

Kipling's Ecclectic Religious Identity

Serdar Öztürk
Erciyes University

Rudyard Kipling's religious identity is really difficult to trace to a certain religion, but he is deeply a religious man because he believes in one absolute God, and a divine purpose behind the creation of man. Philip Mason claims that Kipling is very religious (113), yet it is difficult to see where his religious faith lies. He was not a Christian though both his grandfathers were Wesleyan ministers (Knowles 13). He was also not a Hindu as some Kipling scholars used to think. He was not a Muslim or not a Buddhist. Shortly, he was not an adherent of any institutionalized religion. Yet, he was not an atheist because it is possible to see a religious heterogeneity in his works. His works focused on themes of God, love and truth, eternity and the meaning of life.

According to Philip Mason, "Kipling was a religious man at heart, not that he took part regularly in any form of public worship or adhered to any formal creed, but because he thought much about death and eternity and the meaning of life" (113). Mason, commenting on Kipling's views about religion, adds: "Because he was so essentially an intuitive his religion expressed itself in stories, fables and verses, rather than in a creed or a reasoned philosophy"(113-4). It is a fact that Rudyard Kipling is an intuitive writer. The main reason he never subscribed to any particular religion is that he was basically a seeker with an independent mind. He "detests the prig, and hates above all the religious prig" (Knowles 37). Belonging to any particular religion or faith meant forfeiting his freedom of thought and that would

impede his search for truth. Commenting on Kipling's personality, T. Thruston Hopkins says:

One thing is certain: Kipling does not attach himself to any particular creed or party. He evidently thinks that to belong to any party is to be owned by it. Kipling's soul revolts at life in a groove. He dislikes typical men – their ways of life, their sophistry, their stupidity. He likes to be free of all party restrictions, so that he can study in his own sweet way – when at school he was distinguished from other boys by his independence (40).

The contradictions in Kipling cannot be explained if one does not have the imaginative sympathy to understand the incidents that shaped his personality and the context in which he presented his works of art. Rudyard Kipling has a complex personality. Some events in his life left a lasting impression on him and forged his personality. Philip Mason asserts that there are “many inconsistent aspects of his personality and a great deal of tension between them” (84). Among the contradictions in Kipling the most common is his attitude towards Christianity. While Kipling is critical of Christianity, he seems to subscribe to its basic principles, such as love, compassion, forgiveness, repentance, sacrifice, grace, selflessness, mercy and “unflinching faith in a personal God who he calls the Great Overseer” (Kipling *Life's Handicap* 308). At the beginning of the poem ‘L'Envoi’, Kipling beseeches the Great Overseer:

If there be good in that I wrought
 Thy hand compelled it, Master, Thine;
 Were I have failed to meet Thy thought
 I know, through thee, the blame is mine.

One instant's toil to Thee denied
 Stands all Eternity's offence,
 Of that I did with Thee to guide
 To Thee, through Thee, be excellence.

...

The depth and dream of my desire
 The bitter paths wherein I stray,
 Thou knowest Who hast made the Fire
 Thou knowest Who hast made the Clay

One stone the more swings to her place
 In that dread Temple of Thy Worth
 It is enough that through Thy grace
 I saw naught common on Thy earth. (5-12, 17-24)

At the first glance, readers of 'L'Envoi' may think that Kipling embraces Christianity; but it is a fact that he does not believe in any particular institutionalized faith. Yet, in a letter he wrote, it is possible to infer that he was a Christian. The letter was written when he was flirting with Caroline Taylor whose father was anxious about Kipling's lack of orthodoxy. Kipling wrote this letter in order to satisfy Caroline and her family:

I believe in the existence of a personal God to whom we are personally responsible for wrongdoing - that it is our duty to follow and our peril to disobey the ten ethical laws laid down for us . . . I disbelieve directly in eternal punishment . . . I disbelieve in an eternal reward . . . I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth and in One filled with His Spirit who did voluntarily die in the belief that the human race would be spiritually bettered thereby (qtd. in Mason 249).

Perhaps it is a mistake to give much credence to this letter. Kipling scholars like Philip Mason and Charles Carrington do not attach importance to this letter. However, it is a fact that Kipling's knowledge of the Bible was extensive and as a man and artist he was deeply under the influence of the Bible. Philip Mason maintains:

[A]ll the evidence suggests that he continued all his life to believe in a personal moral responsibility to some kind of divine purpose. And his knowledge of the Bible often influenced his reactions to

circumstances in ways he did not attempt to define or formulate. He was always aware of the majesty of the Hebrew vision of God in the Old Testament – the sanctity of the Law, the purpose of God for mankind, the balance that must be restored by punishment or sacrifice, the sense of man as somehow knitted into Family and People (253).

Rudyard Kipling firmly believes that the human being in its entirety in some mysterious way is knitted into a community. He underlines the brotherhood of all humanity regardless of their nation, race, gender, color and especially their religion. Every human being is equal for Kipling's standpoint.

It is easy to see the influence of the New Testament in Kipling's works. Kipling alludes to the New Testament in his 'The Miracle of Purun Bhagat,' *The Day's Work*, and *Kim*. Kipling asserts that suffering on behalf of others purifies and ennobles the self (Mason 257). Moreover, he frequently uses Christian symbols and his works contain many Biblical allusions. His literary style is deeply influenced by the Authorized Version; he uses a Biblical language "by repeatedly going to Holy Writ for sonorous expression" (Hopkins 43): "When I was a King and a Mason-a Master proven and skilled / I cleared me the ground for a palace such as a King should build" ('The Palace' 1-2). Kipling also alludes to King Solomon in a biblical language in his poem:

"One man in a thousand, Solomon says,
Will stick more close than a brother,"
"Once in so often," King Solomon said,
Watching his quarrymen drill the stone."
"King Solomon drew merchantmen
Because of his desire
For peacocks, apes, and ivory
From Tarshish unto Tyre.
With cedars out of Lebanon
Which Hiram rafted down,
But we be only sailor men
That use in London Town" ('King Solomon' 1-12).

Kipling's many biblical references and his frequent adoption of biblical language can be accepted the evidence of his sympathy towards Christianity.

Kipling was highly critical of Christianity. In the first short story from *Plain Tales from the Hills* 'Lisbeth' begins with the following stanza:

Look, you have cast out love! What Gods are these
 You bid me please?
 The Three in one, the One in Three? Not so!
 To my own Gods I go.
 It may be they shall give me greater ease
 Than your Cold Christ and tangled Trinities (3).

Chaplin's wife tries to rationalize the situation here in orthodox terms and remarks: "There is no law whereby you can account for the vagaries of the heathen, and I believe that Lispeth was always at heart an infidel" (8). Rudyard Kipling makes a sarcastic remark and comments: "Seeing that she had been taken into the Church of England at the mature age of five weeks, the statement does not do credit to the Chaplin's wife (8).

In the story, 'Baa, Baa, Black Sheep', Kipling is even more critical of Christianity. In this story, he depicts the life of a small boy, Punch, whose feelings reveal "what Kipling thought happened to him at Southsea. For that reason Kipling sympathizes and empathizes with Punch. Perhaps every incident was not police-court truth that can be sworn to, but the whole is poetic truth and represents what he came later to feel had happened" (Mason 32). Punch was very unhappy because he was separated from his parents and home. The following extract summarizes Punch's thought about Christianity:

Harry might reach across the table and take what he wanted; Judy might point and get what she wanted. Punch was forbidden to do either. The grey man was his great hope and stand-by, for many months after Mamma and Pappa left, and he had forgotten to tell Judy to 'remember Mamma'.

This lapse was excusable, because in the interval he had been introduced by Aunty Rosa to two very impressive things . . . and a dirty brown book filled with unintelligible dots and marks. Punch was always anxious to oblige everybody. He therefore welded the story of the Creation on to what he could recollect of his Indian fairy tales, and scandalized Aunty Rosa by repeating the result to Judy. It was a sin, a grievous sin, and Punch was talked to for a quarter of an hour. He could not understand where the iniquity came but was careful not to repeat the offence, because Aunty Rosa told him that God heard every word he had said and was very angry. If these were true why didn't God come and say so, thought Punch, and dismissed the matter from his mind. Afterwards he learned to know the Lord as the only thing in the world more awful than Aunty Rosa (239).

In this extract, Kipling does not introduce a merciful and compassionate Christian God. Even in *Life's Handicap*, Ameera is not sure of the mercy of God, and when her small boy dies she complains, “[I]t was because we loved Tota that he died. The jealousy of God was upon us. We must make no protestations of delight, lest God find us out” (147).

In his later years, Kipling frequently uses Christian symbols to expose his religious sensibilities. In his short story ‘Uncovenanted Mercies’, there is a character named Gabriel, who is responsible for All Guardian Spirits, Azreal (the Angel of Death) and Satan, working together. As a servant of Mercy, Satan is not the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, but the Satan of the *Book of Job*, whose mission is to test human beings. One of his duties is to recondition human souls for re-issue as Guardian Spirit, so he has to work in collaboration with Gabriel.

In the story ‘Without Benefit of Clergy’ in *Life's Handicap* Blind Chance controls man's fate. Some phrases in the story like ‘blind chance’, ‘blind gods’, and ‘jealousy of god’ remind of Thomas Hardy's conception of the Immanent Will “that neither good nor evil knows and it is the motive power of the universe. This will is

an indifferent and unconscious force and the results of its impulses are almost invariably disastrous" (Pinion 82). The cold indifference to the "screaming conches in the Hindu temples, service in the great Mohamedan shrine, unceasing call to prayer from the minaret" and "the shriek of a mother who had lost a child and was calling for its return" (*Life's Handicap* 151) display a merciless God. Of course, this is the paradox of the idea of Christian deity. Thomas Hardy "never ceased to complain of chance and change", which cause human suffering (Pinion 83). However, Kipling was "naturally predisposed to postulate an incomprehensible power at the head of affairs to keep chaos at bay" (Hopkins 113). Unlike Thomas Hardy who "spent too much time shaking his fist at a man-made Creator, who existed vaguely in his own mind" (Pinion 82), Kipling seems convinced of an incomprehensible power which has created the orderly universe. For Kipling, God is not a cold and metaphysical being, but very much a caring God.

Rudyard Kipling's idea of Christianity seems to be based on a binary principle: "the world of love and the world of work" (Mason 26). The world of love is a source of pleasure, whereas the world of work exposes man to pain and suffering, though human suffering in Kipling's system of reality is not a sport of "the Presidents of Immortals" (Hardy 489). For Kipling, pain and suffering have a purpose to serve, because personal suffering ennobles the soul and makes the heart tender and compassionate. Mahbub states that "shared sorrow creates a new bond of love and suffering on behalf of others that has an ultimate value of its own" (*Kim* 157). In 'Without Benefit of Clergy', Kipling deals with the importance of pain and work in man's life and the change from the personal world of love to the impersonal world of work. It is possible to see the same theme in his later works but the main source is available in this story. When Tota the son of Ameera and Holden dies, initially Ameera is driven mad with sorrow (*Life's Handicap* 146). In the state of pain Ameera

says unpleasant things to Holden, but later she makes amends for it and says, “I love more because a new bond has come out of the sorrow that we have eaten together, and thou knowest” (147). As for work, Kipling maintains: “One mercy only was granted to Holden. He rode to his office in broad daylight and found waiting him an unusually heavy mail that demanded concentrated attention and hard work. He was not however, alive to this kindness of the gods” (145). Mason claims that Kipling “has a permanent natural contact with the oldest and deepest layers of human consciousness . . . This deep archetypal welled – I suggest – intermittently to the surface . . . The contrast between the world of love and the world of work comes surely from such a level” (26).

Besides Christianity, Rudyard Kipling often alludes to Indian religions and Indian cultures in his works. The religions in India and Indian culture had a deep impact on Kipling, and “of all aspects of Indian culture the one which fascinated Kipling most was probably religion. Indian items falling into the realm of religion can be seen in almost every one of his works” (Husain 188). Rudyard Kipling introduces Hindu mythology to show that human efforts mean little in the face of eternity in ‘The Bridge-Builders’. There is a bestiary in the story. The story begins with Findlayson, an engineer, who had worked extremely hard for four years on his bridge, which symbolizes human efforts to make progress, joining the present with the past. Later, a flood comes and Finlayson finds himself in a very difficult situation. He goes over his calculations and finds that his “side of the sum was beyond question, but what man knew Mother Gunga’s arithmetic?” (21). The line refers to the belief that the blind chance controls man’s fate and that man is incapable of understanding the gods who punish at random. In a state of dream or trance, Finlayson gets into a boat and then finds himself on an island, where he is the spectator of a Panchayat (a kind of council) of the Gods discussing the

complaint made by Mother Ganga against the insolent people who built a bridge over water. After a long philosophical consultation, Indra, the father of the Gods, says that it is useless to fear because "Brahm still dreams and till he wakes the Gods die not" (*The Day's Work* 38). In this context, there is a simple message: All is illusion, the dream of Brahm, which is a Hindu belief to which Rudyard Kipling apparently adheres. Nevertheless, the boat returned the next morning and Findlayson was rescued. He went back to the world of men to perform his work. Although human efforts amount to nothing but "the dirt digging at the dirt" (32), man has to work hard in order that the bridge stands. He must join the present with the past.

Unselfish work is among the most important deeds in Hinduism. Kipling also attaches a great importance to unselfish work. C. S. Lewis asserts that "Kipling is the poet of work and it is his creed that the job must be done well and that this worth scarifies but does not say anything about the purpose of the job, thus producing a sense of weariness because of vagueness at the centre" (qtd. in Mason 20). 'The Bridge-Builders' questions the idea of human effort, displaying its futility and tininess. Ants are far better than human beings in this respect. Men try to do something, but in the face of eternity their work is really of no importance.

The importance of work is seen in Kipling's in another story 'The Miracle of Purun Bhagat'. The protagonist Sir Purun Das is the Prime Minister of a native state and renounces the world for the salvation of his soul. Because of his humility and love for life Purun Bhagat calls even animals 'my brothers' and they respond to his love. His low call of 'Bhai! Bhai!' draws the animals from the forest if they are within earshot. At last, Purun Das dies, sacrificing his life to save the lives of the villagers.

Kipling shows a great respect for the spiritual strength of Purun Das for he was no longer a holy man even at the critical moment, but Sir Purun Das, a man

accustomed to command, going out to save life. It is the most noble good deed in Hinduism. For Mason, Sir Purun Das, who believes in Hinduism, postulates three different ways to realise God and to achieve salvation: a- *the karma-marga* (the path of duties or work, b- *the jnana-marga* (the path of knowledge), which postulates the use of meditative concentration (yoga) in order to realise the Absolute and c- *bhakti-marga* (the path of devotion) which means devotion to a personal God. Hinduism, at the same time, postulates that the universe is a cosmos. Vedic man was convinced that the universe is an actually existing organised cosmos (sat) governed by order and truth (rta) and it is always in danger of being damaged or destroyed by the power of chaos (asat). Purun Das was a yogi, who renounced the world to use his time in meditative concentration “with a view to gaining a supra-intellectual insight into his identity with Brahman, but it did mean that he could ignore his duty of saving life only to continue his mediation (154). He would have seriously destroyed his chances of salvation because he had been indifferent to the impending death and destruction of life. Purun Das gave up his meditative concentration and contemplation and became an active administrator. This means he was no longer a holy man but he only acted in harmony with, in a real sense, his Hindu belief.

Rudyard Kipling attaches a great importance to hard work and shows admiration for administrators. For him, hard work is to be “something worshipped of its own sake” (Mason 131). In this context, the purpose of the job can be questioned. Why should man work hard if his efforts amount to nothing but the dirt digging at the dirt and are of no significance in the face of eternity? Why should the English, who were intruders in India, work hard there when in a thousand years their work will be forgotten? Unfortunately, Kipling does not provide any satisfactory answer. He does not formulate any philosophy for hard work. Kipling’s emphasis on

hard work and the significance of work (karma) are rooted in his understanding of Hinduism.

In Kipling's novel *Kim*, it is possible to meet the Lama in the quest of the River of Arrow, which symbolizes the greatest achievement of mankind according to Buddhism. It is significant that there is a miraculous River of the Arrow in Buddhism (Montgomery 20). The Lama's quest for the River of Arrow was inspired by a dream. In this dream, he was informed that he could reach salvation by washing himself in the river. When he saw Kim and recognized him as his *chela* (disciple) (56), he intuitively thought that Kim had been sent to him by god. Nevertheless, the Lama is critical of his religion of Lamaism:

“It was in my mind that the Old Law was not well followed; being overlaid, as thou knowest, with devildoms, charms and idolatry . . . The books of my lamassary I read, and they were dried pith; and the later ritual with which we of the Reformed Law have cumbered ourselves - that, too, had no worth to these eyes!’ (*Kim* 57).

Just like the Lama who is quite critical of his religion of Lamaism, Rudyard Kipling is critical of Christianity. However, unlike the Lama, he is sarcastic in his attack on Christianity in his early years of his career.

In the Lama's final sacrifice, Kim, having attained union with the Great Soul, withdrew his own soul “with strivings and yearnings and retchings and agonizes not to be told” (59). Thus, Kim learns the way, the exact way of Buddhism. However, Rudyard Kipling never called himself a Buddhist, because he always showed respect to other religions. He was sympathetic to Buddhism and Hinduism and often alluded to Hindu/Buddhist gods and goddesses in his stories and novels. F. L. Knowles rightly maintains that it would be absurd to think that Kipling believes in Buddhism and Hindu mythology any more than Shelley believes in Greek myths (166). He also

does not know enough about Buddhism, “although his father tells him a great deal about the early tradition of Buddha Gatama’s sayings and travels in India (Mason178). Perhaps, Kipling tries to reflect the common denominators of some of the different religious’ faiths in his works. Consequently, as Montgomery rightly observes “a great deal that masquerades behind Buddhism is primarily Hinduism and to a considerable extend Sufism and Christianity” (190).

Kipling sometimes alludes to Islam in his works with lucid affirmation: Living and dying are only referred to Allah, the Most Merciful Creator. The dominant themes such as sacrifice and forgiveness are both Islamic and Christian elements in Kipling’s literary works. In Islam pain and suffering have also some kind of redemptive value as they do in Christianity. Sin and repentance occupy a place in the basic design of the creation of human being. Mason rightly remarks that “repentant sinners hold important place in Islam” (267). As a matter of fact, repentance holds a vital place in Islam, for Allah Almighty says in Quran: “Pardon them, and ask God to forgive them, and accept their repentance (3 159). “Indeed He is Oft Returning and Most Merciful” is among the oft repeated verses of Quran. Repentance and forgiveness are a more powerful motivation than brute compulsion in Kipling’s literary works.

Kipling seems to come close to some concepts of Sufism because he thinks that there is a veil between man and his Lord in his poem ‘Helen All Alone’, “A veil ‘twixt us and thee, Good Lord, / A veil ‘twixt us and thee” (646).Kipling believes it is possible to gain knowledge of the nearness to God by means of spiritual effort. The Creator does not want men to be too near Him lest he should become unfitted for his work in the world. It is men’s intense love for Him that enables them to find Him in others, and that is why service to God includes serving his reaction. Since man is His creation, service to mankind is extremely important to a Sufi. Since he is a real

lover, he does not run away from anything or anyone for any reason. Man finds his Beloved everywhere. In serving His creatures he serves his Beloved, and in return the Beloved shows His mercy and grace on him which enables him to face pain, suffering and even death in content. Suffering and pain only make man more purified. Kipling knows all that and has faith enough in mercy and grace to save himself the fall into pelagianism. Pelagianism is a kind of sin or arrogance first introduced and defined by Philip Mason (251). It appears that in Pelagius' opinion man is perfectible by his own efforts. A pelagian has nothing spiritual about himself. A pelagian is reluctant to talk about death and sin. If no one interfered with man, he would be perfect. It is possible to achieve absolute happiness on earth if certain external obstacles like kings, priests, politicians or capitalists are removed.

Kipling rejects pelagianism, for he believes that death is a natural inescapable fact. Pain and sorrow are two undeniable facts of life. Moreover, Kipling asserts that man is responsible for his acts. Man is created full of desires and he has to be educated and controlled, because "the man who truly deserves the name of man is under discipline and master of himself, even though his self-command is something that has to be watched and jealousy preserved. He is like the captain of a pirate ship, for whom mutiny is always close" (Mason 252). For Kipling, watchfulness is just not enough, sometimes fate and metaphysical factors may devastate him. As a fragile element civilization may be easily destroyed. History witnesses that civilization fell into fragments when men deviate from modesty. Kipling believes that man's merit depends on his suffering and integrity in the face of trial, so he needs mercy. This is what the Sufi believes (Jackson 14) and probably Kipling knows something about Sufism. It does not mean that Kipling is a Sufi, for there is no evidence that he ever embraced Sufism. Kipling is aware of the significance of repentance, forgiveness and mercy in Islam. Every Muslim is obliged to pray to the

Lord at least five times a day. In every part of each prayer, he has to recite *Fatiha* from Quran: "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. / Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds; / Most Gracious, Most Merciful (1 1-3)". In another verse in Quran, God explains the unique aim of sending his Messenger: "And We have not sent you but as a mercy to the worlds" (21 107). The Lord in Islam is The Most Merciful, the Most Kind and Oft Returning. There is an affectionate invitation from the Lord to man to come to the way of prosperity in every call to prayer.

To sum up, Kipling believes that there is a consciousness of death and of the smallness of man in the face of eternity and of a vastness of power beyond man's comprehension. In his early stories, he emphasizes on chance, for gods chastise at random. However, in his later works, he believes in something incomprehensible but it is not chance. For Kipling, pain and evil have a place in the purpose of the creation of man. Mercy and forgiveness are two important merits and the greatest triumph of human beings is self-sacrifice. He believes in an unknown God as a Creator but he is agnostic about the explanations, formulation and description of God. Although he is faithful to the Creator and some divine motive in the creation of man, he is skeptical about some opinions and interpretations of God. Although Rudyard Kipling uses a lot of Christian symbols in his works, he is not a Christian. In some of his stories, he shows a unique insight into the redeeming power of love, which is the main pillar of Sufism. He also accepts some of the Islamic precepts, though he is not a Muslim. He is very sympathetic to Buddhism and Hinduism and always alludes to Hindu gods and goddesses, but he does not believe in Hinduism or Buddhism. Briefly, Rudyard Kipling, who uses a lot of religious themes, motives and symbols in his works, does not subscribe to any particular religious views at all, though he is deeply religious at heart.

Works Cited

- Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Uubervilles*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1987.
- Holy Quran, The*. Trans by. Paul Jackson. Bombay: St. Paul Press, 1985.
- Hopkins, R. Thruston. *Rudyard Kipling*. London: Simpkin Marshall Co., 1916.
- Husain, S. S. A. *The Indiannes of Rudyard Kipling*. London: Cosmos Press, 1983.
- Jackson, Paul. S. J. *The Way of Sufi*. Delhi: St. Paul Press, 1987.
- Jones, R. T. *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1992.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Life's Handicap*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1987.
-*Plain Tales from the Hills*. New York: AMS, 1970.
-*We Willie Winkie*. New York: AMS, 1970.
-*Kim*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987.
-*The Day's Work*. London: Macmillan, 1964.
- Knowles, Frederick Lawrence. *A Kipling Primer*. New York: Haskell House, 1974.
- Mason, Philip. *Kipling, The Glass, The Shadow, and The Fire*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975.
- Montgomery, J. A. *Religions of the Past and Present*. London: J. B. Lippincott, 1918).
- Pinion, F. B. *Thomas Hardy and the Modern World*. Dorchester: Thomas Hardy Society, 1974.