

God and Allah in the works of Rudyard Kipling

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As a young reporter who returned to India in 1882 while still a teenager, Rudyard Kipling became more and more interested in the native people and their culture and their religious practices and beliefs. In an article entitled “Ruddy’s Search for God: the Young Kipling and Religion” Charles Allen writes: the young Kipling “wrote with growing sensitivity about Islam and Muslims”,¹ and in a letter to his new young editor, Kay Robinson, Kipling reveals:

“I am deeply interested in the queer ways and works of the people of the land. I hunt and rummage among ‘em; knowing Lahore City—that wonderful, dirty, mysterious ant-hill—blind fold and wandering through it like Haroun Al-Raschid in search of strange things.”²

Allen states: “Kipling in his twenties was a man who has turned his back on Christianity, but who has no time for atheism” (23). While Kipling may not be described as a religious man, he is far from being an atheist; religious beliefs and practices of a wide variety surrounded him in his life and work as a writer and reporter and are extensively included in his work.

Islam was brought to life in many of Kipling’s early stories and poems published in the *Civil and Military Gazette*, 1882 - 1889,² and collected in *Plain Tales From The Hills* in 1888. David Trotter writes: “It was the Indian rather than the English years that gave him his first subject, his most important territory, and that breadth of imagination found above all in *Kim*”.³ The Outward Bound edition of his works published in 1899 begins with the Koranic invocation, “In the name of God the Compassionate, the merciful,” and it is apparent that Rudyard Kipling “took to referring to God as Allah, a habit that stayed with him to the end of his life.” Further he began his final work, the autobiographical *Something of Myself* “by ascribing all good fortune to Allah, the Dispenser of Events.”⁴

As a result of Kipling’s youthful introduction to Islam and perhaps because of the extreme physical and emotional abuse, he received from the overly evangelical Mrs. Holloway at Southsea, Christianity seems to have lost its appeal and strength for him.⁵ The sixteen year old Kipling returned to Lahore somewhat ambivalent toward “the Almighty” and in his poems and stories Kipling presents a co-equal admiration and respect for God and Allah.

¹ Charles Allen, “Ruddy’s Search for God: the Young Kipling and Religion,” *The Kipling Journal* 32 (June 2009): 23-37.

² Rudyard Kipling, *Letters*, 4 vols., edited by Thomas Pinney (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990-1999), vol. 1, p. 127.

³ Rudyard Kipling, *Plain Tales From the Hills*, with Introduction and Notes by David Trotter (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 8.

⁴ Allen, 26.

⁵ Harry Ricketts, *Rudyard Kipling: A Life* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1999), 18. Kipling and his younger sister Trix were placed at Lorne Lodge by their parents from 1871 to 1876.

The central tenets of his personal creed may be found in his letter, December 9, 1889, to Miss Caroline Taylor to whom he was briefly engaged:

Chiefly I believe in the existence of a personal God to whom we are personally responsible for wrong doing....I disbelieve directly in eternal punishment... I disbelieve in an eternal reward... Summarized it comes to *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.*⁶

Throughout his writing the central elements of Deism can also be observed: for example, in his story “The Enemies to Each Other” one can find a religious and philosophical belief that a supreme god exists who created and governs the universe; secondly, in his last and best novel *Kim* he shows that this God gave humans the ability to reason and wants them to behave morally; and thirdly, the belief that human beings have souls and survive death, that is, there is an afterlife, can be seen in the “Eye of Allah” and other stories. But the religious belief in Kipling’s writing shows more than Deism or merely ambivalence to the Almighty; through the representation of God and Allah in his works Rudyard Kipling portrays the power and strength of an almighty being, who, in the end, is both just and compassionate and is an interchangeable representation of “the Almighty.”

According to Islamic belief, Allah is unique, the only deity, creator of the universe and omnipotent. In the *Qur’an* there are ninety-nine names associated with Allah, the most common being *al-rahman*, “the compassionate” and *al-rahim*, “the merciful.” In Islam God or Allah is not only majestic and sovereign but also a personal God, a God who responds to those in need or distress whenever they call and above all guides humanity to the right way.

Both the Christian God and Allah, the Muslim Supreme Being, in Kipling’s work are highly elevated and superior to the world of humans, and while they display interest and personal feelings of love, they are autocratic and domineering. They represent a god or authority figure who demands respect and dispenses justice.

“The Enemies To Each Other”

“The Enemies To Each Other” was the first selection in *Debits and Credits*, a collection of fourteen short stories and twenty-one related poems published in 1926.⁷ “The Enemies To Each Other” is an Islamic representation of the story of the Creation and of the Fall of Adam and Eve, using the images and names of Islam. According to Islamic teachings the creation and ordering of the universe is seen as an act of prime mercy for which all creatures sing Allah’s glories and bear witness to God’s unity and lordship. Vincent J. Connell points out: “The *Qur’an* asserts the existence of a single and absolute truth that transcends the world; a unique and invisible being

⁶ Kipling, *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 178-179.

⁷ The story was previously published in *MacLean’s Magazine* in July, 1924 and in *Hearst’s International Magazine* the following month entitled “A New Version of What Happened in the Garden of Eden.”

who is independent of the entire creation.”⁸ Also, in another passage, “According to the *Qur’an*: “Say He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.” (Sura 1 12:1-4, *Yusuf Ali*) The power and omnipotence of Allah is also emphasized in this passage: ”Thy Lord is self-sufficient, full of Mercy; if it were God’s will God could destroy you, and in your place appoint whom God will as your successors, even as God raised you up from the posterity of other people.” (Sura 6:133, *Yusuf Ali*)

“The Enemies To Each Other,” is set in an Islamic Garden and uses Islamic names and terms for some of the characters: God or Allah is “the Benefactor,” Adam is “the Greater Substitute” and “the pure Forefather,” Jibrail is Gabriel, and Habil and Quabil are Cain and Able. The Archangel Azrael is banished as was Lucifer, and Eblis “the Accursed” represents Satan. The names, tone, and mood of the story are reflective of the style of the *Qur’an* as can be seen in these opening lines of the story:

It is narrated (and God knows best the true state of the case) by Abu Ali Jafir Bin Yakub-ulisfahani that when, in His Determinate Will, The Benefactor had decided to create the Greatest Substitute (Adam), He dispatched, as is known, the faithful and excellent Archangel Jibrail to gather from the Earth clays, loams, and sands endowed with the various colors and attributes, necessary for the substance of our pure Forefather’s body.⁹

In the story Jibrail fails in his effort to convince Earth to give up some of her resources. Earth proclaims:

I adjure thee to abstain from thy purpose, lest evil and condemnation of that person who is created out of me should later overtake him, and the abiding (sorrow) be loosed [sic] upon my head. I have no power to resist the Will of the Most High, but I take refuge with Allah from thee.¹⁰

Later, after the “Just and Terrible “Archangel Michael, who is also directed by God to DESCEND and obtain materials from earth, fails in the attempt, the Archangel Azrael known in Islam as the Angel of Death, is sent to remove the elements from Earth and when she resisted “he closed his hand upon her bosom and tore out the clays and sands necessary.”¹¹ Eventually Adam is formed and later Eve, despite the continuing protests of Earth: “Is it not enough that one should have dominion over me?”

⁸ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 5, pp. 3561-3562

⁹ Rudyard Kipling, “The Enemies to Each Other,” *Debits and Credits* (New York: Doubleday , Page and Company, 1926), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

As in the Book of Genesis the fall of man is described, including the evil figure Eblis , but also involving the peacock and a mole. The mole is blinded for spying on Adam and Eve after the Fall, and the Peacock is deformed because of his aid in getting Eblis into the Garden to tempt and conquer Adam and Eve.

The Peacock said:”Though I myself would by no means consent to convey Eblis into the Garden of the Tree, yet as is known to thee and all Seeing, I referred him to the Serpent for a subtle device, by whose malice and beneath whose tongue did Eblis secretly enter that Garden. Wherefore did Allah change my attuned voice to a harsh cry and my beauteous legs to unseemly legs, and hurled me into the district of Kabul the Stony. Now I fear that He will also deprive me of my tail, which is the ornament of my days and the delight of my eye. For that cause and in that fear I am penitent O Servant of God. ¹²

Adam and Eve are much like Noah and his wife in the Old Testament story; Adam builds an altar with which to honor and praise himself which when seen by Eve, she demands one. Later she asks why her altar is on the left side and his on the right! Since he doesn’t seem to have an answer that she desires, Eve destroys his altar and Adam rebuilds both altars as she desired. Eventually they learn to laugh with each other and they agree to continue together.

Then Adam entered and the two looked at each other laughing. Then said Adam: “O my Lady and Crown of my torments, is it Peace between us?” And our Lady Eve answered: O my Lord and the sole cause of my Unreason, it is peace till the next time and the next occasion.” And Adam said;”I accept and I abide the chance.” They agree to their predicament and Kipling writes “So they removed both altars and laughed and built a new one between. ¹³

At this point the Peacock and the Archangel Jibrail return to the Vestibule and prostrate themselves before the Throne. When asked they report that they left Adam and Eve before one altar and that above it was God’s Decree of Expulsion: *Get ye down, the one of you an enemy unto the other.*” God’s response is “Enough! It shall stand in the place of both Our Curse and Our Blessing.”

The god in this story is authoritative, judgmental and assertive of his justice; he is also powerful in his blinding of the mole, his disfiguring of the Peacock, and his expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden,

Kim

Kipling wrote three novels *The Light that Failed* (1890), *Captains Courageous* (1897),_ and *Kim* (1901). He also co-authored a fourth novel, *The Naulakha*_(1891-92)_with his brother-in-law, Wolcott Balestier.

¹² Ibid., 10-11.

¹³ Ibid., 15.

His last novel *Kim*, “concerns a religious quest and a quest for identity... .”¹⁴ “ In the course of the novel *Kim*, [the orphan son of a British soldier and an Irish mother,] ... dresses alternately as a Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Eurasian, as well as British civilian, soldier, and schoolboy, and plays three main roles: disciple, student, and spy.¹⁵

Kim is called “Little Friend to All the World, but during the passage of the novel he asks three times: “Who is Kim?” (p. 116); “What am I? Mussalman, Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist?” (p. 140); and in the last pages of the work “I am Kim. I am Kim. And what is Kim? (p. 272). The story questions the relevance and importance of the beliefs and practices of Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and other sects, including Christianity.¹⁶

Henry James notes the “richness of the characters” and “the liveliness of their journey.”¹⁷The main characters in *Kim*, include a Tibetan Buddhist Lama; an Afghan Muslim horse trader, Mahbub Ali; a Hindu Bengali, Hurree Chunder Mookerjee; and Protestant and Catholic clergymen , Mr. Bennet and Father Victor. Along with asking who and what he is, in a “brief and touching scene he combines Buddhist, Muslim, British and Jain elements in his character and culture and forgets “even the Great Game as he stooped, Muhammedan fashion, to touch his master’s feet in the dust of the Jain temple.” Within the novel comparative religious and ethical views relate to the young boy as he grows to manhood discovering who he is and his identity. Religious practices and beliefs are constantly appearing and opposing each other. The Tibetan lama, for example, keeps repeating the same solemn banalities in a singsong cadence; “They are all bound upon the wheel Bound from life after life. To none of these has the Way been shown” (64-65). The Moslem Mahbub Ali’s declamatory phrases express his hearty ruffianism “God’s curse on all unbelievers. Beg from those of my tail who are of thy faith.”

T. S. Eliot recognized the importance of Kipling’s early excitement and love for India and its people and religions. He particularly noted the variety and the development of the characters:

There are two strata in Kipling’s appreciation of India, the stratum of the child and that of the young man It was the latter who observed the British in India and wrote the rather cocky and rather acid tales of Delhi and Simla, but it was the former who loved the country and its people.... The Indian characters have the greater reality because they are treated with the understanding of love....It is the four great characters in *Kim* who are

¹⁴ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim with Introduction and Notes* by Jeffrey Myers (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics), 1

¹⁵ *Ibid.* , xviii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Henry James, *Letters, Volume IV, 1895-1916*, edited by Leon Edel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) 210.

real: The Lama [who is Tibetan, not an Indian] , Mahub Ali, Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, and the wealthy widow from the North.¹⁸

A central incident toward the end of the story involves Kim's relationship with the Woman of Shamlegh. Kim and his companions in the Great Game, including Mahub Ali and Hurree Mookerjee, have managed to disperse the Russian and French spies and captured their messages and maps. At the same time Kim is trying to get the Lama to his final resting place. The Woman of Shamlegh having failed to seduce Kim says: "Once long ago, I wore European clothes... Once long ago, I was Ker-lis-ti-an (Christian) and spoke English as the Sahibs spoke it." She reveals that she had been deserted by her Sahib. "Yes, my Sahib said he would return and wed me—but he never returned. Then I saw the Gods of the Kerlistians lied and I went back to my own people." (254) This incident is mindful of Kipling's story "Lispeth." "Thy Gods are lies; thy works are lies; thy words are lies. There are no Gods under all the heavens. I know it." As Kim realizes the enormity of his task to bring the Lama who is extremely weak to his final home, the Woman of Shamlegh exclaims "Thy Gods useless, heh? Try mine. I am the Woman of Shamlegh." (256) "Now I give alms to priests who are heathen. Curse me," she says, sarcastically, "Maybe it will give him [the Lama] strength. Make a charm! Call on thy great God. Thou art a priest." (255)

The Woman of Shamlegh represents a cynical and atheistic view of religious belief, mindful of the attitude of the thief who addressed Jesus at the crucifixion, and Kim is a Jesus figure on a journey to save man as well as himself. She tried Christianity and because of her rejection found it lacking. She now has a cynical and irreligious view. As an atheist or agnostic, she represents a foil to Kipling's religious perspective, but he shows that, despite the difficulties, God is compassionate and merciful. This incident reveals Kipling's attitude toward blind religious belief. He had strong reservations about thoughtless following of creed without ethical purpose or rational thought. Kipling admires people of all races and creeds; he admires them for who they are, what they represent, and how they live their lives. He is a man of principle who has standards and beliefs, but he sees admirable qualities in other religions.

Kim is an odyssey, it is a pilgrimage. It is about "home;" it is a search for identity and a search for self through the presentation of religious themes.

Conclusion

Henry James wrote in an introduction to The Edinburgh Society edition of *Mine Own People*, published in 1909, his high regard for Kipling's work.¹⁹

This helps to explain, I think, the unmistakable intensity of the general relish for Mr. Rudyard Kipling. His bloom lasts, from month to month, almost surprisingly –by which

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Rudyard Kipling," in *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (Garden City: N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962) 26-27.

¹⁹ Rudyard Kipling, *Mine Own People* (Boston: Jefferson Press, 1909)

I mean that he has not worn out even by active exercise the particular property that made us all, more than a year ago, so precipitately drop everything else to attend to him.²⁰

James continues:

And then there is the further charm, with Mr. Kipling, that this same freshness in such a strange affair of its kind so mixed and various and cynical, and, in certain lights, so contradictory of itself.²¹

James captures the magic and mystery found in Kipling's writing of religion, places and people:

...the author [Kipling] always reminds us that India is above all the land of mystery. A large part of his [Kipling's] high spirits, and of ours, comes doubtless from the amusement of such vivid, heterogeneous material, from the irresistible magic of the scorching suns, subject empires, uncanny religions, uneasy garrisons and smothered-up women—from heat and color and danger and dust. India is a portentous image, and we are duly awed by the familiarity it undergoes at Mr. Kipling's hand and by the fine impunity, the sort of fortune that favors the brave, of his want of awe.²²

“The Two-Sided Man” a poem included in *Kim* summarizes the ambivalence and the co-equal admiration for God and Allah found in his writing. The first and last stanzas are found at the beginning of Chapter VIII in *Kim*. The middle stanzas quoted here reflect Kipling's attitude and respect for a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices which he knew and experienced in his life and are reflected in his works.

Much I reflect on the Good and the True
In the Faiths beneath the sun,
But most upon Allah Who gave me two
Sides to my head, not one.

Wesley's following, Calvin's flock,
White or yellow or bronze,
Sharman, Ju-ju or Angekok,
Minister, Mukamuk, Bonze --

Here is a health, my brothers, to you,
However your prayers are said,
And praised be Allah, who gave me two
Separate sides to my head. (Stanzas 3, 4, and 5)²³

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 12-13.

²³ Rudyard Kipling, *Complete Verse: Definitive Edition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 589.

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