

RELIGION IN ROBINSON CRUSOE

For many, perhaps most readers, Crusoe's many references to God, to Providence, to sin are extraneous to the real interest of the novel and they quickly skim these passages, to get to the "good parts." Some see the religious references as Defoe's attempt to make his fiction acceptable to the large section of the book-reading and book-buying public which regarded fiction as lies which endangered the soul's salvation. So a major critical issue for you to think about is whether religion plays an essential role in this novel or whether it has been imposed upon the novel.

SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Readers through the nineteenth century read Robinson Crusoe in this light. For example, a reviewer for the Dublin University Magazine called the book "a great religious poem, showing that God is found where men are absent" (1856). In deciding whether or to what extent Robinson Crusoe is a spiritual autobiography and "a great religious poem," you might consider the following:

In the "Preface," Defoe announces that his intention is "to justify and honour the wisdom of Providence in all the variety of our circumstances" (xv).

Crusoe receives warnings against the rashness of going to sea from his father and from the captain of the first ship he sails on. Both are figures of authority and can be seen as proxies for God. In ignoring their warnings, is he also denying God's providential social order in the world and, by implication, God? By "God's providential social order in the world" I mean that God arranged the world hierarchically, endowing the king with authority in the political realm and the father with authority in the family.

Does Providence send him punishments and deliverances to awaken a sense of his sinfulness and to turn him to God? Are the shipwrecks and his enslavement, his escape from slavery and then from the island evidence of God's Providence or merely chance?

In the Puritan view, the duplication of dates for significant events is indisputable evidence of Providence at work. Crusoe notes that the date he ran away from his family is the same date he was captured and made a slave; the day that he survived his first shipwreck is the same date he was cast ashore on the island; and the day he was born is the same day he was cast ashore, "so that my wicked life and my solitary life begun both on a day" (129). Is this similarity of dates the working of Providence or merely chance, meaningless coincidence?

Crusoe converts Friday to Christianity. Is Crusoe saving his soul for spiritual reasons or for self-interest to make Friday more tractable, reliable, and controllable?

Crusoe narrates his life story long afterward, and from the beginning of his tale Crusoe presents events not only from his point of view as a youth but also from a Christian perspective; he looks at his past through the eyes of the convert who now constantly sees the working of Providence. He tells of his first shipwreck and of his then ignoring what he now perceives as God's warning, "... Providence, as in such cases generally it does, resolved to leave me entirely without excuse. For if I would not take this for a deliverance, the next was to be such a one as the worst and most hardened wretch among us would confess both the danger and the mercy" (7).

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