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Christianity in the Poetry of Stevie Smith

Ken Anderson

Christians often sing of the comfort that Christianity brings them, for example, in the lines of the well-known hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus": "What a friend we have in Jesus / All our sins and griefs to bear / What a privilege to carry / Everything to God in prayer. / Oh, what peace we often forfeit. / Oh, what needless pain we bear / All because we do not carry / Everything to God in prayer"; and "We should never be discouraged / Take it to the Lord in prayer"; and "Thou wilt find a solace there."

Yet some people seem to be more tormented by Christianity than comforted by it. Joseph Conrad, for example, said, "Christianity—is distasteful to me. Great, improving, softening, compassionate it may be but it has lent itself with amazing facility to cruel distortion and is the only religion which, with its impossible standards, has brought an infinity of anguish to innumerable souls—on this earth" (Njader, 392). We may not agree with Conrad, but we can see that he was obviously more troubled than comforted by Christianity.

The English poet Stevie Smith was also troubled, not to say tormented, by Christianity. Michael Schmidt wrote of Stevie Smith that "Many of her poems, concerned with Good and Evil, carry on a direct debate with God over the mysteries of the Trinity, the nature of Christ, the cruelty implicit in the Crucifixion, the doctrine of damnation, and the imperfection of God as seen in the imperfections of Creation... she also confronts without sidestepping the paradoxes of faith—a faith toward which her ambivalent feelings were never convincingly resolved... She adopts an anarchic Christianity, accepting the central ethical distinctions but dispensing with the cruelty of the story and the dogma. She would aim at being good without enchantments—but instead she devises alternative enchantments" (Schmidt, 202).

In his introduction to Stevie Smith's *Collected Poems*, James MacGibbon

quotes from a friend of Smith's, the Reverend Gerald Irvine, about Stevie's personal beliefs:

In religion Stevie was ambivalent: neither a believer, an unbeliever nor agnostic, but oddly all three at once. Intellectually she rejected the dogmas of her high Anglican background, as unreasonable and morally inferior. But she had an obsessive concern with them. She demanded a maximizing faith to reject; she was scornful of what she considered watered-down reformulations of the faith, and disgusted by their liturgical expression. One could say that she did not like the God of Christian orthodoxy, but she could not disregard Him or ever quite bring herself to disbelieve in Him. (Smith, *Collected Poems*, 9).

Throughout her life she addressed specific Christian doctrines in her poems that bothered her, or expressed in poems her mixed feelings about Christianity. She raises interesting questions about Christianity.

Smith wrote about how she felt about Christianity in her essay, "Some Impediments to Christian Commitment". She wrote,

My thoughts about Christianity are much confused by my feelings. My feelings fly up, my thoughts draw them down again, crying, Fairy stories. But how can one's heart *not* go out to the idea that a God of absolute love is in charge of the universe, and that in the end, All will be well? I do not think there is any harm in trying to behave as if this were the case. But if we say that positively we believe it is so, then at once the human creature is apt to do something that is dangerous and not very good; that is, to fall into definitions as to the nature of God and Goodness, and be angry with those who do not agree. Nor do I find the world of uncertainty, to which my thoughts draw me back, a cruel place; there is room for love, virtue, affection, and room too for imagination (Smith, *Me Again*, 153).

These words seem to be a plea for tolerance, for following Jesus' dictum in Matthew 7: 1 and 2: "Do not judge and you will not be judged, because the judgments you give are the judgments you will get, and the

standard you use will be the standard used for you"; and also in Luke 6:36-38: "Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap; because the standard you use will be the standard used for you." Smith's words also caution us to remember what Paul said in II Corinthians 3:6: "For the written letters kill, but the Spirit gives life."

In the previously cited essay, Smith explains that she was

...brought up in a household where there was a great love and a great faith in the Christian religion according to the tenets of the Church of England. I enjoyed my religion, I enjoyed the church services.... In the season of Lent, we had...lectures, with coloured slides, to show how Christ was tortured and killed. There was the bitter crown and the bloodstained robe, and there too were the Jewish faces that seemed so cruel, and the Roman Pilate, who was made to seem less cruel than the Jews—more like one of us, more like any governing person in a political situation of some delicacy. I was confirmed and became a communicant. I learnt that the elements were truly changed into the body and blood of our Lord, and that to receive them unworthily was to 'eat damnation unto oneself.' And what was damnation? Ah now, what was that indeed? Let me say at once that the pains of hell, and the nature of hell, were not much spoken of.... We were taught that God was a God of Love, that there was hell, and it was eternal, but that we should not think about it but trust in God and in the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross and upon the altars of the church, and try to be good for his sake. But I could not forget Hell. And I thought: How could a God of Love condemn anybody at all, even a person as wicked as the most wicked person could be, even a great angel so rebellious as Lucifer Star of the Morning Sky, to eternal fiery punishment? I began to think that a God of Love should rather slay altogether a creature gone irremediably wrong, than keep him alive to torment him for ever. I read my Bible

and I saw that the lofty Christ believed, too, and taught this monstrous doctrine of eternal hell: "Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels..." and they went away into everlasting punishment [Matthew 25: 41-46] (*Me Again*, 154-155).

At this point in the essay Smith introduces her poem "Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell" (*Me Again*, 155-156):

Is it not interesting to see
How the Christians continually
Try to separate themselves in vain
From the doctrine of eternal pain.

They cannot do it,
They are committed to it,
Their Lord said it,
They must believe it.

So the vulnerable body is stretched without pity
On flames forever. Is this not pretty?

The religion of Christianity
Is mixed of sweetness and cruelty.
Reject this Sweetness, for she wears
A smoky dress out of hell fires.

Who makes a God? Who shows him thus?
It is the Christian religion does.
Oh, oh, have none of it,
Blow it away, have done with it.

This god the Christians show
Out with him, out with him, let him go.

The Bible verse Smith quotes in her essay on the fires of hell is Matthew 25: 41. One might also refer to Mark 16:16: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned." One may also think of Matthew 13: 41 and 42: "The Son of man will send his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of falling and all who do evil, and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth."

Smith asks a rhetorical question in the first stanza of this poem: Is it not interesting to see how Christians are always trying to overlook or avoid thinking about the Biblical doctrine that some people are going to be eternally tortured when the Last Judgment comes. They don't want to think about this doctrine because it is painful for them to reconcile a God of love, mercy and forgiveness with a God who plans to punish his enemies eternally. It may also be painful for them to think that, they feel guilty and afraid, they themselves may face this horrible eternal punishment if they fail to be good. Smith maintains that, if they believe what the Bible says to be true, then they cannot avoid believing this doctrine and committing themselves to believing it.

Smith next imagines the vulnerable body of someone condemned to hell being pitilessly being burned in fire forever, and asks Is this not pretty—a very sarcastic remark. Why she says "vulnerable body" is not certain, as the apostle Paul wrote that, when a human is resurrected, his or her new body will not be like the fleshly one we have now—that is, it will not be vulnerable in the way that the human body is vulnerable, that is, capable of being hurt. Paul wrote, in I Corinthians 15: 43-44, about the resurrection of the dead, "what is sown is perishable, but what is raised is imperishable; what is sown is contemptible but what is raised is glorious; what is sown is weak, but what is raised is powerful; what is sown is a natural body, and what is raised is a spiritual body." Nevertheless, since the Bible speaks of people being punished in fire and that there will be weeping and grinding of teeth, even the new, spiritual body must be vulnerable. Perhaps the fire is not real fire, but a symbol, perhaps of separation from God. Spiritual anguish, however, is still anguish, and if it is eternal there will be no more possibility of forgiveness or redemption, and this is what Smith finds appalling.

Smith states that Christianity thus is a mixture of sweetness and cruelty, and therefore she counsels us to reject it. She compares Christianity to an alluring woman whose outer sweetness masks her fiery nature: her dress is smoky—that is, like smoke, it obscures our vision and stings our eyes—and says that the real fabric of the dress, hidden by the smoke, is the horror of hell.

This, says Smith, is the image of God shown to us in Christianity, so that we should “blow it away” as if we were blowing smoke away. She says, “Out with him”—that is, to cast God out of our house. And notice that she demotes God from being a real God to a lesser one, perhaps even man-made, by spelling God in the last stanza with a small g, not a capital G. She also says to “let him go”—in other words, to give up one’s belief in God, even though one doesn’t want to, as a world without God or a belief in God can also be frightening and comfortless.

Calvin Bedient (Bedient, 144-145) comments on the opening lines of the poem:

Though these lines come from ‘Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell,’ they are more than thoughts, they are acts. Here is an adversary who delights in her own force and voice, in the mind at joust. “Is it not interesting”—‘amusing’, hints the euphemism. ‘Continually’ and ‘in vain’ perpetuate the gloating, unChristian tone. And how the emphatic staccato of the second stanza routs the deceptive flowing mildness of the first. In those brutally abrupt, rigidly parallel, flatly declarative sentences the Christians are as effectively imprisoned as in the doctrine of eternal pain; the lines seem audibly to nail them in. Later, with a fine new note of urgency the poet will say, ‘Oh, oh, have none of it, / Blow it away, have done with it.’ The poem changes in expression like a living face.

In their biography about Stevie Smith, *Stevie*, Jack Barbera and William McBrien quote Smith’s own comment on the word “interesting” in the first line of this poem. “‘Interesting,’” she said, “has as loud a sneer as you can get in English” (Barbera and McBrien, 218). Barbera and McBrien have this to say about Smith’s expression of her views in this poem:

“Our temperament rules us,” she wrote... “I daresay my own temperament, preferring this emptiness of an indifferent universe, is no more a pointer to absolute truth than the narrowest of orthodox religion,” Stevie admitted. But one must emphasize the extraordinary passion inherent in her religious concerns. Her friend Father Irvine later likened Stevie to Jacob “who could not let God go for the whole long night of life.” Watching her fierce pursuit of truth about the transcendent, one is immensely impressed by Stevie’s integrity (Barbera and McBrien, 218-219).

As Smith says in the first stanza of her poem “God the Eater”:

There is a god in whom I do not believe
Yet to this god my love stretches.
This god in whom I do not believe in is
My whole life, my life and I am his. (*Collected Poems*, 339)

A poem in which Smith addresses the problem of Jesus’ incarnation as a human being is “Oh Christianity, Christianity” (*Collected Poems*, 416-417):

Oh Christianity, Christianity,
Why do you not answer our difficulties?
If He was God He was not like us
He could not lose.

Can Perfection be less than perfection?
Can the creator of the Devil be bested by him?
What can the temptation to possess the earth have meant to Him
Who made and possessed it? What do you mean?

And Sin, how could He take our sins upon Him? What does it mean?
To take sin upon one is not the same
As to have sin inside one and feel guilty.

It is horrible to feel guilty,
We feel guilty because we are.
Was He horrible? Did He feel guilty?

You say he was born humble—but he was not,
He was born God—

Taking our nature upon Him. But then you say
He was perfect Man. Do you mean
Perfect Man, meaning wholly? Or Man without sin? Ah
Perfect Man without sin is not what we are.

Do you mean He did not know that He was God,
Did not know He was the Second Person of the Trinity?
(Oh if he knew this and was,
It was a source of strength for Him we do not have)
But this theology of emptying you preach sometimes—
That He emptied Himself of knowing He was God—seems
A theology of false appearances
To mock your facts, as He was God whether He knew it or not.

Oh what do you mean, what do you mean?
You never answer our difficulties....

Smith alludes to Paul's letter to the Philippians, Philippians 2: 6-8 in this poem. This passage says that Jesus, "being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross." Smith also refers to the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the desert as recounted in Matthew 4:2, Mark 1:13 and Luke 4:2.

Smith points out several ways that Jesus could not be exactly like a human, starting off with the fact that God cannot fail, cannot sin, cannot lose, while humans can fail, sin, and lose everything. God cannot be defeated by Satan, since God is perfect and since God created Satan. And how, she asks,

could Satan tempt Jesus with what the world has to offer when Jesus is the Master and owner of the universe?

Moreover, she points out that, unlike humans, Jesus could not sin and therefore could not feel guilty, and thus disgusted with himself the way humans can be. Therefore, Jesus was not completely human. Also, if Jesus knew He was God, it was indeed a source of strength humans don't have. And even if Jesus is supposed to have "emptied" himself of the knowledge that he was God, the fact is that he was whether he realized it or not.

Finally, she says how can the Trinity, "unchanging from eternity", not have been affected by Jesus becoming a flesh and blood human being?

She concludes that human reason cannot answer these questions and that human reason cannot resolve the conflicts such statements present. Yet humans have been given questioning, curious minds to try to find answers to such questions. Herman Melville, Tolstoy and Dostoevski are three other writers who have posed religious questions like Smith's, and perhaps, if one can never find the answers, one has to merely accept one's ignorance.

An example of this is Job, who undergoes great suffering in life because God allowed Satan to have complete power over Job in order to test Job's faith in God. The only thing Satan is not allowed by God to do is to actually kill Job. All of Job's children are killed and Job himself is struck with malignant ulcers from his head to his feet. Job questions why God allows him to suffer. His own wife tells him that he should "curse God and die." Job does not, and remains faithful to God, and eventually God restores Job's good fortune and gives him and his wife more children (although what happened to the children who had already died is a mystery). But God does not tell Job that He, God, has allowed Satan to torture Job to test Job's faith. Instead God tells Job that Job has no right to question God's wisdom because Job is an ignorant human being. Job then says to God, "I take back what I said."

Smith refers to this story about Job in two poems. One of them is "God and the Devil" (*Collected Poems*, 34):

God and the Devil
Were talking one day
Ages and ages of years ago.

God said: Suppose
Things were fashioned this way,
Well then, so and so.
The Devil said: No,
Prove it if you can.
So God created Man
And that is how it all began.
It has continued now for many a year
And sometimes it seems more than we can bear.
But why should bowels yearn and cheeks grow pale?
We're here to point a moral and adorn a tale.

This poem refers, of course, not only to the creation of the human race by God but also to the beginning of the book of Job, where God is setting the conditions for how much Satan may torture Job. And one of the questions that comes to mind in thinking about God and Satan is how a God who is all good and incapable of evil can create a being like Satan who is evil, and humans who have been given some degree of free will and are free to choose between good and evil; a God who ordered the Israelites of the Old Testament to kill their enemies—men, women and children—or, as Smith says in her poem, “Dear Child of God” (*Collected Poems*, 424), “In the beginning, Father, / You made the terms of our survival / That we should use our intelligence / To kill every rival.”

As for free will, how much free will does any human actually have? Trying to answer such questions while maintaining faith in God in the midst of pain and suffering may well, says Smith, make “bowels yearn and cheeks grow pale.”

Smith alludes to God’s answer to Job in her poem “The Passing Cloud” (*Collected Poems*, 351), in which she writes, “Hurrah hurrah for the grand old heavenly gusty creator Lord / Who said to Job, Don’t bother me son, I’ll do as I please my word.”

Smith also questions Jesus’ human nature because Jesus was not married and did not have children. In his biography of James Joyce, Richard Ellmann quotes James Joyce as saying that Jesus could not be considered to be a “complete all-round character” because “He was a bachelor, and never

lived with a woman. Surely living with a woman is one of the most difficult things a man has to do, and he never did it" (Ellmann, 435). We might add here that no doubt to many women living with a man is one of the most difficult things a woman has to do. At any rate, here is what Smith has to say about Jesus not being married, in her poem "Was He Married?" (*Collected Poems*, 389-390):

Was he married, did he try
To support as he grew less fond of them
Wife and family?

No,
He never suffered such a blow.

Did he feel pointless, feeble and distraight,
Unwanted by everyone and in the way?

From his cradle he was purposeful,
His bent strong and his mind full.

Did he love people very much
Yet find them die one day?

He did not love in the human way.

Did he ask how long it would go on,
Wonder if Death could be counted on for an end?

He did not feel like this,
He had a future of bliss.

Did he ever feel strong
Pain for being wrong?

He was not wrong, he was right,
He suffered for others', not his own, spite.

But there is no suffering like having made a mistake
Because of being of an inferior make.

He was not inferior,
He was superior.

He knew then that power corrupts but some must govern?

His thoughts were different.

Did he lack friends? Worse,
Think it was his fault, not theirs?

He did not lack friends,
He had disciples he moulded to his ends.

Did he feel over-handicapped sometimes, yet must draw even?

How could he feel like this? He was the King of Heaven.

...find a sudden brightness one day in everything
Because a mood had been conquered, or a sin?

I tell you, he did not sin....

This poem represents an internal dialog that Smith carries on with herself. She first notes that Jesus never married. In Smith's day, of course, generally men were the breadwinners and women stayed at home to take care of the household and the children, and Smith notes that for many husbands and fathers this role was (and often still is) unhappy and stressful, for they grow less fond of their wives and children, but still have to shoulder

the burden of taking care of them. For some men, like Smith's father, the responsibility becomes more than they can bear, so that they abandon their families. Without the safety net of social welfare, such abandoned wives and children can find themselves in dire straits.

Smith says that Jesus, not being married, did not experience the stress and unhappiness that can sometimes result from having to take care of a family. Moreover, she says, his experience in all situations could not have been equivalent to that of human beings, for he was God—and as God, unlike human beings, he never wavered in his purpose. Furthermore, Smith says, Jesus could not have suffered the death of someone he loved as humans do (even though he wept at the death of Lazarus) because he knew for certain of the life beyond death, which no human does.

Smith also maintains that the suffering human beings feel because they know they are inferior is one that Jesus could not know, since Jesus was inevitably superior. She also asks how Jesus could be a friend to human beings and answers herself, "He did not lack friends, / He had disciples he moulded to his ends." In Smith's view, the tendency of some humans to see Jesus as a friend is mistaken, as it does not match her sense of Jesus as a superior being who commands humans to do his will (e.g. John 14:23, in which Jesus says, "If a person loves me, he will keep my commandments." Nor does this tendency match her view of what genuine, human friendship is: a close relationship of two equals who become friends in spite of or even because of their mutual failings.

Smith has more to say about women and marriage in her poem, "How Cruel is the Story of Eve" (*Collected Poems*, 481):

How cruel is the story of Eve
What responsibility
It has in history
For cruelty.

Touch, where the feeling is most vulnerable,
Unblameworthy—ah reckless—desiring children,
Touch there with a touch of pain?
Abominable.

Ah what cruelty,
In history
What misery.

Put up to barter
The tender feelings
Buy her a husband to rule her
Fool her to marry a master
She must or rue it
The Lord said it.

And man, poor man,
Is he fit to rule,
Pushed to it?
How can he carry it, the governance,
And not suffer for it
Insuffisance?
He must make woman lower then
So he can be higher then

Oh what cruelty,
In history what misery.

Smith alludes in this poem to Genesis 3: 16 in which God tells Eve she will suffer intense pain in childbirth because of her sin in getting Adam to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Paul adds to this, in I Timothy 3: 11 and 12, "I give no permission for a woman to teach or have authority over a man. A woman ought to be quiet, because Adam was formed first and Eve afterwards, and it was not Adam who was led astray, but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin. Nevertheless, she will be saved by child-bearing." Smith condemns this doctrine as "abominable" because it says that women deserve the pain they feel at giving birth, in the most sensitive part of their body, because Eve, their predecessor, deceived Adam. Smith also refers to Paul's statement in Ephesians 5: 24 that "the

husband is the head of his wife". These Biblical passages, Smith says, are responsible for women, through history, feeling guilty about childbirth, which is natural, and guilty about questioning the authority of husbands who may be unwise, cruel and incompetent. Moreover, Smith says, men also suffer from this Biblical doctrine, as they may feel "pushed" to rule over their wives even when their wisdom to do so is insufficient (Smith uses the Old English word "insuffisance", derived from the French, rather than the English word "insufficiency", perhaps because she wanted a rhyme for "governance", but also because using an Old English word emphasizes that she feels the idea of husbands being masters of their wives is archaic and outdated). Smith also deplors this Biblical doctrine because it encourages men to feel that they are in fact superior to women and therefore compels them to "keep women in their place"—i.e., lower in status than themselves. The result of this, she says, has been cruelty and misery for both men and women throughout history.

The poems I have looked at so far are just a few of the poems Smith wrote on Christianity. She asks herself in the poem "Why do you rage?" (*Collected Poems*, 418) why she can't make up her mind about Christianity, why she can't stop asking questions that have no answers, accept her own ignorance and have faith:

Why do you rage so much against Christ, against Him
Before Whom angel brightness grows dark, heaven dim?
Is He not wonderful, beautiful? Is He not Love?
Did He not come to call you from Heaven above?
Say, Yes; yes, He did; say, Yes; call Him this:
Truth, Beauty, Love, Wonder, Holiness.

Say, Yes. Do not always say, No.

Oh I would if I thought it were so,
Oh I know that you think it is so.

As in the poem "Was He Married?," Smith conducts an internal dialog with herself. For her, the difficulty of trying to understand the nature of Christ as

both God and human being shakes her faith, so that the radiance of belief in angels and heaven dims and threatens to disappear all together. She wants to believe that Christ is the embodiment of truth, beauty, love, wonder, holiness, and admonishes herself to "Say, Yes. Do not always say, No." But she can't: she is torn between belief and unbelief, which causes her great distress. She tells herself, "I would say Yes, Christ represents truth, beauty, love, wonder and holiness, if I really believed it"—and she also tells herself, "I know that you believe it." She is a divided self, and reminds one of the anguished father mentioned in Mark 9:25, who cries out to Jesus, "I have faith. Help my lack of faith!"

She also tells us, at the end of her poem, "Thoughts about the Person from Porlock" (*Collected Poems*, 386),

...These thoughts are depressing, I know. They are depressing,
I wish I was more cheerful, it is more pleasant,
Also it is a duty, we should smile as well as submitting
To the purpose of One Above who is experimenting
With various mixtures of human character which goes best,
All is interesting for him it is exciting, but not for us.
There I go again. Smile, smile, and get some work to do
Then you will be practically unconscious without positively having to
go.

Smith, like so many people, tried to keep depression at bay by reminding herself of her moral duty to be positive and cheerful and to submit to the will of God without question. But she was constitutionally incapable of that. What some people can do others cannot, for, as Smith points out, people are different, and some are stronger or weaker than others, for whatever reasons. She chides herself each time she fails to be positive—"There I go again". She tells herself to smile "and get some work to do"—for work is what many people use to distract themselves from the guilt and fear which haunt them (although, as mentioned earlier, having to go to work in an office every day helped drive Smith to attempt suicide).

Smith is talking, in other words, about freeing oneself from being self-conscious. Work forces one to move attention from oneself to something

else, so that one can forget, however fleetingly, the troubled self. In Smith's case the work was making poems. As T. S. Eliot said, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"). Thus, work, which in Smith's case was poetry, was a way of being "practically unconscious"—almost free of the torment of the self-conscious mind—"without positively having to go"—that is, without absolutely having to commit suicide and escape human consciousness all together.

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