Beckett’s Conception of God and Religion

Abstract

This article aims at discussing about a very controversial issue in the scholarship of Anglo-Irish writer Samuel Beckett – the possibility of the religious interpretations of Beckett’s plays. Critics have been divided over this topic. Since one group maintains that in most of his plays there are many religious undercurrents and that Samuel Beckett was greatly concerned about theological questions that deal with the relationship of God with mankind, and the other group of critics repudiates that stance and align Samuel Beckett with the sceptical thought of the previous century claiming that the author rejects the traditional concepts of God and divinity, the purpose of this article is not to give an exhaustive view on this topic. Rather, its main aim is to juxtapose these views showing some of the advantages and disadvantages of each perspective, always trying to provide evidence from the oeuvre of the great writer.

Key words: Samuel Beckett, the absurd, God and man, agnosticism, ignosticism.

Introduction

In Beckett’s dramatic oeuvre different currents of his manifold cultural background flow in. Part of that background comes from different religious sources, from Zen Buddhism to theism and modern atheism. Can we say that Beckett didn’t have a definite, clear stand on this topic? Probably he is simply – as always – reluctant to reveal himself. However, in spite of stratagems used, he gives us some vague clues. Vague as they are, they, consciously or not, leave a trace in the readers’ mind. We will try to come to an understanding of Beckett’s view on God and religion following examples and hints that are found in his plays.

Religious allusions in Waiting for Godot

According to the two of four gospels, accepted by the church as authentic (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34), Jesus, suffering a slow and painful death nailed at the cross, cried out: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” Certain critics conjecture that, in that state of agony, a thought passes through Jesus’ mind. A thought that, in Endgame, Hamm, after vainly waiting for a reply to his prayer addressed to God, blasphemously vents: “The bastard! He doesn’t exist!” Does he exist according to Beckett? Hard to tell.

Let’s focus on the beginning of the all-inclusive philosophical scientific barrage of
Lucky: “Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquauquaqua with white beard quaquauquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown…” Evidently, this God of Lucky, apathetic, uncaring (athambic), speechless (aphasic) has nothing to do with man, feels no obligation whatsoever to explain anything to him and cannot/does not want to talk to him.

In the above-mentioned words of Lucky is embodied what somebody calls “apathetic agnosticism”, a view according to which there’s no evidence either of God’s existence or of the lack of his existence, but, since God (if there is one) seems uninterested in the affairs of the world and its inhabitants, the whole discussion seems an abstract matter, having no pragmatic value. While he gives hints of this view in the “scientific”, all-encompassing abracadabra of Lucky, at the same time the playwright seems to mock it.

In his pilgrimage, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra encounters the saint in the forest, who tells him: “I make songs and sing them; and when I make songs, I laugh, weep and mutter: thus I praise God.” Upon hearing these words, Nietzsche’s hero decides not to stay in the forest with his interlocutor and continues his journey towards the people. On his way Zarathustra says to himself: “This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of it, that God is dead!” Beckett, too, had read that parable and had heard its finale played as a refrain in various tonalities. But did he believe it?.. Few rays amidst the gloom in Beckett’s Universe are unable to change the overall tonality of his dramatic work. This question has given rise to many interpretations, including the religious ones. Some interpretations find similar circumstances with those described in the Bible about the Fall and its outcome. Man suffers not the consequences of his own transgressions, but of the carelessness of Eve and Adam since the time when they tasted the forbidden fruit. And in Beckett’s theatrical pieces we can find evident biblical and evangelical words, expressions, or parables. As in the gospel, Godot’s herds are made up of goats and sheep. His beard is as white as snow, resembling that of the evangelical patriarchs. The tree Vladimir and Estragon plan to hang themselves in every day might be the emblem of Golgotha where, according to the New Testament, Christ was crucified and also the emblem of the crucifixion that befalls every mortal in this world. Such an interpretation is reinforced by some repartees that the protagonists of Waiting for Godot have, as well as several other examples which have evangelical associations. What we’ve just said could make us believe that this interpretation is satisfactory and there is no more to say about it. But, as always, the playwright does not let us settle the matter permanently. Indeed, it is said that Godot’s herds are made of goats and sheep, but here, contrary to what is written in the Bible: “And he (My note: Jesus) will place the sheep on his right but the goats on the left”, it turns out that Godot
beats the keeper of the sheep and favours the keeper of the goats. Likewise, Beckett questions the truth of the parable which features the two thieves crucified with Jesus, when first he has Vladimir utter a phrase that gives hope for a very satisfactory ordering of the world: “One of the thieves was saved... It’s a reasonable percentage”, and then explaining to Estragon that occurrence, he reduces that hope into a faction of the first, thereby greatly diminishing its value:

“Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other... damned.

.....

And yet... how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there – or thereabouts – and only one speaks of a thief being saved.

.....

Of the other three, two don’t mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him (My note: Jesus)

Nevertheless, that is the “only version they (My note: people) know”. Maybe, because they want to hope. Maybe... But the fact is that this interpretation now seems weak. Man will continue in his calvary of various illusions, of various disappointments.

Following the religious explanations of Waiting for Godot, the persevering waiting of Vladimir and Estragon appears as a manifestation of their unflinching hope in Him, whereas Vladimir’s kindness towards Estragon is seen as a symbol of Christian compassion. Other commentaries point at the discrepancies of this view. There’s no certainty whatsoever of the two protagonists meeting Godot, even of a distant, very distant meeting; and, for that matter, whether or not the man they’re waiting for is Godot.

Opposite Perspectives

One of the pillars of religion – not only Christian religion – is the way mortals are divided into those who will find eternal rest in paradise and those who will suffer eternal damnation. There have always been debates as to why the two children of Adam and Eve were assigned opposite perspectives. We could find this discussion continued, albeit obliquely, through the dialogues of Waiting for Godot. In Genesis we find no clear explanation as to why Cain was predestined with the stigma of the evil and Abel was the chosen one. That’s why, apparently, Pozzo responds more eagerly not when he is called by his real name, but when called by the two names that have nothing in common but the blood – shared and shed:

VLADIMIR and ESTRAGON: Pozzo! Pozzo!
VLADIMIR: He moved.
ESTRAGON: Are you sure his name is Pozzo?
VLADIMIR: (alarmed) Mr. Pozzo! Come back! We won’t hurt you!
Silence.
ESTRAGON: We might try him with other names.

... 

ESTRAGON: To try him with other names, one after the other. It’d pass the time.
And we’d be bound to hit on the right one sooner or later.

... 

ESTRAGON: We’ll soon see. (He reflects). Abel! Abel!
POZZO: Help!
ESTRAGON: Got it in one!
VLADIMIR: I begin to weary of this motif.
ESTRAGON: Perhaps the other is called Cain. Cain! Cain!
POZZO: Help! 18

In both cases, Pozzo-Abel-Cain cries for help. As a result, an actual coming of Godot might not be a punishment for the evil and salvation for the good, all the more so when the good and the evil are inextricably mixed in the same human being. That explains why, when Vladimir thinks that the idol they’re waiting for is coming, Estragon, scared to death, runs away shouting: “I’m in hell!” 9

Such a complex conception of the relationship between man and God in Beckett’s dramatic work gives rise to quite different, even contradictory interpretations. Summarily, they can be clustered in two categories. In the first we could group those interpretations that present God as an arbitrary force, who follows his whim; who has created or has let evil spring when, being omnipotent, he could eradicate it from the start; cruel for letting evil infest people’s souls; who finds pleasure by spiritually tormenting those beings that he himself created; who punishes the one for the guilt of the other (if that can be called guilt at all); who has invented death and gives life with the purpose of taking it back again; who is so hypocritical as to implant in man the concept of the beautiful but has concocted a world of suffering, absurdity, and death. This is the god of the preacher in the radio play All that Fall. In the second category we find those views that, focusing on this delicate theme in Beckett’s oeuvre, echo the well-known ideas found in the Holy Scripture of an omnipresent, omnipotent, all-creative God, source of light, right, and goodness, yesterday, today and in eternity, which from time to time emerges out of the murkiness of Beckett’s setting. We can discern that the latter view, as a rule, distances itself from the idea of an anthropomorphic deity.

Conclusion: God’s Existence Remains an Open Debate

Following a consideration of ethical character by Martin Esslin on the works of absurdist writers, we could say that Beckett’s work, created in the “era of doubt”, is paradoxically one of the few attempts that tries to find a new way of searching for or substituting that
supreme being that Nietzsche, justly or not, put in a bier. That way is a more acceptable one for the modern man that instils in him, if not a full religious feeling, at least the primordial feeling of being amazed by his soul and by the Universe, an attempt to grasp the “Unnamable”, to understand la condition humaine, thus escaping the mire of banality of futile illusions. We would say that Beckett might be aligned with that theological position called “ignosticism”, which holds the view that the concept of God as a being is useless, since there are no wholly verifiable results, therefore his existence remains an open debate.

After all, we can talk here about Beckett’s “God” the same way as it has often been talked about a god of Victor Hugo – a whole worldview condensed in a Notion which sublimes its (the worldview’s) essence. To rescue that Notion from being discredited as a manifestation of a Being that does harm just to please itself, in the context of Beckettian metaphysics that Notion expresses that “Nothing… which… is more real (My note: than reality)”\(^{10}\), as Murphy concludes in the homonymous novel by Beckett. The shadow – as well as the reality – of this Nothing(ness) is projected in all conceptual levels of Beckett’s worldview. Beckett seems not to go so far as to identify God with Nothingness as has been done, for instance, by the 13\(^{th}\)-14\(^{th}\) century German Dominican theologian Meister Eckhart. Certain critics conclude that in this respect Beckett’s view seems closer to that of one of the founders of ancient Chinese Taoism, Lao Tzu, who asserted that heaven and earth have come out of the “Unnamable”, whose existence we cannot reject absolutely.

Endnotes:

4 ibid.
5 Waiting for Godot, p. 13.
6 ibid., p. 14.
7 ibid., p. 15.
8 ibid., pp. 77-78.
9 ibid., p. 69.
Bibliography


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