

'All these Pearls...' - Florence Nightingale on Comparative Religion

Florence Nightingale's Bicentenary on the 12th May 2020 comes at a poignant time, especially in the light of the opening of Nightingale Hospitals to serve the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, the World Health Organisation has declared 2020 'The Year of the Nurse and the Midwife' in honour of her Bicentenary. Florence Nightingale's work as a pioneering nurse in the Crimean war is well known. However, it is lesser known that she spent the second half of her life largely bedridden, yet actively engaged in successful social reform and writing extensively on theology, philosophy, spirituality and comparative religion...

Florence Nightingale had an inclusive respect for all the major world faiths and, as Anne Peirce highlights, she believed that 'there are many manifestations of the same God known under different names...the Egyptian Gods Ptah and Atem, the Islamic God Allah, the Christian Lord God and the Jewish God Yahweh. Nightingale believed that God needed different names and representations in order to meet the needs of the people in different times and places'.

Florence Nightingale, who is considered a Mystic in her own right, believed that the Divine is within us all and only needs to be actualized and expressed in the world - viewing practical social action as a *natural result* of the mystical inner realisation of the 'Divine Within' through contemplation and prayer. As a favourite prayer, Florence quoted the last line of Plato's Phaedrus: '*Give me beauty in the inward soul, and may the outward and inward man be as one*'.

Florence Nightingale, who was declared a 'lesser saint' by the Episcopal/Anglican Church for her philanthropy and humanitarian work, despite some opposition to her theological views in her book '*Suggestions for Thought*' being regarded by some as 'heretical', said herself that saints were 'not for the church but for God' and that they 'lived for God alone', saying that, 'you must go to the Mohammedanism, Buddhism, to the East, to the Sufis and Fakirs, to Pantheism, for the right growth of mysticism' and that, 'To know God we must study Him as much in the Pagan and Jewish dispensations as in the Christian...and this gives unity to the whole - one continuous thread of interest to all these pearls.'

Rev. Jenny Miller, Interfaith Minister

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