Shelley's theory and practice of religion

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
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Thesis
SHELLEY'S THEORY AND PRACTICE OF RELIGION
Submitted by
Rowland Merlin Hill
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SHELLEY'S THEORY AND PRACTICE OF RELIGION

Percy Bysshe Shelley has received just though perhaps insufficient praise for his poetic power; but his work as a teacher and as a thinker and philosopher has never met with the consideration due to it. We are often told that Shelley was an ethereal idealist, a dreamer of dreams, a revolutionary reformer --- and it is always intimated that his thoughts were not very deep, very practical, very coherent or, indeed, very important. He has not yet recovered from the stigma cast upon him by the Victorians; he was misunderstood and depreciated in his own time for the very reason that he was far ahead of that time in his thought and in his view of the universe; he continued to be depreciated and stigmatized because he presented a highly idealistic constructive system of philosophy that conflicted in every way with the narrow moral standards of the Victorians; today he has not come into his just heritage because we have been all too willing to accept the judgment of the past, instead of conducting an investigation in the light of the present. To be sure, Shelley never dealt in the obviously concrete; he did not attempt to do so for he believed that spiritual values and a spiritual message must be clothed in a form as nearly spiritual as the limitations of mortality will allow; he himself said "As to real flesh and blood you know I do not deal in those articles; you might as well go to a gin shop for a leg of mutton as expect anything human or earthly from me. But he had a message for the world; he delivered it powerfully

1. Letter to John Gisborne, Oct. 22, 1821
and idealistically; with keen intellect, a fine sense of nice discrimination, and a poetical intuition, he formulated a definitely constructive philosophy of life, questioning and rejecting all those principles of his day which could not measure up to his high standard. It is my pleasure to present one phase of this philosophy; this paper is devoted to a consideration of his religious theories and of the unswerving courage which he displayed in carrying out these convictions through the practical application of them in his every day life. I shall demonstrate that, though his attitude toward established Christianity was unrelentingly hostile, yet, basing his philosophy on the pure teachings of Jesus Christ, he evolved a system of thought that is eminently Christian in its larger significance. Furthermore, I shall show that he steered a straight course through the tumultuous and chaotic sea of practical existence by utter reliance on these same pure, highly idealistic beliefs.¹

Living in an age before the science of the historical

¹ Kineton Parke's statement on this subject is extremely interesting: "A most striking peculiarity in Shelley's history is the association of his religious and moral ideas with the most ordinary occurrences of his life. Whatever he did was connected in one way or another with his faith. This faith caused its author to apply it to everyday action,—which made those around him feel that here was a man who had strength enough to bring his religion to bear on the most ordinary things of life." These are very sensible remarks and deserve due consideration—especially in reference to the common charge that Shelley was impractical, and that his idealistic theories, though inspiring, had very little bearing on the practical problems of human conduct.
criticism of the Bible removed many of the seeming inconsistencies of the Christian religion as represented by the writers of the Biblical accounts, Shelley can hardly be blamed if, after an examination of all available evidence, he drew the conclusion that the established religion was a hindrance to mankind - an enemy to truth, liberty and progress, and the great curse of civilization. He saw the society of his time as a mixture of feudal savageness and imperfect civilization based upon the unenlightened morality of the Christian religion which was in itself an aggravation of all social evils. He looked upon religion as a prolific fiend, tainting all it gazed upon, peopling the earth with demons, hell with men, and heaven with slaves. It seemed to rest on utterly false foundations, miracles, concerning which it seemed more likely that man should lie than that the harmonious laws of nature should undergo violation, prophecies, in the consideration of which it seemed more likely that the prophet had forecast from the signs of the times or had fabricated a prophecy after the occurrence of the event than that he knew events by direct intercourse with God, and martyrdoms, which appeared to be merely demonstrations of enthusiasm and madness that had usurped the place of truth and reason.

The God of established Christianity seemed weak and absurd, the prototype of human misrule, a tool invented by

1. The science of historical-biblical criticism can hardly be said to have been begun before the publication of David Strauss' "Life of Jesus", Baur's "Pastoral Epistles", and Wilhelm Vatke's "History of the Religion of the Old Testament" in 1835.
2. Notes to "Queen Mab" - Poetical Works, Cambridge Edition, Pg.598
3. "Queen Mab" VI 58-72
4. Notes to "Queen Mab" Pg. 606-607
5. "Queen Mab" VI 88-110
hypocrites and thieves to fence about all crimes with holiness.\(^1\)

It was impossible for him to believe in God as a "venerable old man, seated on a throne of clouds, his heart the theatre of various passions, analagous to those of humanity, his will changeable and uncertain as that of an earthly king";\(^2\) it was absurd to believe that a Great Pervading Spirit could "beget a son upon the body of a Jewish woman",\(^3\) and to place one's faith in the tale of Adam and Eve which symbolized to Shelley nothing more than "the disease and crime that have flowed from unnatural diet".\(^4\) Furthermore, it was directly contrary to the sentiments of a freeman to believe in a God who will damn forever all those who dare to doubt the precepts of conventional orthodoxy.\(^5\) The idea of a devil and a hell seemed to him the weakest points of the Christian religion; he laughs them to scorn in his essay "On the Devil and Devils" which bubbles over with irrepressible humor, showing us that this was a subject that Shelley, as a poet and an idealist, could not but treat as a matter for witticism.

He perceived prayer from two standpoints,—both derogatory,—first, as an endeavor to change the intention of God, and, secondly, as a formal testimony of our obedience; the former seemed childish in that it supposed that man could instruct his creator in the proper way of regulating the universe, the latter in that it was analagous to the loyalty demanded by earthly monarchs.\(^6\)

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1. "Queen Mab" VII 26-31
2. "A Letter to Lord Ellenborough "Prose Works, Pg. 416, Volume 1
3. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical works, Pg. 594
4. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical works, Pg. 608
5. "Mask of Anarchy" LIX
6. Notes to "Queen Mab" Pg. 606
He looked upon the Bible as a book of false and degrading pseudo-history. It told that "God made earth in six days, and there planted a delightful garden in which he placed the first pair of human beings," that he planted therein a forbidden fruit; that the devil persuaded them to eat "in consequence of which God condemned both them and their posterity yet unborn to satisfy his justice by their eternal misery"; that after 4000 years passed (the human race meanwhile having gone to perdition) "God engendered the betrothed wife of a carpenter (whose virginity was nevertheless uninjured)"; that this virgin gave birth to Christ; that this Christ was crucified, bearing "by proxy", for the human race, his father's displeasure; finally, "that the soul of whosoever disbelieved this sacrifice will be burned with everlasting fire".

When we consider that Shelley was discussing Christianity in the light of his own age - as the belief in all the Bible contains interpreted in a strictly literal sense - it will not appear strange that a humane disciple of peace, liberty, truth and love should have been repelled and nauseated with what were to him the uncouth and preposterous ideas of the orthodox.

The final proof for him of the utter ridiculousness of organized Christianity lay in the evident conflict between the doctrines of Christ and the True God and the dogmas of the church. Shelley thought of Christ as a man of extraordinary genius, of

1. Notes to "Queen Mab" Pg. 604
2. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 604
3. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 605
unexampled doctrines, of invincible gentleness and benignity, - as a hero in the cause of tolerance "who opposed with earnest eloquence the panic, fears and hateful superstitions which have enslaved mankind for ages",\(^1\) the enemy of falsehood and oppression and the advocate of equal justice;\(^2\) he claims him as the "Being who has influenced in the most memorable manner the opinions and the fortunes of the human species".\(^3\) On the other hand, he did not consider Christ divine; he saw in him merely a man of pure life fighting to rescue his countrymen from barbarous superstition and meeting the common fate of all who desire to benefit mankind. The people sacrificed Jesus to the honor of a God with whom he was afterwards fallaciously confounded. But the real Christ was one who stood "in the foremost list of those true heroes who have died in the glorious martyrdom of liberty and have braved torture, contempt and poverty in the cause of suffering humanity".\(^4\) Had the dogmas of the Established Church been the same as the opinions of this man I believe Shelley would have been willing to bear the name of Christian -- but upon investigation he found they were not. What did he find? - That the God of the established church was not the God of Christ; the first was a petty anthropomorphic deity having all the faults of man and who, being all powerful, was the tyrant - ruthless, fiendish - a creature of everchanging whim - another Nero who joyed in the sufferings of his people. On

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1. *Essay on Christianity* Pg. 339 Vol. 2 Prose works  
2. *Essay on Christianity* Pg. 339 Vol. 2 Prose works  
3. Notes to *Queen Mab* Pg. 604  
4. Notes to *Queen Mab* Pg. 604
the other hand, "according to the acceptance of Jesus Christ, the word God is the interpoint and over ruling spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things; .... he everywhere represents that power as something mysteriously and illimitably pervading the frame of all things!" - Shelley saw the God of Christ as the fountain of all goodness, the eternal enemy of human misery in any form, the uniform immutable cause of the salutary operations of the material world, the Power from which and through which all that is excellent and delightful flows, which molds all the elements of the complex universe to the most perfect state their nature will allow, "the source of all happiness, the wise and benevolent Creator and Preserver of all living things". Jesus Christ would not have cited as a gentle, benevolent and compassionate God, a Being who deliberately schemed to torture most of mankind with protracted and indescribable punishment - without any mistake as to the true effect of pain or any view to future good - but merely because it was just. But "the interpreters of his doctrines have confounded the good and evil principle." The sublime character of Christ has been deformed by imputed identification with a Power who tempted, betrayed and punished all those innocent beings that he had called into existence by his sole will. Seeing the ironic side of this, Shelley exclaimed, "For the period of one thousand years the spirit of the most just, wise and benevolent of men has been propit-

1. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 341-342
2. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 355 Prose Works
3. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 346 Prose Works
iated with myriads of hecatombs of those who approached the nearest to his innocence and wisdom,—sacrificed under every aggravation of atrocity and variety of torture".\(^1\) Furthermore, as regards the hereafter, Christ held an entirely different view from that of the Established Church; the heaven of Christ was a paradise where the Benignant Principle visited, in his power, "the universal frame of things!", where all that human life contained of the pure and divine dwelt in the minds of the immortals in its serenest mood. This view so appealed to Shelley that he was forced to exclaim, "How delightful a picture, even if it be not true!"\(^2\) He then adds, in condemnation of Established Christianity, "It is not to be believed that the most prominent group of this picture would consist of millions of sensitive beings enduring immortal agony."\(^2\)

The doctrines of Christ, as Shelley saw them, were utter revolt against the forces of habit and superstition,—the stripping of sensuality of its power and selfishness, sacrifice of personal desires and appetites in favor of reason and the liberty and welfare of all humanity, and the embracing of the doctrines of universal love as the sole means of purifying the social system.\(^3\) He saw Jesus acting the part of Imitator and Minister of the Eternal God, trampling on all received opinions, cherished luxuries, and the superstitions of mankind,—thus breaking the chains of

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1. Notes on "Hellas" Pg. 638 Poetical Works
2. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 350 Prose Works
3. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 364 and 369 Prose works
custom and blind faith. He looked upon Him as the messenger of the Divine God sent to fight with the forces of evil and bigotry:

"A Power from the unknown God
A Promethean conqueror, came;
Like a triumphal path he trod
The thorns of death and shame.
A mortal shape to him
Was like the vapor dim
Which the orient planet animates with light.
Hell, Sin and Slavery came
Like blood hounds mild and tame,
Nor preyed until their Lord had taken flight".

He saw this great hero die - because he attempted to supersede the law of Moses by more moral and humane regulations -- at the hands of a faltering judge and a bigoted and ignorant mob.

"But, Alas!", cries Shelley, "Christ became a tool in the hands of oppression through organized Christianity". The established church has mocked him by its horrible deeds against the wise, mild and lofty - merely because they refused to be orthodox; so feeling the ignominy of this paradox, Shelley makes Prometheus scream out in anguish as he gazes on the vision of the crucifixion:

"Remit the anguish of that lighted stare,
Close those wan lips; let that thorn wounded brow

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1. "Essay on Christianity" Prose works Pg. 360
2. "Hellas", lines 211-220
3. "Ode to Liberty" XVII
Stream not with blood; it mingles with my tears!

Oh, Horrible! Thy name I will not speak -
It has become a curse. I see, I see

The wise, the mild, the lofty and the just
Whom thy slaves hate for being like to thee

Some hunted by foul lies from their heart's home,
As hooded ounces cling to the driving hind;
Some linked to corpses in unwholesome cells;
Some - hear I not the multitude laugh loud? -
Impaled in lingering fire."¹

Furthermore, Christ, says Shelley, has been grossly misinterpreted by the theologians. "It cannot be believed that Christ endeavored to prevail on the inhabitants of Jerusalem neither to till their fields, nor to frame a shelter against the sky nor to provide food for tomorrow. He simply exposes the miseries and mischiefs of that system which makes all things subservient to the subsistence of the material frame of man."² Christ was really attempting to teach the way of spiritual approach to Divine Nature, and that virtue and knowledge were the one means of alleviating the present oppressive social system. Christ did not suggest that man should torture himself in this life as a means of seeing the glory of God in the next, but rather that, by communion with the beautiful in nature, he should obtain close intercourse with the universal God; he merely pointed out that virtue is its own reward and that purity of

1. "Prometheus Unbound" I 597-612
2. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 366 Prose Works
mind is essential to spiritual vision. Thus the pure in heart will see God continually in the spotless purity of their own souls which will mirror the inexpressible majesty and virtue of God. Shelley saw these doctrines perverted and degraded by the established church; contemplating this defeat of the spiritual by ignorant and hypocritical churchmen, he exclaims:

"Mark that outcry of despair!
Tis his mild and gentle ghost
Wailing for the faith he kindled".

Thus the spirit of Christ lamented the perversion of his doctrines which, if stripped of the veil of familiarity thrown about them by a superstitious church, flash like the lightning of truth on the fog-ridden horizon of incomplete and limited mortality, revealing the dogmas of the theologians as fallacious, slanderous and impious.

This system was, to Shelley, the result of the historical development of organized religion; at its basis were falsehood and hypocrisy; in its wake followed war, imprisonment and murder, - "deeds of unexampled and incomparable atrocity made it what it is." If, he tells us, the Christian religion had commenced and continued by the mere force of reasoning and persuasion and by its self-evident fitness, it would endure as long as nature endured; it would be as indisputable as the light of the sun, the criminality of murder, and those other physical and moral

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1. Essay on Christianity Prose Works Pg. 342-343
2. "Prometheus Unbound" lines 546-556
3. "Letter to Lord Ellenborough" Prose Works Pg. 418-419
facts which must remain acknowledged as long as man is man. However, it employed the opposite means and so condemned itself. Shelley describes the beginnings of established religion in the following terms: "No one knows much about the early times of the Christian religion, until about three hundred years after its beginning, two great churches called the Roman and the Greek churches divided the opinion of men. They fought for a very long time. If they had looked an inch before their noses they might have found that fighting and killing men, and cursing them and hating them, was the very worst way for getting into favor with a Being who is allowed by all to be best pleased with deeds of love and charity." Furthermore, had the Jews not been a barbarous and fanatical race of men, or had the resolution of Pontius Pilate been equal to his candor, the Christian religion could never have come into existence. So much for the beginnings; later the Protestant Religion found its origin in the Reformation under the leadership of men who showed how little they understood the spirit of reform, by burning each other. Shelley saw the deity of Christ as the fond invention of conventional religionists to give their mad fiend of a God a plea for sating his unnatural thirst for murder, rapine, violence and crime; the ignorant were convinced of his divinity by the testimony of miracles and supposed supernatural forces; this belief roll-
ing through the ages became a dogma that it was infamy to doubt. After thus summing up the historical development of Christianity, he drew this conclusion: "Analogy seems to favor the opinion that, as like other systems, Christianity has risen and augmented, so like them it will decay and perish; so when enthusiasm has subsided, and time, that infallible controverter of false opinions, has involved its pretended evidences in the darkness of antiquity, it will become obsolete. Then Milton's poem alone will give permanency to the remembrance of its absurdities, and men will laugh as heartily at grace, faith, redemption and original sin, as they do now at the metamorphoses of Jupiter, the miracles of Romanish saints, the efficacy of witchcraft, and the appearance of departed spirits."

Nor was this merely the opinion of his immaturity. In "Queen Mab" and in a letter on Southey in 1811 he denounced Christianity as the representative of bigotry and tyranny, and, in a letter to Hogg, as the tool of intolerance. In 1812, in his Letter to Lord Ellenborough, he attacks the reasoning of its defenders; and in a letter to Miss Hitchner, he exclaims: "Every day adds to the perfect and full conviction I feel of its falsehood and mischief". At the age of twenty-four, he cautions Peacock to "leave Mammon and Jehovah to those who delight in wickedness and slavery - their altars are stained with blood and

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1. "Letter to Lord Ellenborough" Prose Works Pg. 417-418
2. "Letter to Lord Ellenborough" Prose Works Pg. 418-419 and Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 605
3. Letter to Eliz. Hitchener Dec. 15, 1811 P.B.S.Letters Pg. 197
4. Letter to T.J.Hogg Jan.3,1811 Hogg's "Life of Shelley" " 100
5. Letter to Lord Ellenborough Prose Works Pg. 422
6. Letter to Eliz. Hitchener June 6, 1812 EB.S.Letters Pg. 312
polluted with gore."¹ Two years later, in his preface to "Julian and Maddalo", he catalogues himself as a "complete infidel and a scoffer at all things reputed holy".² In 1819 he condemns Christianity as a cloak for fraud,³ and calls it "Christless, Godless,—a book sealed";⁴ in the same year in a letter to Leigh Hunt on the defense of Mr. Carlile, he remarks: "For what was Mr. Carlile persecuted? For impugning the deity of Jesus Christ? I impugn it. For denying the whole mass of ancient Hebrew literature is of divine authority? I deny it..... I hope by the enmity of our political enemies, I am not to be made a sacrifice to the superstitious fury of the ruling sect." In the same letter he charges that this religion is based on the impossible supernatural, is an enemy to progress and a political tool to hinder reform.⁵ In 1820, in a letter to Robert Southey, he declares: "I confess your recommendation to adopt the system of ideas you call Christianity has little weight with me, whether you mean the popular superstition in all its articles or some more refined theory."⁶ Still later, in 1821, in his notes to "Hellas", he suggests that the Character of Jesus Christ had been greatly deformed by its association with the God of the established theology.⁷ On April 11, 1822 he reiterates that Christianity is not useful to the world and that no man of sense can think it true.⁸

¹ Letter to Peacock July 17, 1816 P.B.S. Letters Pg. 504
² Preface to "Julian and Maddalo" Poetical Works Pg. 152
³ "Mask of Anarchy" IV, VI
⁴ "England in 1819"
⁵ Letter to Leigh Hunt Nov. 3, 1819 P.B.S. Letters Pg. 737
⁶ Letter to Southey Aug. 17, 1820 P.B.S. Letters Pg. 816
⁷ Notes to "Hellas" Poetical Works Pg. 638
⁸ Letter to Horace Smith April 11, 1822 P.B.S. Letters Pg. 959-960
Finally, nine days before his death, he exclaims: "If every-
man said what he thought, it could not subsist one day."¹

Thus Shelley was forever at war with organized Christ-
ianity. Having rejected it as a system of philosophy, he
set out to build an idealistic conception of life and the
universe which would suit his own intellectual and emotional
demands. In his early days, as a Godwinite, led astray by
too great a reliance on reason, he naturally tended toward
a purely materialistic philosophy; but this stage was merely
an indication of the intellectual foam of his mind and
found no firm foundation in his poetic nature;— "his real
philosophy lay deep down in his imagination and though it
developed as he learnt wisdom, its main tendencies never
changed."² In 1815 he denounced materialism as not only
absurd but also fatal to morals and thought,— adding that
it was merely a seducing system to young and superficial
minds, allowing its disciples to talk and excusing them
from thinking.³ As late as 1822 he assures us that "the
doctrines of the French and material philosophy are as
false as they are pernicious."⁴

Continually disappointed in searching for the ideal
in material form and entirely disillusioned as to the like-
lihood of reforming the world by revolutionary tactics, he
struck his intellectual and imaginative bottom and built
thereon a system of high idealism,— of rational and

¹. Letter to Horace Smith June 29, 1822 P.B.S.Letters Pg.983
². "Shelley and the Unromantics" Pg. 279
³. "on Life" Prose Works Vol 2 Pg. 260
⁴. Letter to Horace Smith April 11, 1822 P.B.S.Letters Pg. 959-960
spiritual splendor. Some critics trace his philosophy to the influence of the Greeks - especially Plato - and of Berkeley; it is not to be doubted that he found something kindred to his spirit in their philosophies. Like Plato, Shelley was intensively conscious of the unity of the universe and of all life; they both maintained that the Underlying Spirit of Life, though it reveals itself in many forms, is always essentially the same. Furthermore, Shelley may have been following the Greek philosopher in being forever intensively conscious that the life of the body, in comparison with the dazzling light of the soul, is but a mere darkness. Both men, it may be added, were never able to solve to their own satisfaction the problem of evil.\(^1\) Shelley's conceptions, like Plato's, are often overwhelmingly baffling in their impersonality. For instance, it is undeniably true that he followed Plato in regarding all earthly substance as reflection only; even the Ideal Itself, as apprehended by the human mind, appeared to both as a mere shadow of an infinite beauty which is imperceivable to man. Finally, with Plato, Shelley took a spiritual view of the heavenly world, representing heaven as a temper of the mind and a condition of the soul, to which only the pure can attain because they only have sufficient affinity with it; it is also true, to a certain extent, that he agreed with Plato in viewing the idea of deity largely from the aesthetic side. Certain factors from the

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1. The "Revolt of Islam" shows Shelley's perplexity in regard to this subject.
pure idealism of Berkeley may also have been a formative influence in his philosophy. I feel, however, that I must part company with Mr. Winstanley and a great host of Shelley critics when they state that his religious system was Greek and Platonic rather than Christian. This argument rests on far too unstable foundations, for they contend that, since he agreed with Plato in the minor details to which I have just drawn attention and constantly opposed some of the extremely fabulous doctrines of the established church, he was therefore Platonic rather than Christian. Such a statement is as presumptuously foolish as it would be to maintain that because a man unhesitatingly removes the tarnish from silver, he values un tarnishable copper more than the more precious metal. Quite the contrary is true; it may be that Platonism and Berkeleianism helped him to see the fallacy of agnosticism and scientific materialism, --- but they certainly were no more than minor factors. Kineton Parkes states the essential truth of the matter; he reminds us that Shelley had a profound admiration for the character of Jesus and regarded His teachings as the highest possible, and that what he had for his aim was a system of philosophy which should cooperate and harmonize with Christ's teachings.  

It is a strange paradox, but it is often true, that through investigation and condemnation of a system which

1. "Platonism in Shelley"
2. "Shelley's Faith" Pg. 213 Shelley Society Papers Vol. 2
seems absurd, men may find in the pure foundations of that very system the basis and ruling principle of their highest philosophy. Thus it happened to Shelley that in making a critical study of the Bible, he found not only matter for derision but also a basis for his philosophy in true Christianity, - which I take to be the teachings of Christ as found in his works and actions, unencumbered by the additions of the commentators of his time or the misrepresentations, throughout the centuries, of overzealous churchmen and theologians. It appears that Shelley was very far in advance of his time in his appreciation and understanding of the principles and ideas advanced by Jesus Christ for the rejuvenation of mankind. Certainly Shelley forecast and foreshadowed that high critical understanding of the doctrines of Christ which has but recently dawned on our clouded horizon and which those who prefer darkness and superstition to light and knowledge are still dogmatically opposing. Let us see in what religious ideas Shelley is in accord with the philosophy of Christ and the best modern critical understanding of his teachings.

The question of the purpose and end of religion has been a vital one ever since Christianity was in its infancy. Throughout the Middle Ages and, indeed, almost to our own time, the view taken by the majority was that religion existed to point out the supremacy of the spiritual or good over the physical or evil side of man; that by suffering
and degrading ourselves in this life, we might gain a crown in the world to come. The theologians of the present day, enlightened by research and scientific knowledge, realize that the purpose of any true religion is to elevate the nature of man in this life, to instill in him those principles which will work toward the highest and purest happiness he is capable of entertaining -- not by degrading the body to save the soul, but rather by making the physical the agent and aid of the spiritual through perfect coordination of the integral parts of every man's being. In short, religion must point the way to that great spiritual happiness which can only be obtained through virtuous and noble conduct. Shelley is in absolute accord with this view; he tells us that the purpose of religion is to make man wiser and better, and admonishes us to "learn to make others happy." This is truly in agreement with our modern standpoint, for we hear ministers of Christianity forever pointing out that the true road to spiritual happiness lies in service to mankind. This was also Christ's view of his mission in the world, for his whole life was actuated by principles of the most unselfish and unparalleled sacrifice in the interest of his fellow men; he pointed out that the way to happiness of the highest spiritual value lay in strict adherence to the precepts of virtue. Just as Christ had condemned the Jews for exalting ceremony and dogma, thereby obscuring

1. "An Address to the Irish People" Prose Works Pg. 324  
2. "Queen Mab" II 64
the true religion of righteous acts, so Shelley reminds us that "goodness of heart and purity of life are of more value in the eye of the spirit of Goodness than idle earthly ceremonies and things which have anything but charity for their object". Therefore he admonished the Irish people that their salvation lay not in attending chapel, in crossing themselves, in confessions or in paying and believing priests, for "many a rascal has attended regularly at mass and many a good man has never gone at all" but in devoting their lives to the good of mankind, for "this is the true way to be good".

Shelley, as an idealist of the first order, was extremely cautious not to label the Great Spiritual Power whose presence he saw in all things, for he felt that where definiteness begins idolatry and anthropomorphism flourish. He says that the word God is the source of numberless errors, but that it really implies "the soul of the Universe, the intelligent and necessarily beneficent actuating principle" which it is impossible not to believe in, for the leaf of a tree or the meanest insect we trample under foot are "arguments more conclusive than any which can be advanced that some vast intellect animates infinity". Thus, having recognized a God, he tells us that He is invisible but gives evidence of his presence in all things, for the emotional

1. "An address to the Irish People" Prose Works Pg. 326
2. "An address to the Irish People" Prose Works Pg. 335
3. Letter to T. J. Hogg Jan. 3, 1811 (Hogg's "Life of Shelley" Pg. 100)
nature of man at its best is in tune with the spiritual element in the natural world:

but this low sphere,
And all that it contains, contains not thee,
Thou whom, seen nowhere, I feel everywhere.
From heaven and earth and all that in them are,
Veiled art thou like a star.

By heaven and earth, from all whose shapes thou
Neither to be restrained, delayed or hidden;
Making divine the loftiest and the lowest
When for a moment thou art not forbidden
To live within the life which thou bestowest.¹

This animating, immanent, all-encompassing Power has quickened the pulse of His creation "from the great morning of the world when first God dawned on chaos."²

Though Shelley at times, especially in his early work, denied the existence of a God, he was always careful to explain that this negation must be understood solely to affect a creative deity, and that the hypothesis of a Pervading Spirit coeternal with the universe remains unshaken.³ This point of his early philosophy may seem strange and unnatural to us; but it immediately becomes clarified when we remember that, in the early period of his life, he tested everything at the bar of reason,—it was, of course, more difficult to explain the existence of a creative spiritual power than to affirm

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1. "The Zucca" III - IV
2. "Adonais" XIX
3. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 601
that a Pervading Power and the World itself had always existed as coeternal elements. It is also well for us to remember that seemingly inconsistent statements on spiritual matters throughout his life were probably due to the fact that though he found more and more comfort in imaginative and emotional thought, the logical element in his mental constitution was sometimes too strong and he used it too often not as a restraining and limiting power but as a touch-stone for truth. When this happened his philosophy was weakened, for, as he himself exclaims, "deep truths are imageless".1

"But Shelley", as one of his critics has justly remarked, "conceived a century ago a God who is both universal and intimate, impersonal and lovable, serene and yet consoling; who encompasses all living things and is reflected in every form of life; who is manifested in nature as the indestructable soul of beauty and in man as the unconquerable spirit of love. It is the most original of his achievements, and to future generations this Benignant Spirit may be as vivid and sustaining as it undoubtedly was to Shelley".2 Since Oliver Ward Campbell thinks that Shelley has made such a profound contribution to religious thought, it may be profitable for us to enquire into those specific attributes which he assigns to the Divine Being. In the first place, He is just - but not in the Old Testament sense. The justice of this Benignant Principle consists

1. "Prometheus Unbound" II 4 112-116
2. "Shelley and the Unromantics" Pg. 299
in considering under all the circumstances and consequences of a particular case how the purest and largest amount of happiness will ensue from any action that he contemplates.\textsuperscript{1} The spirit of Shelley's God is the loving, constructive spirit expressed by Christ and not that of the destructive and pitiless tyrant of ancient Hebrew conception; he is the Spirit of Nature,\textsuperscript{2} the Soul of the Universe, the eternal spring of life and light that penetrates the prison house of mortality\textsuperscript{3} and reveals to mankind through some interpenetration of man's intuitive sense the beauties of those spiritual values that exist only to him who seeks for himself that dazzling purity of soul which alone can mirror the deep truths of spiritual life.

This God then is an unapproachable ideal of perfection; those great spiritual abstractions of beauty, love and peace -- the eternal guiding elements of the spiritual world -- are merely reflected rays of the great Eternality; man can realize their spiritual value as reflections of a Power whose full light would but blind him --- but whose rays are sufficient to consume the last clouds of cold mortality.\textsuperscript{4} Indeed, we find that Shelley considered his art as a means of preserving these ethereal visitations of a Divine Power; he tells us in his "Defense of Poetry" that "poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and
best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling, sometimes regarding our mind alone, sometimes associated with place or person,—but elevating and delightful beyond expression. It is, as it were, the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of the wind over the sea, which the morning calm erases and whose traces remain only; the enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism and friendship is essentially linked with such emotions. Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of divinity in man".¹ Thus we find that the poet's office is to transform these ethereal impressions of the divine into figures understandable to humanity; he interprets for us, in so far as he is able to express his thoughts and in so far as we are able to understand his mode of expression, the visitations of our Spiritual Father.

Furthermore, this Benignant Principle is a mass of infinite intelligence,² the Power of Intellectual Beauty, An Awful Loveliness, that supplies life with its deepest values and calls men to love all humankind. Shelley, realizing his debt to this Great Spirit, exclaims:

"Thus let thy power, which like the truth
Of nature on my passive youth
Descended, to my onward life supply
Its calm,—to one who worships thee,

¹. "A Defense of Poetry" Prose Works Pg. 138-39
². Letter to Eliz. Hitchener Jan. 2, 1812
P.B.S. Letters Pg. 205
And every form containing thee,-
Whom, Spirit Fair, thy spells did bind
To fear himself, and love all humankind."¹

This Great Power is active within the world; it is the secret strength of all things, governs thought and is as a law to the universe;² it makes in mortal hearts its brief abode and there inspires "love, only love".³

"Throughout these infinite orbs of mingling light is wide diffused a spirit of activity and life, that knows no term, cessation or decay; that fades not when the lamp of earthly life, extinguished in the dampness of the grave, a while there slumbers. But active, steadfast and eternal, still guards the fierce whirlwind,- and presides, apportioning with irresistible law, the place each spring of the machine shall fill; no atom of the storm's turbulence fulfills a vague or unnecessitated task or acts but as it must and ought to act."⁴ It is no wonder that Shelley was branded an atheist in the day of a petty anthropomorphomorphic God who was but the prototype of earthly power. Surely he has shown us a vision, dazzling because of its purity and immensity, of the True God, -- "the light that never was on sea or land, the consecration and the poet's dream".⁵

It is a pathetic fact, but one none the less true,

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1. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" VII 6-12
2. "Mount Blanc" 139-41
3. "Lines Connected with Epipsychidion" 124-137
4. "Queen Mab" 146-173 (with some omissions)
5. "Elegaic Stanzas Suggested by a picture of Peel Castle" - Wordsworth
that as the people of Christ's day failed to understand him, so Shelley, bearing the same message, met the same fate. The majority of Shelley's readers and critics have wrangled so much over the superficial that they have lost the spirit of his work.\textsuperscript{1} It is still evident that the majority have ears to hear but will not hear; they have eyes to see but will not catch the vision.

Shelley's philosophy was largely an interpretation of the teachings of Christ; when a great poet interprets a greater one it is our duty to be reverently attentive. Shelley calls to our attention the fact that "the word God, according to the acceptance of Jesus Christ, is the interpoint and over ruling spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things. It is important to observe that the author of the Christian system had a conception widely differing from the gross imagination of the vulgar relative to the ruling power of the universe. He everywhere represents this Power as something mysteriously and illimitably pervading the frame of things. His doctrines do not represent God

\textsuperscript{1} Practically all Shelley's biographers and critics have catalogued him as anti-Christian and agnostic. A few take the initiative in challenging this superficial judgment. Professor Peck says "I think it seasonable to show a misjudging world how much of the heart of Christianity Shelley accepted before he died; and how beautifully he has set forth his creed in mid career in the "Essay on Christianity" and near the end in "Hellas". Stopford A. Brooke does justice to Shelley in "Naturalism in English Poetry" in a chapter on Shelley's interpretation of Christianity, in so far as his work goes --- but he deals only with the "Essay on Christianity" and not with his work as a whole; it proves however that some are not blinded by scholasticism.
as a limitless and inconceivable mystery, affirming at the same time his existence as a Being subject to passion."¹

He points out that Christ could not have cited as an Ideal of Perfect Love a Being who was eternally scheming to inflict man with pain, without any view to future good and merely because it was just.² Shelley was far too advanced in thought to accept such an immoral deity. His God is not an earthly tyrant in divine station, partaking of all the faults and whims of frail humanity — but is a Strong Illimitable Majestic Deity from whom and through whom all that is good and delightful flow - A Power who shapes all the elements of the universe to the most perfect and ideal shape that it is within their nature to assume, who is the fountain of all goodness, an eternal foe of all evil and the "uniform and unchanging motive of the salutary operations of the material world".³

Shelley was apparently far in advance of his time in his conception of God; the modern theologians are coming more and more to interpret the principles of Christ in the same light in which this disciple of truth, love and universal beauty perceived them. He tied up the purity of man's conception with his moral development reminding us that that nation which has arrived at the highest peak of moral progression will believe most purely in that God whose attributes must be considered the firmest foundation of true religion.⁴ This conception of the

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1. "Essay on Christianity" Prose Works Pg. 341-342
2. "Essay on Christianity" Prose Works Pg. 346
3. "Essay on Christianity" Prose Works Pg. 348-349
4. "Essay on Christianity" Prose Works Pg. 354
development of man's idea of God was practically unheard of before the science of historical criticism had been well developed -- some fifty or sixty years ago.

He thought of God as an all-sufficing power whose attributes are in no way mortal, who "requirest no prayers or praises". "The caprice of man's weak will belongs no more to Thee than do the changeful passions of his heart to thine unvarying harmony; all that the wide world contains are but thy passive instruments and Thou regardest them all with an impartial eye,— whose joy or pain thy nature cannot feel because thou hast not human sense, because Thou art not human mind."¹ Though this Great Spirit is impartial, he nevertheless is forever seeking the happiness of all his creatures, and his

"Light alone like mist o'er mountains driven,
Or music of the night wind sent
Through strings of some still instrument,
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream."²

God, because of his principle of the greatest possible harmony, gives to every one of his creatures every possible happiness he can enjoy. He discriminates against none; the poor and the rich, the good and the bad are all included in his divine plan and partake of as much joy as their natures will allow. Thus Shelley holds with Tennyson "that somehow good will be the final goal of ill"³

1. "Queen Mab" VI 197-203; 212-219
2. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" III
3. "In Memoriam" LIV 1
and believes in a great harmony which, in its immensity, creates good from evil and reconciles all seeming inconsistencies. Alfred Noyes expressed this idea of Shelley's perhaps better than any one else when he wrote "The Paradox" in which he makes God remind us that:

"The sins and the creeds and the sorrows that trouble the sea
Relapse and subside
Chiming like chords in a world wide symphony
As they cease to chide;
For they break and are broken of sound and hue,
And they meet and they murmur and they mingle anew,
Interweaving, intervolving, like waves:
they have no stay:
They are made as one with the deep, when they sink and are vanished away;
Yea, all is toned at a turn of the tide
To a calm and golden harmony."

Those who are nearest to purity and perfection receive, because of this very fact, the greatest reward, but "if there is the slightest overbalance of happiness which can be allotted to the most atrocious offender consistently with the nature of things, that is rigidly made his portion by the ever watchful power of God".\(^1\) So, in every case, the human mind enjoys the utmost pleasure which it is capable of enjoying. Thus the absurd doctrine of a

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\(^1\) "Essay on Christianity" Prose Works Pg. 348
peculiar providence in which some power beyond that which ordinarily guides the operations of the universe interferes to punish the vicious and reward the virtuous is exploded.¹ Jesus Christ himself, as Shelley pointed out, set himself very definitely in opposition to this doctrine, for he tells us that God "maketh His rain to fall upon the just and the unjust alike";² in reference to the lower orders of nature, He assures us that "if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall He not so much more clothe you, oh ye of little faith?"³ Thus we see that God deals equally with all his creatures, from the least unto the greatest, from the most degraded to the most virtuous. This doctrine as expressed by Shelley, was far in advance of his time and those capable of realizing its full significance even today are too few and far between. So "Shelley believes in a Supreme Power; it is beyond and above the world but also within, at once immanent and transcendent. It works from within the world, struggling with the obstructions of matter, transforming matter and molding it to its will".⁴

A belief in immortality is perhaps one of the strongest tenets of the Christian religion. In seeking the truth of Shelley's view on this matter, we find that, at first sight, we are involved in an intricate maze of conflicting opinions. He sometimes expresses a disbelief

1. "Essay on Christianity Prose Works Pg. 345
2. Matthew 5 45
3. Matthew 6 30
4. "Platonism in Shelley" Pg. 76
in any future state, but his affirmations of the existence of that state far outweigh, in number and intrinsic strength, his denials. I am of the opinion that his few negations may be explained as the result of a combination of two elements. He was, as I have already said, sometimes a disciple of reason as the only criterion of truth; furthermore, as a poet, he thought of death as one of the greatest of dramatic subjects. He was, therefore, led into seeming contradictions sometimes by a false standard of reason (which, though he had rejected it early, rose sometimes to plague him), and at other times by the notion that the idea of absolute death with no hereafter increased the dramatic power of his work. We find the first illustrated in his essay "On A Future State" where he remarks: "The desire to be forever as we are; the reluctance to a violent and inexperienced change, which is so common to all the animated and inanimated combinations of the universe, is, indeed, the secret persuasion which has given birth to the opinion of a future state. They persuade, indeed, only those who desire to be persuaded." The second case is well illustrated in a passage from his "Vision of the Sea", where, for dramatic effect, he caused the mother on board a smoking ship to exclaim to her child:

"Alas, what is life, what is death, what are we, That when the ship sinks we no longer may be?"

1. "On a Future State" Prose Works. Vol. 2 Pg. 280
What! to see thee no more, and to feel thee no more
To be after life what we have been before?
Not to touch those sweet hands, not to look on those eyes,
Those lips and that hair, all that smiling disguise
Thou yet wearest, sweet spirit, which I, day by day,
Have so long called my child, but which now fades away
Like a rainbow, and I the fallen shower?"¹

The repudiations of immortality which he made on these grounds, however, were very few and are not to be treated seriously by any but those who enjoy illustrating the seeming inconsistencies of genius. There is an avalanche of material which leaves no room for doubt as to Shelley's true faith.

He did believe in immortality; he always hoped, but, like all of us, his hopes were sometimes not unmixed with fears for the future state;² yet, barring these few moments of doubt which beset every rational being, he maintained a firm belief in immortality from his early youth to the very time of his death. In 1811, in a letter to Hogg, we find him exclaiming: "Night comes, death comes! Almost I wish it were tomorrow. There is another life!"³

1. "A Vision of the Sea" 82-89
2. Extract from the Ms Journal of Shelley, given on Pg.280 of the Prose Works Vol. 2 and quoted from the Preface to the Essays, Letters, etc. of 1840 Pg. XIV, XV
3. Letter to Hogg Nov. 1811 Letters of P.B.S. Pg. 158
During the same year, in a letter to Elizabeth Hitchener, he remarks: "Are we but bubbles which arise from the filth of a stagnant pool, merely again to be reabsorbed into the mass of its corruption? I think not; I feel not. The eternity of man has ever been believed. It is not merely one of the dogmas of an inconsistent religion. The wild American, who never heard of Christ, or dreamed of original sin, whose Great Spirit was nothing but the Soul of Nature, could not reconcile his feeling to annihilation: he too has his paradise."\(^1\) In 1812 in "Queen Mab", that great poem of denunciation, he informs us that death is merely a gateway, encompassed by a fog of dreariness and gloom, that leads to happy regions of eternal hope; he therefore encourages his spirit to live fearlessly, waging an eternal war with falsehood and tyranny, - thus uprooting the germs of misery from the human heart.\(^2\)

As he grew older, his belief in immortality grew stronger. He had met with the trials and tribulations of human life, he had seen one after another of his fondest ideals shattered and had built for himself a system of idealism which proved itself invulnerable to mortal attacks; he had been met by ingratitude and by disappointment and had drunk to the dregs the cup of human sorrow; yet the firmer his belief grew in the mutability of earthly things, the more triumphant he became in heralding a future existence. \(^{2}\)

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1. Letter to Eliz. Hitchener Dec. 11, 1811 P.B.S.Letters Pg. 192
2. "Queen Mab" IX 161-164; 190
Sensitive Plant", he assures us, in true Berkeleian style, that in this life ignorance, strife and continual error, where everything is an illusion, where nothing really is and where we are merely shadows of a dream, it is a consoling and pleasant creed to own that death, like all the rest, must be a mockery.¹ In 1821 in "Hellas" he assures us that life is merely a clothing of the soul in garments of dust and light which the immortal spirit finally casts aside in mockery of death as it passes on to a pure ethereal eternity.² The next year, in his "Triumph of Life", he reminds us that:

"Others mournfully within the gloom
Of their own shadows walked and called it death."³

Furthermore, he assures Howard Smith, on June 29, that "the destiny of man can scarcely be so degraded that he was born only to die".⁴ Perhaps the most noteworthy of his expressions of belief in a continued spiritual existence and in the hollowness of death is to be found in those superb lines from "Adonais":

"The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity,
Until death tramples it to fragments."⁵

Thus, in lines that will forever live in English literature,

1. "Sensative Plant" - last four stanzas
2. "Hellas" 197-210
3. "Triumph of Life" 58-59
4. "Letter to Horace Smith June 29, 1822 P.B.S.Letters Pg.983
5. "Adonais" LII
he sums up his idealistic conception of the future of man.

As to the mode of our existence in this future life, Shelley seems, if we go no deeper than the surface, vague and contradictory. At one moment it appears that he believes in a personal immortality and in the next it seems equally certain that we are to lose our personalities and become absorbed in the eternal spirit of God. From a single reading of the "Adonais" we might well assume that he held these two views side by side and made no effort to explain their apparent contradiction. He tells us, for instance, how Chatterton and many of the other inheritors of unfulfilled renown rose from their thrones far in the Unapparent to welcome Keats to his place among the immortals;¹ but he also assures us that every pure spirit shall become a part of the burning fountain of life and shall be merely a drop in the river of eternal all-encompassing Intelligence.² However, if we go no deeper into the "Adonais" than this, we miss one of the finest and most consoling doctrines of Shelley's philosophy. It appears to me that he found, upon mature consideration, that continued existence as an individual had its drawbacks and its assets; it seemed puerile and anthropomorphic to assume that we should carry all the conflicting elements of our characters - the evil as well as the good - to a future life which was to be utterly spiritual and utterly good; yet it seemed

1. "Adonais" XLV
2. "Adonais" XXXVIII
impossible that those elements which operate through our personalities to make the spiritual values of life—such as our individual senses of truth, hope, faith and love,—should be lost in the world to come, for, should this be the case, we should lose those spiritual values which, by dint of struggle, sorrow and pain, we had devoted our earthly lives to attain. It probably seemed desirable, to Shelley, that the soul should continue in heaven its spiritual development, for, were this not the case, mortal life would be drab, meaningless, purposeless—and the soul would become a ship at sea making no progress and having no port, but merely waiting to be swallowed up by the greedy waves of chance. On the other hand, the idea of utter absorption in God probably seemed a little too much like eternal stagnation and the loss of all our conscious moral and spiritual development; yet it held out a promise of liberation from finite limitations and moral as well as physical weaknesses through absorption in a Perfect Whole.

I believe that what Shelley really did in "Adonais" and in other poems expressive of his belief was to combine the merits of both systems and make of them a unified whole. He saw that to be one with God did not necessarily mean eternal stagnation or utter quiescence, but rather implied ceaseless intellectual activity as a part of the consciousness of the Eternal Will; furthermore, to become one with God is to find one's wants
satisfied, all spiritual values in the full bloom of totality - in short, to gain eternal completion rather than annihilation. Thus it appears that his view, though somewhat mystic, amounted to this: We return at death and are one with God, becoming an integral part of a great directing Consciousness, yet retaining those spiritual assets which compose personality; we are not lost in the life that sustains us but form a definite part of that Life which uses our individual balances of spiritual power as integral parts of its total expression. Thus that combination of spiritual values, which we term personality, continues to exist in God, performing as an individual soul its allotted and fitting part of the work of the Eternal Whole. The following passage from the "Adonais" well illustrates this belief:

"He lives, he wakes, - tis death is dead, not he;
He is made one with nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder to the song of night's sweet bird.
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light from herb and stone,
Spreading itself where'er that Power may move
Which has withdrawn his being to its own.
It wields the world with never wearied love,
Sustains it from beneath and kindles it above."  
Thus it appears to me that Shelley was far more consistent

1. "Adonais" XLI-XLII
than he has been given credit for being, and I am inclined to believe that those critics who speak of the pantheistic and individual view of immortality in the "Adonais" have erred - in seeking to compare separate passages instead of looking for the significance of Shelley's philosophy taken as a whole. Furthermore, the belief outlined above is in perfect harmony with his belief in pure spiritual love and eternal brotherhood; for what is more conducive to the growth and interchange of love and brotherhood than to believe that all are constituent parts of God, working as parts of the same Power and for the same final purpose?

The belief in this form of immortality is as essentially Christian in spirit as it is idealistic. Christ has nowhere said, as far as I am aware, anything apparently contradictory to this view. In fact the scriptures give us cause for conjecture as to whether this was not, in substance, His very own idea. He declares to the thief on the cross: "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise."¹ But he also announces: "I and my Father are one; he that hath seen me hath seen the Father."² He further assures us that He and all mankind are brothers, having a common Father.³ Therefore it appears likely that Christ believed all mankind to be One with God, though each one of us will retain his own individual spiritual consciousness as the best means of fulfilling

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2. John 14:9
3. Mark 23:9 See also Mark 3:33-35
the will of the Great Intelligence. Furthermore, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity implies the existence of three personalities in one Intelligence. We have only to carry this argument to its logical conclusion to see that Shelley's concept was purely a Christian one.

That Shelley was definitely Christian in spirit, that he understood the New Testament better than the scholars of his own time, and that he foreshadowed the work of those modern Biblical students who have made a study of the New Testament in a critical-historical light, may be seen in his interpretation and understanding of the life, the method, the doctrines, the purpose and the accomplishment of Christ. Shelley defined religion as "that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world", and pointed out that hence "all religions are allegorical or susceptible of allegory"; he therefore viewed the Bible and the life and teachings of Christ from this standpoint.

As we have seen in the earlier pages of this paper, he looked upon Christ as a human being eternally opposed to falsehood and oppression, an advocate of equality, - calm, majestic, natural, solemn and severe - beloved by his adherents and respected by all through the force of

1. In John 17 21-22 Christ says: "that they all may be one as thou Father art in me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us".
2. See also John 5 26 "For as the Father has life in himself; so hath he given to the son to have life in himself"
3. "A Defense of Poetry" Prose Works Vol. 3 Pg. 104
his personality. But he denied the divinity of Christ, scoffed at the virgin birth, and characterized the supernatural element in the crucifixion as false and as the result of the zeal of His devoted followers; he viewed the accounts of the life of Christ as the work of good disciples who, writing down the sayings of Jesus from memory, often confounded His words with their own fallacious ideas, thus adding to the precepts and deeds of Christ much contradictory material; but these men left us enough of the true record of Jesus to enable us to draw a clear picture of his character and the general import of his doctrines. Therefore, Shelley chose to view Christ as a man of extraordinary genius, eternally at war with the forces of evil and oppression, who was deified by a mistake of Pilate, by the fanatic fury of the Jews, and by the zeal of his followers, who, valuing his marvelous teachings, could not explain them except as the result of the supernatural; but Shelley saw that He was crucified because He attempted to supersede the ritual of Moses with regulations more moral and humane. Thus it was that Christ became, to the poet, the world's greatest hero, - a man who exemplified in his deeds and doctrines those truths to which Shelley, in turn, devoted his own life. This view of Christ is held today, almost in its entirety, by Unitarians and by a great

1. "Essay on Christianity" Prose Works Vol. 2 Pg. 356
number of other Christian people who are content to let
every individual make his own decision as to the divinity
of Christ so long as the spiritual truth of His teachings
is recognized and used as the motivating power for brother-
ly action.

Christ's method, according to Shelley, was the method
of every clever reformer. "He accommodated his doctrines
to the prepossessions of those whom He addressed. He
used the language for this view sufficiently familiar to
our comprehensions - for all reformers have been compelled
to practice this misrepresentation of their own true feel-
ings or opinions."\(^1\) Then "having produced this favorable
disposition of the mind, Jesus Christ proceeds to qualify
and finally to abrogate the system of the Jewish law. He
descants upon its insufficiency as a code of moral conduct,
which it professed itself to be, and absolutely selects
the law of retaliation as an instance of the absurdity and
immorality of its institutions".\(^2\) Thus by strategy and
wisdom, benevolence, pity and love, Christ sought to con-
vert the people to an understanding of the laws of a higher
moral and spiritual value.\(^3\) This was truly the method of
Christ; it was directly opposed to the practices of the
historical church where tyranny, debauchery and dogma ruled
supreme; but it was in direct line with the views and prac-
tice of Shelley and has become the heritage of all who today

\(^1\) "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 359
\(^2\) "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 360
\(^3\) "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 373
truly understand the significance of the teachings of
the Master.

Shelley saw in the doctrines of Christ the salvation
of a world of men. His teaching demanded the
abandonment of the chains of habit, superstition, and
blind faith, and the embracing of principles of truth and
reality; it was the modern cry to face the facts. Fur-
thermore, the poet informs us: "Before man can be free
and equal and truly wise, he must strip sensuality of its
pomp and selfishness of its excuses, and contemplate
actions and realities as they really are. He will dis-
cover the wisdom of universal love; he will feel the mean-
ness and injustice of sacrificing reason and the liberty
of his fellow men to the indulgence of his physical appe-
tites, and becoming a party to their degradation by the con-
summation of his own." He adds that, with the differences
only incidental to the age and the state of the social sys-
tem in which the doctrines were promulgated, they appear to
have been the doctrines of Jesus Christ.¹ Thus, he says,
we are advised by the author of the Christian system to
cast ignorance and superstition aside and receive the
teachings of the imitator and minister of the universal God.²

So much then in reference to the general doctrines of
Christ; however, in Shelley's specific explanation of certain
particular doctrines, we see that he held many of the ideas
of a critical-historical scholar before the science of biblical

¹. "Essay on Christianity" Prose Works Vol. 2 Pg. 364
². "Essay on Christianity" Prose Works Vol. 2 Pg. 360
criticism had, supposedly, come into existence. Two instances of this critical excellence, taken from the "Essay on Christianity", will be sufficient to show his remarkable insight in reference to the teachings of Jesus before any concrete evidence had been brought forth by scholars to point their true significance. In relation to the following passage from St. Matthew: "Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? .... Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought of the things of itself",\(^1\) Shelley says: "Nor can it be believed that Christ endeavored to prevail on the inhabitants of Jerusalem neither to till their fields, nor to frame a shelter against the sky, nor to provide for tomorrow. He simply exposes the miseries and mischiefs of that system which makes all things subservient to the material frame of man."\(^2\) Christ merely attempted to teach, says Shelley, that that man who has fewest physical wants approaches nearest to the divine, that if we satisfy our wants at the cheapest rate and expend our energy in the attainment of spiritual values we shall render ourselves worthy; then we shall become as free in our imaginations as the swift and many colored fowls of the air, and as beautiful in pure simplicity as the lilies of the field, for, in

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1. Matthew 6 25-34
2. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 366
proportion as mankind becomes wise, the extinction of the unequal social system under which we live will be culminated. Furthermore, says Shelley, when Christ said: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God", he did not predict that, through being holy and pious here, men should be rewarded by seeing God - in heaven, but rather that by communication with the beautiful in nature, they might obtain some intercourse here and now with the universal God. "Jesus", he remarks, "has merely said that virtue is its own reward. Whosoever dares to examine and to estimate every imagination which suggests itself to his mind, he has already seen God." From these two examples of his critical opinion, it may be seen that Shelley understood, better than most men of his own age, the true import of Christ's doctrines; it is not difficult to imagine how horrible these opinions must have seemed to those churchmen of his day who were involved in the fallacious doctrine of the literal infallibility of the Holy Scripture. Nor do we wonder that while they called him atheist, he attacked their system in the most bitter and uncompromising terms, and mocked at and disbelieved in their God because he "conceived that to be the most summary way of irradicating established Christianity".

Furthermore, he saw that the purpose of the teaching of Christ was

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1. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 367
2. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 342-343
3. Letter to Elizabeth Hitchener June 11, 1811
   P.B.S. Letters Pg. 91
the "abolishing of artificial distinctions among mankind so far as the love which it becomes all human beings to bear toward each other, and the knowledge of truth from which that love will never fail to be produced,"¹ and the abolishing of these distinctions with no other weapons but love and truth. This purpose lay at the foundation of the "Prometheus Unbound". As Stopford Brooke rightly says: "The character of Prometheus is partly built on the character of Christ. His moral position toward mankind and toward Jupiter is the position of Christ toward suffering man, and toward the powers of the world, who crucified Jesus because he would not yield to their policy and their priestcraft, nor back up their power, exercised for their own advantage over the bodies and souls of men. The means of Prometheus are the means of Jesus - nothing but enduring love."²

Thus we see that the purposes of Christ, Prometheus and Shelley are alike; all desire the rejuvenation of mankind, all repudiate force as a means of bringing this about, all trust in the power of endurance, love and forgiveness, - placing their faith in the unconquerableness of the principle of Eternal Love. Thus like Christ and Shelley, modern Christians may well take as their guiding principle the glorious thought in the closing lines of the "Prometheus":

"To suffer woes which hope thinks infinite;

¹. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 369 Prose Works Vol. 2
². "Naturalism in English Poetry" Pg. 232
"To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;  
To defy power which seems omnipotent;  
To love and bear; to hope till hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
This like thy glory, Titan, is to be  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory!"¹

Thus Shelley found in Christ a greater but a kindred spirit who opposed with earnest eloquence the panics, fears and hateful superstitions which have enslaved mankind for ages.² Both tried to teach mankind to become king of life by vanquishing "whatsoever can be between the cradle and the grave."³ Once again the poet has pointed the way to a universal brotherhood, a millenium of joy and happiness (which he pictured so effectively in the later half of the "Prometheus"); he exhorts every individual to write, on his heart, the principles of the Master -- for only by individual perfection can a lasting benefit for mankind ever spring.

Shelley also shows his general grasp and understanding of spiritual facts by his comment on certain other miscellaneous elements closely allied to Christianity. He did fall into error at times, as when, led on by his zeal for the cause of vegetarianism, he assures us that the allegory of Adam and Eve admits of no other explanation

1. "Prometheus Unbound" 570-578
2. "Essay on Christianity" Pg. 351
3. "Ode to Liberty" XVII
than the disease and crime that have flowed from unnatural diet; "Milton," he assures us, "was so well aware of this that he makes Raphael exhibit to Adam the consequence of his disobedience." However, he was generally correct in his interpretations: He was perfectly modern in his view of miracles, prophecies and martyrdoms. When Shelley ridiculed miracles, he did it because he realized that an all powerful God was not likely to manifest his power by interfering with the natural laws he himself had set into operation; when he denounced prophecy, it was because he saw that man was more likely to forecast by a keen foresight into the trend of the times, fortified by a background of historic knowledge than to foreknow events by direct communication with God; and in relation to martyrdom as a proof of Christianity, he correctly pointed out that mad enthusiasm has led many men to sacrifice themselves on the ground of strong though misplaced conviction:—"The Mahometan dies fighting for his prophet; the Indian immolates himself at the chariot wheels of Brahma; the Hottentot worships an insect; the negro a bunch of feathers. If each of them should affirm, in opposition to the strongest possible arguments, that inspiration carried internal evidence, I fear their inspired brethren, the orthodox missionaries, would be so uncharitable as to pronounce them obstinate." All this is truly modern interpretation; miracles are explained

1. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 608
2. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 606
3. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 607
as results of startling natural phenomena; prophecies are regarded as indirect manifestations of the power of God - the prophet being given the power to analyze, observe and interpret the trend of the times with a higher intuitive accuracy than is common to the average mortal; martyrdoms, as proofs of the truth of Christianity, are entirely disregarded by modern Biblical scholars.

Shelley also recognized that soul and conscience were two great powers that exercised a considerable influence in the spiritual world. In reference to the first, he tells us that "throughout the varied and eternal world, soul is the only element, the block that for uncounted ages has remained; the moveless pillar of a mountain's weight is active living spirit."\(^1\) This view of the soul as the only lasting reality is certainly Christian in its significance; his acknowledgement of conscience as the government before which all others sink into nothingness is also impressively religious.

Nor were anthropomorphic ideas of religion any more acceptable to Shelley than they are to modern biblical scholars. He tells us that it is impossible to believe that an infinite spirit could beget a son upon the body of a Jewish woman, and that that miserable tale of the Devil and Eve and an intercessor,

\(^1\) "Queen Mab" IV 139-143
\(^2\) "Proposals For An Association" Prose Works Pg. 381 Vol. 1
with the childish mummeries of the Jewish deity, is not reconcilable with the world about us; and he reminds us that the very works of God are sufficient to stamp as fallacious any such foolish and petty idea.¹

Furthermore, he was extremely modern in his attitude toward prayer. He saw about him many people supplicating God from the egoistic standpoint of petition and confession rather than from the aesthetic one of praise and communion; he also observed political powers seeking to limit God in His relations with mankind. In the "Address to the Irish People" he remarks: "The act permits certain people to worship God after such a manner, which, in fact, if not done, would, as far as in it lay, prevent God from hearing their address. Can anything be more presumptuous, and at the same time more ridiculous, than a set of men granting a license to God to receive the prayers of certain of his creatures?"² Therefore, viewing prayer from the two standpoints of his time - as an endeavor to change the intention of God or as a formal testimony of our obedience³ - he unqualifiedly condemned it. But he did believe in the aesthetic type; in his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", he praises the Unseen Power, the Awful Loveliness, the Spirit of Intellectual Beauty⁴ - and asks that its power may

1. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 594
2. "An Address to the Irish People" Prose Works Pg.327 Vol.1
3. Notes to "Queen Mab" Poetical Works Pg. 605
4. Shelley’s reference to God by mentioning some of his attributes can be paralleled in the Bible. The "Ecclesiastes" calls him All Powerful, "Baruch" - Immensity, "Hohn" - Light, "Ephesians" - Liberty, "Leviticus" - Sanctity, "Esdras" - Justice, etc.
descend, instilling in him a calmness and a love for all
humankind. Thus Shelley believed that prayers of praise
and of unselfish petition were perfectly justified. He
saw that, given faith and persistence, peace of mind,
calmness, cheerfulness, wisdom, courage, and all other
moral virtues are obtained in fuller measure by him who
prays. This is the modern psychological viewpoint of
prayer; we are told that the mere fact that man dwells
upon these virtues in his innermost mind goes a long way
to creating them by producing and calling to service the
subconscious energy within his own mind. Furthermore,
according to Dr. W. K. Wright of Dartmouth, "It is not
necessary to conclude that all this energy has been pro-
duced within the organism. Some say it may enter the
organism from without when the individual prays.
William James suggests such a hypothesis; there may be
somewhere in the universe a great reservoir of subcon-
scious energy that is tapped and made available for
finite beings, in prayer. This reservoir presumably
would either be God, or under the control of God; so
the energy would really be supplied to the individual
by God in answer to his prayers". ¹ This modern
psychological view of prayer would, I believe, have been
acceptable to Shelley as reconcilable to his own view of
spiritual matters.

In reference to the so-called Christian virtues,
there is much to be learned from him. He was the arch-

¹. "A Students Philosophy of Religion" by W.K.Wright Pg.280
disciple of love as the greatest power in the world; he sought it in mortal form and failed because the limitations of mortality make impossible an absolutely pure spiritual affection;\(^1\) of his search and disappointment all the greatest of his poems leave a record.\(^2\) Finally he came to understand that that Intellectual All-Beautiful Love which had become his moving passion was not to be found this side of eternity - but, nevertheless, he continued his search for its most perfect manifestation in mortal form, so that through love he might approach as near to divine perfection as possible. "Love", he tells us, "is the bond and the sanction that connects not only man with man but with everything that exists. We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature, as it were, of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of everything excellent and lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it. The discovery of this antitype; the meeting with an understanding capable of clearly estimating our own; an imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret; with a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres, strung to the accompaniment of one

1. "Epipsychidion" 267-268
delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own; this is the invisible and unattainable point to which love leads; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the fondest shadows of that, without the possession of which there is no rest or respite to the heart over which it rules. So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere hulk of what once he was.\(^1\) What a lofty conception of love! Is it any wonder that he could not find it? Is it any wonder that he continued to pursue it? — for this love is the life-blood of spiritual happiness, the only satisfying and redeeming force within the heart of man; he can never attain to it, yet without its gleam to lead him on, it were better that he should never have been born. Through love:

"The spirit of the worm beneath the sod

In love and worship blends itself with God.\(^2\)

Love is the fountain that never runs dry: the more we drink of its waters, the greater becomes the supply. Love is the spiritual grace of God that is given freely to all mankind for the salvation and the rejuvenation of the life of the spirit:

"Mind from its object differs most in this:

Evil from good; misery from happiness;
The baser from the nobler; the impure

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1. "On Love" Prose Works Vol. 2 Pg. 268-270
2. "Epipsychidion" 128-129
And frail, from what is clear and must endure:
If you divide pleasure and love and thought,
Each part exceeds the whole: and we know not
How much, while any yet remains unshared,
Of pleasure may be gained, of sorrow spared.
This truth is that deep well, whence sages draw
The unenvied light of hope; the eternal law
By which those live, to whom this world of life
Is as a garden ravaged, and whose strife
Tills for the promise of a later birth
The wilderness of this Elysian Earth."¹

This well of love is similar to the one of which Christ
spoke when he said to the Samaritan woman: "Whosoever
drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall never
thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in
him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."²
Both Christ and Shelley maintained that the power of love
was the greatest, the purest and the only force by which
a lasting progress could be brought about; in "Prometheus
Unbound", after being tortured by the furies and comforted
by the spirits, Shelley, in the person of Prometheus,
cries out: "And yet I feel most vain all hope but love!"³
Christ, looking forward to the same ideal state and feel-
ing that love was the only agency for the rejuvenation
of mankind, laiéd down his life in the fullness of manhood
for suffering humanity. Furthermore, love is conceded

¹. "Epipsychidion" 174-189
². John 4:14
to be the greatest world power by all great writers and thinkers before and after Christ, for, as Shelley reminds us, "at successive intervals, Aristo, Tasso, Shakespeare, Spenser, Calderon, Rousseau, and the greatest writers of our own age, have celebrated the dominion of love, planting, as it were, trophies in the human mind of that sublimest victory over sensuality and force."¹ Thus Shelley, in his turn, celebrated the dominion of that great power; he saw its might and its quiet energy working forever within the heart of man, and in "Prometheus Unbound", he pictures for us, in two short stanzas, the work of love for human kind:

"Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul,
Whose nature is its own divine control,
Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the sea;
Familiar acts are beautiful through love;
Labor, and pain, and grief, in life's green grove
Sport like tame beasts; none knew how gentle they could be!

His will, with all mean passions, bad delights
And selfish cares, its trembling satellites,
A spirit ill to guide, but mighty to obey,
Is as a tempest winged ship, whose helm
Love rules, through waves which dare not overwhelm,
Forcing life's wildest shores to own its sovereign sway."²

¹ "A Defense of Poetry" Prose Works Pg. 126
² "Prometheus Unbound" IV 400-411
Shelley was also a great disciple of the Christian virtues of toleration and brotherhood, and an arch enemy of any semblance of force. He tells us that God values a poor man as much as a priest and has given him an individual soul, so that the worship He most loves is that which shows its piety in an affectionate heart and in good works rather than in ceremonies, confessions, burials, processions or wonders. He also exhorts us not to enquire if a man is a heretic, a Quaker, a Jew or a heathen, but rather if he be a virtuous man and works for the happiness and peace of mankind, for "if a man be ever so much a believer and love not these things, he is a heartless hypocrite, a rascal and a knave."¹ He considers all men his brothers, is happy when he can do them a service, and assures us that his greatest pleasure lies in making men wiser, better and happier.² Shelley reminds us of the power of place and environment on our opinions, admonishing us that if a person's religious views do not correspond with our own, it is still our duty to love him, for "how different would you have been had the chance of birth placed you in Tartary or India."³ He hopes for the time when the Mohammedan, the Jew, the Christian, and the Atheist will live together as brothers, united in the bonds of charity and brotherly love and sharing the benefits of

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¹ "An Address to the Irish People" Prose Works Pg. 321-322
² "An Address to the Irish People" Prose Works Pg. 317
³ "Declaration of Rights" Prose Works Vol. 1 Pg. 397
mutual association;\textsuperscript{1} and assures us that "anything short of unlimited toleration, on which you will recollect that Jesus Christ principally insisted, is wrong."\textsuperscript{2} He then draws instances of the futility of force, saying that the French Revolution, though undertaken with good intentions, ended ill for the people because violence was employed; he remarks that the cause they vindicated was one of truth but that they gave it the appearance of a lie by using methods which suited better the purposes of liars than their own.\textsuperscript{3}

In his open letter to Lord Ellenborough, he enquires of that noble Lord if he expects to please a God of mercy by torture, and then denounces political and religious bigotry in the following uncompromising manner:

"In a civilized and enlightened country, a man is pilloried and imprisoned because he is a Deist, and no one raises his voice in the indignation of outraged humanity. Does the Christian God, the regenerator of the world, the meek reformer, authorize one man to rise against another, and, because lictors are at his beck, to chain and torture him as an Infidel? When the apostles went abroad to convert the nations, were they enjoined to stab and poison all who disbelieved in the divinity of Christ's mission; assuredly they would have been no more justifiable in this case than he is at present who puts into execution the law which inflicts

\begin{itemize}
\item 1. "Letter to Lord Ellenborough" Prose Works Vol.1 Pg. 424
\item 2. "An Address to the Irish People Prose Works Vol.1 Pg.324
\item 3. "An Address to the Irish People Prose Works Vol.1 Pg.330
\end{itemize}
pillory and imprisonment on a Deist."¹ Thus Shelley courageously attacked the decadent mock-Christianity of his own time. He admonishes the people to reform and follow Christ, and to be tolerant in all things for "reason points to the open gate of the Temple of Religious Freedom, and Philanthropy kneels at the altar of a common God."² He tells them that, if they are thankful for the beneficence of God, if they adore His wisdom and desire to hang upon his altar the garlands of their devotion, they must not curse those of another belief, — for the purest religion is that of charity and its loveliness will always proselyte the hearts of men.³ Finally he makes it clear that only through toleration can liberty and happiness exist in spotless purity: "In no case employ violence; the way to liberty and happiness is never to transgress the rules of virtue and justice. Liberty and happiness are founded on virtue and justice, if you destroy the one you destroy the other."⁴

Shelley believed in goodness, virtue and wisdom as the means of personal reform; government, he tells us, is an evil — a necessary evil through our own thoughtlessness and vice; for where virtue does not exist there will be crime, and where there is crime there must be government; before government is done away with

1. "Letter to Lord Ellenborough" Pg. 412 Prose Works
2. "Proposals for an Association" Pg. 370 Prose Works
3. "Proposals for an Association" Pg. 371 Prose Works
4. "An Address to the Irish People" Pg. 328 Prose Works
we must reform ourselves.¹ To him, all religions are
good that make men good, and the best proof that any
one religion is better than another is for a man pro-
"The gates of heaven", he tells us, "are open to people
of every religion, provided they are good".² In
"Queen Mab", we are told that there is a nobler glory
that survives until life is over; it is the conscious-
ness of good which neither gold, nor sordid fame, nor
hope of heavenly bliss can purchase.³ "Virtue", for
him, "is peace, happiness and harmony";⁴ it is the
vivifying power of the universe, for "the eye of vir-
tue, eagle like, darts through the undazzling beam of
eternal truth and, from the undiminished fountain of
its purity, gathers wherewith to vivify and illuminate
the universe".⁵ Fetters, as he informs Lord Ellen-
borough, cannot bind or subdue the soul of virtue for,
from the solitude and dampness of its dungeon, it
ascends free and undaunted to soar in the ethereal
blue of happiness.⁶ Thus virtue and wisdom, truth
and liberty alone can give mankind the bliss of which
a soul that claims its kindred with eternity is worthy.⁷
In closing this subject of the Christian virtues, I
should like to point out that, as in the character of

¹. "An Address to the Irish People" Pg. 339 Prose Works
². "An Address to the Irish People" P.317 Prose Works Vol.1
³. "An Address to the Irish People" Pg.318 Prose Works Vol.1
⁴. "Queen Mab" V 214; 222-224
⁵. "Queen Mab" III 129
⁶. "Proposals for an Association" Pg. 379 Prose Works
⁷. "A Letter to Lord Ellenborough" Pg. 420 Prose Works
⁸. "Queen Mab" II 206-210
Prometheus we see Shelley's own defiance of any power (religious, political or social) based on superstition, so also, in contrast, we mark his idealization of love and freedom, - the good, the true and the beautiful,- as the lasting values of life and the only source of man's continued happiness.

Shelley's vision of a unified world scheme in which all life takes part is, perhaps, one of the greatest of his accomplishments. In "Queen Mab" he tells us of the high importance of insignificant objects:

"I tell thee that those living things
To whom the fragile blade of grass
That springeth in the morn
And perisheth e'er noon
Is an unbounded world;
I tell thee that those viewless beings
Whose mansion is the smallest particle
Of the impassive atmosphere
Think, feel and live like man;
And the minutest throb
That through their frame diffuses
The slightest, faintest motion,
Is fixed and indispensable
As the majestic laws
That rule yon rolling orbs."¹

Thus every atom of the universe is a necessary part of God's plan; the whole creation, in silent eloquence,

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¹ "Queen Mab" II 225-243
declares that all fulfill His works of love and joy.\(^1\)

Man is the highest creature of this creation, enjoying all the pleasures of mortal life, and, at the same time, basking in the eternal happiness of the spiritual world.

"Man is of soul and body, formed for deeds
Of high resolve; on fancy's boldest wing
To soar unwearied, fearlessly to turn
The keenest pangs to peacefulness, and taste
The joys which mingled sense and spirit yield."\(^2\)

Thus man and nature fulfill the will of a God who pervades the entire creation as a Spirit of Lovely Perfection, till, all things working together for good toward an age of endless peace when all the diffusions of God in the universe will unite, there is formed a perfect whole "without a flaw marring its perfect symmetry".\(^3\)

What cosmic concept could be more helpful, more alluring, more satisfactory, more in agreement with our knowledge of scientific laws, and, in its greatness and unity, more lastingly comforting than this idealistic conception of world harmony? It will be generally admitted that it is essentially Christian in its larger significance; though the ignorant and bigoted of all ages will rant against it, their ranting proceeds from lack of imaginative vision; the wise and just must always see in Shelley's system of philosophy more than a ray of the beautiful and divine truth of their Creator.

\begin{itemize}
\item 1. "Queen Mab" III 193-199
\item 2. "Queen Mab" IV 154-158
\item 3. "Queen Mab" III 240
\end{itemize}
system is not without its flaws, its inconsistencies, its seemingly contradictory elements, - yet it raises us a little above the level of cold mortality and affords us a glimpse of Divine Eternality in its Love, its Purity, and its dazzling Glory.

If it is Christian to be spiritually minded, a seeker after eternal truth, a dreamer of just and holy dreams, a teacher, a friend of man, and a follower of the pure principles of Jesus Christ, then Shelley must be included among the greatest of practicing Christians. His charity was far reaching; the bounty of a man who, though denied admission to the presence of an old friend and the father of his wife, nevertheless never refused to lend him enormous sums of money and spoke of him with the utmost kindness and consideration, is remarkable. When Godwin, displeased with Shelley on the ground that he had committed a moral sin (by putting into practice the very philosophy that Godwin himself had preached and Shelley, his disciple, had accepted) wrote, with the pedantry of virtue: "I return your check because no consideration can induce me to utter a check drawn by you and containing my name. To what purpose make a disclosure of this kind to your banker? I hope you will send a duplicate of it by the post which will reach me on Saturday morning. You may make it payable to Joseph Hume or James Martin or any other name in the whole directory"1 it is indeed wonderful that any

1. "The Life of P.B. Shelley" by Ed. Dowden Pg. 297
human being could, like Shelley keep his natural gentleness of temper and continue, throughout his life, to do like acts of good will which sometimes practically impoverished him; if there be any Christianity in heroic forbearance, and in returning kindness for insult, then certainly Shelley practiced Christianity. His great love and compassionate forgiveness can also be brought out by a single remarkable instance: in 1811 Shelley took a trip south, leaving his wife, Harriet, in the care of Hogg, his old friend and school chum; Hogg, it appears, betrayed the trust imposed in him and made ignoble advances to Harriet, which, on the return of her husband, she reported; the sequel follows in the poet's own works: "We walked to the fields beyond York. I desired to know fully the account of this affair. I heard it from him and I believe he was sincere. All I can recollect of that terrible day was that I pardoned him - fully, freely pardoned him; that I would still be a friend to him, and hoped soon to convince him how lovely virtue was; that his crime, not himself, was the object of my detestation; that I value a human being not for what it has been, but for what it is; that I hoped the time would come when he would regard this horrible error with as much disgust as I did."¹ The ensuing years proved the earnestness of this pardon, for Shelley continued to be a devoted friend to Hogg.

Shelley's sense of brotherly love, encompassing all

¹ "The Life of P.B. Shelley" by Ed. Dowden Pg. 92
mankind, was highly developed. He gave freely to the poor and oppressed; he started a project at Tremadoc to build an embankment to keep the waters from flooding the lands and endangering the lives of the people; find that there was not enough money to complete the project, he spent six weeks in London seeking subscriptions and attempting to raise more money (at a ruinous rate of interest) on his expectations.¹ During the bitter winter of 1812 he was continually playing the good Samaritan to the poor and needy — visiting them in their humble abodes and supplying them with food, fuel and raiment; nor did he make a display of this charity; — Mrs. Williams tells how, on one occasion, there was talk of the straightened means of a poor widow in the neighborhood; Shelley said nothing — but the next morning a five pound note was delivered at the house.² These acts of charity and good will continued throughout his life; he was never too busy nor too pressed for money but that he could raise some for others who, not having learned the lesson of frugality, needed it more than he.

Furthermore, he attempted to instill Christian virtues into the hearts of all. In his youth, buoyed up by hopes for revolutionary change, he undertook a trip to Ireland where he spent his time in issuing tracts in which he assured the Irish people that freedom of church

¹ "The Life of P.B. Shelley" by Ed. Dowden Pg. 165-66
² "The Life of P.B. Shelley" by Ed. Dowden Pg. 164
and state could never be gained through violence, and that the greatest and most powerful actuating principles in the world were those of love and toleration.\(^1\)

To be sure, he was soon disillusioned as to the possibility of revolutionary reform, but he devoted the rest of his life to "those little unremembered acts of kindness and of love" that Wordsworth extols as forming the "best portion of a good man's life."\(^2\)

In the mind of the great mass of people, Shelley is still regarded as anti-Christian and therefore repulsive because of his relation with Harriet, Mary and those other forms 'in which he rashly sought the shadow of that idol of his thought'.\(^3\) Shelley's love, however, was pure spiritual love; he lifted that "painted veil which those who live call life":

"He sought,
For his lost heart was tender, things to love,
But found them not, alas! nor was there aught
The world contains the which he could approve.
Through the unheeding many he did move,
A Splendor among shadows, a bright blot
Upon the gloomy scene; a spirit that strove
For truth, and like the Preacher found it not."\(^4\)

Shelley merely practiced the Christian virtue of free spiritual love; with the possible though not probable

\(^1\) "The Life of P.B.Shelley" by Ed. Dowden Pg. 117-132
\(^2\) "Lines on Tintern Abbey" by Wm. Wordsworth 34-36
\(^3\) "Epipsychidion" 268
\(^4\) Sonnet on Pg. 364 of the Poetical Works.
exception of Harriet, his loves were on an extremely high spiritual level; he was ever loving, kind and considerate to Mary, and, though he shared his spiritual love with others whom, for a while, he thought might measure up to his ideal, he never in any way or to the slightest extent, forgot his love and duty toward her; it may be said, in her honor, that she was sufficiently broad and pure spirited to realize the true trend of affairs, and to be friendly and even affectionate to those who were her spiritual sisters in love. We are told by Hogg, a very narrow orthodox Christian, that "in no individual perhaps was the moral sense more completely developed than in Shelley -- in no being was the perception of right and wrong more accurate."2

Thus we have seen that, though opposed to historical Christianity because its fruits were not the fruits of the seed of Christ's pure and unadulterated doctrines, he evolved a system of religious thought that was eminently Christian in its larger significance, and then, put his system to the acid test of every day application. He proved conclusively that his high religious idealism, with its clear, penetrating and all encompassing view of life and the world, was practical, and that love, tolerance, virtue and wisdom are the essential basic requisites for the advancement of mankind. It will be unpleasantly surprising if, at some future date when mankind is less

1. It seems likely that Shelley was more sinned against than sinning in his relations with Harriet. (See Dowden's Life, especially Pgs. 217, 220, 223, 225, 235, 334.)
2. T. J. Hogg's "Life of Shelley"
narrow and bigoted, Shelley does not take his place in the minds of Christian people as a poet with a great message and, as a man, remarkably near to the purity of Christ in the unparalleled promulgation and practice of the highest virtue. "Loving, innocent, sensitive, secluded from the vulgar concerns of his companions, strongly moralized after a peculiar and inborn type of excellence, drawing his information from nature and from his own soul in solitude, Shelley passed across the stage of this world attended by a splendid vision which sustained him at a perilous height above the kindly race of men."¹

¹ "Shelley" by John A. Symonds (Eng. Men of Letters Series)
SUMMARY

Shelley's Theory and Practice of Religion

Shelley was violently opposed to historical or established Christianity. He declared it to be an enemy to progress and an aggregation of all social evils. He clearly saw the faults and excesses of the established church of his time and was relentless in his criticism of it. To him, miracles, prophecies and martyrdoms were false foundations upon which an unenlightened people relied for proof of a puerile and unsatisfactory religious conception; an anthropomorphic God, a heaven of angels and golden streets, and a hell of grovelling wretches bearing eternal punishment seemed utterly inconsistent with the probable purpose of a Great Benignant Principle. Prayer, used to change the purpose of God or as a formal testimony of our obedience, appeared childish; the Bible, when interpreted in the strictly literal sense of the church of his time, abounded in inconsistency and in nauseating conceptions. The final proof of the ridiculousness of organized Christianity lay in the evident conflict between the doctrines of Christ and the True God and the dogmas of the established church in reference to such matters as the attributes of God, the future state, and the interpretation of the doctrines of the Master. The viciousness of the Christian system had its roots in the falsehood, hypocrisy, and brute force employed by its enthusiasts; it condemned itself, he tells us, to utter oblivion by the very means it seized upon for its propagation.
Having rejected historical Christianity, he searched for some sound system of religious belief. He perceived the fallacy and the shallowness of French materialism and rejected it. Then, with the philosophy of Plato and Berkeley as minor influences, he constructed a lasting and satisfactory system of thought on the pure doctrines of Jesus Christ, unencumbered by the dogmas of centuries of theologians.

This philosophy, though not sympathetic with established doctrine, is nevertheless essentially Christian. It seemed to him that the purpose of religion was to point the way to that great spiritual happiness which can only be obtained by virtuous and noble conduct. He saw God as the Soul of the Universe -- an animating, immanent, all-encompassing Power, - at once impersonal and lovable, serene and yet consoling, who manifests Himself in nature as the Soul of Beauty and in man as the Unconquerable Spirit of Love; this Benignant Principle supplies life with the deepest values and calls men to love all humankind. Shelley revealed the God of Christ, - in His matchless purity and immensity, - discriminating against none, creating good from evil, and evolving a perfect harmony from the seeming chaos of mortal existence. He believed in the Christian doctrine of immortality, - and conceived that, at death, we are made one with God, becoming a part of a great directing Consciousness, and yet retaining those spiritual values which compose personality; thus we form a definite part of that Life
which uses our individual balances of spiritual power as integral parts of its total expression. Furthermore, Shelley was a devoted disciple of Christ; he saw him as a man of extraordinary genius, - eternally at war with all evil and oppression, - whose methods were the methods of every clever reformer, whose doctrines, if stripped of theological encumbrances, would free the world from habit and superstition and cause it to embrace the principles of truth and reality, whose purpose was the abolishing of all artificial distinctions by means of love and truth, and whose great accomplishment lay in teaching humanity the way of spiritual life. He recognized the greatness of soul and conscience, and believed in the power of unselfish prayer. He bitterly opposed all anthropomorphisms and relegated the half-truths of theological invention to utter oblivion. He emphasized the power of love, toleration, brotherhood, goodness, virtue and wisdom as rejuvenating forces for our social system. Finally, his conception of the incomprehensible harmony of a unified universe where all things play their allotted parts in the task of creating, from chaos, a perfect whole without a flaw to mar its symmetry is alluring, satisfactory and comforting.

Furthermore, Shelley's life provides an exhilarating demonstration of the sincerity of his philosophy. His tolerant generosity, his spirit of complete forgiveness, his whole hearted and self-effacing philanthropy, and his practice of the pure doctrine of spiritual love show
us that he practiced, as well as preached, the principles of pure Christianity.
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