that Tess bears in mind before the grave of her baby—which bring victory to “the man,” and not to “the ecclesiastic.” The Path to the spirit is, in Tess’s language, “not as saint to sinner, but as you yourself to me myself.”

Although Tess at Talbothays attended Church almost every Sunday morning and was “a good Christian girl” (Tess, XXVI)—this is only one of the “accidents in Tess’s life,” “because of its obvious unreality amid beliefs essentially naturalistic” (Ibid.)—no “systematized religion” (Tess, XVI) can be the God of Tess’s faith in the latter half of her life.

Angel Clare, that “advanced and well-meaning young man,” who might have been able to save his wife Tess, “with all his attempted independence of judgment,” was yet “the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings” (Tess, XXXIX). He should have reckoned his wife’s moral value “not by achievement but by tendency” (Ibid.). When her past was confessed to him he deserted his wife, that “pure woman.” He had to go through hardships in Brazil before realizing he was wrong and asking himself “why he did not judge Tess constructively rather than biographically, by the will rather than by the deed” (Tess, LIII). Angel’s “ethical system without any dogma” (Tess, XLVII) cannot be a substitute for God’s providence.

When Tess says to her seducer Alec, who has asked her to pray for him,

“How can I pray for you, when I am forbidden to believe that the great Power who moves the world would alter His plans on my account?” (Tess, XLVI)

she does not believe in God’s providence. Then what is the substitute for God that Tess has found? What is it that gives “life” to Tess and makes her experience “all that’s sweet and lovely”, (Tess, LVIII) in the New Forest and say, facing death, “I am almost glad—yes, glad!” (Ibid.). It is perhaps
what moved the parson in the baptism scene, or what brought about Tess’s “dignity” and “tenderness” in the same scene,—or, in the language of Tess, “the religion of loving-kindness” (Tess, XLVII),—or, to quote Hardy’s comment on Tess’s misfortune in The Chase:

But though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature;...(Tess,XI),

the religion of “human nature,” and not that of “divinities.”

II. Hardy and Theravāda Buddhism

“The religion of loving-kindness” or that of “human nature”, reminds me of the teaching of the Theravāda or Hinayana School of Buddhism, which makes “no appeal to dogmatic assumption,” “claiming assistance from neither God nor gods, saviours or priestly men.”

There is no record of Hardy having read Buddhist Scriptures, but Hardy certainly read Schopenhauer. The resemblances between Hardy and Schopenhauer have often been discussed. Schopenhauer “dislikes Christianity, preferring the religions of India, both Hinduism and Buddhism” and “acknowledges three sources of his philosophy, Kant, Plato, and the Upanishads.” So there is a possibility that Hardy may have been influenced by Indian religions, especially Theravāda Buddhism, through the reading of Schopenhauer. But, if I discuss here the resemblances between Hardy’s views of life and Theravāda Buddhism, it is because I should like to make it as clear as possible what are the substitutes for God for which Hardy’s people are

(4) Cf. “it symboled none the less/Potency vast and loving-kindness strong” (“God’s Funeral”)./“loving-kindness” (Jude, VI, iv).
Buddhism is, of course, the teaching of Gautama, the Buddha, but Buddha himself wrote nothing. It is said that probably the nearest to the original teaching is the Theravāda, which can be found in the Pali Canon of the Southern or Theravāda School. Among its Scriptures the most fundamental and important is said to be the *Samyutta-Nikāya*. In this Scripture "the Four Noble Truths" are recorded.

The first Noble Truth is the Noble Truth concerning *dukkha* (=suffering; pain; ill). Buddha says:

> Birth is suffering [ill; painful], decay [old age] is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering: likewise sorrow and grief, woe, lamentation and despair. Association [to be united] with the unpleasant [the unloved; things which we dislike] is suffering; separation[to be separated] from the pleasant [the loved; things which we like] is suffering; and any craving that is unsatisfied [not to get what one wants], that too is suffering. In brief the five aggregates (=body, feeling, perception, will and reason) which spring from attachment are suffering. (*Samyutta Nikāya*, Ch. LVI, II, i, "Spoken by the Tathāgata")

Decay, disease, and death are suffering, so their cause "birth" is also suffering. Life is suffering. This is "the very raison d'être of Buddhism" (Coomaraswamy, p. 91) and the starting-point of the teaching of Buddha—Theravāda Buddhism.

Hardy’s views of life as found in his works are common to Buddha’s views of life found in the *Samyutta Nikāya* in that they both think of life as painful and full of suffering.

Hardy's poem "Yell’ham-Wood’s Story" is a fantasy of what the woods

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near his birth-place tell the poet about life. Coomb-firtrees say, "Life is a moan," and Clyffe-hill Clump says "Yea!" Then Yell’ham says, "Life would signify/A thwarted purposing: we come to live, and are called to die."

And the poem ends with the following lines:

Yes, that’s the thing/In fall, in spring,/That Yell’ham says:—/“Life offers—to deny!”

To Hardy himself, “almost every species of tree has its voice” (Under the Greenwood Tree, I, i), and, as the wind blows through the firs, Hardy could hear them moan. The last line: “Life offers—to deny!” is Hardy’s view of life, just as the last lines of “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” are Keats’s.

Hardy’s novel Jude the Obscure is, according to the author’s preface, “the tragedy of unfulfilled aims”, which is none other than “a craving that is unsatisfied.” Jude Fawley was handicapped from the start. As an orphan he was “a burden to his great-aunt” (Jude, I–ii) and besides he was “a boy who could not himself bear to hurt anything” (Ibid.)—even young birds or insects. “He could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped(Ibid.)”. He felt “the flaw in the terrestrial scheme” (Ibid.) even in his boyhood. This may be said to be his “weakness of character” (Ibid.).

Jude, while pursuing the trade of a stone-cutter, painfully taught himself Latin and Greek, stealing every moment he could for study. Nevertheless, when he comes to Christminster (=Oxford), he is coldly refused entry to the university, in spite of all his learning through his own unaided efforts. Jude is, as his love Sue says, “one of the very men Christminster was intended for when the colleges were founded; a man with a passion for learning, but no money, or opportunities, or friends.” But he is “elbowed off the pavement by the millionaires’ sons” (Jude, III–iv).
His second aspiration, which is “towards apostleship” (Jude, IV-iii), is also checked, because he has fallen in love with Sue Bridehead, who has been married to Phillotson. Still, Jude would be able to lead a moderate yet happy life with Sue, but even this he is not destined to enjoy. Separated from his beloved children by their deaths and separated from his “dear, free Sue” (Jude, III-ix) by her conversion, he murmurs on his deathbed at Christminster:

“Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived...” (Job, iii, 3)

To Jude the “five aggregates (=body, feeling, perception, will and reason) are suffering.”

Sue Bridehead, who was once pure and sensitive, whose intellect “played like lambent lightning over conventions and formalities” (Jude, VI-iii), and who “used to say that human nature was noble and long-suffering, not vile and corrupt” (Ibid.), grief-stricken by her children’s deaths, has enslaved herself to conventions and has given herself “to what she loathes” (Jude, VI-x). She had “unaccountable antipathies” (Jude, IV-i) against her husband, and, when he forced himself into her room, she jumped out of the window and took refuge with Jude. But because of her conversion, though she still loves Jude, she returns to Phillotson, at first to be his wife only in name, but at last, with great aversion and “clenching her teeth” (Jude, VI-ix), to make the supreme sacrifice of wifely duty, which she herself calls “penance” (Ibid.). This is a horrible case of “association with the unpleasant.”

Buddha says this about the source [origin] of suffering:

It is that craving thirst that causes the renewal of existence, accompanied by lust [sensual delight], seeking satisfaction now here, now there: namely, the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving for being, the craving for prosperity or power [the lust of the flesh, the lust of life, and the love of this present world]. (Samyutta-
Before we can escape from suffering we must face its existence and analyse its cause" (Humphreys, p. 84). These are the first two Noble Truths, and the cause, tanhā (=craving; thirst; lust; attachment), is analysed by Buddha. The reasoning is as follows:

"this" being present, "that" exists; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being present, that exists not; from the ceasing of this, that ceases. (Samyutta-Nikāya, Ch. XII, 3, §21 "The Ten Powers")

So, where there is craving, there is suffering; from the arising of craving, suffering arises; where there is no craving, there is no suffering; from the ceasing of craving, suffering ceases.

Hardy's heroes and heroines—Clym Yeobright, Michael Henchard, Giles Winterborne, Jude Fawley, Bathsheba, Eustacia, Tess, even Sue who says, "Some women's love of being loved is insatiable; and so, often, is their love of loving" (Jude, IV-i),—all undergo suffering that arises from "craving thirst." It is not too much to say that all the causes of Hardy's tragedies are some kind of "craving thirst."

"The craving thirst that causes the renewal of existence, accompanied by lust" reminds me of Jocelyn Pierston's love, his pursuit of the Well-Beloved. Still more horrible is Jude's lust for Arabella, which not only causes "a complete smashing up of his plans" (Jude, I-ix), but also gives birth to "Little Father Time" who asks his stepmother Sue if it would be better to be out o' the world than in it. Saying, "I wish I hadn't been born!" (Jude, VI-ii), Father Time hangs Sue's two children and himself. Sue's conversion and Jude's desperate struggle and death result from this calamity.

Jude the Obscure itself is, to quote the author's preface again, "a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit" which is none other than suffering.
arising from the lust of flesh. And Jude’s plans to enter Oxbridge to become a great scholar or a bishop is one form of the craving for prosperity, or the love of this present world.

The above-mentioned reasoning leads the second Truth to the third Truth, which states that the elimination of craving thirst will remove the cause of suffering. About the cessation [extinction] of suffering Buddha says:

Verily it is the utter passionless cessation of, the giving up, the forsaking, the release from, the absence of longing for this craving thirst [the extinction of this craving thirst by complete annihilation of lust, letting it go, expelling it, separating oneself from it, giving it no room]. (Samyutta-Nikāya, Ch. LVI, II,i, “Spoken by the Tathāgata”)

And the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering, which is the fourth Noble Truth, is the Noble Eightfold Path:

It is Right Views, Right Aim [Attitude of Mind], Right Speech, Right Conduct [Action], Right Living [Means of Livelihood], Right Effort, Right Mind Control, Right Meditation [Concentration]. (Samyutta-Nikāya, Ch. LVI, II,i, “Spoken by the Tathāgata”)

“This is that middle path which giveth vision, which giveth knowledge, which causeth... enlightenment, Nibbāna (=nirvana).” (Ibid.) “This teaching consists in a knowledge of the world and of man as they really are,” (Coomaraswamy, p. 91) and the practice of the teaching requires strong fortitude. Buddha “does not preach the mere worthlessness of life” but asks us to “attain a life of a finer quality” (Radhakrishnan, Vol. I, p.365).

Jude’s “craving for prosperity” is diminished, and he is a little enlightened, when he revises his plans and decides a new plan to be a “humble curate in an obscure village or city slum”, which he thinks has “a touch of goodness and greatness.” (Jude, III-i) He says:

“Now I know I have been a fool, and that folly is with me. And I don’t regret...
the collapse of my University hopes one jot. I wouldn’t begin again if I were sure
to succeed. I don’t care for social success any more at all. But I do feel I should
like to do some good thing;…” (Jude, II-vii).

The “ignoble strife” (Gray, “Elegy” I. 73) described in Far from the
Madding Crowd is caused by the craving thirst of Bathsheba and her
lovers. Far from the strife, Gabriel Oak has made Right Effort, has exer-
cised Right Mind Control, and in the long run, has procured calm happiness.
He is united with the loved, his love Bathsheba, who was swayed by the
lust of the flesh but, having borne great sufferings, at last has become aware
of Gabriel’s love. Gabriel and Bathsheba have gained “good-fellowship—
camaraderie”.

They spoke very little of their mutual feelings; pretty phrases and warm expressions
being probably unnecessary between such tried friends. Theirs was that substantial
affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together
begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other’s character, and not the best
till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic
reality. (The Madding Crowd, LVI)

Such love as theirs, “which is strong as death”, “which many waters cannot
quench, nor the floods drown”, and “beside which the passion usually called
by the name is evanescent as stream” (Ibid.), seldom occurs, as Hardy
comments, between the sexes, “because men and women associate, not in
their labours, but in their pleasures merely” (Ibid.).

Buddha says to Farmer Bhāradvāja, likening his Right Effort to plough-
ing:

Faith is the seed, and rain the discipline./Insight for me is plough fitted with
yoke./My pole is conscience and sense—mind the tie,/And mindfulness my ploughshare
and my goad./Guarded in action, guarded too in speech,/And temperate as to my
stomach’s food,/I weed with truth, and my release from work/Is that fair thing of
innermost desire./... Such is the ploughing—thath is ploughed by me./The fruit
it bears is food ambrosial./Whoso this ploughing hath accomplished, he/From
suffering and from sorrow is set free. (Samyutta— Nikāya, Ch. VII, 2,§1 “The

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Thus "cultivation" is common both to Buddha and to Farmer Oak, though the former cultivated his mind and the latter cultivated the soil, through which Gabriel Oak has been getting nearer to nirvana. That stage which Tess has at last reached at Stonehenge, and in which she can say, facing death, "I am almost glad—yes, glad!" (Tess, LVIII) is also something like nirvana.

In The Dynasts Hardy calls Immanent Will "Turner of the Wheel" (Fore Scene of The Dynasts), and in Tess of the d'Urbervilles he refers to "the possibility of retribution" (Tess, XI). But Hardy never believes in "rebirth by Karma" or "the transmigration of souls." Since Hardy says that though the doctrine that the sins of the forefathers are visited on the descendants "may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature" (Ibid.), perhaps he scorns the doctrine of retribution. In this Hardy has much in common with Buddha, who taught the way to be freed from the endless transmigration of souls. The following verses uttered by one of his disciples are recorded in the Samyutta-Nikāya:

> Bestir yourselves, rise up, renounce and come, /And yield your hearts unto the Buddha’s rule./.../Whoso within this Norm and Discipline,/Shall ever strenuous and earnest live,/Rebirth’s eternal round put far away,/All pain and suffering he shall end for aye. (Ch. VI, 2, §4 ‘Aruñavati’)

Another disciple’s verses are as follows:

> Now is there no new dwelling-place for me/In realms celestial,...!/The endless line of birth is snapt in twain./Now can I never more become again. (Ch. IX, §6 “Anuruddha”)

Such is the teaching of Buddha, which has been preached, Tess-fashion again, not as saint to sinner, but as from Buddha himself to each of his disciples himself.

Just as if one should raise what is overthrown, or show forth what is hidden, or
point the way to him what wanders astray, or hold up a light in the darkness that they who have eyes may behold objects,—even as in divers ways hath the Norm been set forth by the Exalted One (=Buddha). (Samyutta-Nikāya, XLII, §1 “Wrathful”)

To sum up, Buddha, from his spiritual experience, has become convinced of the Four Noble Truths, which teach us that life is full of suffering and ills, that the cause for the suffering is a craving thirst, that it can be suppressed, and that the way to accomplish this is through the Noble Eightfold Path. In the same way, Hardy, who has sung, “Life offers—to deny!” writes his motto in his diary at the age of 77:

My motto is, first correctly diagnose the complaint—in this case human ills—and ascertain the cause: then set about finding a remedy if one exists.

Arthur Schopenhauer, having conceded to Buddhism “the pre-eminence over the rest” of religions, says in his World as Will and Idea:

In any case it must be a satisfaction to me 'to see my teaching in such close agreement with a religion (i.e. Buddhism) which the majority of men upon the earth hold as their own; for it numbers far more adherents than any other. This agreement, however, must be the more satisfactory to me because in my philosophising I have certainly not been under its influence. (Supplements to the First Book, Ch. XVII)

If Hardy had read the Pali Canon and known the Four Noble Truths, he would have found the same satisfaction as Schopenhauer.

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