

Richard Burton's religious views

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There are two reasons for extreme caution in considering Richard Burton's religious views. First, he liked to shock people by stating outlandish opinions, for example in descriptions of cannibalism or killing people.

Secondly, and more important, he had an extraordinary capacity to enter into any and every human experience, and to know it from within. Mary Lovell's brilliantly researched biography, to which I am hugely indebted, is called [A rage to live](#).¹ This rage to live meant in practise that conventional boundaries and divisions meant little to him. *Nihil humani alienum puto*.

The implication of this, combined with his extraordinary facility for languages, and sheer hard work to learn them, is that he not only entered fully in other cultures but the religions of those cultures as part of his deep desire to experience, and to experience from within. He even offered to become a Mormon, an offer which was not accepted by their leader Brigham Young. He was interested in spiritualism, a great Victorian craze, and though highly sceptical of many aspects of it, certainly thought there was such a thing as paranormal phenomenon, which ought to be investigated. Here, for example, are his own words from his time as a subaltern in India in 1846-9, when he was learning Arabic and learning to recite a third of the Qur'an by heart. To this, he said

I devoted all my time and energy; not forgetting a sympathetic study of Sufism, *The Gnosticism of Al-Islam* which would raise me high above the rank of a mere Moslem. I conscientiously went through the *chilla*, or quarantine of fasting and other exercises...At times, when overstrung, I relieved my nerves with a course of Sikh religion and literature....as I had already been invested by a strict Hindu with the *Janeo* or "Brhaminical thread" my experience of Eastern faiths became phenomenal and I became a Master-Sufi.(p.84/5)

As that passage indicates, although he was prepared to enter into every religion it was Islam, and in particular its mystical expression in the form of Sufism, that particularly took hold of him. And as is well known he made the pilgrimage to Mecca, in complete disguise as Abdullah, which included the necessity of being circumcised before he left, in 1853. Thereafter he was much respected in Muslim circles as a *Haji*, one who has undertaken the *Haj*. He once told a friend that "Islam was the only practical, ethical religion and almost free from the two demoralising elements-dogma and priestcraft. Christianity ...has no value as a moral agent." And in 1888 he wrote "Being amongst Moslems again is a great repose to me. The atmosphere of Christendom dominates and distresses me."(p.735)

What then of his attitude to Christianity? At Oxford as an undergraduate in 1840-2 John Henry Newman was the kind of cult figure we now associate with pop stars. People flocked to his mesmerising sermons, including Burton, who thought that no man in Oxford was held in greater respect.(p.18/19 When he was in India as a young subaltern (1843-5) he attended the Roman Catholic Mass, taken by a Goan priest, rather than the more usual Church of England services. Later he suggested that Roman Catholicism was the only serious alternative to Atheism.

Great controversy surrounds Burton's death bed scene. Isabel his remarkable wife was an exceedingly devout Catholic and the one thing she longed for more than anything else was for him to become a Catholic, because for her it meant he could join her for ever in heaven as well as being buried with him on earth. As he was dying she arranged for him to be given extreme unction, the last rites, by a Catholic priest, though there is some doubt about whether he was still alive at that point. He could only be given the last rites of course if he had previously been baptised. A few years earlier when he was very ill in Cannes, Isabel had baptised him herself. Earlier still (Dated 15th February 1877) she had prepared a statement for him which said in effect that if he was in such a state he wanted to be considered a Catholic, and this statement is signed. (p.628) It was on the basis of this she acted. A short time after the baptism he opened his eyes and said "Hallo! There's the luncheon bell; I want my luncheon." When she told him later in the day about the baptism he was amused and said

¹ Abacus, 1999. Page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

"Now that was superfluous, if only you knew; the world will be very surprised when I come to die." Isabel did not quizz him on the meaning of this curious statement, and took it to mean he had in fact been baptised in Goa as a young man. (p.706) But as Mary Lovell points out, if this had been the case there would have been no need for them to have a civil registrar at their marriage.

Against this perspective of Isabel, we have the clear statement he made to the Anglican chaplain in Trieste that he was an atheist.(p.728)Furthermore in his conversations with Isabel he sometimes expressed strong feelings about religion and remarked once "Do I hurt you when I talk like that?"(p.729) So one explanation is that he did not believe anything himself, but he wanted to please his wife whom he loved so dearly, for whom his being a Catholic meant so much.

There are, however, three other little details that seem to me significant in indicating that his faith meant more to him than this.

One is that he liked to listen to Isabel saying her prayers beside him. Another is that the three books he insisted on taking with him everywhere, included a breviary. I find that very curious, for a breviary is the daily prayer book for a Roman Catholic priest. The third point is that he regarded religious belief as a very private, personal matter.

In the light of this let us look at what Isabel wrote

I am by no means going to tell you that his Catholicity was a life-long, fixed and steady thing, like mine. It was not. He has long and wild fits of Easter mysticism, but not the agnosticism that I have seen in England since my widowhood. It was the mysticism of the East, Sufism. Periodically he had Catholic fits, and practised it, hiding it sometimes even from me, though I knew it. (Friends might describe him as a Deist, or agnostic or Atheist and free thinker) but I can only describe the Richard I knew, not the person they knew. I his wife, who lived with him day and night for thirty years, believe him to be half Sufi, half Catholic. (P.773)

In the light of this I think it is important to bear in mind that all forms of mysticism are acutely aware of the limitations of human language, however sacred, to convey ultimate reality. In Christianity, for example, there is the Via Negativa, or Apophatic way, in which all we can do in words is to say that God is not this and not that. It is this theme which runs through T.S.Eliot's "Four Quartets", for example, which in turn draws on St John of the Cross. So when Isabel says that his mysticism was not like the kind of agnosticism she had seen in England since her widowhood I think she was saying something crucially important. It is not that Richard Burton believed nothing, and although, like any true believer, but particularly one of his temperament and outspoken views, he would speak strongly against all forms of religion when this was warranted, this did not indicate that he had no faith. He knew that the ultimate reality, to which he looked, was only very inadequately grasped by every religion but he did look to some ultimate reality. I would suggest that he did this, not just as a seeker, but as one on a journey-and being baptised as a Catholic, perhaps indeed mainly to please his wife, was not incompatible with that. He wanted to experience things, new things, and he, who had refused to accept the usual human boundaries, would more than anyone have been open to experience whatever it is that lies beyond death.