Browning's Religion: The Undecided Philosophy

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Abstract

Religion is one of the most important themes in Robert Browning's poetry, and it has attracted many readers, whose goal is to re-examine the truth about the poet's attitude towards religion. The purpose of this research is to explore the poet's concept of religion and demonstrate how this is reflected in his poetry. This paper demonstrates that Browning fluctuates between faith and doubt, and yet he is clearer and more confident of his faith than his doubt. In general, Browning's faith mainly stems from his personal conviction, while his doubts spring from his surroundings in the Victorian society.

Keywords: Robert Browning, religion, poetry

> In youth I looked to these very skies,
>
> And probing their immensities,
>
> I found God there, His visible power;
>
> My soul brought all to a single test
>
> That He the Eternal First and Last,
>
> Who, in His power, had so surpassed
>
> All man conceives of what is might,
>
> Whose wisdom, too, showed infinite,
>
> Would prove as infinitely good; ("Christmas Eve and Easter Day")

In a literature class at King Abdul Aziz University, one of my students inquired about Robert Browning's religion. As part of my lecturing technique, I redirected the question to the rest of the class and eventually received varied answers. Some students, depending on their general knowledge, said that Browning was a Christian; others suggested that he was an atheist. This question encouraged me to conduct research centring on this particular topic, to uncover the truth about Browning's religion. In order to achieve my purpose, I had to review many of his poems in addition to some relevant points in his biography. Thus, in this paper, I intend to explore Browning's religion through his poetry, to determine whether he was a Christian, an atheist, or something else.

I suggest that Browning was not straightforward in his views regarding religion. In fact, he was almost inconsistent; in some of his poems, he seems to be a true Christian, while in others, he seems to convey a negative view of the religion, so much so that it appears evident that he was not a Christian at all. Further, in some poems, it is difficult for the reader to make a determination on this matter. What Browning does is remain true to his Victorian age, and he can be described as a religious doubter.

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was born and raised in Camberwell, a suburb of London, to a prosperous middle class family. Both of his parents were Protestants, and more specifically evangelical Christians. His mother is said to have been a strictly religious woman, who passed her faith to her child. According to Browning's biography, his mother gave to her child two important things: a "strong religious habit and a great belief in manners". During his childhood, he used to accompany his mother to Sunday sermons at the nearby church,

where he gained some early knowledge of Christianity.

Juliana Ludick, in *Christ in the Poetry of Robert Browning*, states the following:

> His parents, his native Camberwell, and his wife were the most potent influence in Robert Browning's religious life. His mother, brought up in the Scottish Kirk, was a devout member of the congregational Church of York, for the last forty-three years of her life. His father, not so devout, and originally an Anglican, was something of eighteenth century rationalist, though was later persuaded to join the church in which his wife worshipped… attended services in York Chapel regularly… His [Browning's] marriage with Elizabeth Barrett deepened his Christian spirit and doubled his formal nonconformist affiliation.' (pp. 12-13).

It seems that Browning greatly admired his mother's teachings and followed them wholeheartedly. Indeed, this religious influence appears clear in the selection of a religious symbol for the title of his series, *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841). The title was borrowed from the religious inscriptions found on a priest's robes. This demonstrates the poet's early interest in Christianity. Everett, understood the religious significance of this title and concluded that Robert Browning had already acquired knowledge of the Bible by this point.

In reviewing Browning's poetry, one may detect many poems reflecting Browning's true interest in religion. According to a critic, Browning had been 'interested in religion all his life'. Many of his early poems, such as 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day', bear strong evidence of the poet's interest in religion, and explain his attitude towards Christianity at that particular time. 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day' deals with the inner nature of faith, expressing the profoundest of Browning's spiritual convictions, which centred upon the most sublime of all religious hypotheses—namely, that of the omnipotence and omnipresence of God, the divine power (Ward, 2000).

Browning's perspective on God remains mostly the same in his poetry throughout the years, with a few exceptions. His understanding of God mainly remains within the limits of religious dogma, but sometimes he diverts to adopt non-religious views. In many poems, and especially in 'Rabbi Ben Ezra', God is introduced as the divine power that rules the world (Jones, 2006). Jones interprets it as 'a perfectly familiar Christian idea':

> Thence shall I pass, approved
>
> A man, for aye removed
>
> From the developed brute; a God though in the germ.

According to Jones, in the poem 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' and others, the will of God prevails: 'there prevails a constant sense of the community of God and man within the realm of Goodness; and the world itself, with its dread machinery whose purpose is at once the evolution of man's character and the realization of the will of God' (Jones, 2006).

In 'Paracelsus', Browning shows full faith in God: 'God! Thou art Love! I built my faith on that'. God is the superpower that keeps control over everything on earth, and the One that can be trusted to do everything. Furthermore, as Conley notes, 'Browning's deep trust in God's Providence is brought out in the last line of "Prospice" and is supported by several portions of his later work, "Rabbi Ben Ezra. Browning simply leaves everything in God's hands, and trusts Him to bring good out of His greatest evil. In short, Browning vows to 'commit all things to God' and trusts in 'His care in bringing all things to their proper end' (Conley, 2001).

'God! thou art mind!' says Paracelsus. A call, according to Berdoe, echoes the 'noble definition of the Supreme cause of all thing given by Aristotle when he said "God is Thought"; the absolute, eternal, thinking Essence, distinct from matter, thought, ever the same and unchanged, whose object is supreme perfection'. This is the definition of God as interpreted through Browning's poetry. Moreover, in regard to the existence of God, Berdoe states that 'to prove the real existence of the thinking ego is to prove the existence of God, the Supreme Thought, Essential Mind, Infinite Intelligence'.

As stated above, Browning's God is omnipotent. It is God who owns all human and non-human souls; He is the One who lives in everything:

> God… dwells in all,
>
> From life's minute beginnings, up at last
>
> To man—the consummation of his scheme
>
> Of being, the completion of this sphere
>
> Of life. ('Christmas Eve and Easter Day')

God is hidden. He reveals Himself to those who seek Him, and He can only be discovered by those who seek Him with their whole hearts. According to Berdoe, Browning was such a seeker; his first poem, 'Pauline', expresses the cry of his whole being for God, down to his swan song in death, where he proclaims that he found and dwelt in God.

One author thinks that Browning introduces God in his poetry as the only one who is permanent, unchangeable, never decays, is everlasting, and is always the source of moral and spiritual support. Browning advises his readers to look up to Heaven for mercy and help, rather than down to earth: 'the poet embraces Heaven with great affection, as it brings him closer to God', who makes man. Browning says with 'faithful devotion': 'My times be in thy hand / Perfect the cup as planned' ('Aging in Mathew Arnold's 'Growing Old' and Robert Browning's 'Rabbi Ben Ezra'). Another author finds in 'A Grammarian's Funeral' that Browning believes fully in God ('Grammarian's Funeral').

Furthermore, Chesterton, in *The Philosophy of Browning*, supports the poet's idea of God's will. According to him, Browning has full faith in God and His ability to supervise the world, where man is but a creature whose will lies in the hands of God, and whose mission is to obey his creator and work according to His instructions (Chesterton, 2004).

The above statements demonstrate Browning's true belief in God as the creator, the controller of the whole universe, who has the upper hand over man's will. He is the omniscient, the omnipotent, and the omnipresent. However, some of Browning's readers misread some lines in his poems, thus constructing a faulty conception, irrelevant to what is already known and common. They think that when Browning refers to God as being personal and discusses a man-like God, he degrades God by making Him equal to man, who in fact works as a servant and obedient being. They read in 'Saul' that Browning's God is a personal God, a God of love, a God self-revealed and brought down to human comprehension in the incarnate Christ (Falwell, 2012). Reacting to these misreadings, Berdoe states that in his attempt to attach extra qualities to God, Browning refers to Him as God the person, God the man and God the love, but these references all mean the Almighty God, who loves and pities man, who reveals Himself to His believers in the person of Jesus Christ, who died to save his people. These are solely religious perceptions that constitute part of Christian creed, and this, asserts Berdoe, was the faith which Browning held.

Browning, opines another critic, 'is at war indeed with the anthropomorphism which would degrade God to the level of human appetites and passion. His "Caliban on Setebos" is a most scathing and convincing argument of superstitions and slavish worship' (Falwell, 2012). Henry Jones puts the above views to test and concludes that they are logically unbalanced and confusing. He argues that if Browning thinks that God beyond the stars is unknowable, stripped of human elements to be a mere name, the process of human evolution does not exhaust the idea of God, for this process is but a 'movement which has no beginning or end, and in it neither the head nor the heart of man could find contentment' (Jones, 2006).

Nevertheless, in 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day' a kind of dichotomy between God and religion seems to undermine Browning's faith in religion. The practice of religion does not satisfy the pure intention of God. Therefore, Browning tells us that God leaves the chapel in protest against the wrong practice:

I saw the back of Him, no more—

He had left the chapel, then, as I.

The above lines mirror Browning's religious doubts due to the wrong practice of Christianity; hence, with this understanding, Browning allies with many fellow Victorians who experienced the same religious doubts for the same reason.

Katie Turner tells us that Browning was a religious man, but that his views tended to shift from time to time. Regarding Christ, Browning's perception is almost the same as that revealed in the religion. In 'Pauline', he shows him much respect and devotion, and looks to him as the one who saves humanity on earth and the one who has a divine power: 'Christ God who savest man'.

In 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day', Browning places Christ very near to God, if not God himself, and talks of God the man: 'He is very God and very Man'. According to Ludick, 'The vision of Christ is portrayed with fine religious reverence, introduced by majestic lines that suggest the splendor and purity of the Preference'. He quotes lines from the above-mentioned poem as a reference:

All at once I looked up with terror

He was there.

He himself with his human air,

He is divine

…believe in good,

In justice, truth, now understood.

Browning describes Christ in 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day' as follows:

A Man! – a tight true man, however,

Whose work was worthy a man's endeavour,

Work, that gave warrant almost sufficient

To his dispels, for rather believing

He was just omnipotent and omniscient.

Further, in 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day', Browning refers to Christ as a saviour:

I knew him through the dread disguise

As the whole God within His eyes

Christ rises! Mercy every way

Is infinite, – and who can say?

Ludick affirms that the God-Man lies at the very heart of Browning's poetry. Browning recognized incarnation not merely as a historical fact of the past, an ever-present miracle revealed throughout the ages in the hearts of those who love Him and experience His quickening, regenerating power (Ludick, 1936). Moreover, Pigou states that in 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day' and 'Saul', Browning dresses Christ in the clothes of God. However, this does not mean being equal with God; rather, he makes himself a servant. When he is in the fashion of man, he humbles himself and becomes obedient unto death, revealing the truth about God's eternal nature.

However, in 'La Saisiaz', Browning claims the absence of Christ and the Trinity and asserts the presence of God—the only God in the universe: 'there was no Christ, only God; no Trinity, but one God' (Ludick, 1936). This indicates Browning's fluidity in his attitude towards Christ. He sometimes depicts Christ as a divine being and a message of divine love, and sometimes denies his existence.

We turn to another element that constitutes part of Browning's religion—that is, death. Browning's attitude towards death may not differ from what is common in the religion. Browning presents a thorough Christian view of death in his poetry. To him, as expressed in 'Prospice', death is the final battle that brings man to eternity, the assured resting place after the battle of life. Browning views death as a summit, the 'guerdon' and the reward of life:

FEAR death? – to feel the fog in my throat,

The mist in my face,

When the snows begin, and the blasts denote

I am nearing the place,

The power of the night, the press of the storm,

The post of the foe;

Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,

Yet the strong man must go:

For the journey is done and the summit attained,

****

Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,

Then a light, then thy breast,

O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,

And with God be the rest! ('Prospice')

Browning knows that he can approach death with great confidence, as a reward for those who have done well in life. His theory is that if you do well in this life, you will be rewarded in the afterlife. Doing good now means

receiving the same treatment in the next life. According to Conley, Browning 'expresses a deeply Christian hope that has a strong biblical basis. He knows that true life is not in the here and now but awaits him in heaven… Browning shows that for the person who has such a faith in God, the end of the light is something to hope for, not something to dread' (Conley, 2001).

Katie Turner comments on Browning's view on death as follows:

> Browning's fearlessness towards death probably stemmed from his strong religious background. With the belief in an afterlife, Browning had no reason to fear what would happen after death. He understood life to be a journey and death the pinnacle of adventure. In line 9, he writes, 'For the journey is done and the summit attained', seeking reward for a life well lived, as well as a reunion with Elizabeth. Browning uses 'Prospice' to exemplify his zeal towards a final battle with death; he wanted to taste the whole of it. (p. 11, 17)

Another commentator agrees with Turner and states that Browning views death as a new and exciting 'enterprise'. "It is an adventure brave and new, fearless and unperplexed. One has to face death with eager acceptance" ('Aging').

With reference to Browning's opinion regarding the soul, Browning immortalizes it. He expresses the belief that at the time of death, the human body vanishes as the soul ascends to Heaven to continue living. With this conception, Browning again proves his faith. He confirms in 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' the immortality of the soul and keeps the belief that the soul never decays; the soul and God stand sure. One critic states that Browning keeps strong faith in God's permanence as well as the soul. He continues, 'although physical beauty is ephemeral, as time makes its marks on the body, God and soul are everlasting' ('Aging').

In 'A Grammarian's Funeral', Browning through the Grammarian announces that he believes in life after death and that the soul has no end. Thus, Browning believes in the immortality of the soul and that the dead will meet after death. The soul survives and the body goes away. Some critics suggest that by the concept of the immortality of the soul, Browning may mean that the dead ones will be remembered by their living friends. Hence, a future life for Browning may be interpreted as the meeting of the dead who have been loved:

> A moment after, and hands unseen
>
> Were hanging the night around us fast
>
> But we knew that a bar was broken between
>
> Life and life: we were mixed at last
>
> In spite of the mortal screen. ('By the Fire Side')

Immortality to Browning may mean the efforts to strengthen people's lives and works as the motive for leading a better and happier life. His approach to life is essentially religious and individualistic (Bhatt, 2011). Browning communicates in his poetry his strong will for living with hope that negates despair and hard work that helps to make life better and eventually brings far-reaching happiness.

In 'Rabbi Ben Ezra', he has no weary days or melancholy hours. He is the herald of sunrise. Always and everywhere, he represents the will to live—to live bravely, confidently here, and forward with a cheerful heart to immortality:

> Grow old along with me!
>
> The best is yet to be
>
> The last of life, for which the first was made:
>
> Our times are in his hand
>
> Who saith, 'A whole I planned
>
> Youth shows but half, trust God: see all, nor be afraid!'

Browning's faith in life and in the development that awaits after death gives extra vitality to his poetry. It is his true belief in the immortality of the soul which forms the basis of his generous optimism, beautifully expressed in the following lines of 'Pippa Passes':

> The year's at the spring,
>
> And day's at the morn;
>
> Morning's at seven,

The hill side's dew pearled,

The lark's on the wing,

The snails on the thorn,

God's in his heaven—

All's right with the world.

Browning, a happier man, finds much joy in his age and comfort in the moral and spiritual strength which God gives him. Browning devotedly expresses his optimistic outlook on old age and death as God's consummate end to the labours of life.

Browning's outlook on life is almost highly religious. His philosophy of life is mainly based on his Christian faith. Through 'A Grammarian's Funeral' Browning teaches us that 'the present life and the enjoyment of life is meant for lower animals and not for human beings. He says that only animals believe in present and enjoyment life' ('Grammarian's Funeral').

In 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', Browning states that life is the work of God, and few people are prepared to listen to the fact that they have to prepare for the final day, the Day of Judgement. Browning thinks that everything, good or bad, must be planned by God, that one must obey and accept with pleasure what God instructs, and that all human life is bound to the will of God. Therefore, Browning accepts that there is no will but the will of God and that man is an obedient creature acting in accordance with His hidden hands. Browning thinks that in order to have unity with God, man has to suffer. Thus, Bishop Blougram is certain that his life of panic and tottering compromise has been justified as the only method that could unite him with God (Chesterton, 2004). Browning's philosophy of life seems to derive from some religious teachings with optimistic views based on experience.

What has been reviewed in this paper leaves no doubt of Browning's true faith. His belief in God the Creator, in death as a place of rest, in the immortality of the soul and in the Day of Judgement constitute the main bases of religion. However, Browning's poetry may reveal some other opinions that differ from what has been mentioned and lead his readers to conclude that he was a religious doubter. Brett argues that when Browning appears to have embraced a Christian creed, his Christianity was far removed from any orthodoxy. He explains that Browning's religious beliefs were derived from German philosophy and the Higher Criticism. In regard to religion, Browning's poetry evinces change over the years. For example, in 'Charismas Eve and Easter Day', Browning expresses his antagonism to Christianity through his visit to a chapel on Mount Zion. Though he had intimate knowledge of the Bible, he was repelled by the services and the ugliness of the surroundings, and finally got bored and decided to cut his visit short:

I very soon had enough of it.

The hot smell and the human noises,

And my neighbor's coat, the greasy cuff of it.

He was fascinated by the odd assortment of people who made up the congregation:

The fat weary woman,

Panting and bewilder man's immense ed, down-clapping

Her umbrella with a mighty report

And

The many tattered

Little old-faced, peaking, sister-turned-mother

Of the sickly babe she tried to smother

Somehow up, with its spotted face.

But his fascination turns to distaste:

The big-of-lead like pressure

Of the preaching man's immense stupidity,

As he poured his doctrine forth, full measure,

To meet his audience's avidity.

Even the preaching man 'leaves the chapel in doubt not only at what he has feared, but at all attempts to convince the unbelievers':

> Each method abundantly convincing,
>
> As I say, to those convincing before,
>
> But scarce to be swallowed without wincing. (Brett, 1997, p. 148)

In 'Confession', Browning writes the following:

> It is a lie… their Priests, their Popes,
>
> Their Saints, their… all they fear or hope
>
> Are lies, and lies… there! Through my door,
>
> And ceiling there! And walls and floor,
>
> There, lies, they lie… shall still be hurled
>
> Till spite of them I reach the world! ('Confession' I)

However, some think that these are but broad fancies resulting from Browning's readings of Voltaire and Shelly, and that they last only for a short time before Browning looks forward and recovers his faith. As Altick shows, Browning laid to rest the ghost of Voltairean-Shelleyan anti-religion. He abandoned reason because it menaced his precarious faith, and he exalted intuition not due to any true confidence in its validity but due to its power to justify the desires of the heart. He kept reiterating, 'as if in an attempt at self-hypnosis: I believe… I believe… I believe… of course I believe', because he was swept by misgiving, and he kept asserting his belief the more dogmatically for the same reason (Houghton, 1957, p. 387).

In fact, many readers of Browning's poetry have noted the poet's temporal disinterest in Christianity. 'Browning never proposes a fixed religious perspective or subscribes to any organized religion. Most often, he casts doubt on the structure and hypocrisy of organized religion. Consider "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church", or "Fra Lippo Lippi"' ('Robert Browning'). This author claims that Browning creates characters with a strong grip on religion. However, their religion is not the same; it varies, with everyone having his or her way, being very uniquely individual. 'A Death in the Desert' and 'Caliban upon Setebos' serve as examples. The critic continues, 'Browning has much poetry that can be interpreted through its lack of a religious sense, a world that has death and afterlife but eschews any relation to God. This happens in many grand poems like "Child Roland" to the "Dark Tower Came" or in the more personal ones like "Prospice"' ('Robert Browning').

Many of his readers have found traits of irreligious thoughts in some of his poetry, and placed the blame on Shelley's writings, which Browning was interested in and read so avidly that he adopted atheism. Everett, in 'Browning's Religious Views', observes the change and concludes, 'Browning became atheist as Shelley, although it is clear from his poetry that he didn't remain atheist, whether he ever completely shed his skeptical views is still an open question' (Everett, 2004). Everett is aware of Browning's changeable mood:

> Many of his poems approach the problem of faith and the nature of man's religious aspirations, but wherever we think that he has offered as a resolution, a second reading will show that the resolution undercut or made suspect. Much later in life when he was asked if he considered himself a Christian, Browning is supposed to have answered with a thunderous 'NO' nevertheless, many nineteenth-century readers thought that they know where the real Robert Browning stood, and it is easy to find articles with titles like 'Browning as a Teacher of Religion'.

Browning's poetry highlights a conflict between reason and faith. It seems that he struggled with Christianity on the basis of its processes and traditions, yet he was deeply attracted to the 'beauty of its core spirituality'. 'His verses allude to Christian ethics, even as he seeks in nature a foundation for spirituality, one likely reinforced by his skeptical probing into faith. This may be seen by examining two poems, "Christmas Eve" and obliquely in "Bishop Orders His Tomb". Robert asserts the deep spiritual Christianity within him beneath an unforgiving cynical exterior' ('Browning's Faith').

In 'Poetry and Robert Browning', Falwell asserts Browning's religious faith, and states, 'I am inclined to recommend the reading of Robert Browning to all preachers and theologians, as well as, to all thoughtful Christian people… he is a religious philosopher as well' (Falwell, 2012). Furthermore, Jones states that Browning is aware of the conflict between religion and consciousness and does not hesitate to give each of them its uncompromising utterance (Jones, 2006). Browning peppers his library with biblical allusions and uses these

in conjunction with varied characters, but hides his purpose in retelling the true account (Meglio, 2011).

It is difficult to specify a belief system of which Browning's poetry shows consistent approval. Often, believers who take their beliefs to extremes are shown in an unfavourable light. This pattern of discrediting the extremists may partially explain Browning's fondness for the dramatic monologue. By allowing this speaker to express a view with which neither the poet nor the reader would sympathize (for example, in Johannes Agricola), he is able to undercut the positions which he opposes without exposing his own beliefs. One may suspect that this rhetorical technique permits him to leave his own beliefs permanently undecided. Even when David in 'Saul' takes a thoroughly pro-Christian stance, it is still a hypothetical position: whether or not the poet is a believer, real belief must work this way (Everett, 2004).

Thus, Browning's attitude towards religion is not clear-cut. In his poetry, he fluctuates between faith and doubt. Sometimes, he introduces himself as a strong believer, who regards God as the supreme power and Christ as the divine human saviour, and Christianity as the ideal religion. However, in other cases, Browning doubts the existence of Christ and questions the teachings of Christianity. In fact, with an eye on his poetry overall, we can conclude that Browning wanted to be faithful to his own society which had experienced intellectual division due to the scientific advancements that sparked religious controversy which eventually divided the Victorians into believers and doubters. Browning seems to have thought that his mission was truly to represent this division; thus, he had to take a side. Consequently, the voice in his poetry sometimes appears to be that of a religious man, faithful to the Christian creed, and at other times, it appears to be that of one who agrees with those in doubt of Christianity.

Browning, as mentioned above, declares his detachment from Christianity and exclaims simply, 'I am not Christian', while at other times, he says, 'I do believe in Christianity'. Therefore, it may be concluded that Browning remained faithful to his contemporaries, especially in this regard, to win himself the quality of an honest doubter. I believe that Browning the person had more faith in religion than doubt, but he did not find a convenient ground to declare his real feelings about religion.

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