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Burns: His kirk, his religion.

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BURNS: HIS KIRK, HIS RELIGION

by

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INTRODUCTION

It is much easier and more interesting to collect garbled anecdotes and insignificant incidents which can be moulded to suit individual theories than it is to find the character of the poet in the whole body of his work. For that reason, from the earliest biographers and essayists, Currie and Cunningham, to more recent biographers and critics, Catherine Carswell (1931), Grant Smith (1940), and Robert Fritzhugh (1969), superficial criticism has been built up concerning Burns; particularly shallow has been the criticism of Burns's religion. Critics and biographers are too prone to take for granted and copy what their precursors have said, so we are continually finding the same half-truths and undocumented fabrications. We are tired of hearing that Robert Burns freed Scotland from the tyranny of Calvinism and we are tired of hearing that Calvinism meant to its followers only a belief in hell and an assurance of their own election. Even the more competent critics discuss Burns's religion in sweeping statements. Carlyle said Burns had no religion, Miss Christina Keith depicts Burns as unquestionably a Calvinist, J. L. Hughes presents Burns as being unquestionably an anti-Calvinist, Fergusson and MacCaig both present Burns's religious views as those of a schizophrenic.

The poetry and letters of Burns have been used to support almost every conceivable religious opinion from the orthodox to the merely eccentric. Burnsians of every religious school have pulled threads from his back to patch their own coats. What we have presented to us by the critics is a vociferous stack of contradictions. It would seem that the

Caledonian antisyzygy rides again.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the common ground underlying these contradictions. To do this, this essay will show that Burns's religious consciousness was based intellectually on moral laws to which man conforms through reason; morally, as a Christian, on the love of God and on Christian charity towards men; and sentimentally, on the affections and passions of the benevolent heart.[1] Once establishing a basis for Burns's religious convictions, it is easy to show that Burns had no definite system of theology but agreed with the views that came within the framework of his own sentimentalism.

Burns was not a mercenary fighter for any religious sect but, from his own religious convictions, he satirized what he considered to be profane and hypocritical in the kirk.

This essay also provides a survey of the background which is necessary for an understanding of Burns's attitude toward the kirk.

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1. In this study the stress will be mainly on the second and third bases, for it was a concept of "feeling" which mostly affected his poetry and letters. (Catchwords, such as "feeling" are not the worst of clues to the character of Burns. They may not tell the whole story, but they point out certain elements in it which help to catch the mood of much of Burns's attitude toward religion.)

CHAPTER ONE

THE SCOTTISH KIRK

i

After the marriage of Queen Mary of Scotland in 1558 to the Dauphin of France (later King Frances of Scotland), it became apparent that Scottish independence was being sacrificed to French interests. It was this sacrifice of independence which in part led to the Scottish Reformation. In 1559, Mary of Guise, who by this time was considered by the Scottish people to be both French and Catholic, was ousted from her position as regent. The government was taken over by the Lords of the Congregation who were responsible for the Scottish Parliament of 1560. "It was this parliament that overthrew Catholicism and enacted a Protestant Confession of Faith, although its acts never received royal approval."[1] Although the parliament of 1560 was in favour of Protestantism, it rejected Knox's First Book of Discipline simply because the nobles[2] were more interested in the wealthy church lands than in any ecclesiastical code. For seven years after this parliament, Knox's ecclesiastical views were denied formal political recognition, with the result that during this period Knox's Calvinism and Knox's form of discipline were practised voluntarily by

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1. David Daiches, The Paradox of Scottish Culture (London, 1964), p. 36.

2. The Scottish Parliament until very near the end of its life was far from a popular assembly; it was essentially feudal and baronial ...it can hardly be said that Scotland's history-making Reformation Parliament represented the Scottish people. Ibid., p. 37.

those who believed them. Since Knox was influenced by Calvin, Scottish Presbyterianism was modelled on the system of Calvin. The Calvinistic-Presbyterian church provided a severely united but democratic form of administration in which the people chose their own pastors[3] and then elected lay elders[4] to share with the pastor in governing the local church. Central authority was given to representative bodies of ministers and laymen who were chosen by the church they represented. Thus the decision-making bodies ranged from the local Kirk Session to the General Assembly, the highest decision-making body of the church, allowing the movement of opinions from the smaller communities to the very centre of the country. The democratic Calvinist church provided means of expression for the layman in the smaller community, something the Scottish Parliament had never done.[5]

In 1643 the parliamentary party signed the Solemn League and Covenant with Scotland, pledging the civil and religious unity of England, Scotland, and Ireland under a Presbyterian parliamentary system. The parliament ordered the Assembly of Divines to proceed, with the help of six Scottish advisors, to the drafting of a new religious constitution for the three kingdoms.

The Assembly (called the Westminister Assembly because its meetings were held in Westminister Abbey) wrote a Confession of Faith (known as

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3. Knox states in the fourth head of the First Book of Discipline that "It appertaineth to the people and to every several congregation to elect their own minister." Quoted in George Grub's Ecclesiastical History of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1861), II, p. 93.

4. The eighth head of the First Book of Discipline states that the church elders and deacons should be elected from each congregation yearly. Ibid., p. 94.

5. It is interesting to note the democratic trend in Scottish Presbyterianism, but the democracy applied only to the faithful.

the Westminister Confession), a Larger and a Shorter Catechism, a Form of Government, and a Directory of Public Worship. The Scottish church and the Scottish Parliament accepted these documents almost immediately.

The parliamentary union of England and Scotland (1707) left Scotland with a national church[6] but as David Daiches points out, "We must recognize that no settlement could have succeeded in institutionalizing in a national form all the ideals, aspirations, beliefs and principles which had been developed in the fierce religious and politico-religious conflicts of the preceding century."[7] Indeed, a national church did not solve all of the problems, for after the parliaments were united, patronage was restored to Scotland. Within the established church were two parties: one, a group of hard line orthodox Presbyterians (covenanters, and later known as Auld Lights); the other, a group of essentially professional clergymen (Moderates, and later known as New Lights), whose interests were in social life, in culture, and in their prerogatives within a state establishment.[8]

In 1759, the year of Burns's birth, the more orthodox Calvinism, with the popular election of ministers, still prevailed in the smaller districts, while the Moderates were in power in the larger cities and among the landed gentry.

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6. Such a leap from 1643 to 1707 passes over many of the religious and political conflicts of the 17th Century.

7. Daiches, p. 40.

8. Douglas Nobbs, England and Scotland, 1560-1707 (London, 1952), p. 34.

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Most Burns's critics who discuss his religion would have us believe, as does J. L. Hughes in The Real Robert Burns, that Calvinism was "one of the most horrible blasphemous doctrines ever preached."[9] Mr. Hughes would have us believe Calvinism preached that all mankind, since the original sin, is justifiably under the curse of God and is born into the world wholly in sin, that God deals with humanity out of no regard to character or conduct, that God elects a limited number of persons and places them in a state of grace from which there is no fall, leaving the rest of mankind helpless in their native corruption by withholding the grace which could save them, thus necessarily casting them into Hell for ever.[10] If Hughes and other Burns's critics[11] like him are correct, then we would wonder at the fact that 17th and 18th Century Scotland embraced Calvinism as a basis for a religious creed, which it unquestionably did.

Calvinism was intensely dogmatic from its conception.[12] Calvin, himself a brilliant and consistent theologian, was careful to organize

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9. J. L. Hughes, The Real Robert Burns, (Toronto, n.d.), p. 67.

10. Ibid., pp. 63-98.

11. One does not have to read far in The Burns Chronicle and Club Directory before discovering that there are not a few second rate critics who talk about Burns and Religion. See, among others, D. M'Naught, The Burns Chronicle and Club Directory, 1926, pp. 70-77, and James Muir, The Burns Chronicle and Club Directory, 1932, pp. 80-93.

12. See James Orr's excellent essay "Calvinism" in The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, ed., James Hastings (Edinburgh, 1908), II, pp. 146-155.

his system so completely into a unity that there were no loose edges that might cause disputes among his followers. While his theological system was airtight as far as his followers and all the orthodox Calvinists were concerned, it left little room for the inquiring mind. Rather, the severe logical consecutiveness tended to rouse opposition.

The doctrine of Absolute Predestination was the cause of much of the opposition: its logic seemed harsh and unChristian. One form of opposition manifested itself in the reactionary group known as the Arminians.[13] Formed as a reaction to the Predestination doctrine,[14] the movement subsequently opposed the rigidity of Calvinism as a whole, interpreting the Calvinist God, who from pure will divided the human race into the "saved" and the "not saved", as a kind of blind fate.

The Calvinist idea of a God of election is like the idea of the ultimate power in tragedy, which cannot adequately be described as a law or order which we can see to be just and benevolent, nor can it be described accurately as a blind and relentless fate.[15] It is, as the Calvinist theologians recognized, inscrutable, and will always remain a

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13. "Many symptoms of dissent were manifest before Arminiamism arose as a definite reaction." Arminianism, Ibid., I, p. 808.

14. The Predestination doctrine of Calvinism, generally regarded as its most characteristic feature, is not peculiar to Calvin. It is at least as old as Augustine; it was maintained by Luther and Zwingli as stoutly as by Calvin himself. The atonement and Justification by Faith without works or merits of the sinners own are in the main the common heritage of Protestantism. What Calvin did was to mould these doctrines into a logically articulated system under the guidance of the great determining thought of God's absolute sovereignty both in the world of nature and the world of spirit, and to give them a form fitted to exercise the strongest influence on both intellect and will, in the individuals and peoples accepting them.

15. See A. C. Bradley, Shakespearian Tragedy, Lecture I, (London, reprint 1965), pp. 1-29.

mystery; but, however we describe this ultimate power, it appears part of that order of which individuals form an inconsiderable part; it determines, more than we do ourselves, our native disposition; it is far more complex than any moral order or conception of justice we can formulate and because of this it carries out its purposes without regard to our desires or regrets.

When the Calvinist God allows the majority of persons to be damned eternally, He is not necessarily unjust and unChristian, but is merely fulfilling a divine order which, encompassing time and space, is beyond accommodating those who in obedience to a finite social order of their own creation, have lived with distinction.

The Arminians (as well as the modern critics of Calvinism) failed to see that the Calvinist idea of an Omnipotent God included infinite love; hence the difference between Calvinism and Fatalism. The Arminians believed in the idea of free activity of the human will which had equal power with the divine will in the work of salvation.[16] To the Calvinist, this was heresy, for it implied the denial of divine grace and transferred the act of salvation from God to man.

In Scotland the Calvinists[17] used the Westminister Confession of Faith to judge the opinions (or "heresies", as the Calvinists called them) of the New Light Preachers. If any idea deviated from the Westminister Confession, even if it did so by close examination of the scriptures, its originator was accused of heresy. Thus the conflicts,

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16. Frederick Platt, "Armeniamism", Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, I, p. 808.

17. In this essay the term "Calvinism" will refer to covenanters and Auld Licht Presbyterians.

instead of leading to enlightenment, often lead to schisms.[18] By its repressive nature, Orthodoxy laid itself open to well-deserved censure.

But in spite of its repressive authoritanianism, Calvinism stood for democracy[19] and national liberty (both civil and ecclesiastical). The covenanters,[20] who were Calvinists, had always maintained that sovereign power was vested in the people and not in the king.[21]

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18. William Law Mathieson, Scotland and the Union, 1695 - 1747, (Glasgow, 1905), pp. 205-276.

19. Calvinism ruled out freedom of the will, yet the emergence of Calvinistic Presbyterianism in Scotland allied Calvinism with an idea of national freedom and an idea of democracy. The Calvinist Church provided a severely limited but democratic form of administration. The decision-making bodies ranged from the local kirk session to the General Assembly, the highest decision-making body of the Church, thus allowing the movement of opinions from the smaller communities to the very center of the country. Thus the Democratic Calvinist Church provided means for expression for the layman in the smaller community.

20. Burns writes of the covenanters:

> The Solemn League and Covenant,
> Now brings a smile, now brings a tear.
> But sacred freedom, too, was theirs:
> If thou'rt a slave, indulge they sneer.

21. Douglas Nobbs, England and Scotland, 1560 - 1707 (London, 1952), p. 113.

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From the time of John Knox, the Kirk had been democratic in form, and long before the birth of Robert Burns, it had been free from state control. All churches and parishes were independent of one another and were administrated only by assemblies appointed from their own number to represent them at session. There was a Kirk Session in every parish, made up of elders and deacons to whom were assigned the spiritual superintendence of different parts of the parish. This group was alert to neglect in observing the Sabbath.[22] The moment any suspicion entered the mind of the Session, an investigation commenced and was not dropped until

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22. Sunday acquired in Scotland a sanctity which far exceeded that of the Sabbath of the Jews in their most Pharisaical days--equalling in austerity the Puritanism of New England. It is a mistake, however, to believe that a "Scottish Sabbath" is a distinctive peculiarity of Presbyterianism, for it was upheld as vigorously, and breaches of it were punished as vigorously in the reign of Episcopacy. The day was fenced about by solemn preparation. Sedateness and gravity were required especially on the Saturday night, by which time the fire was 'set' for the morrow, the provisions prepared, the goodman's face snipped with scissors or shaved of a week's growth of hair. In the country towns and villages at 6 o'clock on Sabbath morning, the church bell rang to waken the people for their solemn duties. To attend church was no question of choice: it was a matter of compulsion. During the service, edlers went out to "perlustrate" the streets, to enter change houses, to look into windows and doors of private dwellings, and to bring deserters to Kirk, or report them to Kirk Session. When evening came, again the vigilant patrol of elders set forth to force to their homes all who were found "vaguing", strolling, or loitering in the fields or roads. Town councils were ever ready to assist elders and deacons in their operations against Sabbath desecrators. There was not a place where one was free from their inquisitorial intrusion. They might enter any house, and even pry into the rooms.

To carry a pail of water to the house, to fodder horses or clean their stalls, to cut kail in the yard, to grind snuff, all such offences were punished without hesitation. H. Gray Graham, Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century, (London, 1899), II, pp. 40-81.

guilt was established or the party was proven innocent.

All too often the stringent discipline of this Scottish Gestapo degenerated into tyranny, from which the only escape was an appeal to the Presbytery. Such an appeal was difficult because it involved a long administrative procedure.

The work required of the ministers for the pulpit was severe and incessant. Three 2 1/2-hour sermons[23] were required every Sunday. The theme of the sermons was invariably the same: the fourfold state of man. This included what man was like in a state of Innocence, what he was after the fall, what he is under the gospel of grace, and what shall be his eternal state. It was on this quartet of doctrines that the minister preached throughout his whole ministry without variation or cessation. These dogmas he discovered with perverse ingenuity in every text from the Song of Solomon, Leviticus, or Habakkuk.[24] With such a limited selection and the repetition that became inevitable, vocabulary and delivery became more important than text. Sermons became no more

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23. These sermons were obviously very long; they were not written, and they dared not be read, for that would be offensive to the people and call forth little blessing from the Lord. Ibid., pp. 27-31.

24. Ibid., p. 29. Limited as he was in subject, he was further restricted to texts, for he was expected week after week to discourse from the same passage of scripture. This custom demanded no little ingenuity, to avoid dreary repetition; and through months he had to rack his brain to turn barren metaphors in canticles to some fruitful evangelical sense, to insert meaning the Hebrew poet never dreamt of. Every text was twisted in a gospel significance "No thimble finger at a country fair more nimbly put under the thimble peas which he professed to have found there, than at 'Holy fairs' did ministers insert into Jewish words Calvinistic doctrines which he professed to discern therein." Ibid., p. 31.

than instruments for the delectation of the ungodly.[25]

By the time of Burns, the old strain of preaching with its gruesome rhetoric, had become less common and there was less emphasis laid on the harsh dogmas of old, although the creed remained unaltered. Strict Calvinism in the pulpit and the tyranny of the elders in the parish were becoming things of the past. There were, of course, a few of the staunch Calvinists left. Moodie and Russell ("The two herds"), Calvinists of the sternest type, were willing to enforce the "terrors of the law".

Nobody can deny that there were evils in the Calvinist church in the days of Burns--there are always religious evils present where the religion is lofty, earnest and difficult--yet, we must recognize, as did Burns himself, that there was also nobility and true religious feeling. The Scots' religion recognized that sin, which hinders man's efforts for perfection, was always an active force, hostile to man. Therefore, their religion never tired of urging man not simply to hide from sin but to become conscious of it, to awaken to a sense of sin and to overcome it. The Calvinist faith gave the people a constant sense of duty and enabled

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25. There is a danger in overemphasizing this point so much that it would seem that Calvinism banished from Scottish life all joy and gaiety and filled the people with terror and despair. A reading of Burns's poetry will prove that this is not so. "The Holy Fair" shows us a dual trait in the Scottish Temperament; e.g., we can see the same man taking part in public worship, talking intelligently on matters of the soul, who the night before indulged in a drunken debauch. This dual trait in the Scottish Temperament cannot be adequately explained, but it is the secret of much of Burns which would be otherwise inexplicable. The answer probably lies in Calvinism itself. The Calvinist is forever uncertain whether he has faith enough to be numbered amongst the elect, or whether he has experienced regeneration. So in a black, dour, unyielding religious mood the Calvinist determines to make sure and becomes very religious. Any profound religious state is often too much for the ordinary Calvinist (or any man) to achieve, and we find in its place--hypocrisy, or at least a change in stance.

them to accept and deal with times of trouble with a calm resignation: it made them conscious of the littleness of things having human value and the presence of things divine. Such a background gave the Scots people a confidence in a sure and definite way of life. However artificial the "Cotter's Saturday Night" may seem to us at first glance, it gives us an admirable (and true) picture of this side of Scottish religion.

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The reaction against the strictness of Calvinism began roughly at the end of the first quarter of the Eighteenth Century.[26] At the General Assembly in 1726 several Presbyteries told their representatives to propose that an inquiry be held to look into the truth of certain rumors affecting the soundness of Professor Simson's teaching with regard to the Trinity.[27] Many members of the Assembly of 1729 held that Simson's errors "were the most serious that had been broached in Scotland since the Reformation," that they were "gross and damnable."[28] The final decision of the Assembly was lenient toward the professor.[29]

But a man of more importance, at least to Burns and his area, was Simson's successor, Hutcheson, a man who directly influenced the Ayrshire New Light ministers. Simson had tried to explain away the doctrine of the fall by asserting that it conveyed a moral, not a legal taint, and

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26. This is about the same time as the rise of rationalism. Probably the two are very closely allied. A. B. Jamieson, Burns and Religion (Cambridge, 1931), p. 26.

27. John Simson was a Professor of Theology at Glasgow University between 1709 and 1729. Simson had departed from the orthodox conception of the Trinity. He taught that the three persons were not numerically one, that the Son was not necessarily existent, and that the term "supreme deity" might be used in a sense which applied only to the Father and not to the Son. Mathieson, p. 233.

28. Ibid., p. 233.

29. So lenient was the decision, in fact, that it caused much dissension which finally led to the great Secession of 1733.

that the rational creature was so constituted "as chiefly to seek its own good and happiness."[30] Hutcheson, without reference to this dogma, effectually dissolved it by developing Shaftesbury's idea of moral sense which "approves and recommends such dispositions as tend most to the public good."[31]

Hutcheson held that God is everywhere revealed in Nature and that everything is to testify to His goodwill. "Happiness," he says, "is far superior to misery even in this present world."[32] Hutcheson bids us meet all misfortune cheerfully, believing that God is most benign and all His doings are, in the end, for the best.

Lecky, in his History of England in the Eighteenth Century, tells the story that Hutcheson, while still a young man, took his father's place in the pulpit and preached for him. His sermon, tinctured with a new liberalism, caused many of the members to leave the church. "Your silly son Frank," reported one of the elders to his father, "has fashed a' the congregation wi' his idle cackle; for he has been babbling this oor aboot a gude and benevolent God, and that the souls of the heathen themsels will gang to heaven if they follow the licht of their ain consicience. Not a word does the daft boy ken, speer or say aboot the gude, comfortable doctrines of election, reprobation, original sin and faith. Hoot man, awa wi' sic a fellow."[33]

Many of the new Presbyterian ministers received their training

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30. Quoted in Mathieson, p. 254.

31. Ibid., p. 254.

32. Ibid., p. 253.

33. E. J. Lecky, History of England in the Eighteenth Century, (London, 1879), II, note p. 539.

under the influence of Hutcheson and carried his liberal theology into the country parishes where they came into conflict with the older, more orthodox ministers.

These New Lights (the name given to the new generation of ministers) were more liberal in their theology and more mellow in the delivery of their sermons, which now contained more moral and practical counsel and less theological discussion.[34]

Ayrshire, a country parish, was of course a stronghold of strict Calvinism; as a result, there was a bitter confrontation in that district between the New Lights and the Old Lights (the Orthodox Calvinists) and on both sides, as Lockhart says, "There was much to regret, and not a little to blame."[35] Dalrymple[36] and M'Gill, two ministers in Ayr, were the leaders of the New Light Party, and by their sermons they attracted such men as Gavin Hamilton, Robert Aiken, a writer in Ayr, and William Burnes, the poet's father. All these men were suspected of holding heretical opinions on the doctrines of Original Sin and the Trinity. Dalrymple's work, according to Chambers and Wallace, "deserves study in connection with Burns, if at all, for its tone. Mildness and gentleness of character are exhibited in everything he wrote, and the reader is tempted to discover in statements such as "Natural passions are not criminal, save when ill directed or ill employed," and "No penitent sinners whatever are excluded from pardon," "the origins of the poet's

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34. As the New Light principles became more popular they came more and more to stand for worldliness. They ceased to represent, in the eyes of Burns and many of his fellows in Eighteenth Century Scotland, a genuinely religious or genuinely Scottish feeling.

35. J. G. Lockhart, Life of Robert Burns, (London, n.d.), p. 86.

36. Dalrymple was the minister who baptised Robert Burns.

(Burns's) working theory of life, as well as the theological dogmas which he held so loosely."[37]

Dr. M'Gill, on the other hand, was more dogmatic in his beliefs which he set forth in his Practicle Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ. M'Gill states:

> Upon the whole, to suffer many indignities in the world, and to die upon the cross were not the chief and ultimate ends of our Savior's mission, nor any direct ends of it at all, but only incidental calamities, which could not fail to come upon him in discharging the duties of his mission faithfully, amidst an evil and adulterous generation. The direct and immediate end of his mission was to preach the gospel of the kingdom, or reveal the will of God; to confirm his doctrine by proper evidences; to set an example of what he taught; and, in short, to promote the salvation of sinners in the most effectual manner, whatever sufferings the doing so might bring upon him and though it should cost him his life.[38]

For God can have no delight in the misery of sinners, and we may well believe that

> it was not his will that Christ should suffer merely for the sake of the pain and the patience in enduring it. Rather, surely would God have spared his son the pains of the cross, if His designs toward men could have been otherwise accomplished.[39]

A spirit of Revolution was stirring in all Europe. Great changes were taking place. In Scotland the changes not only affected the literature but they kindled the desire for greater religious freedom. The New Lights saw that the old creeds of Calvinism could not satisfy the Scotland of their day. The Kirk as reformed by John Knox was becoming as tyrannical as the Roman Catholicism it had ousted and was itself in need of reform.

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37. Ibid., pp. 459-460.

38. Dr. M'Gill, Practicle Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ, Edinburgh, 1786), p. 13.

39. Ibid., p. 14.

CHAPTER TWO

BURNS'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE KIRK

i

To fully understand Burns's satires we must go back further than his dealings with the New Lights and consider his youthful education. Burns's satires come from something deeper than simply revenge on the poet's part after his treatment by Mr. Auld's Session[1]--the satires come

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1. In 1784, when the results of Burns's affair with Elizabeth Paton became obvious, the two were called before the Kirk Session for an inquiry into the matter. "There is no record of an appearance on the stool with Paton, but the circumstances of this, his initial difficulty, appear to be set forth in "Reply to a Trimming Epistle". Burns writes:

> This leads me on to tell for sport
> How I did wi' the Session sort:
> The Bellman Auld Clinkum at the inner port
> Cried three times:--'Robin!
> Come hither lad, and answer for't,
> Ye're blamed for jobbin!'
>
> Wi' pinch I put a Sunday's face on,
> Toddled off An' snoov'd awa' before the Session:
> I made an open, fair confession--
> I scorn'd to lie--
> then An' syne Mess John, beyond expression,
> Fell foul o' me (11, 97-98)

When Burns admitted to his part in the affair, the Kirk demanded penance in the form of a public reprimand, and a guinea for the 'poor box'. This punishment called forth from Burns, the "Epistle to John Rankine". The epistle serves Burns as a vent for the humiliation inflicted on him by the Kirk. It contained a great deal of bragging and venereal slang; but part of it is a witty satirical impeachment, openly aimed at the attitudes which the Scottish Kirk fostered and tinctured with Burns's scorn of the existing circumstances that created such humiliation. Burns writes to Rankine:

(Footnote continued on p. 17.)

from Burns's instinctive disgust at hypocrisy. When we understand what the poet received from his father, William Burnes, we shall see that the satires are as inevitable as the songs.

It was William Burnes's greatest ambition to bring up his children to be both educated and God-fearing. William Burnes was not an illiterate peasant: he liked nothing better than to engage in theological arguments.[2] "Gilbert (the poet's brother) tells how his father used to talk to him and his brother as though they were grown men, allowing them to discuss any subject they liked."[3] It is supposed that William Burnes is the

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1. (Footnote continued from p. 16.)

> Hypocrisy, in mercy spare it!
> That holy robe, O, dinna tear it!
> Spare't for their sakes, wha often wear it--
> The lads in black;
> But your curst wit, when it comes near it,
> Rivest off their back.
>
> Think, wicked sinner, wha ye're skaithing;
> It's just the Blue-gown badge an' claithing,
> O' saunts; tak that, ye lea'e them naething
> To ken them by
> Frae onie unregenerate heathen,
> Like you or I. (l. 176-177)

Henly and Henderson, IV, pp. 257-258.

2. Daiches, p. 39. Dr. Currie, the first editor of Burns's work, made a few observations on the quality of the Scottish peasants:

> A slight acquaintance with the peasantry of Scotland will serve to convince an unprejudiced observer that they possess a degree of intelligence not generally found among the same class of men in other countries of Europe. In the very humblest condition of the Scottish peasants, every-one can read, and most persons are more or less skilled in writing and arithmetic; and under the disguise of their uncouth appearance, and of their peculiar manners and dialect, a stranger will discover that they possess a curiosity and have obtained a degree of information corresponding to these acquire-ments.

Ibid., pp. 39-40

3. Hans Hecht, Robert Burns, The Man and His Work, (Glasgow, 1936), p. 5.

author of a tract entitled "Manual of Religious Belief". A dialogue between father and son, it consists of a few easily grasped[4] biblical precepts free from doubts and the harsh dogma of Calvinism.[5] The "Manual", which quotes the "Sermon on the Mount", has a strong liberal tinge, stressing the influence which subjective experience exerts on reason,[6] love, and righteousness. In the dialogue, Burnes says that repentance is necessary for salvation and defines repentance in these terms:

> I mean not only a sorrowing for sin, but a labouring to see the malignant nature of it; as setting nature at variance with herself, by placing the animal part before the rational and thereby putting ourselves on a level with the brute beasts, the consequence of which will be an intense war in the human frame, until the rational part is entirely weakened which is spiritual death, which in the nature of the thing renders us unfit for the society of God's spiritual kingdom and to see the beauty of holiness.[7]

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4. The catechising of children was an important feature of Scottish family worship. The children had to memorize the answers to the questions given in the Shorter Catechism and often the children would repeat the correct answer without understanding the question or the answer. William Burnes must have seen the weakness of this method for in his "Manual" he reversed the procedure. He encouraged the inquiring spirit of children by having them ask the questions while he gave them intelligible answers. It is more natural for children to be asking questions than to parrot back eloquent answers found in the Shorter Catechism. This seems like a very simple innovation, but it does show the wisdom of William Burnes.

5. Although this compendium of religious doctrine is fragmentary and defective even as a document reflecting the theology (Calvinistic and Arminian) of its own period, it points, with some clearness to some of the main tenets of the Christian faith. It has nothing to say of the Fatherhood of God or the brotherhood of Man in Jesus Christ; it lacks altogether the love-note of the Gospels; it savours more of the Old Testament than of the New; it has more of legality in it and human "works" than of the Grace of God; it has no intimacy of Godwardness, no suggestion of sacramental inwardness, none of the mystery of the Christ-relation, none of the everyday walk with and growing likeness to Christ, no reference to spiritual re-birth in express terms or to the heavenly world.

6. It is worth remarking how often the words "reason" and "rational" appear in the "Manual": These words were favourites of the New Lights.

7. Chambers, 1, "Manual of Religious Belief". Appendix No. II, p. 457.

Thus the subjective life is a continual struggle between animal instinct and controlling reason. The "Manual" goes on:

> ...setting the rational part above the animal, though it promote a war in the human frame, every conflict and victory affords us grateful reflection, and tends to compose the mind more and more, not to the utter destruction of the animal part, but to the real and true enjoyment of them by which in the natural consequence of the thing, promotes spiritual life, and not only so, but gives animal life pleasure and joy, that we never could have had without it.[8]

The ideal life is to attain inner peace and order, "whose aim is to exalt the mind above those irregular passions that jar, and are contrary one to another, and distract the mind by contrary pursuits." The final result of this conflict is the "uniformity of pursuits" which is dependent on the belief "that all our interests are under the care of our Heavenly Father."[9]

The intelligent and highly principled author of the "Manual", William Burnes, was a devout man and as was usual in his time he conducted family worship services in the evening. This scene is well described in "The Cotter's Saturday Night". We learn from Allen Cunningham that the poet continued in his father's footsteps during his stay at Ellisland.

> He performed family worship every evening except during the hurry of harvest when that duty was perhaps limited to Saturday night.[10]

While living at Alloway and Mount Oliphant, the Burnes family attended the parish church at Ayr to hear Dalrymple, of whom William Burnes had a very high opinion.[11] With such a background, we cannot be surprised that

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8. Ibid., p. 458.

9. Ibid., pp. 457-488.

10. Quoted in Lockhart, p. 43.

11. In 1776 Murdock (the tutor of Robert and Gilbert Burns) lost a teaching position in Ayr because in a moment of anger he had expressed an opinion to the effect that Dr. William Dalrymple was as revengeful as Hell and as false as the Devil and a liar and hypocrite to boot. Hecht, p. 13.

when Robert Burns moved to Mossgiel, in his twenty-sixth year, he was not pleased with the doctrines, dogmas, and disciplines of Mr. Auld, their new minister. In religious matters Robert became what Hecht calls "suspiciously free".[12] In delivering his censures against the Old Lights, Burns was never discreet. We can believe the scene, described by Lockhart, where at the front of an inn in Mauchline at the time of the celebration of the Sacrament Burns was touring on horseback with a crowd of eager listeners around him arguing against Calvinist theology, and finally riding off amidst the hisses of the little crowd, which regarded him as a heretic. In his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore, Burns says that

> Polemical divinity about this time was putting the country half mad; and I, ambitious of shining in conversation parties on Sundays between sermons, funerals, etc., used in a few years more to puzzle Calvinism with so much heart and indiscretion that I raised a hue and cry of heresy against me which has not ceased to this hour.[13]

His boundless honesty only provoked the antagonism of respectable people and confirmed them in their conviction of his heresy.

As a result of his skill and originality in theological arguments, Burns gained a reputation in the Ayrshire countryside. One minister of his acquaintance relates how

> The acuteness and originality displayed by him, the depth of his discernment, the force of his expressions, and the authoritative energy of his understanding, had created a sense of his power, of the extent of which I was unconscious, till it was revealed to me by accident. On the occasion of my second appearance in the pulpit, I came with an assured and tranquil mind and though a few persons of education were present, advanced some lengths in the service with my confidence and self-possession unimpaired, but when I saw Burns, who was of a different parish, unexpectedly enter the church, I was affected with a tremor and embarrassment, which suddenly apprised me of the impression which my mind, unknown to itself, had previously received.[14]

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12. Hecht, p. 13.

13. Letters of Robert Burns, edited J. DeLancey Ferguson (London, 1931), 1, p. 107.

14. Quoted in Lockhart, p. 36.

Burns liked arguments and the hotter they became the better he liked them. Nevertheless, he did not argue simply for the sake of uttering platitudes and superficialities. He was naturally and sincerely religious, and his wrath was aroused by whatever was hateful and false. His sense of fun took the sting from some of his satires, but his hatred and contempt for the unChristian, unreasonable doctrines of the Old Light preachers and the lack of benevolence and hypocrisy which these doctrines fostered was genuine.

ii

It is when the contrast between appearance and reality strikes Burns as ridiculous that satire is created. To hold folly up to ridicule, the satirist must have an intimate knowledge of the subject in order to make it appear ridiculous and evoke towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, or scorn. Burns knew exactly what was being said week after week from the pulpits in Ayrshire and it was this he ridiculed.

Not only the Old Light ministers but the vast majority of the people in Ayrshire were against Burns. (A like fate awaits anyone who attacks the Pharisee, the most respectable person in society.) The people were incensed at the rapid spread of the New Light principles (Arminian heresies they called them) in Ayrshire. Burns satirises their alarm in his Epistle to John Goldie. "Goldie, a Kilmarnock merchant, was in his later years," as Henley puts it, "addicted to advanced theology."[15] He published his religious views in a book entitled Essays on Various Important Subjects, Moral and Divine, Being an Attempt to Distinguish True from False Religion. This work, chiefly an argument against original sin, became popularly known as "Goldie's Bible."[16] The second edition of "Goldie's Bible" in 1785 occasioned the writing of Burn's epistle "To John Goldie" in August of that year. In a gloriously funny personification, Orthodoxy (here equated with emotional religion)[17] and her sister,

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15. Henley and Henderson, II, p. 356.

16. Ibid., p. 356.

17. Burns, who in other contexts praises Enthusiasm, here scorns religion of feeling in favour of a bleak and rational faith.

Superstition, are depicted as sick unto death. Superstition is so sick that a physician, "Black Jock" Russell,[18] (a minister of the old faith) is called in to examine her urine.

staring

Poor gapin, glowrin Superstition!
Wae's me, she's in a sad condition!
Fye! bring Black Jock, her state physician,
To see her water!
Alas! there's ground for great suspicion
She'll ne'er get better.

Enthusiasm's past redemption
Gone in a gallopin consumption:
Not a' her quacks wi' a' their gumption
Can ever mend her;
Her feeble pulse gies strong presumption
She'll soon surrender. (II p. 71)

Burns specifically links Taylor with Goldie as the main ministers of Arminian ideas in Ayrshire "ironically suggesting that if this were not the enlightened Eighteenth Century but the good old theocratic days, Goldie's opponents would have burnt him alive."[19]

'Tis you an' Taylor are the chief
To blame for a' this black mischief;
if empty But, gin the Lords ain folk gat leave,
A toom tar barrel
An' twa red peats wad bring relief,
An end the quarrel. (ii p. 72)

The "toom tar barrel" and the "twa red peats" with their "t's" of contempt and what they imply ("The witch-fires in all their horror")[20] and their mocking conjunction with "the Lords ain folks" create an instant cameo of the Old Light Kirk at work.

Burns encourages Goldie, bidding him,

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18. "Black Jock" is also a main figure in "The Twa Herds": or the "Holy Tulyie, An unco mournfu' Tale".

19. Thomas Crawford, Burns, A Study of the Poems and Songs, (Stanford, 1965), p. 50.

20. Keith, p. 107.

sorely E'e swinge the dogs[21] and thresh them sicker!
strike The mair they squeal ay chap the thicker.
(11, p. 72)

But the first[22] of the great satires "that saw the light"[23] was the "Twa Herds", "a burlesque lamentation on a quarrel between two rev'd Calvinists,"[24] which the New Lights greeted with "a roar of applause."[25] A dispute about parochial boundaries arose between two of the Old Light leaders--Moodie, minister of Riccarton, and Russell, minister of Kilmarnock--which finally became so violent that the Presbytery of Kilmarnock looked into the matter at the Presbytery meetings. In the words of Lockhart

> the reverend divines, hitherto sworn friends and associates, lost all command of temper, and abused each other "coram populo" with a fiery virulence of personal invective, such as has long been banished from all popular assemblies, wherein the laws of courtesy are enforced by those of a certain unwritten code. 26

Burns bewails the fate of the two orthodox congregations as sheep without shepherds.

O a'ye pious godly flocks,
Weel fed on pastures orthodox,
Wha now will keep you frae the fox
dogs Or worrying tykes?
tend Or wha will tent the waifs an' crocks
stragglers and old ewes About the dykes?
stone fences
west The twa best herds in a' the wast,
gave That e'er gae gospel horn a blast
These five an' twenty simmers past--
sad O, dool to tell!--

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21. Calvinists.

22. Though not published till 1796.

23. Letters, I, p. 114.

24. Ibid., I, p. 114.

25. Ibid., I, p. 114

26. Lockhart, p. 42.

quarrel Hae had a bitter, black out-cast
Between Atween themsel. (II, 20)

Burns's ironical lamentations in pastoral terms over the quarrel is effective satire because it heightens the absurdity of the situation by reducing the two ministers to ridiculous proportions.[27]

The picture of the typical Eighteenth Century Calvinist minister is probably the best thing in the poem.

scabbed He fine a mangy sheep could scrub;
Or nobly swing the gospel clubs;
Or New-Light herds could nicely drub
And pay their skin;
puddle Or hing them o'er the burning dub
Or heave them in. (II, 21)

The New Lights could not help but rejoice when they read the insults hurled in such a farcical light.

In "Holy Willie's Prayer" Burns attacks the narrow-minded to whom Calvinism meant simply a belief in hell and an assurance of their own election. In Holy Willie,[28] Burns saw not only hypocrisy--that eternal element which lifts Willie out of provincial Ayrshire and into the world at large--but also degenerate Calvinism incarnate. It was the Holy Willies who aroused Burns's hatred for corrupt Calvinism and the unChristian attitudes that so easily became

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27. By reducing the two ministers to such ridiculous proportions, Burns increases the humiliation of the Old Lights.

28. William Fisher (Holy Willie) was a farmer near Mauchline and since 1772 was an elder in the parish church of Mauchline. He was one of the most strenuous of Auld's assistants in his rigid surveillance of the parishioners and was the informer against Gavin Hamilton for neglect of ordinance and violation of the Sabbeth. Though active in bringing offenders to the notice of the Session, he was not particular about his own behaviour, for in 1790 he himself was rebuked by the minister, in presence of the Kirk-Session, for drunkenness; and was reputed (see stanza XVII of "The Kirk's Alarm", I, p. 35) to have utilized his opportunities as "elder at the plate" to help himself to the Kirk's offerings. On his way home from Mauchline, in a snow storm, he died in a ditch by the roadside, 13 February, 1809. Henley and Henderson, II, p. 321.

implicit in it.

The stimulus for the poem was the quarrel between Gavin Hamilton and the Mauchline Session. The Session continually tormented Hamilton from 1777 to 1788[29] under the headings of: mismanaging the poor funds,[30] being absent from church in December and January, "for journeying to Carrick tho' advised and admonished against it by the minister, for the habitual, if not total, neglect of the worship of God in his home, and finally for forcing his servants to dig potatoes on the Sabbath."[31] The quarrel developed further as Gavin was publicly attacked in the printed Session minutes. Hamilton made a detailed complaint to the Presbytery of Ayr where his rights were successfully defended by Robert Aiken (Orator Bob), and the Kirk Session of Mauchline was forced to clear his name of guilt. For Burns, the quarrel represented something larger than the petty points being brought forth by both sides. It is likely that he viewed Hamilton as the incarnation of the spirit of Ecclesiastical rebellion and Auld as representing not merely the Mauchline Kirk Session but as Snyder puts it, "an antiquated and tyrannical form of church administration." Even if this is not exactly how Burns saw the quarrel, he was able to raise this purely local dispute about dogma between individuals in a little Scottish town to the level of something that concerned the whole of humanity.

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29. For the complete history of this quarrel, the Reverend J. C. Glennie of Mauchline Old Church has an account "Gavin Hamilton and the Kirk Session of Mauchline" in the Burns Chronicle, 1962, pp. 20-30.

30. Glennie suggests that the Kirk's charge of mismanaging the poor funds levelled against Hamilton was indeed justified. Ibid., p. 30.

31. Ibid., p. 20.

"Holy Willie," who seems to have taken a leading part in reprimanding Hamilton, was a wholly detestable character and "much and justly famed for that polemical chattering which ends in tippling orthodoxy, and for that spiritualized bawdry which refines to a liquorish devotion."[32] He shared the beliefs of the degenerate Calvinism of his Old Light brethren and had no conception of the real meaning of original sin. Holy Willie failed to understand the profundity of the doctrine of predestination and regarded the God of election as a blind and indifferent fate who divided the elect and the reprobate by an arbitrary and irresponsible choice, merely by a kind of chance.

Burns, as the poet, knows more than "Holly Willie", the speaker. Burns knows also what was said week after week from the pulpits and it was this he was to parody throughout the poem. The "Prayer" begins, not in the vernacular, too familiar for a prayer, but in the more distant and dignified tongue, used also in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" for family worship--"O Thou that in the Heavens dost dwell" with only an occasional dialect form, "onie" and "guid," to suggest the scene is Ayrshire. The poem is in English then--but not the heavy sententious English of the pulpit. The "Prayer" had to be intelligible and convey its meaning instantaneously. For that Burns uses the clearest English at his command--an English so clear and so superlatively difficult to attain that no Holy Willie could ever have acquired it. And as always when Burns is working at white heat (as later, for instance, in his best songs "A Red, Red Rose"), the diction is largely monosyllabic. You

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32. Henley and Henderson, II, p. 321.

can't mistake a monosyllable. It has the clarity of a pistol shot.[33]

So equipped then, Burns starts off on the theory of predestination, expounded so a child might understand it.

> O Thou that in the Heavens does dwell
> Wha, as it please best Thysel,
> Send ane to Heaven an' ten to Hell
> A' for Thy glory,
> And no for onie guid for ill
> They've done before Thee. (II, p. 25)

By the third verse Burns has moved on to the equally vital tenet of Original Sin:

> What was I, or my generation,
> That I should get sic exaltation?
> I, wha deserv's most just damnation
> For broken laws
> Sax thousand years ere my creation,
> Thro' Adam's cause! (II, p. 26)

The next verse takes a commonly preached Old Light doctrine that babies, dying unbaptised, go straight to Hell--something that seems to have really roused Burns's ire, for of its thirty-six words, thirty-two are monosyllables.

> When from my mither's womb I fell,
> Thou might hae plung's me deep in hell
> To gnash my gooms, and weep, and wail
> In burning lakes,
> Whare damned devils roar and yell,
> Chain'd to their stakes. (II, p. 26)

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33. "In 'Holy Willie's Prayer', polysyllables with theological connotations ('generation, exaltation, damnation, creation, mercies, temporal, divine, glory') seem particularly impressive when set beside the hammer strokes of short words such as 'Thou might hae plunged me deep in hell' and 'That I for grace an' gear may shine.'"

Because Willie is of the elect he becomes a self-righteous pillar of God's temple, "A guide, a buckler," and an example to God's flock.

. . .

That I am here before Thy sight,
For gifts an' grace
A burning and a shining light
To a' this place.

. . .

Yet I am here, a chosen sample,
To show Thy grace is great and ample:
I'm here a pillar o' Thy temple,
Strong as a rock
A guide, a buckler, and example
To a' Thy flock! (II, pp. 26-27)

How ludicrous this becomes as the poem progresses.

But yet, O Lord, confess I must:
irked At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshly lust;
An' sometimes, too, in wardly trust,
Vile self gets in;
But Thou remembers we are dust,
Defiled wi' sin.[35] (II, p. 27)

last night O Lord! yestreen, Thou kens, wi' Meg--
knowest Thy pardon I sincerely beg--
O, may't ne'er be a living plague
To my dishonour!
An' I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg
Again upon her.

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35. It is interesting to note that the thoughts Burns satirises in stanzas VI and IX of "Holy Willie's Prayer" (But yet, O Lord, confess I must...and "Maybe Thou lets this fleshy thorn...") are the same which are expressed sincerely in "A Prayer in Prospect of Death."

If I have wander'd in those paths
Of life I ought to shun--
As something loudly, in my breast,
Remonstrates I have done--
Thou knowst that Thou hast formed me
With passions wild and strong;
And list'ning to their witching voice
Has often led me wrong. (I, p. 135)

This is perhaps an example of Scottish contradictoriness, the habit among Scots of turning into ridicule their own sincerest feelings and profoundest experiences.

must
drunk

Besides, I farther maun avow--
Wi' Leezie's lass, three time, I trow--
But, Lord, that Friday I was fou,
When I cam near her,
Or else, Thou kens, Thy servant true
would: meddle with
Wad never steer her. (II, p. 28)

"Holy Willie" here is far removed from the self-righteous purity of the opening stanzas. Willie goes on to list some of his own sins that the kirk would recognize--those of wine and women. Being intellectually purblind, Holy Willie fails to see the hypocrisy that becomes obvious in his failure to measure up to his own precepts. A self-righteous tone is still possible, for whatever "Holy Willie" may be--a drunkard, a murderer, a fornicator--he is still one of the elect and is guaranteed salvation. The tone itself evidences the hypocrisy that is implicit in this kind of Calvinism. His sins become merely thorns in his flesh so that he may not grow too proud and arrogant in the fullness of grace which God has conferred upon him.

May be Thou lets this fleshly thorn
Buffet Thy servant e'en and morn,
too
Lest he owre proud and high should turn
That he's sae gifted:
If sae, Thy han' maun e'en be borne
Until Thou lift it.[36] (II, p. 28)

"Holy Willie" had assurance of salvation, but his Calvinistic God sends one to heaven and then to hell. The ten are, of course, the non-elect, which included, for "Willie" at least, the blasphemers, the ones that

Set the world in a road
O' laughin' at us. (II, p. 29)

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36. Miss Keith wonders if Burns could have heard of St. Augustine's similar entreaty: "Lord, give me chastity--but not yet." See also footnote 40.

Such as Gavin Hamilton, the Presbytery of Ayr, and the "glib-tongued" Aiken.

Lord, hear my earnest cry and pray'r
Against that Presbyt'ry of Ayr!
Thy strong right hand, Lord, mak it bare
Upo' their heads!
do not Lord, visit them, an' dinna spare,
For their misdeeds!

O Lord, my God! that glib-tongu'd Aiken,
My vera heart and flesh are quakin
To think how, we stood sweatin, shakin,
An pish'd wi' dread,
sneering While he, wi'hingin lip an' snakin,
Held up his head. (II, p. 29)

From being the embodiment of the Calvinistic elect, "Holy Willie" has reduced himself, his tone, and his language to that of a small, frightened, whimpering village busy body. In the next stanza, however, he appears as the very incarnation of ecclesiastical tyrrany.

Lord, in Thy day o' vengeance try him!
Lord, visit him what did employ him!
An pass not in Thy mercy by them,
Nor hear their pray'r,
But for Thy peoples' sake destroy them,
An' dinna spare. (II, p. 29)

The hypocrisy becomes larger than life. Willie becomes one with the psalmist and the avenging God of the 109th psalm. In the role of this avenging God, the tone and the language become hard and ruthless, "Holy Willie" becomes terrifying, and the doctrine and purpose of Willie and his God approach a grandeur that is awful. The hypocrisy is cosmic--Willie, of course, is blind to this blasphemy. From this exalted position of a God he falls back to the essential littleness of William Fisher asking for his share of material prosperity:

But, Lord, remember me and mine
Wi' mercies temporal and divine,
wealth That I for grace an' gear may shine
Excell'd by nane;
And a' the glory shall be Thine--
Amen, Amen! (II, p. 30)

As we hear "Willie" pray, we hear him ironically become blasphemous, self-righteous, self-congratulatory, and a monstrous hypocrite, until he damns himself, and his religious tradition dissolves in irony.

Binding the whole poem together with an iron fist is Burns's use of Holy Willie as a living illustration of the products and doctrines he mouths--his haughtiness of being one of the "elect," with its corollary, his pharisaic lack of charity and benevolence toward the "non-elect". "It is this character, so exquisitely delineated and so brilliantly pointed, that Burns used to floodlight the kirk and all it stood for."[37]

A few weeks after the excitement of Gavin Hamilton's law suit had passed, Burns wrote another satire, "The Holy Fair." This fair was the celebration of the sacrament of the Holy Communion, held in Mauchline every August. Those attending (and that included almost everyone) went partially for the Communion and partially for the social opportunities. The frame of mind of the fair and the frame of mind of the Holy sacrament are inextricably woven together in the poem. The humour of the satire is found in the rhyming contradictory balance between the holy nature of the sacrament and the profane attitude of many of those at the fair: this is an implicit criticism of Eighteenth Century Calvinism.

Here some are thinkin on their sins,
An' some upo' their claes;
soiled Ane curses feet that fyl'd his shins,
Anither sighs an' prays:
sample On this hand sits a chosen swatch
Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces;
On that a set o' chaps, at watch,
busy Thrang winkin on the lasses
To chairs that day. (I, p. 40)

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37. Keith, p. 76.

In "Thy Holy Fair" some members of the New Lights, or moderate party, also come under attack by Burns for their lack of a genuinely religious feeling.

> Smith[38] opens out his cauld harangues,
> On practice and on morals; (I, p. 41)
>
> . . .
>
> What signifies his barren shine,
> Of moral pow'rs an reason?
> His English style, an' gestures fine
> Are a' clean out o' season.
> Like Socrates or Antonione,
> Or some auld pagan heathen,
> The moral man he does define,
> But ne'er a word o' faith in
> That's right that day. (I, p. 42)

"The Holy Fair" is a subtly constructed poem. Its construction is similar to "The Cotter's Saturday Night", a day from morning till evening, with action and contrast developing it. In the first nine verses we see the summer morning, the jolly crowds, everything leading to an atmosphere of gaiety with innocent "Fun" always close by. The introduction of "Fun" determines the organization of the poem which begins "upon a simmer Sunday mourn." The hisses (Simmer Sunday) continue until the final line.

> Upon a Simmer Sunday morn,
> When Nature's face is fair,
> I walke'd forth to view the corn,
> An' snuff the caller air. (cool)
> The rising sun, owre Glaston Muirs,
> Wi' glorious light was glintin; (glancing)
> The hares were hirplin down the furs, (hopping; furrows)
> The lav'rocks they were chantin (larks)
> Fu sweet that day. (I, p. 36)

Here the alliterative and assonantal qualities are obviously not embroidery but are part of the poem's total meaning. No matter how artless it seems, the hisses are there; one cannot help but hear them. Burns manages to

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38. Smith was a New Light minister in Glaston.

have the sound of his words echo their sense--the hisses go on until the appearance of the three sisters. Then they hiss out:

> An' this is Superstition here
> An' that's Hyprocrisy-- (I, p. 38)

The only thing that endangers this summer morning is the hail of hisses. In verse ten we have the first contact with the kirk and every line seethes with hisses:

> On this hand sits a chosen swath
> Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces.

(The sound is reinforcing the appeal to the intellect.)

With the first line of the service, the old psalm--"O Happy is the man an' blest,"[39] the sister, "Fun," who has been guiding the poet, seems no longer present. She has been replaced by one or the other of the sisters --Hypocrisy or Superstition--a daring stroke on Burns's part. With the disappearance of "Fun" the tone of the poem alters radically. Turmoil, confusion and noise become prominent.

climbs

> For Moodie speels the holy door,
> Wi' tidings o' damnation:
>
> . . .
>
> Hear now he clears the points o' Faith
> Wi' rattlin and thumpin!
> Now meekly calm, now wild in wrath,
> He's stampin, an' he's jumpin!
>
> . . .

unearthly

> His eldrich squeel an gestures
>
> . . .
>
> Smith opens out his cauld harangues.
>
> . . .

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39. Miss Keith refers to this line as "the bitterest parody in the poem." Ibid., p. 44.

biscuits

Here's crying out for bakes an' gills,
An' there the pint - stowp clatters;
While thick an' thrang, an' loud an' lang,
Wi' logic an' wi' Scripture,
They raise a din, that in the end,
Is like to breed a rupture. (I, pp. 42-43)

The din of the pulpit, the noise of the change-house, pint-stowps clattering, "The Lord's ain trumpet blaring 'o Hell where devils dwell," the yelling of the ministers, the snoring of the congreation--what a contrast to the Sunday morn before the kirk was introduced.

But the poem ends away from the confusion of the kirk. (It is interesting to note the religion Burns attributes to the common folk away from the confusion of the kirk.)

jolly

In comes a gawsie, gash guidwife,
An' sits down by the fire,
Then: cheese Syne draws her Kebbuck an' her knife;
The lasses they are shyer:
The auld guidmen, about the grace,
Frae side to side they bother;
Till some ane by his bonnet lays,
rope An' gies them't, like a tether,
Fu' land that day. (I, p. 45)

Once again peace and happiness are restored, and with the kirk well out of the way, Burns gives us a final look at the happy youth. Although with the final verse, the hisses return.

How monie hearts this day converts
O' sinners and o' lasses!

The metre thus, like a pianist to a singer, plays up to the main theme throughout and loud-pedals its points.[40]

The reader is apt to overlook the wit of the short satiric thrusts while laughing at the fuller pictures. Few, if any, flashes of wit surpass those in "The Holy Fair." For example:

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40. Keith, p. 44.

See, up he's got the word o' God,
An' meek an' mim has view'd it,
While Common-sense has taen the road,
An' aff, an' up the Cowgate. (I, p. 42)

unearthly

His [Moodie's] eldritch squeel an' gestures,
O how they fire the heart devout--
Like cantharidian plaisters. (I, p. 41)

Cantharides, or Spanish fly, is a stinging agent if applied externally and an aphrodisiac if swallowed. Thomas Crawford feels that "the very use of this term establishes a connexion between the Hell fire sermons of the body of the poem and the "houghmagandie" of the conclusion:

How monie hearts this day converts
O' sinners and o' lasses!
Their hearts o' stane, gin night, are gone
As saft as onie flesh is:
There's some are fou o' love divine;
There's some are fou o' brandy
An' monie jobs that day begin,
fornication May end in houghmagandie
Some ither day. (I, pp. 46-47)

It is difficult for us to realize how grotesque must have been the scene described by Burns. The week during which the sacrament was observed was the most important time of the year for the ministers and for every church member, which meant that practically everybody in Scotland attended the services on that occasion. Owing to the popularity of Mr. Auld as a preacher and a pastor, the attendance at the communion services in Mauchline in the year that "The Holy Fair" was written (1786) was about fourteen hundred.[41] It was impossible to dispense the sacrament to all these people at once; consequently, while the communion services were going on inside the church, a succession of ministers, usually from nearby parishes, conducted services from a "tent" or movable pulpit for the remainder of the crowd who sat about on stools or stretched themselves on the ground. The conditions are perhaps best described by a devout

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41. Chambers, I, p. 268 notes.

blacksmith who deplored the disgusting conditions which prevailed at the celebration of the sacrament. He writes:

> In Scotland they run from kirk to kirk, and flock to see a sacrament, and make the same use of it that the papists do of their pilgrimages and processions--that is indulge themselves in drunkenness, folly and idleness. Most of the servants, when they agree to serve their masters in the western parts of the kingdom, make a special provision that they shall have liberty to go to a certain number of fairs, or on occasion (as they call the administration of the Lord's Supper), in a neighbouring parish in the same light in which they do at a fair, so they behave at it in much the same manner. I defy Italy, in spite of all its superstition, to produce a scene better fitted to raise pity and regret in a religious, humane and understanding heart, or to afford an ampler field for ridicule to the careless and profane, than what they call field preaching upon one of those occasions. At the time of the administrations of the Lord's Supper, upon the Thursday, Saturday and Monday, we have preaching in the fields near the church. At first you find a great number of men and women lying together upon the grass; there they are sleeping and snoring, some with their faces towards heaven, others with their faces turned downwards, or covered with their bonnets; there you fine a knot of young fellows and girls making assignations to go home together in the evening, or to meet in some ale-house; in another place you see a pious circle sitting around an ale barrel, many of which stand ready upon carts for the refreshment of the saints. The heat of the summer season, the fatigue of travelling, and the greatness of the crowd naturally dispose them to drink; which incline some of them to sleep, works up the enthusiasm of others, and contributes not a little to produce those miraculous conversions that sometime happen at these occasions, in a word, in this sacred assembly there is an odd mixture of religion, sleep, drinking, courtship, and a confusion of sexes, ages and characters. When you get a little nearer the speaking so as to be within the reach of the sound, though not of the sense of the words, for that can reach a small circle, you will find some weeping and others laughing, some pressing to get nearer the tent or pub in which the parson is sweating, bawling, jumping and beating the desk; others fainting with the stifling heat, or wrestling to extricate themselves from the crowd; one seems very devout and serious, and the next moment is scolding and cursing his neighbour for squeezing or treading on him; in an instant after, his countenance is composed to the religious gloom, and he is groaning, sighing, and weeping for his sins; in a word, there is such an absurd mixture of the serious and the comic, that were convened for any other purpose than that of worshipping the God and governor of Nature, the scene would exceed all power of force.[42]

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42. Quoted in Chambers, I, 268-269.

Lockhart points out that the scenes depicted in "The Holy Fair" and "The Cotter's Saturday Night" are part of the same religious system. Lockhart remarks "that the same man should have produced 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' and 'The Holy Fair' about the same time, will ever continue to move wonder and regret." The answer to Lockhart would seem obvious, for the satires are a product of that same feeling that inspired "The Cotter's Saturday Night." Burns had seen true religion at home and felt true devotion when his "priest-like father" opened 'wi patriarchal grace, The big ha'Bible." It is little wonder he was aroused at such scenes as those described in "The Holy Fair." It is just because he was able to write "The Cotter's Saturday Night" that he could write "The Holy Fair." Burns knew real piety and this impelled him to expose the profanity and hypocrisy of the scenes at the fair; it was part of his duty as a poet to champion the cause of true religion.

> All hail, Religion! Maid divine,
> Pardon a muse sae mean as mine,
> Who in her rough imperfect line
> Thus daurs to name thee:
> To stigmatise fake friends of thine
> Can ne'er defame thee.
> (Epistle to John M'Math, II, p. 79)

"The Holy Fair" called forth from the orthodox clergy a number of pamphlets, the most famous of which was published anonymously by "Peebles frae the Water fit," the minister of Newton-on-Ayr. Peebles accuses Burns of profanity and attributes any indecencies which may take place at the communion services to men like Burns himself, who go merely for the fun.

> Is it possible [asks Peebles] that Dr. Blacklock, Dr. Laurie and Dr. Blair could approve of "The Holy Fair"? the exhibition of the grossest profanity, of the most deliberate and horrible cruelty and brutality towards the ministers of religion. The worthy clergymen who were gibbeted by this executioner are well known. He takes care to point them out as by name ... The

> characters of the good men are too well known, too much respected and well established to be injured by the effusions of profane wit. As to them, it was mere harmless explosion, but kindled by irreligious malice. The objects of his wrath are safe; but he is involved in the smoke, and exhibited in the blackness of darkness to all generations, to whom such brutality is transmitted; gibbeted, in the eye of decency, morals and faith, distorted, ugly and abominable: such is, such cannot but be, to all Christians, the author of "The Holy Fair."[43]

Obviously Peebles is lying when he says the orthodox regarded it as "mere harmless explosion".

When the Holy Fair was taking place at Mauchline, great excitement prevailed at Kilmarnock, where, owing to the death of a Moderate clergyman called Maltrie, the people were anxiously waiting to see whom the patron, Lord Glencairn, would appoint to the charge. Glencairn appointed McKinley, a young man of the zealous Old Light faction. The Old Lights were jubilant. Before McKinley finally accepted the charge, Burns created "The Ordination," a mock celebration or preview of his ordination. In the poem Burns assumes the point of view of those to whom he is opposed. "Personification," says Crawford, "(always a favourite mode of poetical thought with him) is more daringly extended [in "The Ordination"] than in almost any other work of his."[44]

Curst Common-sense, that imp o' hell,
Cam in wi' Maggie Lauder:
But Oliphant aft made her yell,
An' Russell sair misca'd her;
This day MacKinlay taks the flail,
An' he's the boy will blaud her!
He'll clap a shangan on her tail,
An' set the bairns to daud her
Wi' dirt this day. (I, p. 210)

slap
cleft stick
pelt

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44. Crawford, p. 63.

43. Wm Peebles, "Burnomania: The Celebration of Robert Burns Considered in a Discourse"(Edinburgh,1811),p.8.

Now auld Kilmarnock, cock thy tail,
An' toss thy horns fu canty;
joyful
low
Nae mair thou'lt rowte out-owre the dale,
Because thy pasture's scanty;
For lapfu's large o' gospel kail
Shall fill thy crib in plenty,
stalks;
choice
every
An' runts o' grace, the pick an' wale,
No gien by way o' dainty,
But ilka day. (I, p. 212)

foes
flogging
See, see auld Orthodoxy's faes
She's swingin thro' the city!
Hark, how the nine tail'd cat she plays!
I vow it's unco pretty:
There, Learning, with his Greekish face,
Grunts out some Latin ditty;
And Common-sense is gaun, she says,
To mak to Jamie Beattie
Her plaint this day.
(I, p. 214)

But ther's Morality himsel,
Embracing all opinions;
Hear, how he gies the tither yell
Between his twa companions!
flesh under the skin
See, how she peels the skin an' fell,
As ane were peelin onions!
Now there, they're packed aff to hell,
An' banish'd our dominions,
Hence forth this day.
(I, p. 215)

Kilmarnock is compared to a half famished cow "(and, by implication, all its people to cattle)"[45] that charges over the dales because it has been fed on the poor grass of "reason" and now has a chance to fill itself with the "gospel kail" of orthodoxy. MacKinley, the popular choice of the people of Kilmarnock, accepted the position only because of the pressure put on him.[46] Obviously, in this poem Burns is not the poet of the people. The oafishness of the people could not be more witheringly expressed than it was in "The Ordination." Even the New Lights as seen in the "Ordination" appear so limited that they could not have much

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45. Crawford, p. 64.

46. Henley and Henderson, I, notes p. 398.

appeal to Burns. In the stanza "But ther's Morality," Crawford points out "The Old Light contempt for mere legality is rendered in another homely image, linked to 'gospel kail' by the association of the kitchen Morality peeling off the skin of argument in successive layers.[47] As one were peelin onions." One feels that Burns in "The Ordination" finds both antagonists rather funny. However, in the last stanza there is a frightening note as Burns hints at the savage glee of a mob that could easily turn dangerous:

pint Come, bring the tither mutchkin in,
And here's--for a conclusion---
To ev'ry New Light mother's son,
From this time forth, confusion!
deafen If mair they deave us wi' their din
Or patronage intrusion,
match We'll light a spunk, an ev'ry skin
We'll run them aff in fusion
Like oil some day. (1, p. 215)

The comedy and the satire of the "Ordination" are one, emerging through the allegorical frame work.

MacKinley was a man Burns could never have liked; he was a typical Old Light and, like Russell, delivered his sermons with tremendous "gusto" though it is said he was more persuasive and less menacing than "Black Jock."[48] In his youth MacKinley was raised in the strictest Calvinism, but, according to his son,

> his appreciations of the mode of salvation were at first erroneous and unscriptural. He vainly imagined that he could merit salvation by his good deeds, and that if he read his Bible, prayed every morning and evening, obeyed his parents, spoke the truth, God could not but have mercy and bestow on him every spiritual and saving blessing. When, however, he was about twelve years of age he was led to adopt more correct views of the truth by reading Stoddard's Guide to Christ, and Gutherie's Trial of a Saving Interest in Christ. These books which have been blessed to many, showed him that men were wholly depraved, and dead in sin;

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47. Crawford, p. 64.

48. Henley and Henderson, 1, p. 398.

> that they never, by anything they do or suffer, merit the least mercy from God, and that they are saved from first to last through the merits of Christ. Hence he was led to cast away all hope, and all confidence in himself, and to make Christ his wisdom, and righteousness and strength... His experience shows what will be found to hold true universally, that a sinner can never find real peace and pleasure in serving God, till brought by divine grace utterly to despair of ever deserving the smallest mercy from God, and led to depend simply, and with his whole heart, on the infinitely precious merits of Immanuel.[49]

This is the kind of "holiness" that turned Burns against the depraved Calvinism that was being taught by the Old Lights in the kirk.

Whatever can be said about kirk life in Ayrshire it can never be called dull, for no sooner was one dispute settled than another arose. The "bitter black out-cast" between Moodie and Russell, the quarrel between Gavin Hamilton and the kirk sessions of Mauchline, the controversy after the publication of "Goldie's Bible," the action of the parishoners before the final appointment of MacKinley to the Kilmarnock kirk, all these provided Burns with poetic ammunition in his fight against the Old Lights' kind of Calvinism. These events all occurred within three or four years. Then in 1789 came the appointment of a committee to examine Dr. M'Gill's Practical Essay on the Death of Christ, which evoked yet another satire, "The Kirk's Alarm."[50]

The New Lights, especially Dalrymple, defended M'Gill, while the Old Lights, under Peebles, held his doctrines to be heresies. Peebles published two sermons (on which he appended a poem entitled "An Ode to

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49. "Memoir" prefaced to MacKinley's Select Sermons, Kilmarnock, 1843, quoted in A. B. Jamieson, Burns and Religion (Cambridge, 1931), pp. 58-59.

50. Burns writes to Mrs. Dunlop, July 17, 1789 "You will be well acquainted with the persecution that my worthy friend, Dr. M'Gill, is undergoing among your divines. Several of these reverend lads his opponents have come through my hands before; but I have some thoughts of serving them up in a different dish!" Letters, I, p. 345.

Liberty" to which Burns makes a very scathing allusion in the "Poet Willie" stanza of the "Kirk's Alarm"[51]) which were a direct attack on M'Gill. M'Gill's essay created such a stir in the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr that the Presbytery of Ayr appointed the before-mentioned committee. Finally, to end the matter, M'Gill offered an explanation and an apology that satisfied the kirk authorities.[52]

Burns's poem burlesques the "alarm" caused by the essay in the camp of the Orthodox. The wit and the ridicule is overwhelming but gone is the bitterness and indignation. The following stanza:

> Holy Will! Holy Will!
> There was wit i' your skull,
> When ye pilfer'd the alms o' the poor:
> *material* The timmer is scant,
> When ye're taen for a saunt
> *rope* Wha should swing in a rape for an hour--
> Holy Will!
> Ye should swing in a rape for an hour. (II, p. 35)

does not show the same hate and disgust as "Holy Willie's Prayer." The jogging measure helps to give a lighter tone to the satire.

The closer one looks at the religious satires, the easier he can see the great debt Burns owed to the kirk. It was the kirk that lifted him to his position among the finest satirists in English literature. For, dislike some kirks as he might, it was the kirk and her traditions in which his whole personality was steeped. While on one hand he knew

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51. Poet Willie! Poet Willie!
Gie the Doctor a volley,
Wi' your 'Liberty chain' and your wit:
O'er Pegasus' side
Ye ne'er laid a stride,
Ye but smelt, man, the place where he shit--
Poet Willie!
Ye smelt but the place where he shit. (II, p. 34)

52. See Henley and Henderson, II, Notes pp. 324-330.

folk like Holy Willie, also, and as intimately, he knew other folk like the Cotter, the 'Ayld guidman over the grace' in "The Holy Fair. "The Cotter's Saturday Night," as has been said, is also part of Burns's debt to religion. It was the principles that Burns had received from religion that made him so furious with the crookedness, the lies, the hypocrisy he saw in some kirks. It was a true religious feeling in Burns that made him care. Other folk, like Gavin Hamilton, didn't care. That there were hypocrites in the Kirk--as everywhere else--was to Hamilton an everyday fact. For Burns these hypocrites--Holy Willie, Black Russell, and the other "lads in black"--belonged to a very special category. Burns could tolerate and even have sympathy for the reprobates of the road, "The Jolly Beggars," but for the reprobates of the kirk he had no tolerance. They summoned up every bit of black bile Burns had in his system; they made him sick and he spit his vilest epithets at them. A great series of religious satires was produced as a result.

One verse of his epistle to John M'Math will reinforce the fact that Burns was deadly serious in his satires. Burns wrote to Reverend John M'Math, sending him a copy of "Holy Willie's Prayer" and explaining how he came to write it:

> I own 'twas rash, an' rather hardy,
> That I, a simple, countra Bardie,
> Should meddle wi' a pack sae sturdy,
> Wha, if they ken me,
> Can easy wi' a single wordie
> Louse Hell upon me. (II, p. 77)

The last couplet refers to the power of excommunication, which might be and often was pronounced by the kirk. Here, there is neither mockery nor fun.

CHAPTER THREE

BURNS'S ATTITUDE TOWARD RELIGION

Burns cannot be labeled an Arminian, a Deist, a Calvinist, or anything else. It is because Burns was so profoundly religious that we are able to say he did not embrace wholeheartedly creeds and dogmas set down by others. Any thinker prefers to explore the mysteries of religion for himself, accepting creeds only where they coincide with his own discoveries. Such a thinker, especially if he is of Burn's temperament, will keep an open mind on all questions, and be continually revising his ideas, and with an increase of knowledge, be willing to forego former conclusions. He will not believe what he is told he ought to believe but what he feels to be true. Consequently, to say that Burns is completely and consistently a Calvinist or anything else is to misunderstand the man at the outset. Except for one or two principal beliefs, Burns was continually revising his religious opinions, which varied with his changing moods and conditions. Burns may seldom have been consistent or definite in his religious views, but it does not follow that he had no religion as Carlyle states in his Essay on Burns.[1]

The satires are purely negative and are aimed solely at the Kirk, so they do not tell us a great deal of what is positive in Burns's religion. Instead, we must turn to such poems as "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "Address to the Deil", "Tam O'Shanter," and the epistle "To the

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1. Thomas Carlyle, Essay on Burns, ed. W.C. Gore (New York, 1925), p.76.

Rev. John M'Math." Chambers is incorrect when he divides Burns's poetry into "poems which he wrote as an advocate" and "spontaneous utterances on religion,"[2] for the satires are as spontaneous as any of Burns's poems and not simply the work of an advocate.

Until his twenty-fourth year Burns tells us in his autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore, he lived a life of "ingrained piety" and "cheerless gloom,"[3] no doubt brought on by the "unceasing moil" of the life at Lochlea when the family was always threatened with ruin.

> To the buffetings of misfortune [writes Gilbert Burns], we could only oppose hard labour and the most rigid economy. We lived very sparingly. For several years butcher's meat was a stranger in the house, while all the members of the family exerted themselves to the utmost of their strength, and rather beyond it, in the labours of the farm...The anguish of mind we felt at our tender years under these straits and difficulties was very great.[4]

At the end of Burns's residence in Irvine, after the failure of the flax dressing shop in 1781-82, Burns writes:

> There was a certain period of life that my spirit was broke by repeated losses and disasters, which threatened, and indeed effected, the utter ruin of my fortune. My body, too, was attacked by that most dreadful distemper, a Hypochondria, or confirmed melancholy: in this wretched state, the recollection of which makes me yet shudder, I hung my harp on the willow trees except in some lucid intervals, in one of which I composed...The Prayer under the Pressure of Violent Anguish.[5]

This is a short prayer with little literary merit. The poem-prayer exhibits a spirit of true Calvinism, showing the strength and patience under hardship which is so characteristic of that faith. "All wretched

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2. Chambers I, p. 168.

3. Letters I, pp. 108-109.

4. G. Burns's "Memoir", Wm. Scott Douglas, Works of Robert Burns (Edinburgh, 1878), IV, p. 258.

5. Robert Burns's Common-Place Book, 1783-1785 (Illinois, 1965), p. 9.

and distrust," the poet resigns himself to the mysterious ways of the Almighty, in whom he has absolute confidence.

> Sure Thou, Almighty, canst not act
> From cruelty or wrath!
> O, free my weary eyes from tears
> Or close them fast in death!
>
> But, if I must afflicted be
> To suit some wise design,
> Then man my soul with firm resolves
> To bear and not repine! (I, 234)

To this same period belongs the "Prayer in Prospect of Death."[6] At the time of the collapse of his flax-dressing project, Burns underwent something approaching a nervous breakdown. "The weakness of my nerves," he wrote his father on the 27th of December, 1781,[7]

> has so debilitated my mind that I dare not, either review past events, or look forward into futurity; for the least anxiety or perturbation in my breast, produces most unhappy effects on my whole frame...I am quite transported at the thought that ere long, perhaps very soon, I shall bid an eternal adieu to all the pains, and uneasiness and disquietudes of this weary life; for I assure you I am heartily tired of it, and, if I do not very much deceive myself I could contentedly and gladly resign it.

In this mood he confesses his sins saying,

> Thou know'st that Thou hast forme'd me
> With passions wild and strong;
> And listning to their witching voice
> Has often led me wrong. (I, 135)

Relying on God's goodness, which "delighteth to forgive," the poet goes on to cry aloud for forgiveness.

Many critics, Daiches among them, doubt the sincerity of these poems, telling us that the genuine Burns lies in the satires rather than the pious pieces.[8] We perhaps would rather turn to the satires

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6. The "Prayer in Prospect of Death" was probably written during Burns's residence in Irvine.

7. Letters, I, 4-5.

8. Daiches, p. 157.

than the pious pieces, but in fact the real Robert Burns is to be found in both.

Though melancholy often affected him throughout his life, he seems to have risen about it at Mossgiel. At Mossgiel he could not bring himself to accept the doctrines of the utter depravity of human nature and the God of election preached by the Old Lights. William Burnes had raised his son under the influence of the New Lights, Dalrymple and M'Gill of Ayr, but at that time the poet was a boy and could not thoroughly understand the doctrines preached by those men. When Burns's critical faculties were fully developed, he was in the parish of Mr. Auld, whose preaching roused the anger of the young man of twenty-five. "The heretic has not the same security and peace of mind as the conservative who holds to the orthodox faith, for he has to be continually revising his arguments, reinforcing weak places in his heretical system, so that he can withstand the orthodox majority who rely more on numbers and tradition than on efficiency and integrity."[9] Burns found himself in a position not unlike the heretic. All around him he saw his neighbour folk, good honest men for the most part, accepting the teachings and dogmas of the Old Light preachers, as if it were the only thing they could do. Burns's own conscience rejected it and he longed for support. It was at this time Burns argued with his neighbours against Calvinism until he "raised a hue-and-cry of heresy"[10] against himself.

Previously, Burns was not too sure of his own religious opinions, but through his dealing with Auld and the Old Lights, he was forced to a decision and he chose to defy the Old Lights. By his decision, Burns was forced into a position which necessitated a keener insight and a

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9. Jamieson, p. 75.

10. Letters, I, p. 107.

sharper understanding if he was to hold his own in a battle against "the Lads in Black." As a result, he became more sensitive to the corruption and falsehood of the kirk, and consequently his disgust was greater than most of those who had not gone through such a mental struggle. The satires followed the struggle and their tone is not that of a man in despair or doubt, but of a man who had long studied himself and knew exactly what ground he occupied.[11] On this ground he is confident and from it he is able to ridicule his enemies. He is now able to laugh at the men who had previously confused him.

In his epistle "To the Rev. John M'Math," Burns gives vent to the rich store of emotion which showed itself as anger against the hypocrisy and cant of the Old Lights. So vivid and real is the emotion in his epistle that we can actually see the changing expression on Burns's face as he wrote it. The epistle begins in a light mood.

> My Musie, tir'd monie a sonnet
> On gown an' ban' an' douse black-bonnet,[12]
> Is grown right errie now she's done it
> Lest they should blame her,
> An' rouse their holy thunder on it,
> An anthem her. (11, pp. 76-77)

Burns becomes very serious when he starts to think of the hypocrisy of some of the Old Lights. He raises his voice; his words become bitter.[13] We can almost hear the poet spit the words out in his anger:

> But I gae mad at their grimaces,
> Their sighin, cantin, grace-proud faces,
> Their three-mile prayers an' hauf-mile graces,
> Their raxin conscience,
> Whase greed, revenge, an' pride disgraces
> Waur nor their nonsense. (11, p. 77)

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11. Letters, I, p. 60.

12. 'On gown a' ban' an' douse black-bonnet': The clergymen on Sunday wore a gown and band; and the elder in those days wore a black bonnet.

13. Note the S's and T's of contempt. Twenty-three of the thirty-four words are monosyllables.

And Gavin Hamilton, Burns's patron: how did "the Lads in Black" treat him?

> There's Gau'n, misca'd waur than a beest,
> Wha has mair honor in his breast
> Than monie scores as guid's the priest
> Wha sae abus't him:
> And may a Bard no crack his jest
> What way they've use't him? (II, p. 77)

> See him, the poor man's friend in need,
> The gentleman in word an' deed--
> An' shall his fram an' honor bleed
> By worthless skelluns,
> An' not a Muse erect her head
> To cowe the blellums? (II, p. 78)

The pace of the epistle had quickened as Burns talks of how the men of the kirk have persecuted Hamilton. There is no humour left. The poet lashes his victims without mercy. The epithets show how Burns's indignation has been worked up. He first refers to "the Lads in Black" by talking of "gown an' ban' an' douse black-bonnett." In the next verse Burns calls them a "pack sae sturdy." He then tells us of "their sighin, cantin grace-proud faces." By the time he reaches the sixth verse Burns calls them "worthless skellums" and "blellums." The poet gets even more savage:

> O Pope, had I thy satire's darts
> To gie the rascals their deserts,
> I'd rip their rotten, hollow hearts,
> An' tell aloud
> Their jugglin, hocus-pocus arts
> To cheat the crowd! (II, p. 78)

Finally he scorns them as "scoundrels," "wi holy robes but hellish spirit."

> In spite o' crowds, in spite o' mobs,
> In spite of undermining jobs,
> In spite o' dark banditte stabs
> At worth an' merit,
> By scoundrels, even wi' holy robes
> But hellish spirit! (II, p. 80)

In spite of his withering, desicating attacks on the men of the kirk, the tone of the poem suggests that Burns was no atheist at the

time, in spite of the fact that in the eighth verse he says:

> God knows, I'm no the thing I should be,
> Nor am I even the thing I could be,
> But twenty times I rather would be
> An atheist clean
> Than under gospel colours hid be
> Just for a screen. (II, p. 78)

For Burns, an honest atheist is obviously preferable to a religious hypocrite, but, as he makes clear in the eleventh stanza:

> All hail, Religion! Maid divine,
> Pardon a muse sae mean as mine,
> Who in her rough imperfect line
> Thus daurs to mane thee
> To stigmatise false friends of thine
> Can ne'er defame thee.

and in the fourteenth:

> O Ayr! My dear, my native ground,
> Within thy presbyterial bound
> A candid lib'ral band is found
> Of public teachers,
> As men, as Christians, too, renown'd
> An' manly preachers. (II, p. 80)

Burns regarded himself as a member of a true religious group, in this case identified with that "candid lib'ral band" to which M'Math belonged.[14]

Critics have been just as sharply divided over "The Cotter's Saturday Night" as they have been over the satires. In Victorian England the poem was greatly overrated by all those who blushed over, or found apologies for the satires, and by those who took the same pride in old national piety as the Pharisees did in their obedience to the law. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the general opinion

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14. Fortunately, as T. Crawford points out, Burns was too great to stay within such narrow bounds. It was an extremely dangerous position for Burns to take, for it is suspiciously like the first stage of the process which so often turns a sincere man into a party hack. Crawford, p. 62.

of the poem started to change, until it went too far in the opposite direction. In 1828 we find Lockhart saying:

> "The Cotter's Saturday Night" is perhaps, of all Burns's pieces, the one whose exclusion from the collection... would be the most injurious, if not to the genius, at least to the character of the man....Loftier flights he certainly has made, but in these he remained but a short while on the wing, and effort is too often perceptible; here the motion is easy, gentle, placidly undulating. There is more of the conscious security of power, than in any other of his serious pieces of considerable length; the whole has the appearance of coming in a full stream from the foundation of the heart, a stream that soothes the ear, and has no glare on the surface."[15]

Henley, nearly seventy years later, calls it "The most artificial and the most imitative of Burns's works. The intent of the Saturday Night is idyllic and sentimental, as its effect is laboured and unreal".[16]

There is an element of truth in both these criticisms, but Lockhart is blind to the sentiment in the poem and Henley has missed its sincerity.

The description of family worship (stanza XII-XVI) is the real kernel of the poem.

The chearfu' supper done, wi' serious face,
They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;
The sire turns o'er, wi' patriarchal grace,
The bid ha'-Bible ance his father's pride,
His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,
grey side locks His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare;
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,
selects He wales a portion with judicious care,
And 'Let us worship God' he says with solemn air.

XIII

They chant their artless notes in simple guise,
They turn their hearts, by far the noblest aim;
Perhaps Dundee's wild-warbling measures rise,
Or plaintive Martyrs, worthy of the name;
fans Or noble Elgin beets the heaven-ward flame,

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15. Lockhart, p. 52.

16. Henley and Henderson, I, p. 362, and IV, p. 276.

The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays:
Compar'd with these, Italian trills are tame;
The tickl'd ears no heart felt raptures raise;
Nae unison hae they, with our Creator's praise.

(I, p. 111)

XVI

Then kneeling down to Heaven's Eternal King,
The saint, the father, and the husband prays:
Hope 'springs exalting on triumphant wing,'
That thus they all shall meet in future days,
There, ever bask in uncreated rays,
No more to sigh or shed the bitter tear,
Together hymning their Creator's praise,
In such society, yet still more dear;
While circling Time moves round in an eternal sphere.

(I, p. 112)

The sentimental colouring Burns gives to this scene of family worship is consistent with what he was to later call his "religion of the bosom".[17] It is all too easy to magnify this sentimentality and sneer at such a religious ethic, but such an ethic was for Burns an honourable morality and

Compared with this, how poor Religion's pride
In all the pomp of method, and of art;
When men display to congregations wide
Devotion's every grace, except the heart's...

(I, p. 112)

One personage who seems to have captured Burns's interest during the period when he was brooding on religion was the Devil, whose "dauntless" and "unyielding" courage in opposing an omnipotent power Burns greatly admired. Burns writes to his friend Nichole in 1787:

> I have bought a pocket Milton which I carry perpetually about with me, in order to study the sentiments--the dauntless magnanimity, the intrepid, unyielding, independence, the desperate daring and noble defiance of hardship, in that great personage, SATAN.[18]

In spite of what we read in Burns's letter we can hardly imagine Burns treating the Devil the same way as Milton did. Burns's "Address to

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17. To Mrs. M'Lehose 12th January, 1788, Letters, I, p. 161.

18. Letters, I, pp. 96-97

the Deil" is not simply a burlesque on the majesty of the Miltonic Satan (although it is that); it is a playful expression of the popular attitude to the Devil, whose description always called forth the vigour and terrifying rhetoric of the old Calvinist preachers.[19] As has been pointed out, the old manner of preaching was dying out and the Calvinist stories about the Devil and hell had become little more than popular tradition; nevertheless, the majority of the people still believed the superstitions and feared the workings of "Auld Nick".[20] Burns probably believed in an evil force of some kind but in his "Address to the Deil" he ridicules the degenerate Calvinist idea of a real living Satan who is busy travelling over the world "To scaud (scald) poor wretches."[21] And Satan's office, that awe inspiring doctrine of eternal punishment, in the poem is reduced to nothing more than "spairgin" (splashing) brimstone from a "lowin heugh" (flaming hollow). This reduction of Satan to a prankster is a much more effective (though implicit) attack on the hell fire preachers than is the sentimental morality of Hutcheson.[22]

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19. Part of the comedy of the "Address" lies in the juxtaposition of the "Chief of many throned powers. / That led th' embattl'd seraphin to war," with "Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie," the only dignified title "Satan," being lost in the middle. From the "Mighty Prince" of Milton, to the picture which Burns draws, that of a naughty boy having fun--is to cover the possible extremes of attitude towards the devil. The metre, the gay old metre of the troubadours, perfectly fits the light mood as it lifts the thought lightly along. No serious thoughts could be carried well by such a metre.

20. H. Gray Graham, I, p. 87.

21. Henley and Henderson, p. 47.

22. Daiches, p. 124.

Burns proceeds to list the devil's activities with the biblical references showing a deliberate lack of reverence,[23] as in his account of Satan's part in the temptation of Job:

flurry D' ye mind that day, when in a biz
smoky: scorched Wi' reekit duds, an' reestit gizz,
smutty wig Ye did present your smoutie phiz
'Mang better folk,
squinted An' sklented on the man of Uzz
Your spite fu' joke? (I, p. 52)

As Daiches rightly points out, this lack of reverence does not imply any contempt whatsoever for the Bible; rather Burns is trying to show that the Bible stories are a series of human documents which can be related to the everyday life of man.[24] This point can be illustrated more clearly in the original fifteenth verse which ran:

'Lang syne in Eden's happy scene
When strappin Edie's [Adam's deleted] days were green,
An' Eve was like my Bonnie Jean
My dearest part,
A dancin, sweet, young, hansome queen
Wi' guiless heart. (I, notes, p. 343)

After the invocation (which sets the tone), Burns proceeds to show the devil's activities in folklore while suggesting perhaps some of the accidents that have been blamed on the devil are really the results of natural causes, such as drunkenness on the part of the victim, "and then in terms of biblical and theological activities he sums up his catalogue:[25]

But a' your doings to rehearse
fighting Your wily snares an' fechtin fierce
Sin' that day Michael did you pierce
Down to this time,
be at: lowland Wad ding a Lallen tongue, or Erse,
In prose in rhyme. (I, p. 52)

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23. Ibid., p. 124.
24. Daiches, p. 125.
25. Ibid., p. 125.

The third and final section of the poem is the poet's own view of the devil which continues in the same mood:

hoofs	An' now Auld Cloots, I ken ye're thinkin,
roistering	A certain Bardie's rantin, drinkin,
hurrying	Some luckless hour will send him linkin,
	To your black Pit;
dodging	But, faith! he'll turn a corner jinkin,
	An' cheat you yet.
	But, fare-you-weel, auld Nickie-ben!
	O, wad ye tak a thought an' men!
perhaps	Ye aiblins might--I dinna ken--
	Still hae a stake:
sad	I'm wae to think upo' yon den,
	Ev'n for your sake! (I, pp. 52-53)

The suggestion that even the devil could repent and escape from "yon den" is not the mere sentimentality that some critics hold it to be. It is a satiric jab at the Calvinist view of damnation and original sin disguised as a piece of sentimentalism. The picture of the devil, with the suggestion that even he might be saved, sets the entire doctrine of everlasting damnation and original sin in a context where it cannot possibly survive.

It is not true to say, as some critics do, that Burns was the first to have no fear of the devil,[26] for long before Burns a familiar attitude towards the devil was common in folklore,[27] and in the works of Scottish writers such as Dunbar. (One thing only is apparent: with the growing disbelief in the devil, the realism and grim humour of the stories about him degenerated.)

Religion is implicit in some of the least likely places. For instance, one would hardly expect to find religion in a poem like "Tam

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26. Miss Keith is quite incorrect when she says "As Burns freed Scotland from the tyranny of the Kirk, so now he released her from the hold of the devil." Keith, p. 48.

27. See The Scots Book: Folklore, Rhymes and Tales compiled by R. MacDonald Douglas (London, 1935), pp. 104-109.

O'Shanter". Here Burns makes it a point to tell the reader that "Tam O'Shanter" is "a tale o' truth" and not one of those meretricious romances of which the kirk disapproved; so the girl, the music, the dance, and Auld Nick himself were simply the content of a dream and Tam was not to blame for any one of them. After all, he was really riding home to his wife, as the kirk said he should. Tam had all the credit of good intention. The poem contains both worlds, the world of the flesh and the Devil, and the world of the kirk. The poem has the moral approval of the kirk, for after all, "honest Tam" was riding away from all of the temptation. Tam knew the fate of those who couldn't take their eyes off the girls: "In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin!" (line 202). So Tam must ride to escape; he must ride back to his own wife. Tam just makes it home ("But faith, he'll turn a corner jinkin', an' cheat you yet," as Burns had said in his "Address to the De'il"). Burns goes on to point out the moral: if your mind runs to drink and girls, "Think! you may buy the joys owre dear." (Line 223.) Joys there are aplenty in this poem; the warm ale house and your friend Souter Jonnie beside you, the music, the whirlwind dance, the sympathetic devil who always understood humanity to the core and would give you everything you would ever need, and then those girls, with no one to see them but Tam. What a banquet of delights. Yet Robert was not his father's son for nothing. "Think! Remember!" ring out a warning at the end of the poem. "Domnada est voluptas,"[28] Calvin had written. "Think! Remember!"

Because Robert Burns had failings and did not follow his own advice, we have no reason to deny him the sincerity of his preaching,

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28. Quoted in Keith, p. 103.

nor is there any need to apologize for him. We should accept him as he himself bids us in "A Bard's Epitaph":

> Is there a man, whose judgment clear
> Can others teach the course to steer,
> Yet runs, himself, life's mad career
> Wild as the wave?--
> Here pause--and, thro' the starting tear,
> Survey this grave. (I, p. 189)

He was a good and sympathetic preacher, for none knew better than he the frailty of human nature and the bitterness of repentance and remorse. "The Epistle to a Young Friend", despite some rather worldly advice, is a fine sermon.

IV

> Yet they wa fa' in Fortune's strife,
> Their fate we should na censure;
> For still, th' important end of life
> They equally may answer:
> A man may hae an honest heart,
> *poverty* Tho' poortith hourly stare him;
> A man may tak a neebor's part,
> Yet hae nae cash to spare him. (I, p. 141)

VI

> *flame* The sacred lowe o' weel-plac'd love,
> Luxuriantly indulge it;
> *attempt* But never tempt th' illicit rove,
> Tho' naething should divulge it:
> I waive the quantum o' the sin,
> The hazard of concealing:
> But, och! it hardens o' within,
> And petrifies the feeling! (I, p. 142)

IX

> The great Creator to revere
> Must sure become the creature:
> But still the preaching cant forbear,
> And ev'n the rigid feature;
> Yet ne'er with wits profane to range
> Be complaisance extended
> An atheist-laugh's a poor exchange
> For Deity offended! (I, p. 143)

X

frolicking

When rantin round in Pleasure's ring,
Religion may be blinded;
Or if she gie a random sting,
It may be little minded;
But when on Life we're tempest-driv'n--
A conscience but a canker--
A correspondence fix'd wi' Heav'n
Is sure a noble anchor!

The "Address to the Unco Guid" [29] is another fine sermon; the following lines in particular breathe a pure spirit of Christianity:

Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister women;
Tho' they may gang a kennin wrang
To step aside is human:
One point must still be greatly dark,
The moving why they do it;
And just as lamely aim ye mark
How far perhaps they rue it.

VIII

Who made the heart, 'tis He alone
Decidedly can try us:
He knows each chord, its various tone,
Each spring, its various bias:
Then at the balance let's be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted.[30] (I, p. 220)

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29. "The Address to the Unco Guid", or "Rigidly Righteous", may be seen as a connection between the ecclesiastical satires and the rest of Burns's poetry. The "Unco Guid" are the Holy Willies of the world and the profit mongers of the epistles. "Calvinist austerity, rigid righteousness, mechanical living, fear of the instincts, "miserliness", are all aspects of the same thing, irony of ironies." T. Crawford, p. 66.

30. This final stanza expresses a theory which was at the back of Burns's mind always, even when he wrote the ecclesiastical satires. Salvation to Burns depends entirely on the quality of life as judged by God alone.

ii

The positive side of Robert Burns's religious nature finds a fuller expression in his prose. Besides the two early prayers, "The Cotter's Saturday Night", "To the Rev. John M'Math", and parts of the "Address to the Deil" and what is implicit in poems like "Tam O'Shanter", there is very little we can learn from the poetry about his religion. Burns found it easier to exhibit his views and analyze his reflections on the subject in letters to his friends rather than in his poetry.[31]

The letters are generally disappointing after the poetry. They are often marred by silly sentimentalism and excessive flattery; they seem laboured and appear often as epistolary exercises rather than letters to intimate friends. While yet a boy, Burns was inspired, as Gilbert Burns tells us, "with a strong desire to excel in letter writing."[32] Unfortunately, Robert seems to have been too much influenced by the atrocious style of Murdock his teacher. In a letter written in 1799, Murdock writes:

> But now the plains of Mount Oliphant began to whiten, and Robert was summoned to relinquish the pleasing scenes that surrounded the grotto of Calypso, and, armed with a sickle, to seek glory by signalising himself in the fields of Ceres.[33]

In other words, Robert had to leave school to help with the harvest.

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31. See the letter to Robert Aiken (about 8th October, 1786), Letters, I, p. 47; see also Alexander Cunningham, 11th February, 1790, Letters, II, p. 13; also to Mrs. Dunlop, 16th August, 1788, Letters, I, p. 246.

32. Gilbert Burns's "Memoir", Scott Douglas, IV, p. 355.

33. Ibid., IV, p. 301

The faults of the letters, however, are superficial; underneath the extravagant diction lies his sincerity, and this is especially true of his religious letters.[34] Burns had a habit of adapting his style to the taste and temperament of each of his correspondents. For example, he writes in a tender, sentimental, yet lively tone in his letters to Clarinda, and in a genteel and respectful manner to Mrs. Dunlop. The various prose styles which he affected in his correspondence not only give us a good idea of the character, but reveal Burns's skill in recognizing the character of the people with whom he came into contact.

From about the age of twenty-five until his death, the main tenets of his creed did not change, although sometimes when in a melancholy mood he anxiously questioned the existence of a benevolent God and he expressed doubts about immortality.[35] In his Common-Place Book we find Burns

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34. The most important of which are:
1. Letter to Robert Aiken, (about) 8 October 1786, Letters, I, pp. 46-48.
2. Letter to "Clarenda", 8 January 1788, Letters, I, pp. 158-160.
3. Letter to Robert Muir, 7 March 1788, Letters, I, pp. 207-208.
4. Letter to Mrs. Dunlop, 22 June 1789, Letters, I, pp. 342-343.
5. Letter to Mrs. Dunlop, 13 December 1789, Letters, I, pp. 372-374.
6. Letter to Alexander Cunningham, 13 February, 14 February, 16 February, 1790, Letters, II, pp. 11-13.
7. Letter to Mrs. Dunlop, 22 August 1792, Letters, II, pp. 115-118.
8. Letter to Alexander Cunningham, 10 September 1792, Letters, II, pp. 118-122.
9. Letter to Alexander Cunningham, 25 February 1794, Letters, II, pp. 234-236.
10. Letter to Mrs. Dunlop, 29 December, 1794, Letters, II, pp. 280-282.

35. For instance in his letter to Mrs. Dunlop, 13th December 1789, Burns says, "Can it be possible, that when I resign this frail, feverish being, I shall find myself in conscious existence? When the last gasp of agony has announced that I am no more to those that knew me....When the cold, stiffened, unconscious ghastly course is resigned into the earth....Shall I be yet warm in life, seeing and seen, enjoying and enjoyed....Is there probability in your conjectures, any truth in your many stories of another world beyond death?...If there is another life, it must be only for the just, the benevolent, the aimiable, and the humane; what a flattering idea, then, is a world to come! Would to God I as firmly believed it as I ardently wished it." Letters, I, pp. 372-373. Or in his letter to Cunningham 14th February, 1790, Burns states: "One thing frightens me much that we are to live forever seems too good news to be true...how much would I be indebted to anyone who could fully assure me that this were certain fact." Letters, II, p. 13.

setting down the opinions which could well be the basis for his universal appeal. Burns writes:

> I have often observed in the course of my experience of human life, that every man, even the worst, has something good about him, though very often nothing else than a happy temperament or constitution inclining him to this or that virtue. For this reason, no man can say in what degree any other person, besides himself, can be, with strict justice, called wicked. Let any of the strictest character for regularity of conduct among us examine impartially how many of his virtues are owing to constitution and education: how many vices he has never been guilty of, not from any care of vigilance, but for want of opportunity, or some accidental circumstances intervening: how many of the weaknesses of mankind he has escaped, because he was out of line of such temptation: and, what often, if not always, weighs more than all the rest, how much he is indebted to the world's good opinion, because the world does not know all: I say, any man who can thus think, will skan the failings, nay, the faults and crimes, of mankind around him with a brother's eye.[36]

It is this Christian feeling for his fellow man which recurs in his letters. Contrary to the Calvinist theory of human nature, Burns maintained that men were benevolent creatures;[37] consequently, God would not and could not be "willing that any should perish, but that all should come to everlasting life."[38] Burns says much the same thing in a letter to Peter Hill.

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36. Robert Burns' Common-Place Book 1783-1785. Reproduced in facsimile from the poet's manuscript (Illinois, 1965), p. 9.

37. Burns writes to Miss Rachael Dunlop, on the 2nd of August, 1788: I am in perpetual warfare with that doctrine of our Reverend Priesthood, that "we are born into this world bond slaves of iniquity and heirs of perdition, wholly inclined" to that which is evil and wholly disinclined to that which is good untill (sic) by a kind of Spiritual Filtration or rectifying process called effectual calling etc.--The whole business is reversed, and our connections above and below completely change place--I believe in my conscience that the case is just quite contrary--We come into this world with a heart and disposition to do good for it, untill by dashing a large mixture of base alloy called Prudence alias Selfishness the too precious metal of the soul is brought down to the black guard Sterling of Ordinary currency. Letters, I, p. 242.

38. To Mrs. Agnes M'Lehose "Clarinda" 8th January, 1788, Letters, I, p. 174.

> I am all out of patience with this vile world for one thing--Mankind are by nature benevolent creatures, except in a few scoundrally instances, I do not think that avarice of the good things we chance to have is born with us.[39]

However strongly Burns felt for this theory of the brotherhood and benevolence of man, he never allowed himself to be blinded to the actual conditions around him, for he saw the necessity of prudence in the affairs of the world. Burns goes on in the same letter to Peter Hill:

> We are placed here amid so much Nakedness and Hunger and Poverty and Want, that we are under a damning necessity of studying Selfishness, in order that we may Exist.[40]

Yet by the very tone in which he says it we can see that for Burns this is not a lofty aim, for he recognizes that there are some "in every age... [whom] all the wants and woes of life cannot debase to Selfishness, or even give the necessary alloy of Caution and Prudence."[41] Burns inclines to number himself among these, for the same letter goes on:

> God knows I am no Saint; I have a whole host of follies and Sins to answer for; but if I could, and I believe I do it as far as I can, I would wipe away all tears from all eyes.[42]

This is not vanity, neither is it false modesty; Burns needed no one to tell him that he lacked caution and prudence, but never was Burns deluded. Always he faced reality head on. That is why he courted the acquaintance of the outcasts of society. One is reminded of the following entry from the Common-Place Book dated March 1784:

> I have often coveted the acquaintance of that part of mankind commonly known by the ordinary phrase of Blackguards, sometimes farther than was consistent with the safety of my character; those who by thoughtless Prodigality, or headstrong passions

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39. To Peter Hill 2nd March, 1790, Letters, II, pp. 15-16.

40. Ibid., p. 16.

41. Letters, II, p. 16.

42. Ibid., p. 16; see also Revelations VII, 17.

> have been driven to ruin:-though disgraced by follies, nay sometimes "Stained with guilt, and crimson'd o'er with crimes"; I have yet found among them, in not a few instances, some of the noblest Virtues, Magnanimity, Generosity, disinterested friendship and even modesty, in the highest perfection.[43]

Many have blamed Burns for keeping the kind of company he describes in "The Jolly Beggars" while others have praised him for it, but not for the right reason. Burns found that these men had something in common with himself: poverty, distress and hardship had stripped them of the fond delusions which most men cherish, and forced them to face reality.

> The honest man, tho e'er sae poor
> Is king o' men for a' that.

Burns tells us in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop that we must

> find the heart weaned from earth, the soul affianced to her God, the correspondence fixed in heaven, the pious supplication and devout thanksgiving.[44]

We must not look among the comfortable classes, in the court, the palace, or in "the glare of public life".

> No: to find them in their precious importance and devine efficacy, we must search among the obscure recesses of disappointment, affliction, poverty and distress.[45]

When we have lost everything of worldly value, then we come face to face with reality, and are able "to see ourselves as ithers see us". It is interesting at this point to remember that Calvinism with its doctrine of depravity did not allow men to get too inflated an opinion of themselves.

As has been stated before, Burns never really formed an elaborate or consistent system of theology. The best and fullest account of his belief is contained in a letter to Clarinda, and always the influence of

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43. Robert Burns's Common-Place Book, 1783-1785, pp. 7-8.

44. To Mrs. Dunlop, 16th August, 1788, Letters, I, p. 246.

45. Letters, I, p. 246.

of M'Gill's Practical Essay is obvious. Clarinda had written to Burns to say that she regretted to find that he was an enemy of Calvinism, and asked him to set forth his chief objection to that faith. In his reply he gave her a brief account of his creed.

> He who is our Author and Preserver and will one day be our Judge, must be--not for His sake, in the way of duty, but from the natural impulse of our hearts--the object of our reverential awe and greatful adoration. He is almighty, and all bounteous; we are weak and dependent; hence prayer and every other sort of devotion. "He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to everlasting life:" consequently, it must be in every one's power to embrace His offer of "everlasting life," otherwise he could not, in justice, condemn those who did not. A mind pervaded, and governed by purity, truth, and charity, though it does not merit heaven, yet is an absolutely necessary prerequisite, without which heaven can neither be obtained nor enjoyed; and by devine promise, such a mind shall never fail of attaining "everlasting life;" hence, the deceiving, and the uncharitable, exclude themselves from eternal bliss, by their unfitness to enjoy it. The Supreme Being has put the immediate administration of all this, for wise and good ends known to Himself, into the hands of Jesus Christ, a great personage, whose relation to Him we cannot comprehend, but whose relation to us is that of a Guide and a Saviour; and who, except for our own obstinacy and misconduct, will bring us all, through various ways, and by various means, to bliss at last.[46]

From this letter we see that Burns had much in common with Calvinism, though he did not accept the doctrines of election and the vicarious sacrifice of Christ. Clarinda, however, relied on Christ's atonement for the pardon of her sins, and argued that she could not see the need for such a sacrifice, if man had power to redeem himself. Burns had had this difficulty answered for him by M'Gill.[47] M'Gill's tenets for the

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46. To Mrs. Agnes M'Lehose, January, 1788, Letters, I, p. 174.

47. M'Gill's essay on this point reads: Upon the whole, to suffer many indignities in the world and to die on the cross were not the chief and ultimate end of our saviour's mission, nor any direct ends at all, but only incidental calamities. Quoted in Chamber and Wallace, appendices, pp. 449-457.

most part agree with Burns's own kindly, if somewhat sentimental, belief in a benevolent God[48] who desires that all men should have an everlasting life. The sentimental strain in his religion was, no doubt, encouraged by Clarinda, who was probably more sentimental than the poet himself, and Burns knew that the sentimental colouring which he gave to his "religion of the bosom",[49] as he called it, was bound to please Clarinda.

When Burns wrote to Mrs. Dunlop, his attitude changed. The chief religious topic with her was immortality, which seems to have been one of the biggest problems in his religion. In one of his letters to Mrs. Dunlop we have another version of his creed. Burns writes:

> I have just heard Mr. Kirkpaturck preach a sermon. He is a man famous for his benevolence, and I revere him; but from such ideas of my Creator, good Lord, deliver me: Religion... is surely a simple business, as it equally concerns the ignorant and the learned, the poor and the rich. That there is an incomprehensible Great Being, to whom I owe my existence; and that He must be intimately acquainted with the operations and progress of the internal machinery, and consequent outward deportment of this creature which He has made; these are, I think, self-evident propositions. That there is a real and eternal distinction between virtue and vice, and, consequently, that I am an accountable creature; that from the seeming nature of the human mind, as well as from the evident imperfection, nay, positive injustice, in the administration of affairs both in the natural and moral worlds, there must be a retributive scene of existence beyond the grave; must, I think, be allowed by everyone who will give himself a moment's reflection. I will go farther, and affirm that from the sublimity, excellence, and purity of His doctrine and precepts, unparalleled by all the aggregated wisdom and learning of many preceding ages, though, to appearance, He Himself was the obscurest and most illiterate of our species--therefore Jesus Christ was from God....[50]

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48. "But, Thou art good; and Goodness still Delighteth to forgive."

49. To Mrs. M'Lehose 12th January, 1788, Letters, I, p. 161.

50. To Mrs. Dunlop, 21st June, 1789, Letters, I, p. 351.

Burns's faith in future existence is not always so firm, for when he is afflicted by melancholy, his faith becomes no more than a desperate hope. In September, 1789, he writes to Mrs. Dunlop, fully confident of a life hereafter.

> Religion, my dear friend, is a true comfort! A strong persuasion in a future state of existence; a proposition so obviously probable, that, setting revelation aside, every nation and people, so far as investigation has reached, for at least near four thousand years, have in some mode or other, firmly believed it. In vain would we reason and pretend to doubt. I have myself done so to a very daring pitch, when I reflected, that I was opposing the most ardent wishes and the most daring hopes of good men, and flying in the face of all human belief, in all ages, I was shocked at my own conduct.[51]

Yet shortly after that letter Mrs. Dunlop was to receive another where Burns speaks of "another world beyond death" as a "baseless vision" and "fabricated fable", while wondering if Jesus Christ was an imposter. If there is another life beyond the grave Burns feels it is only for the just and benevolent. The letter[52] was not written under ordinary circumstances, for it opens:

> I am groaning under the miseries of a diseased nervous system, a system of all others the most essential to our happiness-- or the most productive to our miseries. For near three weeks I have been so ill....

When not afflicted by such a state of melancholy, his attitude to immortality seems to have been that expressed in a letter to Robert Aiken.

> Though sceptical in some points of our current belief, yet I think, I have every evidence for the reality of a life beyond the stinted bourne of our present existence.[53]

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51. To Mrs. Dunlop, 6th September, 1789, Letters, I, p. 359.

52. To Mrs. Dunlop, 6th September, 1789, Letters, I, p. 359.

53. To Robert Aiken, (about) 8th October, 1786, Letters, I, p. 47.

Despite his occasional anxiety about a life to come, Robert Burns avoided the fault too often committed by orthodox Calvinists. He concentrated on this worldly life and his relationship toward his fellow men.

> Whatever mitigates the woes [Burns writes to Robert Aiken], or increases the happiness of others, this is my criterion of goodness: and whatever injures society at large, or any individual in it, this is my measure of iniquity.

And again in a letter to Clarinda, Burns writes, "My definition of Worth is short: Truth and Humanity, respect for our fellow creatures."[54] He never equated the future life with any selfish idea of reward. The Calvinists of Burns's day, on the other hand, were often more interested in the future life than in the present. Their good actions were often done with a heavenly reward in mind. Burns found enough to interest him in the present condition of man:

> What strange beings we are! [he exclaims to Cunningham] since we have a portion of conscious existence, equally capable of enjoying pleasure, happiness, and rapture, or suffering pain, wretchedness, or misery, it is surely worthy of inquiry, whether there be not such a thing as a science of life; whether method, economy, and fertility of expedients be not applicable to enjoyment, and whether there be not a want of dexterity in pleasure, which renders our little scantling of happiness still less; and a profuseness, an intoxication in bliss, which leads to satiety, disgust and self abhorrence.[55]

In another letter Burns gives us a more detailed exposition of his practical "science of life":

> When I think of life, I resolve to keep a strict look-out in the course of economy, for the sake of worldly convenience and independence of mind, to cultivate intimacy with a few of the companions of youth, that they may be friends of age; never to refuse my liquorish humour a handfull of the sweetmeats of life, when they come not too dear: and for futurity--

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54. To Mrs. Agnes M'Lehose, 4th January, 1788, Letters, I, p. 154.

55. To Alexander Cunningham, 13th February, 1790, Letters, II, p. 12.

"The present moment is our aim,
The neist we never saw."
How like you my philosophy?[56]

From what we have seen already of Burns we can safely say that he had no great liking for that philosophy himself, and he certainly did not keep his resolution. Any such detailed course of worldly wisdom cannot be true to his sentimental belief in the affections and passions of the benevolent heart. In the letter to Cunningham, previously quoted, Burns goes on to say:

> There is not a doubt but that health, talents, character, decent competency, respectable friends, are real and substantial.

Notwithstanding all these blessings, people are still unhappy and the cause, Burns affirms, is ambition

> which goads us up the hill of life, not as we ascend other eminences, for the laudable curiosity of viewing an extended landscape, but rather for the dishonest pride of looking down on others of our fellow-creatures seemingly diminutive in humbler stations--etc. etc. etc. etc. etc.[57]

Here again Burns is referring to that "damning necessity of studying selfishness, in order that we may exist" and though Burns recognizes its usefulness for getting on in the work-a-day world, he prefers to be a failure in the eyes of society so long as he can "wipe away all tears from all eyes", for Burns is sure

The heart benevolent and kind
The most resembles God.

During the last few years of his life, his health deteriorated and the attacks of melancholy came more often: but he still clung, and clung more firmly than ever before, to his two cardinal beliefs in a benevolent God and immortality. In February 1794 he wrote to Cunningham while suffering from "a number of domestic vexations, and some pecuniary

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56. To Richard Brown, February 1788, Letters, I, p. 196.

57. To Alexander Cunningham, 13th February, 1790, Letters, II, p. 12.

share in the ruin of these damned times", asking Cunningham to minister to his "diseased mind", since he himself had exhausted every comforting thought.

> Still, [he continues] there are two pillars that bear us up amid the wreck of misfortune and misery. The one is composed of the different modifications of a certain noble, stubborn something in man, known by the names of courage, fortitude, magnanimity. The other is made up of those feelings and sentiments which however the sceptic may deny them, or the enthusiast may disfigure them, are yet, I am convinced, original and component parts of the human soul; those "senses of mind", if I may be allowed the expression, which connect us with, and link us to, those awful obscure realities--an all-powerful and equally beneficent God, and a world to come beyond death and the grave. The first gives the nerve of combat, while a ray of hope beams on the field; the last pours the balm of comfort into the wounds which time can never cure.[58]

Despite what the critics have said to the contrary, Burns goes on to say that religion affords for him a superlative source of enjoyment in this life and that an irreligious man is to be pitied for he is shut out from the comforts that religion can provide.

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58. To Cunningham, 25th February, 1794, Letters, II, pp. 234-235.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

No doubt Robert Burns was in agreement with Dalrymple and M'Gill--two spokesmen for the New Light party--when they spoke of the benevolence of human nature and the love of a God who was not willing that any should perish but that all should have everlasting life; however, Burns was no mercenary fighter for the New Lights.

In parts of "The Holy Fair", it is the New Lights who come under attack.

> Smith opens out his cauld harangues,
> On practice and on morals; (I, p. 41)
>
> * * *
>
> What signifies his barren shine,
> Of moral pow'rs an' reason?
> His English style, an' gesture fine
> Are a' clean out o' season.
> Like Socrates or Antonine,
> Or some auld pagan heathen,
> The moral man he does define,
> But ne'er a word o' faith in
> That's right that day. (I, p. 42)

In the eyes of Burns the New Lights often represented a morality that was more cerebral than religious.

In "The Ordination", one gets the feeling that Burns finds both the Old Lights and the New Lights fitting subjects for satire. The

New Lights in the poem appear so limited[1] that they could not have had much appeal to Burns.

Although Burns had many friends in the New Light party he did not accept all their doctrines. All that we can say is that he found some of their principles agreeing with his own ideas of Man and God. Burns's religious convictions were at times Calvinistic, like those of the Old Lights. At other times, Burns's religious views coincided with the "moderate" views of the New Lights. However, to label Burns as unquestionably a Calvinistic Old Light or a "moderate" New Light is to completely misunderstand the man, for Burns was sympathetic to whatever views came within the framework of his own sentimentalism.

Burns's ideas of Man and God were based on Christian charity towards men and on the actions and passions of a benevolent heart. These are the underlying emotions which explain what appear to be glaring contradictions in the thoughts of Burns's critics--and by implication, what appear to be glaring contradictions in Burns's thought.

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1. It is a fairly safe generalization that, on the whole, the popular New Lights presented a narrower view, and the autocratic Calvinism the more enlightened. None of the clergy, with the exception of Hutcheson, possessed the imaginative genius that would provide the philosophic depth and subtlety to construct an intellectual position that could vie with Calvinism in strength and logic.

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