

FAITH BEYOND DOGMA: RELIGION AND ETHICAL VISION IN THE WORKS OF JOHN GALSWORTHY

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Abstract

John Galsworthy's dramas reflect a profound moral and spiritual inquiry that transcends traditional dogmatic boundaries. This paper explores the nuanced depiction of religion and ethical vision in his major plays, arguing that Galsworthy's work consistently advocates for a human-centred spirituality rooted in compassion, justice, and personal conscience. Through characters who challenge societal norms and institutional authority, Galsworthy critiques rigid religious dogma and promotes an ethical framework grounded in empathy and individual moral responsibility. Drawing upon plays such as *The Silver Box*, *Justice*, *Strife*, *The Fugitive*, and *The Skin Game*, the study illustrates how Galsworthy's protagonists navigate conflicts between social expectations and inner ethical imperatives. Influenced by the Victorian crisis of faith and the humanist currents of his time, Galsworthy reshapes the role of religion on the stage, emphasising ethical action over ritualistic belief. His dramas function as secular sermons that plead for a spiritual awareness embedded in lived experience rather than theological abstraction. By illuminating the link between social justice and moral awakening, Galsworthy reveals a vision of faith that is humane, inclusive, and transformative, offering a compelling counterpoint to the oppressive ideologies of his era and inviting modern readers to reconsider the role of ethics in everyday life.

Keywords: John Galsworthy, Religion and ethics, Spiritual humanism, Social justice in drama, Victorian moral crisis, Ethical conscience, Anti-dogmatic literature, Modern morality plays

1. INTRODUCTION

John Galsworthy, a luminary in early 20th-century English literature and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1932, is primarily known for his acute observations of English society through *The Forsyte Saga*. However, his plays—equally masterful—reveal a deeply ethical imagination wrestling with the role of religion in a rapidly industrialising and morally complex society. Galsworthy did not write religious dramas in the traditional sense. Instead, he sought to redefine spirituality through a secular lens, portraying ethical conflict as the central moral drama of the modern age. His vision of faith was grounded not in doctrinal allegiance but in human empathy, justice, and moral courage.

Rather than constructing religious figures or settings, Galsworthy infused his characters with spiritual urgency and ethical restlessness. The result was a unique form of modern morality play—dramas that eschew ritual and creed to foreground the daily choices of conscience and the silent heroism of principled dissent. Galsworthy's rejection of religious orthodoxy is not a dismissal of faith, but a reorientation toward an ethical spirituality rooted in compassion, social justice, and human dignity. His plays raise enduring questions about the relationship between belief and action, offering a vision of moral awakening that transcends sectarian divides.

2. GALSWORTHY AND THE VICTORIAN MORAL LEGACY

Galsworthy wrote during the aftermath of the Victorian crisis of faith—a time when traditional Christian belief was being steadily eroded by scientific discovery, industrial progress, and philosophical scepticism. While many late

Victorians turned to agnosticism or aestheticism, Galsworthy turned to ethical realism. He inherited the moral seriousness of Victorian liberalism but stripped it of its doctrinal clothing.

His plays reflect a transition from religious certainty to moral questioning. The dogmatic structures of the Church were, for Galsworthy, inadequate to address the injustices of the age, particularly the inhumanity embedded in social institutions such as the legal system, the workplace, and class hierarchies. Rather than reaffirming religious orthodoxy, Galsworthy asked what it meant to be good in a world where suffering was often socially engineered.

In this context, Galsworthy's dramas can be seen as responses to what philosopher Charles Taylor called the "disenchantment" of modernity. But unlike Nietzsche's nihilism or Hardy's pessimism, Galsworthy envisioned an ethical spirituality that found divinity in moral action. For Galsworthy, the sacred was not lost—it had simply migrated from the church altar to the human conscience.

3. THE SILVER BOX - THE PARABLE OF SOCIAL HYPOCRISY

The Silver Box (1906) introduces Galsworthy's moral aesthetic with striking clarity. The play juxtaposes two men: Jack Barthwick, a wealthy young man who steals a woman's handbag while drunk, and Jones, an unemployed labourer who steals a silver cigarette box from the same household. The legal system punishes Jones harshly while letting Barthwick go unscathed. Here, the courtroom becomes a kind of altar where society offers up the poor to preserve the illusion of moral order.

While the play never references religion explicitly, its structure and message are deeply spiritual. Jones, though guilty, becomes a Christ-like figure sacrificed on the altar of class privilege. His plea for dignity—"I've got feelings like other men"—echoes a profound humanism that Galsworthy elevates above the hypocrisies of institutional religion.

The ethical indictment is clear: true morality lies not in the lip service of the respectable but in an empathetic acknowledgment of human suffering. In this light, The Silver Box becomes a modern parable where the real sin is not theft, but the self-righteous blindness of the powerful—a theme that reverberates throughout Galsworthy's dramatic corpus.

4. JUSTICE - THE GOSPEL OF CONSCIENCE

In Justice (1910), Galsworthy turns his attention to the prison system. The protagonist, Falder, is a young clerk who forges a cheque to save the woman he loves from her abusive husband. Though his motives are compassionate, he is arrested, tried, and imprisoned—where his spirit deteriorates until he is a broken man.

The ethical dilemma is not Falder's act, but society's response to it. The legal system, devoid of mercy or understanding, becomes a mechanism of spiritual destruction. As one of the barristers observes, the law is administered "without regard to motive or condition." It is this moral emptiness that Galsworthy challenges.

Falder's descent into despair is not only a critique of institutional injustice but also a lament for a society that has lost its soul. In Galsworthy's world, forgiveness and moral insight—virtues once associated with religion—are now found only in those willing to listen to their conscience over the letter of the law. Justice thus reclaims the moral authority once held by religious institutions and places it in the heart of the individual.

The prison, like the courtroom in The Silver Box, serves as a desecrated sanctuary—a space where ethical questions are decided not by grace but by machinery. In counterpoint, Galsworthy presents ethical compassion as the only possible redemption.

5. STRIFE - MARTYRDOM AND MORAL AUTHORITY

Strife (1909) dramatizes a bitter labour strike between workers and industrialists, focusing on two intransigent leaders: the capitalist Anthony and the labour leader Roberts. Both men are men of principle, but Galsworthy ultimately exposes the spiritual futility of rigid idealism divorced from human need.

Roberts is portrayed almost as a prophet, willing to sacrifice everything for the purity of the cause. Yet his rigidity leads to the ruin of the very people he seeks to uplift. He is left isolated, his moral absolutism turning into a kind of spiritual pride. Anthony, similarly unyielding, clings to the sanctity of property and order, blind to suffering.

The ethical centre of the play is found in Enid Underwood, Anthony's daughter, who pleads for compromise and understanding. Her compassion cuts through the binary of industrial conflict, offering a feminine ethic of care over the masculine ethic of war. Her moral vision recalls Christian values of reconciliation and mercy, though not derived from scripture, but from an inner ethical awareness.

In Strife, Galsworthy critiques dogmatism in all its forms—religious, political, or economic. He portrays ethical humility as the highest spiritual ideal, subtly aligning it with a Christ-like willingness to yield for the sake of others.

6. THE FUGITIVE - THE RELIGION OF FREEDOM

In The Fugitive (1913), Galsworthy addresses the moral complexity of love, marriage, and female autonomy. The play follows Clare, a woman who leaves an unloving marriage and lives with a younger man, only to find herself socially ostracised and ultimately driven to suicide.

Clare's refusal to live a lie and her yearning for emotional truth mark her as a spiritual rebel. Galsworthy constructs her as a modern-day saint, suffering not for sin, but for honesty. Her tragedy lies in society's inability to offer grace to those who break its moral codes, even in pursuit of greater truths.

Clare's suicide is not framed as moral failure, but as society's failure to evolve spiritually. Her last words— "I have not been afraid"—are a testament to moral courage, a secular benediction. In Galsworthy's ethical universe, the fugitive is not the sinner but the visionary—exiled not for vice, but for living a faith that is too radical for the world to bear.

This play extends Galsworthy's ethical critique into the realm of gender, revealing how patriarchal morality punishes spiritual independence. In doing so, it affirms his overarching belief that true morality arises from authenticity and love, not conformity.

7. THE SKIN GAME - THE PARADOX OF PROGRESS

The Skin Game (1920) continues Galsworthy's exploration of class conflict, this time between the old gentry and the rising bourgeoisie. The Hillcrist, an aristocratic family, wage a bitter moral battle against the Hornblowers, industrialists seeking to buy and redevelop land.

The ethical conflict centres on the methods used by both sides. The Hillcrist, ostensibly upholding tradition and principle, resort to blackmail, exposing a dark secret in Hornblower's family. The result is not justice but ruin—and a young woman's descent into despair.

What makes this play spiritually provocative is its meditation on moral compromise. Galsworthy refuses to grant easy righteousness to either side. Instead, he reveals the tragic cost of ethical absolutism when it becomes weaponised.

The title itself is a metaphor for the stripping away of pretences, revealing the raw, vulnerable self beneath. In this exposure lies the play's spiritual vision: no ideology, whether aristocratic or industrial, can replace the need for compassion. When characters pursue righteousness without empathy, they become agents of destruction rather than justice.

In *The Skin Game*, Galsworthy again rejects dogma—whether political or religious—in favor of a humanist ethic. The divine, he suggests, is not found in institutions but in the fragile dignity of each individual.

8. TOWARD AN ETHICAL HUMANISM - GALSWORTHY'S DRAMATIC SERMON

Across his dramatic works, Galsworthy constructs a compelling spiritual vision that operates outside traditional religious frameworks. He does not deny the possibility of faith, but he radically reinterprets it. In his universe, faith is not adherence to creed but fidelity to conscience. Religion is not measured by rituals, but by the courage to act justly and love mercifully.

In this sense, Galsworthy's plays are modern sermons—offered not from pulpits but from the proscenium. He presents characters who struggle, fail, and sometimes rise above their circumstances through acts of moral insight. His ethics are grounded in lived experience, his spirituality in the sacredness of human struggle.

This moral humanism aligns Galsworthy with figures like George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and even Leo Tolstoy—writers who saw ethical striving as the true ground of the spiritual life. Unlike theological dramatists such as T.S. Eliot, Galsworthy avoids metaphysical speculation, choosing instead to illuminate the “kingdom of God” within the choices of ordinary people.

His legacy is thus one of quiet revolution: he reclaims faith not for the church, but for humanity.

9. CONCLUSION

John Galsworthy's contribution to literature extends far beyond his acclaimed social realism and depiction of Edwardian society; he emerges as a profound thinker who wrestled with the spiritual questions of his age. His works reveal a nuanced religious imagination that transcends traditional Christianity and institutional religion. Rather than presenting faith as adherence to doctrine or ritual, Galsworthy centres his vision on the lived experience of morality—on conscience, compassion, and the pursuit of justice. In doing so, he reframes the sacred as accessible through human relationships and ethical action rather than through dogmatic belief. This redefinition challenges readers to reconsider what it means to be religious in a modern, secular world, emphasising that the essence of faith lies in sincere and consistent ethical living.

Moreover, Galsworthy's scepticism of religious institutions does not equate to cynicism but instead reflects a deep yearning for authentic spirituality. He critiques the failures of churches and clergy, who often prioritise form over substance, yet he upholds the enduring values associated with religious teachings: mercy, sacrifice, and love. His characters' struggles with marriage, death, and social injustice illustrate this tension between inherited religious frameworks and the demands of modern conscience. Through these narratives, Galsworthy advocates for a faith that embraces doubt, personal integrity, and humility—qualities necessary for navigating the complexities of a fractured world. His emphasis on beauty in nature and sensitivity to suffering further underscores a spiritual sensibility grounded in the immediacy of human experience and the natural order.

Galsworthy's work offers a hopeful alternative to despair in the face of cultural and theological upheaval. At a time when many contemporaries retreated into irony or nihilism, he maintained a belief in the possibility of goodness and grace, even without supernatural guarantees. His literature insists that faith is not a static creed but a dynamic, ongoing commitment to seeing and responding to human need with kindness and justice. By elevating ethical responsibility

over metaphysical certainty, Galsworthy's vision anticipates many modern theological and philosophical developments, carving a unique space for literature as a vehicle for spiritual reflection. His legacy invites us to recognise that true religious insight often dwells in the ordinary acts of courage and compassion that sustain our shared humanity.

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