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Faith of a novelist : religion in John Galsworthy's work

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Conclusion

To the modern reader John Galsworthy's reputation is primarily based on his trilogies, *The Forsyte Saga* (1922), *A Modern Comedy* (1929) and *The End of the Chapter* (1934), collectively called *The Forsyte Chronicles*. The novels that are less well-known today, such as *The Country House* (1907), *Fraternity* (1909), *The Patrician* (1911), *The Dark Flower* (1913) and *Saint's Progress* (1919) were widely read and well-received in his own times, though, and solidly confirmed the name that he had made for himself. In the first two decades of the twentieth century Galsworthy also made his mark as a successful playwright and contributed to a new movement in modern drama, together with Bernard Shaw, J.M. Synge, James Barrie, St John Hankin and Harley Granville-Barker. In addition Galsworthy gained appreciation through his short stories, his essays and his lecture tours.

Galsworthy's readers also knew him as an activist taking stands and speaking out throughout his life on controversial issues, from solitary confinement, slum clearance, divorce law, to censorship and cruelty to animals. As such, he lobbied with politicians and used his reputation as a writer to gain access to the highest political circles. As Chairman of the International PEN Club he also gained international repute, and was respected for his leadership and vision in the furtherance of international understanding through personal friendliness and hospitality among writers all over the world.

Literary criticism and scholarly publications on Galsworthy's oeuvre mainly focus on such themes as the changing times, social abuse, middle-class hypocrisy, morality, unhappy marriage, adultery and divorce law, the Great War and land reform. There is one theme, however, the theme of religion and philosophy that most of his biographers and literary critics have largely ignored. My aim for this book, therefore, was to fill this gap by analysing the religious aspects in Galsworthy's work and his religious and philosophical development.

Galsworthy's life was marked by a number of events that influenced his thinking: his discussions with his elder sister Lillian; his meeting with Joseph Conrad in 1893, which marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship; his illicit love affair with Ada, his cousin Arthur Galsworthy's wife; Ada's divorce in 1904, their marriage in 1905; the literary guidance he received from Edward and Constance Garnett, who both actively championed the interest in Russian literature and introduced Galsworthy to the works of Turgenev and Tolstoy; and, finally, his friendship with Bernard Shaw, who welcomed him to the British stage. These were the main ingredients for the start of Galsworthy's career as a novelist and a dramatist, but they also determined much of his philosophical and religious ideas at the beginning of his career.

There was a clear turning-point in his career after 1910. Not only is his work less satirically tinted from then on, but there is also a shift in emphasis from the satirical to the philosophical. *The Inn of Tranquillity* bears witness to this change and marks the beginning of an in-depth probe into the philosophical ideas that remained central to his character

throughout his life. The Great War proved to be another landmark in his career. Although he was an avowed pacifist, he agreed with the nation that Germany's violation of basic human rights justified this war. Unfit for active service, Galsworthy did his bit by serving as a masseur in France for the Red Cross, and by setting up a hostel for disabled soldiers in London. He always tried to practise what he preached. His literary output was affected by his war efforts, however, which clearly harmed his reputation. His novels *Beyond* (1917) and *The Burning Spear*¹ (1919) are examples of his less-appreciated literary work from those years, and, indeed, they strike a discordant note. Also his diaries for 1917 and 1918 show how preoccupied he was with matters outside the literary domain. In the 1920s he worked on his second and third Forsyte trilogies, which re-established his position as an acclaimed novelist. His plays, however, no longer matched the success he had with his novels at the time, as his tendency to moralise and satirise no longer seemed to suit the taste of the audience in the 1920s.

In this book I have tried to establish what influence other writers and philosophers had on Galsworthy's development. Galsworthy himself says that it was "the spirit of Dickens" that inspired a passion in him, "the first serious and most abiding passion of [his] imaginative life". Dickens' influence on Galsworthy makes itself especially felt in such themes as the church and hypocrisy, social injustice and humanitarianism, marriage and divorce. Galsworthy also appreciated Samuel Butler for his scathing criticism of the Church and the clergy and his controversial views on death and belief in God.

Galsworthy admitted that the Russian novelists Turgenev, Tolstoy and the French novelists Flaubert, Maupassant and France were sources of inspiration to him, too. It is Turgenev's freethinking heroes, Bazarov and Litvinov, and Tolstoy's Pierre and Levin that serve as models to many of Galsworthy's male characters. It is Turgenev's Irina and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina that inspired Galsworthy to create Irene in *The Man of Property* (1906). In Irene, for that matter, there are also echoes from Henry James' Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Flaubert and Maupassant's novels of unhappy marriages and adultery, and Anatole France's brazenly outspoken criticism of contemporary French society and the Church, complete the picture of writers from whom Galsworthy felt he had taken much of his inspiration. Finally, however, there is also Olive Schreiner's influence on his development, which has so far been ignored in studies of Galsworthy's work. What these writers had in common was their rejection of traditional religion and their humanism, but also their ideas on the position of women caught in the chains of unhappy marriage, and of established morality concerning adultery, separation and divorce. These were the ingredients Galsworthy was looking for in the works of his literary predecessors, as these were the central questions in his life from 1895 to 1905.

Although Galsworthy never accepted that Ibsen had influenced his work, on a number of thematic issues, clear parallels are noticeable, though, mainly in the themes of unhappy marriage and divorce, the emancipation of women (the rise of the "new woman"), and the role

¹ John Galsworthy, *The Burning Spear*, 1919, London, Heinemann, 1927

of the Church. Similar parallels may be traced in the work of August Strindberg. Galsworthy's close friendship with contemporary playwrights, such as Shaw and Barrie, but also with contemporary novelists such as Conrad and Hudson, and the classical scholar Gilbert Murray, created the cultural and intellectual background from which Galsworthy's creative work originated. First and foremost, it is agnosticism, humanism and feelings of anti-orthodoxy, anti-clericalism, anti-hypocrisy and humanitarianism, which all these writers have in common.

I have shown that Galsworthy's remark to Hardy that he was "miserably read in Philosophy", was indeed an understatement. Judging from his references to Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, he had actively read the German philosophers. Although he appreciated Nietzsche's tongue-in-cheek, Galsworthy rejected Nietzsche's views on the individual versus the state and joined Shaw in his repudiation of Nietzsche's concept of the "noble man". He distrusted the German philosophers in general, because it was in their philosophies that he recognised the portents of future war, and, indeed, it was the Great War which would prove him right. Through Conrad Galsworthy had also become aware of Schopenhauer's thought, and traces of these are noticeable in Galsworthy's work, especially concerning such themes as determinism and free will, Judaism, life and death, and original sin.

Galsworthy was familiar with Spencer's and Huxley's philosophies concerning agnosticism. He had also actively studied Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and *Literature and Dogma* (1873), both works providing him with novel insights into the Bible, the Church, concepts of death and the Deity. Finally, he was well-versed in Bergson's major works: *Time and Free Will* (1889), *Introduction à la métaphysique* (1903), and *L'Évolution créatrice* (1907), especially where such concepts as "instinct" and "intuition", "free will" and "determinism", "creation" and "the universe" were concerned.

In marked contrast to what some biographers have claimed, through the years Galsworthy remained a believer in free will, convinced as he was that the Christian concept of "providence" did not exist, and that one should always try to face one's fate, defy it and strive to perfect oneself. Galsworthy's motto is "character is fate", but at the same time he admits that there are forces in play beyond the influence of man. Eventually he concedes that there is no real antagonism between determinism and free will, which brings to light a first, major parallel between Galsworthy's views and those of the French philosopher, Henri Bergson. Galsworthy also rejects 'prayer' as a means to influence fate. He maintains that "the only efficient, the only decent Prayer, is Action." In this matter too he was inspired by earlier writers, most notably W.H. Hudson. Also in Galsworthy's philosophical concept of 'existence' Bergson's influence becomes visible again. The latter's ideas on the *élan vital*, the vital impulse underlying all creation and existence, exerted an overriding influence on Galsworthy's thinking in the period 1910-1918. Galsworthy transfers Bergson's ideas to his own work and completely absorbs them, at least for some years, as his own. As late as the 1930s, however, traces of Bergson's notions are still visible, particularly the concept of "perfection". This also proves that Galsworthy was susceptible to and had a thorough knowledge and understanding of Bergson's philosophy, the echoes of which reverberate

throughout Galsworthy work, but which has not been noted before by Galsworthy's biographers and literary critics.

Galsworthy's aversion to institutionalised religion becomes clear from his descriptions of churches and churchgoers. There is not a single village church, nor a single churchgoer that escapes his biting pen. Galsworthy contrasts these cold and dark churches, and the dark-clothed churchgoers, with the bright sunlight outside, reinforcing the negative feelings associated with the church, almost turning it into a contrast between life and death. Galsworthy models this imagery on what he read in Dickens, Maupassant and Schreiner. However, he takes a slightly different approach where Roman Catholic churches are concerned. The reason for these comparatively positive descriptions lies in his own favourable experiences with the French clergy during the Great War. Galsworthy's descriptions of cathedrals are greatly different from those of village churches and Roman Catholic churches. He seems to have been more appreciative of cathedrals by the end of his life, seeing them as works of art, remnants of Britain's past, which offered him a "sense of escape", harmony and equilibrium.

One might look for Galsworthy's aversion to the church and churchgoing in his past. Galsworthy himself observes, however, that churchgoing and prayer, though a matter of course of his childhood, "were never pressed to the point of fatigue or tyranny" (Marrot 1936, 56). Irene's remark about churchgoing in *Awakening* (1920), may offer us a clue to the contrary, however: "We both of us went when we were little. Perhaps we went when we were too little." Galsworthy describes his churchgoers in depressing tones, modelled on the examples of his literary predecessors. He also frequently points to the scantiness of the congregations, and also shows how people experience a sense of relief when the church service is over. His main object in this is the exposure of middle-class hypocrisy and the gap between the churchgoers and their spiritual guides.

The picture that Galsworthy draws of the clergy is partly based on the clergy's social position by the end of the nineteenth century, with only a small minority of clergy that could be regarded as better-off and as the social equals of the landed gentry. Incomes of vicars and rectors varied greatly depending on the size of the parish and the revenues with which the living provided them. Curates were exploited and frequently they had to rely on charitable organisations for the support of their families, which explains the origin of Galsworthy's caricature of the "anaemic" curates in many of his early novels and plays. Galsworthy also observed the clergy from close by in the persons of his uncle Lionel, whom Galsworthy's father described as a "dogmatic chap," and his uncle Robert, "a man of means, of which he disposed very quickly." Galsworthy recalls that his uncle Robert had twelve children, and, indeed, in his novels Galsworthy seizes every opportunity to point to the sheer size of clergymen's families. According to Galsworthy, parson's wives and parson's families were not to be envied.

Galsworthy goes to great lengths to expose clergymen's double standards, modelled after examples from earlier writers, Dickens and Butler in particular. Over the years, however, some sympathy towards the clergy began to develop as Galsworthy realised what

psychological struggle some of them were going through in reality, and what role some of them played in the trenches during the Great War and in slum-relief projects. It is this very struggle with religious doubt, their transparency about this and their increased humanitarianism, which finally softened Galsworthy's anti-clericalism. In Edward Pierson, the protagonist of *Saint's Progress* (1919), Galsworthy portrays the stereotypical High Churchman, modelled, perhaps, on Jim's father in Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), and James Morell in Shaw's *Candida* (1898), a play that John and Ada Galsworthy attended in October 1910. The true role model for the clergy that Galsworthy created was Hilary Cherell, the 'slum priest' who devoted his life to work in an urban, working-class parish, trying to identify himself totally with the life of his parishioners, a picture Galsworthy may have based on the clergyman in Shaw's *Widower's Houses* (1892).

Galsworthy inveighs against institutionalised religion as embodied in a Church that tried to "command rather than to serve", a Church that stood aloof from what really happened in life, and whose social involvement he found too meagre. He also satirises the upper middle classes for their hypocrisy in relation to religion and their narrow moral values. He blames the Church for not making a firmer pacifist stand, and allowing nations with the same belief to fight one another. Galsworthy looks upon the Church's failure to prevent war as the bankruptcy of Christianity. He also rejects Nonconformism as the embodiment of orthodoxy, and when referring to the religious views of Nonconformists, Galsworthy criticises their blind acceptance of their faith. He utterly rejects men like John Wesley and General Booth, a rejection that found its roots in the works of Dickens, Hawthorne and Matthew Arnold, and was reinforced by W.H. Hudson and G.B. Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1905-1907).

Galsworthy appeals for a renewed and secularised Christianity from a truly humanitarian spirit. He sympathised with the poor and the oppressed, and felt that socialism provided the best guarantee for a solution to contemporary social problems. His fervent humanitarianism is not rooted in politics though. Although he sympathised with the Fabian principles of gradual reform, he was basically apolitical. On issues such as slum housing and sweated labour he felt great kinship with such authors as Dickens and Maupassant, but was also led by examples in the works of contemporary playwrights. Galsworthy no longer believed in the dogmatic Christianity of the established Church, but believed in a "demystified faith", a new faith of "unselfish humanity," in which "God is the helping of man by man," which he eventually labels as an "ethic Christianity." Especially Dickens' novels and Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* had a lasting influence on Galsworthy in this respect. Galsworthy himself was an active champion of a number of good causes and did so from the true feeling that if we "profess humanity" we cannot sit and suffer "such barbarities and mean cruelties to go on amongst us as must dry the heart of God."

I have also shown Galsworthy's criticism of society for its double standards regarding pre-marital sex, adultery, divorce and prostitution. Galsworthy's creativity was kindled by such issues as the loveless marriage, adultery, church weddings, the marriage bond, divorce and divorce law. He frequently points out the social evil of the marriage of 'convenience', which is only continued for the sake of morality and for the Church's claim that the marriage bond is

indissoluble. Galsworthy repudiates the sanctity of marriage as articulated in the traditional “Marriage Service” in *The Book of Common Prayer*. He does so especially because it underlines women’s inferior position within matrimony, stresses the need for the procreation of children, and because it claims the indissoluble nature of this bond. Time and again Galsworthy poses the question whether continuing a loveless marriage was not just as sinful as divorce. Over the years there is a gradual shift in his work from his criticism of the Church to his criticism of divorce law, showing that the Church had gradually lost its hold on such matters and that it was rather established morality that held on to what Galsworthy deemed to be antiquated laws.

Throughout his writing life Galsworthy ponders the question of life after death. In his early years he questions and mainly searches for answers. As a maturer writer he rejects an afterlife in the Christian sense and stresses life in the present, rather than life hereafter. He becomes more philosophical in the second decade, albeit with a distinct touch of nostalgia and a sense of loss. Towards his own death in 1933 there is full resignation that death will ultimately mean “oblivion”, “darkness”, and “nothingness”. What remains is Galsworthy’s love of life as a guiding principle. Galsworthy’s remark in *Over the River* that “Death may be a good thing, but Life’s a better,” sums up, in the best possible way, the concept of death that he arrives at by the end of his life. Again it is the works of earlier writers that laid the foundations for Galsworthy’s outlook on death and life after death.

Galsworthy respected the Bible as a beautiful work of art, but frequently refers to it as a “fable” and a “legend”. He was familiar with Spencer and Huxley’s denial of the literal truth of the Bible and Arnold’s reference to orthodox theology as a “misinterpretation of the Bible”. The early 1890s were characterised by criticism of the Bible, of both the Old Testament and the New. The debate on the literal and historical truth of the Bible culminated when in 1891 prominent clergymen sent in their “Declaration of the Truth of Holy Scripture” to the editor of *The Times*. Clearly, England was moving from an age of religious certainties to one of uncertainty and doubt. Even thirteen years later, in 1904, there was a correspondence in the *Daily Telegraph*, entitled “Do we Believe?”, to which several thousand readers contributed, showing how Christian orthodoxies were still under widespread challenge (McLeod 1996, 176).

Galsworthy rejected the divinity of Christ, but still accepted and appreciated many of Christ’s sayings as laid down in the “Sermon on the Mount”, especially because of their humanitarian and universal truths. Galsworthy also frequently refers to the notion of “original sin”, and analysis shows that all these references have a distinct sexual colouring. They seem to point to a less familiar aspect of Galsworthy’s character: his unfulfilled desires and his ultimate acceptance of his own and human frailty.

Never in his writing life did Galsworthy believe in the anthropomorphic God of the Christian faith. Galsworthy’s belief in a deity developed from the pantheist idea that God was omnipresent in Nature, through the acceptance of the existence of “some great dignified principle” and a “Cosmic Spirit”, to an adoration of “the great wonders of Eternity.” However, also in an insect did he eventually see “a manifestation of divinity”, and did he

accept the existence of an all-pervading and harmonising principle. He openly rejects the authoritarian God of the Hebraic Scriptures in his poem "The Dream" (1912), exposing the God of the Old Testament as devoid of sympathy and understanding. After the Great War Galsworthy embraces the Bergsonian idea of God as "an endless Creative Instinct", and combines Herbert Spencer's and Henri Bergson's notions of the deity to "an Unknowable Creative Purpose, which colloquially we call God." Galsworthy believes that "God is within us, within the trees, the birds and inanimate matter—within everything. And there is no God outside us." Galsworthy rejects mysticism and theism, and believes that our conscience is all we have to go by.

American and English nineteenth-century thinkers influenced Galsworthy's intellectual growth from roughly 1887 to 1900. Parallel to this is his increased interest in literature and the literary masters in England and abroad. The ideas of these writers were an extension and a translation of those expressed by the nineteenth-century philosophers and acted as a catalyst to Galsworthy's own thinking. Henri Bergson, in combination with Herbert Spencer, was of overriding importance in the development of Galsworthy's concept of the deity, and formed the foundation for Galsworthy's own concept of the "Unknowable Creative Purpose which colloquially we call God." In 1931 Galsworthy arrives at: "But after all God was eternal mind that you couldn't understand; God was not a loving father that you could." Basically, God was to Galsworthy the "helping of man by man," a creed, which he tried to live up to all his life. Galsworthy realised how he was "pre-eminently the son of a time between two ages—a past age of old, unquestioning faith in authority; a future age of new faith, already born but not yet grown." He realised that in the Victorian era people were part of the "long and tremendous struggle . . . between Science and Orthodox Religion," and he calls the Victorian era, "an era without real faith." Galsworthy's literary predecessors openly struggled with their religious doubt and thereby accelerated among intellectuals the process of growing doubt, agnosticism, unbelief, atheism, ultimately leading to humanism. It is in humanism that Galsworthy feels a deep kinship with Charles Dickens, the Russian writers Turgenev and Tolstoy, and with the French novelists Flaubert, Maupassant and France. He feels the same kinship with his friend W.H. Hudson, whom he refers to as the "standard bearer of new faith." Galsworthy terms the period around 1912 a "Third Renaissance", as it witnessed the birth of a "new philosophy", a philosophy, which he qualifies as "the only possible religion" that aims at "love of Perfection, not for hope of reward, not for fear of punishment, but for Perfection's sake." Galsworthy signals the steady decline of church attendance after World War I and predicts that orthodox believers in the coming generations will constitute a minority. In fact, he estimates the number of true believers in the early thirties at only "ten to fifteen per cent".

John Galsworthy was profoundly influenced by Spencerian agnosticism, having derived the concept of the "Unknowable God" from Spencer's philosophy. He calls himself an agnostic where it concerns the "great Why" of things, as he refers to this himself. However, he is more of a Spencerian agnostic than a Huxleyan one, for like Spencer, Galsworthy believes in a divine force as represented in nature or in man, in a pantheist sense, not in the Christian sense. With Bergson he believes in God and the universe as an eternal, creative

force, referring to it as the “Impersonal Creative Instinct”, and he looks upon this impulse to create as “the Good—the God.” With Tolstoy he regards “faith in God, in the good, as the sole purpose of man” and, with Tolstoy, Galsworthy is convinced that “the Kingdom of God is within you”. Galsworthy’s God is “Eternal mind that you couldn’t understand,” and not unlike Emerson’s “Oversoul”. Basically, Galsworthy’s faith is “a sense of an all-pervading spirit, and the ethical creed that seems best to serve it,” or, in other words, “a mere creed that good must be done . . . just out of a present love of dignity.” Still, as late as 1930, we see Bergson’s influence when Galsworthy says that “the best of faiths is the will towards Perfection operating in all that has ever been, is now, and ever shall be.” Above all, and especially by the end of his life, Galsworthy was a believer in life, a believer in man, Confucian and Humanist, rather than Christian, regarding justice, love and courage as elemental virtues and our conscience as the instrument to lead us to perfection. According to Galsworthy, this in itself makes human life “worth while” and may bring “an inner happiness”. What Galsworthy propagated was the Confucian principle of “belief in ancestors, and tradition, respect for parents, honesty, moderation of conduct, kind treatment of animals and dependants, absence of self-obtrusion, and stoicism in [the] face of pain and death.”