

William  
shakespeare's  
religious beliefs  
through king lear  
essay



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William Shakespeare is widely regarded as one of the greatest writers that has ever lived—if not the greatest. His works had been made staple study materials in high schools and universities around the globe. Moreover, his works had reached audiences of different generations. With that being said, those who study Shakespeare had even gone beyond the boundaries of his works, his biography had stimulated the interest of many. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of his life to be explored is religion. After all, an individual's religion would tell us many details about the personality of that particular individual.

This paper would use Shakespeare's "King Lear" to surface the author's ideas about religion. King Lear was basically about the demise of an arrogant king named Lear—thus the title. The conflict of the story was ignited by King Lear's distribution of the lands of his kingdom to his three daughters. Ironically he gave larger portions to his two daughters who are just pretending to love him. His daughter who truly cared for him, Cordelia, was disowned by King Lear. King Lear was a person of many regrets so the plot had focused much on his quest of redemption.

Besides redemption, Shakespeare's "King Lear" had also discussed other topics that are also common topics in religion like forgiveness, temptation, suffering, and sin. With a diversity of common Christian themes, it would not be surprising that King Lear is often used as a reference in religious discussions. A particular concept of religion that was touched by Shakespeare's "King Lear" is the concept of divine justice. This particular concept was a popular topic in religion during Shakespeare's time, the Elizabethan era.

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The concept is basically shown through the demise of King Lear who had made some choices that were begging inevitable consequences. " King Lear" had also revealed to us Shakespeare's awareness of the existence of multiple religions and beliefs. The characters of the play could be considered as pagans. Throughout the whole play, characters would always be referring to pagan icons like Apollo. In addition to that, the characters would exclaim expressions that mention " gods. " A common trait of the pagan belief is a polytheist system of beliefs.

Pagans do not belief in the existence of just one god but of multiple deities. An example of this would be in act one, where Edmund stated " thou, nature, art my goddess. " Paganism is also closely associated with the worship of nature. In some respects, it could be said that King Lear is a pagan play set on a Christian era. There are some claims that Shakespeare's family is a catholic family. However, those claims are not fully proven. What is certain is that his mother, Mary Arden, came from a devout catholic family (Pritchard 3). Somehow, his mother had influenced Shakespeare's notion of religion.

In addition to that, if Shakespeare's family were Catholics, they were under a religion which was restricted during their time. In King Lear, there are hints of both for and against the catholic religion. A detail that suggested that Shakespeare could be against Catholicism is his acknowledgement of the Protestant religion. This detail is exemplified by the character of the Earl of Kent. There was an instance wherein the Earl of Kent had mentioned the phrase " to eat no fish. " It is practiced by the Protestant religion that they would not eat fish during some occasions like Good Friday.

Earl of Kent's mention of the phrase is a strong hint that he believes in the teaching of the Protestant religion. After Earl of Kent utters "to eat no fish" an interesting exchange of lines had transpired between him and King Lear. King Lear had asked "what art thou?", then Earl of Kent had replied "a very honest hearted fellow and as poor as the king." Bewildered by the statement, King Lear had asked Earl of Kent "what wouldst thou?" Earl of Kent confidently replied "service." This small exchange of lines could already provide us a peek of Shakespeare's view on the Protestant religion.

It could be roughly interpreted that Shakespeare admires the Protestants. However, Shakespeare could have also viewed Protestants as the oppressed as denoted by the phrase "...as poor as the king." Though it is unclear as to which religion Shakespeare is promoting, it is certain that he is aware of the religions that are around him. Christianity is already a blooming religion during his time, so it is just remarkable of him to reiterate about the gradually diminishing pagan belief. Ultimately, religion for Shakespeare seems to be a very important aspect of an individual.

He had depicted the characters according to the religion that they practice. As some sort of criticism, King Lear was characterized as lacking conscience. That is probably because King Lear was a pagan, a religion which is viewed as lacking ethical components—an accusation most likely developed by Catholics against paganism. On the other hand, Shakespeare had also given a voice for the Protestant religion through Earl of Kent. All in all, King Lear exudes a religious tone for many common topics in religion were touched.