

Shelley's *The Necessity of Atheism*



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Although most of the examples we look at in Creative Writing are contemporary, this article looks at a famous incident in the life of the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). It prefigures the current clash between the demands of various religious ideologies and the writers of the modern secular. Shelley's attitude towards the authorities of his day (academic and religious) can be seen as a distant prelude to current events.

Shelley's short pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* was produced while he was a first year student at University College, Oxford. It was published anonymously in the early months of 1811. The pamphlet came about because Shelley considered Oxford University to be the 'advanced squadron of the English Church' and was intended to be a logical attack on the conventional view of God. Shelley argued that God's existence could be 'proved' only by reference to the senses, reason and the testimony of others and that as none of these three sources could in fact provide any irrefutable evidence of God's existence, religion was nothing more than a 'passion of the mind'.

Shelley seems to have set out to irritate, upset and offend as many College tutors, Churchmen and University officials as he possibly could by distributing the pamphlet widely through the mail to a large number of 'bigots, bishops and academic scholars'.¹ Although the pamphlet was anonymous, he had been discussing the topic for some weeks, so it was widely known that Shelley was the author. It is possible the authorities might have preferred to ignore the pamphlet altogether, but when Shelley arranged for it to go on prominent display in the window of a bookshop in Oxford High Street the authorities felt this was a provocation and they had no option but to act.

Shelley was summoned to a meeting with the Fellows of the College, who were all members of the Church of England clergy, and he was questioned. Shelley obstinately refused to answer any questions on the subject of the pamphlet and as a result was expelled from the University. While it is important to remember Shelley was expelled for flouting college discipline - as the college put it, for his 'contumacy in refusing to answer certain questions' - rather than for the pamphlet or for his atheism, it is fairly certain had he answered those 'certain questions' he would have been 'sent down' anyway.

¹ P. Foot, *Red Shelley* (London, 1984), p.61; E. Blunden, *Shelley: a Life Story* (London, 1948), pp.54-6; R. Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (New York, 1994), pp.54-60.

Shelley's father urged him to recant his atheism and apologise to the College, saying that after the University had calmed down Shelley would certainly be re-admitted. Shelley, however, replied that his atheism was not a passing fad but the very basis of his beliefs. No apology or recantation was ever issued and Shelley never resumed his university studies.

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'THE NECESSITY OF ATHEISM'
by
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

A close examination of the validity of the proofs adduced to support any proposition, has ever been allowed to be the only sure way of attaining truth, upon the advantages of which it is unnecessary to descant; our knowledge of the existence of a Deity is a subject of such importance, that it cannot be too minutely investigated; in consequence of this conviction, we proceed briefly and impartially to examine the proofs which have been adduced. It is necessary first to consider the nature of Belief.

When a proposition is offered to the mind, it perceives the agreement or disagreement of the ideas of which it is composed. A perception of their agreement is termed belief, many obstacles frequently prevent this perception from being immediate, these the mind attempts to remove in order that the perception may be distinct. The mind is active in the investigation, in order to perfect the state of perception which is passive; the investigation being confused with the perception has induced many falsely to imagine that the mind is active in belief, that belief is an act of volition, in consequence of which it may be regulated by the mind; pursuing, continuing this mistake they have attached a degree of criminality to disbelief of which in its nature it is incapable; it is equally so of merit.

The strength of belief like that of every other passion is in proportion to the degrees of excitement.

The degrees of excitement are three.

- The senses are the sources of all knowledge to the mind, consequently their evidence claims the strongest assent.
- The decision of the mind founded upon our own experience derived from these sources, claims the next degree.
- The experience of others which addresses itself to the former one, occupies the lowest degree.

Consequently no testimony can be admitted which is contrary to reason, reason is founded on the evidence of our senses.

Every proof may be referred to one of these three divisions; we are naturally led to consider what arguments we receive from each of them to convince us of the existence of a Deity.

1st. The evidence of the senses. If the Deity should appear to us, if he should convince our senses of his existence; this revelation would necessarily command belief. Those to whom the Deity has thus appeared, have the strongest possible conviction of his existence.

Reason claims the 2nd. place, it is urged that man knows that whatever is, must either have had a beginning or existed from all eternity, he also knows that whatever is not eternal must have had a cause. Where this is applied to the existence of the universe, it is necessary to prove that it was created, until that is clearly demonstrated, we may reasonably suppose that it has endured from all eternity. In a case where two propositions are diametrically opposite, the mind believes that which is less incomprehensible, it is easier to suppose that the Universe has existed from all eternity, than to conceive a being capable of creating it; if the mind sinks beneath the weight of one, is it an alleviation to increase the intolerability of the burden? The other argument which is founded upon a man's knowledge of his own existence stands thus. A man knows not only he now is, but that there was a time when he did not exist, consequently there must have been a cause. But what does this prove? We can only infer from effects causes exactly adequate to those effects. But there certainly is a generative power which is effected by particular instruments; we cannot prove that it is inherent in these instruments, nor is the contrary hypothesis capable of demonstration; we admit that the generative power is incomprehensible, but to suppose that the same effect is produced by an eternal, omniscient Almighty Being, leaves the cause in the same obscurity, but renders it more incomprehensible.

The 3rd. and last degree of assent is claimed by Testimony. It is required that it should not be contrary to reason. The testimony that the Deity convinces the senses of men of his existence can only be admitted by us, if our mind considers it less probable that these men should have been deceived, than that the Deity should have appeared to them - our reason can never admit the testimony of men, who not only declare that they were eye-witnesses of miracles but that the Deity was irrational, for he commanded that he should be believed, he proposed the highest rewards for faith, eternal punishments for disbelief we can only command voluntary actions, belief is not an act of volition, the mind is even passive, from this it is evident that we have not sufficient testimony, or rather that testimony is insufficient to prove the being of a God, we have before shewn that it cannot be deduced from reason, They who have been convinced by the evidence of the senses, they only can believe it.

From this it is evident that having no proofs from any of the three sources of conviction: the mind cannot believe the existence of a God, it is also evident that as belief is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality can be attached to disbelief, they only are reprehensible who willingly neglect to remove the false medium thro' which their mind views the subject.

It is almost unnecessary to observe, that the general knowledge of the deficiency of such proof, cannot be prejudicial to society: Truth has always been found to promote

the best interests of mankind. Every reflecting mind must allow that there is no proof of the existence of a Deity. QED.²

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Follow-up Work

- Why do you think Shelley wrote this pamphlet?
- Is this just a youthful indiscretion, a teenage 'strop' gone wrong, or is there something more serious to it?
- Do you think the pamphlet is still relevant?
- Does it still offend?
- If so, in what way?
- Which religions do you think it might now offend?
- Do you think the fact a poet wrote this has any particular meaning or value?
- Do you think that it is right or decent to say such things?
- Because Christians or Muslims might be offended by such an opinion, is that a reason for them to be protected from ever hearing such an argument?
- Even if Shelley had the right to say these things, should he have kept his opinions to himself?
- Should this have been banned? Were the university authorities right to expel Shelley for expressing his opinions?
- Was it their business to police his religious beliefs?
- Does the poet bring any particular poetic insight to bear in this pamphlet?
- Does the fact that a young poet wrote this make it more or less acceptable now?
- In what ways do you think the idea of challenging authority might be connected to poetry and creative writing?
- In what ways could this pamphlet be connected to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* or with the suppression of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* at Birmingham Rep?
- We often think of writing as an essential part of democracy in that it allows everybody to express their opinions, but how would a multicultural democracy preserve and protect opinions such as those Shelley expresses?
- Do you think the responsibilities of a writer in 1811 are different from those of a writer after 9/11? If so, in what way?
- Do you think that the democratic freedoms of 1811 are similar to those of the 21st century?

² QED - Latin for: *Quod erat demonstrandum*, meaning: 'Thus my case is proved', or: 'Which was what I set out to show'.

- In what ways does Shelley's political, artistic and religious world differ from our own?
- Should we bother to defend people with opinions like Shelley? If so, why? If not, why?
- How do you think the poet and his pamphlet would fare now?
- Does an atheist have as much right to express an opinion on the subject of God as any believer?
- Do you think Shelley had the right to say what he thought?
- Do you have the right to say what you think?
- Do you think Shelley's passionate plea for atheism might now constitute 'hate speech' towards religious belief or 'people of faith'?
- If Shelley were alive now, would you agree to him being prosecuted or would you sign petitions in his support?