When I chose to work on Shakespeare for my Ph.D. degree, I was under the impression that a thematic study of the Last Plays would be a challenging but not an arduous task. It gradually dawned on me that the plethora of interpretative material produced during the last four centuries had created such an impregnable fence around the bard that it was not easy to discover the real Shakespeare, a timeless artist who was also a citizen of the extended Christendom. I had to dig deep to bring to light the true religious content of the plays.

A few words are needed to explain my viewpoint. Modern critics of Shakespeare often overlook the fact that sixteenth-century England was not a post-Christian world of today. The only single book that shaped and controlled people’s imagination, language and expression was the Bible. If Biblical influence is ignored the plays of Shakespeare will be deprived of their true spirit. Bible can be understood without Shakespeare but Shakespeare cannot be admired without a proper knowledge of Biblical ethos. Although protestant influence was always there yet an outright revolt against the Church, or against religion itself, was rather a late
phenomenon which traces its origin in the publication of Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* in 1841. The English translation by George Eliot appeared 13 years later, in 1854. Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, Bauer and a host of other intellectuals who read the book turned atheists. The situation further aggravated when Darwin proclaimed his evolutionary theory of ‘natural selection’ and Freud’s psychoanalysis was taken as the ultimate insight into the working of the human mind. The nineteenth century Europe was an intellectual mess that paved the way for a variety of misplaced interpretations of the plays in question.

The late twentieth-century however witnessed a marked change. Critics like Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode and Harold Bloom wrote extensively on the relationship between Shakespeare and the Bible. Yet other scholars, including Wilson Knight, Roy Battenhouse, Barbara Lewalski and Louise Schleiner drew thematic parallels between specific plays and selected biblical passages. However, no extensive exploration of an overall relationship between the last plays of Shakespeare and the design of benevolence was made by these critics. Many write-ups, published recently in journals, have tried to determine Shakespeare’s faith with the help of Biblical allusions & references found in the text. They are no doubt a bold and successful attempt to establish Shakespeare’s Christian credentials. Not lately, in 2007, the Modern Language Association had organized a major conference, seemingly to settle this issue: "Shakespeare and Faith: Roman, English, or None?"
The present study has no claim that it has established, once and for all, the true religious perspective so essential to appreciate the artist. At most, it tries to recreate the lost perspective and with some irrefutable textual as well as contextual evidences.

A PhD thesis is never accomplished alone. I have no hesitation to say that the thesis in the present form owes much to Prof. S. N. Zeba, chairperson, Department of English, who came to my rescue when it seemed almost impossible to submit it within the stipulated time-frame. She was instrumental in appointing Prof. Iffat Ara, a Shakespeare scholar as my supervisor. I was inspired by her illuminating remarks and close perusal of my work. My visits to her house also gave me an opportunity to meet Prof. Asloob Ahmed Ansari, the father of Prof. Iffat Ara and a living legend of Shakespearian studies. Special thanks are due to Prof. Qazi Afzal Husain, Dean, Faculty of Arts, whose unfailing support cheered me up when I was in gloom. It would be churlish on my part not to thank Prof. Iqbal Ahmed who suggested many improvements on the first draft.

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This summer when I came to Aligarh, primarily to submit my thesis, I could not fail to notice amazing change that academic policies of the present vice-chancellor, has brought in my Al-ma Ma-ter. I salute him for creating such an environment that also benefitted me beyond my expectations.

I must, however, take full responsibility for any errors or inadequacies that one may find in this work.

Md. Shahid Kamal