

Review of  
"The Introduction of Androcles and the Lion"  
by George Bernard Shaw

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No Date<sup>1</sup>

I suppose that you are all very familiar with this very interesting "Introduction" in which the author declared his conversion to Christianity in a manner that made many pious souls turn back into their sanctuaries and pray that no more such converts be admitted. "Why not give Christianity a trial" is the opening challenge,

I am no more a Christian than Pilate was, or you, gentle reader; and yet, like Pilate, I greatly prefer Jesus to Annas and Caiaphas; and I am ready to admit that after contemplating the world and human nature for nearly sixty years, I see no way out of the world's misery but the way which would have been found by Christ's will if he had undertaken the work of a modern practical statesman.

Pray do not at this early point lose patience with me and shut the book. I assure you that I am as skeptical and scientific and modern a thinker as you will find anywhere. I grant you that I know a great deal more about economics and politics than Jesus did, and can do things he could not do. I am by all Barabbasque standards a person of much better character and standing, and greater practical sense. I have no sympathy with vagabonds and talkers who try to reform society by taking men away from their regular productive work, and making vagabonds and talkers of them too; and if I had been Pilate I should have

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<sup>1</sup> While this manuscript has no date, Earl Davis wrote another piece on George Bernard Shaw in 1913 ("The Court Jester to King Bourgeois") and, it is reasonable to date this piece proximate to that piece. Shaw's play, "Androcles and the Lion," along with its "Introduction" was published and first performed in 1912.

recognized as plainly as he the necessity for suppressing attacks on the existing social order, however corrupt that social order might be, by people with no knowledge of government and no power to construct political machinery to carry out their political views, acting on the very dangerous delusion that the end of the world was at hand. I make no defense of such Christians as Savonarola and John of Leyden: they were scuttling the ship before they had learned how to make a raft; and it became necessary to throw them overboard to save the crew. I say this to set myself right with respectable society; but I must still insist that if Jesus could have worked out the practical problems of a communist constitution, an admitted obligation to deal with crime without revenge or punishment, and a full assumption by humanity of divine responsibilities, he would have conferred an incalculable benefit upon mankind, because these distinctive demands of his are now turning out to be good sense and sound economics.

I say distinctive because his common humanity and his subjection to time and space (that is to the Syrian life of his period) involved his belief in many things, that in no way distinguish him from other Syrians of his time. But such common beliefs do not constitute specific Christianity any more than wearing a beard, working in a carpenter's shop, or believing that the earth is flat or that the stars could drop on it like hail stones. Christianity interests practical statesmen now because of the doctrines that distinguished Christ from the Jews and the Barabbasques generally, including ourselves.

Of course that is just like Shaw. Shaw is the modern practical statesman who sets up for emulation Jesus the expounder of Shaw's doctrine, quite regardless of facts or critical wisdom. Whether his presentation of Jesus is true or not, another fact cannot be escaped that in this "Introduction," Jesus has become converted to a particular brand of modern statesmanship that Shaw has long advocated. Now the reason why I selected this "Introduction" for a

review was not for the purpose of presenting Shaw's views, not still the views of Shaw's Jesus, but after the manner of Shaw, to make Shaw and Shaw's Jesus the spokesman for some of my own notions. It makes them seem more as if they had an historical background, if in some roundabout way I can read them back into history, and then come running out of the dark endless hole of historical research with the very same game in my mouth that I had in it when I went in, changed only by the addition of a few specks of dirt that the process accumulated.

Many people object to Shaw, and even the mention of his name brings a curl of scorn to their lips. But I confess that I like Shaw very much. He has a way of riddling intellectual Zepperlins, and spiritual balloons that pleases my fancy greatly. I admit very readily that I know more about lots of things than Shaw does, even as he is willing to admit that he knows more about some things than Jesus did. Also I admit that in some things I am more respectable than he, but yet I delight in the consoling thought that these admissions, frank as they are, give me a delightful feeling of condescending fellowship not only with Shaw but with Shaw's Jesus. Having made those admissions, and like the stock-broker, discounted them in the market, I derive a great deal of unearned intellectual increment from this same Shaw. So, whether you know this "Introduction" by heart or not, makes no difference to me so far as the purposes of this paper are concerned. Shaw is just one of those texts that Prof. Peabody<sup>2</sup> used to call a pretext, and does still for aught that I know.

First of all the fact that Shaw chooses to set forth his teaching backed by the name of Jesus, and under the cover of an un-tried Christianity, is very interesting. Shaw is the greatest advertiser of modern times. By the use of a few postal cards he made the Fabian Society a world famous institution. In the same way he made G.B.S. a very great personage in English Editorial life long before people knew Shaw. He follows the turn of the public mind as a skilled broker follows a ticker, and he is one point ahead of the market. In thus turning to the religious

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Earl Davis refers to Francis Greenwood Peabody (1847-1936) who was the Dean of the Harvard Divinity School from 1901 until 1906, when Earl Davis was a student there.

sanction for the advancement of his ideas, he is true to logical human experience. Perhaps he is unwittingly true to the logic of history, and this may be one point in which I may admit that I know more than Shaw does. Shaw has made Jesus the spokesman for him of a direct economic program, a program of statesmanship, of sound modern statesmanship. Whether that program is true to Jesus, or true to reality is not a point that I am now concerned in. The point that I am now concerned in is the fact, repeatedly demonstrated by history, that in the ultimate push of things we have to search our way back or forward as you choose to put it, for a universal sanction to even a common economic program. This is the process. First a cry of pain in society, bespeaking maladjustment, the wail of the suffering, the call for help, the peril of lost souls. Then comes the criticism, the analysis, the diagnosis of the trouble. In our own time we have seen both of the processes going on in society. Strikes, agitators, revolutions are witness to the cry of pain. So was it in the Graeco-Roman world before Jesus when the Jews of the Dispersion sent up their cry. So was it in the Peasants revolt that bespoke the cry of pain and injustice under the domination of the institutions of the middle ages. So have spoken the sufferers under the pressure of modern capitalism.

Then comes the analysis, the criticism, the diagnosis of the condition of the social order that produces these unhealthy results. With such analyses [we] have had many in our time, and are still not free of them. Of them we pick and choose as best seems to meet the requirements of the times, and with the analysis comes the remedy. It may be a panacea, it may be a recreation treatment, it may be the verdict that things are as well as could be expected and the patient is improving. Or it may be [of the] necessity of a radical surgical operation. But this is the point I wish to bring out. The cry of pain may startle us from our apathy; the diagnosis may send us into the study of historical experience, for justification and support, but the remedy inevitably sends us back into our closets to revalue, to rejudge, to re-estimate the very nature and character of the universe we live in, to remake for ourselves a God, so that when we come to the point of applying our remedy to life we may feel that the very essence of life, the very power of God is back of us, and "To this end have we been born and to this end have we come into the world that we should bear witness

to the truth."<sup>3</sup> We have heard the cry of Europe staggering under its heavy burden of Militarism, we have heard the shriek of Europe bleeding in war. We describe war as hell, and we propose remedies for its elimination, or its humanization. Here science, political economy, and history help, but in the last analysis, we are driven back into our closets to discover just what the character of this universe is, whether it is a universe in which war is an inherent factor in human life, or merely a passing factor belonging to one stage of its process. What is the character of God? What are the great values of life? Is God in his might, are the stars in their courses, on the side of war, and misery is a permanent factor of life, or are the dreamers of peace and goodwill true to the essential purpose and character of the Universe?

Now I admit that Shaw may not know what he has done in this "Introduction" but I know that he is going back for universal sanction, for the sanction of religion for the support of his economic program. He is as wise as a serpent, for in the popular mind at least the sanction of Jesus is universal sanction. Moreover, Shaw has done this, and here again I admit that I may know more than he does, because he feels that in the turbulence of the times the minds of the many are instinctively feeling for just that universal sanction. If they could overcome their doubts as to the nature of God, and the nature of the universe and the essential character of life, they might step forward regardless of all obstacles. But they face now that mountain of doubt before which they halt, dismayed. Human nature is the obstacle to all progress; human nature is the thing that prevents peace; the very Gods sit upon their high thrones, and watch with glee the fighting, the conflict, the suffering, the destruction. The conception of Calvin is written deep upon the mind of the Western world. In moments of amiable asininity we lay claims to the achievement of having substituted a God of Love for a God of stern Hard reality, for things. But as [a] matter of cold fact we still cling to the old God of Calvin, hard, stern, who elects the few to be saved and the many to be damned whether in this world or the next. All this amiable talk is very well for women, parsons and dreamers, but it has no place in the reality of things and life. It has no standing in the Universe. Whether we like it or not, we have to face the facts of life as they are, and we have to make the most of it.

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<sup>3</sup> John 18:37.

There is much said today about a revival in religion. In the background of it there is this eternal question, "What is the nature of this Universe? I would like to believe your amiable notions about the brotherhood of man and a loving and tender spirit like unto the spirit of Jesus that hovers over the Universe and permeates all life. My soul longs for such assurance, but what basis have you for your faith?" Such as I see it is the background of the religious interest of today. The question of the authority of the Church, or the Bible, or the creeds, or Jesus, is of no particular interest, only as in some vague way they symbolize for certain types of persons that which may be called the sanction of Universality.

It is because that, the mind of today under the pressure of misery and suffering is turning its attention to this fundamental question of the character of the universe, the character and integrity of God, that Shaw has converted Jesus, a sort of symbol in the minds of the western world at large for universality, to his economic program for the purpose of announcing the sanction of the universe for his program. He is calling upon the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to testify in behalf of his remedy for the exiting situation.

I admit that Shaw may not know why he is doing this thing, but that does not matter for I long ago admitted that there are some things that I know that Shaw may not know. Possibly this is one of them.

With only a very vague idea as to the significance of Higher Criticism, or the evolution of Religion, or the development of religious systems and thought, Shaw wades through the vast material of solidified myth, legend, and interpretation that passes in the minds of many for the history of religion, and arrives with the keenness of a scientist at what seems to me his most important implied conclusion, or perhaps better his most important implication, namely that the mind of modern man, and the mind of many whose attitude is rapidly becoming modern sees clearly that in order to arrive at any satisfactory answer to our great present-day doubt, we must throw overboard all the past for purposes of thought at least, that is in anyway implicated in what may be called a supernatural or revealed religion. We cannot meet the situation by the resort to slight of hand in the use of such words as miracle, supernatural, or by

that still more dangerous and confusing sin of spiritual interpretation of past interpretations. Among the most dangerous of these sins of modern religious life is, to my mind, the constant use of Jesus as authority, club or symbol in places where it is necessary to pervert the manifest facts in order to make him fit present conditions. Jesus' God may or may not be the same as the concept of God today, but the conception of God today must be a conception that grows out of the life of today. It is interesting that you or I may think that Jesus' conception of God was like unto ours, but it is not essential to our conception. It is interesting to Shaw that the ethical code of Jesus seems to Shaw to be like Shaw's, but that does not give Shaw's code any better standing for me. Shaw's code must stand upon its own merits measured according to our best insight into the nature of the universe and the operation of universe forces. But there is one valid sanction in the life of Jesus, greater than any intellectual concept, greater than any interpretation of experience, and that is his ethical integrity. To that I refer later. The point is that the pathway of history is strewn with the remains of dead Gods. They are dying today. In all the fields of modern activity we make our generalizations in accord with the facts of experience. We do not seek to bolster up present-day interpretations by an unwarranted sanction from the past interpretations.

In short, the significance of this "Introduction" of Shaw's for me is the way in which he uses the language of today, the human approach, the natural approach to his problem. He is as "skeptical and scientific and modern a thinker as you will find anywhere," to use his own description of himself. To put it in other words, he is not credulous, not apologetic, not seeking to find the shelter of a great rock under the shadow of a haystack. If he is guilty of the sin of special pleading, it is not in the interest of bolstering up a crumbling haystack, but in the interest of upbuilding a new structure to meet the requirements, and the knowledge of the present. In this again I think that Shaw's astuteness is sound. To be more concrete, the mind of man today is not especially interested in maintaining the continuity of form which the preservation of either Catholic or Protestant ecclesiasticism demands. Instinctively he lets those pass by, except in convulsive efforts of not entirely disinterested parties, efforts [that] are made to inject religious strychnine into the aged body that has done its service in the world and interpreted the spirit and content of his youth, manhood and old

age. Hence the revival, hence the Everybody to church movement, and all such truck. To use a phrase which Jesus used, and in this use here carries about the meaning that seems to be implied, "Let the dead past bury its dead."

Briefly to the last point, and in this I must add that I think I know more than Shaw does. I may be wrong. Shaw is a mystic. I admit that he may not know it, but all his writings indicate that. He is not a mystic after the fashion of some of the mystics of the past, for he uses not their language, or the intellectual conceptions, but still I admit that Shaw is a mystic. Shaw is repelled by the language and mysticism of John's Gospel, but he concludes that

In spite of the suspicions roused by John's idiosyncrasies, his narrative is of enormous importance to those who go to the gospels for a credible modern religion. For it is John who adds to the other records such sayings as that "I and my father are one;" that "God is a spirit;" that the aim of Jesus is not only that the people should have life but have it "more abundantly;" and that men should bear in mind what they are told in the 82<sup>nd</sup> psalm: that they are Gods, and are responsible for doing the mercy and justice of God.

Very interesting also in this place is the statement in which Shaw defends natural Jesus as against the supernaturalists and the Jesus' myth theory.

It must therefore be taken as a flat fundamental modern fact, whether we like it or not, that whilst many of us cannot believe that Jesus got his curious grip of our souls by mere sentimentality, neither can we believe that he was John Barleycorn. The more our reason and study lead us to believe that Jesus was talking the most penetrating good sense when he preached communism; when he declared that the reality behind popular belief in God was a creative spirit in ourselves, called by him the Heavenly Father and by us Evolution, Elan Vital, Life Force, and other names; when he protested against the claims of marriage and the family to appropriate that high part of our energy that was meant for the service of his Father, the more impossible it becomes for us, the more impossible it becomes for us to believe that he was talking equally

good sense when he so suddenly announced that he himself was visible concrete God.

In other words, it is [the] mystic relationship that Shaw strikes upon as significant in his religious thought.

But it was a mysticism that carried with it a definite moral, and intellectual responsibility, expressed in Shaw's interpretation of the four distinctive doctrines of Jesus' Social Message, which I am dragging in by the heels here, for in Shaw's mind they are the Hamlet of the Introduction.

Such then is the Shavian Jesus. But in one thing in particular does Shaw fail entirely to meet the situation. Jesus may or may not have held these economic views. If he did hold them under the limitation of his eschatological conceptions, that does not hide the fact that for me at least the eternal, the abiding value in the life of Jesus is not to be found in any of his thoughts or any of his eschatological or ethical dicta. But in the sublime courage with which he faced what seemed to him to be his moral responsibility. You may have the rest of the Gospels, and all the rest of Christianity to do what you please with, provided you leave only the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, the power to choose to bear witness to truth at any cost, and the rest is easy. Shaw rather looks upon that as a time when Jesus was sort of squealing. I look upon it as the time when he reached a point infinitely higher than any other in his life, the making of a moral decision with unflinching courage.

This is the last suggestion I have to admit that I am anxious to make in addition to Shaw's. This modern time demands, not amiable platitudes, not haystacks as substitutes for great rocks in a weary land, not revivals, but moral leadership, sealed by suffering.