

The Unconverted Devotee: An Exploration of Emily Dickinson's View of Religion

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson is one of the greatest American poets of the nineteenth century. Her uncertainty and contradictory attitudes towards religion in her poems have always been a controversy of critics about her religious belief. By analyzing her poems and letters and referring to her life experiences, the paper identifies Dickinson as individualistically religious rather than pagan.

Key words: Uncertainty; Contradictory; Religious; Pagan

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1. INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson is one of the greatest American Poets in the nineteenth century. Known for the unconventional form, vivid imagery and aphoristic lines of her poetry, Dickinson is regarded as the precursor of a new era of American Poetry along with Whitman. She wrote almost 1800 poems of which only seven were published in her lifetime. Her seclusion at a young age makes her life as well as her poetry a mystery. From her first poem with a reference to Eden to her last letter, religion is always a major concern of Dickinson's poetry. The contradictions and inconsistencies in her poems have always caused controversy about her religious attitude. In her poem, she describes God as "a distant and stately lover," "papa above" and "our hospitable old neighbor" while at the

same time condemned him as "burglar" and "banker." Dickinson seems to be a woman of dual nature, a sincerely religious woman and a pagan at the same time. However, with a deeper understanding of her poetry by referring to her correspondence with her family and friends and the social environment, Dickinson is found to be religious rather than pagan, and she retains "her religious faith, mystical and individualistic as it was" (Voigt 196).

The first part of this paper is mainly about the profound religious influence on Dickinson in her formative years imposed by the society, her family and school. But she refuses to be converted in a rebellion against the punitive Christian doctrines. The second part analyzes the relation between her poems and her belief. Alienated and lonely, she turns to art for comfort and through writing poetry Dickinson finds a better way to communicate with her inner God. The third part traces her attitude towards God in her later years. In her later years the death of her family and friends makes her doubt the merciless and indifferent God, but she finally reconciles with her "Father." After analyzing her poems with a combination of her letters and life experiences, it can be concluded that Dickinson never abandons her God. She is not a pagan but the naughty little John of her Christ.

2. FAILED CONVERSION IN DICKINSON'S FORMATIVE YEARS

Dickinson born in 1830 lived through the great period of Congregational revivalism in the Connecticut Valley, which was then the center of the movement and had a tradition of Puritanism over two hundred years. She was born in a religious family and her predecessors had once helped to build Amherst's First Church which her family attended. Immersed in such a social and familial environment, Emily and her brothers "grew up with constant reinforcement of church teachings at home, in school and in peer relationships" (Pollak 68). However,

even under such great influence young Dickinson didn't turn out to be a devout puritan. In 1847 Dickinson went to Mount Holyoke for academic study and also during this period her attitude towards God and religion becomes more uncertain. Since the college founder Mary Lyon was an earnest evangelical, one major task of the college was to convert the heart of the girls. Students were divided into three groups: "...those who (like her cousin-roommate Emily Norcross) had already been saved, those who had "hope" of conversion (meaning direct experience of what might be the stirring of grace), and those still without hope" (Pollak 76). Dickinson remained to be in the third group when most of her classmates had been converted and saved. But Dickinson's resistance of the pressures for conversion is not a simple rebellion against God and the religion. On the contrary, she shows a desire to be converted in her poems. "I hope the Father in the skies/Will lift his little girl---/Old fashioned---naught---everything---/Over the stile of "Pearl" (Poem 117). The speaker in the poem is described as a childlike and naughty girl and "the stile of 'pearl'" symbolizes the baptism and conversion. It suggests that Dickinson at first takes her uncertainty of God not so seriously and is still involved in a hope of conversion. In her letter to her converted friend at the age of fifteen she said, "I have had the same feelings myself Dear A. I was almost persuaded to be a Christian. I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior" (Letter 10). Dickinson's near-conversion implies that both her social and familial religious tradition and the heavy atmosphere in college have a deep influence on her and that's also why religious themes and terminology occupy a large part of her poetry.

Two years after the letter about her near-conversion, Dickinson thought more serious about her God and religion when confronting the ardent persuasion in Mount Holyoke. "...there is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject" (Letter 20). The doubt in her poems suggests that her final refusal of being converted is not a simple rebellion against God but an argument with the religious dogmas and creeds, and more specifically, human's total depravity, limited atonement and predestination.

Is Heaven a Physician?
They say that He can heal
But Medicine Posthumous
Is unavailable-
Is Heaven an Exchequer?
They speak of what we owe-
But that negotiation
I'm not a Party to- (Poem 1260)

The poem is written in a rather ironic tone. The medicine only available posthumously is a satire of the Christian creed that only by atoning for human beings' original sin can they be saved by God and go to Heaven

after death. The debt human beings owe is the sin predestined before they are born. But Dickinson rejects the religious creed that Adam's guilt is transferred to his posterity and that Christ suffers to pay for human beings' sin. In a letter to her friend she admitted her that she was scared by a sermon about "...death and judgment, and what would become of those...who behaved improperly" (Letter 175). Since she could not accept the punitive creed and dogma and only accepts the part of Bible which she has experience, she gradually departs from the church rituals in her community. But this does not mean that she is a pagan. She still visited her priest after stop going to church and her priest told her parents that it was not necessary for her to go to church. As she described in one poem, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church-/ I keep it, Staying at Home-" (Poem 236). For Dickinson, an inner conversion and communication with God is more suitable. She also pleaded her best friend Susie "...come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love---shall intercede there for us!" (Letter 181).

The preacher Dickinson longing for is "love" instead of the one whose sermon is about judgment and punishment. It implies that Dickinson's refusal of conversion is a rejection to some of the Christian dogmas and creeds going against her own life creed--love, which is one of the major themes of her poetry. Although God keeps his mystery unexplained to Dickinson and Dickinson holds uncertainty about religion, she still believes in God, as it is shown in her poem, "I know that He exists./Somewhere-in silence-" (Poem 365).

3. SEEKING COMFORT IN A NEW "FAITH"

The co-existence of piety and uncertainty puts Dickinson in a dilemma, a disposition that "could neither believe, nor be comfortable in ...unbelief" (Pollak 69). Her failure to be converted makes her feel spiritually unsettled. Moreover, as someone who values love and friendship, Dickinson feels lonely when all her family members and best friends attend the church. Then she selects her own society and turns to art and this period around 1861 becomes the peak of her creation. Thus Dickinson "establishes an alternative, more nearly stable deity within her art and within herself" (Louis 359).

I'm ceded-I've stopped being Their's-
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spoons,
I've finished threading-too-

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace-
Unto supremest name-
Called to my Full- The Crescent dropped-
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,

With one- small Diadem-
My second Rank- too small the first-
Crowned-Crowning- on my Father's breast-
A half unconscious Queen-
But this time- Adequate- Erect,
With Will to choose,
Or to reject,
And choose, just a Crown- (Poem 353)

Baptism in Christianity symbolizes “a convectional ‘seal’ that affirmed God’s promise....” (Jones 33) and it means that one is entitled to the royal rank and a privileged status. The crown of crescent that “I” am half unconsciously given refers to the baptism in the speaker’s infancy. The crown is crescent instead of circular because the baptism is a privilege gained by the speaker’s parents being church members. It only means that the speaker is likely to be converted in the future and at the moment still unqualified as a full member of the church. But the second time the speaker changes from a passive and half-unconscious acceptor to an active and conscious pursuer of God’s grace by making her own choice.

According to Jones, “ ‘Baptism,’ in Dickinson’s poems, is the seal that marks the elect, the sign of supreme spiritual status” (Jones 36). Since Dickinson refused to be converted and join the church, the second baptism may suggest Dickinson’s inner conversion free of of rituals and her unfavorable doctrines. Or it can be taken as the baptism of art. She is spiritually purified and realizes her wholeness of existence by writing poetry. Compared with her identity as a poet, neither the royal rank nor the privileged status could give her as much comfort and satisfaction.

Therefore she wrote,
I reckon-when I count at all-
First-poets-Then the Sun-
Then Summer-Then the Heaven of God-
And then-the list is done-

But looking back-The First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole-
The others look a needless Show-
So I write-Poets-All- (Poem 533)

The sun, summer and the heaven of God as frequent images in Dickinson’s poems here respectively correspond to major themes of her poetry: nature, love and immortality. Being a poet, she could have---the sun, the summer and the Heaven of God---all these included in her poems. With an imagination and a pen, she can create whatever she wants. In art Dickinson finds her heaven without external disturbance. Her writing is her thinking and feeling about life, and for Dickinson her poems are more like inner communication with God: her love of nature as an embodiment of God, her celebration of love, and most of all, her uncertainty and puzzle about death and immortality, all these are well expressed in her poems. Dickinson may be disappointed about God’s silence, but deep in her heart she never doubts him.

He strained my faith-
Did he find it supple?

Shook my strong trust-
Did it then-yield?

Hurled my belief-
But-did he shatter-it?
Racked-with suspense-
Not a nerve failed!

Wrung me- with Anguish-
But I never doubted Him-
Tho’ for what wrong
He did never say-
Stabbed- while I sued
His sweet forgiveness-
Jesus- it’s your little “John”!
Don’t you Know me? (Poem 366)

A series of verbs applied in the poem---strain, shake, hurl, rack and wring---make God seem violent and cold, but the speaker’s belief is never shattered. It implies that although Dickinson fails the test of the church to be converted, she goes through harsh trials of God and proves her devotion. She may feel uncertain and confused about God’s silence, but her faith never breaks up. She does not join the church but deep inner she is still God’s loyal disciple.

In her mature years Dickinson “invents” a new “faith” and hope in art. At the same time she finds a better way to communicate with God through her poems. As a reflection of her thoughts about love, death, immortality and death which are also major concerns of Christ, her poetry functions just like her preacher and prayer.

4. DOUBT OF GOD AND FINAL RECONCILIATION

Dickinson was thought to be pagan mostly because of her subversive view of the absence of God in the nineteenth century. “God is dead” is a rather modern concept, and this also helps to explain Dickinson’s popularity in the twentieth century. The following poem is most often quoted to prove her doubt of God:

Those-dying then,
Knew where they went-
They went to God’s Right Hand-
That the hand is amputated
And God cannot be found-

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small-
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illumine at all- (Poem 1581)

In the first stanza there is an allusion to Isaiah which reads “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save.” This is an implication that God would reach out to save the oppressed. But in the poem, God cannot save his man any more because his hand is amputated. Moreover he can not even be found, which suggests the speaker doubts even the presence of God. Then why did Dickinson doubt the God whom she once had loved and trusted so much?

In 1859, Charles Darwin initiated a mental revolution with *The Origin of Species* which explained the origin of animals with a theory of evolution without reference to God. Furthermore, the publication of *The Descent of Man* in 1871 directly challenged the authority of God and Bible by raising the possibility that man had evolved from apes rather than created by God. Although reclusive from the outside, Dickinson always kept correspondence with her friends and it is hardly possible for her to avoid the influence of this revolution. Besides the social influence, a more important reason for her doubt of God is the struck of death of her family and friends. This poem was written around 1882 when Dickinson had experienced a series of death of her beloveds and her own health was also on the decline. In 1874, her respected father died suddenly and it took her a year to confront the loss. In the following year her mother suffered a paralyzing stroke and finally died in 1882. In 1878 Samuel Bowles died and in 1870 Charles Wadworth, Both of whom have been considered as the masters in Dickinson's love poems. The last but cruelest blow is the death of her little nephew in 1883, and in this great pain she suffered the first full attack of her own fatal disease in the same year. Familial affection and friendship is significant to Dickinson and the love and beauty of humanity have always been her life creeds. For her, "love-is anterior to Life-/Posterior- to Death-/Initial of Creation, and/The Exponent of Earth-" (Poem 980). She resisted Christian Creeds of atonement and total depravity because she did not believe in a cold and punitive God. In a letter she said,

"When Jesus tells us about his father, we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is 'acquainted with Grief,' we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own" (Letter 837).

What Dickinson believes in is a God of humanity. He may have his own mood but he loves his man. But the hard hit of the death of her family and friends makes her doubt God's presence for she can not accept such a merciless and indifferent God if he does exist. As she once told her friend, "To be human is more than to be divine" (Letter 406).

As it is analyzed above, in the first stanza of the poem 1581 the speaker expresses a doubt of God and a loss of belief, but the last two lines "Better an ignis fatuus/ Than no illumine at all-" deliver a slight different mood. It seems that although the speaker is disappointed about God's failure to save his people, she still thinks the presence of an indifferent God is better than nothing at all. She still has hope for her God.

In the later decade of her life, Dickinson was occupied with looking after her paralyzed mother and family affairs so that she wrote fewer poems. But the change of her attitude towards death can be seen in her letters to her friends. In one consolation letter she said, "To have lived is a Bliss so powerful-we must die---to adjust it--but when you have strength to remember that Dying

dispels nothing which was firm before, you have avenged sorrow" (Letter 523). Although she often rehearses even desires her encounter with death in her poems, the direct confrontation with the death of her beloved ones and even her own is quite different from her imagination. Not persisting in asking God of the mystery of death, immortality and heaven as she used to be, Dickinson in her later years learns to cherish the present. Instead of urging to settle her uncertainty and mystery of God, in her poem she takes the ignorance as cuirass and waits for God to emerge whenever he wants to break in and to be known. This implies Dickinson's "steps towards an acceptance of the unknown, an intelligent surrender" (Buell, 1989, p.334). Her last letter to her cousins which reads "Little cousins, called back" (Letter 1046) signifies a final reconciliation with her God.

CONCLUSION

Karl Keller once remarked Emily Dickinson as a puritan rebel against Puritanism: "She stamps her foot at what she stands on. She yells at the voice she yells with" (qtd. in Louis 346). The religious tradition of her hometown and family sealed the image of God in her heart from her childhood. Dickinson's refusal to be converted is not a rebellion against God but against the punitive and scary Christian doctrines of predestination, total depravity and atonement. She does not take her poetry as a weapon against God but as a way of inner communication with him. Her poetry is "the isolated outpourings of a highly individualistic religious thinker" (Burbick, 1980, p.62) instead of a pagan's censure of God. By analyzing her poems and letters in her different life periods, Dickinson is found to be religious despite of her disfavor of the fundamental creed of Christianity, her uncertainty and puzzle. Her last two-word letter---call back---finally releases all her complicated feelings towards her God.

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