

## CHAPTER - I

### Christian Message and Hardy's Responses

#### I

Thomas Hardy is generally called a pessimist, and his pessimism is often ascribed to his loss of faith in Christianity. This is, however, an inadequate explanation of Hardy's view of life. In order to get a comprehensive idea of Hardy's view, it is necessary to consider certain other things. First, Hardy rejected Christian theology but valued the Christian idea of the coming of a rejuvenated world through the good deeds of men. Secondly, he was not only a pessimist, <sup>b</sup> but also a meliorist and, though the rejection of christian theology was the immediate cause of his pessimism, the deeper cause was his idea of the blind Will as working in the world — an idea which, modified on an evolutionary line, was at the basis of his meliorism, too. Finally, his evolutionary idea of the dawning of consciousness on the irrational Will combined itself with his Christian faith in man — the essential goodness and potentiality of human nature, and gave his melioristic vision a sound basis. To substantiate these supplementary ideas and show Hardy to be an essentially christian soul is the object of the present dissertation. The contentions will be examined in the order in which they have been presented here; so the question of Hardy's rejecting christian theology is examined first.

## II

Christianity entered the world with the joyful tidings of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The hopeful message Christ and the apostles announced to the hearing of the world was about the imminence of the coming of the divine kingdom. In the Apocalyptic books of the Jewish race there appeared repeatedly the figure of the Son of Man, the Anointed one (Messiah), appointed before the beginning of creation, to the task of judging the earth and establishing the reign of righteousness on earth. The Jewish people living in travail under the tyrannical rulers of Palestine were eager to believe in any prophecy about the coming of the Messiah and Kingdom of God. John the Baptist was a messenger heralding the coming of one greater than himself and discovered in Jesus of Nazareth the divinely appointed agent sent to establish the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus, himself a Jew, shared in the belief of his race in the speedy, cataclysmic end of this world and the coming of a new world where the humiliated and oppressed would be given joy and happiness. He had little doubt in his predestined role of the Messiah. So, on the shores of the sea of Galilee he preached about the coming of the divine kingdom: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent Ye and believe in the gospel"<sup>1</sup>.

Jesus died on the Cross, but that was no cause for the believer's disillusionment, for they remembered Isaiah's prophecy that the chosen

servant of God would be wounded for the transgression of his people and bear their inequities. So they only waited for Jesus's return to establish the promised kingdom on earth. That Jesus would speedily return to restore all things was the sum and substance of the teaching of the disciples. They roused hope in people by proclaiming boldly that the ascended Christ would return to judge the world and inaugurate the kingdom of Heaven :

"When the Son of Man shall come in his glory and all the holy angels with him, then shall <sup>he</sup> sit upon the throne of his glory : And before him shall be gathered all nations and he shall separate them, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the king say unto them on the right hand, come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"<sup>2</sup>.

This is the hopeful message, the gospel, christianity brought to mankind. The deliverance of the souls entering the heavenly kingdom is given in the Revelation : "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away"<sup>3</sup>.

But, what will give man an access into the divine kingdom?

What will make him worthy of being chosen for the eternal bliss of

the kingdom of God? The believers would say : Faith in Christ; belief in the gospel.

This message gave the early Christians the strength to endure cheerfully the persecution that broke out on them, and it gives the believers of all ages the courage to face the trials and tribulations of life. But, what is this hope built upon? Faith. The kingdom is not fashioned by human hands; it descends all complete from on high. The deliverance from suffering and pain is not achieved through human might or power, but by the spirit of the Living God who broods as it were over the whole process of creation, redemption and restoration. There is an undercurrent of supernaturalism in this view of deliverance of mankind. This message of the heavenly kingdom is based on christian theology and has its appeal to the believers, but to one who has renounced Christian theology and refuses to believe in the supernatural it means nothing. Here it must be mentioned that a rational interpretation of the gospel is quite possible, and such interpretation does not make the christian message any less forceful and convincing, but it has ever been opposed by the orthodox who assert that "the contents of the christian doctrine is not only above reason, but also, in a certain sense, contrary to reason". The orthodox cling to the theological interpretation of the message and take the gospel of the coming of the kingdom of God in a literal sense, but the rational-minded christians delight in scoffing at the belief of the credulous.

The so-called un-Christian views of Thomas Hardy are but the reactions of the rational mind to the credulity of the orthodox. The charge of rejecting Christian ~~christian~~ faith generally brought against Hardy is only partly true, for he renounced christian theology; but the more important aspect of christianity viz. christian ethics, remained with him the infallible guide for human conduct. We shall see in course of our discussion that the means of amelioration suggested by him is fundamentally based on the christian ethics. He was a christian in spirit, though not in faith. That he renounced christian theology and, with it, the orthodox, literal interpretation of the message of the coming of the divine kingdom is, however, true enough. The following passages deal with this point.

Christian theology conceives of God as a Personal Power, and speaks of the divine sonship of man, and Hardy rejects these views. In the poem A Dream Question, we hear God say,

Another such a vanity  
 In witless weak humanity  
 Is thinking that of those all  
 Through space at my disposal  
 Man's shape must needs resemble  
 Mine, ..."<sup>4</sup>

The poem hints at the absurdity of the anthropomorphic view of God and theomorphic view of man, expressed in the biblical phrase "God made man in His own image". The words God speaks here are aimed at demolishing the ideas of the theologians.

Again, as to the divine sonship of man, Hardy writes in Drinking Song,

Next this strange message Darwin brings,  
 (Though saying his say  
 In a quiet way);  
 We all are one with creeping things,  
 And apes and men  
 Blood-brethren  
 And Likewise reptile forms with stings"<sup>5</sup>.

Hardy, who had been among the earliest acclaimers of the Origin of Species and referred so enthusiastically to Darwin's View of the origin of human species, can hardly accept the orthodox view of the divine sonship of man.

Secondly, God is regarded in Christian theology as Omnipotent and Eternal and Hardy scoffs at it. In the poem A Plaint to Man God is presented as a man-created being, fearing the doubt and disbelief of the modern times threatening his very existence:

Wherefore, O Man did there come to you  
 The unhappy need of creating me —  
 A form like your own — for praying to?  
 "Such a forced device", you may say, "is meet  
 For easing a loaded heart at whiles:  
 Man needs to conceive of a mercy-seat,  
 Somewhere above the gloomy aisles,  
 Of this wailful world, or he could not bear

The irk no local hope beguiles".  
 —But since I was framed in your first despair  
 The doing without me has had no play  
 In the minds of men when shadow scare;  
 And now I dwindle day by day  
 Beneath the decioed eyes of the seers  
 In a light that will not let me stay,  
 And to-morrow the whole of me disappears,  
 The truth should be told, and the fact be faced  
 That had best been faced in earlier years<sup>6</sup>.

In God's Funeral this man-created God is dead, and the poet presents a view of the procession of the mourners bearing the dead God. D. Schwartz comments on this poem, "The God of Christianity is being escorted to his grave by a long line of mourners who are described in Dantesque lines and who have thoughts which are overheard by the protagonist of the poem which rehearse the history of monotheism from the standpoint of a higher criticism of the Bible"<sup>7</sup>.

E.F. Hardy writes that the poem is about the gradual decline and extinction in the human race of a belief in an anthropomorphic god.

Thirdly, Christ is believed by the christians to be the Son of God, and the birth of Jesus is, therefore, shrouded in mystery. Hardy rejects this view, too. In Drinking Song he reminds us,

"And when this philosopher had done  
 Came doctor Cheyne :  
  
 Speaking plain he

Proved no virgin bore a son  
 Such tale, indeed,  
 Helps not our creed  
 He said, A tale long known to none"<sup>8</sup>.

This is Hardy's views of God and Son of God. If we examine his views of the Bible, we shall see that what he appreciates in the Bible is not the authenticity of the chronicles, but the art of narration. While admiring the literary quality, he makes the very art of narration an argument for the inference that the narratives are not true. He writes,

"But in these Bible lives and adventures, there is the spherical completeness of art. And our first and second feeling that they must be true because they are so impressive, becomes a third feeling, modified to "Are they so very true, after all? Is not the fact of their being so convincing an argument, not for their actuality but for the actuality of a consummate artist ...?"<sup>9</sup>

Hardy's poetry, notes and prefaces show his departure from the views of the orthodox Christians, and his novels indicate the same thing. The publication of Tess of the D'Urberville in 1891 was the occasion that "started a rumour of Hardy's theological ~~views~~ beliefs, which lived and grew, so that it was never completely extinguished"<sup>10</sup>. What incensed the believers most was Hardy's authorial observation in Tess; "The President of the Immortals had



ended his sport with Tess"<sup>11</sup>. Once these blasphemous words about God came to be noticed, the critics and the commentators started their attack on Hardy's un-Christian Views. Jude the Obscure came out in the final book form in 1894 and Bishop of Wakefield announced in a letter to the papers that he had thrown Hardy's Jude into the fire. Edmund Gosse, a friendly critic of Hardy's, exclaimed in the Cosmopolis, an International Review, in January 1896, "What has Providence done to Mr. Hardy that he should arise in the arable land of Wessex and shake his fist at his Creator"?<sup>12</sup> These reactions of the readers and reviewers clearly show how unwelcome his un-Christian views were to them.

Some incidents of his life also lead to the same inference about Hardy's rejection of christian theology. We may remember here Hardy's being present to witness Leslie Stephen's signing the deed of renunciation of the Holy Order. E.F. Hardy quotes from Mailland's<sup>t</sup> Life of Leslie Stephen Hardy's own account of it. (See E.F. Hardy's Life p. 122). Commenting on this event G.D. Klingopulos writes in Hardy's Tales : Ancient and Modern, "... it may seem at first a little incongruous, but the scepticism of the countrymen was the compliment of the intellectuals. Probably Stephen saw in Hardy the spokesman of continuities which would survive an age of change"<sup>13</sup>.

Whereas Stephen renounced the Holy Order, Hardy, abandoned the desire to enter it for some conscientious reason, though he cherished the desire early in life. Emile Hardy tells us, "This scheme fell through less because of its difficulty than from a conscientious feeling, after some theological study that he could hardly take the step with honour while holding the views which on examination he found himself to hold. And so he allowed the curious scheme to drift out of sight...."<sup>14</sup>

Thus both Hardy's writings and the incidents of his life afford instances supporting the contention about his rejection of the theological beliefs of the orthodox Christians. Hardy himself speaks on it very clearly in the poem The Impercipient.

That with this bright believing band  
 I have no claim to be,  
 That faith by which my comrades stand  
 Seem fantasies to me,  
 And mirage-mists their Shining Land,  
 Is a strange destiny.

Why this my soul should be consigned  
 To infelicity  
 Why always I must feel as blind  
 To sights my bretheren see,  
 Why joy's they have found I cannot find  
 Abides a mystery.

Since heart of mine knows not that ease  
 which they know; since it be  
 That He who breathes All's well to these;  
 Breathes no All's Well to me,  
 My lack might move their sympathies  
 And Christian charity !

I am like a gazer who should mark  
 An inland company  
 Standing upfingured with Hark ! hark !  
 The glorious distant sea !"  
 And feel, "Alas, 'tis but yon dark  
 And wind-swept pine to me !"

Yet I would bear my shortcomings  
 With meet tranquility,  
 But for the charge that blessed things  
 I'd liefer not have be.  
 O, doth a bird deprived of wings  
 Go earth-bound wilfully !<sup>15</sup>

The poet's comparison of the loss of faith to the falling of a bird "deprived of wings" points to the impossibility of the revival of faith. It is, however, clear that Hardy will bear the loss and pain calmly.

Little more is needed to prove Hardy's rejection of the theological belief of the orthodox Christians. It comes as a corollary, therefore, that the orthodox interpretation of the coming of the Kingdom of God, which is inextricably related to this theological

belief must have appeared meaningless to him. Christian theology offers the teleological view of creation which is that the All-merciful Heavenly Father has created the world with the ultimate purpose of leading mankind through trials and tribulations to some celestial bliss. No wonder, Hardy finds this view of the theologians a subject fit for ridicule. Sent by people on earth, the poet approaches God for the amelioration of human lot and is bewildered to see that God has totally forgotten having created anything like the earth. When, after raking His mind for a long time, He remembers something dimly about it, He hastens to the conclusion:

"Haply it died of doing as it durst".

It needs the poet to remind him,

"Lord, it existeth still".<sup>16</sup>

God then seeks to justify His indifference to the earth : "It lost my interest from the first", and seems rather vexed by mankind's solicitation for help:

"And it is strange though sad enough  
 Earth's race should think that one whose call  
 Frames, daily, shining spheres of flawless stuff  
 Must heed their tainted ball"<sup>17</sup>.

As shown in this poem, God is too busy to come to the succour of men who are "by hopes distraught, and strife and silent sufferings"<sup>17</sup>. Then, what point is there, Hardy would ask, in comforting ourselves by the thought of God's noble purpose behind Creation? What divine help can people hope for, when God has forgotten all about having created the earth? Needless to say, the poem is a sarcastic comment on the absurdity of the theologians' teleological view. It is clear from our discussion that Hardy rejected Christian theology, whether under the impact of the scientific and rationalistic thoughts of his age, or because of his own sceptic temperament. But does it amount to his rejection of christian faith? It is hard to think so.

### III

Hardy's rejection of christian theology was a protest against the orthodox belief in the occult and supernatural, mystery and miracle, gathering round the life and teaching of christ and making the truth of christianity obscure. What he wanted was weeding out the spurious elements and holding forth the essence of christianity. An observation<sup>of</sup> E.F. Hardy has some bearing upon the point. Referring to the Preface to Late Lyrics and Earlier the biographer writes,

\*An interesting point in this preface was his attitude towards religion. Through the years 1920 to 1925 Hardy was interested in conjectures on rationalizing the English Church. There had been rumours for some years of a revised Liturgy, and his hopes were

accordingly raised by the thought of making the Established Church comprehensive enough to include the majority of thinkers of the previous hundred years who had lost all belief in the supernatural".

"When the new Prayer Book appeared however, his hopes were doomed to disappointment and he found that the revision had not been in a rationalistic direction, and from that time he lost all expectation of seeing the church representative of modern thinking minds"<sup>18</sup>.

This observation helps us understand what Hardy expected of the custodians of religion and why he set himself to expose<sup>ing</sup> the absurdities of the orthodox beliefs. It also shows that he must have discovered beneath all superstitions and make-believes the truth of Christianity and would have it revealed.

While making notes on an article to be written Hardy writes, "Religions, religion, is to be used in the article in its modern sense entirely, as being expressive of nobler feelings towards humanity and emotional goodness and greatness, the old meaning of the word — ceremony or ritual having perished or nearly"<sup>19</sup>. This is Hardy's idea of religion, and we shall not be greatly mistaken if we assume that he found in christianity what he considered the essence of religion. Here is another note justifying that assumption: "Christianity, nowadays, as expounded by christian apologists, has an entirely different meaning from that which it bore when I was

a boy . If I understand, it now limits itself to the religion of emotional morality and altruism that was taught by Jesus Christ, or nearly so limits itself ...."<sup>20</sup>

The apologists' interpretation of christianity Hardy gives here stresses the ethical aspect of Christianity — Jesus's Sermons on the Mount and St. James's preaching about the need of good work. Jesus said, "If you love me keep my commandments .... If you keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love"<sup>21</sup>. There is in these words of Jesus a demand of ethical conduct on the part of his followers. Again, faith — an unquestioning acceptance of the Scriptures, is regarded by the orthodox as the only thing expected of the Christians, but St. James stresses the need of work ; "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man may say he hath faith and have not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, and be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye gave them not those things which are needful to the body, what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath no works, is dead, being alone"<sup>22</sup>. The stress on charity and philanthropy is obvious enough in these words<sup>22</sup>.

Hardy would have the Church ~~to~~ preach about love and charity as the essence of Christianity. He wanted people to learn the teaching of the Bible : "Judge ye not, and ye shall not be judged; condemn

not, and ye shall not be condemned; forgive, and ye shall be forgiven" <sup>23</sup>

He was shocked to see the uncharitable attitude of the christians towards one another and in his Birthday notes, dated 2nd June, 1920 he referred to this loss of "disinterested kindness" in people.

He wrote, "People are not more humane... Disinterested kindness is less. The spontaneous goodwill that used to characterise the manual workers seems to have departed ...." <sup>24</sup> Again, replying to a birthday letter he wrote, "All development is of a material and scientific kind — and scarcely any addition to our knowledge is applied to objects philanthropic and ameliorative ...." <sup>25</sup> Hardy's polemics in the novels against society and the ecclesiastical Order was, in reality, his denunciation of the <sup>a</sup>pathy and unconcern of the christians towards the distressed and afflicted. He found the Sues and the Judes struggling hard with passion assailing them and people watching them with indifference, scorn or wrath. He knew that no help could practically be given to men and women in their struggle with passion, and their own strength alone would decide their success or failure; but people could, ~~not~~ <sup>at</sup> least, lessen their suffering by treating them with pity and compassion. But the custodians of morality condemned them, and people held them in scorn. Hardy denounced their callousness and cruelty, and by doing it, urged them to prove true Christians in their thoughts and deeds. Hardy's writings are a long, persistent plea for practising the christian virtues — tolerance, compassion and charity.



Hardy's defending the cause of Tess, a helpless seduced girl, by calling her "A Pure woman" shows his Christian spirit. His treatment of Tess may remind the reader of the story of Jesus and the woman brought to Him on the charge of adultery. Jesus words to the woman were, "Neither do I condemn thee ; go and sin no more"<sup>26</sup>. With his view of men and women as victims of passion, Hardy would perhaps use "natural weakness" instead of 'Sin', but there is hardly any doubt that his attitude to Tess was exactly that of Jesus to the woman — the attitude of pity, compassion and forgiveness.

Hardy's tragic novels are a fervent plea for practising Christian <sup>virtues</sup> ~~witness~~ in our everyday life, and his war poems are a strong argument for understanding among nations as the remedy for war. The war-craze of the Christian countries shocked him and in Christmas: 1924 he wrote,

Peace upon earth ! was said. We sing it  
 And pay a million priests to bring it.  
 After two thousand years of mass  
 We've got as far as poison gas<sup>27</sup>.

He was shocked and pained, still with Christian hopefulness he looked forward to the time when "men shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more"<sup>28</sup>. He did not lose his Christian faith in the better elements of human nature and

in the poem entitled Cry of the Homeless, while wishing the Prussian invaders of Belgium a "richer malediction", he wrote,

Rather let this thing befall  
 In time's hurling and unfurling  
 On the night when comes thy call; -  
 That compassion dew thy pillow  
 And bedrenched thy senses all  
 For thy victims,  
 Till death dark thee with his pall<sup>29</sup>.

This faith in the essential goodness of human heart was instilled into him by his religion — Christianity. The impact of the Victorian thoughts and his own "obstinate questionings" made it difficult for him to retain his belief in the orthodox view of the Creator and the Creation, but faith in man, which I understand to be the essence of Christian teaching, lay ensconced in his heart with undiminished lustre. Christ had a great faith in man's moral capacity, otherwise, the commandments would not have been there; ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> the same argument proves that Hardy's plea for the christian virtues undoubtedly shows his Christian faith in the goodness and nobility of human heart. Hardy was in this respect a true christian.

This faith in man — the essential goodness and immense potentiality of human heart, kindled in him Christian hopefulness, of course, in an unorthodox way. Like all unorthodox Christians, he

regarded the message of the coming of the divine kingdom as meaning the process of making the internal external and found it quite practicable. Like the other unorthodox Christians, he viewed the coming of the kingdom of God as the natural result of man's using his innate goodness and nobility. Jesus's faith in man — in the goodness and potentiality of human soul, led him <sup>to</sup> believe that the seed of the kingdom he was sowing would sprout and grow silently and steadily into a mighty tree that would shelter under its spreading branches everything on earth. This is the rational interpretation of Christian message, and it is corroborated by Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and St. James emphasis on "good works". If Jesus's moral teachings are regarded as practical propositions and rules of conduct, the kingdom of God on earth seems possible of attainment. It ceases to be a miracle and supernatural occurrence and proves the natural outcome of the good deeds of man. None with a faith in man would reject this vision of Jesus about a rejuvenated world as a figment of imagination, nor did Hardy. He believed in the prophecy of Jesus and proved a true Christian. It is in a Christian spirit that he wrote,

The truth should be told, and the fact be faced

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The fact of life with dependence placed  
 On the human heart's resource alone,  
 In brotherhood bonded close and graced  
 With loving — kindness fully blown,  
 And visioned help unsought, unknown<sup>30</sup>.

Hardy is a true Christian imbued with Jesus's faith in man and recognising human potentiality as the only thing that can make the coming of the kingdom of God possible.

#### IV

The discussion on Hardy's loss of Christian faith, therefore, reaches the conclusion that he was a Christian in spirit, though not in belief. And, if his rejection of christian theology resulted in his taking a gloomy view of life, his faith in the human and moral aspect of christian teaching gave him good reasons to be hopeful about the future. But, as we shall presently see, his attitude to life, whatever it is, cannot be explained wholly in terms of his religious belief or disbelief. Neither is his rejection of orthodox belief solely responsible for his gloomy view, nor is his faith in man alone capable of supporting his hopefulness. Belief or disbelief is a contributory factor, a very powerful factor, in shaping his view; but there are factors other than this, conditioning his outlook. Hardy's outlook and its causes is examined in the following chapter.

R E F E R E N C E S

1. Mark 1.14
2. Matthew 25.31-34
3. Revelation 21.1
4. Pieces Occasional and Various
5. Winter Words
6. Satires of Circumstances
7. Poetry and Belief in Thomas Hardy. D Schwartz  
A Collect of Critical Essays.
8. Winter Words
9. Lif.F.E. Hardy, p 171
10. Life.F.E. Hardy, p. 243
11. Tess ch. 59
12. Thomas Hardy E. Blunden p 87
13. History of Eng. Lit Volume ed. Boris Ford
14. Lif - 376
15. Wessex Poems and other Verses
16. Wessex Poems and other Verses
17. wesses Poems and other Verses
18. Life.F.E. Hardy, p. 415
19. Life.F.E. Hardy, p. 333
20. Life. F.E. Hardy, p. 330
21. John 15.10
22. James 11.14-17
23. Luke 7.37
24. Life.F.E. Hardy, p 406
25. Life. F.E. Hardy, p. 389
26. John i. 2-11
27. Wincer words
28. Isiah 2.4
29. Poems of War & Patriotism
30. Satires of Circumstances