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THE CONVERSION OF BERNARD SHAW

By Preston Slosson

THOSE who have read "Man and Superman," "The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet" and the introduction to "Androcles and the Lion" will not be altogether surprized at the apparently sudden plunge of Europe's greatest jester into theology. He has felt religion "coming on" for some time; his plays have been, as it were, haunted by an underlying belief in the supernatural, and long ago his friend and enemy, G. K. Chesterton, pronounced him a Puritan at heart. Shaw did not come back to religion with the easy grace of his two cleverest contemporaries, Chesterton and H. G. Wells, because in early youth he had acquired a sort of Freudian anti-religious complex. Chesterton had, we are told, a sort of intellectual spree in his youth when he shook his fist at the heavens. But he was still a young man when he found that it was more fun to shake hands with the heavens than to shake fists. Since that time he has been aggressively on the side of the angels, altho, like Billy Sunday, he preaches orthodoxy in a shockingly unorthodox manner. Wells began with an ordinary hard materialist creed, but with no special grudge against religion. He easily acquired a mystical pantheistic outlook on the universe, and the emotional crisis of the Great War changed this to a definite belief in a personal and militant God, "the Invisible King."

But Bernard Shaw, as he explains at length in the introduction to his latest play, "Back to Methuselah" (Brentano), reacted with great violence against the Calvinism in which he was brought up. The eternal truths of religion (as he now believes them to be) were mingled with legends; not only the Biblical stories, but more modern legends of atheists struck dead for blasphemy, special providences and vindictive divine interventions. He tells of an incident in 1878 when he held out a watch for five minutes and challenged God to strike him dead:

The effect was electrical. Neither sceptics nor devotees were prepared to abide the result of the experiment. In vain did I urge the pious to trust in the accuracy of their deity's aim with a thunderbolt, and the justice of his discrimination between the innocent and the guilty. In vain did I appeal to the sceptics to accept the logical outcome of their scepticism: it soon appeared that when thunderbolts were in question there were no sceptics.

A petty-minded deity could not satisfy him and he had not yet been introduced to any other kind of God, so he very naturally went into atheism.

The teachings of Charles Darwin were also being popularized about that time, and seemed to destroy the intellectual foundations of religion. Shaw points out, with much emphasis and reiteration, that "evolution" is not the same thing as "natural selection." Evolution was an idea familiar to Goethe, to Erasmus Darwin, to Lamarck and to many other pioneers of biological philosophy. It contains nothing inconsistent with religion, as God is equally a maker whether he makes things all at once or in the course of a thousand ages. But natural selection seemed definitely irreligious because it showed the shaping tool of organic evo-

lution to be a mere struggle for existence. As Shaw put it, the work of Nature "is to modify all things by blindly starving and murdering everything that is not lucky enough to survive in the universal struggle for hogwash." A God who operated in that way and that way only would be a very crude and cruel sort of deity; it was easier to believe that the struggle and the survival were matters of chance.

SHAW first found religion by way of biology. He found in organic nature an upward striving, a will to live, a creative energy which did not appear to be a mere result of elimination and chance survival. Like Bergson, he came to the conclusion that evolution could not be wholly explained on Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection; tho that theory was unquestionably true as far as it went and explained a great deal. Unlike Samuel Butler, who objected on the same ground to the theory of natural selection, Shaw has no quarrel with Darwin personally. As Shaw points out, Darwin "was not a Darwinian, but an honest naturalist working away at his job"; the mischief was done by his disciples who attempted to solve everything by the magic phrases "the struggle for existence" and "the 'survival of the fittest.'" It was not Darwin who banished mind from the universe, or proclaimed it the duty of strong nations to trample the weaker out of existence. But there were plenty of biologists to do the first, and plenty of imperialistic professors and journalists to do the second, and by and by Shaw discovered that he was getting into company that he didn't like.

So he established a religion of the "Life-Force" and wrote "Man and Superman." A few years later he discovered that, but for his old prejudices, he might as well call the Life-Force God, as other people did. (As Chesterton pointed out, no one will worship a hyphen!) Shaw's present creed is still far from orthodoxy, but it is very clear as far as it goes and certainly contains "the root of the matter." The creed consists in a belief that life is divine and purposeful, that there is a moral duty resting on everyone to help human evolution forward to better things, and that God is doing His best at the same task all the time. Shaw still fights shy of personal immortality, but he goes so far as to admit that "men do not live long enough: they are, for all the purposes of high civilization, mere children when they die." He wishes Life, and that more abundantly—a very Christian wish.

This brings us to the play. Its central idea is that will power, as it may be developed in future ages, can prolong human life indefinitely. Apart from this central thread the play has less unity than any other dramatic production in the history of human literature. It begins with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and ends with A. D. 31,920. It contains mysticism more bewildering than Maeterlinck's wildest moods; it contains also straight farce-comedy. Some general idea of the play might be given, if one were to imagine a dramatist producing a play on the following lines:

- Act I—The Book of Job, translated into colloquial English by George M. Cohan.
- Act II—The first act of Gogol's *The Inspector*.
- Act III—The fourth act of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.
- Act IV—Scene 1—A scene from William Archer's *The Green Goddess*. Scene 2—The Witch Scene from *Macbeth*.
- Act V—The scene of the unborn children from Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*.

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What would you say of that dramatist? You could not deny the greatness of the individual scenes, but you well might wonder whether the author was one man or a committee; and if informed that one man alone did the work you might suspect him of a serious case of dissociation of the personality. Now that in no way exaggerates "Back to Methuselah." The first act is a half mystical, half satirical version of the discovery of Death in the Garden of Eden. The second act is a pure satire on modern English politics, in which Asquith and Lloyd George appear under very thin disguises. Take as a sample the scene where Burge (Lloyd George) "defends" his old chief and present enemy:

Nothing will induce me to say one word against the old man. I never have; and I never will. Lubin is old: he has never been a real statesman: he is as lazy as a cat on a hearthrug: you can't get him to attend to anything; he is good for nothing but getting up and making speeches with a peroration that goes down with the back benches. But I say nothing against him.

It is announced to Burge and Lubin that men can live to be three hundred years old; they see in the information only an election cry, "Back to Methuselah!" The third act takes us forward to A. D. 2170. England is ruled by a Chinese bureaucracy. A few individuals have begun to outlive the rest, but they keep it quiet because it would not do to seem "odd." In act four the long-lived folk of 3000 A. D. rule England. The "short-livers" with their youthful passions are scorned as barbarians by the calm "ancients." In the final act the whole human race have become ancients. People are hatched out of eggs, already adult, and they outgrow all human emotions and passions in a few years and then spend centuries in calm philosophic reflection worthy of a race of supermen. They are very much like Bulwer-Lytton's "Coming Race" and (to our way of thinking) equally cold-blooded and inhuman. In spite of Shaw we are not convinced that the superman when he comes will be an aloof and scornful creature without human affections. If people ever do live to be centuries old it seems to us more probable that they will remain young for a long time than that they will soon outgrow their youth.

But that is a side issue. The important fact to note is that Bernard Shaw has found his pulpit and his creed. He still has a few old feuds with the parsons, but they are as nothing to his quarrels with the professors!