

# Piety and prejudice

*In his respect for the Jewish people, Osler was less a man of his time than a man of his profession*

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## Résumé

DANS CE NUMÉRO, les D<sup>rs</sup> David Hogan et Mark Clarfield (page 1559) soutiennent que par son philosémitisme, Sir William Osler était en avance sur son époque et que son attitude allait à l'encontre de l'intolérance de son auteur favori, Sir Thomas Browne, médecin du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cet argument repose sur l'erreur historiographique que constitue le «présentisme», qui consiste à juger des personnages historiques en fonction des valeurs d'aujourd'hui. Si l'on juge Browne dans le contexte de son époque, il est possible de le défendre contre l'accusation de racisme, surtout à l'endroit des Juifs. De plus, Osler était un homme de son époque par un grand nombre de ses opinions sur la race. Osler était certainement philosémitte, mais pas parce qu'il était en avance sur son époque. C'était plutôt parce que les Juifs dominaient la profession qui était le centre de son univers.

In this issue (page 1559) Drs. David B. Hogan and A. Mark Clarfield argue that Sir William Osler was not merely immune to the endemic anti-Semitism of his age but was positively philo-Semitic. Hogan and Clarfield find the liberality of Osler's views inexplicable given the intolerant influences of his time. They cite as one of those influences Osler's favourite author, the 17th-century physician Sir Thomas Browne, "who . . . was prejudiced against Catholics, Jews, Moslems, blacks and women." From a historian's perspective, this position poses a serious problem of "presentism," that is, the anachronistic judgement of historical figures according to present-day values, interests, knowledge and etiquette. I wish to demonstrate this point, first by defending Browne against the charge of racism — particularly against Jews — and secondly by showing that Osler was a man of his age in many of his views on race. If he was philo-Semitic, as I believe he was, it was because Jews figured so prominently in his profession.

Originally written as a memoir for private circulation in 1635, Browne's major work, *Religio Medici (A Physician's Piety)*<sup>1</sup> was printed in 1642. Continental Europe was in the final, bloodiest phase of the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants, a war that devastated Germany and reduced its civilian population by a quarter. England was not involved in this conflict but was sliding rapidly into a politico-religious civil war of its own. *Religio Medici* was a personal response to the prevailing atmosphere of murderous religious extremism. In this work, Browne proclaims his sincere Protestant convictions but explicitly denounces coercion or even disdain of those who do not share his faith. However, the terms in which he articulates his "piety" are easily misinterpreted by 20th-century readers who share neither his elaborate rhetoric nor his deep seriousness about religion.



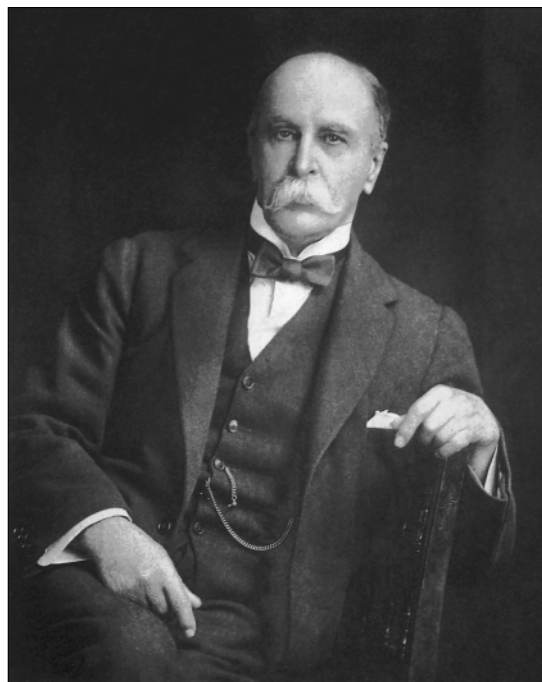
Editorial

Éditorial

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Sir William Osler (1849–1919)



For my Religion, though there be several circumstances that might persuade the world that I have none at all, as the generall scandall of my profession, the naturall course of my studies, the indifferency of my behaviour, and discourse in matters of Religion . . . ; yet in despite hereof I dare, without usurpation, assume the honorable stile of a Christian: . . . But having, in my riper yeares, and confirmed judgement, seene and examined all, I finde my selfe obliged by the principles of Grace, and the law of mine owne reason, to embrace no other name but this [i.e., Christian]; neither doth herein my zeale so farre make me forget the generall charitie I owe unto humanity, as rather to hate than pity Turkes, Infidels, and (what is worse) Jewes, rather contenting my selfe to enjoy that happy stile, than maligning those who refuse so glorious a title. (1.1)

The last phrase of this quotation is likely to raise modern eyebrows: What does Browne mean by “(what is worse) Jewes?” To carefully pick apart this baroque sentence is to see that it is anything but bigoted in intent. Browne is proud to be a Christian but he will never permit his religious commitment to override charity; in particular, he would rather pity Moslems (“Turkes”), pagans and Jews than hate them for rejecting the faith so precious to him. But what about the phrase “what is worse”? Does it modify “Jewes”? Are they “worse” than Moslems or pagans? Or does it refer to “hate”? Hatred of any kind is evil, but would not hatred of the Jews be even worse, given that Christ himself was a Jew and that Christians profess to share with Jews the faith of the Old Testament?

Browne himself furnishes evidence in support of the second interpretation, but it is important to read what he says in the light of the “piety” of traditional Christianity. For Browne, the crucial distinction between Christian and Jew is not a question of “race;” this biological view of culture did not arise until the 18th and 19th centuries. It is a theological matter: the Jews persist in rejecting what Browne sees as the truth of Christianity. But Browne hastens to add that Christians exhibit the opposite vice: a distressing lack of steadfastness and stability. The Jew, at least, “is obstinate in all fortunes; the persecution of fifteen hundred yeares hath but confirmed them in their error: they have already endured whatsoever may be inflicted, and have suffered, in a bad cause, even to the commendation of their enemies. Persecution is a bad and indirect way to plant Religion” (1.25). In short, the resistance of the Jews to Christianity is really the Christians’ fault; moreover, it teaches Christians a lesson in fidelity.

Theological opposition is for Browne no justification for aggression. On the contrary: *Religio Medici*, especially

in the context of its day, is a remarkable appeal for tolerance. Although Browne speaks in the first person, the broader moral is visible:

I am of a constitution so generall, that it consorts and sympathizeth with all things; I have no antipathy, or rather Idiosyncrasie, in dyet, humour, ayre, any thing; I wonder not at the French, for their dishes of frogges, snailes, and toadstooles, not at the Jewes for Locusts and Grassehoppers, but being amongst them, make them my common viands; and I find they agree with my stomach as well as theirs. (2.1)



Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682)

Osler himself cites this passage as evidence of Browne’s cosmopolitan openness.<sup>2</sup> Browne likewise abhors racial slurs and advocates courtesy and respect toward the religious practices of others (2.4). As for his attitude toward Catholics, amongst whom he lived and studied in his years in Montpellier and Padua, he confesses to a deep attraction to their ritual. He describes how once he wept with emotion during a Catholic procession, while other Protestants in his company cracked tasteless jokes (1.3).

An understanding of both Browne and Osler demands an understanding of the context of their piety and prejudice. Neither Browne nor Osler lived in what we would now call a multicultural society. Browne’s England harboured, officially at least, no Jews: they were expelled *en masse* in the 13th century by Edward I and were readmitted only in 1655. His prejudices with regard to Jews (or Moslems for that matter) were somewhat abstract, since he would never have been in a position to help or harm a real Jew. If he had been, it is highly doubtful that a man who refused to speak discourteously of the Pope — despite the fact that the Pope failed to return the compliment and declared him a heretic (1.5) — would have committed any offense against a flesh-and-blood Jew. But the circumstances and audience of *Religio Medici* must also be borne in mind: “Jewes” and “Turks” are code words masking Browne’s more immediate preoccupation with how Catholics and Protestants of various stripes might both preserve their religious convictions and live in peace.

Osler was born in backwoods Ontario in the middle of the 19th century and probably never met a Jew until he went to Montreal to study medicine. Montreal had a small but long-established Jewish community, but the major waves of immigration from central and eastern Europe that spawned a vocal Canadian anti-Semitism had hardly begun. Coming from a clerical family, Osler may well have been weaned on a theological anti-Semitism not un-



like Browne's. Unlike Browne, however, he came into close contact with many Jews in his profession, and this stimulated his admiration and affection. Indeed, observing the situation in Germany, he was puzzled by the fact that an abundance of Jews in the medical profession was provoking hostility. He plainly expected it to produce the opposite effect.

Osler's prejudices, like those of many people, operated at a distance and for the most part evaporated on face-to-face contact. I say "for the most part" because he seems to have disliked Latin Americans, whom he encountered at international meetings.<sup>3</sup> But 2 further examples support my point. The first is a speech given by Osler to the Canada Club in London, England, in 1914. It was reported as follows in the Montreal *Gazette*.

Speaking of the problems which lay before Canada, Sir William said in the first place we have made the country a white man's country. Other [i.e., Asian] countries were beginning to swarm over with population. "The question with us is what are we to do when the yellow and brown men begin to swarm over . . . . We can say we do not want [Chinese and Japanese] people, but the case is different with the [East] Indians, who are our fellow citizens [of the British Empire]. We ought, if we could, say to them: 'Come in, you are welcome.' But we have to safeguard our country. Therefore we shall be bound to say, 'We are sorry, we would if we could, but you cannot come in on equal terms with Europeans.' We are bound to make our country a white man's country."<sup>4</sup>

Thus in some respects Osler was as much of a racist as the next Edwardian. On the other hand, despite his notorious opposition to the admission of women to the Johns Hopkins medical school, when the female students arrived he appears to have treated them with fairness, civility and generosity.<sup>5,6</sup> Once they proved that they really wanted to be physicians, Osler accepted them. Similarly, Osler's philo-Semitism seems to have been a function of the strong representation of Jews in his chosen profession. Medicine was the centre of Osler's world; that so many Jews shared his devotion raised them in his esteem.

Browne met few Jews and said things about them that in our secular age might seem unsympathetic. Osler met many Jews and said things about them that in a modern idiom seem enlightened. Yet Osler named Browne as his mentor in tolerance — and rightly so, for they shared a common religious outlook. Whereas the insular Browne was subject to few forces that could temper his theological anti-Semitism, Osler lived in a cosmopolitan professional world where he encountered Jews daily. Yet it is significant that in his 1914 address to the Jewish Historical Society of England, Osler stated that religion, not medicine, was Judaism's greatest cultural achievement. At bottom, both men rooted their relationship with Jews in their Christian faith. Osler's attitude might be contrasted with that of Harvey Cushing, his biographer, who in his own

memoirs referred to the Jewish Historical Society speech as "Osler's charitable comments on the Semitic Invasion of Britain."<sup>7</sup> Osler speaks the language of piety; Cushing, of prejudice.

No justice is done to either Browne or Osler by weighing their words on the present-day scale of political correctness. Both were men of wisdom, but both were men of their age. Our century, which has seen the Holocaust, the civil rights movement, decolonization and massive international migration, is understandably shocked and perplexed by some of the things they said. It is easy to pass judgement on the dead, whose world we will never know and who cannot reply to our accusations. By presuming moral superiority over the dead and discounting their experience, presentism becomes itself a kind of prejudice. If it seems harmless — mere bias, perhaps, but hardly bigotry — it is only because its targets cannot respond.

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