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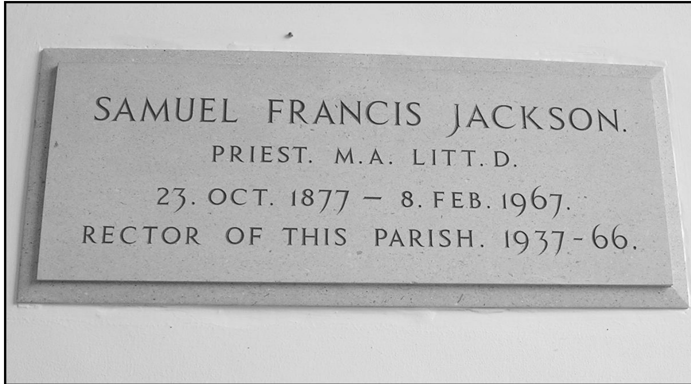
The Sailor's Return at Chaldon Herring
courtesy T.W. Townsend

Theodore Powys's God

WHENEVER the work of T. F. Powys is discussed, the questions of whether he believed in God, and whether he qualifies as a Christian, are customarily debated. The first is more often than not answered in the affirmative, but some disagreement is usually recorded in reference to the second. Ultimately, however, it seems to me that these questions are not very helpful in themselves. The only adequate answer must surely be: it depends on how you define God and what you mean by belief. Still, such debates are of value since they help to highlight the quintessentially enigmatic character of the man and his work.

Theodore's own answers and his patterns of behaviour in relation to religious issues were equivocal at best. At East Chaldon, a village close to the Dorset coast, he seems to have read the lessons at Sunday services fairly regularly during most of the first four decades of the twentieth century; further inland at Mappowder in his later years, he spent an hour or so sitting in the church every weekday, yet was conspicuously absent on Sundays. At the same time, he helped

to revive a traditional evening service at Mappowder, at least in the summer months, though it took the form of the Roman Catholic Compline rather than that of the standard Anglican service. When asked why he went to church, he would give a series of contradictory and seemingly flippant reasons, such as "the kneeling position beneficial to his health"[1], and "to keep Frank Jackson [the rector] in regular employment"[2]. David Gervais, to me the shrewdest of Theodore scholars, offered perhaps the most plausible (because most Powysian) explanation: "I believe that he liked to savour the suspense of wondering whether God was present there or not".[3] But Theodore's adopted daughter probably gave the two most convincing reasons. First: "he liked to be in church" and the Compline service "was a good excuse to be there" (presumably because the most committed Anglicans would keep away); second, the Compline preference notwithstanding, he once gave her a more personal reason: "Well, my dear, the Church of England was my father's Church. I would never leave it myself".[4] Theodore and the rector were often the only persons present at these services, though after she moved into the village his youngest sister Lucy attended regularly, as did Gerard and Mary Casey (Lucy's daughter) when they were back from their home in Africa.[5] Perhaps at this point attention should be drawn to a sublimely simple statement in *Kindness in a Corner*, a currently underrated Theodore novel: "A holy peace never wants company".[6]



Plaque in Mappowder Church

What are the characteristics of God as presented in Theodore's fiction and non-fiction? They take on an unexpected variety of forms that include the following: a virtually unimaginable creator of the universe embodying power and so arousing Fear; a father, though we need to remember that, while fathers can be loving, they can also be figures of authority and therefore of fear; a moral arbiter; an essentially unpredictable force; and, most unexpectedly, a thief. In addition, we should be aware of the idea—primarily derived from St. Paul—that God is "within us", although even he is considered by Theodore to be a human rather than a divine creation.

God the creator is the most important of these because, underlying all Theodore's thought about the Divine, is the philosophical problem that goes

[1] Alyse Gregory. 'The Character of Theodore', in Belinda Humfrey, ed., *Recollections of the Powys Brothers* (London: Peter Owen, 1988), p.147.

[2] Holloway, Mark. 'With T. F. Powys at Mappowder', in Humfrey, p.155.

[3] T. F. Powys: 'A Medium Clearer than Water or Crystal', *Powys Society Newsletter* 25 (July 1995), p.4.

[4] Scutt, Theodora Gay. *Cuckoo in the Powys Nest* (Harleston: Brynmill Press, 2000), pp.229, 241.

[5] See Scutt 230, Gerard Casey, 'Three Christian Brothers', *Powys Review.* p.4 (Winter/Spring, 1978), p.14, and 'A Double Initiation', in Humfrey, p.171.

[6] *Kindness in a Corner* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), p.15.

back at least as far as the Book of Job: the paradox that, if God created all things, he would seem also to be responsible for the evil so evident within our world. This, as we shall see, is a perennial source of unease for all the Powys writers. It also causes the Rev. Grobe to lose faith in God in *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* because he cannot forgive the pointlessly accidental way in which his wife died (Chapter 27). More generally, the topic finds its most prominent expression in the long short story 'The Only Penitent', where Tinker Jar, one of Theodore's God-figures, is the only person who accepts the Rev. Hayhoe's invitation (itself bizarre in an evangelical) to Confession, and asks for his forgiveness: "'Twas I who created every terror in the earth, the rack, the plague, all despair, all torment … all pain and all evil are created by me". He has already just admitted: "I crucified my son"[7]. This too is an idea that casts its shadow, if only covertly, over much of Theodore's fiction, and it is obviously a concern that had a profound effect upon his thinking, as we shall see later.

It seems fair to state that Theodore shows more interest in the "jealous god" of the Old Testament (Exodus 20:5) than in the loving father of the New (a topic I shall take up later). Fear, indeed, is a constant in Theodore's conception of God that also loomed large in his everyday life. It is prominent in *An Interpretation of Genesis* (1907) and through most of his early writings, including an allegorical narrative, *Under the Burden of Fear*—a title that clearly sums up Theodore's own experience. As early as the essay 'On God', written in 1905-6, he writes: "Beyond and before God cometh Fear, and when Fear findeth an entrance into the heart of man, the word God cometh also"[8]. In *Soliloquies*, he observes: "When I speak of God, I mean the mystic fear that I share with all men".[9] And in the novella entitled 'God' Johnnie Chew fears that the form of God he so wishes to see could become a "terrible thing", and is told by his pious father: "He is great and mighty—and the fear of him is ever in my heart"[10]. When Alyse Gregory questioned Theodore himself on the subject, "he said FEAR had been the whole centre and driving force of his life" until his stroke just before the outbreak of the Second World War.[11] The principle is excellently summed up in a single sentence from *Soliloquies*: "The fear of God is sure to break in upon you"[12].

We can see God as moral arbiter clearly enough in 'The Left Leg' where Tinker Jar is presented through most of the narrative as a *deus absconditus* until he returns in the final chapter in the more traditional role of *deus ex machina* to take the oppressed Gillets away from the cruelty of Madder to a paradise elsewhere (at the same time producing echoes of Joseph and the flight into Egypt, and acting as an agent of moral retribution who engineers the death of the unredeemable Farmer Mew). Even here, however, though he achieves his tasks, they are accomplished with the opposite of confident divine ease. Besides, when the moral aspect of "moral arbiter" is emphasized, 'moral' should not be limited

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[7] 'The Only Penitent', in T. F. Powys, *God's Eyes A-Twinkle* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), p.222.

[8] Quoted in Michel Pouillard, *T. F. Powys (1875-1953): la solitude, le doute, l'art.* (Lille: Service de reproduction des thèses, 1981), p.502.

[9] *Soliloquies of a Hermit* (1916, Kilmersdon: Powys Press, 1993), p.18.

[10] 'God' in *The Two Thieves* (London; Chatto & Windus 1932) or in *The Sixpenny Strumpet* (Denton: Brynmill Press, 1997), pp.102,105.

[11] Alyse Gregory, 'The Character of Theodore', in Humfrey, p.147.

[12] *Soliloquies of a Hermit*, p.19.

to any narrow, conventional sense. One gets a similar effect in 'The Sixpenny Strumpet' where Mary Triddle, the prostitute in question whose Christian name appropriately links her with both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdelene, is greeted by the Jesus-figure riding upon an ass as "his dear bride" and told of "a glorious mansion prepared for her in his father's city, where she would be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white"[13]. Theodore, indeed, seems to take delight in defending conventionally 'immoral' actions for traditionally 'moral' reasons.

This climax of 'The Sixpenny Strumpet' certainly shows God's ways as unpredictable, perhaps because the mixture of good and evil which he had unpredictably built into Creation is a characteristic of God continually presented in Theodore's writings. This is seen most clearly in ***Soliloquies*** with the famous "moods of God"[14]. In the Theodorean universe, it is God rather than humankind who is 'moody' and unstable; "when an evil day comes, it is the mood from above that is evil; when the earth and sky and my heart are bathed in sunbeams, God is in a shining mood above"[15]. This may seem at first sight one of Theodore's minor departures from Christian thought, but in fact it has major implications. Unstable moodiness is no longer considered a human weakness but a divine attitude for which human beings are not responsible; all they can do is to react to these 'moods' as best they can. Here, before priests have taken on invariably ugly connotations in Theodore's vocabulary, Theodore as narrator presents himself as "a good priest" who "tames the moods by prayer, and he tries to shut up the bad moods, the good moods, all the moods, in the Bible"[16]. Theodore sees himself in the unexpected role of priest here because, *un*like the priesthood within the Established Churches, he acts as a defender of man to God rather than the policeman sent from God to discipline man.

But the most surprising manifestation of God appears in 'The Two Thieves'[17]. From the title, we might expect an allusion to the two thieves crucified beside Jesus, but for Theodore God is, in a somewhat *outré* sense, a thief himself in that he steals souls because, as David Gervais has said, "it is only by stealing souls that he can give a human thief like George Douse a hope of redemption"[18]—though Douse is not ultimately spared the final penalty. The image has biblical precedent: "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (Revelation 3:3, and cf. Luke 12:39). This is a good example of Theodore's playful, provocative approach. It is important to realize that humour is almost always present in his religious writings. In an early dialogue between himself and God cited by Louis Wilkinson, Theodore, who is in love, asks God: "Can you see Sally?" God begins to offer details, but then adds darkly: "I do not think you would like to see what she is doing now".[19] Theodore was an earthy countryman, and fastidiously solemn Christians will find little acceptable in his work.

Theodore's views on death and immortality lie somewhat outside the limits of this essay, but a few points need to be made about them. His already

[13] 'The Sixpenny Strumpet' in *The Sixpenny Strumpet*, p.343.

[14] *Soliloquies of a Hermit*, p.12 and *passim*.

[15] Ibid., p.10.

[16] Ibid., p.9.

[17] In *The Two Thieves* or *The Sixpenny Strumpet,* with other novellas: see note 10.

[18] Review of T. F. Powys, *The Sixpenny Strumpet, Powys Journal* 8 (1998), p.228.

[19] Louis Marlow [Louis Wilkinson]. *Seven Friends,* London: Richards Press, 1953), p.91.

registered fear of God can hardly be separated from the fear of death, and what may or may not exist after death. This was a topic over which he had agonized in the years when he was working out his own 'life-illusion', and he seems to have eventually forced himself to learn to welcome death rather than fear it. One of the things he learnt in the brief period during which he studied farming and tried to become a farmer himself, was the fact that many rural workers, whether ignorant or sceptical concerning an afterlife, welcomed death because it delivered them from unbearably harsh conditions as toilers in the fields. If Llewelyn's account in *Skin for Skin* can be relied upon, this point was fully established by 1911. In one of their conversations of that year, life and death being the topic of conversation, Llewelyn reports that Theodore "cried, with more emotion than I had ever known him to display … 'we must learn to welcome Death. Death is the great Father of all things; for without him there is no life'"[20]. The argument was still going on fifteen years later when Alyse Gregory remembers both men walking "through the lanes and meadows of East Chaldon … one defending life, the other praising death"[21]. Theodore's position becomes more understandable when we realize that death could be welcome for the very reason that, there then being no consciousness, there was no suffering beyond it.

These attitudes, unfamiliar as they may seem to many in the twenty-first century who have dissociated death from the claims of everyday living, have a long history, and Theodore could have found them in *Holy Dying*, by one of his favourite seventeenth-century authors, Jeremy Taylor. There he doubtless read such observations as the following: "Death is the harbour whither God hath designed every one, that he may finde rest from the troubles of the world"; and "He that would willingly be feareless of death, must learn to despise the world"[22]. Viewed within their appropriate historical context of spiritual meditation—which, be it noted, is a specifically Christian context—Theodore's views should not seem bizarre.

Similar attitudes are regularly reflected in his fiction—so regularly, in fact, that any further discussion of the topic here ought to be superfluous. However, I know of no literary subject providing a better illustration of a curious fact that most readers derive from any text what they expect to receive and display an extraordinary deafness to whatever is original and unforecastable. For example, at the climax of his confession to the Rev. Hayhoe, Tinker Jar admits: "I destroy all men with the sword … I cast them down into the pit, they become nothing". Hayhoe asks him to confirm this last statement, and when he does replies boldly: "Then, in the name of Man … I pardon and deliver you from all your evil … and bring you to everlasting death".[23] The point is clear enough, yet, if my personal experience is at all typical, we read it with shock and ultimately acknowledge it as a brilliant ending but not as a religious principle to be taken seriously. It is so alien to our conventional responses that we simply fail to register it.

Yet, surprising as it may seem, there is another fanciful belief concerning death that we also find quite prominently in his fiction, and even in curious hints dropped by Theodore himself. According to Louis Wilkinson, he "really

[20] Llewelyn Powys, *Skin for Skin* (1926. London: Village Press, 1975), p.112.

[21] Alyse Gregory, 'A Famous Family', in Humfrey, p.60.

[22] *Holy Living and Holy Dying* (2 vols. Ed. P.G. Stanwood. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), II 100, 105.

[23] 'The Only Penitent' in *God's Eyes A-Twinkle*, p.222.

believed—so it seemed—that there was some kind of dim slow earth consciousness, 'a rather pleasant one', in the grave".[24] He elaborates, a generation later, in *Seven Friends*:

> Like the old Jews, Theodore believes in God without believing in survival after death. But he does believe in a sort of survival *in* death, and that is why he can say "He's in this grave", and really mean it. He thinks the dead have some sort of consciousness … under the ground.[25]

Mappowder Church

Perhaps this attitude is hinted at in a remark he made in 1943 reported by Alyse Gregory: "He said that what he loved best was to be in a state as near to non-existence as possible".[26] This may sound bizarre, but similar ideas recur surprisingly often in the fictions. As early as 'The Left Leg', for instance, we find this:

> Mark Button believed in angels and snowdrops, and he had once asked the snowdrops a question. "Do they buried folk talk down under grass?" … "No", replied the snowdrops, "but what is much more important, they listen".[27]

Theodore's later position is conveniently summed up in 'The Stone and Mr. Thomas': "Although a churchyard may seem to any who chance to wander there to be a peaceful as well as a silent place, yet in reality, in the garden where the

[24] Louis Marlow [Louis Wilkinson], *Swan's Milk* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), p.276.

[25] Louis Marlow [Louis Wilkinson], *Seven Friends* (London: Richards Press, 1953),p. 93.

[26] Alyse Gregory, 'The Character of Theodore', in Humfrey, p.148.

[27] *The Left Leg* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1923), p.28, or in *God's Eyes A-Twinkle*, p.284.

dead are laid a good deal of talk goes on"[28]. In 'The Clout and the Pan', Mr. Keddle is dead and buried, yet even though he "looked dead, that was a state—when the dying was once over and done with—that he appeared to abide in for a while at least". After a week has passed, he "was not much changed, unless that each day he might be said to sleep the sounder". According to the pan, "he is happily surrounded by his own gossips—the clods of earth—and he has already addressed a lively centipede as 'My brother'".[29] In 'Mr. Pim and the Holy Crumb', Pim and his friend John Toole used to chat in the village inn. Toole hanged himself, but Pim continued to speak with "a muffled voice from the ground". Pim asks God (in the form of the Holy Crumb) for the privilege of being left in the churchyard along with Toole on the Day of Judgment—and even invites him: "do 'Ee come and be a rotted bone by John and I".[30]

When we turn more specifically to immortality—in its orthodox sense—Alyse Gregory is again our best witness. She asked him more than once whether he believed in immortality: "His answer was invariably the same. He thought it the utmost arrogance on the part of man to wish to conserve his inconsequential identity in the great and blessed absolution of 'dateless oblivion and divine repose'"[31]. Also: "He said that no one really believed in immortality whatever he might say, not even the vicar. He said the survival of the spirit was even more fantastic than the survival of the body".[32] His ultimate comment on such matters occurred in a letter to Valentine Ackland in 1930 when he remarked of Jesus's claimed resurrection: "they wouldn't even let him stay at peace in the ground".[33]

Theodore is remarkable as a self-taught independent thinker who worked out his own religious position by means of *re*thinking and *re*interpreting the simple Christianity he had learnt from his father at Montacute vicarage, and "would never leave". One of the boldest of his assertions is his argument in *Soliloquies* that Jesus acted not as a loving and dutiful son of God the Father but as a Blake-like, Promethean figure challenging the cruelties of the traditional "jealous god" of the Old Testament. One of the chapters is called 'His Idea', which derives from the hypothesis that Jesus transformed the conventional prospect of heaven as an endless life after death, and substituted a full awareness of the potential quality of life lived to its utmost, an Eternal Now, "a state of vision with no everlasting deadness about it", "life in a moment".[34]

This essay has only been able to scratch the surface of a vast and complex subject. One surprising result of concentrating on his religious attitudes is the way it shows us that, although Theodore is generally regarded as a hermit-like 'loner' (a myth he seemed to encourage himself), Theodore's beliefs as we can establish them, bear some unexpected resemblances to those of his writer-brothers. All of them rejected the creator God whom they saw as responsible for all the cruelties and imperfections of the world in which we find ourselves. All of them acknowledged that happiness was a legitimate goal for human beings in

[28] In *Fables* (New York: Viking Press, 1929), p.118, or in *God's Eyes A-Twinkle*, p.235.
[29] In *Fables* pp.10-11, 12, 14-15.
[30] In *Fables* 22, 27, or in *God's Eyes A-Twinkle*. pp.161, 162.
[31] Alyse Gregory, 'A Famous Family,' in Humfrey, p.61.
[32] Alyse Gregory, *The Cry of a Gull* (Dulverton: The Ark Press, 1973), p.121.
[33] T. F. Powys, 'Letters to Valentine Ackland'. *Powys Journal* 5 (1995), p.152.
[34] *Soliloquies of a Hermit*, pp.75, 77.

this world. And all of them responded to the sheer beauty of the natural world and the mystery of the universe. In addition, though they all came to reject their father's simple brand of Anglicanism in which they had been brought up, they all retained an interest in religious matters, and searched for other alternatives—Llewelyn in a rationalism that still allowed for "the religion of an atheist", John Cowper in a form of polytheism involving aspects of the occult. In addition, they all retained a love for the King James Version of the Bible, were saturated with biblical knowledge, and constantly introduced biblical quotations and allusions into their works. Indeed, one can legitimately wonder whether the three of them, while still at Montacute, took part in private religious discussions of which we have no record. But whatever his individual beliefs may have been, Theodore's combination of religious seriousness with ironical humour—the cosmic leavened by the comic, a love for traditional lore punctuated with the outrageous, and even the revolutionary—is unique and worthy of our deep respect.

W. J. Keith

(This essay is an extract from a larger study in preparation devoted to religion and myth in the work of the Powyses.)