RELIGION, GENDER, GENRE:
NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN’S THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This thesis considers how women in the nineteenth century used a variety of literary genres to write theology, when formal theological channels were closed to them. Each chapter considers a different literary genre and different writers. Features of genre are foregrounded as I consider how each writer constructs meanings and addresses her audience, and what the implications were for them as women writing this way. It departs from the specifically feminist approach of many studies of women’s theology, to explore a range of women’s attempts to find an adequate spirituality.

Emma Jane Worboise’s popular novels and biography of Thomas Arnold construct parables in which ‘feminine’ Christian values are extended to the public world. The poetry of Anne Brontë debates with Calvinism, and with the Romantic and Evangelical ideals of intense personal communion with the divine. Harriet Martineau creates a religion for middle-class liberals through her essays for the Unitarian periodical the Monthly Repository. She embodies a new model of a theologian who has earned her authority through the press. The autobiographies of the intellectuals Frances Power Cobbe and Annie Besant also do this, as they present themselves as creators of post-Christian theologies. Autobiographies by Margaret Howitt and Margaret Oliphant rather evaluate the emotional adequacy of belief.

Other writers anticipate some late twentieth-century developments in theology. The writers of collective biography, while addressing distinctly Victorian gender issues, also offer a form of feminist Bible criticism. Josephine Butler creates a ‘liberation’ theology in her political speeches against legalised prostitution. The perspective of women’s theology, expressed in literary forms, brings to light writers who, while forgotten today, were significant in the nineteenth-century context. It also enables a new appreciation of authors who are better-known for other achievements.
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Introduction

There is one dangerous science for women – one which let them indeed beware how they profanely touch – that of theology.¹

So wrote John Ruskin in his famous polemic on the role of women in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet throughout the century, women did approach the ‘dangerous science’, and wrote theology in all manner of writings outside of the establishment’s forms. As Julie Melnyk summarises:

Barred from the university and pulpit, [women] were also forbidden to write in the traditional genres of theology, the treatise and the sermon. Their theological ideas appear instead in non-traditional genres, in letters, novels, pamphlets, devotional manuals, and in the increasingly influential periodical press, disguised as uncontroversial religious writings. These women authors almost never claimed to be writing theology, and, naturally, they did not propose overarching, self-consistent theological systems, but they did reinterpret the nature of God and of Christ, the relationships between God and humans, and the Scriptures.²

My thesis in part builds on Melnyk’s attention to the informal theology written by women in non-ecclesiastical forms of literature across the nineteenth century.

The vast majority of work to date on nineteenth-century women’s religious discourse has discussed women’s theology in the terms of feminist discourse. Christine Krueger’s The Reader’s Repentance (1992) considers how the revival of Evangelical Christianity empowered women to challenge male-dominated social values;³ Reclaiming Myths of Power (1995) exemplifies writers who ‘reappropriated the substance and the language of the Judeo-

Christian narratives to authorise their subversion of patriarchal institutions'. Melnyk does not claim such a subversive project, but she places gender issues to the fore and claims women theologians’ common achievement of ‘revising different aspects of the masculine theologies they challenge’. Almost all the criticism consulted in relation to the authors studied in my thesis considers their religious writings through a feminist perspective. These critics focus on women finding spiritual resources to think and speak for themselves, to resist patriarchal control as they live out a religious vocation, and in some cases, to recover ‘the feminine face of the Divine’.

While these are fascinating insights, they do not tell the whole story of nineteenth-century women’s theology. If ‘a theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix’, feminist critics have considered only the ‘matrix’ of gender relations. It is time to consider how women were interpreting their religion in relation to other concerns – intellectual, emotional, ethical - in which, as human beings, they were implicated. Researchers in women’s history warn against a monolithic approach to women of the past, and against the assumption that gender was the prime factor in their personal identity. Christine Crosby writes,

women are only sometimes “women”, ... gender can at times recede in the face of other attributes – ethnicity, race, class, and so on – and at other times be so dominant as to obscure anything else.

The experience of being female in the nineteenth century differed according to class, family relations, religious affiliation, cultural milieu and temperament. This more nuanced sense of women’s experience is reflected in their religious concerns - sometimes they write solely as ‘women’, at other times with gender constituting part of a concern, and sometimes without it in mind at all. Very little work has been done which recognises women’s contributions to many aspects of reinterpreting the religious tradition within Victorian society and culture.

5 Melnyk, p. xv.
I consider examples of theological writings by women which demonstrate a range of religious concerns. What they have in common is that they all engage with the problem of finding an adequate spirituality for life in their lives and times. The role of women within religion and society is undoubtedly a significant issue, and Martineau, Cobbe, Besant and Butler all make claim to a specific leadership role. But this issue is inseparable from debates about the impact of 'feminine' Christian values on society. This forms the main concern for the novelist Emma Worboise and for many of the collective biographers. A strong social awareness demands responses from Harriet Martineau and Josephine Butler who use forms of non-fiction prose to interpret Christianity in relation to democracy, liberal values and social inclusion. The matter of finding personal meaning dominates in autobiographical writings, and Margaret Oliphant and Anne Brontë challenge the emotional adequacy of Christian beliefs for a modern consciousness. Some of these writers anticipate late twentieth-century developments in theology – feminist Bible criticism in the case of the collective biographers who read the Bible as 'women', and liberation theology in Butler's prioritising of the experience of the oppressed. Although all (bar the Jewish Grace Aguilar, briefly discussed in chapter 6) start from one form or another of Christianity, these women have different priorities and reach different conclusions.

My second emphasis is to foreground the implications of genre for each writer's theology, a matter which has attracted little critical comment. In all literature, form is not merely a vehicle for pre-conceived conceptual content, but itself contributes to meaning. Therefore, in religious writings, the literary form plays a vital role in constructing the theology. This is particularly true in the nineteenth century since different literary forms had particular implications when used by women or men: they implied different claims regarding spiritual authority and subject parameters. These 'secular' literary forms are also more contextualised than the traditional treatise or sermon of the church, in that they come closer to both writer's and reader's quotidian experience. Through their close reference to the audience's contemporary life, these writers effectively reinterpret the theologian's role as well as the religious tradition.

I have chosen writers whose works are not now well known but which are significant in the Victorian religious context and which regain interest when considered as theology. These writers use their chosen genres in resourceful ways to reflect and construct the religious concerns of the time. My thesis will bring to light some of the unheard voices in Victorian religious debates, and thus will contribute to broadening the agenda for studying women's theology in the nineteenth century.
1: The Contexts of Nineteenth-century Women's Theology

The nature of nineteenth-century religious debate

At the present moment, two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do without it; the other they cannot do with it as it is.1

Matthew Arnold's diagnosis of the state of religion in 1875 reveals both the importance of belief in the nineteenth century, and of debates about belief. Religion had been made a vital matter by the late eighteenth-century Methodist revival and the Evangelical movement in the church of England. Both reacted against formalist religious observance and promoted experiential religion, personally appropriated and applied to all aspects of life. This religious 'seriousness' contributed to the identity of the middle classes who were growing in numbers and cultural power.2 The emphasis on a personal relationship with God, and a reliance on the Bible rather than social convention, appealed to the middle-class individualistic and meritocratic ethos. Evangelical Christianity became the prevailing orthodoxy, in terms of doctrine and as the source of high Victorian values. But nineteenth-century religion is characterised more by divisions and debate than by any straightforward conformity. The few parties of 'Old Dissent' split and multiplied in the first half of the century into many new denominations. By 1890 there were 244 officially registered denominations.3 Methodists alone could be New Connexion, Revivalist, Independent or Primitive, not to mention their numerous regional secessions such as the west country Bible Christians.4 Parties also appeared in the established church. The 'high' Oxford or Tractarian movement developed in response to 'low' church Evangelicalism, and the 'Broad' church movement reacted against

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the dogmatic tendencies of both. Protestant voices united against the ‘papal aggression’ of the 1840s and 50s when the Roman Catholic church in England grew in freedom and influence. In the first half of the century much energy was expended in interdenominational debate about doctrines, ecclesiastical structures and practices.

Conflict and debate were increasingly created by pressures from outside the church, threatening the future of religious belief altogether. The earliest challenge Evangelical orthodoxy faced was ethical. As early as the 1840s doubts were expressed concerning the morality of a God who predestined salvation and eternal punishment, doctrines foregrounded by revived Calvinist theology which were deeply troubling to a sensitive humanist understanding. New knowledge, both scientific and historical, challenged a literal belief in the Bible and, particularly through Darwinism in the 1860s, the very concept of a divine benevolent design. Stories of ‘Victorian doubt’ were told by many in the middle and late century who lost their faith and became atheist or agnostic; some like John Stuart Mill and Harriet Martineau with a sense of relief, others like ‘Mark Rutherford’ and Matthew Arnold with profound sorrow. As well as moral and intellectual issues, social changes brought new challenges to the religious tradition. The nineteenth century was a period of urbanisation and industrialisation, the growth of the middle class and the expansion of the urban working class. The structures of the traditional rural community gave way to new social stratifications in which communal church-going was less of a habit. The census taken on 30th March 1851 revealed that only seven million, out of a population of eighteen million, had attended public worship that day. The proportion was smaller in urban areas. Institutionalised Christianity was in many ways on the defensive in the second half of the century.

However, many still hungered for some form of belief. Throughout the century, attempts were made to re-interpret Christianity in more radical ways, from the early-century millenarian sects to the Christian Socialism of Charles Kingsley and the ‘liberation theology’ of Josephine Butler. In the late century, liberal interpretations of Christianity became more accepted. While the Broad Church Essays and Reviews published in 1860 elicited an antagonistic response, Mary Ward’s novel of liberal faith, Robert Elsmere (1888), was received as a work in keeping with the spirit of its time. New forms of belief emerged, some

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7 See chapter 7 of this work.
like Theosophy drawing from other religions altogether. A Daily Telegraph survey in 1904 which posed the question 'Do we believe?' concluded that 'Dogmatic Christianity may indeed have decayed, but those instincts to which as a form of religion it appealed are as fresh and indomitable as ever'.\(^9\) The worldview of secular materialism was the common enemy for late-century spiritual writers as disparate in views as the Theosophist Annie Besant, the Theist Frances Power Cobbe, and the advocate of radical Christianity Josephine Butler. As important as the well-known narrative of lost belief are the stories of finding new forms of faith to meet new religious needs.

A distinct feature of nineteenth-century religious debate is the extent to which it was conducted outside the clerical realms of church and university. The period is characterised by a democratisation of religious discourse. Lay people, including women, appropriated the roles of religious thinker and writer which traditionally had been the prerogative of a theologically educated elite. Middle-class meritocratic values confronted traditional clerical status, bound up as it was with gentry and privilege. Anthony Russell suggests that 'the rising level of education and access to the public and intellectual world' placed 'new demands on the ability and competence of the preacher'.\(^10\) Mid-century, high churchman and priest John Henry Newman rued the loss of clerical authority when he noted that 'Men have hitherto depended on others and especially on the clergy for religious truth: now each man attempts to judge for himself.'\(^11\) Lay people of a reasonable education and some conviction used the press to address an audience of their peers on the religious matters that concerned them most. In the literary marketplace, they required no institutional authorisation, patronage, or specialist training in order to make their ideas public. T. W. Heyck summarises the 'sympathetic' relationship between 'men of letters' and their audience, through which they earned authority:

> Whether novelist, poet, historian, philosopher, or social critic, the man of letters was expected to help the audience through the troubles of economic, social and religious change ... In [the] process of secularisation, the public encouraged the men of letters to act as preachers, moralists, critics and sages, with essentially didactic and prophetic functions.\(^12\)

This applied in all manner of intellectual discourse, and religion was no exception.

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This is not merely the verdict of literary history. Writers then were profoundly conscious of the quasi-priestly role they enacted, or at least aspired to. Thomas Carlyle’s famous lecture ‘The Hero as Man of Letters’ made bold claims. He promoted the man of letters as the ‘spiritual light’ of his time, replacing the prophet, poet and priest in a modern society: ‘the writers of Newspapers, Pamphlets, Poems, Books, these are the real working effective church of a modern country’ he declared. The oral tradition of the sermon and exclusive theological institutions were things of the past — ‘Books are our church ... The Press is to such a degree superseding the Pulpit.’ Carlyle also saw the potential for a wider, national audience — ‘[t]he Writer of a Book, is not he a Preacher preaching, not to this parish or that, but to all men in all times and places?’ The religious writers of the press responded to the age’s tendency towards national rather than local social identity, and a growing preference for authority earned through merit not granted by privilege. They could address anxieties and changes that the church was not in tune with. Carlyle was not alone in these views, nor did they apply only to writers of serious non-fiction prose like his own. The journalist Frances Power Cobbe declared her regular column in the Echo to be her ‘pulpit’, and the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray equated his role to that of the ‘parson’, writing with ‘a solemn prayer to God Almighty...that we may never forget truth and Justice and kindness as the great ends of our profession.’ Geraldine Jewsbury thought of her novel Zoë as ‘a Sermon’, and Margaret Oliphant too claimed a spiritual vocation in writing fiction:

Authors who feel the solemnity of their calling cannot suppress the truth that is within them .... They must go straight on, as the inward voice impels; and He who seeth their hearts will guide them aright.

Even those with official church pulpits, such as John Henry Newman, F. D. Maurice, and numerous less well known clergy, chose to publish novels and autobiographies or to send sermons to religious periodicals rather than publish them as independent pamphlets. Religious thought and preaching had become public property.

The sheer volume of religious publications in the nineteenth century shows how far religious debate became ‘democratised’. Records suggest that a fifth of the books published

15 Quoted in Heyck, p. 39.
between 1814 and 1846 were on religion. Dedicated organisations like the Religious Tract Society and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (both established in the late eighteenth century) disseminated religious literature prolifically, much of it written by laity. More popular than the traditional sermons or treatise were devotional and fictional works—verse, biography, the novel, and tracts. The strict Sabbatarianism that prevailed until the late century meant that reading such works was the only leisure activity allowed on Sundays in many households. Individual religious works became best-sellers, such as John Keble’s devotional poems *The Christian Year* (1827), which sold 378,000 copies before the expiration of copyright in 1873—far more than the 60,000 copies of Tennyson’s seminal *In Memoriam* over twenty years. Catherine Marsh’s religious novel *Memorials of Captain Hedley Vicars* (1856) sold over twice as many copies as *Bleak House* in their first year of publication, in spite of Dickens’ huge popularity, and Charlotte Yonge’s *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) rivalled *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* in sales. Even allowing for the fact that some were purchased for distribution, these are remarkable figures.

Indeed, the religious novel was something of a phenomenon as is testified by surveys like Margaret Maison’s *Search Your Soul, Eustace* and Robert Lee Wolff’s *Losses and Gains*. It was here that interdenominational conflict took place, stories of loss of faith were told, and unorthodox viewpoints were voiced. Increasingly, sermons and treatises succumbed to periodicals which were another phenomenon in the religious publishing world: there were as many periodicals as denominations, and plenty of non-denominational publications such as the *Christian World* magazine (1857) edited by Emma Jane Worboise. Religion formed by far the largest category of monthly publications in the mid-century: in 1864 there were 400,000 religious magazines compared with 350,000 ‘useful, entertaining, educational’ together. The fact that so much religious debate was conducted in the secular literary marketplace was of particular advantage to women.

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Women and Religion

Women’s religious roles in the nineteenth century were characterised by a paradoxical mixture of empowerment and limitation. While these varied according to individuals and denominations, there were boundaries to negotiate in most cases. The religious revivals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had effectively promoted the religious status of women and endowed them with spiritual responsibility. Evangelical spirituality required a personal conversion and emphasised an almost emotional ‘experience’ of God in daily life, imbuing the everyday with spiritual significance.²² Lord Shaftesbury wrote of ‘a deep, earnest, solemn sense of direct and individual responsibility in every man and woman born into this world’, which invested all action and speech with vocational meaning.²³ This spiritualising of the everyday affirmed female experience which in formalised Western religion had been considered ‘less worthy of divine engagement’.²⁴ Evangelical religion also promoted personal study of the Bible and the application of its meanings to everyday life. In all, this was an individualistic spirituality which created ‘a powerful sense of self’ in believers, and a ‘profoundly meritocratic’ ethos which could challenge the structures and values of society.²⁵ These values helped empower the ‘Tolpuddle Martyrs’ to stand up to their oppressive landlord in the 1830s; five out of the six labourers were Methodists, and their leader a Methodist lay preacher. The same ethos was a significant factor for women gaining social power in the nineteenth century.²⁶

Evangelical religion gave women a distinct role and a voice. In early Methodism’s informal ‘cottage religion’ which did not have established hierarchies, women could lead reflections and prayers and give each other spiritual counsel.²⁷ Some had more public opportunities, and Christine Krueger discusses women like Mary Bosanquet Fletcher and Sarah Crosby who preached to a mixed audience as evangelists. The Methodist emphasis on sharing religious experience enabled them to do this while apparently obviating ‘the grand

²² Although the Methodist and Evangelical movements began as separate phenomena, they had much in common and are often conflated in discussions of the effect they had on early Victorian religion.
²⁵ Davidoff and Hall, pp. 88,77.
²⁶ Olive Banks, for example, argues for Evangelicalism as a significant (if problematic) factor in Victorian feminism. See Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement (Oxford: Robinson & Co., 1981), pp. 3-4.
objection’ which denied them the authority to interpret scripture.28 As one preacher, Agnes Bulmer wrote, in this style of preaching, ‘the more difficult and abstract ministrations of the pulpit [are] brought down to special states and circumstances.29 Evangelicalism inspired women to apply Christian values to wider realms of life than the merely personal. ‘Action is the life of virtue, and the world is the theatre of action’ wrote Hannah More, a role model for respectable female religious commitment.30 On a local level, this included the teaching of children and philanthropic work among the poor. Many churches formed a ‘Dorcas Society’ where women gathered to make clothes for impoverished families as did their biblical namesake. Women distributed religious literature for national societies, and collected signatures and raised funds for reform campaigns to abolish slavery and promote temperance. Daughters and wives of clergy made hidden contributions and frequently acted as ‘unpaid “curates”’,31 even with their own advice literature such as Hints to a Clergyman’s Wife: or Female Parochial Duties Illustrated (1832) and Female Visitor to the Poor (1852). The author of the latter wrote of her ‘religious career’.32 For the leisured middle-class woman, religion could provide meaningful work and a social contribution while other outlets were still closed to her.

Gender stereotypes attributed particular religious capacities to women. In the early to mid nineteenth century, middle-class gender roles were polarised more than ever before, on the basis of ‘separate spheres’. Men’s realm was the public sphere, dealing with business and government, while women’s realm was the private sphere. In the domestic ideal, women symbolised the values of the Christian home, love, purity, moral refinement – values not to be found in the harsher public world. She was ‘the Angel in the house’ as Coventry Patmore’s famous poem celebrated. As John Tosh summarises in his work on Victorian middle-class masculinity, women provided the men of the family with ‘psychological reassurance and refuge from the hard world outside’, offering the ‘intimacy and comfort so painfully lacking in the outside world’.33 John Ruskin clarifies that woman’s role was to create for man a home which was ‘the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from injury, but from all terror, doubt,

29 Quoted in Krueger, p. 52.
32 Maria Charlesworth, quoted in Davidoff and Hall, p. 148.
33 John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 68, 123.
and division’, to counter ‘the anxieties of the outer life’. Evangelical religion added a strong spiritual dimension to this role; it became a work of redemption. Femininity became identified with Christianity, and Sarah Lewis claimed a unique social role for women because

[God] has deigned to put in woman’s heart the only feeling … which affords the faintest representation of his most unextinguishable love to us, his erring and wayward children.

For many it was a truism that men were essentially earthly, ‘sensual’, ‘worldly’, while women were ‘more spiritual and unselfish’; it was widely believed that ‘[the] gospel harmonises best with feminine nature’. Woman now had a ‘mission’ to elevate man’s nature by eliciting his spiritual dimension.

This identification of femininity with Christianity, and both with the private sphere, had considerable implications in the discourse of religion. As Barbara Taylor suggests, the fact that Christian values were generally confined to the private sphere deprived them of their radical potential:

The fate of women and Christian selflessness having been thus bound together, the dependency and social powerlessness of the first became a virtual guarantee of the social irrelevance of the second: once God had settled into the parlour, Mammon had free range in public life.

Domesticating Christianity prevented it from taking full effect in the economic and political institutions of the public sphere. This was a source of concern to many women who wanted a fully Christian society. Many of them claimed a greater social role in order to extend the influence of gospel values, arguing that woman’s redemption was not for individuals alone, but for the whole of society. This was Sarah Stickney Ellis’s vision for woman’s mission:

As Christians, how wide is the prospect which opens before you – how various the claims upon your attention – how vast your capabilities – how

37 Sarah Hale, Woman’s Record: or, Sketches of all Distinguished Women from ‘The Beginning’ till A.D. 1850 (New York: Harpers and Bros, 1853), p. xxxvii.
deep the responsibility which those capabilities involve! ... you are one of a family – of a social circle – of a community – of a nation...39

Hence many ‘angels in the house’ became ‘angels out of the house’.40 They applied the values of their domestic activities (nurturing, teaching, upholding moral ideals) to a wider social sphere. Such was the ethos in which women conducted their works of philanthropy and reform, and challenged social policy through protest fiction.41 To achieve this, some approved the indirect strategy of ‘influence’ on men with power; at the other extreme was ‘apocalyptic feminism’ which envisioned a very public, female-led social regeneration in the face of male moral bankruptcy.42 The work of Emma Jane Worboise, the collective biographers, and Josephine Butler, will be seen to take various positions along this continuum.

However, social convention set limits to female spiritual activities and, in particular, female spiritual leadership. In the first half of the century, women’s religious activities were generally bound by the expectation that they should be unpaid and not involve a public role. As Methodism became an established denomination, it developed a hierarchy which reflected social norms and in 1802 the decision was made virtually to ban women’s preaching. From then on, female preaching became associated with just a few traditions of Old Dissent (Unitarians and Quakers), a few minor Methodist offshoots, and working class radicalism. It was not an option in most respectable denominations in which the middle classes worshiped. In missionary and philanthropic work, ‘while women provided most of the labour ... men were appointed to the organising bodies and served as executives.’43 This is exemplified by the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London, where women were not allowed to take the platform and address the audience, although they had done most of the canvassing, letter writing and fundraising. The divinely ordained place of women became an issue of contention among delegates.44 Women’s religious work was also constrained by voluntarism, based on the middle-class ideal of their economic dependence. In the 1840s and 50s campaigns developed to offer women professional opportunities in the church, resulting in the establishment of Anglican convents and the restoration of the role of deaconess. Yet even here, ‘most clergymen wanted them limited to philanthropic rather than sacred functions and

42 Helsinger et al, p. xv.
43 Shimam, p. 44.
kept in strict subordination to the male hierarchy'.\textsuperscript{45} While no doubt many women were content with the opportunities presented to them, Ruth Jenkins writes of the 'spiritual crises' experienced by others whose sense of calling was severely curtailed by social realities.\textsuperscript{46}

What this state of affairs meant in practice varied greatly, since the boundaries that regulated publicity and authority varied according to the local milieu in which individual women lived. The different 'religious careers' of four women of roughly contemporary dates demonstrate something of the diversity of opportunity and response. Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) had great intellectual ability and energy, encouraged by a liberal Unitarian education. She was bitterly frustrated by the 'tyranny' of her family who expected her to conform to the conventions of upper middle-class femininity - which for Nightingale meant trivial occupations and an inane round of hospitality. She wrote angrily of the gap between spiritual aspiration and opportunity, particularly for single women: 'Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity - these three - and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?'\textsuperscript{47} As well as pursuing her own unconventional career as a nurse and a nursing reformer, she supported the campaigns to restore Anglican convents and the female diaconate. By contrast, Josephine Butler (1828-1906) was of similar social status, but came from a socially active Anglican family where her gender was never a restraint. She modelled her religious career on her father's, and in a campaign on the particularly unfeminine subject of prostitution was supported by an unusually 'liberated' husband. On her public lecture tours, she preached a radical Christianity in the context of her campaign and was both adored and maligned for it.

Less exceptional figures include Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901) who took a conservative position on the role of women. Her high church convictions reinforced her submission to church authority, and she saw herself as a disciple to John Keble and subjected her work to her father's control. Nonetheless, she created a well-recognised role for herself as servant to the Oxford Movement by writing popular novels based on its principles. Finally, Emma Jane Worboise (1825-87) was something of a pragmatist. She had a successful career writing novels of an Evangelical bent and editing the non-denominational \textit{Christian World} magazine for several decades. In neither did she engage in polemical debates but nevertheless

\textsuperscript{45} Mermin, p. 108.  
promoted women's greater influence on society.\footnote{For a discussion of how Worboise's editorial work achieved this, see Julie Melnyk, 'Emma Jane Worboise and the \textit{Christian World} Magazine: Christian Publishing and Women's Empowerment', \textit{Victorian Periodicals Review} 29.2 (Summer 1996), pp. 131-145.} These four examples illustrate the variety of religious convention and opportunity in which women constructed their religious vocations.

Women's Religious Writing

While opportunities for religious professions were limited, writing provided enormous scope for women as a religious activity. The expansion of the literary market in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries allowed both men and women with a decent education to communicate with a wide public. Unlike official church leadership, the literary market required neither institutional authority nor professional membership in order to participate. While there was some early hostility to women writing, it was generally a socially acceptable way for them to reach the public sphere without compromising feminine ideals, particularly if it was undertaken as an amateur activity. Self-effacement could be retained as no public appearance was involved; in fact, publicity could be avoided altogether by publishing anonymously, as Harriet Martineau did at first, or by using a pseudonym as Anne Brontë did in the genderless name 'Acton Bell'. While some women used their writing to earn a living, it did not necessarily mean financial independence – 'Charlotte Elizabeth' (Charlotte Tonna) wrote on a voluntary basis for the Dublin Tract Society and Charlotte Yonge gave all her earnings to the church. Neither did writing need to interfere with domestic priorities, since it could be done at home and fitted around other duties. Elizabeth Gaskell recalled writing her novels at the dining room table, with all doors open to other parts of the house so she could be accessible to her family and servants.

The religious qualities associated with 'woman' – that of educator and moral influencer – legitimised her writing to disseminate Christian messages through society. It was part of the role of the angel reaching out of the house. In the context of the Evangelical revivals in particular, believers had an imperative to spread the gospel and its values in a world which lacked them. Many women writers in this religious climate felt impelled by the knowledge that 'Scripture itself imposed on the individual a duty to attend to that Word, the authority to interpret it, and the duty to spread it – to speak for God'.\footnote{Krueger, p. 8.} Hannah More was a seminal figure as an Evangelical polemicist and social critic, in the 1790s and early 1800s...
publishing poems, tales, tracts, essays, and novels. Her series of *Cheap Repository Tracts* were still being debated in the 1820s. Harriet Martineau considered More a role model for her own work and she features as the first entry in many of the collective biographies of effective modern religious women.\(^5^0\) Christine Krueger argues that More's achievement in social discourse was not only to 'democratise' it, but 'to feminise it as well.' The same can be said for her impact on religious discourse. Scriptural compunction and the attributed 'feminine' ability to teach enabled More and her followers to write in the spirit of 'prophecy', speaking out God's word to a society which did not live up to its Christian ideals.\(^5^1\) In her wake, the Evangelical Charlotte Tonna undertook 'literary labours in the Lord's cause;\(^5^2\) and a similar motivation for religious reform underpins the work of Unitarians like Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell. While their beliefs may have differed widely, More remained a powerful role model of female religious action through writing.

The form used by the female religious writer had important implications. Literary genres were to an extent 'gendered' according to the intellectual and spiritual capacities attributed to each sex. Carol Christ notes that non-fiction prose was dominated by male writers, who aspired to the 'strenuously masculine ideal' of the man of letters delivering wisdom on serious moral and philosophical subjects. The genre's 'claims to broad learning, original thought, and spiritual authority' were 'difficult for women to assume'. In contrast, poetry and the novel were 'feminised' genres, drawing from the domestic experience and emotional life in which women were thought to excel.\(^5^3\) Even those who promoted women's writing as a social contribution supported the notion of separate literary spheres. John Stuart Mill, while arguing that they were culturalised rather than intrinsic characteristics, agreed with the general view that 'the general bent of [women's] talents is toward the practical', rather than the 'speculative' or 'theoretical'. He agreed also with their general 'deficiency of originality' in terms of generating 'great and luminous ideas'.\(^5^4\) In a work on female education which continued to be popular throughout the nineteenth century, Hannah More suggested a female incapacity for the skills needed to logically argue a concept. Women's minds were 'inferior' in the functions of:

- comparing, analysing, and separating ... ideas; that deep and patient thinking which goes to the bottom of a subject; ... that power of

\(^{50}\) 'Female Writers on Practical Divinity', *Monthly Repository* First series XVII (1822), pp. 593-5.

\(^{51}\) Krueger, p. 60.

\(^{52}\) Quoted in Krueger, p. 128.


arrangement which knows how to link a thousand connected ideas in one dependent chain...  

These conventions affected the forms of religious writing which women undertook. Genres were considered appropriately feminine which applied religion to personal experience or mediated received doctrines. Collectively termed ‘practical divinity’, these included novels, tracts, tales, teaching material for children, devotional works, verse and hymns. More formal, doctrinal argument and the original interpretation of scripture were deemed beyond the capacity of the female mind and beyond her ordained province. In religious, as well as other intellectual discourse, male and female abilities were correlated with the hierarchy of theory above practice. More’s introduction to her Essay on the Character and Practical Writings of St Paul (1815) illustrates the conventional boundaries. She felt the need to reassure her reader that she approached her subject ‘with no little diffidence’, and that she would draw on Paul’s instructions on ‘every-day practice’, avoiding ‘doctrinal’ and ‘controversial parts’. Written half a century later, when boundaries were a little less fixed, Frances Power Cobbe’s anonymous Essay on the Theory of Intuitive Morals was reviewed as ‘the work of a masculine and lofty mind’, since it was still assumed that such a work of discursive theology would have a male author. Her work, along with that of other essayists like Annie Besant, made new paths for women’s religious writing.

The same negotiations of boundaries that characterise women’s other religious activities can be seen in their religious writing. Denominations and individual contexts varied. High church women like Charlotte Yonge and Elizabeth Sewell, with a keen sense of submitting to the church’s authority, wrote only novels. Lower church women often had a more liberal attitude to spiritual authority; the Evangelical Dora Greenwell, for example, published The Covenant of Life and Peace (1867) which consists of doctrinal arguments as well as their application to daily living. Unitarians were the most egalitarian denomination of all in terms of gender, and some of its female adherents engaged in the ‘masculine’ form of non-fiction prose to argue doctrinal points. Joanna Baillie’s A View of the General Tenour of the New Testament regarding the Nature and Dignity of Jesus Christ (1831) and Harriet Martineau’s Monthly Repository essays present logical arguments which take issue with other theological views and freely interpret Bible quotation. Experiential genres themselves could achieve more in terms of original interpretation than they were given credit for when they

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were considered ‘safe’ options for women. For example, Robert Kachur illustrates that devotional works on the book of Revelation did not merely apply received wisdom; this biblical book is itself ‘so radically open-ended that to write about it is to interpret it’, allowing the women to offer their own ideas of the utopian society which the apocalyptic text foretells.58 Worboise’s novels and Bronte’s lyric poetry also constitute very particular interpretations of the Christian tradition – they are not merely imitative. In these works, the tidy division between theory and practice breaks down.

To return to Bernard Lonergan’s definition of a theologian, women ‘mediate[d] between [their] cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix’.59 The conventions of permitted writing were therefore not hard and fast, and were eroded as the century went on. Both directly and indirectly, women contributed widely to theological discussion such that by the mid-century Ruskin was condemning the proliferation of women ‘profanely’ practising the ‘one dangerous science ... crawling up the steps of [God’s] judgement throne, to divide it with him’.60 As Melnyk points out, this protest certainly suggests that women’s theology was being noticed and was taking some effect.61

Literary Theology

The use of ‘lay’ literary genres had implications for the theology women wrote. Democratised religious discourse moved away from specialised religious forms and language and was therefore more accessible to the reader. Walter Bagehot commented on this trend in the National Review in 1855:

In religion the appeal now is not to the technicalities of scholars, or the fiction of recluse schoolmen, but to the deep feelings, the sure sentiments, the painful strivings of all who think and hope. And this appeal to the many necessarily brings with it a consequence. We must speak to the many so that they will listen – that they will like to listen – that they will understand. It is of no use addressing them with the forms of science, or the rigour of accuracy, or the tedium of exhaustive discussion. The multitude are impatient of system, desirous of brevity, puzzled by formality.62

59 Bernard Lonergan, see Introduction of this work, p. 2.
60 ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’, p. 87.
61 Melnyk, p. xii.
The use of popular forms of literature meant writers were speaking in the terms of ordinary, secular reality. Stories and images taken from familiar experience and contemporary social situations became the loci for expressing religious ideas. This contrasts with the more abstract terms of formal theology, remote from the readers’ everyday reality. Literary theology thus demands less of a mental leap from its audience, and presents religious meaning on a continuum with the everyday. As Sallie McFague argues, literary theology depicts

a story of ordinary people and events which is the context for envisaging and understanding the strange and the extraordinary...people are not asked to be ‘religious’ or taken out of this world; rather, the transcendent comes to ordinary reality and disrupts it.63

Such a method is modelled in the Bible, itself a compilation of literary theology:

We are never given a theology of the kingdom ..., but we are told stories about it, about people who want the kingdom and why they want it; we are shown metaphors ... which image it forth.64

Formal, abstract theology is a cultural derivation from the scriptural tradition rather than the tradition itself. Thus the writers of literary theology continue the original, biblical tradition of speaking ‘in parables’, and depicting “‘religious” matters in “secular” terms’.65

McFague argues that, for the sake of maintaining a religion’s freshness and relevance, it is the theologian’s vital task to find new metaphors and narratives from contemporary culture to express religious meanings.66 This work is a necessary part of mediating between a religion and the cultural context. Thus, nineteenth-century writers who expressed religious meanings through contemporary images, narratives and social affairs were performing a vital role, renewing the tradition’s relevance and accessibility in a modern world which profoundly doubted the value of traditional theology. This activity is perhaps most evident in imaginative writing forms such as lyric poetry, the novel and autobiography. Domestic and personal experiences form the material through which religion is explored. But in non-fiction too, contemporary situations become the context for new interpretations of Christianity, be that the 1832 Reform Act, as it was for Martineau, or the 1860s Contagious Diseases Acts, as for

64 Ibid., p. 40.
65 Ibid., p. 3.
66 Ibid., p. 88.
Butler. In all of these, the material of the everyday is shown in the light of a particular understanding of faith. It thus becomes the vehicle for a new understanding of that faith.

Literary theology demands a different response from traditional theology. The latter's language of propositions and argument requires intellectual assent. Contextual, experiential writing forms elicit a recognition of the familiar, and invite the reader to share in the imaginative act of seeing the familiar in a new light. Perhaps the reader is drawn into an empathetic response, and thus a vicarious experience of faith or doubt. Dinah Mulock, one of the most popular of mid-Victorian novelists, commented thus on the writer's power to reach hearts and minds:

His power is three-fold – over heart, reason and fancy. The orator we hear eagerly, but as his voice fades from us its lessons depart: the moral philosopher we read and digest, by degrees, in a serious, ponderous way; but the really good writer of fiction takes us by storm.67

What she wrote about the novelist applied to all writing with imaginative and emotional dimensions. George Eliot too felt that 'art' could more effectively instil a moral or philosophical viewpoint through its subtler, indirect method, than the more overt discourse of 'hundreds of sermons and philosophical dissertations.'68 The goal of literary theology was not so much to impart ideas as to elicit a response.

There was also the feeling among some nineteenth-century writers that literary language was best suited to religious subjects on philosophical grounds. Traditional theology which defined the nature of God and systematised divine-human relations depended on a scientific understanding of language. In this, language was directly referential. It was a neutral medium used by the subject to describe objective reality. Twentieth-century developments in the philosophy of language have shown how language itself constructs our perceptions, and that that language is not neutral but embodies preconceptions and ideological values. For many current theologians, this has meant a reassessment of claims that absolute truth can be perceived or communicated.69 Some nineteenth-century writers anticipated this by suggesting that a tentative, 'literary' language was more appropriate for religion than the scientific

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language of statement. Several of the Romantic poets identified the work of the imagination with spiritual insight. Samuel Taylor Coleridge in particular sought to restore a sense of the Bible as literature, communicating through ‘a system of symbols’.\textsuperscript{70} Stephen Prickett argues that Coleridge and Wordsworth’s sensibility formed a ‘minority tradition’ in the nineteenth century based on the union of the poetic and religious; religious language is above all symbolic, and thus suggestive and ambiguous, rather than directly referring to an absolute reality which is reduced to statement.\textsuperscript{71}

Several post-romantic writers voiced this preference for a literary theology. John Keble preferred the humility of metaphors and similes which ‘guide us by gentle hints’, and like the sacraments ‘[preach] silently to man’s aesthetic sensibilities’.\textsuperscript{72} George MacDonald rejected the absolute truth claims of prepositional language:

\begin{quote}
We are far too anxious to be definite and to have finished, well-polished, sharp-edged systems – forgetting that the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it is to be wrong, the more impossible it is to be right.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

He chose mythopoeic fantasy as his theological method. Matthew Arnold most explicitly contrasts the ‘scientific’ and ‘poetic’ modes of religious language, the former speaking of God through ‘the ideas of substance, identity, causation, design, and so on’ while the latter might conceive that even the term ‘God’ is poetic, ‘a term thrown out, so to speak, at a not fully grasped object of the speaker’s consciousness’.\textsuperscript{74} The language of metaphor made humbler truth claims than the language of statement. Literary theology, then, had a particularly important role to play in a century when the absolute truth claims of traditional theology were to so many untenable. Whether the writers intended it or not, the forms they used implicitly recognised the limits of human perception and language. They could suggest rather than state, and allow for ambiguity and ambivalence in a way that discursive theology could not. Rather than monologic arguments for belief, they offered instead religious reflections and possibilities which could have value in a reader’s life.

\textsuperscript{73} Quoted in Prickett, Romanticism and Religion, p. 225.
Yet in spite of its modest truth claims, literary theology provided a powerful tool for reinterpreting the religious tradition. Metaphor is more than an image chosen to communicate a pre-existent concept. Rather, it is a ‘conceptual vehicle’ with ‘cognitive potentialities’. Janet Soskice argues for the ‘interanimation’ theory of metaphor: by suggesting one thing in the terms of another, the unique juxtaposition creates new insights into both terms. So when Jesus spoke of God in terms of a father celebrating the return of a wayward son, he created a new understanding of what God could be like in first-century Jewish culture, and suggested new understandings of what a father could be like. As the familiar illuminates the spiritual, so the spiritual illuminates the everyday. Thus, as Sallie McFague says, metaphor is ‘a way of knowing, not just a way of communicating’ and it dissolves the theory/practice division in religious discourse.

What is particularly powerful about metaphorical language is that it is not a specialised form of religious language, but the normal ‘way we think’. As McFague argues, ‘[m]etaphor is indigenous to all human learning from the simplest to the most complex’. The unknown can only be conceived of through the terms of the familiar; meeting any new phenomenon provokes the question ‘what is it like?’ asking for the unknown to be explained in terms of the known. Even in science, new conceptual possibilities are created by the juxtaposition of metaphorical terms in phenomena described as a ‘light wave’ or a ‘magnetic field’. As well as being conceptually rich, metaphors structure our responses and behaviour at a subconscious level. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain:

[M]etaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people.

Thus, theology which suggests spiritual realities by means of metaphors, images, and narratives can form a model according to which the reader may begin to respond to the world. In this light, women’s literary theology made a vital contribution to the reinterpretation of religion in nineteenth-century Britain.

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76 *Speaking in Parables*, pp. 4, 31.
77 McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 31, 32.
78 As Janet Soskice and Sallie McFague both argue; see Soskice, p. 103, and McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 67-8.
During the early decades of the nineteenth century, the novel had gained a new status as a serious literary form. From being considered light entertainment, the novel had found a 'purpose', as many reviews noted, to engage with serious issues of the day. The genre was used to instruct and guide in matters legal, historical, scientific, political and religious. By mid-century, novelists like Scott, Dickens and the Brontës had brought 'seriousness and dignity' to the form, and created 'a totally new image of the novelist as now not a mere storyteller but a prophet and a sage'. George Eliot felt writers fulfilled the 'office of teacher or influencer of the public mind'. Fiction therefore played an enormous role in religious debate. Writers as diverse as Thackeray, Dinah Mulock Craik and George MacDonald claimed a quasi-ecclesiastical status in declaring their fiction to be a form of preaching. Novels were used to argue denominational positions, to promote 'practical divinity' which applied belief to life, and to voice unconventional positions of belief and doubt.

For women, the novel provided perhaps the easiest way into public religious debate. It required no specialist training but could reach a wide audience, and the dominant form of domestic realism accorded with perceived feminine expertise. In 1852 George Henry Lewes wrote of the compatibility of gender with form:

Of all departments of literature, Fiction is the one to which, by nature and by circumstance, women are best adapted...The domestic experiences which form the bulk of women's knowledge find an appropriate form in novels; while the very nature of fiction calls for that predominance of Sentiment which we have already attributed to the feminine mind...The joys

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1 E.g. anon., 'Novels with a Purpose', Westminster Review New series XXVI (July 1864), pp. 24-49; see also Robert A. Colby's survey Fiction with a Purpose: Major and Minor Nineteenth-Century Novels (Bloomington; London: Indiana University Press, 1968).  
and sorrows of affection, the incidents of domestic life, the aspirations and fluctuations of emotional life, assume typical forms in the novel.⁴

Many women used the novel to contribute to religious debate from the full range of religious positions. Out of about a hundred and fifty religious novelists listed in Margaret Maison’s survey, seventy-four are women, and many of the most prolific authors are women.⁵

The novel was a favored genre in religious discourse due to its extensive readership. By mid-century it was the most popular form, and a writer for the Spectator was complaining of the ‘preposterous place’ it had in British literature. He also observed the contemporary ‘predominant system of conveying all instruction, from the deepest difficulties of religious inquiry to the elementary facts of physical geography, through the medium of stories’⁶. Individual religious novels reached remarkably high sales figures. The Evangelical Catherine Marsh’s Memorials of Captain Headley Vicars (1856) sold 78,000 within a year and Hesba Stretton’s Jessica’s First Prayer (1868) and Christie’s Old Organ (1873) each sold over a million in hard cover.⁷ Dinah Mulock Craik expressed a sense of the novelist’s power:

The essayist may write for his hundreds: the preacher preaches to his thousands; but the novelist counts his audience by millions ... The amount of new thoughts scattered broadcast over society within one month of the appearance of a really popular novel, the innumerable discussions it creates, and the general influence which it exercises in the public mind form one of the most remarkable facts of the day.⁸

Religious writers, both clergy and lay, realized the advantages fiction offered in reaching a larger audience than did sermons and tracts, and in a more palatable way.

Emma Jane Worboise (1825-87) was perhaps the most prolific writer of popular religious novels in the century.⁹ She published around fifty novels in her forty-year career which virtually spanned the second half of the century, possibly propelled into a writing

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⁶ Quoted in Robert Colby, p. 18.


⁸ Quoted in Robert Colby, pp. 10, 17.

⁹ Her married name was Guyton, but she published as Emma Jane Worboise.
career by her father’s bankruptcy. Many were serialised in the ecumenical monthly *Christian World Magazine and Family Visitor*, edited by James Clarke until she took over the role in 1866. These all rapidly appeared in volume form and many went through multiple editions, two of them reaching American audiences. About half her books were reviewed in the *Athenaeum* and the *Academy*, suggesting they had a reasonably wide appeal. In 1880, Worboise featured twenty-seventh out of forty-eight favourite authors in a survey of the reading habits of girls aged eleven to nineteen. Along with other religious novelists (Charlotte Yonge, Hesba Stretton, Dinah Mulock Craik and Grace Aguilar), she topped the popularity of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and Alfred Tennyson. She evidently wrote ‘the [kind] of novel which formed the mainstay of lending libraries in the later nineteenth century’, whose ‘collective contribution to the formation of late nineteenth-century culture was immense.’

Worboise blended the popular domestic novel and a good dash of sensation with spiritual themes. On one level, she wrote an Evangelical challenge to High Church theology. Her background was Congregational, and most of her novels assert the value of an individually discovered faith, ‘simple and earnest’, with ‘nothing about baptismal grace, or the decrees of the Church; no assumption of priestly authority; no jargon from “the fathers”’, but simply ‘salvation through Jesus Christ’. As in much other Evangelical fiction, conversion is central and often improbable. But for Worboise, just as important as coming to faith is the exploration of what it means to live fully by that faith. She engages in wider cultural debates about how Christianity should be applied to life. Her central characters are usually girls growing into young women, discovering what faith can do to equip them for the challenges of life. Worboise made one excursion into biography when she wrote a life of Thomas Arnold. In this she continues the theme of her novels, applying Christianity to the private and public spheres, with the extended possibilities afforded by a male life.

Worboise adds her voice to the debate about feminised, privatised Christianity. In *A Wife’s Trials* she explores what resources vital religion can offer a woman living entirely within the domestic sphere. In *Married Life*, she argues against the limitation of Christian ethics to the private realm. Worboise extends this theme in *Violet Vaughan* to envision

11 *The Wife’s Trials and Triumphs* (1855) and *Lillingstones of Lillingstone* (1864) were published in New York in 1860 and 1872 respectively.
Christian values at work in the public masculine world, and this is also the rationale underlying her *Life of Thomas Arnold*. As well as exploring the relations between belief and action, and spirituality and gender, Worboise also aims to advertise the well-worn principles of Christianity in terms that are relevant to her readers’ lives. She gives religious themes a popular edge by embedding them in contemporary life and in the literary genres of romance and sensation. Her novels become parables in that they are:

> stor[ies] of ordinary people and events which [are] the context for envisaging and understanding the strange and the extraordinary. In the parabolic tradition people are not asked to be ‘religious’ or taken out of this world; ... The parable sees ‘religious’ matters in ‘secular’ terms.\(^{15}\)

Worboise creates parables from Victorian scenes of life, restoring the ‘strange and the extraordinary’ factor which traditional narratives may have lost.

**A Pilgrimage to Selfhood**

*A Wife’s Trials* (1855) is a sermon on what faith can do for women when conventional sources of fulfilment fail. It is a version of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the classic tale of an individual engaging with a hostile world. In this case, it is brought into the home and the trials are distinctly female experiences. The heroine, Lilian Grey, is in turn disappointed by marriage, motherhood and life as a lady of leisure, the roles which society constructs for her. The narrator presents faith as a source of personal identity independent of these social structures. That the *Athenaeum* reviewer voiced some impatience with yet another ‘victim-wife’ story, albeit a ‘spirited and amusing’ one, suggests that Worboise had picked a popular theme.\(^{16}\) It evidently struck a chord with many as it went through eight reprints and was published in the United States.

The hope of fulfilment in marriage becomes Lilian’s first disappointment. A lively nineteen year old, she is engaged to Basil and has high expectations of marriage. She confides to her sister:

> Yes, that is it, Elizabeth; I shall be Basil’s wife, and that thought puts away all my sadness. I must be happy while I am with him. It would be dreadful

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to go amongst strangers if I were not going with my husband; but his mother will be my mother, and his sisters will be my sisters, and his home and his friends will be mine also. Oh, Elizabeth, I wish you were as happy as I am! 17

While experience proves her naïve, this is no more than an expression of the Victorian ideal of conjugal unity, the wife’s identity subsumed into her husband’s. But the intimacy Lilian hopes for does not materialize. Basil’s affections are undermined by his family’s constant criticism of Lilian, despising her social and educational inferiority. Basil places loyalty to his family and their aristocratic interests before loyalty to his wife, and a series of misunderstandings and tensions build up deep discord between him and Lilian. Marriage becomes for her a lonely experience, excluded from the family she hoped to join. The narrator points out Lilian’s particular emotional vulnerability because she lacks any strong sense of personal identity outside her social roles,

where there is no strong and abiding root of principle — simple Christian principle — in the human soul, that is tossed upon the waves, and ebbs and flows with the life-current of this troublous world. (18)

Lilian’s becomes a quest for a transcendent source of identity.

Motherhood brings a new set of trials. The experience which was above all meant to fulfil a Victorian woman proves to be painfully isolating. Basil’s social life takes him away from the home and Lilian is left alone and struggling to cope:

Lilian was almost sorry when the doctor advised her migration to the drawing room; it seemed a breaking-up of the quiet, happy life she had led since the birth of her little one. The drawing room was an open ground; any one might come there. Basil would never care to sit reading and chatting and petting her by the hour together, when they were every moment liable to interruption.

...after dinner he took his hat, and told Lilian that now she was nearly well again he must just look in at his club, and see what the fellows were doing there. He should not be late; but they had better not wait tea.

Lilian saw him depart with tolerable composure, but it required all her stock of fortitude to refrain from tears as she saw him disappear. (87-88)

Although Basil is little more than a caricature, Lilian’s experience is a stereotype of what many Victorian wives no doubt faced. Happiness in the domestic role is made impossible by a

husband’s neglect, financial ignorance which leads them into debt, and hostile in-laws. As a wife, Lilian is in a passive position, her entire life governed by her husband’s priorities.

Through these trials Lilian reaches a point of crisis and conversion. She briefly attempts to rival Basil’s neglect with a hectic social life of her own, but it is brought home to her that a woman who assumes the freedoms of a man pays heavy consequences. To Lilian’s profound remorse, her neglected baby catches a preventable illness and dies. Retaliation does not bring satisfaction. The narrator, however, is not judgmental but portrays Lilian’s predicament with sympathy: ‘There was a void in her heart, a weight dull and heavy on her spirits, and a languor on her physical frame that frightened her attendants ... Basil never came to comfort his wife’ (144-5). Lilian finds that, when the expectations of her social identity have failed, there is nothing left:

A great darkness was upon her soul; she felt that every spring of earthly happiness was dried up. Love! had not she given her purest, her deepest, and it had failed her? Pleasure! has she not sought it under every shape and guise – and the phantom only mocked her, and allured her to her confusion and disappointment! All was hollow, empty, vain. (111)

This emotional experience takes on metaphysical dimensions. When grieving the loss of her child, Lilian undergoes a spiritual experience: ‘it seemed as if the bodily form alone lay on the curtained bed in that quiet room, while the spirit slumbered or wandered far away into the shadowy regions of an unknown world’ (145). She turns to faith as a source of consolation from outside social roles.

The second half of the novel explores how this faith can give meaning to a woman’s domestic life. Trials continue for Lilian. She has to live in reduced circumstances due to debt, with Basil’s family still hostile and himself still extravagant and neglectful. But Lilian gains from her new faith a strong sense of self, and the confidence to direct her life. She is still limited by circumstances but is no longer mentally confined by them. She embraces domestic economy and finds satisfaction in practical work and caring for three children who are born to her. She undertakes a programme of self-education guided by the local minister’s sister, Miss Williams, ostensibly to make herself a better companion to Basil; but all these activities give her a great deal of satisfaction in terms of her own personal growth:

How it delighted her to find things, which had formerly been incomprehensible or obscure, gradually growing clear and distinct...It was to Lilian like walking in a Paradise of flowers, with permission to cull all, but with time only for the gathering of a few. (267)
Spiritual kinship overrides class distinctions, so Lilian enjoys the companionship of Miss Williams and her house servant Bridget, with whom 'a week's cooperation in useful, hearty labour, is worth more than a year's chatting, dancing, and visiting, for the purpose of bringing [women] heart to heart' (247). In these women's lives, faith translates into friendship, purposeful activity and self-development which thrive without reference to the largely absent man of the house. Lilian attains a strong identity which sustains her independent of financial or marital ease. When her husband finally converts, she is the spiritual leader ('You will be my teacher, my Lily', he says), although what this will mean in practice is left unexplored (335).

In all of this, Lilian has no otherworldly experiences. Worboise's novel is a parable, in that spiritual possibilities are found entirely within the ordinary round of life, 'intimated indirectly' through the human situation. Sallie McFague suggests that in parables, 'hearing and acceptance' of religious meanings 'take place through imaginative participation when an old word or story or event is suddenly seen in a new setting, an insight with implications for one's belief and life.' Worboise writes parables for her own time, putting Christian themes into contemporary settings of Victorian life and popular literary genres. Divine grace comes to Lilian in the character of Alice, a childhood friend who is in the background of Lilian's life throughout her trials. As an invalid, Alice's necessarily static life places her outside the temporal vicissitudes of Lilian's story, but her cheerfulness and patience in pain make her a constant symbol of a spiritual life that transcends limiting circumstances. Alice first points to this quality of living in the face of Lilian's early complacency about marriage:

'One has need of so much faith, so much patience!'
'Poor Alice!' said Lilian, tenderly. 'It must indeed require patience to bear so much weakness and pain; to see others entering on a life of happiness, and know that no such change can await yourself'.
'I was not thinking of myself, Lilian ... It is in the world, in the great struggle that must be carried on through life, that faith and patience is so much needed.' (10)

This 'secret of perpetual peace and content' is to be learned from 'no one on earth' (11). Lilian forgets about Alice much of the time, too engrossed in her affairs to remember this absent friend or the transcendent values she embodies. But Alice is something of an alter ego to Lilian. At a particularly low point, Lilian dreams of a crowded party where

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19 *Speaking in Parables*, p. 7.
Basil turned away from her, reproaching her as he went. And she too turned away from the scene, full of bitterness and anguish of heart; and she saw Alice Rayner far off, no longer worn with suffering, but radiant and beautiful as an angel. She strove to reach her, but there was a dark, deep sea between them, and she was left quite alone in the world. She awoke, her whole frame shaking with bitter sobs, and all was still; she was in her own chamber, the baby sleeping peacefully by her side, and the night-lamp burning low in the socket. (93)

The dream suggests Lilian’s need for spiritual connection. It is also a premonition of Alice’s death, warning Lilian that she cannot rely on Alice but must find the spiritual source for herself.

Although this dream prompts Lilian’s conscience, she never feels judged by her friend: rather she feels that ‘all my neglect, all my heartlessness, could not estrange Alice; she was too good’ (149). It is with divinely patient love that Alice waits for Lilian to respond and learn from her how to endure. Alice embodies divine friendship in a very different way to the authoritative, masculine images of God in Victorian Christianity. She is instead symbolic of the ‘feminised Christ’ which Julie Melnyk finds in ‘relatively orthodox Christianity’ in the nineteenth century, a figure who turns suffering into a source of power and with whom women frequently identified.20 As Melnyk suggests was often the case, in A Wife’s Trials too this power does not translate into ‘meaningful temporal authority’ for Lilian in terms of challenging her traditional relational role.21 However, it does provide her with a core of independent life within the conventional roles which many of her readership would have shared. This independence is emphasised when Alice dies, leaving Lilian to continue her new life of faith alone. It is as if the human embodiment is no longer necessary now that Lilian has internalised the spiritual life that Alice incarnated.

Lilian’s story becomes a theology of encouragement to women. It is a parable that shows the spiritual possibilities of a mundane female life, and presents faith as a way to resist being totally constructed by circumstances. These spiritual possibilities are made immanent through their embodiment as a female friend, an image of the divine which may have been for Victorian women ‘psychologically more effective’, as McFague suggests in a different context, than an authoritarian or male image: ‘God as the companion whom we wish to please and who attracts our cooperation’.22 Worboise offers an image of divinity who does not stand

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21 Ibid., p. 143.
22 Metaphorical Theology, pp. 181, 184.
above, but comes alongside Lilian and who can be met in a woman's ordinary, secular experience of life.

Mammon and Masculinity

'You cannot serve both God and Mammon.' (Matthew 6:24)

While it was broadly accepted in the mid-nineteenth century that gospel values should infuse the home, there was not a widespread conviction that they should also transform public life. Home and the spiritual values it represented were important for men, but as an escape from 'the anxieties of the outer life.' In this religious-gender discourse, Christianity was interpreted conservatively, applied to individual experience and personal relationships but not at institutional or political level. Barbara Taylor suggests that the identification of spiritual values with the feminine domestic sphere ensured their 'social irrelevance':

Once God had settled into the parlour, Mammon had free range in public life... domesticated Christianity, like domesticated womanhood, was the most comfortable kind for a bourgeois man to live with.

While she is no radical, Worboise nonetheless rejects the restriction of Christianity to the domestic, private sphere. Married Life: or, the Story of Philip and Edith (1863) refuses to accept that the male world of work and finance must be devoid of Christian values, or deaf to the female voice of correction. Philip is a Liverpool tradesman with aspirations to expand his stationery business, and his wife Edith is a housewife who also works in his shop. As their opinions diverge on how to run their finances and home life, the woman's voice is identified with spiritual values, and both challenge Philip's competitive business ethic.

As an Evangelical, Edith believes that faith should pervade every aspect of life. This leads to a difference of opinion with her more 'moderate' husband, who argues:

'You know, my love, I cannot see the thing as you see it; ...We both go to chapel twice every Sunday, and you very often attend the week-night service; we give as much as we can afford to good causes, and you visit the poor, and are kind to little children; you obey the dictates of conscience, and

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I hope I may say I do too.... More than this would border on sanctimoniousness; surely an upright life, a cheerful contented spirit, and a due observance of the ordinariness of religion must be quite sufficient?"

’Not quite, dear husband’, said Edith, gathering strength as she spoke... ‘it is not enough to live morally, and to join in the services of the sanctuary, unless we are one with Christ ... unless we love Him supremely, and strive, however feebly, to glorify Him in all we do and say’.25

Philip’s interpretation of Christianity is conservative, applied to a personal conscience and in acts of charity. He puts the onus on Edith’s activities and thereby transfers responsibility to her to fulfil their religious responsibilities. Edith’s is an Evangelical argument, drawn from a genderless ideal of total consecration, but the effect is to challenge a specifically masculine middle-class ethos of self-advancement and material gain. Envy of richer friends, and personal ambition and pride, motivate Philip to expand his business again and again. Edith, in contrast, is content with what they have, and values time with her family and friends more highly than economic and social advancement. Feeling judged, Philip soon refuses to discuss religion and its application to life with her. He excludes her voice and thereby her values from his world view.

The consequences of Philip’s decisions show that there are no separate spheres in terms of who is affected by this worldly masculine ethos. His marriage suffers, since due to his long hours of work he no longer has time or energy to read or converse with Edith as he used to in the evenings. He becomes impatient with his disabled daughter Mary, now ‘a very ugly, tiny, troublesome specimen of humanity’ (76). She is bewildered by her father’s lack of love, but there is no room in his achievement-driven ethic for the vulnerable and unproductive. Edith suffers when Philip relocates the business (and hence the family) to the larger market of London. She leaves friendships and local connections with ‘the pain of exile ... at her heart’ (193). Through his actions in the supposedly separate male sphere, those whose lives he controls suffer, and Philip himself suffers. Worboise shows that two moral codes – for men and women, for public and private – are an impossibility. All suffer when Mammon is worshiped in the public sphere.

By conflating Evangelical values with the female voice, Worboise defends the necessity of both being heard in marriage. Julie Melnyk discusses such a conflation in Worboise’s Overdale, when women defy High Church priestly authority. In their defiance of

male ecclesiastical authority, 'Evangelicalism and feminism coincide'. Married Life shows something similar in the context of marriage, where Edith's spiritual conviction leads her to challenge Philip’s high-handedness. Afraid of making a public statement of her faith by joining an Evangelical church, she concludes: 'She must hesitate no longer; if she held back, for fear of displeasing her husband, she was not taking up her cross' (101). By vindicating Edith's spiritual viewpoint, Worboise also vindicates the female viewpoint in a marriage. Philip excludes Edith from his decision making as he takes on more work and risky financial investments, preferring the advice of his wealthier and worldlier friends Edwin and Estelle. This is shown as an act of profound marital disloyalty, such as when Edith queries:

'Ah, I wish we could have staid here, and saved a little; we might, now the business has improved so much. I don't like speculating with borrowed capital. When must you decide, dear?'

Philip turned very red, and answered, 'I have decided, my dear...I have signed the papers.'

'And you have taken counsel with Estelle Drummond, and concealed it from your own wife!' was Edith's unuttered reproach. She was cut to the heart. (118)

Worboise defends the orthodoxy of wifely obedience but asserts virtually a parallel right on the part of a wife. Edith refutes Estelle's accusation of her 'feminine autocracy' by arguing: 'I do think every woman should obey her husband ... Neither ought the husband to be under any influence but that of his wife' (168). Worboise suggests that the female viewpoint is necessary, not optional, in decisions in a marriage, just as the spiritual viewpoint is necessary in decisions in business.

Experience teaches Philip his spiritual lesson, which he learns entirely in the context of his marriage. Resistance to Edith equals resistance to God. His guilty anxieties are portrayed with some sympathy as he is torn between 'confess[ing] his errors humbly and penitently' to Edith or 'act[ing] with a high hand, telling her he had a right to manage his own business as he pleased' (183). In Philip, Worboise dramatises the conflict between the need for forgiveness and the 'sense of masculine self-sufficiency' central to the middle-class male ethic. This conflict in his marriage is identified with a spiritual conflict, in wanting divine acceptance but resisting the claims of God on his priorities. Philip learns the cost of his self-division. He is weighed down with work and anxiety; a particularly risky investment and the


greed of an employee leave him bankrupt – the competitive world has no mercy. In the meantime, he has forfeited Edith’s affection because of his constant disregard of her, reducing her attentions to ‘duty, reverence and a certain kind of regard’ such as he was content to offer God (187). The materialist, aspiring ethos leads to self-destruction and Philip undergoes a ritual death and resurrection in an extreme illness and recovery to a life based on reformed values.

Philip discovers the logic of spiritual wholeheartedness through the logic of his own marriage, which becomes a parable to him of a relationship with God. Through failure and illness, he is confronted by his vulnerability, the factor not taken into account by the competitive ethics of Mammon. From a new point of humility, he recognises his ‘egotistical complacency’, admitting:

‘I began to doubt myself: and from doubting my own wisdom in temporal matters, I fell to considering my long-cherished opinions on matters of faith; and there, too, I was led, or rather constrained – for it was in spite of myself – to arrive at the conviction that I had been all my life little better than a fool.’ (328)

He perhaps alludes to the ‘fool’ of the biblical parable who gathered in riches, but forfeited his soul. Philip reconfigures his masculinity in relation to both Edith’s and God’s claims, finding forgiveness and greater dependence on both. The business is restarted on humbler terms and with due consideration of other aspects of life, Philip agreeing with Edith that ‘we are rich, although poor in worldly goods – rich in love, rich in friends, rich in content’ and ‘rich in the blessing’ of faith (328). In *Married Life*, Worboise insists that masculinity is not compensated by feminised spiritual values, but is challenged and reconfigured by them.

Sensation and Forgiveness

In *Violet Vaughan: or, The Shadows of Warneford Grange* (1866) Worboise develops further her theme of applying ‘feminine’ Christian values to the public sphere. These values are first rekindled in the home but are then enacted also in the world of business and law. Secondly, the novel takes on the sensation genre, all the rage in the 1860s. Worboise portrays a family with a dark secret, supernatural suggestion, and crime – all staples of the sensation genre – but gives them a spiritual dimension. She reworks them into a sermon on forgiveness, with particular allusion to the biblical parable of the prodigal son. Worboise is known to have written novels in response to other successful novels of her time. Elisabeth Jay shows how her
Thorneycroft Hall (1864) is in part an evangelical response to *Jane Eyre*. In *Violet Vaughan*, Worboise offers a Christian response to another phenomenally popular work – Mrs Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) which in many ways set the standard for the sensation genre. Worboise draws on its subplot for the whole story of *Violet Vaughan*, and turns it into a parable of the need for ‘feminine’ Christian ethics in both private and public life.

Worboise’s motif of the harsh, unforgiving father and the exiled son echoes Wood’s subplot, although Worboise makes it central. In *East Lynne*, Richard Hare lives in exile from the family home after being wrongly suspected of murder, the penalty for which would be death. He returns in secret to the home where his sister Barbara meets him, at first thinking him ‘a supernatural visitant’ or a ‘delusion’. She, and in due course, their mother, receives his visits, which they keep secret from their father. The appropriately titled Judge Hare is adamant that he will deliver his son to the law should he reappear. Ultimately, Richard’s innocence is proven and reconciliation is achieved with his father in a touching reunion. In Worboise’s novel, William Warnecroft lives in exile after being convicted of defrauding his father through forgery, for which he ‘a few years back might have expiated the crime with his life’. He too returns in secret, and Violet (a relative who comes to live with the family) thinks at first he is the ‘ghost’ of Warneford Grange. William’s sisters, and later his mother, welcome him back lovingly but in secret. Like Judge Hare, Squire Warneford is bad tempered and tyrannical, immovable in seeking the full force of the law to be visited upon his son should he return. His wife despairs: ‘he said he had no son; I had no son; we had cast him off for ever, a criminal, a forger’ (127). While he is guilty of fraud, William’s innocence is proven in relation to later charges and the father and son are finally reconciled. It seems that Worboise drew on Wood’s successful work to make her Christian themes accessible and appealing to contemporary popular taste.

Like much other sensation fiction, *Violet Vaughan* reveals anxieties and tensions underlying the myth of the sacred, unified family. Violet comes as an outsider to the Warneford family and gradually uncovers the underlying secrecy and hurt caused by the harsh father’s law. The sisters are resentful, the mother guilt-ridden by her divided loyalties to husband and son, and all are tense in the squire’s presence. Worboise portrays these tensions in some detail, the penalties paid by the family for the father’s legalism. Violet diagnoses

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28 *The Religion of the Heart*, pp. 244-260.
'Irreligion', 'Mystery' and 'Implacability' as the 'spirits' which 'haunt' the Grange, giving moral reality to the early supernatural suggestions of a ghost and a family curse (129-30). Her evangelical faith gives her a mission to exorcise them. She counsels the Wamefords to take action towards openness and reconciliation, based on her faith in redemptive possibilities: 'We must never be discouraged; we may have to wait for years; but the answer will come ... Remember Esau' (92). She gives the biblical example of brothers reconciled after years of alienation. Violet sees it as her spiritual work to facilitate this, in her conversations with family members and her use of contacts in London to act on William's behalf. The sensation is domesticated in Violet's redemptive project to confront and dispel the family secret.

In their opposition of female love to legalistic male authoritarianism, Worboise follows Wood in presenting a critique of 'the disciplinarian patriarch whose wishes reign supreme.' Wood opposes Judge Hare's adherence to the law with the women's intuitive faith in Richard's innocence. Worboise turns this into legalism versus female forgiving love, which is closely identified with divine love. Unlike Richard, William is actually guilty of his crime and thus needs forgiveness from his father, not vindication. Worboise builds into his situation many allusions to the biblical parable of the prodigal son. Their sin is similar. Wameford issues post-obit bonds to obtain credit, and the biblical son asks for his portion of the inheritance – each speculates on his father's death in order to supply profligate living. Squire Wameford thus has reason to be angry with his son, as Mrs Wameford describes:

'That part of the business struck to my husband's heart; that the boy he had petted, and caressed, and trusted, and lavishly supplied with means, his only living son, should count upon his death to relieve him from the burden of his debts.' (128)

In Violet Vaughan, to forgive is feminine, and it is divine. The women of the family recognise William's sincere repentance proven by thirteen years spent in menial work trying to repay the money he took. An emotional reconciliation with his mother forms a dramatic centrepiece which echoes the biblical son's reception by his forgiving father after years of labour:

[Alice said:] 'Come; come quickly! Mamma is almost dying of the horrible suspense, and Anne-

And, grasping William's hand, she led him through the winding passages he knew so well, to Anne's sitting room. Then, with the door double-locked and bolted, they were free to utter all they would, and greet the wanderer, who had come once more to receive his mother's kiss under

the roof that had sheltered him and her, when, more than thirty years ago,
the Squire's heart had welled with pride and joy, because a son and heir was
born to the ancient house of Warneford.

But no one gave vent to emotion in words. His mother could only
hold him in her arms, and look with streaming eyes into the face that so
lovingly and so sadly sought her own; and Anne, who had raised herself up,
sat still and mute, with rigid looks and clasped hands, and short, sobbing,
gasping breath. They feared it might be too much for her shattered, sinking
frame.

'William, oh, William!' was all she could say, when at length her
tongue was loosened.(115)

This echoes and elaborates on the biblical reconciliation:

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off;
his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and
kissed him.33

As in the original parable, love overcomes claims to legal redress and a proud spirit of
offence. It also challenges the father's authority. One by one the sisters defy his ban on having
William in the house, and Anne finally persuades her mother to do the same, in spite of her
concern 'to obey [her] husband', declaring '[t]hose who command impossibilities must expect
revolt, or secret disobedience' (102). As in Married Life, wholehearted Christianity leads
women to contravene authorized male hierarchy when it represents anti-Christian values.

Worboise turns the novel's threatened legal proceedings into a sermon on forgiveness.
The novel's frontispiece quotes 'He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which
he must pass himself; for every man has need to be forgiven.'34 The mutuality of forgiveness
is Worboise's main theme, and is applied to earthly and spiritual relationships. Squire
Warneford is unforgiving because he lacks a sense of his own imperfections: 'I ask no man to
forgive me. There is no man living who can lay his hand on his heart and say that I have
injured him or his so as to require forgiveness. I do not ask to be forgiven' (309) he declares
when challenged with hypocrisy. Another man reminds him that in the Christian framework
'[t]here will come a day, Mr Warneford, when you will seek with all your soul to be forgiven
for the sins and follies of a lifetime ... one who never forgives can never be forgiven' (309).
As in Married Life, the human is not separate from the spiritual; the logic of one relationship
is the logic of the other. William experiences this too, rejection by his own father causing fear
that his heavenly father has not forgiven him: 'I have not repented enough' he worries. 'If my

33 Luke 15:20; all biblical references are to the 1611 King James Authorised Version, which nineteenth-century
Protestant writers would have used.
34 This alludes to the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors' (Matthew 6:12).
own father is so obdurate, how can I hope to propitiate an offended God?’ (82, 83) Worboise makes human relationships metaphors of divine grace or its withdrawal.

Worboise extends this forgiving ethic to the public sphere. She envisages divine and human forgiveness transforming the legal relations in which William becomes embroiled. It applies to the debtor-creditor relationship when Mr Paulett, whom William also defrauded thirteen years before, does not press charges. He takes into account William’s youthful naivety at the time, and his proven change of heart. He also considers his own position in the Christian framework as a forgiven sinner, declaring: ‘Dear me! If we all had our deserts, what would become of us? I forgive him, as I hope God will forgive me’ (280). William is therefore free to make a new start. Having been given a second chance in the form of a clerical job, he extends the same grace to a man who wrongs him. His colleague Abraham Ford frames him for a theft Ford committed, knowing William would be an obvious suspect due to his criminal history. Violet’s friend, a lawyer who becomes private investigator, clears William’s name and defends him in relation to his old crimes. But William shows compassion to Ford in his last illness and visits him, knowing he cannot judge too harshly a crime which he too once committed. He hears Ford’s confession like an informally appointed priest, and his forgiveness assures Ford of divine acceptance in his final hours. Paulett and William set aside their legal rights to redress. They judge the errors of others with humility in the knowledge of their own imperfections, and bring divine grace closer to repentant offenders. Worboise makes no apology for this sentimental agenda for the legal world. She has her lawyer hero deny the division of life into sacred and secular, private and public spheres: ‘A Christian barrister has as much right as a Christian prelate or pastor to speak of his Master, and to try to help on His work in the world’ (473) he says, after speaking to the Squire on forgiveness and asking him to drop charges against his son. This is Worboise’s utopian vision of a society in which there is no secular, masculine sphere untouched by Christian values, and where legalism in all spheres is replaced by a more flexible, compassionate ethic.

This Utopian vision characterizes the end of the novel as Worboise suggests the establishment of a new ethical order of grace. In *East Lynne*, the reconciliation of father with son forms a touching scene to wrap up the subplot. Worboise makes it a symbol of a whole new social order based on grace rather than law. William rescues his father from catastrophe when the foundations of the Grange flood and the house collapses. This disaster is symbolic of the exorcism of the Warneford ‘shadows’, since the ghostly groans which added ‘sensation’ to the earlier parts of the novel turn out to be the collapsing foundations. Material neglect of the property parallels moral neglect which has brought on the disintegration of the
old order. Humbled and vulnerable in his plight, the Squire forgives and is forgiven in his simple statement: ‘God bless my son William, and make him a better man than his father has been!’ (490) Literally and morally William establishes ‘the new house of the Warnefords’ (492) on sound foundations. The situation illustrates the biblical analogy of building on good foundations with ‘whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them’.35 Only fully applied Christianity is a worthy foundation for a sound society. Worboise gives tropes of the romance genre a specifically Christian turn as the harsh law of the father gives way to the tolerance of the younger generation. In this specifically Christian context, the novel suggests the Old Testament’s covenant of law being replaced by a new covenant of grace.

In *Violet Vaughan*, Worboise places familiar Christian themes in the setting of popular literary culture, with none of the anxieties many evangelicals had about ‘the propriety of stating ... divine principles, or sacred influence, through the plot of a romance.’36 Indeed, L. E. Elliot-Binns claims that Worboise’s serialized work ‘did much to overcome Nonconformist prejudice against fiction’.37 While she certainly wanted to make her books sell, Worboise shows a genuine concern to make Christian themes accessible and relevant to a modern readership. The romance and sensation tropes are not merely ‘jelly’ to sweeten the ‘calomel’, as Thackeray quipped regarding many religious novels.38 They provide for Worboise new contexts to defamiliarise Christian themes and present them in a fresh way to her contemporaries.

Christianity beyond Gender: *The Life of Thomas Arnold*

Worboise used her one venture into the genre of biography to explore further the theme of Christianity applied to all spheres of life. The *Athenaeum* reviewer of her *Life of Thomas Arnold* (1859) questioned the point of its publication. With reference to previous biographies of Thomas Arnold, the most authoritative version of which was A. P. Stanley’s two-volume *Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* (1844), he claimed ‘we fail to see the want for, or the motive of this new book ... we do not recognise any new matter.’39 Worboise indeed uncovers no new factual information, but she offers a new interpretation of

36 From the *Baptist Magazine* 1823, quoted in Doreen Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 189. Although Evangelical reluctance decreased over the following few decades, some distrust lingered about mixing the sacred with secular culture.
39 *Athenaeum*, 1641 (Jan-Jun 1859), p. 484.
Arnold’s life. It is clear from a comparison of the two works that Worboise was presenting Arnold’s life with a different purpose and to a different audience than Stanley. This she states in her preface, acknowledging Stanley’s ‘more weighty and more extensive work’ but defers that:

[s]til, there are thousands, whose means, whose time, and whose opportunities, will not permit them to avail themselves of the treasures of the larger memoir, and for such the present volume is expressly written.40

Worboise here suggests the inadequacies of Stanley’s work for her readership - it is too expensive, too long and too elite in its reference. Her own Life is written for her largely female novel-reading audience, and develops her favourite theme of Christianity applied to all spheres of life. It was unusual for a woman in the mid-century to write a monograph biography on a male subject to whom they were not related. Most female biographies were collections of exemplary women’s lives.41 But Arnold was something of a hero to Worboise, a leading advocate of Broad Church values, emphasising an effective faith with little interest in doctrinal detail. A quotation from Arnold featured in every volume of the Christian World under her editorship: ‘I never wanted articles on religious subjects half so much as articles on common subjects, written with a decidedly religious tone.’42 This sanctifying of the secular sphere is what Worboise celebrates in his life, as a genderless ideal for all to follow. Arnold’s life in Worboise’s hands becomes another contemporary Christian parable.

Worboise aims to make Arnold’s life far more accessible to the general reader than Stanley does. His takes a rather dry, ‘life and letters’ format focusing on Arnold’s public career, two thirds of the work comprising chronologically arranged lengthy letter extracts.43 Stanley also writes from within Arnold’s rather elite milieu. Once his pupil and later a friend, he shared the same academic environment and professional status and opportunities. The heavy referencing, untranslated Greek quotations, and appendices of some of Arnold’s educational materials suggest that Stanley expected this biography to be appreciated by others familiar with their world, or at least with professional responsibilities in education. Worboise of course writes from outside this milieu, and for readers like herself. Her work is a slim two hundred and twenty-seven pages to Stanley’s eight hundred and twenty-four, with virtually no

41 E.g. Agnes and Elizabeth Strickland, Lives of the Queens of England. (See chapter 6 of this work for a discussion of women’s collective biographies). Some of the earliest full-length monograph biographies of women were Anna E. Bray, Joan of Arc (1874), Elizabeth Charles, Joan the Maid: Deliverer of England and France (1879), and Josephine E. Butler, Catharine of Siena: a Biography (1878). The earliest comparable works by women on male subjects to whom they were not related appear to be Margaret Oliphant, Edward Irving (1862), Elizabeth, Lady Eastlake, Life of John Gibson, (1870) and Josephine Butler, The Life of Jean-Frederic Oberlin, Pastor of the Ban de la Roche (1882).
42 Quoted in Brett Harrison, Dictionary of National Biography on-line, op. cit.
footnotes, no appendices and no Greek. She assumes the reader has little or no knowledge of the inside of public schools and universities, for example adding an entire chapter on the organisation and physical lay-out of Rugby school, which she researched herself from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and her personal inquiries of other 'Rugbaeans' (vii).

As well as this increased 'reader-friendliness', Worboise gives Arnold's life a novelistic treatment to make it compatible with her usual audience's expectations of a story with a theme and clear characterisation. She selects far shorter extracts from the correspondence and blends them into the life narrative. They become an expression of her subject's concerns and feelings, integral to the action. She sometimes presents Arnold as if a fictional character, attributing motives and creating atmospheric setting:

> Calmly and peacefully the wintry weeks of the Christmas vacation passed away. With the solemn beauty of the valley, and the lovely grandeur of the encircling mountains about him, Dr Arnold rejoiced in the tranquility of the season, and braced his mind anew for the coming toil of the Rugby duties. (181)

Where her own knowledge and experience fail, her imagination supplies. Describing his exclusive educational experiences at Winchester school and Oxford University, she surmises:

> ... it must have been a pleasant circle, that knot of young men at Corpus, so familiar with each other, so frank, so cordial, and so unceremonious in their common and most genial intercourse. Poetry, history, philosophy, logic and all the political and ecclesiastical questions of the day, were in turn mooted and debated as occasion arose. (11-12)

The scene is evocatively conjured up for her readers, and wistfully empathises with the intellectual life and camaraderie which were unavailable to her readers. Worboise blends into the work narrative family events, births, bereavements and travels, all of which Stanley left in the letters and the appended travel journals. She draws on these to show him a family man as much as a professional, whose life featured recognisable events to women readers. At Rugby school prior to the start of term, 'he tells us how he and Mrs Arnold used to sit out in the garden under the enormous elms of the school-field' and 'Moreover he confessed to “divers happy little cricket matches” with his young sons on the very cricket ground of the “eleven!”'(136). This is a more holistic picture of Arnold the man, linking his private and public life and describing elements which women readers in particular would be able to relate to.

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Worboise takes narrative control of Arnold's life in an act which Victoria Glendinning terms 'author-theology'.\(^{44}\) She invests his life with a sense of telos, not only to make a complete story but also to make it embody certain meanings. Stanley follows Victorian biographical conventions which sought to minimise the intrusion and subjectivity of the biographer in the portrayal. The first edition of his work was reviewed approvingly as 'Reserved, judicious, largely impersonal'.\(^{45}\) He aspired to the common biographical ideal of the neutral presentation of fact, through which the subject is allowed to 'speak for himself' as far as possible – hence the importance, and space, given to letters.\(^{46}\) Readers are left to do much of the interpretation themselves. Accustomed to fiction writing, as few biographers were, Worboise has no such hermeneutic reticence.\(^{47}\) Her work is quite consciously an act of selection and interpretation, conveying the truth of Arnold's life as she perceived it. In the words of a recent critic of the genre, it is a 'deliberate [construction]' in which authorial intention 'is all'.\(^{48}\)

Thus Worboise intrudes to direct us to the meanings that Arnold's life embodies for her. She makes his educational reforms his raison-d'\'etre, rather than, as for Stanley, only one aspect of his life. She anticipates this when relating his early years: 'He knew it not, but surely and silently he was making ready for the arduous toil to which God, in his providence, was about to call him' (23). Likewise his early death at forty-six is shown not as an interruption, with potential unfulfilled as Stanley certainly believed, but it carries a sense of completion. The school was 'overflowing', Arnold's educational principles, once derided, 'had actually become popular' and his opinions on many matters 'received and adopted' at large (209). Like many of Worboise's fictional characters who stand up for their convictions, they are vindicated by the end of the story. His appointment as Regius Professor of History at Oxford University is taken as a public recognition, a reward for his labours, rather than a new opening which his early death aborted. Stanley voices regret over this 'premature close' (II, 286), but for Worboise there are no might-have-beens. She imposes 'teleological unity' on

\(^{47}\) According to Altick, there were only 'a handful of biographies written by novelists'. Ibid., p. 212.
Arnold's persona, creating a story in which 'the self is given whole, as an activity in time.'49 Arnold's life becomes an extended metaphor for Worboise's theme of holistically applied Christianity.

Through a study of a man's life, Worboise could explore her favourite theme in areas of life inaccessible to women. She recounts Arnold's works which refuse to separate Christianity from state affairs. He wrote theological and ecclesiastical pamphlets advocating an ecumenical faith and a more practically effective national church. He applied the bible to social crises, such as the unrest and fears of revolution in the 1820s; he found biblical parallels in which prophets 'did not preach subordination only, or chiefly, but denounced oppression' (91). He campaigned (albeit unsuccessfully) for the inclusion of a divinity exam in the new London University's degrees, fearing the exclusion of Christianity from state education. And his notion of training boys to be 'Christian gentlemen' (55) above all underpinned all his reforms at Rugby; he introduced an evangelical seriousness to all aspects of school life and took on himself the role of chaplain so as to blend secular and spiritual concerns – Worboise avoids the authoritarian implications of this. He promoted a sense of spiritual import in all matters in the education of those destined to be influential members of society. By choosing to write a man's life, rather than the usual subject of women's lives, Worboise could exemplify a deeper invasion of the political, secular sphere with Christian beliefs and values.

Worboise places higher value than Stanley on Arnold's work as a headmaster. Structurally she makes this his life's central theme, and she extols it as a calling and a matter of spiritual warfare:

The state of public schools had reached a climax, which rendered them more a crying evil than a benefit to the nation. The unchristian character of that which constituted the education of the upper classes of English society had become a great scandal; and religious men in vain denounced the inutility and mischievous tendency of the whole system. Who would come forward, and, for the sake of the public good, incur the whole weight of odium, slander, and misconception, which is sure to be cast on the most prudent and disinterested reformer? A great work was to be done; educational Christendom called loudly for a champion, and he must needs be the Bayard of the nineteenth century. (51-2)

49 James Olney, Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 20 and Stephen Crites, quoted in McFague, Speaking in Parables, p. 37. Both comments were made of autobiography but the same is true in such a 'novelised' biography.
Her treatment of this work makes his life a more relevant inspiration to women readers than Stanley’s could be. She portrays the pastoral dimension of his headmastership, in that he shared his home with sixth-form boarders and took a detailed interest in ‘the immortal nature of the child’, his ‘intellectual and moral character’, as Sarah Stickney Ellis recommended mothers should.\(^{50}\) He attended to details of discipline and manners, applying the same belief in the moral value of the mundane which underwrote women’s value as educators of the young. Stanley poses doubt as to Arnold’s actual effects, saying ‘the mass of boys are ... incapable of receiving a deep and lasting impression from any individual character, however remarkable’ (I, 169). He also implies regret that Arnold confined himself to ‘a life so necessarily monotonous’ (I, 27, 83) instead of a more public and dynamic role. Worboise, however, insists on Arnold’s great effects. She frequently refers to Arnold’s achievement over the years as ‘influence’, the very term used to elevate women’s indirect contribution to society, training the young who would one day be lawmakers and businessmen. She cites as support a writer who may well have been an authority to her readers, if not to Stanley’s: Charlotte Brontë is quoted declaring of Arnold’s ex-pupils, ‘A hundred such men – fifty, nay ten or five, such righteous men – might save any country’ (182-3).\(^{51}\) Hence Worboise aggrandises Arnold’s humbler work, and links it to the spheres of activity in which many of her readers may have been spending their lives, suggesting they engaged in the same work. She throws them the gauntlet in her final pages:

Who will be his successor? ... there are few – are there any? – who may not teach someone – There are the little children ... the poor ... the ignorant ... the tempted ... and the fallen. (226)

Referring to the typical subjects of female concern, within and beyond the home, she makes of Arnold a genderless model of applied Christianity.

Worboise eulogises Arnold as something of a messiah for the times, but she demystifies his greatness by emphasising his connections with the mundane. She prefaces her narrative with the unexpectedly effacing comment that she is about to treat ‘a life almost devoid of startling incidents, or thrilling romance...made up, in an exterior point of view, of very ordinary materials’ (2-3). Her details of Arnold’s educational methods, the annual rhythm of work and vacations which she builds into each chapter, and the continued theme of work at Rugby school interspersing accounts of his writings together suggest that in daily reality much of Arnold’s life was as mundane as her humbler readers’ lives were likely to be.


\(^{51}\) Worboise cites no source for this quotation.
It also shows that, as with most women writers, his writings for the wider public had to be fitted around more local tasks. Stanley's compartmentalisation of school reforms and religious and political writings into separate themed chapters of achievement belie this reality. From Arnold's example, Worboise points out that the mundane can become great through a sense of vocation and national contribution: a 'living, animated faith ... consecrates and beautifies the coarsest and most stereotyped events that rise up as mere matters of course in the beaten track of our diurnal paths.' (21) By insisting on Arnold's ordinariness, she makes him all the more accessible as a model to follow.

Rather than letting him remain the public figure that Stanley's Arnold is, remote from the humbler and more 'stereotyped' sphere of her novel readers, Worboise appropriates him as an icon for them. He embodies not only the non-sectarian, active Christianity which Worboise approves, but also the blurring of the separate spheres which confined Christianity's effects. She presents Arnold crossing the spheres, exerting influence in personal and public ways, attending to school and national issues, teaching children and writing theology, and above all refusing the categories of secular and sacred even at the highest institutional levels of the nation's life. Worboise creates from his life a narrative theology which makes greatness through active Christian service accessible to the reader of humbler opportunities.

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Worboise shares in common with Broad Church thinkers like Arnold a view of Christianity as 'not a Theory, nor a Speculation; but a Life ... a living Process'.52 She shows an Evangelical faith as a strong source of personal identity for a woman, which empowers Lilian, Edith and Violet to exert some control over the direction of their lives, and others'. Sometimes this is shown to contradict male authority. Worboise's great theme is the application of Christian values to all areas of life – personal development, family, business, law, education and institutional reform. Indeed, she complicates the notion of separate spheres by showing how in experience they impinge on each other. Philip's and Squire Warneford's behaviour, which follows a secular masculine ethic, endangers the well-being of their family and is self-destructive. Thomas Arnold's life models a blurring of feminine and masculine work, and extends 'private' Christian values to public life. Worboise denies the exclusion of

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the masculine, public sphere from the challenge of Christian ethics, and envisions, albeit in romanticised terms, a holistically applied Christianity.

Like the biblical parables, it is through familiar, human situations that spiritual possibilities are suggested. Alice in *A Wife's Trials* images an ever-patient divine friend; marriage teaches Philip the meaning of spiritual fidelity; a sensational plot allows a rediscovery of forgiveness; and finally, the life of a well-known figure in recent cultural memory becomes the setting for her overarching theme: Christian values extended to all spheres of life, by women and men alike.
Victorians generally considered the anguish and excitement of doubt a male prerogative. The poems of Tennyson, Clough, and Arnold were haunted by nostalgia for a deity who seemed to have withdrawn his presence from men but not from women ... Women poets rarely deal with doubt at all.¹

This chapter will consider Anne Brontë (1820-1849) as a virtually ignored poet of doubt. In Victorian gender ideology, faith and femininity were closely aligned: women were thought to be unassailed by the religious anxieties which beset their male counterparts. It is true that they generally escaped the intellectual pressures faced by men at University or in the Church, where Higher Criticism and new scientific knowledge made a traditional faith impossible for many. The few women who wrote intellectual critiques of Christian orthodoxy (such as Frances Power Cobbe and Annie Besant) typically rejected the faith for more radical beliefs and politics, gaining notoriety as 'unfeminine intellectual women'.² However, less exceptional women could, as Brontë did, sense deficiencies in their tradition based on their own Bible reading, their experience of the church, and their own rational and ethical thought. Brontë is unusual in that through her poetry she offers an overt critique of Christianity's adequacy for personal religious needs, whilst maintaining a tentative faith. She should be recognized as one of the early Victorian 'honest doubters', her poetry an argument between the desire for assured faith and the emotional experience of doubt.³ Her work shares the sense of bereavement at the withdrawal of God found in Tennyson's, Clough's and Arnold's work. Her poetry, published in the 1840s, predates Tennyson's seminal depiction of 'doubtful belief' in In Memoriam (1851).⁴

Brontë was an independent, and informed, religious thinker. Religious reflection and discussion were engrained in the atmosphere of the Brontë household. Their father was an

² Ibid., pp. 117, 115; see pp. 115-126 for Mermin's analysis of writings which illustrate these.
Anglican vicar, their aunt (who brought them up) a Methodist. A range of religious materials influenced the Brontë children, including the *Methodist Magazine*, and they also received critical perspectives on religion and its forms from periodicals like *Fraser's* and *Blackwood's*. The family's Low Church influences fostered an independent search for faith, and the commitment to speak the truth once it was found. Marianne Thormahlen comments on all the sisters' unusual 'confidence in one's own power to search for and recognise the truth', as well as the 'intrepidity' with which they expressed it, a confidence perhaps encouraged by their collaboration with each other. In their poems and novels they share a tendency towards doctrinally liberal views, insist on a personally discovered faith, and demand honesty and consistency in belief and practice.

In recent years, Anne Brontë has come to be recognized as a writer with her own distinct concerns and methods, and less as the quiet sister in the Brontë legend. She took a religious journey very much her own. She was far more interested than her sisters were in eighteenth century religious writers such as Samuel Johnson, the poet William Cowper and Evangelical hymn writers like Isaac Watts, influences which her poetry reveals in both form and content. Evangelical idiom and the 'common metre' hymn form are characteristic of many of her poems. A personal crisis during an illness in 1837 led her to seek counsel from James la Trobe, a minister in the Moravian church. He encouraged her to consider God as an object of love rather than fear, an experience which had a lasting effect in Anne Brontë's perception of a generous, compassionate God. Brontë set herself a year long project in 1841-2 to read the whole Bible through, making notes of her responses. She prefaced her study with the question, 'What, Where, and How Shall I Be When I Have Got Through?' showing a characteristically Methodist interest in self-analysis and self-improvement. This is evident in all of her religious poetry.

Much of Brontë's poetry portrays personal experience in argument with the consolations religion claims to offer and which she longs for. A 'lively distrust of romantic

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7 Common metre consists of four-line stanzas, alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter, with ABAB rhyme scheme. Most of Anne Bronte's poems are based, with variations, on iambic tetrameter.
posturings and a predilection for a clear-sighted realism’ have been recognized in her fiction, and this indeed is the keynote to her novel The Tenant of Wildfell Hall which subverts the myth of the marriage idyll.9 In its preface, Brontë states:

I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it .... When I feel is my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I will speak it.10

Bronte feels it a moral duty to portray painful experience honestly. In her poems, she speaks many ‘an unpalatable truth’ in response to some prevailing religious ‘myths’, namely the consolations offered by Protestant theology and Romantic spirituality. The two movements were connected, and both influenced Brontë profoundly. Critics such as M. H. Abrams and Stephen Prickett argue that Romanticism was ‘primarily a religious phenomenon’ given in natural terms, ‘a secularized form of devotional experience’.11 Coleridge and Wordsworth in particular conveyed a world which held intimations of a spiritual presence, ‘the Great and the Whole’, with which the subject could reach a personal communion.12 This vision was a profound influence on many Victorian poets who struggled to rediscover it. Evangelical and Methodist spirituality also emphasized inner experience, seeing faith as the personal appropriation of divine favour. It shared with Romanticism an intense participation in divine immanence, a ‘religious climax’ which brought a sense of wholeness and assurance to the subject.13 This is the spiritual life for which Brontë longs in her poetry, and so rarely achieves. Her poetry constitutes an experiential argument with the convictions demonstrated in Evangelical and Romantic spirituality.

This sense of argument between the ideal and real is embedded in all of Brontë’s religious poems. In some later poems, it is dramatised in a dialogue between personae. In many others, the ‘voices’ are more embedded. Most of the poems seem extremely personal, first person lyrics recording struggles of spiritual experience. They embody a continual inner debate between belief and experience, desire and realisation. Brontë uses the lyric to unusual effect. Women’s poetry of the early decades of the nineteenth century was expected to accord with ‘the myth of female sensibility’.14 Female lyric poetry was seen as a direct expression of a feminine sensibility untroubled by doubt, frustration or bitterness and expressing

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9 Langland, p. 2.
10 Acton Bell, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall 2nd ed. (London: Newby,1848), pp. iii, vi.
13 Colville, p. 60.
'conventional piety, didactic feeling, emotions, sentiment'. As Isobel Armstrong suggests, several women poets' lyrics 'mak[e] problematical the affective conventions and feelings associated with a feminine modality of experience', in spite of their poems' simple surface. Brontë's poems are formally simple, using conventional verse structures, plain syntax and a fairly narrow diction. Endstopped lines and economic use of adjectives create clarity and a sincere tone. Yet her exploration of a divided inner life, and in places her rational argument, contravene stereotypical views of both female piety and feminine poetry.

Many of Brontë's poems reached a nineteenth-century audience. Twenty appeared in the collected Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell in 1846, which was reissued in 1848 following the success of Jane Eyre. Two are embedded in her novels, and 'The Three Guides' and 'The Narrow Way' were published in Fraser's Magazine in 1848. Six more were published in Charlotte Brontë's 'selection from [her sisters'] literary remains' in 1850, and some found their way into hymnals of various denominations. Recent critics who have turned their attention to Brontë's poetry have either taken a broad sweep approach, aiming to establish her outside of the Brontë myth; or they have given feminist critiques of her as a Victorian woman poet, focusing on her representation of the self. By considering her poetry as theological discourse, justice can be done to aspects of Brontë's work which have received very little notice. I consider the duality of Brontë's religious poetry in various aspects, as she debates with Evangelical and Romantic convictions. Brontë argues with Calvinist theology, and then with the ideal of communion with a divine presence which is immanent in the natural world. I then consider Brontë's engagement with the Christian doctrine of afterlife and of the premise of a providential design in the believer's life. Anne Brontë worked closely with her sister Emily for many years, and they share many poetic themes such as imprisonment, loss and exile. Some poems suggest quite direct responses to each other's work due to their similarity of imagery and at times phrasing, and comparison with some of Emily Brontë's work highlights what is distinctive about Anne Brontë's.
Humanism and Calvinism

Calvinist theology originated in the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation but came again to the fore through the late eighteenth-century Evangelical revival. It continued to be influential in early Victorian Christian orthodoxy. Brontë was familiar with the theology from her upbringing, and with arguments about it, from articles such as ‘On the Evangelical Sects’ in the *Methodist Magazine* which took issue with a critique in the *Quarterly Review* (1811). This sort of reading provided ‘argumentative models’ which Lee Talley has noted at work in Brontë’s fiction, and which are particularly evident in her poems which engage with Calvinist theology.\(^\text{20}\) In ‘To Cowper’, ‘A Word to the Elect’ and ‘Confidence’ Brontë opposes Calvinist with humanist thought. Calvinism was in many ways an anti-human theology, asserting the total depravity of mankind, and a salvation which was achieved not by human choice but by God’s appointment. The belief that God predestined some to salvation and others to damnation could suggest arbitrariness, a deity whose all-powerful judgements did not accord with human standards of justice. Defenders of the theology argued that God was above and beyond the comprehension of fallen human intellect, and the divine plan not open to mortal question. Calvinism thus entailed a strong distrust of human reasoning as a means to judge matters of truth, the antithesis of humanist thought. Brontë proves herself a daughter of the enlightenment in her analyses of Calvinistic doctrines by means of moral logic, and her judgment of their spiritual validity on the basis of experiential validity.\(^\text{21}\)

In the poem ‘To Cowper’, Brontë responds to William Cowper’s anxieties over his spiritual state, which she read about in his biography.\(^\text{22}\) He experienced deep depressions in which he feared that, no matter what he did, he was not predestined to salvation. Brontë is assured that God is on the same moral wavelength as human beings and so could not pursue such a cruel and arbitrary policy.\(^\text{23}\) She first identifies with the poet as she reads his works:


\(^{22}\) Written 1842; published in Bell, Currer, Ellis and Acton *Poems* 1846 (hereafter, *Poems*, 1846); published in *The Poems of Anne Brontë*, ed. Edward Chitham (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 84-5 (hereafter, Chitham). I use the poem titles which Brontë used for their first publication, sometimes different from their manuscript titles which Edward Chitham gives.

\(^{23}\) Throughout I use ‘Brontë’, ‘the narrator’ and ‘the subject’ as shorthand for the first person persona of her poems, but this is not to assume a total identification of persona with poet, nor a consistency in the personas through which the poems are voiced. There is instability of viewpoint in individual poems, and across the oeuvre as a whole.
'The language of my inmost heart / I traced in every line'. But this poem which begins with a classic expression of female sensibility becomes an argument in Cowper’s defence. Calvinists claimed that a personal sense of assurance was itself evidence of being among the elect, and thus Cowper’s very fears were a sign that he was not saved. The topic had personal resonance for Brontë as her brother Branwell voiced a similar fatalism about his eternal state.24 Brontë’s opposing premise is God’s reasonable nature, and the correlation of human and divine morality. She deduces that Cowper is now in heaven — ‘It must be so if God is love / And answers fervent prayer’. She also considers evidences in Cowper’s life that suggest God’s presence:

How else when every hope was fled
Couldst thou so fondly cling
To holy things and holy men
And how so sweetly sing—

Of things that God alone could teach?
And whence that purity;
That hatred of all sinful ways,
That gentle charity?

Are these the symptoms of a heart
Of heavenly grace bereft,
For ever banished from its God,
To Satan’s fury left?

The rhetorical questions are confident and challenging, like a barrister addressing a jury on behalf of her client. Brontë judges by the evidence, diagnosing from ‘symptoms’ a healthy spiritual condition. She thereby insists that Christian character is the best evidence of salvation rather than a subjective sense of assurance. The initially personal poem becomes in the end a more general argument about what merits salvation, and Brontë points to rational rather than subjective criteria as the source of truth.

The final stanza, however, suddenly undercuts this confidence:

Yet should thy darkest fears be true,
If Heaven be so severe
That such a soul as thine is lost,
O! how shall I appear?

If read ironically, Brontë appears to satirise Calvinism, emphasising how unreasonable a God would be who rejected such a devout and godly man as Cowper: under such a policy, whoever would be deemed worthy? However, if not read ironically, the stanza anticipates the struggles Brontë voices in later poems when she tries to align her emotions with an essentially optimistic understanding of God's nature.

'A Word to the Elect' maintains a confident tone. Brontë critiques Calvinist doctrines in more detail and offers her own salvation theology. Again she judges pragmatically, rejecting Calvinism on the basis of its psychological and ethical effects. She satirises the assurance of the 'elect', depicting them as complacent and exclusive:

You may rejoice to think yourselves secure,
You may be grateful for the gift divine ...

But is it sweet to look around and view
Thousands excluded from that happiness?

Brontë uses the rhetorical strategies of syntactic parallelism and questions, and the (for her) unusual iambic pentameter creates a measured, confident tone. Brontë alludes to some very specific correlatives of Calvinist theology in its extreme, such as 'antinomianism', which asserted that since salvation was predestined, moral behaviour did not matter. Hence she questions the logic whereby the unsaved may be no different, in moral terms, from the elect, '[t]heir faults not greater nor their virtues less'. She also alludes to the doctrine of 'limited atonement', which asserted that Jesus died only for the elect, not for all humanity who could then respond or not. In ironic tones she highlights that the Calvinists' assurance is actually based on the knowledge of others' exclusion, and that such a theology cannot produce the values of compassion or fairness:
And wherefore should your hearts more grateful prove
Because for all the Saviour did not die?
Is yours the God of justice and of love?
And are your bosoms warm with charity?

Calvinism is a non sequitur, as its logic in practice produces the opposite of Christian values.

From this critique emerges a concern that anyone should be doomed to endless punishment, predestined or not. Brontë goes on to offer her own view of salvation: heaven will finally be granted to all after a kind of purgatory. This ‘Universalism’ was a highly unorthodox view, held openly only by Unitarians in the 1840s. Even a few decades later it cost both F. D. Maurice and George MacDonald public positions when their belief became known. A forceful objection was made to the Universalist belief which Brontë expresses in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1848, but five years before this she argued her view in this poem. Her was one of the earliest voices in an essentially ethical protest against orthodox Christian doctrine. Brontë insisted on her independent arrival at this point of view, ‘with a trembling hope at first, and afterwards with a firm and glad conviction of its truth’. The poem creates this same movement from personal hope to conviction. To introduce her unorthodox view, Brontë adopts the ‘safer’ lyric mode of personal feeling, but then draws in her own scriptural interpretations to support it more authoritatively:

And O! There lives within my heart
A hope long nursed by me,
(And should its cheering ray depart
How dark my soul would be)

That as in Adam all have died
In Christ shall all men live

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25 Written 1843 as ‘A Word to the Calvinists’; publ. *Poems* 1846; Chitham, pp. 89-90.
26 A reviewer for *Sharpe's London Magazine* stated it as ‘alike repugnant to Scripture and in direct opposition to the teaching of the Anglican church’, in Winnifrith, p. 236 note 57.
28 From a letter to Rev. David Thom who had replied in writing to her published poem. Quoted in Connor, p. 63.
And ever round his throne abide
Eternal praise to give;

Brontë alludes to the quotation from Corinthians ‘as in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive’. She takes the words literally, placing the emphasis on the repeated ‘all’, which in her lines make a logical parallel: ‘As in Adam all have died,/ In Christ shall all men live’. She goes on to cite biblical images of purification, using past participles to suggest the processes will reach completion: ultimately all will be ‘fitted for the skies’, their dross ‘purged away’, God’s cup of wrath ‘drained’ and ‘[t]he metal purified’. The modestly-announced personal hope turns into a case evidenced by scripture.

In the poem ‘Confidence’, two images of God do battle with each other in the poet’s consciousness. Each stanza dramatizes a different aspect of this, the poet first asserting her sense of sinfulness and distance from God who is ‘other’, and then overcoming this feeling by a bold assertion of the humane and compassionate God:

With this polluted heart
I dare to come to Thee,
Holy and Mighty as Thou art;
For Thou wilt pardon me.

Far as this earth may be
From yonder starry skies;
Remoter still am I from Thee:
Yet Thou wilt not despise.

Brontë’s ‘confidence’ in her image of a humane God wins each time, although the amount of space given to the emotional impact of God’s apparent distance suggests it is no easy victory. The evangelical idiom of self-abasement is used not to indicate moral failing so much as the emotional experience of distance from God, which Brontë struggles to overcome by her intellectual assertion of positive truths.

29 1 Corinthians 15:22.
30 Written 1845; publ. in Anne Brontë, Agnes Grey (1847), and in Charlotte Brontë’s 1850 edition of her sisters’ selected works. op. cit (hereafter, ‘publ. Charlotte Brontë’); used as a hymn in Congregational Hymnary and Glasgow Hymnal; Chitham, p. 114.
While all three of the Brontë sisters criticised Calvinists in some way, Anne Brontë is distinct in treating the doctrines of predestination and eternal punishment seriously as an influential theology. Emily Brontë’s sanctimonious Joseph in *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë’s supercilious Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* are caricatures based on popular stereotypes. Even Emily’s Universalist declaration is voiced by a character in the Gondal saga rather than offered directly to the reader:

A God of hate could hardly bear
To watch, through all eternity,
His own creation’s dread despair.31

Brontë is sensitive both to the psychological and ethical effects of the kind of God Calvinist theology implied, and counters it with her understanding of a humane God whose ways can be understood according to human moral logic. Brontë independently adds her voice to the ‘warfare of conscience with theology’ which was growing among individual voices in the 1840s, revising rather than discarding Christianity. She has confidence that her reasoning will lead her to a good and loving God, even though her emotions may struggle to follow.

Transcendence and Alienation

In his work *The Disappearance of God*, J. H. Miller sees as a common starting point in much Victorian poetry a sense of the withdrawal of God from the world. They felt the loss of a sensibility which ‘experienced the divine power as immediately present in nature, in society, and in each man’s heart’. 32 Poets such as Arnold and Tennyson looked back to the Romantic poetic vision of divine immanence, which established a spiritual connection between the subject and the outer world. Wordsworth wrote of

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A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.\textsuperscript{33}

Through participation in this all-pervading spirit, the poet achieved 'communion' and a 'connectedness' which Victorian poets felt as an ideal longed for but unattainable.\textsuperscript{34} Their spiritual condition is one in which

We are alienated from God; we have alienated ourselves from nature; we are alienated from our fellow men; and, finally, we are alienated from ourselves, the buried life we never seem able to reach.\textsuperscript{35}

Brontë wrote with a sense of alienation from this Romantic vision of divine and human communion, and from Evangelicalism's inner conviction. She confronts the Evangelical paradox which asserted that a transcendent, 'other' God brings salvation to a fallen world, yet demanded a personal encounter with God as a guarantee of salvation. Brontë blends Romantic and Evangelical language as she struggles with the desire for God's immanence and the experience of his transcendence. She structures her poems around the dichotomy between the ideal of communion and the reality of alienation.

This dichotomy is created in the poems by opposing imagery structures. Brontë's poetry can appear plain, using a narrow range of elemental imagery but this is drawn from 'conceptual metaphors' which structure her religious experience in profound ways.\textsuperscript{36} She expresses the ideal, desired state in terms of sunshine, celestial bodies, light, space, and ascent, while its polar opposite is figured as darkness, heaviness, confinement and earthiness. This dialectic implies the underlying 'conceptual metaphors' of sun god and underworld found in Western mythology, and which Northrop Frye suggests often occur in literature in 'displaced' terms which are closer to everyday reality.\textsuperscript{37} The main action in many of Brontë's earlier religious poems is a moment (desired or attained) of epiphany, where the subject arises from the lower to the upper realm in an ascending movement echoing a mythic apotheosis. Brontë's poetry embodies a quest for spiritual and emotional wholeness in terms which have wider reference than the specifically Christian.

\textsuperscript{35} Miller, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{36} George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, \textit{Metaphors we Live By} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), p. 4.
In 'Retirement' a joyful epiphany is achieved. The narrator seeks to break out of her spatial and temporal confines, to be 'alone' where there is no 'human form' or 'mortal ear' so she can 'sing and muse aloud'; she follows this with a plea for escape from mental strife:

Away! Ye dreams of earthly bliss,
    Ye earthly cares begone:
Depart! Ye restless wandering thoughts,
    And let me be alone!

The meaning of 'alone' here develops from a desire to escape social demands to a desire to escape her own consciousness which is divided and 'restless'. She seeks a solitude which will bring personal unity, and which she cannot find either in the world around or within herself. This is achieved suddenly in a moment of ascent, in which her spirit, birdlike, transcends her bodily existence:

One hour, my spirit, stretch thy wings,
    And quit this joyless sod,
Bask in the sunshine of the sky,
    And be alone with God!

The subject finds peace by losing herself in the divine presence, expressed in terms of light, sun and space. The delaying of 'God' until the final word gives the sense of discovery, even surprise, that this is the object correlative of her psycho-spiritual needs. God here is utterly transcendent, but she can connect with him through meditation.

Rarely is the moment of communion so fully celebrated. 'In Memory of a Happy Day in February' draws attention to its delight, but also its momentariness. Alone with nature, Brontë celebrates a moment of vision expressed in her characteristic imagery of 'a ray of light / That shone direct from Heaven'. This leads to inner conviction:

I knew there was a God on high

38 Written 1840; publ. 1910 as Emily Brontë’s in C. K. Shorter, Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle; Chitham, p. 77.
39 Since Brontë’s poems address God in the second person, she uses no gendered pronouns; I use the masculine pronoun according to the Christian conventions of her time.
40 Written 1842; publ. Charlotte Brontë 1850; Chitham, pp. 82-3.
By whom all things were made.
I saw his wisdom and his power
In all his works displayed.

Spiritual immanence is perceived, though expressed in Christian idiom which separates 'God' from 'his works'. Brontë claims privileged insight when 'Deep secrets of his providence' are 'graciously revealed' to her 'delighted eyes', and she finds a sense of intimacy and conviction:

I did not tremble at his power,
I felt that God was mine.

I knew that my Redeemer lived,
I did not fear to die;
I felt that I should rise again
To immortality.

The subject participates in God's transcendence.

However, this epiphany is not wholly adequate for her spiritual needs. The poem is a recollection and draws on the Romantic trope of memory as a means to revive an experience of communion. But there is a tentative note even in the opening stanza's plea, 'O let its memory stay with me / And never pass away!' Memory may not be adequate to relive the moment. The final stanza raises another problem with the Romantic 'religious climax' - the moment of communion reached in faith, or the imagination, actually stimulates, rather than satisfies, longing:

I longed to view that bliss divine
Which eye had never seen,
To see the glories of his face
Without the veil between.

The visionary moment is partial in that it draws attention to, rather than dissolves, the 'veil' which separates divine from human, eternal from mortal. Inexorably, God dwells in a different reality.
The poem ‘Despondency’ presents exactly this feared inability of memory to renew intimacy with God.\textsuperscript{41} Two discourses run though the poem. One is the Evangelical language of guilt, that it must be the narrator’s own sin that separates her from God. Factual memory assures her that she has previously ‘mourned / In anguish o’er the past’,

\begin{quote}
And prayed to have my sins forgiven  
With such a fervent zeal,  
An earnest grief – a strong desire  
That now I cannot feel!’
\end{quote}

Through repentance she tries, and fails, to achieve a sense of God’s closeness. Yet a second discourse is also present, whereby Brontë’s dialectal imagery of earth and ascent interprets the separation as an inescapable psychological state. Brontë uses imagery of weight, binding and imprisonment:

\begin{quote}
How can I rouse my sinking soul  
From such a lethargy?  
How can I break these iron chains,  
And set my spirit free? ....
\end{quote}

O how shall I arise?

Failing to cross the distance between God and the narrator is not a matter of moral guilt, but of imaginative inability. Memory is inadequate – the past moment of intimacy and conviction when ‘I have felt so full of love, / So strong of spirit’ can be mentally recalled but not re-experienced to heal her ‘despair’. This contrasts with Wordsworth for whom reflective remembrance of past spiritual communion ‘doth breed / Perpetual benediction’.\textsuperscript{42} For Brontë, connection is subjective and arbitrary, and cannot be recreated when it is most needed.

In ‘The Doubter’s Prayer’ Brontë tries to establish a connection with God by means of logic in the absence of the inspired inner moment.\textsuperscript{43} The first stanza posits simultaneously God’s transcendence and immanence, a power ‘of earth’ as well as of ‘air’, ‘Unseen, yet seen

\textsuperscript{41} Written 1841; publ. Charlotte Brontë 1850; Chitham, pp. 80-81.
\textsuperscript{43} Written 1843 as ‘Hymn’; publ. Poems 1846; Chitham, pp. 91-92.
in all around, / Remote, but dwelling everywhere.’ Again, the poet is unable to connect with God, ‘weak yet longing to believe’. She defines ‘faith’ as an emotional conviction that God is near:

While faith is with me I am blest;
It turns my darkest night to day;
But while I clasp it to my breast
I often feel it slide away.

Then cold and dark my spirit sinks,
To see my light of life depart,
And every fiend of Hell methinks
Enjoys the anguish of my heart.

Without feeling God’s immanence, she suffers a kind of hell on earth. Finally there is a minor breakthrough as she abandons the quest for religious feeling and applies religious reasoning. ‘If’ Jesus died and rose from death, ‘Then’ in the same redemptive logic the qualities of ‘peace and hope and love’ will prevail over ‘sorrow, sin and pride’. At first the language is self-persuading, ‘surely’ it ‘Must’, but the final stanza moves to a more positive assertion, the modal changes to ‘will’ and the final couplet suggests closure:

And all the blessed words he said
Will strength and holy joy impart,
A shield of safety o’er my head,
A spring of comfort in my heart.

Faith in received religious truths here brings comfort, but after ten stanzas of struggle, it is a second best to experiencing intimacy with God.

Brontë’s poetry longs for this intimacy, offered as an experiential certainty by both Evangelical and Romantic spirituality. As Betty Jay summarises, her poems ‘invariably articulate subjectivity in terms of loss, lack and absence’.44 Emily Brontë shares her sense of spiritual alienation in the course of life, and both long for personal freedom through communion with a divine spirit beyond it. But Emily Brontë finds the communion that her sister does not. She celebrates the ‘God within [her] breast’ which she can commune with

44 Jay, p. 58.
aloof from the world. She finds the same spirit immanent in nature, a ‘spirit’ which ‘animates eternal years / Pervades and broods’; ‘thou art Being and Breath’, a pantheistic spirit in which she loses herself.\textsuperscript{45} She finds intimacy with this spirit through the imagination, the ‘God of visions’ who is her ‘comrade ... by day and night’.\textsuperscript{46} Characteristic of Emily Brontë’s poetry is the sense that the imagination is powerful in creating a spirit life that satisfies:

\begin{quote}
What matters it, that, all around,

\begin{quote}
Danger, and guilt, and darkness lie,
\end{quote}

If but within our bosom’s bound

\begin{quote}
We hold a bright, untroubled sky?\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

Only in ‘Retirement’ does Anne Brontë achieve this transcendence in such unproblematic terms. It is a vision which attracts her profoundly, but which when tested out in her reality turns out more often than not to be an unattainable ideal.

Connection and Isolation

The spiritual and emotional are inseparable in Brontë’s poetry. Communion with another human being is the central theme in many poems, and bears metaphysical overtones due to Brontë’s use of open-ended elemental imagery. The same dialectic of confinement and freedom or ascent structures these poems, and moments of human epiphany are conveyed in horizontal displacements of divine light and vision, in terms of ‘glances’, ‘looks’ and ‘gaze’. Brontë’s treatment of the theme of human connections is characterized by the same existential need to escape the boundaries of the lone self. Like other Victorian poets mourning the loss of God’s immanence, she finds herself ‘alone ... confronts [her] isolation, [her] separation from everything outside [her]self’.\textsuperscript{48} This relational emphasis contrasts with Emily Brontë’s poems, in which a highly individualized dynamic with the ‘God within [her] breast’ is sufficient for her spirituality. For Anne Brontë, human communion is as fundamental a need as connection with God, and is inseparable from it.

\textsuperscript{45} ‘No coward soul is mine’, in Emily Brontë, Poems, p. 182.
\textsuperscript{46} ‘Plead for Me’, ibid., p. 22.
\textsuperscript{47} ‘To Imagination’, in ibid., p. 19.
\textsuperscript{48} Miller, p. 7.
‘The Captive Dove’ depicts a painful disparity between need and fulfilment. Brontë takes the metaphor of the caged bird, and adds distinctive dimensions to this trope of personal liberty.49 The narrator watches as the bird seeks ascent:

In vain! In vain! Thou canst not rise –  
Thy prison roof confines thee there;  
Its slender wires delude thine eyes,  
And quench thy longing with despair.

She looks on as one wise to the truth of the bird’s inescapable confines. This creates an ironic perspective on the bird’s innocent longings, and renders pitiful the disparity between its desire and opportunity. The poet raises the possibility of connection with a fellow creature to provide consolation for this fundamental, unmet need:

Yes, even there, if listening by  
One faithful dear companion stood,  
While gazing on her full bright eye  
Thou mightst forget thy native wood.

Gaze turned outwards rather than upwards may provide an emotional resolution to the need to escape psychological solitude. The poem also responds to Cowper’s ‘The Doves’ in which a bird celebrates intimacy with a partner as a consolation for life’s lacks:

Those ills that wait on all below,  
Shall ne’er be felt by me,  
Or gently felt, and only so,  
As being shared with thee.50

Brontë also anticipates Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ which, mourning the ebbing of the ‘sea of faith’, finds a form of resolution by losing himself in love for another. But Brontë’s captive dove finds no companion – ‘The heart that nature formed to love / Must pine neglected and alone.’

49 Written 1843; publ. Poems 1846; Chitham, pp. 24-5.  
Implicit is a complaint against the conflicting actions of the creator and the ordainer. The bird has an implanted memory of its ‘native wood’, was ‘made to wander free’ and ‘formed to love’, the passive participles here evading direct attribution of blame. Elsewhere, Brontë’s complaint is more overt. In ‘Dreams’ she imagines being in loving relationships, emphasising physical sensation and contact: ‘warm affections’, a baby she cares for ‘[w]hile I hold it safe and warm’, and ‘[t]o feel my hand so kindly pressed’ by a lover whose ‘glances’ also bring ‘rapture’ and ‘rest’ to her heart, two terms which she elsewhere uses to describe divine encounters. As she does with the moment of divine connection in ‘In Memory of a Happy Day in February’, Brontë points to the transitoriness of this imaginary human connection, reflecting bitterly, on ‘wak[ing]’, that it is only imagination:

A heart whence warm affections flow,
Creator, thou hast given me,
And am I only thus to know
How sweet the joys of love would be?

A poem about the world of her imagination turns into a complaint against God. Brontë critiques the Romantic celebration of imagination’s capacity to envision a richly connected world beneath mundane surfaces. She begins the poem ‘[w]hile on my lonely couch I lie’, alluding to Wordsworth’s poem which celebrates the imagination rekindling a moment of connection with the natural world. But in her depiction of ‘emotional exile’, the conviction of such connections is another spiritual myth which painful reality dispels.

‘Fluctuations’ is a poignant parody of Romantic spiritual immanence in which the poet shares a psychic life with the outer world, but in terms of deficiency and decay. Alone, the narrator gazes upwards at the night sky to seek emotional energy from the celestial bodies. The archetypal source of light and life has already departed – ‘[w]hat though the sun had left my sky’ she bravely begins. She attempts to come to terms with this loss as she watches in turn the moon, a star and finally an ‘earthly meteor’ enter the sky as decreasingly effective replacements. Each celestial body brings a pitifully modest hope, followed by profound disappointment in her ‘soul’, leaving her in ‘despair’. Of the moon, she writes:

51 Written 1845; publ. A. C. Benson Brontë Poems (1915); Chitham, p. 113.
53 Frawley, p. 64.
But as above that mist’s control  
  She rose and brighter shone  
I felt her light upon my soul,  
  But now – that light is gone!

Thick vapours snatched thee from my sight  
  And I was darkling left,  
All in the cold and gloomy night  
  Of light and hope bereft.

The repeated, narrow vocabulary creates emotional intensity and creates a shared identity between the viewer and viewed, through epithets applied to both, or apparently transferred from one to another. The viewer ‘trembled’ and is left ‘darkling’, and ‘fainting’, while the celestial bodies are ‘faint and chill’, ‘wan and lifeless’, ‘trembling’ and ‘faint’; the sky becomes ‘darker, drearier’. The boundary between subject and object is blurred as the ‘dim horizon’s haze’ may be so because viewed through a ‘tearful gaze’ – the rhyme suggests a mirroring effect. The viewer participates metaphysically in the outer world, but finds no life there to share. She merely shares its emptiness and fears a kind of death in her ‘fainting heart’. It is a parody of participating in divine or emotional immanence, and she is left ‘locked in the prison of [her] own consciousness’. The only explicitly religious reference is, as often in Brontë’s poems, delayed till the final stanza where she prays to ‘Kind Heaven’ for more light. The poem is an extended metaphor for unmet existential need which transcends specifically Christian reference.

‘Fluctuations’ is a parable in miniature, in which ‘stretching the surface of the story with extreme imagery’ suggests the spiritual dimension. ‘Monday Night May 11th 1846’ forms another parable of loss, this time of human communion. Brontë takes a scene of domestic conflict, which biographical critics identify with a particular time of strife among the Bronte siblings, but Brontë ‘stretches’ the scene to suggest a more universal fall from grace. Initially, a scene of outside order but inner discord puzzles the narrator, which she attributes to the loss of ‘Peace’, leaving a ‘desolate ... hearth’. This is first implicitly defined as a domestic quality, a breach in familial relationships and subsequent isolation as ‘Each feels the bliss of each destroyed / And mourns the change – but each apart.’ The quality of

54 Written 1844 with no manuscript title; publ. Poems 1846; Chitham, p. 103-4.
55 Miller, p. 8.
‘Peace’ then shifts meaning to suggest an ideal state, human closeness achieved through sharing a divine source of life:

'Twas Peace that flowed from heart to heart
With looks and smiles that spoke of Heaven,
And gave us language to impart
The blissful thoughts itself had given.

The spiritual is incarnate in human relationships and even language, and blurs the boundaries of individual identity as it ‘flow[s]’ from one to another. A religious dimension is introduced in the final stanza, when peace is personified more precisely as:

Sweet child of Heaven, and joy of earth!
O, when will Man thy value learn?
We rudely drove thee from our hearth
And vainly sigh for thy return.

This domestic fall carries the suggestion of a profounder, more universal loss. The narrator acknowledges some guilt for this breach in human relations. However, she draws on no Christian promises of redemption to restore Eden; alienation is the prevailing condition.

Spiritual and human dynamics are inseparable in these poems, and in Bronte’s Romantic ideal of immanence. Wholeness is found when connections are made, as boundaries blur between subject and object, one person and another, and the categories of human and divine. Brontë’s elemental metaphors are open-ended and suggest a more individual relationship with the Christian tradition than she is usually given credit for. She voices resentment at the gap between the deepest created needs and the opportunities providence supplies; she views alienation as a condition of human existence rather than a matter of sin and repentance. It is virtually an absurd vision of existence, where intimacy is impossible and Brontë, in bewilderment, can only ‘sigh for [its] return.’

Life and the afterlife

Brontë’s later poetry (1845-49) develops different concerns from her earlier work. Her debate is less with Romanticism’s ideal of the immanent divine, and more with themes of Christian pilgrimage, using the prevailing structural metaphor of the path. The overwhelming
sense of loss is replaced by a more positive, practical approach to life within a more overtly Christian framework. Brontë seems to have developed a greater sense that her poetry had a public, perhaps following the 1846 publication; some of the later poems were published in periodicals and found their way into hymn books. At this time, Brontë moved away from her earlier closeness to Emily, and this is evident in the greater differences in their poetry. Emily Brontë’s poetry is pervaded by a longing for death, in which she will find the state of perfect spiritual communion which in life can only be achieved in imaginative escape. Earthly life is a ‘Winter’ which ‘will not linger long’ before true life begins, ‘nothing to eternity’. It has no value in itself and carries no connections to the life beyond. The voice of a Gondal character typifies her view:

Then why lament that those we love
Escape Earth’s dungeon Tomb?
As if the flowers that blow above
Could charm its undergloom.

Anne Brontë’s poetry takes a very different course. Her negation of this world recedes as she searches for philosophies which affirm life and find in it intimations of the state beyond, however humble. But this is not to suggest she resolved earlier concerns through straightforward piety, ‘Christian resignation’ as Chitham suggests. The sense of argument and tension between different perspectives is still strong, particularly in the three long dialogue poems where characters explicitly debate an issue. The conclusions Brontë reaches are often still tentative, and differ from one poem to another.

In many of these, Brontë explores the tensions between finding primary value in this life or the afterlife. Although she takes for granted the existence of heaven, her responses are mixed as to its use as a motivator, a consolation and the site of postponed happiness. ‘The Narrow Way’ suggests John Bunyan’s influence in considering heaven as a reward which must be earned through endurance: the ‘blest abode’ is not for those who will pursue a ‘smooth...path’. Brontë combines the pilgrimage theme with her characteristic imagery of ascent – the steep rough ‘upward path’ is ‘the only road / Unto the realms of joy’ in high

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58 ‘The Three Guides’ and ‘The Narrow Way’ appeared in Fraser’s Magazine; the latter and a section of the former became used as hymns.
60 ‘To A. S.’, in ibid., p. 146.
62 Written 1848 untitled; publ. Fraser’s Magazine 38 (December 1848), p. 712 and again by Charlotte Brontë 1850; Chitham, pp. 161-2. It was probably written as a hymn as it has the same metrical pattern as George Herbert’s ‘Teach Me My God and King’. 
ascent – the steep rough ‘upward path’ is ‘the only road / Unto the realms of joy’ in high places where ‘the sweetest flowerets gleam’ and unearthly ‘scents’ are borne on the breezes. The narrator bracingly instructs the aspiring pilgrim to fight temptations, overcome ‘pride’ and ‘lust’, and remain an alien in this world – ‘Seek not thy treasures here’. However, the reward is not a final destination where trials are over, but is found en route, and is internalised:

What matters – if thy God approve,
And if within thy breast,
Thou feel the comfort of his love,
The earnest of his rest?

Brontë reduces the supernatural in her eschatology, and defines heaven as a state of being as other writers later did: ‘is it not to be something rather than to go somewhere?’ wrote F.W. Farrar in 1877. There are close similarities to Cowper’s poem of the same title, but Brontë revises his celebration of only ‘immortal joys above’ for a more earthly, and intrinsic ‘reward’.

‘Vanitas Vanitatum, Omnia Vanitas’ clearly locates life’s meaning in the here and now. It responds to Samuel Johnson’s ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’ both in form and idea, its iambic couplets reflecting on the vanitas theme of the transience and hence pointlessness of life. ‘In all we do, and hear, and see, / Is restless toil and vanity’ Brontë proposes. The best moments of human life are marred by transience because ‘joy brings sorrow in her train’ and ‘[d]eath comes our labour to destroy’. While Johnson focuses on human wishes and their ultimate disappointment, Brontë extends a pessimistic vision to the entire natural world, perhaps influenced by contemporary scientific interpretations of the age of the universe and their subversion of creation with design. Generations of people ‘come and go like ocean tides’, and the natural elements continue this theme of repetition without completion or fulfilment – the sun ‘nightly sinks but not to rest’, and the rivers pour into the sea ‘[b]ut still the ocean craves for more’. This is a mechanistic, even menacing, universe, a far cry from a world in which God is immanent.

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64 The Poems of William Cowper, I, p. 201.

65 This is incorrect Latin for ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’ (Ecclesiastes 1:2); written 1845; publ. Poems 1846. Chitham, pp. 123-4.
But Brontë eschews a Johnsonian resolution. Johnson is resigned to the fact that the Christian is an alien on earth, all the time ‘panting for a happier seat’. Brontë noticeably does not find resolution in the promise of afterlife joy, nor the creation of a new earth as Revelation prophesies. She offers instead an unexpectedly practical solution:

What then remains for wretched man?
To use life’s comforts while he can:
Enjoy the blessings God bestows,
Assist his friends, forgive his foes,
Trust God, and keep his statutes still
Upright and firm, through good and ill ...

The brisk imperatives direct the emphasis away from finding universal answers to immediate action. Whilst instructing her reader also to fix the ‘firmest hopes on Heaven’, Brontë suggests that ‘Heaven’ is an ideal to bear in mind, rather than a goal to live for. She defines the problem of purpose as existential and personal, and sets aside questions of the master-plan for a daily way of life which has its own intrinsic spiritual significance.

Brontë asserts a ‘this-world’ religious philosophy in the poem which turned out to be her final one, written as she faced the likelihood of her death. Even in these circumstances, heaven does not feature as a near prospect or object of desire; rather there is an intense focus on the present moment. The narrator is disappointed that her aspirations to ‘serve’ God ‘heart and soul’ have found little scope for expression:

I hoped amid the brave and strong
My portioned task might lie,
To toil amid the labouring throng
With purpose pure and high.

But Thou has fixed another part ....

But her desire to give God ‘the whole / Of [her] identity’ leads her to assert that even in the limited world of her illness there is a spiritual work to be done, ‘That inward strife against the sins / That ever wait on suffering’, ‘To gather fortitude from pain / And hope and holiness

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67 Written 1849 untitled; publ. Charlotte Brontë 1850; Chitham, pp. 163-4 as ‘Last Lines’.
from woe.’ Hope is not directed towards the prospect of heaven, but a quality in its own right, like ‘holiness’. There is spiritual value in the immediate, and her final request is ‘Lord, whate’er my future fate / So let me serve Thee now’. Personal meaning is here achieved by self-consecration, moment by moment.

Brontë relativises viewpoints on life and the afterlife in the dialogue poem ‘Views of Life’, where Johnsonian cynicism argues in the voice of ‘Experience’ with ‘Youth’ who expects ideal fulfilment within this life. Experience claims a

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\ldots \text{ keener sight} \\
\text{That clearly sees a world of woes} \\
\text{Through all the haze of golden light} \\
\text{That flattering Falsehood round it throws.}
\]

A narrator hears both views and finally adjudicates, mediating between the two. While she accepts Youth’s expectations are unrealistic, she rejects Experience’s infusion of all of life with a telos of death, asserting again that ‘hope itself a brightness throws / O’er all our labours and our woes … / Then let us not enhance our doom’. Heaven this time enables her to find intimations of the ideal life in a more mundane, less ecstatic way than her earlier poems hoped for. Earth’s joys, though ‘frail at best’, have spiritual value in that they

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\ldots \text{ point beyond the sky;} \\
\text{But gleams of light may reach us here,} \\
\text{And hope the roughest path can cheer:} \\
\text{Then do not bid it fly.}
\]

There is a strong theme of self-persuasion in this long poem, but finally the narrator asserts a modest conviction that overcomes the sense of alienation on earth.

Similarly, connections are found between the heavenly and earthly realms in Brontë’s second dialogue poem ‘The Three Guides’. The cynical and optimistic viewpoints are here not just two states of mind, but have wider reference to beliefs in her culture. Brontë returns to her elemental dialectic, and the pessimistic ‘Spirit of Earth’ is characterized by

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69 Written 1847; publ. Fraser’s magazine 38 (August 1848), pp. 193-5; Stanford notes that the section on ‘Faith’ came to be used as a hymn, p. 214. Chitham, pp. 144-151.
lower world imagery – coldness, damp, rock, clay and rivers. His clasp is ‘icy…stony-hearted’ and his glance ‘presses down my sinking heart’. Like Experience in ‘Views of Life’, he claims his view to be ‘The naked, solid truth’. The narrator confidently refutes his denial of spiritual possibilities within this life:

If, in my heart arose a spring,
    A gush of thought divine,
At once stagnation thou wouldst bring
    With that cold touch of thine!
If, glancing up, I sought to snatch
    But one glimpse of the sky,
My baffled gaze would only catch
    Thy heartless, cold grey eye.

Cynicism is menacing, and does not have the hold on the narrator’s emotions which it does elsewhere. Brontë is perhaps responding to atheism, which evidently troubled her; in ‘A Doubter’s Prayer’ she is pained by the possibility that her faith ‘may be a delusion all’ and that ‘there be no God above / To hear and bless me when I pray’ and ‘death be an eternal sleep’. Here she asserts not only the existence of God but a strong, innate sense of his presence in the world.

The Spirit of Pride is imaged as the spirit of the upper world, associated with light, sky, ascent, mountain tops and flight. Pride embodies the transcendent divine within himself:

Spirit of Pride! Thy wings are strong;
    Thine eyes like lightning shine;
Ecstatic joys to thee belong
    And powers almost divine.

Though his identification with the divine appeals to the narrator, she critiques him as a guide on ethical grounds. Pride is arrogant and lacks compassion, his spiritual exaltation achieved only through a sense of superiority to the common lot when he ascends ‘far above [his] fellow men’. In his ascendancy, he mocks those who:

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70 In ‘Views of Life’, ‘The Three Guides’ and the later ‘Self-Communion’, the characters are addressed only in the second person and no gender is attributed. I use the male pronoun here merely to indicate the distance the narrator has from these viewpoints, which is less in the other two poems where I use the female pronoun.
‘Walk on the common sod;
Go trace, with timid foot and eye,
The steps by others trod.
'Tis best the beaten paths to keep,
The ancient faith to hold,
To pasture with thy fellow sheep,
And lie within the fold.

'Cling to the earth, poor grovelling worm,
'Tis not for thee to soar ....

Brontë seems to have in mind both the Romantic and Evangelical internalised spiritual communion. She suggests the egotism of Emily Brontë’s internalization of the divine (the ‘God within [her] breast’) which entails a proud aloofness from the common lot; to find her ‘God of visions’ she defiantly claims ‘I have persevered to shun / The common paths that others run.’ Anne Brontë explicitly rejects this as arrogant. The elitism of the Calvinists is also suggested, convinced as they are of their superiority in the spiritual hierarchy and therefore lacking compassion towards those left below. To those who fall on the mountain side in their attempted ascent, Pride is ‘fierce’ and ‘scoffing’, and his ‘strong hand did not save.’ Brontë critiques self-exalting, exclusive spirituality, irrespective of its source and seeks a spirituality that is humble and inclusive.

The poem is parabolic, since its imagery forms a self-contained structure of meaning. ‘Faith’ is depicted entirely in the terms already established, combining earthly humility and aspirations of ascent. He is ‘meek’ and firmly attached to the earthly path, but points ‘Beyond the holy skies’; faith enables humbler moments of vision so that ‘E’en while their footsteps press the clay / Their souls ascend to heaven.’ However, it is less the philosophy of Faith than its personification that makes him an adequate guide. He is characterised as companion more than a leader, his journeying with the narrator expressed in the second person (‘we go’ and ‘round us’), unlike Earth and Pride. She describes physical support and contact when ‘thy hand conducts me’ and ‘I hold thee fast’. Whatever the landscape, and with little sense even of destination, the consistent sense of trusted companionship is what prevails:

Deserts beyond lie bleak and bare,
And keen winds round us blow;

71 ‘No Coward Soul is Mine’ and ‘Plead for Me’, Emily Brontë, Poems, pp. 182 and 22.
But if thy hand conducts me there, 
The way is right I know.
I have no wish to turn away;
My spirit does not quail.
How can it while I hear thee say,
‘Press forward – and prevail’?

Brontë accepts the absence of God by displacing intimate communion into this substitute figure. Faith is not a doctrinal matter, but the discovery of a divine companion through an act of poetic imagination.

A poetic solution is also found to a religious problem in Brontë’s poem of bereavement which opens ‘Severed and gone’. Set ‘many years’ after the loss of an anonymous friend, it is less a memorial than a reflection on the Christian doctrine of afterlife glory. She does not doubt her friend’s afterlife existence – looking at the tomb she knows ‘my beloved is not there’ – rather she critiques the psychological adequacy of the doctrine as a comfort for the bereaved. She dwells on her sense of separation from the loved one, who has joined God in a transcendent realm which she cannot access. She struggles with the barrier between life and eternity, and longs for contact with a persona who is at once human and divine:

... for I, by night,
Have prayed, within my silent room,
That Heaven would grant a burst of light
Its cheerless darkness to illume.

And give thee to my longing eyes ....

A shape these human nerves would thrill,
A majesty that might appal,
Did not thy earthly likeness, still,
Gleam softly, gladly, through it all.

In lieu of this impossible vision, the narrator longs for a physical remnant to cherish, ‘one shining tress’ or at least ‘thy pictured form’ as a substitute for contact. The vision of heavenly

72 Written 1847; publ. Benson, 1915; Chitham, pp. 141-143.
glory does not meet the longing for human communion which death severs. Transcendent afterlife is beset with the same emotional inadequacies as a transcendent God.

To resolve this separation, Brontë suggests an earthly afterlife. This partly resides in the tangible difference that she asserts her friend’s life on earth had:

... Thy spirit lingers till
Where’er thy sunny smile was seen:
There’s less of darkness, less of chill
On earth, than if thou hadst not been ....

Life seems more sweet that thou didst live,
And men more true that thou wert one;
Nothing is lost that thou didst give,
Nothing destroyed that thou hast done.

The substantive verbs imply a real, tangible change: ‘There [is] less of darkness’, ‘Nothing is lost … / Nothing destroyed’ (my italics). As well as this ‘afterlife’ in the beloved’s influence, the narrator asserts a continued existence co-dwelling in her own body:

Thou breathest in my bosom yet,
And dwellest in my beating heart;
And, while I cannot quite forget,
Thou, darling, canst not quite depart …

This suggests a pantheistic life in which all participate and to which all return; the boundary between identities is purely corporeal. This is not unlike Emily Brontë’s fusion in Wuthering Heights of the dead Cathy with the living Heathcliff, such that he is haunted by her and she ‘can not quite depart’ this life. While Emily Brontë portrays this as an exception to a general dearth of the spiritual, Anne Brontë’s terms are more general. She asserts that both the ‘heavenly’ and ‘earthly’ parts of her friend ‘still live’, in her heart but also ‘not in mine alone’. She claims a real continued presence for her friend in which she and others participate. As in ‘The Three Guides’, Brontë finds a poetic solution, through the ambiguity of metaphor, to a problem which theology does not resolve.
In these poems, Brontë to an extent accommodates her unrealizable aspirations by postponing their fulfilment to eternity. But the poems do not dwell on this heavenly destination. Overall, Brontë asserts an earthly spirituality, sometimes located in practical Christian living, sometimes in moments when the temporal carries suggestions of divine immanence. But in every poem she arrives at this more reconciled perspective after working through an inner debate.

Perspectives on a Pilgrim’s Progress

‘Self-Communion’ is Brontë’s third and longest dialogue poem.73 It is considered her most closely autobiographical, as she takes a retrospect over her life since childhood, and refers to the loss of a close relationship which is taken to be that with her sister Emily. The poem is an argument between the pilgrim narrator and a guide who tries to assure her of a providential purpose in life’s events. Bronte was probably familiar, through her Methodist reading, with autobiographical writings that followed this model, and her own diary papers and Bible reading project show her interest in self development. However, in ‘Self-Communion’ it is not a model she accepts in any straightforward way, as conflicting interpretations of experience compete to become the authoritative ‘reading’ of her life.

In response to the pilgrim’s first complaint about ‘the wasting power of time’ ‘stealing life away’, the guide argues for spiritual growth in spite of physical aging. ‘[T]he inward inner flame’ burns on, the character which accrues from experience:

... every month and every day
Leaves some effect of good or ill.
The wise will find in Memory’s store
A help for that which lies before
To guide their course aright.

The pilgrim accepts this model when she recalls her extreme sensitivity and isolation as a child, and her discovery of an independent personal faith: ‘God’, she acknowledges, ‘grant[ed] the struggling soul repose’ so that she ‘gains the upward path’, ‘And passes on from strength to strength, / Leaning on Heaven the while.’ However, she argues against the paradigm of personal growth when she considers the traumatising effect of a harsh world on

73 Written 1847-8; publ. privately (30 copies) T. J. Wise, 1900; Chitham, pp. 152-160.
her sensitive temperament. Retrospectively she pities the prospects of her child self, timid and vulnerable to rejection:

Poor helpless thing! What can it do
Life's stormy cares and toils among ...
With strength so feeble, fears so strong
Amid this selfish, bustling throng,
How will it faint and tire!

She applies natural logic to suggest not growth, but atrophy, since 'a harsh soil and a cruel clime' makes tender plants 'droop and pine' rather than become strong. The only quality she concedes will develop from such a collision of environment and temperament is 'inward hardness' that 'freeze[s] the generous blood of youth, / And steel[s] full fast the tender heart'. This the guide argues as a gain, a maturing of the mind and conscience which may prove 'a surer guide / Than those sweet instincts of our youth.' In addition, she argues, the loss of such oversensitivity can only be welcome to the pilgrim herself - 'Blessed be God for that divine decree!' she declares, 'That hardness comes with misery, / And suffering deadens pain.' It is a pragmatic justification of the effects of time and disappointment, making a virtue out of necessity.

What the Guide argues here as a gain in the inner life, the pilgrim feels is atrophy. She uses elemental terms of cold, stone and hardness to depict a kind of death in this 'growth', akin to the psychological pain suffered in 'Fluctuations'. Where emotional needs have no outlet, to 'check' them seems a 'waste' rather than a positive development:

Nay, but 'tis hard to feel that chill
Come creeping o'er the shuddering heart,
Love may be full of pain, but still,
'Tis sad to see it so depart,-
To watch that fire, whose genial glow
Was formed to comfort and to cheer,
For want of fuel, fading so
To see the soft soil turned to stone
    For lack of kindly showers,-
To see those yearnings of the breast,
Pining to bless and to be blessed,
Drop withered, frozen one by one,
Till centred in itself alone,
     It wastes its blighted powers.

The pilgrim also argues that a loving relationship is itself a dimension of the spiritual, ‘a home / Where heart and soul may kindly rest’ and people ‘can bless as they are blessed’. Thus she challenges the guide’s implicit separation of emotional and spiritual on which her argument for progress partly depends. The pilgrim insists that the lack of human intimacy is in itself a spiritual impairment, not an incidental absence in a prevailing theme of spiritual growth.

The guide offers no counter-argument to this, but moves on to the final Christian assurance, heaven as the soul’s true home. Those who fix their hopes on heaven will there ‘Behold a purer, deeper glow / Than these uncertain gleams shall show....’ This is a return to Johnsonian resignation, to which the guide adds bracingly, ‘Life is for labour, not for joy’, a place for spiritual warfare in which the pilgrim’s role is to ‘strive’, not ‘lament’. The pilgrim does not argue with this principle, but complains that, in practice, it is hard to sustain: ‘[M]y gains are light – my progress slow ... / And it is hard to toil for aye’. The inner reward is too little to be a motive. As a last resort, the guide offers the afterlife as an escape route, ‘a rest beyond the grave... / Where dwell the faithful and the brave’. It is the final consolation for a pilgrim who cannot trace patterns of progress within her life. The pilgrim appears to accept this, but in terms which imply a condition. She needs some supernatural inner assurance: ‘Show me that rest’ she pleads, ‘let me see that sunny shore, / However far away!’ More than the actual afterlife itself, she longs for personal contact and recognition from God. While in ‘The Narrow Way’ (Brontë’s next poem, chronologically) this assurance is attained as the intrinsic reward for Christian self-discipline, here it is not. The language is pervaded by the conditional:

Could I but hear my Saviour say, -
‘I know thy patience and thy love;
How thou hast held the narrow way’
For my sake laboured night and day ...’
Oh, this would be reward indeed!
The guide has the final word in the poem, commissioning the pilgrim to 'Press forward' to this goal, but there is no real resolution. Her bracing tone assumes the pilgrim has acquiesced, but the pilgrim's final speech is tentative and conditional – she may not be convinced.

'Self-Communion' is a poignant debate about the Christian belief in progress over time and growth through suffering, which in the tradition of spiritual autobiography was to be evidenced in the individual's life. It is a pattern which the pilgrim wants to believe, but which her subjective experience struggles to accept. She sees loss as much as gain, still feels the need for a supernatural moment of conviction to get her through.

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Anne Brontë's poetry is a rich example of the 'doubtful belief' emerging in the 1840s. There is a profound interiority to her poems, which Frawley observes as the depiction of 'a divided or fractured identity, whose component parts engage with one another rather than with those outside the self'. However, I suggest that Brontë also engages with ideas and ideals 'outside of the self', debating with religious viewpoints that she has in part internalised, but from which she also retains some detachment. Her concerns are ethical and emotional. Religion, she argues, must be humane, inclusive and generous in spirit; God is loving, compassionate and in theory accessible. Her poetry points out the experiential problems with these ideals and doctrines.

Brontë's subjective world largely fails to appropriate this optimistic idea of God, to experience the conviction of divine intimacy in Romantic or Evangelical terms. Whether it is called memory, imagination, or faith, the subjective recreation of this conviction is more often than not impossible for her, and emotionally God remains absent. Her later poems modify the ideal of divine immanence into a compromise with reality – a compromise Emily Brontë does not seek to make. Anne Brontë's greater interest in this world, and in the more commonplace experience, presses her to find value in this life. She locates this in practical Christian action, and in modest connections between this and the next world, but subjective conviction is hard to attain and hard to sustain. Brontë's poetry shows faith to be an unresolved argument between belief and experience, ideal and reality.

Frawley, pp. 75.
4: Harriet Martineau: ‘a forcible and elegant writer on religious and moral subjects’

Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), ‘Victorian England’s most famous female intellectual’, has rarely been discussed as a religious writer. She is better known for her contributions to economic, political and social debates, and for her pioneering role as a very public woman of letters. In particular, she was unusual as a professional female journalist. She wrote hundreds of articles for periodicals including the *Athenaeum* and the *Edinburgh Review*, and for many years had a regular column in the *Daily News*, paving the way for later radical female journalists such as Frances Power Cobbe and Eliza Lynn Linton. She also published novels and non-fictional prose works on history, education, and travel after her *Illustrations of Political Economy* made her a national figure in 1832. She is widely recognised as a ‘populariser of political economy, novelist, journalist, traveller and historian’, in fact as a ‘popular educator’ in virtually every subject but religion. Biographers tend to treat her early religious concerns as a phase in the development of her ideas, but no one has considered the central role Martineau played for a few years at a crucial time in nineteenth century Unitarianism. This chapter will examine that neglected role.

Martineau herself devalued her early religious work in the autobiography she wrote in 1855. Brought up a Unitarian, in her late twenties and thirties she gradually moved towards a secular world view, and by the 1850s had become agnostic. She was particularly influenced by the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, in which natural law replaced God as the ultimate phenomenon humans could know and obey. In her autobiography, she imposes this final viewpoint on her earlier beliefs, and dismisses her Unitarianism as a ‘monstrous

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superstition' from which she has been released. Of her religious writings she is 'heartily ashamed', and cannot 'bear thinking about' her essays, tales and poetry which she now considers 'trumpery', 'morbid, fantastical'. In the story of her growth as a writer, she also correlates religious belief with professional immaturity. This retrospective viewpoint undervalues the importance religion had in establishing her career. Unitarianism provided a motive and an audience for Martineau to become a professional woman of letters. In 1829 she wrote in a private paper:

My aim is to be a forcible and elegant writer on religious and moral subjects, so as to be useful to refined as well as unenlightened minds.

Like many other women writers, she challenged her society to live up to its Christian ideals, and in her writings she applies the full logic of Unitarian beliefs to personal and national life. The woman later designated 'governess of the nation' was initially its religious instructor.

Through her early works, Martineau played an important role as a theologian and consolidator of British Unitarianism in the 1820s and 30s, and pioneered a more formal engagement with theology by a woman. Between 1822 and 1832 Martineau published books of Devotional Exercises and Addresses, a collection of imaginary stories about the life of Jesus called Traditions of Palestine, and several tales on religious and moral themes. She wrote extensive defences of Unitarian doctrine in relation to Roman Catholicism, Judaism and Islam. The British and Foreign Unitarian Association awarded each of these essays a prize, published them and translated them for French and Spanish Unitarians to read. Martineau was also the most prolific contributor to the Unitarian periodical the Monthly Repository. From 1829 to 1832, the height of her work for this publication, she contributed fourteen original essays, twenty-five essay-style reviews, ten poems and nineteen pieces of imaginative prose. She continued to write elsewhere on her changing religious beliefs until the 1850s, but for these few years she was 'in a very real sense ... the Unitarian prophetess.'

Martineau's contemporaries valued her contribution to developing the Unitarian faith. A reviewer of her three prize essays praised her 'distinctness, simplicity and comprehensiveness' and hoped that the essays would be 'read at home' by Unitarians who

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5 Quoted by Chapman in Autobiography, III, p. 33.
6 Some essays are in two, three or four parts published over several numbers in the same year; I have counted each part as a single contribution, as it would have been read by the reader.
might thus learn more of their own faith.\textsuperscript{8} A later editor of the \emph{Monthly Repository}, summarising her work's distinctive features, commended Martineau's abilities as a communicator. He admires her 'power of grasping a principle,' working it through logically, and presenting the truth both 'to the understanding and to the heart.'\textsuperscript{9} In a biographical sketch published in the 1877 \emph{Autobiography}, Maria Weston Chapman (herself not entirely a Unitarian sympathiser) singled Martineau out from more conventional theologians:

The chosen expositor of the faith to foreign lands, the main pillar of its periodical literature at home, the leader of its devotions in song and prayer,- where she began, aged doctors of divinity are content to utter their \emph{nunc dimittis}.

Even forty years after Martineau's break from Unitarianism, Chapman still felt that an important part of Martineau's career was being 'a mother in the little Israel into which she was born', and she paid tribute to her efforts 'to make Unitarianism an affirmative faith'.\textsuperscript{11}

I first discuss what particular combination of historical circumstances and opportunities enabled Martineau to take on this role, one which was exceptional for a lay writer and a woman so early in the century. I then consider Martineau's contributions to the \emph{Monthly Repository} in terms of how she constructed a theology for her particular readership and era. In so doing, she presented herself as a new kind of theologian for a modern society.

Meeting a contemporary need

Robert Aspland, the first editor of the \emph{Monthly Repository} (1806-26), stated his plan for contributors to pursue the 'bold and manly habit of religious investigation'.\textsuperscript{12} Harriet Martineau was therefore probably not the person he expected to fulfil this call, but in 1822 she began to write for the periodical. From 1829-32 she was its leading writer, and the only one to be paid an annual salary. Martineau caught a critical moment both in the history of Unitarianism and in the openings available in the periodical press for a self-educated woman such as herself. Her opportunities were matched by her need. After the collapse of her

\textsuperscript{8} [Anon.], 'Miss Martineau's Prize Essays', \emph{Monthly Repository} VI (1832), pp. 476-7. All references to the \emph{Monthly Repository} are to the new series (starting 1827) unless specified. The periodical title will hereafter be abbreviated to MR.
\textsuperscript{10} \emph{Autobiography}, III, pp. 54, 50.
\textsuperscript{11} \emph{Autobiography}, III, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{12} Mineka, p. 103.

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father's business in 1829, she had to earn her living and 'to work [she] went, with needle and pen.' Her financial need and her Unitarian background respectively impelled and enabled her to become the faith's leading proponent at a vital stage of its development.

Unitarianism was still developing its beliefs in the early nineteenth century. It had emerged in the eighteenth century as a school of thought, joined by individuals who held these unorthodox beliefs in private while worshiping in various denominations. Not until 1774 was there a chapel which designated itself 'Unitarian'. Unitarianism first and foremost rejected the divinity of Christ and thus the trinity, and it was strongly influenced by eighteenth century rationalist philosophy. Unitarians asserted the discovery of truth through reasoning, believing that God revealed himself primarily through natural phenomena. They opposed Calvinist doctrines of original sin, divine atonement and eternal punishment, taking a more humanistic approach to theology altogether in what they advertised as 'rational religion'. But these ideas were not codified in any written creed, as this would have contradicted the Unitarian ideal of individual freedom of conscience. This theology was an evolving belief system, its eighteenth-century founders not qualified theologians but philosophers and scientists such as John Locke, David Hartley and Joseph Priestley. They combined scientific empiricism and moral philosophy with unorthodox interpretations of the Bible. While these remained foundational, Unitarianism's belief in revelation through natural law meant that new discoveries were welcomed as additions to truth. There was therefore a continual project to be undertaken of updating Unitarian belief. Hence Martineau was able to make a significant contribution to Unitarian theology, by building on familiar religious ideas with German biblical scholarship, new scientific and social theories, and political economy.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Unitarianism was consolidating its status as a denomination and a legitimate religious alternative. For decades Unitarians' denial of the trinity had been illegal, but the repeal of the Anti-Trinitarian Act (1813) and of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828) allowed them to practise their faith and engage in public life. The denomination began to build a national identity, creating organisations such as the Unitarian Fund (1806) which was absorbed by the new British and Foreign Unitarian Association in 1825, the Association for Protecting the Civil Rights of Unitarians (formed 1819) and the Unitarian Book Society (1826). The Unitarian Association not only linked chapels in Britain together, but also formed connections with congregations in Europe, North America, and India where, many Unitarians hoped, their faith would be adopted on a national

basis.\(^{14}\) Having a strong social ethic, Unitarians used their new freedom to influence the press, philanthropic and education projects, and to get involved in local and national politics. Indeed, in 1837 four fifths of the dissenting members of the House of Commons were Unitarians.\(^{15}\) With their mere 200 congregations and an estimated 33,000 membership in the 1830s, 'they weighed more than they measured'.\(^{16}\) A historian of the sect summarises:

> For the supporters of the young Unitarian movement the first third of the nineteenth century was a period of rising optimism and rapid growth, in which they had confident expectations as to their future.\(^{17}\)

Martineau shared and fuelled this enthusiasm. She promoted a Unitarian worldview as the basis of a cohesive response to a changing world.

At the time Martineau started writing for the *Monthly Repository*, Unitarians were seeking a new image. Now a legitimate denomination, they wanted to move away from their defensive stance and their doctrinal emphasis. Where not condemned as 'the last and most perfect invention of Satan',\(^{18}\) Unitarianism was frequently perceived as a religion for intellectuals 'cold, analytical, and logical'.\(^{19}\) W. J. Fox, a Unitarian preacher and later editor of the *Monthly Repository*, cited the popular objection that Unitarianism was 'a cold and heartless system, alike unfavourable to zeal and devotion'.\(^{20}\) In a climate strongly influenced by the evangelical 'religion of the heart', Unitarians needed to offer an alternative faith with positive, practical value. Some ministers in the 1810s and 20s shared this as a major concern. W. E. Channing defensively claimed that '[w]e regard Unitarianism as peculiarly the friend of inward, living, practical religion';\(^{21}\) Joshua Toulmin felt he had to argue that in Unitarianism 'there is power ... to affect, to impress and to alarm the heart of man: a power to raise his fears, to excite his gratitude, to encourage his hopes, and to bow his mind to holy obedience.'\(^{22}\) In a series of essays in the *Monthly Repository* on the state of modern Unitarianism, John Relly Beard issued a particular call for writers to make the faith more


\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 361.


\(^{17}\) Wilbur, p. 345.


\(^{19}\) Mineka, p. 146.


\(^{21}\) Channing, p. 6.

experiential and relevant to contemporary life. 'Unitarians have not moved forward with the
general mass' he wrote. 'They have stood in the old paths' and 'not kept pace with the spirit
of the age', having become 'devoid of the attractions for the religionists of the day'. Beard
challenged 'the younger part of our ministers', but added an appeal to all Unitarians: '[y]ou
recognise no peculiar rights of the clergy .... You are each a minister of Christ.'

Martineau did what Beard preached. Her 1820s devotional books and tales show the 'practical divinity'
of Unitarianism in young people's lives, and her *Monthly Repository* discursive essays always
blend theory with practice. Martineau instructs readers how to live out specifically Unitarian
theological principles in personal daily life and wider social involvement. She made a vital
contribution, at a crucial time, to making Unitarianism 'an affirmative religion'.

Through the press, Martineau could address a national Unitarian community which
existed in no other form. The denomination opposed, on principle, the very notion of a
centralised authority through which conformity was enforced. At a time when 'free-thought'
and Broad Church networks had not yet formed, Unitarian chapels included liberal thinkers of
various denominational backgrounds and some 'doubters'. One minister in 1811 described his
congregation as

... a Voluntary Association ... of Individual Christians , each one professing
Christianity for himself according to his own views of it, formed upon a
mature consideration of the Scriptures, and acknowledging the minister's
right to do the same; and necessarily united in nothing but a desire to
worship the Supreme Lord of all as common disciples of one common
Master.'

The model of a 'voluntary association' applies also to relations between the two hundred
chapels in Britain. The Unitarian Association was a loose organisation, with never more than
half of the chapels being members at one time. The press therefore provided a more effective
and acceptable community based on sympathies, but without compulsion. Josef Altholz
argues that denominational periodicals 'stimulated ... denominational consciousness' at least
as much as 'formal membership' did. This was particularly true for the Unitarians in the
absence of centralised institutions, and they relied on periodicals to propagate ideas and form
a collective consciousness, from Joseph Priestley's *Theological Repository* (to 1799), to
Robert Aspland's *Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature* founded in 1806. In
1826 the Unitarian Association took over editorship of the *Monthly Repository* and made it

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24 William Turner, quoted in John Seed, 'Theologies of Power: Unitarianism and the Social Relations of
Religious Discourse, 1800-50', in R.J. Morris, ed., *Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth-
more firmly a denominational organ than it had been. This periodical created a national belief community by giving ‘intelligence’ of regional Unitarian events, publishing correspondence and issuing critical notices of theological works which might be of interest. It also published articles which developed Unitarian belief. In 1827 it took on full-length reviewing, voicing a distinctively Unitarian perspective on contemporary events. Mineka puts its 1809 circulation figure at about 1000, although he estimates an increase over the following years.26 Since several subscribers were chapels, it can be assumed that the actual readership was larger.

It was vital for Martineau’s success that W. J. Fox took on the editorship of the *Monthly Repository* in 1827. His policy accorded with what she had to offer. Fox was convinced of Unitarianism’s need for a more applied theology, which showed its contemporary relevance:

> We must advance from interpretation to application; from studying the letter of the word to imbibing its spirit; and that spirit must be made to bear upon the peculiar circumstances of the times and country in which we live ... If Christianity does not apply to these circumstances, it is an obsolete religion, and we had better look out for a new one.27

Martineau more than any other contributor fulfilled Fox’s editorial policy. She consolidated the scholarship which informed Unitarians’ beliefs into a coherent set of principles, and then applied them to contemporary life. Mineka declares hers a fresh lay voice amid mostly established Unitarian ministers, and she looked forwards and outwards more than most of her co-contributors.28 For example, in August 1829, while other writers reviewed Dr. Whately’s *Essays on St Paul* and rehearsed old arguments against the Trinity, Martineau applied Locke’s and Hartley’s ideas to personal spiritual development and to the improvement of society. Following the 1832 Reform Act in which many of her readership would have gained electoral power, Martineau includes science, prison policy, economics, education and slavery in her theological discussions, turning Unitarians’ eyes outwards to their changing world. Her periodical work was therefore not merely ‘reflective’, ‘sustaining or reflecting a consensual reality already in existence’; rather it played an important part in constructing the Unitarian readership’s meanings.29

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26 Mineka, p. 167.
27 W. J. Fox, quoted in Mineka, p. 216.
28 Mineka, p. 207.
A Woman Writing Theology

Through her periodical writing, Martineau created for herself a position of leadership which traditional channels would not have allowed. Unitarianism had allowed women preachers, though these were few in the early nineteenth century when the domestic ideal for women was at its zenith. Certainly the denomination did not train women ministers. However, many women found that through the press they could earn by merit a role as public educator which institutions would not authorise. Mary Somerville, Anna Jameson and Jane Marcelet made livings as pioneer writers on science, art criticism and economics respectively, specialisms more typically the preserve of men. These disciplines were open to the reasonably educated enthusiast, since they 'had not yet erected educational or institutional barriers that would keep women out' as they did later in the century when they became more formally professionalised. The same applied to Unitarian theology, whose tradition of lay, non-specialist theologians was one Martineau could join. She wrote more for the periodical than did any Unitarian minister (such as Fox or Beard), having more time to do so without their pastoral responsibilities. Her use of several pseudonyms disguised her gender and the extent of her contributions: no reader knew that articles by 'Discipulus', 'V', 'D.F' and 'H.M', as well as some unsigned essays, all issued from Martineau’s pen until she claimed authorship for them in 1833 after making her name with *Illustrations of Political Economy*. She could play a significant role in developing Unitarian thought, without appearing to claim a controversial level of authority.

Martineau had greater preparation than most women to qualify her for this role. Unitarians educated girls to a higher standard than average and produced several women whose achievements exceeded the conventional. Social novelist Elizabeth Gaskell and nursing reformer and campaigner Florence Nightingale both had a Unitarian education. Harriet Martineau’s schooling by the Rev. Isaac Perry included subjects typically reserved for boys – Latin, arithmetic and the strategies of composition, which she describes as 'a capital way of introducing some order into the chaos of girls' thoughts'. Her family allowed her to pursue her intellectual interests independently in her teens, albeit fitted around her domestic duties and – that bane of the Victorian female student – having to 'be fit to receive callers'. She set herself a programme of study which in many ways paralleled that of her brother

30 Mermin, p. xv.
31 [W.J. Fox], 'Some Autobiographical Particulars of Miss Harriet Martineau', *MR VII* (1833), pp. 612-615.
32 *Autobiography*, I, p. 64.
33 *Autobiography*, I, p. 100.
James, who trained at the Unitarian Manchester College to become a minister. Together they studied ‘Lowth’s Prelections in the Latin’, and while James studied them at college, Martineau at home studied works of ‘mental and moral philosophy’ by Priestley and Hartley and by the Scottish school of philosophers including Reid and Dugald Scott. ‘I read every book that I could hear of on the subject of the Will’ she wrote, as she grappled with Necessarian philosophy. James himself suggested that her ‘firm and ready verdict’ influenced his thinking as he prepared to write his important work ‘Divine Influences on the Human Mind’. Harriet Martineau also studied the Bible and many commentaries, ‘and every kind of book or process which could improve my literary skill’ such as Hugh Blair’s Rhetoric. She qualified herself, as far as she could without formal training, in all the formative sources of Unitarian thought.

Martineau’s success was in part due to her strong sense of audience. Her brother James found it painful to ‘write to order’ when preparing sermons, comfortable only when he forgot the presence of his audience and fell into ‘soliloquy’. In contrast, Harriet Martineau is ‘teacherly’, always conscious of her reader’s position. The reviewer of her prize essays praised this ability, saying ‘the author has thrown herself into the minds of those for whom, peculiarly, she was to write’. Her concept of authorship, Linda Peterson argues, takes into account the reader and editor as well as author in the ‘communications circuit’. Martineau eschews the Romantic ideal of an inspired, autonomous author and instead respects the needs of reader and editor (i.e. the market) as equally important participants. It is likely she was influenced by the model of the Unitarian minister, who was directly funded by his congregation and whose authority was thus entirely subject to its approval. If dissatisfied with his preaching, worshippers withdrew their financial support and he could even lose his position. So Martineau negotiated her role in relation to her readers under the mentoring of W. J. Fox. Her Monthly Repository essays target an intelligent general reader. In them Martineau explains concepts of moral philosophy or biblical scholarship in accessible terms, with examples from daily life. She responded to the need that Walter Bagehot indicated, in that ‘the multitude are impatient of system’, ‘the technicalities of scholars’, ‘the tedium of

36 Quoted in Carpenter, p. 44.
38 Carpenter, p. 59.
41 E.g. two Unitarian ministers lost their pew rents after making their Chartist sympathies evident in the pulpit. As a result, both lost their positions. See Seed, in Morris, p. 143.
exhaustive discussion'. He claims that '[w]e must speak so they will listen – that they will like to listen – that they will understand.'\(^{42}\) When formal religious and cultural leaders were losing credibility, Martineau performs a religious version of the 'sage' role usually applied to secular writers, offering 'guidance' to fellow laity in a time of rapid social and intellectual change. She 'assimilate[d] and interpret[ed]’ knowledge which her readership did not have, and ‘dispens[ed] truth, wisdom, and sometimes judgment’ on the state of the world.\(^{43}\) This was a new kind of theologian for a democratic, secularising era.

Martineau was aware that she was stepping beyond conventional boundaries in her theological work. Although Unitarian attitudes to gender were generally less rigid than in other circles, Martineau’s work for the *Monthly Repository* was still exceptional in its incursion into predominantly ‘masculine’ territory. It signalled a widening of her sphere from the more characteristically ‘feminine’ writings she began with: devotional exercises and tales which located her within the tradition of female writers of ‘practical divinity’ she wrote about in her first *Monthly Repository* essay.\(^{44}\) Her first essays on the spiritual implications of Hartleyan psychological theory and on the doctrine of atonement are self-conscious and apologetic; in the latter, she feels ‘conscious of [her] own unfitness to enter into deep arguments of this nature’, pleading with the editor that he should prefer to publish any other submission ‘in which the questions are more ably discussed.’\(^{45}\) Even here, though, she has abandoned her first pen-name, ‘Discipulus’, and its implications of tutelage. By 1829 she was writing with fuller confidence and authority, assured that she was the best person to do the job. Her thirty-nine essays and reviews of 1829-32 claim the ‘broad learning, original thought, and spiritual authority’ which generally made such a form of writing difficult for women.\(^{46}\)

Martineau was exceptional in her contribution to Unitarianism as a lay woman writing alongside men. She won the Unitarian essay prize in a competition which almost certainly included qualified ministers. The few other women who wrote for the *Monthly Repository* during these years (notably Anna Barbauld, Emily Taylor and Jane Roscoe) wrote mostly poems, or short prose pieces which Martineau exceeded in length, scholarship and sheer quantity. Her essays appeared alongside articles by reverends and doctors of divinity, many of


\(^{44}\) ‘Female Writers on Practical Divinity’, *MR* First series XVII (1822).

\(^{45}\) ‘Reply to Objections on the Unitarian Scheme of Atonement’, *MR* First series XIX (1824), p. 598.

whom were chapel ministers. She herself felt she was specially qualified to transcend typical female limitations:

I believe myself possessed of no uncommon talents, and of not an atom of genius; but as various circumstances have led me to think more accurately and read more extensively than some women, I believe that I may so write on subjects of universal concern as to inform some minds and stir up others.47

Some of her contemporaries admired her later journalist work as 'masculine' due to qualities already evident in her Monthly Repository essays: her objective rather than personal approach, her 'acute abstract comprehension' and 'high logic.' 48

But as Linda Peterson argues, Martineau aspires not so much to a masculine but a 'genderless ideal for writing ... by demonstrating [her] competence in masculine rhetoric, then by breaking down common (mis)assumptions about 'masculine' versus 'feminine' capacities'. 49 This is true in her theological work, and alongside her essays and reviews appear her more experiential tales, parables and poems. Her essays always apply theories to practical use, and she draws on 'the same principles' to produce the 'loftiest theological truths and the homeliest practical utility'. 50 Martineau combined genres because her religious ideal was to break down the barriers between theory and practice, and hence between masculine and feminine in the theological enterprise.

Democratic theology: empowering the individual

Martineau wrote predominantly for a developing middle-class consciousness. In her Monthly Repository essays she created a theology which appealed to, and furthered, liberal values and eroded traditional privilege. Unitarian theology had even more than other forms of Protestantism an individualistic ethos, distrusting the authority of institutions or tradition. As Beard stated: '[y]ou recognise no peculiar rights of the clergy .... You are each a minister for Christ'. 51 In addition, many Unitarians were professionals or industrialists and had radical, political interests. The readership of the Monthly Repository comprised the more educated of

49 Linda H. Peterson, 'Harriet Martineau: Masculine Discourse, Female Sage' in Morgan, p. 175.
50 'Miss Martineau's Prize Essays', p. 484.
the Unitarian readership, while the Christian Remembrancer (1815-63) met 'lower brow' tastes. Around 1830, the middle classes were entertaining the prospect of greater political power. The campaign for electoral reform was reaching its peak, and the first Whig government for decades came into power in 1830. The Unitarians' readiness to take advantage of these opportunities is evidenced by there being so many Unitarian MPs only a few years after the 1832 Reform Act. Martineau was foremost among the writers in the Monthly Repository who specifically addressed the readership as an expanding electorate. She wrote as an 'organic intellectual', both reflecting and constructing the consciousness of the class rising to power. Her theological project is to empower a class of independently thinking, active citizens.

Martineau popularised the specialist scholarship which informed Unitarian thinking. 'A Defence of Metaphysical Studies' (1824) is an exposition of Hartley's 'necessarian' philosophy, and her six 'Essays on the Art of Thinking' (1829) are expressly based on the empirical thought processes advocated by Locke, Bacon and Newton. She was paid by the Monthly Repository mainly to write reviews, and according to contemporary literary convention these acted more as summaries of a work, with some of the reviewer's opinions, than as critical analyses. Martineau's four-part essay on a translation of the German scholar Lessing's Education of the Human Race extensively summarised his thesis, while expanding it with her own ideas and application. Like many other reviewers of her time, she offered 'pre-digested information' to an audience who had not the time, commitment or opportunity to read the full originals themselves. At times, Martineau makes overt her project to disseminate Unitarian scholarship. She disagrees with those who argue that Hartley's doctrine of necessity is one 'which ought never to have been heard of beyond the walls of colleges'; rather it 'imperiously demand[ed] the attention of every reflecting mind'. She intends her essays 'On the Art of Thinking' not 'for scholars and wise men', but for 'those who have never studied nor are likely to study under these masters in the art of thinking'. Lessing's thesis merits such full exposition because it suggests a providential plan which 'can be understood' along with 'the purpose for which it was given, and the arrangement in which it is offered'. Martineau extends Lessing's insights to a wider audience than even the English translation would reach. She writes her other essays from a viewpoint which has internalised

54 'Natural History of Enthusiasm', MR III (1829), p. 425.
55 Ibid., p. 57.
these central ideas of Hartley, Locke et al. and Lessing, so that they are conveyed as Unitarian common sense to her regular readers.

Martineau democratised this knowledge because she believed it had a personal, practical relevance in readers' lives.\textsuperscript{57} To act on these ideas was to make of Unitarianism the 'inward, living, practical religion' that Channing and other ministers had sought. Martineau applies Hartley's ideas to Christian practice, placing the believer in control of his or her own spiritual development. In 'A Defence of Metaphysical Studies' she explains his 'Necessarian' philosophy, which argued that all behaviour proceeded on a basis of cause and effect; once a process of motivation, desire and opportunity was set in motion, it would reach its inevitable end. Temptation could not be resisted by arbitrary 'free will' as orthodox Christians taught. Since 'the same motives will produce the same volition and the same consequent action,' the wise believer 'therefore flies from the danger, instead of presumptuously believing that he can overcome temptation'. Not all Unitarians accepted this deterministic philosophy, seeing it as too materialistic, but Martineau believed it could 'form our practice by an invariable rule'.\textsuperscript{58} She advises readers to take control of the causative process, by altering the circumstances which bring about motivation and opportunity. The resulting creation of 'moral habits' is a surer 'safeguard' against temptation than reliance on arbitrary acts of will.\textsuperscript{59} In another essay, Martineau applies Hartley's associational psychology to the ends of virtue. Feelings are to be used as 'instruments in the formation of good principles and habits'. By regularly following a religious or compassionate feeling with an appropriate action, 'by the unfailing power of association' a pattern will be formed where virtue becomes increasingly habitual and effortless. She instructs readers therefore to 'engage these sensibilities on the side of virtue, and to make them act as stimuli to virtuous actions', and thus to develop a holier life.\textsuperscript{60} Spiritual processes are demystified and placed in the hands of the ordinary believer.

Martineau instructs her readers to direct their spiritual lives according to rational principles. Some of her essays are like sermons, applying principles to specific scenarios. She preaches on the 'dangers of adversity', contrasting an erroneous with an enlightened view of the spiritual value of suffering. She mocks the sufferer who studiously attempts resignation and believes in God's particular purpose in his trials. Such a person

\textsuperscript{57} This anticipates the principle of her more famous \textit{Illustrations of Political Economy} (1832), which she intended as practical education. Martineau complained that the specialist works of Adam Smith and his followers 'are very valuable, but they do not give us what we want – the science in a familiar, practical form.' Quoted in Gaby Weiner, 'Harriet Martineau: A Re-assessment' in Dale Spender, ed., \textit{Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Women's Intellectual Traditions} (London: Women's Press, 1983), p. 66.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{MR} first series XIX (1824), pp. 270-71.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{60} 'On the Agency of Feelings in the Formation of Good Habits', \textit{MR} III (1829), pp. 103.
may arise in the morning, pray with real devotion for resignation to bear, and strength to support, and then go forth, satisfied that the blessing of God is on him, and that he must necessarily be benefited by his trial ... The consciousness of peculiar circumstances hangs upon him... If he writes a letter to a friend, he fills his sheet with his thoughts of resignation; he tells of his consolations, his hopes, and the blessings which remain to him ... he recurs to the old impression that it is for the glory of religion that he should show how great and how various are her consolations. Thus he passes the day, desiring that the will of God should be his will, and believing that it is so; but, in reality, thinking only of himself, and living only to himself.

According to Martineau, suffering has no mystical value. God's aim is the development of benevolence in humanity, so she directs her readership to 'observe' their experience and 'carefully direct the process' of responding according to 'influence the operations of Providence ought to have on our character'. '[L]ook abroad', she instructs, 'rejoice with those who rejoice' and 'weep with those who weep'. This self-forgetfulness is more likely to produce growth in moral character than the self-focus of the traditional Protestant sense that God has ordained trial for a special purpose. Individuals must 'work out their own salvation' rather than leaving it to some mystical process in which they are passive.61 Elsewhere she preaches on repentance in similar terms of its instrumental, not intrinsic value. Remorse for past action is only useful to strengthen the resolve to improve. She condemns 'the injurious penance of recording past sins, and revising past sorrows, which, having yielded their results, are fit only to be forgotten'.62 Martineau's is a fundamentally rational understanding of religion, but this does not remain coldly abstract as Unitarianism was often accused of being. She demystifies the process of spiritual and moral development, and places the knowledge and the responsibility for directing it into her readers' hands.

Martineau taught her readers not only to set and maintain their own spiritual course, but to become authors of their own theology. The principle of individual autonomy in matters of conscience had always been central to Unitarian thought, but Martineau is especially keen to educate readers in how to develop the skills of independent thought, and thus inquire into religious truth for themselves. In her series of essays 'On the Art of Thinking' she promotes 'the importance of habits of accurate thought', and insists that if these were widely adopted 'there would be an end at once to half the evils that afflict humanity' due to a better understanding of natural law through which (in the Unitarian framework) the divine will is revealed. Over the course of the essays, she explains how the scientific method of inductive thought can be applied to moral affairs in order to deduce laws of cause and effect, and how to

accumulate ‘impressions’ from experience, to connect, classify and interpret them. Day to day life provides the material for this process, which can be extended by reading. While she advocates the practice of composition as a means to this rational method, she concedes that for those without such educational opportunities, thoughtful ‘conversation’ can develop similar skills of observation and induction. Thus she equips the lay reader to work out truth for him or herself, independent of the religious expert. Informed amateur theology is the way forward, and Martineau gives her reader a toolkit to begin with as well as presenting herself as a model.

There is a strong meritocratic theme to this series of essays in terms of social and educational opportunities. Martineau states:

Far wiser is the cottager who has formed habits of quick and accurate observation, even though he may never have learned his alphabet, than the mere reader who is ever accumulating, but never gaining.

She gives examples which subvert the social hierarchy, of a servant who is clearer thinking than her mistress and a child than his parents who resort to casuistry to justify themselves to him. Clear thinking, which leads to moral wisdom, constitutes ‘that inheritance which the Father of lights has appointed to the whole human race’; this is therefore ‘the common right of every rational being’. Critics of Martineau have accused her of oversimplification of theoretical ideas, from R. H. Horne who thought her ‘too ready at times to adopt a theory bearing a promise of good’ to R. K. Webb who calls her ‘doctrinaire, utopian and woolly’. But Martineau did not aim to engage at a sophisticated level with specialist ideas. Like other men and women of letters, her goal was ‘synthesis, generalisation, and evaluation’ in order to interpret life at a time of rapid social and cultural change. Horne acknowledged that ‘having embraced’ an idea, Martineau was ‘clear and acute in working it out’ in its full practical implications. She sacrifices subtleties and sophistication in order to democratise religious knowledge and thinking skills so everyone could understand and apply them.

Martineau makes of these Unitarian principles a religion of the heart as well as of the mind. She offers her readers the possibility of obtaining a spiritual vision which infuses the world with wonder. If, through associational and inductive thinking, the believer habitually

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63 MR III (1829), pp. 57-8, 109.
64 Ibid., pp. 98, 65, 113.
66 Heyck, p. 42.
67 Horne, p. 73.
makes use of all experience, feelings and observations to further moral and spiritual
development, then the whole natural world becomes imbued with spiritual potential.
Martineau describes this state of perception as the most advanced spiritual state: `[t]he voice
of conscience becomes more clear and sweet as the din of selfish fears and questionings
subsides. The religious sentiment is now exalted almost to a condition of repose ... when the
worshipper not only sees God everywhere, but sees nothing which is not full of God'.
Martineau demonstrates Wordsworth's influence in her sense of a greater reality infusing the
immediate, but she makes it a possibility which all believers can achieve. She creates a
rational sacramentalism, whereby logical thought processes lead to this perception of the
spiritual indwelling the natural, rather than it being available only to those with mystically
endowed insight:

in a confirmed state of habitual piety ... every object glows with sunshine
from another world, and every voice speaks in the music of a higher
sphere.... If well-received, this world of matter will gradually become to us
a spiritual universe.

It is a democratically available spiritual vision, the intrinsic reward for those who develop the
art of thinking and Hartleyan habits of virtue. Martineau equips her believer with the mental
skills to create their own Romantic vision of the natural world.

This perception of a wholly 'spiritual universe' takes on emotive, personal dimensions
in Martineau's more experiential writing for the periodical. Her poem 'The Survivor' asserts
that this sacramental perception can be a source of joy and strength throughout life:

A spiritual life, which never can decline,
Inspires and dignifies all forms for thee.
Nature for thee is dressed in hues divine,
And all things have for thee peculiar sanctity.

'The Three Ages of the Soul' imagines heaven as a state of mind in which this perception
becomes total. The time is anticipated when

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69 Shelagh Hunter describes at length Wordsworth's influence on Martineau in Harriet Martineau: The Poetics of
71 MR III (1829), p. 728.
All these outward forms shall melt away. 

... when the expanded mind, 
Here fed by Nature with immortal food, 
Within itself the universe shall find.\textsuperscript{72}

Martineau’s tale ‘Solitude and Society’ demonstrates how the mind can thus feed itself. An isolated prisoner of conscience has only a limited mountain view from his cell and contact with his jailor and the jailor’s son to provide mental stimuli. But he applies the art of thinking and makes of these ‘objects for speculation’, meditating on them and his memories to come to new understandings of life and the values that matter.\textsuperscript{73} As a result, his unjust imprisonment becomes a time of value in which he makes of himself a wiser, more benevolent person. Martineau suggests that his mental habits produce riches of the mind which sustain him.

Martineau’s parables are short fantasies which metaphorically suggest themes that the tales more overtly illustrate. In ‘Young Life’, the newly created child wanders the earth, seeking an angel to guide her. One finally responds to her distress, with a rebuke:

‘Are there not messengers sent unto thee from above and beneath, and thou regardest them not? Wherefore art thou faint, when they are around thee who shall renew thy strength?’

Then LIFE gazed steadfastly, and saw that a multitude of spirits was near. They uprose from the flowers of the field, and thronged the thickets of the forest. They issued from the abyss, and came down from among the stars. They sang amid the clouds on the mountain-top, and their music floated on the still lake.

When the young spirit held out her arms, they came unto her, and ministered unto her more and more continually.\textsuperscript{74}

Spiritual resources are present in the natural universe, if they are but sought. Supernatural interventions are only required by an immature spiritual understanding. The parable suggests, through metaphor and narrative, the anti-supernatural Christianity which Martineau argues in her essays, while creating a poetic sense of spiritual immanence. Through these parables, she shows that Unitarians need not be ‘the Gradgrinds of religion’, but could embrace the imagination as well as logic.\textsuperscript{75} Martineau’s essays advocate theoretically informed practice and her poems and stories are the experiential expression of these ideas. To Martineau, understanding and response are inseparable dimensions of religious education.

\textsuperscript{72} MR IV (1830), p. 595. 
\textsuperscript{73} MR IV (1830), p. 445. 
\textsuperscript{74} MR V (1831), p. 96. 
\textsuperscript{75} Mineka, p. 146.
Meritocratic theology: against privilege and institutional authority

Martineau promotes the individual's theological independence from institutional forms of spiritual authority. Historically, Unitarians had always advocated this in particular respect to their own case, seeking freedom of conscience and the end of state disabilities on the grounds of their 'heretical' beliefs. Martineau extends this specific concern for religious freedom to a wider project of liberalism, in keeping with the growing middle-class meritocratic ethos of her readership. Deirdre David depicts Martineau as an 'organic intellectual', part of the class rising to power, giving it 'awareness' and 'legitimation' and transmitting its ideas.\(^{76}\) In her later economic writings, Martineau explicitly supports Whiggish policy; in her *Monthly Repository* writings, she creates a theology which underwrites the liberal project of eroding state regulation and validating only earned authority.

Martineau's essay 'The Education of the Human Race' sees this liberalism as a characteristic of a spiritually mature society. She depicts as childlike the need of the chosen people in the Old Testament for 'precepts' delivered by institutions invested with authority. In contrast, she argues, the New Testament offers examples of action and parables whose meanings are 'inferential', embodying truths that are 'universally intelligible' to individual inductive inquiry. Thus obedience 'of a narrow, constrained kind' is replaced by 'deep, sympathetic interest' in the maturer mind of a person who has discovered the truth for him or her self.\(^{77}\) Martineau argues that the providential plan points to spiritual and moral individualism as the inevitable pattern of progress to embrace. The absence of this feature is central to her critiques of other forms of religion. Like many Protestants of the time, she condemns Roman Catholic confession and penance as an iniquitous regulation of the individual's relationship with God; the creed itself is an 'imposition, not an explanation, of doctrine.' But Martineau applies the same logic to the Anglican creed and articles of faith; the established church also holds its members back in a forced state of immaturity. She extends this criticism to 'Judaism, Mahometism, Paganism' in which she feels the individual's relationship with God is regulated and hence hampered by institutional authority.\(^{78}\) Unitarianism alone enshrines as a spiritual principle the value of individual liberty; Martineau claims that it is the only theology for modern intellectual and social tendencies.

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\(^{76}\) David, p. 4.

\(^{77}\) 'The Education of the Human Race', pp. 304, 513-514.

\(^{78}\) 'Romanism and Episcopacy', *MR* VI (1832), pp. 388, 381.
Martineau reflects on the nature of church leadership in this light. In a review, she draws contemporary lessons from the incident of the 'witches' of Salem, when in a bout of religious paranoia the church had several women in seventeenth-century Puritan America executed. Martineau expresses anger at the abuse of religious authority, and finds in the events of Salem 'a tale of the times' for 'the managers of orthodoxy and methodism in this country':

It is true that all these features are modified; it is true that the times are so far ameliorated that the plague of superstition cannot ravage society as formerly. But society is not yet safe. It will not be safe till every man ascertains and applies his Christianity for himself, and no longer needs to flee to his pastor for defence against the devil and all his works. What we have to do is to expose indefatigably the machinery of spiritual delusion; to frown upon all spiritual monopoly; to reveal to the ignorant their own rights and to protect their claim; and to make the meanest of them as capable as the fisherman of Galilee of testifying to the grace and glorying in the freedom of the gospel.79

This is a democratic attack on a minority holding privilege and power. Depriving a person of his 'rights' to '[ascertain] and appl[y] Christianity for himself' constitutes a form of oppression. Martineau employs the language of economic liberalism, accusing leaders of a 'spiritual monopoly'. Her vision of the church is that of a liberal democracy of enlightened citizen-believers. Accepting the Unitarian idea of the 'voluntary association of individual Christians', Martineau rejects any claims to 'a divinely authorised gradation of ranks in the Christian community'. Again she uses the terms of the market to describe leadership as a role earned by merit and exercised only as part of the 'division of labour'. The spiritual leader is the theological equivalent of the self-made man or woman. She declares: 'May or may not any good man imbued with gospel wisdom mount the pulpits of our cathedrals' if they have 'qualified themselves for the office'? 80 This implicitly includes the possibility of a woman taking leadership, as merit transcends gender. Martineau is perhaps, in part, justifying her own role, authorised by no ecclesiastical appointment but by meeting a need in the religious market.

On the basis of this principle of democratic spiritual rights, Martineau constructs a Unitarian response to contemporary social issues which impinge on individual liberties and opportunities. She welcomes the movement towards national education on the grounds that all have 'equal moral ... rights' to observe the world and from it induce natural laws, which are divine truths. This is an inalienable right which the law must enshrine: 'The visible and tangible universe is open to all, and the faculties by which it is to be investigated are common

80 'Romanism and Episcopacy', pp. 384-5.
Education will develop the intellectual skills to enable individuals to access the truths the natural world holds. With this goal in mind, Martineau elsewhere evaluates contemporary methods of education. They must develop inductive habits of thought in order for learners to reach their full moral and religious potential. She rejects, for example, rote learning, and amassing detail ‘to the exclusion of principles’. She commends Jacotot’s method of teaching grammar by encouraging pupils to deduce rules from examples, rather than by teaching rules didactically; this trains the correct method of learning for the acquisition of spiritual autonomy.

Martineau’s viewpoint on the abolition of slavery incorporates the same principle. Like many Unitarians, she takes for granted the humanitarian objections to slavery, as she was later to make clear in her travel work Society in America. The focus of her Monthly Repository essay on the subject is on slaves being denied their God-given right to develop their intellectual and moral capacities, and thus to reach ordained spiritual maturity. Society acts as the oppressor in impeding the progress of this sector of the human race, and thus the race as a whole:

It is appointed to us to mark the movements of the universal human soul; to direct its powers, to controul its tendencies, to develop its capabilities, to animate its exertions, while we present to it ample scope and adequate objects. If we see any portion of it cramped, blinded and deadened, it is our part to remove the evil influence, or to resist it if we cannot remove it. And in what portion of the human race is mind more debased and intellect more stunted than in the slaves of the West Indies?

The ‘fetters’ are not only physical, but are placed on their minds, and their souls as much as their bodies are in ‘thraldom’. Martineau preaches no transcendent religion, but forges a link between social reality and spirituality: the former provides the conditions for the acquisition of the latter. This principle enabled Martineau, unlike many abolitionists, to find parallels with the condition of British labourers. Society again denies spiritual rights by creating an economic system whereby ‘the lot of myriads is to be debarred by their outward circumstances from any intellectual progress.’ Their inevitable preoccupation with physical survival is an impediment to ‘higher aims’ and the application of ‘energies which ought to be immortal’. She hopes for a more even distribution of labour so that ‘the pressure of necessity being removed, men would have more leisure for the pursuit of high and higher objects ... of

84 Ibid., p. 9.
things unseen and eternal’. The concept of inalienable spiritual rights, which demands the opportunity for intellectual development, has radical implications for the structures of church and society.

A theology of current affairs

As the above examples suggest, Martineau’s essays from 1830-32 move away from explaining how her theological principles work in the individual believer’s life to what is going on in the outside world. This is not a departure from theology, but rather a development of it. Unitarians welcomed developments in knowledge as new revelations of natural law, through which could be discerned the providential design. ‘Theology has ever included whatever belonged to the highest interests of man’, Martineau declares. The modern theologian’s role includes interpretation of the secular, since he:

traces the manifestations of Providence in all that exists around him ... Theology is, with him, the beginning, middle, and end of his researches. Not the theology of the schools, or of the dark ages, or of any who would lord it over God’s heritage; but the theology which is chanted by the waves, and illuminated by the stars, and pictured forth in the history of his race... Next to God, his study is Man; next to Man, his study is Nature.

Theology is not then a discrete study of God, but an interdisciplinary study of the whole of human moral and mental life. In such a framework, current affairs were no optional extra for the Unitarian, but a necessary part of updating his or her theology. Martineau infers truth from these developments, and instructs her readers in how to cooperate with that truth.

The periodical genre perfectly suited Martineau’s theological position due to its contemporary emphasis. Her editor Fox had wanted the *Monthly Repository* to bring the spirit of Unitarianism ‘to bear upon the peculiar circumstances of the times and country in which we live’, as a necessary condition of the religion’s survival. Out of the many contributions to the *Monthly Repository* during these years, Martineau above all shared Fox’s vision and put it into practice. She prided herself on writing articles on a month by month basis rather than long in advance, so as to be thoroughly up to date. She tapped into the contemporary concerns both of the denomination and of wider society. In 1830 she wrote articles on slavery as the abolition campaign was coming to a head. Her four-essay review of Lessing’s work on the

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85 ‘Godwin’s Thoughts on Man’, *MR* V (1831), pp. 437, 440.
86 ‘Theology, Politics and Literature’, *MR* VI (1832), pp. 75-6.
Old and New Testaments coincided with a debate about the repeal of civil disabilities of Jews in Britain (which was also discussed in the *Monthly Repository*) in 1829. In 1832, the year of the Great Reform Act, Martineau wrote on a range of new political issues for her readership to consider as part of their spiritual responsibility. These appeared alongside another contributor’s ‘Address to the Electors of Great Britain’, which warned them that ‘the franchise is not your own; it is a sacred trust, and your exercise of it is a solemn act’. That same year Martineau wrote on matters of national education, poverty, penal policy, and economics with instruction to the enfranchised reader as to what action was in accordance with the Unitarian principles she had hitherto outlined. Her work here is more as a religious sage rather than a denominational theologian, offering ‘guidance’ to readers among the world’s changes.

Martineau reviews penal policy in her response to the report of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline, hoping that ‘human governments will in time bring their penal rule into an analogy with the divine’. She complains that prison discipline has no coherent, let alone Christian, principle; rather, ‘as a nation, we have not even arrived at the principle of punishment: we are blind to its objects, and therefore erring in the use of its means’. Martineau finds a principle in her theology. She had argued, in her essay based on Lessing’s Bible criticism, that the moral education of the human race had progressed from a system of reward and punishment to the training of an internalised moral responsibility, with intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards. Applied to prison policy, this means rejecting physical punishment and arbitrary deprivations, and instead developing the prisoners’ altruistic sense. Removal from society, and the provision of education and meaningful employment should train the prisoner into a social consciousness hitherto undeveloped. In addition, ‘the moral sense of the community’ would progress, since the motive towards criminals would become rehabilitation rather than revenge. By the same logic, Martineau criticises the policy of transporting prisoners to penal colonies, where they often suffered out of proportion to their crime, or by luck found wealth and success in the colony. She condemns the government for abdicating its spiritual responsibility to encourage moral development in the prisoners:

To be hankering between escaping into the bush, to seize black wives and knock their husbands on the head, and remaining with the hope of growing rich and cutting a dash in the colony, is to be very ill-disposed for repentance.

88 Heyck, p. 42.
Martineau shows her readers that knowledge of divine operations provides a basis for establishing contemporary penal policy.

Martineau’s theological stance also enables her to make sense of developments in science. Following Hartley, she believes that ‘science has since developed a train of reasoning’ which leads to ‘the same conclusion’ as the biblical revelation, explaining and expanding it. She takes Lessing’s view that biblical revelation was given merely to ‘quicken the progress, and not, as is usually supposed, to change or supersede’ the truths apparent from natural law and positivist morality; this applies to material and moral science. Natural law will be found to explain all phenomena once deemed arbitrary or supernatural, as Martineau argues has been the pattern of old. The death and return of the sun, once attributed to the action of gods and sought by prayer and sacrifice, is a classic example. Biblical miracles too will be explained eventually as natural phenomena, and therefore should not be regarded as ‘supernatural’ events:

Can any one say that he knows all the physical causes which may be put in operation? Can the most learned philosopher declare it to be impossible that the operation of familiar causes may be modified by the agency of others less familiar, or hitherto wholly unknown? Martineau thus anticipates the expansion of science not undermining faith, but rather confirming that God acts according to natural law, and always in character. She applies this principle to certain advances in chemical science. New theories as to phenomena’s capacity to change chemical state under certain conditions add natural credibility to the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body after death. Since mythological readings of the Bible were not common until later in the century, it was still important for Unitarians to be able to reconcile science and biblical miracles. Martineau reassures her readers that they need not fear science undermining their faith; rather they should welcome it as new revelations of the workings of Providence.

The same is applied to the ‘natural laws’ of society. Martineau endows with the status of a providential revelation the market principles of demand and supply as elaborated by Adam Smith, Malthus and Ricardo. They are ‘the will of God’, with which enlightened

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94 ‘Physical Considerations Connected with Man’s Ultimate Destination’, MR V (1831), pp. 217-229; in this she differed from Priestley, who believed the resurrection was a supernatural exception to natural law.
believers are to cooperate. Allowing this natural law to proceed unimpeded is therefore the truest benevolence for society, since God’s aims are for man’s highest good. Thus she appeals to the power of the expanding electorate, which would soon include more of her own readership, to enact this:

A very few individuals who, last year, urged and carried the repeal of the tax on sea-borne coal, did more towards warming the population – without any counterbalancing evil – than all the gentlemen with open purses and all the ladies in drab bonnets who benevolently busied themselves from year to year … In such cases as these, one individual, issuing a sound opinion through the press or in Parliament, may do more good than a score of charity committees with a score of members in each. Why do not more aspire after this truly effectual benevolence?

She appeals to those with political or literary power (and thus, potentially men and women) to promote this enlightened Christian benevolence. She issues a similar appeal to end crime, the result of poverty. She cites the causes of poverty as ‘Injudicious charity … aristocratic idleness … cruel, inconsistent, perplexed laws … imperfect representation’. She appeals to ‘whoever votes’ and ‘everyone who moves in society with more or less influence’ to play their part in changing these factors via legislation and public opinion. Thus they can cooperate to bring about the alignment of human government with divine.

The economic principles which Martineau famously popularised in her 1832 *Illustrations of Political Economy* were therefore underwritten by her theological system. She was not the only Unitarian to preach the support of liberal economic policy as a Christian duty, and her belief that it was a divinely revealed natural law perhaps explains her dogmatic adherence to it in the face of the evident suffering it caused in the shorter term. Martineau draws from current affairs contemporary theology, and appeals to the economic and literary power of her middle-class readership to bring about the reform of society according to the principles of the divine government. Her utopian vision of a society which has reached spiritual and moral maturity informs her responses to current affairs and makes sense of them from a Unitarian perspective for her readers.

96 Ibid., pp. 27-9.
98 John Seed gives examples of other Unitarian ministers who preached political economy from the pulpit. See ‘Unitarianism, Political Economy and the Antimonies of Liberal Culture in Manchester, 1830-50’, *Social History* 7:1 (January 1982), p. 22.
The model of a modern theologian

Increasingly, Martineau's theology becomes a secular project, and she creates for herself the role of a new kind of secular theologian. With no professional status accorded by a chapel, Martineau nevertheless had a full-time, paid role as developer of Unitarian religion for a national belief community. Through her work, she suggests that the role of the spiritual leader is less to declare truths that transcend time, than to interpret the times and respond to contemporary needs. This means writing in the 'communications circuit' of writer, readers, and editors of the denominational periodical. Her story 'Liese' seems to reflect on her own role as she looks back in 1832 on her work for the Monthly Repository.

Liese is a Roman Catholic nun who faces the upheaval of the sixteenth-century German reformation. Forced to leave her reclusive devotional life in a convent, she fears life in a secular society, and the dilution of her devotion through secular influences. But she finds a new role. Converting to Protestantism, she becomes a scribe to Martin Luther. She spreads his ideas, by employing her literary skills, translating his works, writing letters based on his principles, and writing hymns which apply them to devotional life. The parallels with Martineau are evident: she too claimed not to 'discover or invent', rather to 'popularise' the founding thought of her denomination, and did so in similar ways. She too saw these ideas as the basis for a more progressive form of Christianity (as she portrays Lutheran Protestantism) than that which had for centuries been orthodox, based as she saw it more on universal moral and spiritual principles than on forms. In the tale, the role of institutional authority recedes: Liese forsakes her mother superior for a more influential role essentially as a woman of letters in the secular world; so Martineau takes a role as a theological woman of letters in the literary market. Martineau always considered her single status her freedom, and it is also because she is single that Liese can perform this role when Luther's wife Catherine, busy with domestic responsibilities and her children, cannot.

Some of Liese's reflections suggest Martineau's ideas of what theological role a woman of letters could play. Liese criticises her past convent ways which separated the spiritual from the natural, such as when Father Gottfried 'taught us to take the Gospel by turns with other things' rather than as integral to all things; she feels it is 'easier' 'to live a life of devotion, where a free range among the works of God is allowed, than ... in a convent'.

Contact with a wider range of people, she concludes, is a better way to love God than when 'we strove to love those ... less that we might love God more.' As Martineau concludes, separatist religion belongs to a past age; the way forward for theology is greater engagement in 'secular' affairs, and a new model of theologian is a woman of letters preaching through a secular medium. Martineau implicitly claims for herself no mean role; Liese becomes 'one of the most powerful agents of the Reformation'. Martineau thus distinguishes herself as serving the cause of progressive truth.

* * * * *

Martineau's writings for the *Monthly Repository* in the 1820s and 30s demonstrate a perfect connection between the form she uses and the ideas they contain. As a reviewer and essay writer she demystifies and democratises the scholarship underpinning Unitarian theology. Religion and journalism blend as theology becomes not an abstract discourse claiming to transcend temporal affairs, but one which has to be applied to them and worked out from them. She directs her religious philosophy to an emergent middle-class citizenry who were beginning to take a more active part in social and political life, and created a theology which underwrote their liberal, individualist aspirations. She also advertises Unitarianism as a faith which embraces and makes sense of social and scientific change.

Martineau shared with her readership their laity and their class interests, and held authority only as far as market relations would allow. She does not speak across a divide from a protected, privileged position nor does she claim special insights that set her apart from her readership. Rather she models a theological practice which her readers can potentially all follow, taking control of their spiritual lives and applying rational techniques to develop them. For a few years she was the most significant contributor to Unitarian discourse in her denominational journal, and through her writings for the *Monthly Repository* she modelled a new role for theology and for the theologian in the modern world.

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100 'Liese', *MR* VI (1832), pp. 246-7, 245, 333.
101 Ibid., p. 333.
An autobiography is not a neutral record of a life. To write an autobiography is a metaphysical activity, a hermeneutic act in which the writer interprets the meanings of his or her life. Critics have written of autobiography's capacity to create a 'personal myth', or a 'metaphor of the self' in which identity and experience are rendered coherent and purposeful.¹ As Wayne Shumaker writes, 'Homo Autobiographicus' is a markedly different being from 'Homo Sapiens', 'a literary simplification of an extremely complex reality'.² The effect is not merely personal. The patterns of meaning traced in the individual’s life potentially have wider reference. Stephen Spender suggests this when he observes that the autobiographer 'is no longer writing about himself, he is writing about life.'³ For the religious writer, autobiography has theological significance since 'life' includes a spiritual dimension, and the individual’s relation to God forms part of the story of the self. Sallie McFague suggests that orthodox Christian autobiography ‘for centuries [has] provided intimations of the grace of God working in the ordinary, temporal circumstances of particular human lives.'⁴ Even where the writer rejects orthodox Christian meanings (as is true of some of the writers considered in this chapter), the same ‘intimations’ of a providentially ordained course of events are evident in their narrative strategies.

Autobiography was a problematic genre for women. Valerie Sanders has argued for women’s ‘fundamental estrangement from the genre’ as it is traditionally understood, and Linda Peterson suggests that ‘women were avoided by the form’.⁵ While private journals and

personal reflections were not uncommon, the act of writing a life for publication demanded a confidence and a claim to publicity that were alien to feminine cultural norms. Jane Welsh Carlyle’s comment in 1843 illustrates this:

Oh if I might write my own biography from beginning to end – without reservation or false colouring – it would be an invaluable account for my countrywomen in more than one particular – but ‘decency forbids’!⁶

Even with a conviction of the value of her story, social inhibitions prevent her from telling it. In addition, the act of originating an interpretation of life’s meanings was one denied women in Victorian gender discourse. Women were not generally trained or permitted to originate meaning, their forte held to be in either recording the nuances of experience or communicating pre-existent theories and doctrines. In a specifically religious context, this meant not taking spiritual authority, interpreting scripture or writing controversial theological ideas. Since ‘[a]utobiography requires an act of interpretation’,⁷ as a genre it claimed greater hermeneutic authority than convention allowed. Valerie Sanders observes how women’s self-writings frequently sought to diminish this interpretive dimension, claiming to be ‘reminiscences’ and ‘recollections’ which suggest unstructured outpourings of memory; she also writes of autobiography ‘with the self left out’, which eschews self-revelation for a series of superficial anecdotes.⁸

I will discuss five autobiographers whose work had equipped them, unusually for women, to write interpretive accounts of their lives and hence a personal theology. Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe, Annie Besant, Mary Howitt and Margaret Oliphant are all typical of the tendency Linda Peterson points out in Victorian autobiographers to have ‘intensely religious backgrounds’, and thus to be familiar with reflecting on personal and religious meanings. They had also developed their hermeneutic ‘habits of thought’ through their professional work.⁹ Martineau, Cobbe, Besant, Oliphant, and to a lesser extent Howitt wrote reviews and essays on religious, literary and social subjects. Oliphant and Howitt in particular wrote fiction and were familiar with using narrative strategies to create meaningful patterns. These women published autobiographies in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when for the first time a generation of women writers had professional life stories to tell. Each

⁷ Peterson, Victorian Autobiography, p.11.
⁹ Peterson, Victorian Autobiography, p. 27.
also has a strong religious theme. I consider them as spiritual autobiographies in which each writer reflects on her identity, struggles and development in religious terms.

These spiritual autobiographies had a particularly vital role to play at a time of religious upheaval. Like the novel, the genre allowed an experiential exploration of what it meant to live by faith of various kinds, but with the added force of a real person's testimony. The didactic dimension had always been important in the tradition of spiritual autobiography, making belief experientially relevant, but the individual religious experience could offer readers something that established theologies could not. It could trace a unique and unconventional journey out of orthodox Christianity for a new faith, or for none, or for a particularly individual interpretation of it. Many nineteenth century religious thinkers offered an autobiography in the hope of its usefulness to others seeking truth and disappointed with what conventional theology had to offer. Annie Besant hopes, in her preface, that her life story 'reflects many others' and thus

may throw light on some of the typical problems that are vexing the souls of [her] contemporaries, and perchance may stretch out a helping hand to some brother who is struggling in the darkness.10

The personal nature of the genre was perhaps welcome to minds disillusioned with faith systems and dogma, since autobiographies made humbler claims regarding the limits of truth: 'they give no rules and recite no doctrines but present us with some possibilities for living out'.11

This chapter considers how five female autobiographers use the genre in varying ways to respond to religious upheavals in their own lives and in the culture in which they live. Martineau's *Autobiography*, written 1855 but published in 1877, shares many characteristics with Cobbe's and Besant's, so they will be considered comparatively in terms of shared themes. All three claim distinction as pioneering female religious leaders, and offer 'post-Christian' spiritual solutions for their time. Mary Howitt's autobiography is very different in theme and tone, foregrounding matters of taste and temperament in the search for the right form of religion. Finally I consider Margaret Oliphant as an autobiographer who writes against the consolations which spiritual autobiography offers; her self-conscious text challenges the genre's narrative conventions and the theological viewpoints that they imply.

A theology of my own

The autobiographies of Harriet Martineau (1877), Frances Power Cobbe (1894) and Annie Besant (1893) share many features. Each traces a pilgrim’s progress, in which she leaves a stable childhood Christian faith and, after a time of spiritual wandering, converts to a new form of belief. Their works are unusual in terms of Victorian women’s autobiography, since they follow the conventionally masculine structure, individualistic accounts of linear progression in intellectual, professional and spiritual life.12 As critics of female autobiography have argued, this model of self-writing was often alien to women, since its ‘unidirectionality’ did not suit the ‘multi-dimensionality of women’s socially conditioned roles’, and the individualistic focus claimed unfeminine self-importance.13 But Martineau, Cobbe and Besant had pursued unusually ‘masculine’ careers as well-known essayists, journalists and in Besant’s case a public speaker, on matters of theology, moral philosophy, politics and social criticism. They were expositors by profession, and all controversial figures, so their autobiographies are self-justifications of their professional and religious nonconformity.14 Their lack of ties to family also fitted this individualistic form, in contrast with Mary Howitt and Margaret Oliphant’s more ‘relational’ portrayal of themselves ‘within a network’.15

It is not possible to ascertain whether Martineau’s autobiography directly influenced either Cobbe or Besant, published as it was fifteen or so years before them. Besant acknowledges Cobbe’s religious writings as an influence on her departure from Christianity, and later wrote ‘A World Without God’ in reply to Cobbe’s ‘A Faithless World’. Cobbe acknowledged Besant’s Autobiography as by ‘a woman I specially dread – and with whom it w[oul]d be too good fun for my enemies to bracket me in the reviews’.16 I will discuss the three autobiographies in comparative terms, due to their formal and thematic similarities, firstly in offering new theologies in the place of Christianity, and secondly in constructing themselves as religious leaders. Since Martineau’s sense of her role has been discussed more

12 Cobbe takes a thematic approach to her later chapters, but traces a linear spiritual progress in the early chapters until her conversion to Theism.
15 Linda H. Peterson, ‘Women Writers and Self-Writing’, in Joanne Shattock, ed., Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 218-9. Martineau and Cobbe were both single; Besant, married, had two children but after her separation she had little contact with them until they were nearly adult.
16 Mitchell, p.345.
fully in the previous chapter, I will refer to her work chiefly to emphasise links and contrasts with the later two writers.

Martineau (1802-76) wrote her *Autobiography* in 1855, although it was not published until after her death over twenty years later. Linda Peterson explains how she uses narrative conventions from spiritual autobiography with a new purpose, substituting for the Christian narrative a scientific one. She frames her life account according to the contemporary philosopher Auguste Comte’s three stage growth from theological through metaphysical to positivist. These Martineau correlates with her Unitarianism until about thirty, her gradual move away from the supernatural towards natural law, and her final agnostic positivism reached in the 1850s. But as a spiritual autobiography Martineau’s work is limited, because she imposes her final viewpoint upon her entire past and judges her past beliefs only in relation to her present ones. Thus she dismisses her religious phase as a ‘monstrous superstition’ rather than exploring her past motivations and thought processes. Her departure from faith is regarded as inevitable according to a universal pattern, ‘a stage which I should probably have had to pass through at any rate’. She describes her religious doubts without sympathy:

I had now plunged fairly into the spirit of my time, that of self-analysis, pathetic self-pity, typical interpretation of subjective matters, and scheme-making in the name of God and Man'. (I, 157)

Martineau does not offer an apologia for her transitions in belief.

In contrast, Cobbe and Besant recreate each stage and transition of their spiritual journeys for the reader to appreciate. We see each reflect and draw conclusions from their experience – we are ‘brought to “feel” that the autobiographer’s interpretation is true’ of that life. The apologia becomes apologetics in both works as each argues the need for alternatives to orthodox Christianity. Cobbe (1822-1904) makes a powerful plea for liberal theology when she records in the *Life* the trauma of losing her faith. Her moral and psychological structures are so centred on evangelical beliefs and bible literalism that doubting their full veracity produces ‘four long years of miserable mental conflict and unspeakable pain’. She feels guilt and anxiety in ‘alternate spells of paroxysms of self-

17 Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography*, p.150.
18 *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography*, with memorials by Maria Weston Chapman, 3 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1877), I, p.96. Subsequent references will be given within the text.
19 McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, p.156.
reproach and fanciful self-tormentings' (91). Her move to atheism results from the stark choice she has between Bible literalism or no faith at all. Subsequently she arrives at theism, a faith in God but without dogma and which extols the social sentiment above all. Cobbe regards her autobiography as a complement to her discursive writings, showing how she came to these ideas 'from within' (xxix), not argued in the abstract but as a personal journey.

Besant (1847-1933) also aims to show 'from within' what leads many away from Christianity into atheism. Even though by the time of writing her Autobiography Besant had become a Theosophist, she takes pains to recreate her past atheism fully and sympathetically.\(^{21}\) She is keen to show the logic of her inner journey, believing that 'if anyone would understand the evolution of a Soul, he must be willing to face the questions which the Soul faces in its growth'.\(^{22}\) Hence she recounts her first doubts and even reproduces part of the comparative study of the gospels which led her to disbelieve them. In particular, she conveys her trauma as an unhappy wife and as a mother nearly losing her baby, which finally propelled her to atheism:

It was the long months of suffering through which I had been passing, with the seemingly purposeless torturing of my little one as a climax, that struck the first stunning blow at my belief in God as a merciful Father of men ... my own bright life had been enshrouded with pain and rendered to me degraded by an intolerable sense of bondage; and here was my helpless, sinless babe tortured for weeks and left frail and suffering. (90)

As well as describing her personal anguish and suicidal thoughts, Besant lists her questions and her problems with Christianity's logic. She reproduces 'Atheism as I Knew and Taught It' although she had long forsaken it (141). Like Cobbe, she pleads for greater tolerance for thoughtful objectors to Christianity at a time when atheism was still commonly attributed to a 'desire for vice and for licence to do evil' (100).

Both writers glorify the pioneering role they played in spreading more liberal religious ideas through their own writing and lecturing. They both claim to have contributed to a more tolerant religious climate. Besant writes that:

...from many a Christian pulpit today may be heard the echo of the Freethought teachings; men's minds have been awakened, their knowledge

\(^{21}\) The Autobiography was a single-volume publication based on Autobiographical Sketches (serialized 1885) with material added to bring her life story up to date. Besant amended the Sketches to some extent to fit in with her Theosophical views; see below.

\(^{22}\) Annie Besant: An Autobiography, p.140. Subsequent references will be given in the text.
enlarged; and while I condemn the unnecessary harshness of some of my language, I rejoice that I played my part in the educating of England. (174)

In her preface to the second edition, Besant considers the Theosophy Society in which she played a leading role as 'the crest' of 'that great wave of spiritual life' which constitutes 'the turning away from materialism and the revival of mysticism' (1). She is a pioneer guiding a national religious revival, addressing a generation

greedy for the material results of knowledge brought to us by Science but looking askance at her agnosticism as regards the soul ... turning from the husks of outgrown creeds but filled with desperate hunger for spiritual ideals. (5)

Loss of the old faith clears the way for a new one to be found and she offers Theosophy as a 'wedding' between Eastern spirituality and Western scientific rationalism, a faith that goes beyond national thought and the old division of science from spirit.

Cobbe also exalts her contribution to creating post-dogmatic spirituality. She gives a detailed resume of her three substantial works on theism – A Theory of Intuitive Morals, Broken Lights and The Hopes of the Human Race, written between the 1850s and 70s. She emphasises their part in public religious debate, noting which responded to influential atheist writings by, for example, John Stuart Mill, and listing their reprints, translations and distribution in Europe and America. She suggests there was an urgent need for liberal, rational theology:

We were fifty years before Lux Mundi and thirty before even Essays and Reviews... Had anything like modern rationalising theories of the Atonement, or modern expositions of the Bible stories, or finally loftier doctrines of disinterested morality and religion, been known to me at this crisis of my life, it is possible that the whole course of my spiritual history would have been different. (89-90)

Like Besant, Cobbe exaggerates her solitude in the work, omitting to mention those like the Unitarians who did offer a more liberal alternative to Evangelicalism. 23 She too advocates a post-dogmatic religion, Theism, which combines scientific rationalism with a belief in God as immanent in all nature, and thus 'satisf[ies] the demands of the intellect' yet also the 'Religious Sentiment'. 24

23 She also exaggerates how far in advance her ideas were. Her religious turmoil was in the early 1840s; Essays and Reviews was published in 1860 and Lux Mundi in 1889.
24 From Cobbe's preface to her Essay on the Theory of Intuitive Morals, quoted in Life, p.115.
Cobbe's *Life*, written many years after her religious works, re-presents them to a new readership. She too is concerned with an increasingly agnostic society's materialist tendencies, regretful that the 'rising tide of liberal-religious hope' of the 1860s and 70s has waned. She fears her world becoming lost in 'the slough of atheism and carnalism' (410). Reproducing her earlier works in such detail suggests that she took seriously readers of her autobiography as a potential audience for her religious ideas. By 1894, her works had been out of print for a generation and she was best known as campaigner for women's rights and against vivisection. Cobbe uses her *Life* in part to reclaim her role as a theological writer and to offer again a modern faith alternative to atheism. Indeed, the republication in 1894 of several of her religious writings suggests that her autobiography did succeed in stimulating a new interest in them.

The three autobiographers take some common approaches in the way they write about themselves as religious thinkers and leaders, particularly conscious of the exceptionality they must claim as women in order to do so. All three construct their childhood recollections in ways which suggest their innate disposition towards deep religious reflection. At five, Martineau plans her suicide to get to heaven quickly and 'prayed abundantly' when alone (I,18, 22) and at seven she reflected '[e]very night' on her religious progress. In her teens she devises a project to list 'scripture instructions under the heads of virtues and vices, so as to have encouragement or rebuke always ready at hand' (I, 35), a project which led her to conclusions about the Old and New Testaments that she sustained into adulthood. Her religious precocity on the one hand invites amusement, but on the other implies that she is a natural theologian. Martineau claims a privileged education, a 'delectable schooling' by a Unitarian tutor who usually taught boys and who trained her in the masculine subjects of Latin, arithmetic and composition which 'was a capital way of introducing some order into the chaos of girls' thoughts' (I, 61, 64). She achieves competence in religious and philosophical subjects by squeezing her own programme of studies around her domestic duties, training herself in all the Unitarian 'fathers' and Bible commentaries in a programme of self-supervised study that virtually paralleled her brother's studies at theological college. She was conscious of being equipped 'to think more accurately and read more extensively than some women' (III, 33) and thus feels a responsibility to write on theological and moral subjects.25

Cobbe makes similar claims. She writes of herself as 'devout beyond what was normal at my age' (86) and recounts her strict observances of prayer, Bible-reading and moral rules

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25 See chapter 4 of this thesis.
that she imposed on herself. She recalls keeping a book of ‘solemn religious “Reflections”’ and ‘a poetical description of the Last Judgment’ which she hides from her suspicious governess, and refers to ‘my strange fancy for reading the most serious books in my play hours’ to the ‘wonder’ of her mother while her brothers are ‘engaged eagerly in their natural sports and pursuits’ (84). She denounces her typically feminine education at a boarding school as ‘pretentious ... costly ... more shallow and senseless than can easily be believed’ (58), one which prevented any female seriousness: ‘Nobody dreamed that any one of us could in later life be more or less than an “Ornament of Society”’ (63). It is after this schooling that she ‘began to educate [her]self in earnest’ (69), spending almost twenty years reading history, Greek, astronomy, classics, religion and philosophy while running the family home. Geometry provides for her the key which composition did for Martineau to transcend the particular weaknesses associated with the female mind. Cobbe recommends it ‘as specially fitted to counteract our habits of hasty judgment and slovenly statement’ and reinforce the need for ‘real demonstration’ in an argument (70). Through their self-education, both women feel they qualify themselves to engage in the masculine pursuit of religious argument.

Like Cobbe, Besant too puzzles her moderate mother: ‘I took my religion in a strenuous fashion’, she says, fasting and even flagellating herself, ‘of the stuff from which fanatics are made’ (24). Besant does not emphasise her intellectual achievements but rather claims to be a born leader, imagining herself in heroic, messianic fantasies. As a child she has a highly active imagination, finding reality ‘dull, tiresome’ while her mind is lost in the adventures of her voracious reading. ‘How much more exciting to struggle with a winged and clawed dragon that you knew meant mischief, than to look after your temper’ (42) she concludes. As a child, Besant loves sitting in a fruit tree in the garden reading Paradise Lost, ‘personify[ing] Satan, and ... declaim[ing] the grand speeches of the hero-rebel’ (33); it is symbolic that she identifies with the leader of the rebellion against God, setting the note of controversy which continues through her adult life. She fantasises about possibilities of persecution and self-sacrifice:

I would spend many an hour in daydreams in which I stood before Roman judges, before Dominican Inquisitors, was flung to lions, tortured on the rack, burned at the stake; one day I saw myself preaching some great new faith to a vast crowd of people, and they listened and were converted, and I became a great religious leader. But always, with a shock, I was brought back to earth, where there were no heroic deeds to do, no lions to face, no judges to defy, but only some dull duty to be performed. And I used to fret that I was born so late, when all the grand things had been done, and when there was no chance of preaching and suffering for a new religion. (42-3)
As will be discussed below, Besant’s *Autobiography* can be read as a quest to find a new religion for which she can preach and suffer. Valerie Sanders comments on this link in some female, usually male, autobiographers between a sense of ‘alienation’ from the norm in childhood and the development of ‘distinction’ and independence in adult life. Female writers such as Besant, Cobbe and Martineau seem to have recognised the beginnings of their absorption into a repressive code, and used their childhood reminiscences to highlight the split between their emotional and intellectual needs and the meagre provision made for them by society.

They depict childhoods which are precocious, even bizarre, as an implicit ‘protest’ against culturalised femininity, and to suggest that their later roles are a natural fulfilment of what is intrinsic, ‘not the act of deliberate and conscious will’ as Besant writes, but ‘a joyous springing forward along the easiest path’ (57-8).26 Martineau, Besant and Cobbe use their accounts of childhood to claim innate religious and intellectual interests, which prepare for the unconventional role they claim in adulthood.

In their process of coming to belief, each autobiographer emphasises the individuality of her quest and the independence of her thought. Wayne Shumaker links this form of autobiography with an inductive approach to truth; a narrative of mental progress asserts that ‘[t]ruth, instead of being already known in its essentials, could be discovered only by the slow accumulation of particulars’.27 These three writers assert this approach to religious belief. Each casts her early religious faith as a state of thoughtless conformity which she must outgrow to reach a mature independence. Martineau contrasts a child’s faith based on ‘fear and trembling’ with an adult’s ‘working out their own salvation’ (II, 461). She gradually forsakes her religion as her professional success grows, implicitly identifying faith with amateurism.28 Cobbe uses the same image of ‘working out’ her own belief, a metaphor which itself collates intellectual work with spiritual reflection. She claims as entirely her own ‘ideas which I had hammered out’ (98) from experience and ‘work[ed] out from much hard study’ (94). She emphasises her solitude without the support of teachings which might help her adapt her faith:

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26 Sanders suggests that precocious childhoods are presented to this effect in women’s autobiographies, in *Private Lives* pp. 70-72.
27 Shumaker, p.29.
28 See also the discussion of Martineau’s semi-autobiographical story ‘Liese’ which links professional with religious advancement in chapter 4 of this thesis.

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In complete mental solitude and great ignorance, I found myself facing all the dread problems of existence. For a long time my intense desire to remain a Christian predominated, and brought me back from each return to scepticism in a passion for repentance and prayer to Christ to take my life or my reason sooner than allow me to stray from his fold. In those days no such thing was heard of as ‘Broad’ interpretations of Scripture doctrines ....To be a “Christian,” then, was to believe implicitly in the verbal inspiration of every word of the Bible, and to adore Christ as “very God of very God”. (89)

Cobbe points out that she became an agnostic ‘long before the word was invented’ (92). She claims to be a religious pioneer, and to reach her new faith position entirely alone. She declares herself a ‘Tabula rasa of faith’ (92), rid of Christian preconceptions, and thus open to whatever religious impressions can be induced neutrally from experience. Her subsequent conversion comes like a moment of Romantic inspiration. She is alone in a natural setting and after reading ‘a little of my favourite Shelley’, she falls into mournful thought, ‘profoundly conscious’ of a loss of spiritual direction and of the high moral goals which Christianity had given her:

While I was thus musing despairingly, something stirred within me, and I asked myself, “Can I not rise once more, conquer my faults, and live up to my own idea of what is right and good? Even if there be no life after death, I may yet deserve my own respect here and now, and, if there be a God, He must approve me.” The resolution was made very seriously. I came home to begin a new course and to cultivate a different spirit. Was it strange that in a few days I began, instinctively, and almost without reflection, to pray again? No longer did I make any kind of effort to believe this thing or the other about God. I simply addressed Him as the Lord of conscience....(92-3)

This is a moment of romantic inspiration, when Cobbe receives a direct inner light without any human intervention. She takes pains to present herself as a neutral receptor of impressions and the discoverer of an ‘indigenous religion’ (94).

All three writers explicitly make a point of their intellectual independence in response to criticisms that they had merely copied the ideas of other male thinkers. Cobbe describes her engagement with past and contemporary theologians such as the Unitarian Theodore Parker whose Discourse of Religion helped her towards theism, and whose writings she subsequently edited. But she declares that

I had come to the main conclusions of Parker ... three years before; so ... it has been a mistake into which some of my friends have fallen when they have described me as converted from orthodoxy by Parker. (98)
In her keenness to appear wholly independent, she underplays the influence of other theological thinkers such as the Unitarian James Martineau and the freethinker F. W. Newman. Cobbe asserts that their ideas merely confirmed her own 'moral instinct' (94). However, she is aware of being caught in a double jeopardy, in that this claim to an individually discovered theology could be interpreted as mere subjectivity. She counters this by stating that her beliefs were reached 'rationally and not by any gust of emotion', for example rationalising her 'instinctive' belief in an afterlife by also arguing it to be 'the indispensable corollary of that [doctrine] of the Goodness of God' (103).

Martineau and Besant feel the same need to prove their independence of thought, to justify their theology as original. After her co-publication with Henry Atkinson of *The Laws of Man's Nature and Development*, Martineau was widely accused of aping his ideas. Therefore she reproduces in her autobiography correspondence so that 'it may be seen how my passage from theology to a more effectual philosophy was, in its early stages, entirely independent of Mr. Atkinson's influence' (II, 281). Besant refutes accusations that she habitually followed the social philosophy of 'her last male acquaintance' (on 315). With characteristic hyperbole, she claims to be 'a woman who fought her way out of Christianity and Whiggism into Freethought and Radicalism absolutely alone' (316). Margaret Oliphant found Martineau's *Autobiography* unpardonably full of 'self-applauses'; Besant's certainly is. But as women in Victorian culture they were more on the defensive than their male counterparts needed to be in marking out a place for themselves as national religious leaders.

Cobbe and Besant write, to varying degrees, with the sense that religious heterodoxy entails gender heterodoxy. Cobbe shows her religious independence to be doubly controversial in relation to paternal authority. Once her more tolerant mother has died, her father objects to her heretical beliefs and he exiles her from the family home. But she uses this isolated time to write her first religious book. When her father relents and she is reinstated in the family home, getting her book finished conflicts with her domestic duties. Only the excuse of a cold enables her to stay at home to finish the preface instead of accompanying her father on a theatre trip. Since this was to him "'perilous stuff'' (115), she published anonymously 'to save him annoyance' (113). Getting her first work published proves a spiritual experience for her, and one which affirms her independence in many ways. She recalls that '[a]fter this fateful interview [with the publisher], I remember going into St Paul’s and sitting there a long

30 'Harriet Martineau', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 121 (Jan-June 1877), p.495.
while alone’ (112). She records with some glee reviews which assumed a male author, praising ‘the work of a masculine and lofty mind’. She also cites the critic who finds her heresy particularly offensive when he learned its author was female: ‘there is nothing feeble or even feminine in the tone of the work’ which has ‘propounded so unfeminine and stoical a theory’ (114). Professional, intellectual and spiritual independence converge as Cobbe forges a new identity for herself.

For Besant, gender identity is even more central to the religious quest. Established Christianity means for her religious oppression and patriarchal oppression, and she seeks to escape from both. She finds her domestic role hostile to her religious quest since her duties to a demanding husband deny her the time she needs for deep religious reflection. She writes of her five year marriage:

We were an ill-matched pair, my husband and I, from the very outset; he, with his very high ideas of a husband’s authority and a wife’s submission, holding strongly to the “master-in-my-own-house theory”, thinking much of the details of home arrangements, precise, methodical, easily angered and with difficulty appeased. I, accustomed to freedom, indifferent to home details, impulsive, very hot-tempered, and proud as Lucifer ... unwilling to potter over little things, and liking to do swiftly what I had to do, and then turn to my beloved books. (81)

She contrasts the conventional view that ‘surely it was a woman’s business to attend to her husband’s comforts and see after her children’ with her conviction that ‘Sturm und Drang should be faced alone’ in the ‘wilderness’ (98). The individualism inherent in the classic spiritual quest clashes with the relational role society expects her to perform.

Patriarchal and spiritual oppression combine in the figure of her vicar husband, who was authoritarian even by Victorian standards. This fusion of oppression is manifest in his ultimatum to Besant of ‘conformity or exclusion from home’ (117). It is also manifest in his relentless pursuit of custody of their daughter after Besant obtains a legal separation. The court asserts that her ‘Atheism and Malthusianism’ render her ‘an unfit guardian’ for her daughter, who is taken away from her mother ‘struggling and crying’ (215).31 ‘Had not the matter been to me of such heart-breaking importance’, Besant writes, ‘I could have laughed at the mixture of Mrs Grundy, marriage establishment, and hell, presented as an argument for robbing a mother of her child’ (216). Feeling that religion supports all these factors and has upheld ‘the absolute right of the father as against a married mother’ she concludes bitterly that

31 Besant had earned particular notoriety by writing a pamphlet on birth control in 1878.
'It was Christianity that robbed me of my child' (245). Besant portrays orthodox faith not only as unsustainable in intellectual terms, but entirely hostile to female interests.

Besant's spiritual autobiography can be read as a messianic quest. Through all her stages of belief she is driven by the desire to lead and suffer for a great cause. Like Cobbe, she emphasises the solitude of her path, but with a stronger sense of her own exceptionality from the norm:

I went out into the darkness alone, not because religion was too good for me, but because it was not good enough; it was too meagre, too commonplace, too little exacting, too bound up with earthly interests, too calculating in its accommodation to social conventionalities. (24)

Picking up on a classic theme of spiritual autobiography, she emphasises the world's persecution, depicting her religious and political stances in terms of 'warfare', 'struggle', and 'battle'. She tells with some pride of 'the general feeling of hatred with which I was regarded' (175), the stone-throwing and heckling at her public lectures on atheism and socialist causes, and finally the ridicule she received on converting to Theosophy. Here she finally abandons Western options of belief altogether and seeks a spirituality more influenced by Eastern religion, led by H. P. Blavatsky, a Russian émigré naturalised as American, and which rationalised a person's sense of exceptionality in its belief in 'esoteric' wisdom possessed by the enlightened few. Besant portrays her conversion to Theosophy as 'realis[ing] the dreams of childhood on the higher planes of intellectual womanhood' (345). It fulfils her personal longings for 'preaching and suffering for a new religion'. In retrospect, she sees her life's 'keynote' as 'this longing for sacrifice to something greater than the self', giving a more sympathetic portrayal of her youthful mystic spirituality than she had done in her Autobiographical Sketches which she wrote as an atheist in 1885. She also reads back these motives into the 'growing desire' in her socialist campaigns 'to succour, to suffer for, to save ... this crucified Christ, humanity' (317). Thus she imposes a 'teleological unity' upon her 'passing selves', creating a 'metaphor' of her identity as a mystic and saviour.

Theosophy can do this for Besant especially because it sanctions female leadership. George Bernard Shaw declared that Besant "saw herself" as a priestess above all', and, reading between the lines of Besant's autobiography, this is what makes her feel she has finally come 'Home' (338). The Autobiography is full of displaced priestly and leadership

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32 E.g. she was central in co-ordinating the famous Match Girls' Strike in 1888.
33 Olney, Metaphors of Self, pp. 20, 29, 35.
activity. As a child, she fantasises about leading a new religion and preaching to 'a vast crowd' (42). She reviews her marriage to a vicar as a displaced longing for her own vocation, wondering if she married him largely because of 'the consecration which seems to include the wife', and seeing her role as his wife as vocationally 'second only to that of the nun' (68). On losing her faith, she preaches a heretical sermon 'on the inspiration of the Bible' 'to rows of empty pews in Sibsey church':

I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight — but especially of power — that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles .... I knew of a verity that the gift of speech was mine' (116).

Once free of orthodox belief, she feels free of its patriarchal power structures and can begin to envisage herself leading others into new beliefs. In atheism, however, she cannot quite attain this priestly role. Besant worked closely with Charles Bradlaugh in promoting atheist ideas, but she always had something of a supportive role. She was vice-president to his presidency of the National Secular Society, and in her shared editorial work for the National Reformer, she suggests her subordinate role in the intended compliment that '[t]hrough our long comradeship he was my sternest as well as my gentlest critic' (137). Her detailed account of his struggle to take his parliamentary seat in 1879 against much opposition too suggests a dramatic displacement of her own longing for heroism for a cause; as an unenfranchised female this role was denied her. In neither the religious nor political structures of Britain could Besant ever be the leader.

In the new faith of Theosophy, she could. Its first leader was a woman and to her Besant devotes herself. She ends the autobiography with herself as an initiate, praising Blavatsky's 'noble and heroic Soul' (363) and following mention of her death with a statement of her '[q]uiet confidence' and 'strong security' as she faces the future (364). But at the time she was concluding her autobiography, she had herself become the movement's leader and was about to embark for India to lead a national religious and political movement where colonial politics would give her an authority that she did not have in national power structures. Readers of the 1893 Autobiography would have known this, since Besant's conversion to Theosophy was notorious, her valedictory speech to the National Secular Society 'a nine days' wonder'. In this light, the final chapter reads not as the end of Besant's story; it is rather the beginning of Besant's real career as a priest in a new religion. The autobiography is the story of her training and ordination by self-education, self-promotion and personal trials — the only form of ordination available to women.

The three women used the conventions of the spiritual and the masculine professional autobiographies to frame experiences which were new to women in the mid to late nineteenth century. Both of them follow Martineau’s tradition of using their autobiographies to claim themselves as unappointed priests or theologians in new religions for a post-Christian era. Margaret Oliphant mocked Martineau’s self-portrayal as ‘the saviour of her country’. Shaw’s sense of Besant as a ‘priestess’ was echoed by the journalist W. T. Stead, who thought she was one of three ‘apostolic’ women of the nineteenth century. Maurice J. Johnson described Cobbe on her death in 1904 as ‘a priestess of humanity’. In their quests for leadership, they claim exceptional natures and educations, and portray themselves uniquely responding to the spiritual needs of their age, religious pioneers who have forged their own new faith and have shared it with others. They emphasise the form’s inherent individualism and defensiveness to justify their views, claim independence and exalt the significance of their contribution to religious debate. Cobbe and Besant, in the tradition of Martineau, create ‘personal myths’ of themselves as pioneering leaders in new faiths for a culture which has thrown off the beliefs and institutions of orthodox Christianity.

Theology, taste and temperament: Mary Howitt’s sacramental spirituality

Mary Howitt’s *Autobiography* (1889) is more typical of Victorian female self-writing than those previously discussed. It lacks a strong retrospective viewpoint since it was compiled from several writings from various points in Howitt’s life. Howitt (1799-1888) edited these and added some linking narrative to make the whole more coherent for its publication just after her death. It is also a more ‘relational’ text in terms of Howitt’s self-representation and the text’s form. She shared her life until marriage with her sister Anna, whose correspondence is quoted at length, and her professional literary life with her husband William who contributes a chapter of his own. Howitt rarely discusses theology as such in the *Autobiography*, perhaps a leftover of her strict childhood Quakerism which believed God taught by ‘the inward light’ of ‘interior inspiration’. Her parents looked askance at William’s

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37 The other two were Catharine Booth and Josephine Butler (the latter of whom is discussed in this work, chapter 7); quoted in Nethercot, p. 383.
38 Quoted in Tomida, p. 209.
39 Specifically, a narrative of her childhood up to the age of ten (published as ‘My own story’ in 1845); a sketch of her parentage and her youth co-written with her sister Anna in 1868; a chapter inserted by her husband William of his life until their marriage; a substantial amount of correspondence contemporary to the events she relates; and some autobiographical reminiscences she wrote for a periodical in the early 1880s.
attempt to discuss Trinitarian theology with Mary. The spiritual dimension of the text follows Howitt's journey from Quakerism through an ecumenical Christian faith to a late life conversion to Roman Catholicism. It is not religion's conceptual content which is important to her, but its values, and the sensibilities it appeals to. Howitt creates the sense of a spiritual journey within her life story by suggesting the recurrent needs of taste and temperament, and considering what forms of religion meet these.

Howitt's portrayal of her childhood is, among other things, a criticism of the 'Puritanical rigidity' of the Quakerism in which she was brought up (I, 59). Her parents' rule against any hint of worldliness greatly repressed her artistic and imaginative instincts. Mary recalls many minor rebellions conducted 'surreptitiously' against this regime, for example in the silent monthly meeting:

These meetings were far from profitable to me. The nearest approach to good which I remember in these seasons of worship was the circumstance that the side windows were reflected at times, probably owing to the sun's position, in a large window placed high above the gallery, looking down the Meeting-house and opposite to my seat. These windows of light, seen through the larger one, in the sky as it were, represented to me the windows of Heaven ... This, I am sorry to confess, was the nearest approach to Heaven which those silent meetings afforded me. The blotches of damp on the Meeting-house walls presented to me, however, wonderful battles from the Old Testament .... How grieved would my parents have been at this want of mental discipline! (I, 51)

Howitt suggests aesthetic and imaginative needs which demand fulfilment beyond Quaker culture. She expresses, repeatedly, her mortification regarding the dress code:

I understood the constant exhortation to take up the cross to refer to using the plain language and plain attire of the Friends, and our peculiar garb, many degrees more ungainly than that of the most strict Friends, was already a perfect crucifixion to Anna and me. (I, 50)

As with Besant and Cobbe, the amusing, even irreverent, childhood viewpoint makes a serious comment. Not only do Quakers deny a natural enjoyment of life, but they make this denial their hallmark.

Mary's secret adventures also suggest her longing to engage with the wider world, in contrast to her parents' strict separation from all who were not members of their sect. Her

nanny secretly provides outlets for this, taking Mary and Anna to a horse show, telling them folk tales, teaching them to play whist and gossiping about the neighbours 'which made us realise their dispositions and sympathise with their needs' (I, 63). Nanny also instigates Howitt's first recorded literary endeavour, dictating a love letter, which profoundly disappoints her father on its discovery. She guiltily describes this as a loss of innocence, but in terms that suggest that it also begins her separation from her parental culture and rule:

He himself had taught me to write, and this was the fruit of that knowledge...I suppose I felt something as our first parents did when God called to them in the garden. (I, 71)

Never theorising her criticisms, Howitt nonetheless suggests she has needs for a cultural and social life which Quakerism denies.

Her passage through her teens to her marriage at the age of twenty-two traces an expansion of artistic and human interests. She delights as her boarding school opens up her mind:

[T]he beautiful, lofty, and intelligible moral teaching of our beloved instructress opened my eyes to the loveliness of purity, to the infinite richness of Nature, and so led me up insensibly to the Creator. Anna and I no longer mistook evil for good or good for evil; and we soon began to perceive the darkness and ignorance out of which we had come, and to rejoice in the large, bright, glorious world of which we also were denizens. (I, 72-3)

Wider experience of the world improves moral judgment and devotional feeling. She portrays her first artistic experiments as a spiritual 'awakening' to a 'higher existence', which fulfilled 'the innate yearnings of our own souls for perfection in form and colour' (I, 81, 95). Howitt's marriage to William forms the final step into a full enjoyment of the world. They share a love of nature – with him she and Anna 'tramp the country' – and a 'mental culture' in which 'knowledge in the broadest sense was the aim of our intellectual efforts' (I, 111). With William she travels widely and embraces a life of literary and political engagement.

In her letters to Anna, Howitt is more overt about her religious values. In keeping with her broadening sense of humanity, she is critical of the Friends' 'contracted and sectarian feeling', their 'utmost solemnity and shut-up-ness' in receiving them into the Kingston congregation with 'no congratulations, no good wishes. Perhaps they felt none. But if so, it was not according to my notions of Christian charity, that wishes good to all men' (I, 259-60).
Her highest religious value is an inclusive 'spirit of Christian love' (II, 5), and, in William's words, 'of the practice of everything which tends to bind man to man and prepare the heart for heaven' (I, 273). As a result, she becomes increasingly distrustful of doctrine and denominational divisions:

> [M]ere creeds matter nothing to me. I could go one Sunday to the Church of England, another to a Catholic chapel, a third to a Unitarian, and so on; and in each of them I find my heart warmed with Christian love to my fellow-creatures and lifted up with gratitude and praise to God. But indeed each day, each passing hour almost, preaches some sermon to me; and if I never entered an acknowledged place of worship, I should believe that, in my way, my worship would not be unacceptable to Heaven. (II, 4-5)

The two themes of inclusiveness and aesthetic appeal recur as the main themes in Howitt's journey to Roman Catholicism. Her first close encounter with the faith is on her European travels, and in Switzerland she comments that although she distrusts the church's hierarchy,

> at the bottom God, who overrules all things, has caused it to strike its roots into the soil of the common humanity, and send up shoots and crops of an active, a holy, and an indefatigable beneficence such as present Protestantism knows nothing of. Everywhere Catholic women are instructing, collecting orphans from the streets and abodes of death, working for and employing the poor, tending the sick and the contagiously diseased in the palace or the poorest hut, and going about with the simple air and the friendly smile ... When Florence Nightingale went forth to nurse the wounded soldiers in the Crimea, she did only a most commonplace deed, for the Catholic women of all ranks had been doing it everywhere for ages. (II, 195)

In Catholicism she finds the expression of 'true Christianity' which is only beginning to grow in the Protestant church. Even the fact that 'the Catholic churches and cemeteries stand open and the Protestant ones are closed' suggests to her 'something hard and exclusive in the original leaven of Protestantism' (II, 205). She generalises what she had always disliked in Quakerism. Howitt finds also the fulfilment of her aesthetic and imaginative tastes in Catholicism's symbolism and ritual. To Howitt, they have more than symbolic value as they bring the spiritual dimension near. She regards rural shrines in Germany as 'religious thoughts on the highway' (I, 315), and the Easter rituals in the Tyrol not only please her 'imagination' but manifest what is 'taking place spiritually all around us' (II, 262). She expresses an unmet need for these sensible expressions of spirituality:
I wish we had been brought up in a faith that had these holy observances. What a mistake Friends made in regarding nothing but First Day, and that in such a dead manner! I am too old now to begin; yet I do seem to feel a very great want of higher religious life in myself. I would, it seems to me, give anything for a sense of the Divine life within me. (II, 263)

The sacramental traditions of Catholicism, and even the ancient buildings of Rome’s Christian era, are welcome because they incarnate the spiritual to her.

This need for tangible expressions of religion becomes particularly important after her experiences of bereavement. After the loss of two sons, Claude and Charlton, she is for a time tempted by spiritualism because she enjoys ‘the assurance thus gained of an invisible world’ (II, 118). After the death of her husband in 1879, Howitt feels she has lost a source of spiritual closeness in his strong faith:

Your father, though he rejected much, yet held fast by that which was the mainstay and foundation of all true faith - confidence in Jesus Christ and the nearness of the spiritual world. What a blessing it was! I seem to be complaining. In truth, I am not. I am only telling you how I am seeking, as it were, to recover lost ground, and praying in my poor, feeble way for a sign of acceptance. (II, 301)

An attraction of Catholicism in this respect is the belief in praying to the dead, since it seems to make ‘the glorious other world ... only next door’ (II, 306). Her final conversion is shown, like Besant’s, as a home-coming in personal and emotional terms. Howitt voices concerns with Catholic doctrines which are not resolved, but makes a simple personal commitment, after which she feels free to enjoy the affective symbols to which she is ‘sensitive’. ‘[T]here are times’, she writes, ‘but only now and then, just now and then, when I feel the reality of the spiritual life, and even its nearness, with such intense joy ...’ (II, 326-7). One such moment is when she receives the Pope’s blessing, in which he mediates divine acceptance:

A serene happiness, almost joy, filled my whole being as I at once found myself on my knees before the Vicar of Christ ... His hands were laid on my shoulders, and again and again his right hand in blessing on my head, whilst he spoke to me of Paradise. All this time I did not know whether I was in the body or not. (II, 355-6)

These final pages of the Autobiography were taken from Howitt’s ‘private notes’ since she did not live long enough to finish the narrative. Her daughter, also a Catholic convert, acted as editor and no doubt herself wanted to depict the Papal blessing as a finale.
Howitt makes the themes of seeking aesthetic experience and a more inclusive social ethos central in her whole life account, including her religious journey. These themes form the critique of Quakerism, more implicitly in her childhood depiction and explicitly in her letters to Anna which form a substantial part of the autobiography. The same themes justify the appeal of Roman Catholicism to Howitt, but the aesthetic taste takes on a new significance in her later years as the desire to experience tangible symbols of spiritual life and assurance that the other realm is near. For Howitt, doctrinal beliefs are nowhere near the spirit of true religion – conversely, she considers them divisive and exclusive. What makes a religion ‘true’ is its ability to bring God near to the worshiper.

‘What does it matter?’ Margaret Oliphant’s anti-autobiography

Margaret Oliphant’s is a self-consciously unusual autobiography. It consists of a literary and personal memoir which Oliphant (1828-97) began briefly in 1864 and resumed in 1885, taking nine years to reach completion. The retrospect of her past life is interrupted three times by substantial journal-type entries which refer to events occurring at the time of Oliphant’s writing, namely the tragic deaths of her three children in 1864, 1891 and 1894. These sections are of a raw emotional nature as Oliphant struggles to come to terms with her losses and maintain her Christian faith. Oliphant’s editors, two remaining dependants, were dismayed by the formal incoherence of the manuscript she left them, and cut the journal entries almost entirely from the 1899 publication. What Oliphant’s own intentions were regarding publication is hard to judge; she altered the tone of the account from personal life story to literary memoir after her last child’s death, ‘putting in anecdotes that will do to quote in the papers and make the book sell!’41 A reviewer of autobiographies herself, she would have been aware of her text’s unconventionality but she had found comfort in Archbishop Tait’s account of his bereavements, which initially she had felt ‘too personal, too sacred for publication’ (84). Perhaps she felt her own account might serve the same use, and thus did not revise it. The complete text was finally published by Elisabeth Jay in 1990.

Apart from its formal unconventionalities, Oliphant’s record flouts other conventions of autobiographical writing. I suggest that she self-consciously writes against these conventions as part of a protest against the lack of providential meaning she sees in her life. She expresses in literary terms the religious protests which are made overt in the journal

outbursts. Oliphant had a strong religious faith and opinions, having grown up in the Free Church of Scotland and making a loose affiliation with the Anglican Church in her life south of the border. She expresses ideas on the supernatural and the afterlife in her tales, and in her novels raises religious questions, frequently sceptical as to the institutional church's ability to meet the religious need of its members. It might be expected that, with even an unorthodox Christian faith, Oliphant would trace providential meanings in her autobiography. However, as novelist and reviewer, she was wary of the way narrative strategies could construct patterns in experience which may not ring true. She suggests this in the autobiography when she compares her recollections to 'pictures to which the meaning, naturally, is put long afterwards (20). Her own novels demonstrate a 'habitual resistance to closure', replacing tragic or comic endings with a more ambivalent sense of the human condition.42 In one of her many reviews in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, she wrote this of autobiography:

> Real life has no ending save in death, - it is a tangle of breakings off and addings on, of new beginnings overlapping the old, of ties arbitrarily cut and arbitrarily pieced together again, and nothing to make the picture, as painters say, "compose".43

In the *Autobiography*, Oliphant alludes to the conventions of personal myth-making within a framework of spiritual autobiography, usually to reject them.

Contradicting the main feature of spiritual autobiography, Oliphant finds no ordained pattern in events. In her outburst after Maggie's death in 1864, aged ten, she wants to believe in God's good purposes for her daughter, but doubts:

> She is with God, she is in his hands. I know nothing, cannot even imagine anything. Can I trust her with Him? Can I trust Him that He has done what was best for her, that He has her safe, that there has been no mistake, no error, but only his purpose in all, and that he is keeping her now in the position most happy for her, that even my own human judgment, when enlightened, will approve as the best? (7)

She actually fears attributing events to divine appointment, because of what this may imply about God. Blaming Rome's climate, she bitterly reflects:

> Perhaps if I had stayed at home and not come here, but what is the good of saying perhaps. It was rotting Rome that did it and I must not think of God as if he were lying in wait to take such terrible vengeance on me. (5)

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43 Quoted in ibid., pp.30-31.
If considered in providential terms, events only suggest a jealous, or arbitrary God who punishes her for being too attached to her children, or for making a wrong decision in ignorance. After her last child Cecco’s death in 1894 aged thirty-four, Oliphant’s sense of providence is less personal. Rather than openly attack God, she points to cruel absurdity in events. She refers to the ‘horrible accident’ whereby

He died not of the lungs, which we have been so unhappy about, but of exhaustion after inflammation of the throat and tongue which Dr Miller ascribes to the drains, which I had so carefully put in order last year. So we are mocked. (86)

Oliphant sees cruel ironies at work in the longer view of her life. Twice she considers the possibility that she unwittingly created some of her own tragedy. For example, she is ‘frightened’ by Mary Howitt’s suggestion that ‘too much mental work on the part of the mother’ might damage her babies’ health. Having at that point in the narrative lost two babies, she is ‘alarmed and saddened ... terribly’ that she may have lost her children because she worked too hard to provide for them (40). She also worries that she contributed to her sons’ making so little of their lives. In order to spare them from worry, she may have given the impression that work was to be taken ‘very lightly’, setting them a bad example (152). Even her continued supply of work, which she does attribute with gratitude to providence, is full of painful irony. She claims to have sacrificed artistic quality for the sake of ‘the boiling of the daily pot’ to support her extensive family (136). She accepts this price willingly, but in the end feels ‘mocked’ by her choice since she has outlived almost all of them. Irony and absurdity characterise the course of her life, not the coherent development of cause and effect which Wayne Shumaker suggests is more typical of Victorian autobiography.44

At other times, events have more of a sense of the arbitrary. Shumaker also argues that typically autobiographers create a sense of inevitability about their life’s direction, disguising ‘how infinite are the number of directions which the course of events may take’.45 He writes that ‘[t]he path down which the autobiographer has walked, often with uncertainty as to the next turning, straightens out itself into a well-marked highway’.46 As if aware of this convention, Oliphant draws attention to possible alternative fates, the ‘what ifs’ and ‘might have been’ of her life, depriving her account of any sense of ‘inevitability’. For example, she compares herself to George Eliot, next to whom she feels ‘obscure’ (17). Considering her writing career, she wonders:

44 Shumaker, p.89.
45 Quoting Frederick Lewis, Shumaker p.45.
46 Ibid.
Should I have done better if I had been kept, like her, in a mental green house and been taken care of? This is one of the things it is perfectly impossible to tell. (15)

Alluding to a marriage proposal she had refused in her early widowhood, she writes 'but now I think that if I had taken the other way, which seemed the less noble, it might have been better for all of us. I might have done better work' (16). Elsewhere, she reflects on her brother and sister-in-law's decision to 'follow [her] to London': 'Had the circumstances been different – had they stayed in Birkenhead and I gone alone with my husband to London – some unhappiness might have been spared. Who can tell?' (36) M. K. Blasing suggests autobiography's tendency to render what was experienced as 'arbitrary' 'necessary' to the final outcome.\textsuperscript{47} Oliphant writes against this convention, and thus undermines the possibility of a divinely ordained life journey.

Another myth which Oliphant deflates is the autobiographer's sense of her centrality in her own story. Oliphant is self-conscious about the egotism which autobiography could suggest. She wrote scathingly of Harriet Martineau's self-glorification and in her own text she undercuts the conviction that her life is of special importance or interest, sometimes with wry humour. At one point she pulls herself back from a digression saying '[h]ere, then, for a little try at the autobiography' while feeling guilty about the real work she 'ought to be doing' (18). More sadly she returns to the project in 1891 after Tiddy's death, writing 'I forget where I left off in this pitiful little record of my life' (60). Her literary anecdotes she insists include 'nobody ... of any great consequence' (141), apologising 'I need scarcely say there was not much of what one might call a literary life in all this' (137). Indeed, she recounts anecdotes with little attempt to make them entertaining vignettes. This is not the subconscious self-effacement which critics like Peterson and Sanders have seen as characteristic of women's autobiography; Oliphant intentionally writes herself out of the centre of her story.

But this unease with the egotism of autobiography is matched by Oliphant's feeling that she does not hold a central place in any divine plan. A conviction of 'one's own importance' was central to the protestant spiritual autobiography and its exploration of the spiritual meanings which events might hold for the development of the soul.\textsuperscript{48} In response to Maggie's death, it is her own marginalisation from God's plans which most troubles Oliphant. At first she cannot imagine that Maggie is happy in heaven without her – 'Did she not stop short there and say "Where is Mama?" did not the separation overwhelm her?' (7) Then the

\textsuperscript{47} Quoted in Landow, p.xxxiv.
mother is offended by the thought that God has a plan for Maggie’s happiness which excludes her. If God had a plan, Margaret herself felt ‘a secondary person in it. The first and original question must have been between my darling herself and her Maker’ (12). She feels diminished, excluded, and abandoned by God whose interests apparently lie with those who have passed through death, writing ‘I am stranded upon this desolate shore ... I am alone in the world forever’ (12-13). This is spiritual abandonment, since she had other living children and supportive friends at the time. Similarly, after Tiddy’s death in 1891 aged nearly thirty-four, which she accepts more philosophically due to his very troubled life, she still feels ‘but a spectator, that I had so secondary a place, that God and he had to settle the question and there was no other way’ (50). The same sense of exclusion from divine consideration colours her telling of her continuous supply of work. She expresses her thanks in terms which suggest her own exclusion from the matter: ‘Our Father in Heaven had settled it all the time for the children’ (134).

Autobiography generally, and particularly spiritual autobiography, seeks to find a value in suffering, some growth or compensation which to an extent might rationalise the experience of sorrow. This is a literary manifestation of the Christian theme of redemption which Victorian self-writing took from its heritage of spiritual autobiography. 49 Oliphant rejects the redemptive consolations suggested by both theology and autobiography. After Maggie’s death she considers the suggestion that through her grief God will ‘compensat[e]’ by bringing about development of her spiritual character. She refutes this: ‘My misery makes my heart harder not softer. I grudge and wonder at the happiness of others. I am not the better for my grief’. On the contrary, she sees an alternative pattern of events which would have brought spiritual gain:

if from that sick-bed he had raised her up again to life and strength how much good it would have done me, how thankful, how humble, how pitiful I would have been in my great joy. (8)

She finds no redemptive possibilities which could reconcile her to her loss to any degree. When Cecco dies, she sees only repetition, not development: ‘I am like Job, such a monument of endless sorrow, always beginning and beginning once again’ (82). The view she states in these intense moments of grief is also a keynote of her retrospective narrative; less than a page into her text (written in 1864 before Maggie’s death) she questions ‘if experience ever teaches’, commenting ‘I have already concluded it does not’ (4).

It is a characteristic of autobiography to judge the past through the lens of the present outcome, and to infuse those previous events with 'a teleological unity' in relation to that outcome.\textsuperscript{50} While, Oliphant attributes to Providence the appearance of work, sometimes almost miraculously and at the last moment, she nonetheless restrains herself from using this outcome to interpolate motives of faith into her past. The virtue of 'waiting upon God' in another light is merely an admission of powerlessness - 'what could I else?' she asks (133).

Nor does she use the outcome of financial security to justify risks she took as acts of faith: 'I might say now that another woman doing the same thing was tempting Providence. To tempt Providence or to trust God, which was it?' she wonders (135). Her reflections raise more questions than answers.

But in the story of her motherhood, the final outcome of total loss entirely colours her reminiscences. This happens most obviously in uncomfortable juxtapositions of the two time perspectives, such as when she recalls Tiddy's birth just after he has died in her present time of writing:

And best of all, our delightful boy was born. Ah, me! If I had continued this narrative at the time when I broke it off in 1888, I should have told of this event and all its pleasantness, if not with a light heart, yet without the sudden tears that blind me now, so that I cannot see the page. (62)

In the sections she wrote after Cecco’s death, her final loss obliterates any past meanings or happiness. It is 'as if [the children] had never been born' (82) she writes, although she had cherished her daughter until the age of ten, and her sons into their early thirties. She wipes out their entire shared past, writing bitterly that '[i]f [she] had broken down as many women might in that sad time in Rome after my husband died, before Cecco was born, how very, very little difference would it have made' (82). Through telling her whole life story from a viewpoint of bereavement, Oliphant feels she has lost her identity rather than found it, unwritten her meaning rather than written it: 'I am a mother childless', she concludes (79).

This viewpoint of deprived motherhood obliterates any other possible readings of her life. It devalues her professional success:

What does it matter? Nothing at all now – never anything to speak of. At my most ambitious of times I would rather my children had remembered me as their mother than in any other way, and my friends as their friend. I never cared for anything else. And now that there are no children to whom to

\textsuperscript{50} Olney, \textit{Metaphors of Self}, p. 20.
She considers, mockingly, 'pious' people who

console me for being left behind by thoughts of the good I must yet be intended to do. God help us all! What is the good done by any such work as mine, or even better than mine? ... An infinitude of pains and labour, and all to disappear like the stubble and the hay.

Only in 'the more genial land to come' does she see any hope of true fulfilment, 'when one will have no need to think of the boiling of the daily pot' (136). As Elisabeth Jay suggests, this differs from other accounts of her attitude to her professional life, about which she evidently did feel pride;\(^1\) but Oliphant constructs the autobiography from a viewpoint where loss dominates all. In the text she reaches no point of final acceptance, no 'salvation' of peace with God and herself. She acknowledges experiencing 'happiness' in 'unconsidered moments' (64) which 'used to sweep over me like a wave, sometimes when I opened a door, sometimes in a letter, - all in simple ways' (152), but there is no stable point from which she can resolve her past. The text finishes simply because the reminiscence reaches her present time of 1894, and Cecco's death. She finishes with the two lines:

And now here I am alone.
I cannot write any more. (154)

The 1899 text, without the outspoken journal sections, would have been a far less obvious protest against finding consolatory meanings than Oliphant's manuscript was. Nevertheless, in it Oliphant denies cohesion and meaning in the course of her life, from time to time sounds a note of bitterness, and ends with contrived bleakness. The restored journal sections show how much these 'almost anti-literary' qualities, as Philip Davis describes them, were also anti-theological. The disrupted form is inseparable from Oliphant's sense that life did not make evident the character and good designs of God in which she to the end believed.\(^2\) She is not indifferent to this, but bitter, as a rare outburst in the 1899 edition suggests:

It seems to me as if God has broken his word to me, refusing me with an unreasonable silence .... The heavens are to me as brass. (80-81)

The point of spiritual autobiography was usually to suggest that God was not silent, that this life evidences providentially ordained patterns, patterns of redemptive meaning and purpose which tend towards a sanctioned outcome. Oliphant’s is an agnostic spiritual autobiography, her complaint against God’s ‘silence’ expressed in her denial of consolatory conventions of telling.

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Sallie McFague describes religious autobiography as ‘existential theology with a vengeance; it is the living of belief, not the talking about it or the systematising of it’. It challenges the reader to “see what I am” and then enter into your own soul and discover your prime direction’. The texts discussed in this chapter share an acute sense of crisis or change, of personal and cultural religious needs which demand urgent attention and which challenge traditional beliefs. Martineau, Cobbe and Besant create personal myths in which they discover and mediate new forms of faith to the nation. They implicitly make strong claims for female spiritual leadership. Howitt’s autobiography works by suggestion rather than argument to point to emotional and pragmatic, rather than conceptual, dimensions of belief as the primary factor in religious choice. Oliphant foregrounds the artificiality of autobiographical conventions altogether, and implies that they are as glib as the Christian platitudes that inform them. These five professional women make new uses of the various sub-genres of self-writing to make a distinct contribution to the tradition of spiritual autobiography in a time of religious upheaval.

53 *Speaking in Parables*, p. 157.
Collective biographies were something of a phenomenon in the nineteenth century, and form a distinct tradition. These collections of short life accounts of women, written by women and primarily for women readers, constituted a 'feminine preserve' which admitted no 'male intruder', as Margaret Oliphant quipped in a review. Some of the earlier ones took the form of biographical dictionaries, such as Mary Hays' *Female Biography* (1803), Matilda Betham's *Biographical Dictionary of the Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (1804) and Sara Josepha Hale's *Woman's Record* (1853). Queens, martyrs and social reformers feature in these comprehensive accounts which include women of the Bible as well as from history, and which range across social status and nationality. Other biographers took a chronological approach, such as Lucy Aikin's overarching history of 'woman' *Epistles on Women* (1810) and Hannah Lawrance's *The History of Woman in England and Her Influence on Society and Literature, from the Earliest Period* (1843). Many other writers favoured more selective collections based on a common theme, such as Clara Lucas Balfour's *Working Women of the Last Half Century* (1854), Ellen Clayton's *Women of the Reformation* (1861), and *Twelve Notable Good Women of the Nineteenth Century* (1899) by Rosa Nouchette Cary. Increasingly, ancient and medieval subjects were replaced by women of the writers' own culture and recent past, such as Susanna Wesley, Elizabeth Smith, Elizabeth Fry, and Florence Nightingale. These all constitute what Alison Booth terms 'role model biography', exemplary lives of women for the reader to emulate.

The rise of female collective biography was a consciousness-forming exercise on the part of middle-class women. The genre is underpinned by the premise that women formed a distinct cultural group on the basis of gender alone, and occupied a social role which was undergoing considerable change and debate. Mary Hays, one of the more radical biographers, is overtly political in her intentions and seeks to celebrate what women have achieved in spite

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1 Rohan Maitzen, ""This Feminine Preserve": Historical Biographies by Victorian Women", *Victorian Studies* 38.3 (Spring 1995), p. 374.
of 'the disadvantages civil and moral under which the sex has laboured'. 3 She aims her writing 'for women, and not for scholars' (vii), for personal appropriation rather than mere factual record. Other writers too voiced a need to restore women to their culture's historical and scriptural accounts. Researching her book *Women in Christianity* (1852), Julia Kavanagh was frustrated first by the deficiency of records of 'pure and good women who have lived and died since the opening of the Christian era ... whom the historian has rarely mentioned, whom the general biographer has too often forgotten.4 She also complains that 'the lives of the good had been so briefly and imperfectly written whilst of the profligate or notorious more than enough was known' (250); traditional historians had distorted women's history. Anna Jameson too complained that women's 'mischief' was better known, historically, than their nobility.5 The collective biography tradition was both an 'answer' to women's exclusion from records of the past, and a site for debating 'what a woman might be' in the nineteenth century.6

These writings have attracted little critical attention in relation to their quantity. Recently, critics such as Alison Booth and Judith Johnston have recognised them as reflections on women's social status and range of activity.7 Rohan Maitzen evaluates some examples of the genre as women's incursion into the male-dominated genre of historiography. The biographers 'offer their books as supplements to the historical master-narratives in which both women and woman’s sphere are either invisible or marginal, and they vigorously assert a feminine place in history', albeit a marginalised one. In doing so, they anticipate to a degree women's history which has emerged as a discipline since the late twentieth-century feminist movement.8 None of these discussions have done justice to the strongly spiritual emphasis of many of the biographies, and hence their theological potential. Many of the biographers wrote of a continuing spiritual tradition through which contemporary readers could identify with, and emulate, women of the past. This is evident in titles such as Kavanagh's *Women of Christianity* and Mary Pryor Hack's *Consecrated Women* (1880), but Aikin's *Epistles on Women*, Hale's *Woman's Record*, and Balfour's *Working Women* also take notions of Christian vocation and duty as the central principle around which to theme their selected lives and to make claims about contemporary women’s role.

5 From Anna Jameson, *Characteristics of Women* (1832), quoted in Booth, p. 257.
6 Booth, p. 264.
8 Maitzen, pp. 374, 379.
Even more significantly, in theological terms, some used the form as a means to interpret the Bible. Aikin’s and Hale’s works, Balfour’s *The Women of Scripture* (1847) and Grace Aguilar’s *The Women of Israel* (1845) take Bible characters as their subjects and thus interpret the scriptural text as they construe the women’s ‘biographies’. The biographical genre allowed women a uniquely acceptable way into Bible hermeneutics. Women’s relation to Bible interpretation was paradoxical. On the one hand, ‘women were officially prohibited from offering original Bible exegesis within the Anglican Church and most Dissenting congregations during the nineteenth century’; on the other, Protestant and especially Evangelical traditions placed individual reading of the Bible central to the experience of all believers.9 John Wesley in the late eighteenth century, although keen for women to preach, nonetheless felt he could not permit the ‘exegesis and application of a text’ from scripture.10 As Robert Kachur explains, most women who wrote directly about the Bible were adapting scholarly studies for a more general audience, performing a mediating rather than hermeneutic role. But biography was a suitably experiential genre, since it centred on the personal character and social circumstances of their female subjects. Protestant and Jewish women who knew their scriptures well imaginatively constructed characters out of often sparse biblical accounts. They used their own gender as a source of interpretive authority: ‘woman alone knows the heart of woman’, a male reviewer of the genre conceded in 1833.11 And whatever insights the writer came to she could endow with scriptural authority. Hale uses scriptural authority to support her idea of ‘the true idea of woman’s nature and mission’;12 Balfour claims to direct readers to ‘the scriptural estimate of woman and illustrations of her duties’.13

I discuss works by a range of biographers across the century who take an overtly spiritual theme, particularly focusing on Lucy Aikin, Grace Aguilar, Clara Lucas Balfour, Julia Kavanagh, Sara Josepha Hale and Elizabeth Charles. I will include Anna Jameson since her writings on the portrayal of women in western art are commonly recognised as a contribution to the tradition of female biography as well as to art criticism. Most of these biographers had already written novels or journalism, often about women’s role in a Christian society. A high proportion of them knew what it was to earn their own living, often to support

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dependants, and perhaps felt more than many the need for models which exemplified non-domestic female activity. My intention is to show the writers' common themes and concerns while recognising variety in their interpretations. I first discuss the general implications of this project and suggest how it anticipates, in some respects, the feminist Bible criticism which emerged in the late twentieth century. As an important example of 'revisionary' interpretation, I consider writers' treatment of Eve, the archetypal woman of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Then I discuss how the writers used collective biography to enter Victorian gender debates in relation to Bible models and spiritual values — the need for public women, the role of single women and the fate of fallen women. Finally, I consider how female biographers discover female images of God, focusing particularly on Anna Jameson's discussions of European female iconography. In all of these, theology and gender debates are inseparable.

A Scripture of Their own: Reclaiming the Tradition

The aim of recent feminist Bible criticism has been to reread the scriptural text from a gendered perspective. While most feminist theologians take a historical-critical approach to the Bible, many also offer female-centred readings of the text itself. These critics find within the scripture itself more positive images of women than have been perceived, by both androcentric interpreters and by secular feminists who have rejected the Judeo-Christian tradition altogether as irredeemably sexist. This approach has resulted in 'revisionary' readings of women and gender relations in the Bible. Katharine Sakenfield, for example, writes that one of the 'feminist uses of biblical materials' is such a project of 'recovery' that reinstates the more positive contributions of women in the scriptures that androcentric interpretations have undervalued.14 What feminist theory enabled in the late twentieth century, I suggest that in the nineteenth century was achieved in part by taking a biographical approach to scriptural female characters.

One of the biographers' achievements is to elevate the role played by women in the religious tradition. Later feminist theologians practise the strategy of 'recovering' women in the tradition. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, for example, suggests 'careful analysis' to 'unearth traces of a genuine “her-story” of women in the Bible', and also to 'retell the

androcentric Bible stories from the woman's point of view'. By writing women's biographies, nineteenth-century women achieve the same. Protestant theology and Bible interpretation centred on the grand scheme of salvation, expressed primarily in the relations between God and male leaders of the chosen people: patriarchs, kings, the messiah and his disciples. By considering their subjects as individuals taken out of the context of this overarching salvation story, the biographers manage to 'free the women ... completely, both from their marginalisation within the predominantly male criticisms of the texts, and from their domination by the heroes and plots within the texts.' Scriptural women are not dwarfed by the central male characters but are seen as individuals with their own relationship to God and their own calling. Considering them in this light, writers often found that women had played a larger role in bringing about God's redemptive schemes than had been recognised.

A popular choice was Jochabed, mother of Moses, whose actions preserved his life from the Egyptian holocaust of the Jews. Sarah Hale draws attention to the faith and initiative of Jochabed, Moses' sister and Pharaoh's daughter and her maid in arranging for this Hebrew baby to be adopted, insisting that 'women only were the actors in this drama' (Woman's Record, 44). Grace Aguilar points out that Moses' adult spiritual character was not arrived at in manhood, when called to be leader of his people. 'It must be imbibed with the mother's milk, and from the very atmosphere of childhood and youth', she says, drawing attention to the influence she was likely to have on Moses as she contrived to bring him up as a nurse in the Egyptian court. They discover, as their twentieth-century counterparts did, that 'whereas the important events in the Israelite tradition are experienced by men, they are often set in motion and determined by women.' Hale and Aguilar thus attribute vision and intelligence to their women characters, filling in the silences of the biblical text with regard to motive. Thus they portray them as active co-operators with the divine plan, rather than as accidental instruments of it.

Many of the biographers ingeniously find individual characterisation in the details which interpreters miss who are looking for the overarching salvation plots. Aguilar pours speculative feeling into 'the more private history of Eve' (I, 32) after the expulsion from Eden, interpreting her as the ancestress of God's chosen people when she names her third son

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16 Johnston, p. 73, writing of biographies of Shakespeare's women.
18 J. Cheryl Exum, "Mother in Israel": a familiar figure reconsidered", in Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, p. 74.
Seth, and attributing to her insight into God's redemptive plans: 'we may quite believe that Eve was not only comforted by the gift of a son, but ... [that] they could trace the hand of the Lord bringing forth good out of the very midst of evil' (I, 39). Balfour points out that Eve attains a 'status' perhaps equivalent to that of Adam who named animals and herself, when she is the one who names the first born child Cain (Women of Scripture, 20). Hale reads between the lines quite freely to make points in support of her overall thesis, that women have always remained faithful to God while men regularly backslide. Discussing Huldah the prophet who is consulted by the high priest in one short episode (2 Kings 22:14-20), Hale asks '[w]ould the high priest have gone to consult a woman, had not her repute for wisdom and piety been well known; and considered superior to what was possessed by any man in Jerusalem?' (Woman's Record, 42) The sparseness of biblical text, with its limited analysis of motive or character, works in these writers' favour to show their subjects not only as daughters, wives and mothers, but also as individuals relating to God.

This contrasts quite sharply with interpretations of Bible women that do not remove them from the male-dominated salvation plots of orthodox theology. Francis Augustus Cox claimed that his Female Scripture Biography (1817) would redress the absence of women characters from most contemporary spiritual biography. Yet even here, the women are defined as relative and as minor actors in the spiritual drama. Eve as a character is lost in the myth of creation and fall, Sarah embedded in Abraham's call and journey, and Miriam thoroughly subordinate to Moses' predestined role as leader. Eve is essentially 'accessory [sic] to the ruin of man' and Mary 'instrumental in the birth of Him who came as Restorer and Saviour of mankind'. Even from inescapably powerful figures such as Deborah, Cox draws lessons of a general spiritual nature: he celebrates her leading Israel into battle as a demonstration of God's victory against the odds, but makes no mention of the social implications of female leadership. Highly 'spiritualised' readings remove the human implications of the story. This is evident in women's writings which do not 'free the women' from 'their domination by the heroes and plots', such as Agnes Bulmer's Scripture Histories (1837), a verse account of the Bible's grand plan of salvation. As such, it is structured around the main male characters of the Old Testament from Abraham to Jeremiah, and women play a very minor and totally relative role. In neither her nor Cox's works are these 'women' in a gendered sense at all. Only when they are considered biographically, as individuals, can the details be maximised which make them positive models of female faith and action.

Some of the biographers use the depictions of Bible characters to undermine negative female stereotypes which, traditionally, biblical examples had often been drawn on to perpetuate. The fallen Eve/angelic Mary contrast has been criticised as a source of oppression for women by many twentieth-century feminists, but several of the biographers point out that the Bible neither demonises nor idolises its human characters. ‘The Bible tells us of no character above human nature’ says Aguilar as she discusses Eve. ‘It was not to a race so perfect, so gifted, so hallowed, as to be free from all the present faults and failings of the sex that the Lord vouchsafed His love. No, it was to woman, even as she is now’ (Women of Israel, I, 10). Balfour, contemplating Rebekah’s mixed morality, acknowledges ‘inconsistencies, contrasts, contradiction’ as true humanity, not romanticised fictional ideals (Women of Scripture, 41), implicitly making a plea for the same to be tolerated in her time. The anonymous writer of Fifty Famous Women (1864) uses Bible characterisation of its male characters to support the same argument. She expresses anger at the ‘standard of impossible virtue’ and the ‘monstrosities of faultlessness and perfection’ which have hampered women’s self-image. She refers to the imperfect male heroes of the Bible:

Did not David sin? And Moses? And Aaron? Was all Solomon’s wisdom sufficient to keep him from reproach and weakness in his old age? Was Peter free from sin because he was zealous and affectionate? Or Joab, because he was brave? And are not lessons to be learned from the faults and failures, as well as from the virtues and successes of these men?20

As will be seen below in the discussions of Eve and Mary Magdalene, the biographical approach humanises its subject and thus counters stereotypical interpretations of character.

Implicit in many of these readings is the sense that traditional interpreters have ignored or misrepresented women’s contribution in their scriptural tradition. A few biographers make this criticism overt. Lucy Aikin criticises Milton’s interpretation of Eve in his Paradise Lost, which was profoundly influential on traditional interpretations of the creation and fall. He made Eve fully subordinate to Adam in the creation order, and largely to blame for their fall from grace. Aikin refers with thinly veiled sarcasm to ‘our great Milton’, attacking as ‘blasphemous’ his ‘presumption in making his Eve address Adam in the acknowledgement, “God is thy head, thou mine” and his assertion that the first human pair were formed, “He for God only, she for God in him”’.21 In her view, the text withstands no such reading. Hale points to the non sequitur in Milton’s analysis of Eve as both more

vulnerable to temptation, and more culpable in yielding—'she could not have been both'—she retorts sharply. She directs her reader to 'Go not to Milton, or the Fathers, but to the Word of God' (*Woman's Record*, xxxvi-vii). Unsurprisingly, she goes on to declare access to the printed scripture as the central liberating event in women's history. The more conservative Aguilar too celebrates this access, in language which suggests a hitherto gendered exclusion: 'the voice of man need no longer be the vehicle of instruction from father to son, unconsciously mingling with it human opinions, till those opinions could scarcely be severed from the word of God' (*Women of Israel*, I, 6). This separation of the Bible text from its dominant interpretations is of enormous significance in liberating women to become interpreters of their own religious tradition.

The biographical approach to the Bible had other implications for the traditional priorities of historical and religious hermeneutics. Anticipating twentieth-century developments, some of the biographers used biblical example to raise questions as to prevailing 'ideas about historical significance'. Balfour sees the often humble and domestic lives recorded in scripture as grounds to challenge 'the whole assumption' of male interpreters 'to regard the public and political duties of life as the most important' (*Women of Scripture*, 14-15). Kavanagh argues quite specifically that traditional heroic history is a thoroughly anti-Christian enterprise:

Men have filled its pages with their own deeds...the deeds, wars, glories, oppressions and struggles of whole ages. Thus the past reads like a marvellous story of strange events and stirring deeds, succeeding one another with startling rapidity; and in a confusion that, seen from afar, seems both reckless and magnificent...But in all this what have we? The annals of nations, not the story of humanity...History has been written in the old pagan spirit of recording great events and dazzling actions; not in the lowliness of the Christian heart, which, without affecting to despise the great, still loves and venerates the good. (*Women of Christianity*, 2)

Gender and Christianity form part of her argument: '(w)hat share have women in this history of men?' she demands. She characterises national, political history as male and heroic, written in the spirit of the pagans whose Elysium was exclusively 'the house of heroes' and thus excluded the lowly and the female. She contrasts this elitist afterlife belief with the Christian ethic whose gospel was 'open to the meanest slave' and 'made no favour of sex in its rewards' (4-5). A Christian approach to history, she argues, should follow this inclusive spirit—a fuller 'story of humanity' in which lowly and female lives are granted historical value.

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Maitzen notes some of the biographers' advocation of 'what we would recognise as social history', but fails to recognise the spiritual authority with which they endowed their claim, and the challenge they posed to their formally Christian culture.23

Finally, the collective biographers brought a new human-centred approach to Bible interpretation, since they studied the individual human being rather than attempted to deduct principles or doctrines. One obvious gain of this was that by focusing on individual lives, the writers could evade the more generic prescriptions of women's role which might be problematic. Esther and Deborah, leaders of the Israelite nation, were more liberating than Mosaic or Pauline prohibitions. But some writers also suggested a different conception of scriptural truth. Mary Hays writes:

Women, unsophisticated by the pedantry of the schools, read not only for dry information, to load their memories with uninteresting facts, or to make a display of vain erudition...Their understandings are principally accessible through their affections: they delight in minute delineation of character; nor must the truths which impress them be either cold or unadorned. *(Female Biography, I, iv)*

She claims biography presents truths 'for women, and not for scholars', which requires empathetic participation with individuals' stories rather than intellectual assent. Grace Aguilar too points to biography as an alternative theological method, finding 'simple lessons of character as well as precept'. 'Truth is often elicited,' she argues, 'by using not only our intellectual but our imaginative capacities' *(Women of Israel, II, 216-7)*. Although framed in humble terms, these are claims for a different approach to the Bible, challenging spiritualised approaches like Cox's and Bulmer's which ignore the social and political implications of the human stories. It was this approach which enabled Josephine Butler to make radical claims about what the Bible had to say about social ethics. Reading it 'from the human side', she claims insights into the Old Testament stories which the apostle Paul did not attain due to his theological approach which interpreted them only in terms of salvation analogies.24

Whether the Bible biographers made overt statements about gender or not, they all wrote from a gender consciousness, feeling that women had been marginalised in traditional accounts of their religious heritage. As Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests of twentieth-century Bible scholars, these Victorians too sought to 'bring their own experience into the

23 Maitzen, p. 36.

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public formation of the tradition. The biographical approach raised the status of women in
the Bible, and individualised them so they did not always fulfil a subordinate or relative role,
nor conform to stereotypes. It also gave women writers the confidence to challenge prevailing
hermeneutic priorities in both theology and history, and, overtly or covertly, foregrounded the
bias inherent in established traditions of interpretation.

Reclaiming Eve

Eve, like all iconic figures of religion tradition, is ‘multivalent’. She has different
aspects which are emphasised depending on the preoccupations of the interpreter. She is
the woman through whom sin entered the world, the aspect most emphasised in salvation
theology ‘plots’ and used by male theologians from Paul onwards to argue for female moral
weakness. Cox, for example, follows Milton in showing her as Adam’s ‘seducer’ and ‘snare’,
while Adam sinned through ‘blind affection’ to share her fate. He turns the notion of female
moral ‘influence’ against her, since instead of exerting it ‘to prevent [Adam’s] compliance
with any sinful intimation’, she used it ‘to induce him to plunge into guilt and ruin’ (Female
Scripture Biography, I, 19-20). The deep influence of Milton’s ‘misogynistic theology’ is
reflected in several women’s fictional reworkings of the Paradise Lost theme. But Eve has
other ‘valencies’. She is also the first created perfect woman, and later a mother and a witness
to significant events in Genesis. Biographical treatments re-emphasise these roles and through
them explore the archetypal female role in relation to God and to men.

Lucy Aikin, in Epistles on Women, takes issue with Milton and rereads the newly
created Eve as a glorious ideal of womanhood. In her preface she makes it clear that in spite
of some differentiation of roles, woman is intellectually and morally equal to man and shares
a common interest with him. She should be ‘a sister and a friend’, equal contributor to the
betterment of society. Her choice of literary form, an epic in heroic couplets and a heightened
style with ‘woman’ as the central character, argues on their own terms with the ‘war upon the
sex’ waged by the satirists Juvenal and Pope, and Milton’s epic. Aikin dwells on the period

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Interpretation of the Bible, p. 112.
26 Clarissa W. Atkinson, “‘Your Servant, My Mother’: The Figure of Saint Monica in the Ideology of Christian
Motherhood’, in Clarissa Atkinson, Constance Buchanan and Margaret Miles, eds., Immaculate and Powerful:
27 Ibid., p. 164.
28 See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-
Shelley’s Frankenstein, Charlotte Bronte’s Shirley and Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’ as examples, among
others, of responses to Milton’s ‘misogynistic theology’. 

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before the fall, on Eve's creation and complementation of Adam. Without contradicting a word of the biblical text, she contrives to present Adam in the most negative terms possible in his status as a 'lonely' creature. 'Mark his long listless step and torpid air, / His brow of densest gloom and fixt infantile stare!' (9) Noting he had no mother, she comments that lack of female influence has left him sadly inadequate to be lord of creation – 'O hapless world that such a wretch obeys!' (10). It is only Eve's arrival which brings this stultified creature to life, in a displacement of God's life-giving role. 'Sure a new soul that moping idiot warms', the narrator proclaims, and goes on to depict the effect though an epic simile of clouds clearing to reveal the sun. Adam only discovers the capacity for speech when he has Eve to speak to, logically enough. Only at this point 'Then rose complete the mighty Maker's plan, / And Eden opened in the heart of Man' (11).

Aikin reverses the traditional gender hierarchy. Man is a wholly relative creature, of himself nothing and only complete within a relationship to woman. Eve is not subordinate in an androcentric divine plan, but equally central to one which has a common human interest at heart. Aikin asserts their equality in terms which answer Milton, and barely allows for the differentiation for roles which she concedes (in her preface) as a biological necessity:

So hand in hand the happy creatures trod,
   Alike the children of no partial God;
   Equal they trod till want and guilt arose,
   Till savage blood was spilt, and man had foes (12).

Here she alludes to Cain's murder of Abel, and hence equates the fall from perfection with an act of male brutality rather than one of female disobedience. Finally, her notion of woman as 'helpmeet' (the term is from Genesis) comprises not the service of male interests but independently evaluating the common interest and offering her own insights to 'confirm' when men are right, 'and when erring guide' (81). Male governance is only godly if female judgement equally directs it.

Sarah Hale writes on Eve's story in accordance with her belief in female superiority.29 For both Aikin and Hale, the female embodies 'the spiritual principle in humanity who raises Adam from his merely material condition'. Here, nineteenth-century gender stereotypes oddly

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29 Hale was an American author, but her Woman's Record was published simultaneously in Britain. Female superiority seems to be an interpretation found more in the USA than in Britain; Lydia Huntley Sigourney argued similarly to Hale in her introduction to Jesse Clement ed., Noble Deeds of American Women (1851); see Booth, p. 262.
recall the suppressed Gnostic creation texts which valued the spiritual female above the material male. Hale uses this trope to roundly criticise male culture. Eve is a finer creation who emerged from Adam's body 'like diamond from carbon' (Woman's Record, xxxvii). Her role as 'helpmeet' is 'to “help” him where he was deficient – namely, in his spiritual nature' (xxxvii). She reverses Milton’s hierarchy and declares that ‘WOMAN is God’s appointed agent of morality’ (xxxv), mediating spirituality to men whom she implies would not approach God directly if left to it. Eve’s sin she virtually exonerates as evidence of her superior nature, and attributes to Eve laudable motives in taking from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As in some Gnostic versions of Genesis, Hale’s Eve desired spiritual knowledge, whereas materially-minded Adam was tempted merely by the sight of a nice apple: ‘her aspirations were heavenward, while the man disobeyed wilfully and from sensuous motives’ (xxxxviii – ix). Hale therefore turns the tables on traditional readings of Eve by gendering Adam’s sin as typical of a distinctly male weakness.

Hale claims it is to Eve, not to Adam, that promises of redemption are made. God is addressing her alone, she claims, when he forecasts that ‘her seed should at last triumph over the tempter who had brought her woe’ (xxxix). Eve thus becomes first in a line of Old Testament women who share God’s spiritual vision for the human race and enable it to come about, in spite of men’s failings. Abigail and Esther stand out next to slow-witted or tyrannical husbands, and Deborah and Huldah stand above other (and therefore all the male) prophets in Israel. It was women who first saw the risen Jesus and were commissioned to tell the news to less faithful male followers. All illustrate Hale’s theme that ‘in the history of the human race, woman has ever led the forlorn hope of the world’s moral progress’ (44), which has been hindered by ‘selfish men’ who ‘consigned’ women to ignorance and ‘the servile office of ministering to [their] passions and lusts’ (66). She calls on men therefore to allow women education and opportunity to fulfil their appointed role as God’s chosen people set apart for an appointed task of social redemption.

For the Jewish writer Grace Aguilar, Eve was less archetypal. In her tradition, she states, the Edenic fall did not bring about the condemnation of all humanity through the taint of original sin. Hence she is freer to regard Eve less as a symbolic female representative and more as an individual. Aguilar classifies her as the first of ‘the wives of the patriarchs’ and considers her ‘more private history’ (Women of Israel, 32) after her expulsion from Eden and sees her as the first matriarch of God’s people. She notes God’s continuing provision for them, invites sympathy for her maternal anxieties, and makes her the focaliser of the Cain and

31 Ibid.
Abel story and of the birth of Seth, speculating on her 'agony of remorse', 'joy' and 'anxiety' regarding her sons. Eve's life after Eden 'prove[s] forcibly the Eternal's still compassionating love' (I, 39) to women which surpasses all barriers, even sin.

These women writers read Eve in different ways, but all find her a more positive model than tradition permits. Their 'biographies' recover her undervalued aspects, emphasising her as a perfect creature equal with Adam before the fall, and as a sympathetic human being after it. They criticise traditional interpretations which stereotyped her in her one act of disobedience, and reclaim her as a figure of dignity and humanity, with a significant share in the ruling of the earth.

Feminine Christianity and the Public World

The identification of Christianity with femininity was something of a middle-class truism in the early to mid nineteenth-century, and one which the biographers assumed. Julia Kavanagh argues that 'the virtues of Christianity, purity, temperance, forgiveness, and resignation – were essentially feminine virtues: they were more easily practised by women than by men' (Women in Christianity, 56); Hale sees Jesus's nature as 'most truly womanly in its characteristics', demonstrating 'meekness, mercy, purity, patience, charity, humility' (Woman's Record, 129) and devoid of masculine materialism and aggression. Barbara Taylor points out the political implications of this identification where women were confined to the private sphere, their 'social powerlessness' guaranteeing the 'social irrelevance' of the Christian values which they represented. The narrowest interpretations support this, where feminine influence was seen as the ornamenting of individual male lives. Cox considers woman's role is to civilise 'the ferocious and brute propensities of man ... to christianise him' by means of 'beguiling [by] her converse and sympathy the rough and tedious paths of life' (Female Scripture Biography, II, lxxxv, lxxxii). But the female biographers never accept such a narrow prescription, and see the whole of society as their mission field. Their discussion of women of the Old Testament and of Christian and Jewish history enters the debate on extending the social influence of both women and Christianity.

Hale uses the ideal of feminine Christianity to roundly criticise 'masculine' values such as 'Physical strength, earthly honours, riches, worldly wisdom ... the pride of learning'

(Woman's Record, 129), on which society has long been based. She sees society in a state of crisis, oppressed by 'a dead weight of earthly propensities ... a miserable state of perpetual change without moral advancement' (xxxv). She blames the exclusion of female influence from the public sphere for the appalling state of society, in contradiction to God's will since the gospel 'seems given purposely to develop her powers and sanction her influence' (xli). Male cowardice and tyranny, for example, hampered the good work of Abigail in the Bible, Joan of Arc and Lady Godiva. She refutes the commonly given 'excuse' for male materialism that '[man] must be abroad in the world, which is full of temptations to vice, while she can live in the pure atmosphere of home', and lays responsibility at his door: 'What makes the world a sink of iniquity, but the wickedness of man?' (xlv) Unable to save themselves, the best men can do is to provide 'what farther advantages are needed to fit her to perform well her part' (viii) in the forms of education, recognition and opportunities for work. Hence she includes in her exemplary lives recent writers, social reformers and missionaries, and hopes that women will take up the less conventional professions of medicine and science – all areas of life need to be cleansed of masculine evils.

Yet Hale opposes 'women's rights', adamant that women gaining political power will be detrimental to the cause of feminine Christianity. She distinguishes 'influence' as a subtler, more persuasive force than political 'power': 'Greatness is most perfect when it acts with the least display of self; Power is most efficient when moving the will through the heart' (903). Power is a lower instrument of social change, a coercion which corresponds with masculine barbarism. Hale sophistically argues that institutional roles were given only to men in biblical religion as a discipline, making them consider the spiritual sphere while women kept God's word 'hid in their hearts' (xlii, quoting words applied to Mary the mother of Jesus). The very qualities of female spirituality, the world's salvation, will be compromised by the attainment of political power.

Grace Aguilar is ambivalent about female leadership. She defends the Mosaic restrictions on the activities of women, and points to 'INDEPENDENCE' as Eve's failing. Yet she cannot disguise her admiration for those who overstepped these conservative boundaries. She celebrates the achievements of Deborah, judge of Israel, whom God used 'to judge, to prophesy, to teach, and to redeem' his people (Women of Israel, II, 261). While she suggests Deborah was exceptional, she undermines this by her subsequent portrayal of other women of authority in Jewish history: the exception becomes a minor tradition. In particular, she studies Queen Alexandra who ruled in her own right for nine years after her husband's death. Aguilar characterises Alexandra's energy and intellect as 'masculine' (II, 215), but her
preference for peace as distinctly feminine and spiritual. She avoided war and hence could be attributed with no martial victories, which,

though throwing a lustre over the pages of history, were incompatible with that obedience to the Law which was to make Judea a land "holy unto the Lord". Like a true woman, on whom the calm, sober wisdom of maturity has descended, she preferred peace to conquest, and she obtained it. (II, 215)

Alexandra’s rule stands out as Deborah’s did from a catalogue of warmongering male leaders, vindicating public leadership by ‘mothers of Israel, and daughters of the Lord’ (II, 354). Aguilar hesitates from prescribing specific arenas of action to the modern women of Judaism but, inspired by these examples, she opens up virtually endless possibilities in the form of a rhetorical question: ‘And what may not the women of Israel become in this ... land?’ (II, 381)

Balfour finds in her religious heritage an explicit rationale for widening woman’s sphere. Her *Women of Scripture* takes a pragmatic approach, arguing against role prescriptions on the grounds of gender, and suggesting that circumstance and natural ability should dictate the arena in which women can practise their calling. Queen Esther rose to ‘the crisis that called her into action’ (208) and through her abilities and willingness rose in authority:

From being merely the lovely ornament of the king’s gorgeous palace, she seems, doubtless from the force of her intellect and character, to have become his adviser in matters of business and the coadjutor of her beloved kinsman – Mordecai, in his administration. (p.207)

As a result, Esther saved her people from extermination, an event which Balfour notes the festival of Purim commemorates ‘to this day’. Balfour historicises the generally limited role of Bible women to ‘defective education’ and ‘limited spheres and small occupations’ (33, 83). Modern women, she argues and exemplifies in her subsequent volume *Working Women of the Last Half Century*, have greater opportunities and therefore greater responsibilities: ‘Circumstances and results are wholly in the power of the Most High ... Let woman resolve what to be, and God will then show her what he will have her do’.33 This spiritual liberalism Balfour suggests will gradually erode the purely cultural barriers which presently limit women:

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The noble performance of duty is the best assertion of power... The recognition of this has certainly, though slowly, extended the sphere of woman's operations, and that under many disadvantages, and in opposition to the pressure of many prejudices in herself, as well as in others. (3)

This gradualist approach may be more successful than claims for rights, she notes wryly, since

...the most limited estimate taken of her special sphere brings a very wide sphere of labour within her view; and that, too, without extending her demands on man, or making aggressions on what he deems his prescriptive rights. (4)

So Balfour portrays women pushing the boundaries of the acceptable in scholarship and social work, but suggests they are all vindicated not only by their results, but by winning male approbation. Elizabeth Smith's translation from Hebrew of the Book of Job is highly commended by the 'distinguished Hebraist' Dr Magee of Trinity College, Anna Barbauld's poetry commended by her brother Dr Aikin, and Sarah Martin finally remunerated by the local Corporation for her work in Great Yarmouth prison (128, 113, 273). Balfour's are lessons in the practicable, pushing boundaries through action, not argument. She makes these achievements accessible to ordinary women readers by drawing attention to the skills of time management and self-education which enabled these women to serve God in a more public sphere.

A wider concept of Christian duty leads several writers to criticise a purely private exercise of Christianity as a failure in Christian responsibility. Balfour suggests that Old Testament women put their duty to God before social norms, such as Deborah for whom 'personal dislike, feminine benevolence, natural reserve, were all secondary to the grand duty of delivering her people from the oppressor' (Women of Scripture, 93) when she led Israel into battle alongside the general Barak. Likewise, Pharaoh's daughter disregarded '[s]tate policy, prejudice, nay even daughterly disobedience', in order to preserve Moses' life against her father's edict (74). She points out that what society considers to be feminine 'humility' might actually be 'indolence and indifference' in disguise (Working Women, 11), and commends women like the teacher Sarah Trimmer who did not 'confine' her attentions 'to her own dwelling and kindred' (25). Kavanagh too will not praise women 'whose piety went not beyond the circle of home' (Women in Christianity, iv) because the imitation of Christ involves 'go[ing] about doing good' as Jesus did (iv). Some late-century writers reinforce the
theme, Elizabeth Charles writing of ‘family egoism’ as opposed to expansive Christian love. Mary Pryor Hack extends Jesus’ instruction to treat all as ‘[m]y brother and sister and mother’; ‘[w]e must not limit this blessed bond of relationship’ she argues. Thus the biographers argue that the female domestic ideal, which was sanctified in much early and mid-century discourse, is actually anti-Christian in its indifference to wider social need.

As well as arguing for women to have more public impact, some biographers reconfigure Christian qualities to have a more public face. Kavanagh correlates the ‘good works’ which evidence faith with ‘work’, an activity with visible, measurable results such as Dorcas’ productions of ‘coats and garments’ for the poor (Woman in Christianity, 2). Balfour makes ‘mercy’ and ‘sympathy’ into policies for prison reform in the lives of Hannah More and Elizabeth Fry: “Punish” had long been the one cry. “Reform” was not so easy, but it was the more merciful and feminine cry .... What punishment never could have effected, sympathy brought at once – order, hope, reform followed’ (Working Women, 67, 13). Alexandra’s preference for ‘peace’ was a foreign policy, according to Aguilar, which led to national prosperity, as even critical historians had to concede (Women of Israel, II, 212). Other writers voiced the hope that such qualities would become a genderless Christian ideal. Jameson anticipates ‘the establishment on a higher basis, of what has been called the “feminine element” in society’ in order to bring about ‘the coming moral regeneration, and complete and harmonious development of the whole human race’. Hale hopes too that social progress will make ‘the virtues consonant with [woman’s] nature, the rule for man also’ (Woman’s Record, 151). Eroding the clearly defined social roles of men and women entails eroding the gender divide in moral and spiritual qualities.

Biographies of the later century which promote these qualities in women’s lives sound conservative in the context of greater opportunities women had in professional and public life. More common were politicised secular works such as Rose Somerville’s Brief Epitomes of the Lives of Eminent Women (1896), Catherine J. Hamilton’s Women Writers (1892) and Mary Betham-Edwards’ Six Life-Studies of Famous Women (1880) – these celebrated women’s public achievement and defiance of convention rather than any spiritual motivation. But underlying some of these later spiritual biographies is a concern as to the fate of spiritual and compassionate values in a secular and increasingly impersonal world. Hack is concerned

that women’s ‘intellectual powers and acquirements must not make them less able to sit by a sick bed, or bind up a broken heart’, seeming to fear that if women do not do these things, no-one will. Elizabeth Charles particularly takes up this theme in a reflection on the life of Mary the mother of Jesus. Wanting to combat ‘the idolatry of things’ with a ‘love of the persons for whom things exist’, she makes of Mary a challenge to all modern Christians, firstly in a relational life of service (Ecce Ancilla Domine, 169). ‘The ideal of womanhood’, she argues, ‘that is, a life that has no meaning except in relation to God, and to others, has become the ideal of all humanity’. This ideal includes traditionally masculine strength and feminine passivity, ‘renouncing when renunciation is the way to serve; ruling when ruling is the way to serve; rebuking when rebuking is the way to serve’ (163).

Charles also makes of Mary a genderless model of serenity in a busy world. ‘The life of Mary seems to gather us into a stillness like her own, into a peace and quiet which is what many of us, in these restless days, sorely need’. She insists that what ‘seems to many ... passive’ is really a strong quality, actively chosen and cultivated. This is ‘the being which is at the heart of all the doing’, she comments, an ideal in which inner independence is necessary in order to fulfil a relational role: ‘she learned first to stand alone, to be herself, the one unique creature God meant her to be’ (28). Indeed, ‘[i]solation with God ... must be the secret of all true service of man’, as it was with the ‘great prophets’ for whom the desert was ‘the school for the city’ (28-32). Mary is not a gendered role model specifically for women, but a normative one for all Christians, male or female, in a materialistic, competitive world.

The biographers, then, used models of female service to criticise male worldliness and argue for an extension of women’s social engagement. They point to the necessity of ‘feminine’ Christian qualities in policies and institutions as well as in the personal lives of both men and women. Yet many voice the concern that if women take on all male roles, the very values they represent will be compromised.

God and the Single Woman

The mid-nineteenth century was a time when the idealisation of the domestic role left unattached women ‘essentially a social embarrassment’. The revelation in the 1851 census

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that the female population exceeded the male by about 400,000 intensified debate about 'surplus' or 'redundant' women's place in society. The single Florence Nightingale expressed frustration at the 'busy idleness' of many single women who at the same time '[felt] themselves burdensome to their fathers and brothers', and added her voice to campaigns for wider opportunities in education and employment including those within the church. Movements grew in the 1840s and 50s to re-establish female religious communities and the ordained role of deaconess in the Anglican church. Both were controversial in that they threatened the ideal of female dependence and the family hierarchy. Both Julia Kavanagh and Anna Jameson were obliged to be financially independent and to seek fulfilment outside of familial roles. Jameson herself advocated the creation of Protestant religious orders to train women in nursing, teaching and social work. Their collective biographies enter the debate on the options for, and perceptions of, single women.

Many of the subjects in Women of Christianity are single or widowed, and through them Kavanagh explores the implications of work outside the home. She claims a Christian basis for attributing individual worth to women, seeing the gospel as liberating them from a wholly relative identity. Previously woman had been

alternately the toy or drudge of man, whom only birth, beauty, or genius, could raise to equality; who, to be something, must be the daughter, wife, or mother of an illustrious citizen, and who seemed destined never to know the moral dignity of individual worth. (3)

Kavanagh sees Christianity giving a new independent identity to women 'because [the gospel] opened to her the long-enclosed world of spiritual knowledge .... Simple women meditated in their homes on questions which had long troubled philosophers in the groves of Academia'. Mary of Bethany is her model, 'who had sat at the feet of the Master, listening to the divine teaching' (4). Kavanagh also resurrects a Christian history in which single women have been granted meaningful roles. She mentions all-women orders of the medieval period and the deaconess role which existed until 'as late as the twelfth century' (8). Implicit is a complaint that the church fails to live by this gospel spirit and offer single women such opportunities in her own time.

39 Figure from Catherine M. Prelinger, "The Female Diaconate in the Anglican Church: "what kind of ministry for women"", in Malmgreen, p. 166.
40 Ibid., p. 163.
41 The first Anglican sisterhoods were established in 1848, and there were fourteen by 1860. Deaconess training began in 1860, and the first woman was ordained as one in 1862.
Kavanagh’s selection of subjects emphasises social action by single women often of humble social status, reflecting her own economic struggles. She includes Roman martyrs who were slaves, as well as the more popular aristocratic figures like Perpetua. Sainted nuns like Agnes, Catherine and Cecilia offer inspiring examples of women rejecting heterosexual relationships in order to fulfil their higher calling. She also commends communities of single women like the Poor Clares, and insists that such roles are not obsolete. She cites the recent Rosinas in Italy, an informal secular community of social workers, ‘a female association, based on the principles of labour and mutual aid’ (323). For many collective biographers, Elizabeth Fry is the epitome of what a woman in the early to mid nineteenth century could achieve in spiritually motivated work beyond the home. Kavanagh, uniquely, follows her study of Fry with a chapter on the earlier and lesser known Sarah Martin, who did similar prison work at Great Yarmouth but was less widely influential. Martin is important to Kavanagh because she had to earn her own living, ‘a dressmaker by trade’ (449), unlike the middle-class Fry who was supported by her husband. Martin had to reduce her hours spent dressmaking, and therefore her income, to spend a voluntary day a week in the prison befriending inmates, teaching literacy and religion, and coordinating employment. Charitable donations and a small inheritance enabled her to sew less and increase her prison work – Kavanagh records these economic practicalities. When the local Corporation finally recognise her work with an honorarium of twelve pounds a year, Kavanagh is critical of them for ‘making use of Sarah Martin as a substitute for the schoolmaster and chaplain, whom it was by law their bounden duty to have appointed’ (quoting the Edinburgh Review, on p. 464-5).

Female labour needs to be recognised as socially valuable and paid accordingly. Kavanagh implicitly makes a case for paid social work and adds a voice to the deaconess movement, for the sake of single women who are not of the privileged classes.

Anna Jameson’s overt subject is art history, a guide to the ‘sacred and legendary’ figures in Western paintings. But, she states, she wants her work ‘to be read’ as a narrative, and prefaces her painting analyses with biographies of her subjects constructed from history and legend.\(^{42}\) Jameson draws on apocryphal beliefs to maximise the ‘multivalency’ of her subjects’ symbolic potential. These give to Bible figures non-relative roles which they did not have in the scripture itself. In Legends of the Madonna, she includes Mary’s portraiture as ‘the virgin without child’ as well as her more famous maternal role, ‘in which ‘the prominent idea is not that of her maternity’ but of her independent achievements (3). She is a scholar, ‘as studious, as learned, as wise, as she was industrious, chaste, and temperate’ (167); as queen of

\(^{42}\) Anna Jameson, Sacred and Legendary Art 2 vols. (London: 1848), I, p. xi; the first two volumes of the series were not given separate titles as the last three were.
heaven she is often presented alone and endowed with glory and power in her own right, the female face of divinity as will be discussed more fully below. In the first volume of her Sacred and Legendary Art series, Jameson draws extensively on popular legend, even the 'inconceivably wild and incredible' incidents, to show Mary the Magdalene's post-biblical career as an eloquent missionary and a spiritual leader and apostle in her own right (335). Imagistically, she is equivalent to the disciples and the early church fathers (figs. 1 + 2).

Turning to medieval history, Jameson considers the virgin patronesses, single saints who are independent, learned, eloquent and endeared in popular tradition. As patrons of specific activities, they attain a kind of specialisation. St. Catherine was 'venerated by the men as the divine patroness of learning; and by the women regarded as the type of female intellect and eloquence, as well as of courageous piety and chastity' (II, 79; fig. 3). Jameson finds in the tradition of European Catholic art symbolic models of independent female dignity and achievement which the Bible could not supply.

Jameson moves out of the symbolic mode to directly address attitudes towards conventual life. The issue attracted intense debate in the 1840s and 50s when many saw in celibate female communities 'an unnatural withdrawal from the world and an abdication of family ties', including 'parental authority' as at least one father complained. Portrayals of nuns in early Victorian art were characterised by the themes of emotional and sexual repression, which 'reinforc[ed] the Protestant belief that no woman could possibly prefer the life of a nun to that of a wife and mother'. On the other hand, some (usually high church sympathisers) defended women who felt a calling away from worldly values and roles 'under which many a soul is groaning for liberty'.

Jameson's Legends of the Monastic Orders (1850) comments on St. Clara, who disobeyed her parents in order to become a nun. She satirises the priorities of critics who voice alarm

lest young ladies of our own time should incline to imitate her disobedience, renounce their parents, and take to mortification, almsgiving, and maiden meditation, when they ought to be thinking rather of balls and matrimony.

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43 See appendix for Jameson's sketches.
44 Casteras, in Malmgreen, p. 136; quoted in Prelinger, in Malmgreen, p. 164.
45 Casteras, in Malmgreen, p. 130.
46 Prelinger, in Malmgreen, p. 165.
She claims that Clara should not be 'stigmatised as disobedient because she chose what she considered the better part – the higher obedience' (287). For her Bible-centred readers Jameson supports this with Jesus' rhetorical instruction to 'hate' natural parents in comparison with the duty to 'love' God. Jameson defends the integrity of a personal calling irrespective of parental and societal disapproval. While Jameson agrees with critics that a cloistered life like Clara's can be escapist, she accuses them of hypocrisy:

Is not this principle the basis of all female education to this present hour? Is not fear of evil, rather than faith in good, inculcated, by precept, by example, by all pressure from without, leaving us unsustained from within?

Jameson suggests than in mainstream society, women are forced into a kind of monasticism, sheltered from serious moral challenge.

Both Kavanagh and Jameson find within their religious traditions, whether scripture, art or history, models that speak to the pressing contemporary issue of singleness. They find models of independent female activity and vocation, and contribute indirectly to debates on women's religious, social and professional opportunities.

God and the Fallen Woman

Several writers used the collective biography to seek a Christian perspective on the ongoing Victorian debate about the sexually 'fallen woman'. A common belief was that a woman's loss of sexual innocence entailed total depravity; it certainly led to exclusion from respectable middle-class society, since '[a]ccording to some notions, tears cannot wash away her sin' (Balfour, Women of Scripture, 303). Around the mid-century novelists such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell challenged this attitude. Their sympathetic portrayals brought to their readers' notice the double sexual standard and economic hardships that governed the lives of this particular underclass of 'Magdalens'. The name, of course, derives from the biblical Mary Magdalene, although this is perhaps a misnomer. Elizabeth Charles and Clara Lucas Balfour regard the unnamed 'woman who sinned' to be a separate person from Mary Magdalene, from whom demons were cast out. Nevertheless, fallen women characters of scripture and legend provided material for writers to challenge the limits that social convention placed on Christian charity and divine grace.
Balfour links two stories of Jesus’ encounters with women with a sexual past, to establish a truly Christian policy on the matter. She studies the woman ‘who was a sinner’ along with the woman of Samaria who had been married several times and lived with a man who was not her husband. To Balfour, Jesus’ respectful treatment of the women and concern for their spiritual welfare is as sharp a rebuke to social attitudes in the nineteenth century as it was in the first:

Among many harsh prejudices which the holy system of the Gospel was designed to root out, none is so successfully exposed as the spirit of stern, contemptuous judgment against our weak and erring fellow-mortals, and an overweening estimate of ourselves. (*Women of Scripture*, 303)

The disciples, and her contemporaries, contravene the very spirit of the gospel. She withdraws much of the blame from the woman, considering her a ‘victim to depraved social customs, to her own heart, or to the deliberate treachery of the destroyer’ (303). The absence of detail in the gospel account enables her to read these Victorian possibilities into it. The complex marital history of the woman of Samaria, she speculates, was due to Jewish divorce laws which treated women casually. Above all, she expresses indignation at the ‘scorn, contempt, and utter repudiation’ which such women face at the hands of respectable religious society (306). In contrast, she suggests, Jesus was not offended by either woman, and assumed that each had a spiritual identity that was not corrupted by their sexual behaviour. He merely shows them ‘the character of God’ and invites them to respond. Balfour positions the Victorian reader as one of the shocked disciples who need to come to ‘the great Teacher for instruction’ (306).

Charles and Jameson use the notion of a woman’s biography, a linear ‘life’, to move away from the single focus on the role of ‘sinner’ in which she had been iconised. Like Eve, Mary Magdalene gains other ‘valencies’ under biographical treatment. Charles imagines the ‘guiltless childhood’ of the woman who sinned, who will at the end of time be part of the pure ‘Bride’, the church, an image chosen to suggest a sexual innocence regained through spiritual purity.  

Her fallenness is reduced to an intermission between the two states of innocence which characterise her essential, eternal self. Jameson portrays Mary as both sinner and saint. With respect to her sinner role, she de-genders her to a neutral type of repentance, ‘recognised and accepted in every Christian heart as the impersonation of the penitent sinner absolved through faith and love’ (*Sacred and Legendary Art*, I, 332). Her chosen illustrations from the gospel story show no pictures of Mary repenting at Jesus’ feet, but always as a disciple,

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playing an important role in the main events of Jesus’ ministry and death. Jameson’s Mary is one of Jesus’ closest followers and confidants.

Jameson rewrites Mary Magdalene as a celebratory symbol of the independent woman. She prefers the paintings in which Mary is ‘an important figure’ rather than ‘one of the accessories in the history of Christ, and nothing more’ (I, 354). The majority of her discussion is of the Mary of legend, following a spiritual calling which has nothing to do with the sexual error which recedes into her early past. As an apostle, she becomes Jameson’s greatest single woman achiever and a majestic icon of womanhood:

A noble creature, with strong sympathies, and a strong will, with powerful faculties of every kind, working for good or evil – such a woman Mary Magdalene must have been, even in her humiliation; and the feeble, girlish, commonplace, and even vulgar women who appear to have been usually selected as models by the artists, turned into Magdalenses by throwing up their eyes and letting down their hair, ill represent the enthusiastic convert, or the majestic patroness. (I, 372)

Jameson thus criticises artists for suppressing the powerful potential of Mary’s image, and reducing her to weak, sentimentalised stereotypes. Fallenness virtually forgotten, Jameson’s Magdalen is a powerful figure with the divine potential of the Madonna. Hence Jameson recasts the powerful cultural symbol of Mary Magdalen, taking ‘an opportunity to rewrite the metaphor, and reverse its implications, to make an iconographic shift from sinner to saint that might assist in disburdening women to some extent’. 49

Although, as Johnston argues, Jameson mostly uses this ‘metaphorical approach’, her discussion of other fallen women saints addresses the contemporary debate more directly. 50 She attributes St Mary the Penitent’s ‘fall’ to her cultivated naivety in terms very similar to her critique of female education in her discussion of St Clara. In the mistaken notion that ignorance of the world will protect her from evil, her father shuts her up in a cell:

through a little window, which opened between their cells, he taught her to say her prayers, to recite the Psalter, to sing hymns, and dedicated her to a life of holiness, praying continually that she might be delivered from the snares of the arch enemy, and keeping her far, as he thought, from all possibility of temptation. (Sacred and Legendary Art, I, 383–4)

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49 Johnston, p. 186.
50 Ibid.
But temptation reaches her in the guise of a handsome trainee monk and her own unexpected desires. Jameson reiterates the point that cloistering young women from the world does not equip them to deal with the real moral challenges of life. Humiliation and fear of repudiation prevent Mary from returning to her family, so she is obliged to live 'a life of sin and shame for two years' (I, 384). Finally God intervenes to command her uncle to take her back, whereupon Mary goes on to live a happy and useful life bringing healing to others. Jameson finds very few paintings to discuss of Mary the Penitent; but her biography provides a useful way to discuss contemporary issues.

Jameson insists throughout on the continued life of her fallen women, whose sexual sin is not their only, or even their primary, defining feature:

Poets have sung and moralists and sages have taught, that for the frail woman, there was nothing left but to die; or if more remained for her to suffer, there was at least nothing left for her to be and do: no choice between sackcloth and ashes and the livery of sin. The beatified penitents of the early Christian Church spoke another lesson; spoke divinely of hope for the fallen, hope without self-abasement or defiance. We, in these days, acknowledge no such saints; we have even done our best to dethrone Mary Magdalene (I, 386).

The pronoun 'we' tactfully includes Jameson in the Protestant theological tradition which in its terror of idolatry has suppressed the celebratory images of female godliness and perpetuated a negative and sexually defined stereotype. But by praising the vision of the medieval artists, Jameson distances herself from this orthodoxy and resurrects more liberating images of Mary Magdalene. The biographers restore the fallen woman's humanity through creating her life story, and find in her a role model for holiness and leadership.

The Female Divine

Feminist theologians agree on the need for female imagery of deity, since overwhelmingly patriarchal imagery of godhead marginalises female experience, implicitly classifying it as 'other' and 'non-normative'. As has been illustrated, Jesus was commonly characterised as feminine in mid-Victorian Christianity, and women's identification with him

was based on a common experience of suffering and passivity, not power.\textsuperscript{52} The powerful godhead was inescapably male, warrior, father and lord, and in a Protestant culture terrified of idolatry, divine attributes could not be attributed to Mary or other female saints. Aguilar and Jameson both wrote outside the constraints of this Protestant reading of the Bible, and each found resources for contemplating the female face of God.

As a Jewish writer, Aguilar has no messiah to contrast as feminine versus a masculine God, and she finds female imagery for God in the Hebrew scripture which her Christian counterparts neglected. She points to where God identifies himself through female experience, quoting 'Can a mother forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her travail; yea, she may forget, yet will I not forget thee', and 'As a mother comforteth her children, so will I comfort thee' (Women of Israel, I, 7). Her conception of God is broadly maternal, in that she characterises God's dealings with individual women such as Eve in stereotypically maternal terms, forgiving and continuing to love in spite of a child's wrongdoing. She claims a particular affinity between God and women based on essentially feminine characteristics: the nature of woman to live 'an existence of love' is implicitly in the model of her creator's 'love ... to women' (I, 18). She highlights a 'compensatory' female theme in a predominantly male text.

Anna Jameson wrote from a viewpoint of sympathy with presentations of female saints in the Roman Catholic tradition of European art. This was controversial in the 1840s and 1850s when anti-Catholic feeling was at a height, but on the other hand the High Church Oxford Movement had rekindled interest in saints’ lives. Jameson trod a careful path with respect to her critics, arguing that as an art critic her duty was to appreciate the 'true and earnest feeling' that informed the paintings; they can be valued as 'poetry', if not received as 'truth'. This 'respect for the integrity of historical phenomena' allows Jameson to portray fully and sympathetically the motives which made human beings, including women, carry divine attributes.\textsuperscript{53} In particular, she argues that the paintings are a form of popular theology, expressing ordinary people’s religious needs that were ignored by the institutional church. Its obsession with doctrine and heresy ('the perversities of schoolmen and fanatics') had 'veiled' the true deity from the people’s eyes, and had 'conspired to remove [God], in his personal character of Teacher and Saviour, far away from the hearts of benighted and miserable people .... The Gospel was not then the heritage of the poor' (Sacred and Legendary Art, I, xvi).

Thus she is sympathetic to the deification of saints as more accessible images of the divine, and as ‘the intense expression of that inner life, which revolted against the desolation and emptiness of the outward existence; of those crushed and outraged sympathies which cr[y] aloud for rest’ (I, xvi-xvii). The paintings are a theology of a people who are alienated from the church. It is difficult not to read in Jameson’s strong terms a challenge to her contemporary church, which also seemed to focus on doctrinal debates while losing the attendance of the poorer urban classes.

Jameson writes about the cults of female saints in terms of a popular theology. She compares the Virgin Patronesses to the pagan deities of Greece in their ‘superhuman might and majesty’, but sees them as emblems of moral qualities, ‘beautiful and glorious impersonations of feminine intellect, heroism, purity, fortitude, and faith’ (Sacred and Legendary Art, II, 76). These are qualities which were traditionally gendered masculine as well as feminine. Jameson regrets the Protestant defensiveness which loses ‘many pleasures and associations’ by regarding them with ‘indifference or repugnance’, suggesting it is a religious as well as artistic loss (II, 77). Jameson records a kind of resistance movement to the church authorities by women and men who venerated St Catharine:

[V]ain attempts were made to banish her from the calendar; her festival, after being one of the most solemn in the church, was, by several prelates of France and Germany, suppressed altogether...but in art, and in the popular veneration, St Catherine kept her ground. (II, 79)

Likewise, the extravagant legend of St Ursula became the site of a contest between the cultural elite and popular sensibilities: ‘In spite of the critical leers of the learned, it kept its hold on the popular fancy. It was especially delightful to the women, whom it places in a grand and poetical point of view’ (II, 113). Jameson records with some relish these popular victories against religious suppression.

Her defence of female divinity is worked out more fully in Legends of the Madonna, in which Jameson construes a coherent defence of female deity which would have been unthinkable in explicitly theological discourse, but which her artistic appreciation of the ‘true and earnest feeling’ informing the paintings permitted. Sensitive to images as constructs, Jameson argues elsewhere that all representations of God, whether verbal or visual, are ‘figures of speech’; God transcends personality, and therefore also gender. But in a culture which has polarised ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ virtue, both male and female images are needed:

Christ, as the model-man, united the virtues of the two sexes, till the idea that there are essentially masculine and feminine virtues intruded itself on the higher Christian conception, and seems to have necessitated the female type. (xxi)

Jameson insists that the virtues construed as feminine in her culture need to be represented as normative and ideal, not marginal in relation to dominant masculine qualities. Deification of the feminine is needed to grant full status to the values needed ‘to humanise and civilise our race’ (xviii). As Kimberly VanEsveld Adams argues, Jameson creates a ‘Mariology’ in which ‘essentialist feminist beliefs’ enable her to make ‘the most radical statements about the virgin mother’, suggesting that ‘Mary, as representative of woman, is equal to the Son, the representative of man’. So she treats the cult of the Madonna as one which celebrates the feminine aspect of God, ‘an impersonation in the feminine character of beneficence, purity and power, standing between an offended Deity and poor, sinning, suffering humanity’, merely ‘clothed in the visible form of Mary, the Mother of our Lord’ (xvii). Many of the roles in which Mary is portrayed in the devotional paintings, says Jameson, ‘appear to me very touching, as expressive of the wants, the aspirations, the infirmities and sorrows, which are common to poor suffering humanity, or of those divine attributes from which they hoped to find aid and consolation’ (lxii; fig. 4). Jameson suggests regret for the loss of this influential imagery.

Jameson accords maximum status to this feminine icon, presenting many illustrations of Mary ‘stand[ing] alone, absolute in herself, and complete in her own perfections’ (xxxviii; fig.5). Several times she refers to the Nestorian controversy whose doctrinal outcome ‘maintained that in Christ the divine and human were blended in one incarnate nature, and that consequently Mary was indeed the mother of God’ (xxii), i.e. not mother only of his human dimension as Hale argues. Hence Jameson points to doctrinal logic, based on a Christology which Protestants themselves supported, for suggesting that Mary partakes of a divine as well as human nature. It is in these terms that she describes the Madonna di San Sisto by Raphael (fig.6):

There she stands – the transfigured woman, at once completely human and completely divine, an abstraction of power, purity, and love, poised on the empurpled air, and requiring no other support; looking out, with her melancholy, loving mouth, her slightly dilated, sibylline eyes, quite through the universe, to the end and consummation of all things...I cannot here talk the language of critics, and speak of this picture merely as a picture, for to me it was a revelation (xliv).

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She identifies with the original viewers of the paintings who drew religious and emotional sustenance from them. As with Mary Magdalene, Jameson criticises artists who demean the powerful potential of Mary’s image, who manage to portray only ‘sentimental grief’ or ‘inane prettiness’ (13). Jameson does the work of a theologian by resurrecting this popular theology which has been suppressed by her culture’s religious authorities, but which might once again bring to alienated people messages of consolation and inspiration.

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All the collective biographies can be regarded as an exercise in popular theology, where amateurs assert religious needs unmet by their authorised religious traditions. The collective biographers of the Bible and Christian history recovered women from their religious tradition to be role models of public action and leadership, and recovered aspects of well-known women to find them stronger, more positive figures than tradition allowed. Through the genre, they entered contemporary debates on the role of women in various social conditions. Others used these exemplary lives to make normative the ‘feminine’ qualities of Christianity, making a female life a model for men and women alike, and representing these qualities as part of the powerful Godhead. Their greatest achievement was in taking the primary materials, whether text or image, out of the hands of traditional experts and considering them in the light of their own, long-ignored, experience. They began to discover what much later feminist theologians did, that

when women dare to reject the religious ideas and images that inhibit and enervate them, when they begin to weave new patterns with the religious ideas conducive to personal transformation and social change, religion can become a powerful positive factor in their lives.56

56 Margaret Miles, ‘Introduction’, in Atkinson et al., p. 2.
7: Politics and Preaching: Josephine Butler's Liberation Theology

Josephine Butler and Liberation Theology

Josephine Butler (1828-1906) is most famous for her campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, which regulated prostitution, during the period 1870 – 1900. Her activism on behalf of the people she felt were the most vulnerable in society led her to criticise the social circumstances and attitudes which permitted prostitution. To these ends, she wrote treatises and gave numerous speeches, many of which were then published as independent pamphlets or appeared in periodicals such as *The Shield*.1 Butler wrote also on women's education and employment, colonial relations and the international child sex trade. A passion for social justice runs through all of these, and an analysis of the dynamics between the powerful and the oppressed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, hearing Butler's passionate rhetoric at a public lecture, was surprised to find her delivery so much 'like a methodist minister's', with its 'deeply religious enthusiasm'.2 To Butler, politics was inseparable from theology, and her polemics are also preaching, strewn with biblical allusions. This chapter will consider how, through her speeches and pamphlets on this political cause, she creates a theology of social transformation.

Butler has not been given sufficient credit as a theologian reinterpreting Christianity in a new way for her social context. Her early biographers focused on her achievements as a campaigner, and later writers have reclaimed her as a forerunner of the feminist movement, virtually ignoring the religious dimension of her work.3 More recently, critics have recognised her as a theologian, categorising her work as feminist theology in which the prime spiritual

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1 Weekly circular of the Anti-Contagious Diseases Acts Association, published from 1870 to 1886.
concern is gender inequality and the main achievement to 'challenge patriarchal doctrine'. While this is part of Butler's message, it is by no means all of it and the category of 'feminist' does not do justice to her social analysis of oppression and her theology of social transformation. Even in her early work on women's employment, gender is an example of the paradigm of social oppression which is manifest also in other groups, who equally merit spiritual concern. Butler declares the biblical principle of justice to include 'the labourer deprived of just wages, the wronged widow, the neglected orphan, the leper driven out of society, the uninstructed from whom the key of knowledge had been withheld, the Gentile stranger oppressed by the privileged Jew'. I argue that Butler rather belongs to the tradition of liberation theology, a politically radical interpretation of Christianity which for Butler certainly included gender, but was by no means confined to it.

Liberation theology is the term given to a left-wing form of Christianity which has arisen in the majority world of the poor, particularly South America, since the 1970s. Its central challenge to traditional theology has been to refute the separation of spiritual and temporal realms. The vision of a just society in the prophets and the gospels is not merely for the afterlife, and equality is meaningful not only in some transcendent realm of souls. This vision is to be realised on earth, where inequalities and deprivation are part of the fallen state of humanity which redemption seeks to repair. Many liberation theologians refer to the words from Isaiah, here paraphrased by Butler:

Is this not the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke; is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring poor that are outcast to thy house?

The problem of the human condition is not the abstract original sin, but the social reality of suffering caused by flawed social structures. Thus redemption applies not only to the soul in afterlife but involves 'liberation' from the conditions of that oppression. As Jose Miguez Bonino summarises, '[s]ociopolitical struggle, human maturity, reconciliation with God, do not belong to different realms but to a single saving reality'. Christians therefore are to be

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7 Jose Miguez Bonino, Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 70.
active in social reform, not merely as an expression of faith in works, but as participating in humanity’s redemption, realising the Kingdom of God on earth. I argue that this view of salvation is shared by Butler. She also shared liberation theologians’ belief that traditional theology serves a conservative agenda and itself perpetuates social oppression.

Gustavo Gutierrez, the leading writer of liberation theology, criticises ‘Western dualistic thought’ which separates spiritual from material, because it postpones salvation’s effects to a spiritual realm or afterlife.8 The result is an ‘escapist’ theology which avoids dealing with injustice in this world and promises spiritual consolations for suffering, rather than removing its causes. Gutierrez and others argue this conservative ideology has informed Western Christianity for centuries, and Victorian Christianity appears to be no exception. Barbara Taylor argues that the separation of spiritual from secular concerns ‘tamed and contained the anti-capitalist implications of Christian love itself’ so that concerns for social transformation became channelled into secular socialism or minority Christian socialist communities such as the Communist Church led by John Goodwyn Barmby in the 1840s.9 D. W. Bebbington acknowledges that, although activism was part of the prevailing Evangelical ethic, politically it was frequently ‘traditionalist’ in seeing the present social order as divinely sanctioned.10 Ameliorating the individual condition took priority over reforming the social structures which created suffering. Butler herself felt that ‘[t]he religious’ among her listeners tended to ‘shudder … at the word politics’, seeing an artificial separation of sacred and secular as the root of much social evil.11 As I will illustrate below, Butler sees the church as a perpetuator of the oppressive ideology she diagnoses in society, and argues explicitly for a reuniting of the spiritual with the social, political and material sphere. Writing within the mainstream of Low Anglicanism, she rewrites the agenda of Christian theology in a way that anticipates the liberation theologians of the late twentieth century.

She was not the only person to do so. Christopher Rowland points to religious thinkers and activists of the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries who felt they rediscovered this ‘authentic reading of the tradition’ which had been suppressed by the church.12 Eileen Yeo places the preaching of two Chartist preachers in the mid-nineteenth century in this

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Butler shared with these a deep identification with the experience of social oppression, which leads her to the conviction that,

when viewed from the underside of history, from the standpoint of the poor and marginalised, the message of the kingdom looks rather different from the way in which it has been portrayed by those who have had the power to write the story of the church and formulate its dogmas and its social concerns.  

Some particular aspects of Butler’s background and experiences help explain how she reached this position, remarkable for an educated, confident woman of the upper middle class, who was extremely happy in her own family life as daughter then as wife and mother. Her father and husband were unusually ‘liberated’ in their own attitudes to women and she had unrestricted freedom to pursue her personal and political interests. Oppression featured little in her own life. Yet her upbringing encouraged her to identify Christian faith totally with the causes of social justice. She was familiar with the sufferings of slavery through her father’s prominent campaigns, and she was deeply affected by witnessing the effects of famine in Ireland (in 1847), and the deprivation in the city of Liverpool when she moved there in the 1860s. Owenist thought influenced her to some extent, not least by means of her long friendship with the Christian socialist F. D. Maurice. This provided her with a social analysis of class and privilege that informs all her speeches. Her religious crises, one at the age of seventeen and one after the death of her young daughter Eva, were not the intellectual crises of many Victorians, but the struggle to reconcile a loving God with the realities of human suffering.

Butler’s independence of mind and confidence to speak out against received public opinion are striking. In her polemics, Butler shows a detachment from all the experts of her day whether political, theological, military or medical. Helen Mathers attributes this partly to the Evangelical tradition in which she grew up, which valued the individual relationship with God and spiritual judgments against the institutions of the world; this included having ‘a very fluid, and entirely self-directed, relationship with the Churches’ and Butler was never keen to identify herself with any particular denomination.  

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14 Rowland, p. 129.
15 Mathers, p. 312.
made to change'. In intellectual terms, it modelled the denaturalising of human institutions which others argued to be part of the divine order.

This independence was furthered by her experiences living at Oxford University when her husband was a tutor there in the 1850s, and helped her towards her analysis of prostitution. She saw through the claimed objectivity of the privileged all-male upper-class elite who created ‘educated public opinion’ on social and religious issues, as she relates ironically. She found hypocrisy in those who denounced prostitutes while using them, and was particularly disappointed to hear churchmen like Benjamin Jowett suggest their irredeemability, complaining that ‘Mrs Butler takes an interest in a class of sinners whom she had better have left to themselves’. She concluded that people of this cloistered world were not qualified to create public opinion, since a ‘one-sidedness of judgment is apt to be fostered by such circumstances – an exaggeration of the purely masculine judgment on some topics, and a conventual mode of looking at things’. The nation’s political, moral and religious leaders were completely demystified, and Butler diagnosed their thinking as at best unconsciously biased, and at worst selfish and hypocritical, propounding values to support the status quo for their own vested interests.

Butler diagnosed the powerful minority’s ability to maintain their ideological viewpoints by their exclusion of other voices:

In the frequent social gatherings in our drawing-room in the evenings, there was such talk, serious and weighty, sometimes light, interesting, critical, witty, brilliant, ranging over many subjects. It was then that I sat silent, the only woman in the company, and listened, sometimes with a sore heart; for these men would speak of things which I had already revolved deeply in my own mind, things of which I was convinced, which I knew, though I had no dialectics at command with which to defend their truth.

Her response to this, encouraged by her husband’s belittling pity of these men – ‘they know no better, poor fellows’ – was to lose her awe of the ‘authorities on spiritual and moral questions’, to ‘speak little with men, but much with God’ and to become confident in her own judgments in the face of the establishment’s arguments and silences. In their shared detachment from the wisdom of the world (he himself was vocal in supporting women’s

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17 Recollections of George Butler (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1892), p. 94.
18 Quoted in Forster, p. 175.
19 Recollections of George Butler, p. 94.
20 Recollections of George Butler, p. 95.
higher education), they read the Bible together and found Jesus' teaching 'revolutionary',
'and we prayed together that a holy revolution might come about, and that the Kingdom of
God might be established on the earth'.

This critique of accepted arguments, and defence of the socially marginalised,
underlies all Butler's writings on behalf of oppressed groups – women as a whole, prostitutes,
the poorer classes, the Irish under colonial rule. The motivation which triggered her
commitment to the cause of prostitutes was personal. She and her husband had already taken
in ex-prostitutes to their household, but her concern for them became all-consuming after the
tragic death of their young daughter Eva in an accident in 1864. Butler could only experience
consolation by seeking to comfort the sorrows of others:

I only knew that my heart ached night and day, and that the only solace
possible would seem to be to find other hearts which ached night and day,
and with more reason than mine. I had no clear idea beyond that, no plan for
helping others; my sole wish was to plunge into the heart of some human
misery, and to say (as I now know I could) to afflicted people, 'I
understand: I too have suffered'.

Butler began her work with prostitutes with a sense of fellowship through suffering, and their
shared need for liberation from the sorrows of the human condition. On one level this is, as
Nancy Boyd argues, an 'existential' solution or 'antidote' to Butler's deep anxieties about the
mystery of suffering. But finding redemption for oneself by bringing about the redemption
of others becomes a central point in her theology.

I will consider the theology of Butler's polemics, above all those directed against the
Contagious Diseases Acts. Her theological priorities select their own genre: liberation
theology demands socio-political engagement, as it is only in that engagement that concepts
like sin and salvation have meaning. She spent three years travelling around England and
giving public lectures to men and women of all classes, in the first year alone travelling 3,700
miles and addressing 99 meetings. From 1874-5 she toured Europe where similar legislation
existed and the international sex trade flourished, and spoke in many major cities, addressing
her audiences in their native French and Italian. Her passion was to stir up 'the force of a

21 Ibid., pp. 101-2, 108.
22 Ibid., p. 183.
23 Boyd, p. 82.
24 Figures from Forster, p. 183.
spiritual and moral revival as an agency for political reform’,25 or, in the words of a more recent liberation theologian, to recover ‘the possibility of religion operating in society as a source of social transformation’.26 Butler wrote a theology to make this so.

The Social Sin: a dehumanising ideology

Butler defines sin in social terms, as the situation caused by society’s division into privileged and excluded groups, on a variety of axes. Her analysis goes beyond particular social groups to perceive a paradigm which has ideological and theological import. I will trace her thought in these terms, and consider how, in the situation of the prostitute, Butler finds a convergence of axes of powerlessness such that it becomes archetypal of the sin and suffering which society can construct for a part of humanity to endure.

Butler’s earliest writings explore male privilege and female exclusion, but she uses broad terms to suggest a paradigm of power relationships which has reference beyond the immediate topic of gender. She analyses the dynamic between ‘the class which is deprived, oppressed, or denied’ and ‘that which deprives, oppresses, or denies’.27 This operates not only in political and material terms, but at the level of ideology, distorting the very thinking of even the best-intentioned rulers of society:

There is a moral deprivation which is the invariable attendant upon the habit of the careless and irresponsible enjoyment of possession at the expense of the happiness and good of others. No portion of the human family can continue from age to age in the enjoyment of advantages which are not justly shared with others, nor in an attitude of indifference to the disabilities of another and dependent portion of the community, -even though a monopoly of such advantages may have been an heritage to which they were born – without suffering deterioration, gradual but sure, in the deepest part of their nature. For persons in such a case, whether they or their forefathers be chargeable with the blame of it, there is no certain moral health save in the awakened perception of existing wrong, and the conscious will to restore the balance to society, as far as it lies in their power to do so, by bringing a share of monopolised blessings into the lot of those classes who have suffered deprivation. (x-xi)

27 Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture, p. ix.
The very existence of the 'monopoly of privilege' results in an unconscious bias which excludes the interests of others, making the rulers 'blind to their own blindness' (xiii). Butler's sense of ideology is that it is a distortion of truth: it can be dismantled and the objective truth can be found beyond it. She seeks not merely to campaign for better opportunities for women, but to deconstruct the ideology which has hitherto oppressed them.

Butler's is never a purely socio-political analysis. This privileging of one social group's interests against another's is a spiritual issue, since it contravenes her spiritual vision for society. Her reading of Jesus' teachings is that 'the principle of perfect equality of all human beings was announced by Him as the basis of all social philosophy' (lix). God's purposes concern the interests of 'humanity at large', and the model for human relations is interdependence, 'the sweet interchange of services' between those who 'have each something to give and receive. That is a wholly different thing from the abject dependence of one entire class of persons on another and stronger class' (xxxi). It is also entirely different from a Darwinist social philosophy whereby 'the weaker races, classes, persons, must struggle on unaided' while the 'stronger' survive.28 Butler asserts the common social goal and equal representation of interests as a Christian vision; to privilege one group's interests is thus not merely an injustice – it is 'sacriliegous'.29

Butler applies, and intensifies, the same paradigm of the privileged and the powerless, in her addresses on prostitution. In the situation of the prostitute, she sees a convergence of several axes of oppression based on gender, class and the law. Butler argues the economic basis for prostitution, giving examples including one who, when asked to change her ways, replied, 'Gladly I would; but what is to become of my little boy? I am obliged to go out at night to get him a piece of bread'.30 She acknowledges elsewhere 'the streams which feed' prostitution: 'the imperfect education of women, the scarcity of well-paid occupations open to them, the insufficiency of the remuneration offered in such professions as are open'.31 As Alison Millbank comments, Butler was astute in that she 'combine[s] the economic and patriarchal elements in her analysis'.32 She condemns the double standard whereby fallen women are irredeemable social outcasts, while male sexual licence is tolerated as inevitable –

29 Ibid., p. 24.
31 'The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness' (1874-5), tr. from French in 1913, reprinted in Sharp, p. 150.
32 Alison Millbank, 'Josephine Butler: Christianity, Feminism and Social Action', in Obelkevich, Roper and Samuel, p. 160.
a ‘a so-called necessity’. The prostitute is doubly oppressed by economic deprivation and sexual exploitation, compounded by society’s sexist judgments of male and female chastity.

Butler detects a particularly ugly class prejudice in the justification of maintaining an underclass of women as a means to maintain ‘purity’ in the respectable home. Some supporters of the Contagious Diseases Acts argued that prostitutes were needed to be the receptacles of men’s irregular sexual urges, so that at home they could maintain a chaste and respectable family life. Butler sees this as moral scapegoating, whereby

\[ \text{[t]he sanctity of our households is kept intact by [prostitutes’] sacrifice. There can be no better safeguard for virtuous women than the degradation of this outcast crew. The welfare of one class is built upon the ruins of the other.} \]

This is a profound affront to her ideal of a single human community, and she deplores the ‘permitted and systematic sacrifice to destruction of a section of the community for whom Christ died’. Thus Butler locates the sin of prostitution not in the prostitute herself, but in the social structures and attitudes that create her situation. The gospels, she claimed, uttered

\[ \text{[n]ot ... one word of reproof to the poor, the downtrodden, and the suffering ... Not because Christ did not see their sins as well as the sins of the Scribes and Pharisees; but he knew, he felt, with that divine insight of his, that they were not in the same degree responsible while bound hand and foot with the chains society had riveted upon their weak limbs ... the sin of society is ours.} \]

Butler’s analysis of a collective dimension to sin, and its social construction, anticipates that of more recent liberation theologians such as Gutierrez:

Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of humans by humans, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation.

To both liberation theologians, these ‘oppressive structures’ and social guilt demand redemptive attention.

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33 ‘Lovers of the Lost’ (1870), reprinted in Sharp, p. 94.
34 ‘The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness’, Sharp, p. 144.
36 Some Thoughts on the Present Aspect of the Crusade Against the State Regulation of Vice (Liverpool: 1874), p. 17.
37 Gutierrez, p. 85.
In the passing of the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s, Butler sees this condition compounded by legal oppression, whereby the state adds a new oppressive axis in the denial of constitutional rights. The Acts demanded that any woman suspected of prostitution was to be arrested, subjected to a compulsory medical examination, and either registered as an uninfected prostitute, or incarcerated in a prison hospital until recovered. As far as Butler was concerned, this deprived poor women of their personal freedom since any were at risk of arrest and registration. She also considered them to be deprived of their right to a fair trial before sentence and punishment, as she regarded the intrusive examination and incarceration in the lock hospitals if they were infected or refused the examination. They are also deprived of their ‘property’, their reputation, without which they cannot earn a living ‘in an honest situation’. Under the legal principles of ‘the Magna Charta [sic]’, the criminalised woman is ‘outlawed … her whole liberty is curtailed’ and thus she is reduced to the status of ‘slavery’ as were the villeins whom the medieval charter excepted from legal personhood:

I use the word not sentimentally, but in the strict legal sense. Slavery means the condition in which an individual is not master of his own person, and the condition of slavery as defined in the Magna Charta by the omission of all slaves from the rights which that charter grants to everyone else. There could be no more complete, galling and oppressive deprivation of freedom than this which takes place under these Acts.38

The final great social evil for Butler is the legal sanction the Acts give to creating a pariah class. By publicly registering uninfected prostitutes, the state sanctioned the social attitude that they were a moral ‘necessity’. But this condemnation extended beyond actual prostitutes. In reality, any poorly dressed woman walking alone at night was vulnerable to arrest and its consequences, of which Butler gives many examples in her report on the implementation of the Acts in the garrison towns of Kent. A ‘reign of terror’ results in poor communities, and an intrusion into the personal freedom of many which is felt by women and men alike.39 Additionally, Butler recognised that in the context of working-class sexual mores, ‘the boundary line between the virtuous and vicious is so gradually and imperceptibly shaded off, that there is no one point at which it would be possible to affix a distinct name, or infallibly sign a class’.40 The law criminalised many women who were not professional prostitutes, but simply deviated from the middle-class ideal of chastity. In the end the Acts intensify class and gender oppression because they ‘embrace in their arbitrary action women

39 ‘The Garrison Towns of Kent’, letters published in The Shield (April and May 1870), reprinted in Jordan, p. 89. Butler gives the example of ‘Mrs. K’ who was detained under the Acts, to the great distress of her husband who ‘took his wife some tea, and walked up and down outside, weeping very much indeed’ during the examination; he subsequently left his job so they could move away from the town in which Mrs K. had been humiliated (p. 85).
of every shade of character, *so long as these women are poor*.\(^{41}\) She drives the class point home by noting this fate is averted by most women because of the protections of ‘position, wealth and surroundings’ rather than any moral difference.\(^ {42}\) To Butler, the greatest evil of the Acts lies in their creation of a group which is ‘other’ to the norms of humanity, beyond the pale of civil society’s protections and rights. Butler makes explicit this view in a private letter:

> We infringe a principle of God and nature, by pressing and binding into a CLASS APART any number of men or of women, and of dealing with them as a distinct class from the Community, the Commonwealth.\(^ {43}\)

In her unified vision of social with spiritual, this breach of community is a break with God.

For Butler, then, the prostitute symbolises the fullest victimhood. While she is concerned about the rights of women, and of the Irish oppressed by English colonial rule in economic, legal and religious terms, prostitution also implicated sexual exploitation and often physical abuse. As the point at which so many axes of oppression intersect, this condition takes on archetypal significance. It is ‘that huge *Typical Sin*, which comprises all other sins, all crimes, all miseries, and all woes, in its bosom’.\(^ {44}\) Hence Butler often speaks of the prostitute in iconic terms, making her symbolise all within the human condition that Christianity seeks to redeem. Her language becomes emotive when she applies to her Jesus’s parable of compassion in which he chastises the inactive believer: ‘I was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and in prison, and ye came not unto me’. Butler comments:

> [W]ho like these are hungry and thirsty, who stripped as these, and robbed of all the adorning raiment of womanhood? Who smitten to the soul with such a dire disease, or so strictly shut up in “habitations of cruelty,” laden with the chains of sin?\(^ {45}\)

Literally and metaphorically, the prostitute fills the measure of Jesus’ concern, and she is to be fed, clothed, healed and liberated by human intervention. Hers is the salvation issue of Butler’s time.

Butler redefines the fallen, damned state of prostitutes not in terms of their sexual sin, but in terms of their dehumanisation by society. Those convicted or only suspected of prostitution are reduced to object status in several ways. Social attitudes that condone

\(^{42}\) *The Constitution Violated*, p. 40.
\(^{43}\) Written in 1905, reprinted in Sharp, p. 280.
\(^{44}\) ‘The Duty of Women’ (1870), reprinted in Jordan, p. 130.
\(^{45}\) ‘The Lovers of the Lost’, Sharp, p. 98.
prostitution declare them 'mere bits of flesh made for men's basest convenience'\textsuperscript{46} The state reduces them to chattel status by depriving them of personhood before the law. They are treated as objects in the examination process which pays no regard to their dignity or modesty on the assumption that prostitutes had neither. Their registration makes it very difficult to find an alternative living, and so denies them the right of 'freedom for moral progress'\textsuperscript{47} Butler sees a parallel in the Pedlars' Licensing Bill which 'brand[s] those once fallen' and hence prevents them getting an honest means to a living.\textsuperscript{48} Society has made of them 'a hopeless class', which in her socio-political theology is a form of 'blasphemy' since such a denial of redemptive possibility is 'against human nature and against God'.\textsuperscript{49} She summarises the prostitute's spiritual condition as damned by society:

This system necessitates the greatest crime of blotting out the soul by depriving God's creatures of free-will, of choice, and of responsibility, and by reducing the human being to the condition of a passive, suffering minister to the basest passions. Yet no power can make of her a mere 'thing', for the soul awaits the day when it will face its destroyer, and the human nature will yet be avenged of its adversary.\textsuperscript{50}

Butler here separated social 'perdition' from eternal damnation, although in other speeches this distinction is less clear. 'Christian' society has failed in denying the full moral and spiritual potential of these women, an affront to Jesus' offer of redemption to 'every creature'.\textsuperscript{51}

But in Butler's theological analysis of prostitution, it is not only the oppressed who suffer a loss in their humanity – the oppressors do too, and all who collude in the collective sin. The ideology underlying the Contagious Diseases Acts, she asserts, 'in its consequences ... affects the morality of every class'.\textsuperscript{52} Of men who use prostitutes while maintaining apparent chastity among women of their own class, Butler declares their 'whole nature is lowered and injured who acts thus'.\textsuperscript{53} Those who directly exploit the women, or who implement the acts, are marred by selfishness, hypocrisy, self-righteousness and a perverted sense of justice. Men too are reduced to subhuman status, in that the law which implies male sexual irregularity as inevitable renders them 'slaves of their lower appetites'; like the

\textsuperscript{46} 'Great Meeting of Women' (Nottingham 1870), reprinted in Jordan, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{47} 'Speech Delivered by Mrs Josephine Butler at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights' (Bristol: 1874), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{48} 'Address in Craige Hall' (Edinburgh 1871), reprinted in Jordan, pp. 309-310.
\textsuperscript{49} 'The Moral Reclaimability of Prostitutes', Sharp, pp. 124, 127.
\textsuperscript{50} 'A Letter to the Members of the Ladies' National Association' (London: 1875), p. 19.
\textsuperscript{51} 'The Lovers of the Lost', Sharp, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{52} 'Influential Meeting of Ladies' (Manchester 1870), reprinted in Jordan, p. 65.
prostitutes, they are implicitly denied a moral and spiritual dimension, this time in the capacity for sexual restraint instead of exploitation.\textsuperscript{54} Butler talks of the need to redeem fallen men when she promises that ‘[t]he poor coin, trampled down in the mire of the streets, still bears upon it the image and superscription of the king’, which can find ‘restoration’.\textsuperscript{55} The ‘scepticism as to the possibility of virtue’ is a wider ideology which underlies social and legal attitudes to both women and men involved in prostitution; and this ideology is the theological enemy, ‘a denial of [the] eternal principles’ of redemption for humanity.\textsuperscript{56}

Elsewhere, Butler classes this ideological enemy as a ‘materialist’ mentality which regards people as “physical facts” and not “moral agents”\textsuperscript{57}, objects for use or driven by instinct and in each case incapable of moral growth. That social attitudes and finally state law ratify this mentality, she regards as a dangerous advance of a spiritual enemy. She feels, therefore, that she is seeking not only the abolition of an unjust law, but ‘a revolution … in conventional ideas, in prejudice, in the whole of the old and cowardly routine of society, language and custom, under which the real condition of morality is disguised’.\textsuperscript{58} The ideological conflict is a spiritual battle:

I believe that the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, which is our immediate object, is only a small part of the work He has designed for us. I know not what that work may be; but this is sure, that God knows and that he is guiding us. I believe that the materialism of the day and the principle which opposes that materialism are about to meet and to try their strength in a deadly encounter, and that we have a great and holy work before us.\textsuperscript{59}

The work of ‘national exorcism’ has begun’.\textsuperscript{60}

There is no neutral position in this warfare – any individual not fighting the enemy is colluding with it. Perceiving the power of ideology at the subconscious level, Butler writes of the ‘demoralising influence’ and the ‘warping and blinding influence on the judgments and consciences of men of all classes who may themselves not be guilty of any personal impurity’.\textsuperscript{61} Any who are apathetic or inactive about the victims of the Acts hold ‘a partnership in guilt’.\textsuperscript{62} Of women who tolerate the attitudes of the double sexual standard, she

\textsuperscript{54} ‘Great Meeting of Women’, Jordan, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Hour Before the Dawn: An Appeal to Men} (London: 1876), pp. 5-6.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 309.
\textsuperscript{58} ‘The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness’, Sharp, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{59} ‘Address in Craigie Hall’, Jordan, p. 313.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Sursum Corda}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{The Constitution Violated}, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{62} ‘The Lovers of the Lost’, Sharp, p. 94.
declares 'We have, most of us, been more or less supine; we have all some cause for repentance in this matter'. This loss of collective humanity is felt personally:

Can the soul of my sister be defiled and my own soul not be the worst for it? It cannot; unless, indeed, I rise up in wrath for her redemption, and through the long toils, and pains, and anguish of my life, I render back to God my soul for hers.

Only by restoring the humanity to the dehumanised can one's full humanity be gained. In this, the typical sin, the salvation of all humanity is at stake.

Liberation: the restoration to full humanity

Butler anticipates later liberation theologians in her understanding of salvation. Gutierrez sees it in socio-political terms, 'a struggle for liberation from oppressive structures which hinder persons from living with dignity and assuming their own destiny'. A similar understanding, and even terminology, underpins Butler's reading of Jesus' 'act[s] of Liberation' towards women in the Bible, releasing them from 'legal thraldom ... the tyranny of the law ... hereditary disabilities' and hence making them 'free in a double sense, free alike from the inward moral slavery and from harsh, humanly-imposed judgment'. There is nothing other-worldly in this definition; salvation reforms internalised, dehumanising ideology and social attitudes and structures. The restoration of a collective sense of humanity is vital in Butler's theology for achieving this socially defined redemption; as she employs various rhetorical strategies to this end, she finds particular value in the voice of the marginalized.

Butler discerns and criticises the duality of spiritual and social worlds which prevailed in Victorian theology. She denounces the 'unnatural divorce between the claim of religion and social morality' as a 'heresy', in that it denies religion's power to transform society. She historicises earlier theologians' (including the apostle Paul's) application of Christian values only to the personal realm, on the grounds of their audience's lack of political power. Christians in a modern age have a greater calling:

63 'The Duty of Women', Jordan, p. 130.
64 Address delivered at Croydon (London: 1871), p. 11.
65 Gutierrez, p. 102.
66 Woman's Work and Woman's Culture, p. lviii.
67 'Great Public Meeting at Carlisle' (1870), reprinted in Jordan, p. 137.
It breaks my heart to see the supineness and the shutting of the eyes of Christian people on this subject. They "separate themselves", they say, "from the world". They are content to adhere to the primitive limitations of Christian effort; these limitations were unavoidable for the early disciples of Christ; for then the people of God were like the grain of mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds – whereas now they ought to resemble the widespread tree which grew out of that seed. The first Christians could only try to relieve the poor, they did not attempt to reach the causes of poverty; they endeavoured to rescue the vicious, but not to extirpate the social roots of vice; to comfort and instruct the slave, but not to cast down slavery; to defy evil law and wicked governors, but not to displace and replace them. "Their action was upon individuals, not upon society; it was palliative, not radical". But their actions, limited as they were, were all profoundly typical of that larger and wider work to which Christian workers in a later age are called.68

Butler reveals the political conservatism underlying the spiritualising of Christianity and the confinement of it to personal relations. She is especially critical of the notion that women's personal influence is sufficient a manifestation of gospel values. This is unrealistic and inadequate: 'we have flattered ourselves by thinking that our homes must have an influence for good, far and wide, if we simply continue good and pure, and keep within doors and enjoy our sacred seclusion.'69 In the same spirit as some of the collective biographers, Butler demands greater public action from women in order to more fully Christianise society, claiming 'a sterner duty than that of working silently, each in our own corner'; 'wider and more united action', in other words, political action, 'is demanded of us... against evil'.70

Having redefined redemption, Butler redefines faith, shifting the emphasis again from concept to practice. Faith is not assent to doctrines, but a confidence in what can be done to turn the world into the kingdom of God. Again, she critiques traditional Christian theology and offers a radical alternative:

We need a vast and deep renewal of faith, vital faith. The word faith has come to mean far too much among us a belief in the doctrines of Christianity. The faith I speak of is more than that. It is a hope, a confident expectation that the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of God and of His Christ. For lack of this faith we do not, and cannot succeed; and discouraged by the little we have already done, we imagine that little can be done; we continue to call that common and unclean which God is able and ready to cleanse. We continue to assert that the spheres of religion and politics are widely apart and opposed. We think the world, as we call it, must go its way, and we go ours. But to whom did Christ come? To whom did he send forth teachers and Evangelists? Was it not to "every creature"?71

68 'Address delivered at Croydon' (London: 1871), p. 5.
69 Woman's Work and Woman's Culture, p. xxxix.
70 'Great Meeting of Women', Jordan, p. 114.
71 'Address delivered at Croydon', p. 6.
The enemy of faith is not intellectual doubt, but cynicism. Butler finds many who, for all their 'outward religiousness and churchgoing' are yet 'fatalists' because they underestimate 'the infinite resources of the Divine mind'.72 They collude with the materialist, anti-redemptive ideology. Faith asserts that all can be redeemed.

This work of redemption is to reclaim lost humanity both on an individual and social level. Butler's approach to prostitutes, rather than preaching the usual message of repentance, is 'delicately and frankly to elicit the true God-given character' of each woman, however hidden, 'and to give it permanence',73 to 'begin by making them women first'.74 She gives as an example a prostitute she met who seemed to have lost much of her humanity - through years of hardship and abuse 'hideous to look at, dying and raging' in bitterness and like a 'wild beast' in her manners. Butler recalls her humanity through a demonstration of love, speaking gently to her and touching her. 'She heard that she was loved; she believed it and was transformed'; this response is to Butler the sign of a reclaimed soul, in defiance of objections that the woman had demonstrated no 'clear conception of her own sinfulness' and of salvation theology:

I know not. I only know that love conquered, and that he who inspired the love which brought the message of his love to the shipwrecked soul, knew what he was doing, and does not leave his work incomplete.75

Restoring human communion also restores communion with God. Salvation is an earthly, relational activity.

Butler employs much of her rhetoric in creating a sense of shared humanity between the groups which society's power axes have hitherto divided. She invites her audience to feel 'the broad ground of a common humanity' which unites them with prostitutes, and which combats the pariah mentality.76 Prostitutes are 'not different from other women' she asserts:

Their childhood has been passed – like the childhood of others – in our villages and towns, they have played with the other children in the streets, they have been classmates with them in the same schools.77

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72 'A Word to Christian Sceptics' (from Storm-Bell, 1898), reprinted in Sharp, p. 286.
74 Some Thoughts ..., p. 17.
75 'A Word to Christian Sceptics', Sharp, p. 287.
77 'The Voice ...', Sharp, p. 143.
In their personal stories she foregrounds the women's modesty and sense of dignity, and even the (implicitly Christlike) 'passion of pity' which motivates them to sell themselves to feed their families.\textsuperscript{78} Butler creates particular points of identification between her different audiences and her subjects to break down the psychological barriers that render a group of people as 'other' or sub-human. She calls on working men to identify with women of their class, appealing to their sensibilities as 'husbands, and as fathers, to help break these accursed yokes'.\textsuperscript{79} She includes them in a general sense of class oppression, pointing out that 'Of course, the upper classes would not feel the injustice so much as the poor man's daughters'.\textsuperscript{80} She uses this notion of protective family relationships to build a link between middle-class men in her audience and their working-class counterparts:

And yet you know – you cannot help knowing – that these poor women have fathers and brothers, no less than your own daughters and sisters … How can you claim from other men the sacrifice which not one of you is ready to make for himself? … The tears which water the graves of the poor are as bitter and real as ours.\textsuperscript{81}

With her female audiences, Butler establishes a solidarity of gender, speaking of 'we, the women, the weak, the oppressed', and emphasising the legal and economic disabilities which unite them in spite of vastly different social backgrounds. Here, Butler claims to address them as 'a woman, speaking in the name of all women …against the impure and brutal edicts of men'.\textsuperscript{82} Butler uses this rhetoric of sisterhood to cross the national divide in her campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts in British Colonies; she appeals to readers 'to join hands with our sisters, of whatever nation, colour, or race they may be'.\textsuperscript{83} Butler uses inclusive pronouns to identify herself with her audience, while also representing fallen women to them as she recounts her interviews and their experiences. In the live situation of her public lectures, she embodied an emotive link between her audience and her subject. Critics of Butler found her style 'over-emotional', but in her theology, empathy is a religious activity.\textsuperscript{84} In this identification begins the audience's own redemption, as they rediscover a common humanity that heals social divisions.

\textsuperscript{78} 'The Moral Reclaimability of Prostitutes', Sharp, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{79} 'Great Meeting of Working Men' (Liverpool, 1870), reprinted in Jordan, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{80} 'Great Meeting of Working Men' (Birmingham, 1870), reprinted in Jordan, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{81} 'The Voice ...', Sharp, pp. 143-4.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., pp. 132, 7; 'A Voice ...' includes addresses to male and female audiences; this reference is to an address to women, whereas the immediately previous reference is to an address to men.
\textsuperscript{83} The Revival and Extension of the Abolitionist Cause: A Letter to the Members of the Ladies' National Association (Winchester: 1887), p. 54.
\textsuperscript{84} E.g. Benjamin Jowett felt this of Butler; see Mathers, p. 299.
Butler’s redemption is an intellectual, as well as an emotional, activity. As part of the healing of society, people must transcend their partisan thinking. The spiritually wise cease to accept as guides a daily newspaper, or the opinion of the press generally, or the verdict of any class, theological, social, or political; nor even are they satisfied to set their minds at rest by an appeal to the best and wisest of the servants of God ... It is in the solitude of the soul, alone with God, that his thoughts are revealed.85

Butler particularly preaches intellectual and moral independence to those most invested in the current social system. Upper class women, who often condoned the segregation of a prostitute underclass, need liberating from a ‘slavery of the intellect and judgment’; ‘[n]ot for spiritual and moral freedom alone do we pray; we supplicate to God to grant us also the emancipation of the intellect and judgment from every theoretical falsehood and injustice’, to ‘[rebel]’ against the ‘despotism’ of ‘public opinion’.86 Women in general she encourages to ‘leave the chatter of the drawing rooms more often, and commune with their own hearts’ on matters of social justice.87 If they concede prostitution as a moral necessity, they are guilty of ‘selfish submission’ to male ideology, and ‘hardness of heart’ towards their poorer counterparts.88 Butler instructs upper class male students at Cambridge University to detach themselves from the elitist mentality she had met at Oxford some years before. She tells them not to be too much guided on this vital question of human life which we are now considering, by the verdict of certain cliques, or sets of men, however high a scientific, philosophical, or ecclesiastical authority they may seem to possess. Sets of men, cliques, and professions, are extremely apt to go wrong, through the preponderance, in their judgments of vital questions, of the interests or special points of view of their particular class. They pull each other into wrong views; and here the strong reassertion of the individual conscience, enlightened from above, is often the only thing to save men from continued and dangerous error.89

Each individual must liberate her or himself from the partisan mentalities which inhibit a collective human interest.

Butler seeks to end vested interests also at the level of government, in terms which go beyond a protest against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Many of her speeches have a strong

86 Some thoughts ..., p. 18.
87 Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture, p. xli.
89 Social Purity, p. 18.
democratic tone and much ‘Chartist rhetoric’. She speaks of the ‘despotism’ of a government which has brought in an unconstitutional law and imposes immorality on the classes of society who are powerless to fight back. No law should be passed ‘which has not the sanction of the whole nation’ she proclaims. As she toured England and Europe, and received much correspondence from people of various social backgrounds, Butler developed the sense of a widespread popular movement against political exclusion. In her campaign against the Acts, she claims to speak not merely on behalf of a minority ‘puritan party’, but rather for a rising vox populi. This, she insists, includes people from ‘the middle classes ... trade unions and guilds, and municipalities, and schools and colleges, as well as from the homes and firesides’, a powerful union of voices objecting to laws passed without their consent. Butler sees this popular indignation as the voice of God calling wayward rulers to righteousness. A reporter conveys her argument:

Governments and men in high office continually required to be reminded of what was just and right. It seemed to her that men were prone to err in proportion as they held great responsibility or were favoured by fortune, and in the same proportion their errors were calamitous to the nation. It seemed also that God had appointed that the voice of the great mass of the people should be from time to time the corrective of the errors of rulers. When unhappily at any time, the conscience of legislators becomes darkened or dim, then the conscience of the whole nation must be aroused. Rulers require from time to time to be re-baptised in first principles, and in that renewal to get rid of their theories of expediency, and state necessities, their slavery to precedent, and to deadly routine, - sometimes their pride of race, lust of conquest, and forgetfulness of the claims of the humblest and poorest.

Butler feels this newly mobilised popular voice is ‘a baptism into fresh spiritual life’ for the nation – an ‘outpouring of God’s spirit’ which will fight the spiritual enemy of dehumanising, partisan rule. Her language becomes eschatological as she sees God’s kingdom at hand in the battle to heal the commonwealth.

The voice of women has a particular significance for Butler in this process of healing. As Clara Lucas Balfour did through her collective biographies, Butler considers the ‘feminine’ approach to have value at the level of forming public policy. In accordance with conventional gender stereotyping, Butler argues that woman’s natural capacity is ‘to foster, to

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90 Millbank, p. 161.
92 Butler published an entire pamphlet of correspondence received in one week on the Contagious Diseases Acts from working men alone, entitled Vox Populi.
93 ‘Speech given by Josephine E. Butler at Wigan’ (reported in the Shield, 1870), reprinted in Jordan, p. 100.
94 ‘Influential Meeting of Ladies’, Jordan p. 64.
cherish, to take the part of the weak, to train, to guide, to have a care for individuals'.

This 'independent individual ministering' counters the 'masculine' institutional approach and its tendency towards 'centralisation of rule, to vast combinations, large institutions, and uniformity of system.' However, Butler extends the feminine role to include guarding personal liberty, a duty to ensure that legal and political freedoms are not infringed by a bureaucratising central government; this is part of opposing the materialist philosophy which 'tends to turn human beings into machines'.

Butler specifically links women with faith in terms of redemptive confidence, claiming that '[t]he influence of women and their faith in the recoverability of human nature are needed in these legislative matters'.

Constitutional as well as moral issues are brought into the female remit.

However, Butler is one with Anna Jameson and Elizabeth Charles in hoping that what is deemed 'feminine' will become a genderless norm in a more fully Christian society. She argues that maternal qualities are less to do with biological motherhood than a quality of love, extended also to 'grown persons also who are weak, helpless, dependent, and who need maternal handling and comfort'.

This characterises the divine love of the 'Great Father-Mother God', and is shown by 'many fathers' and not all 'actual mothers'.

She particularly allies this philosophy of care for the marginalised with a specifically female viewpoint because of women's own marginalisation from the centres of power. Exiled from the 'places of power'—'the press, the pulpit, the bar, the senate'—women can empathise with others' experience of exclusion and therefore 'fully represent the downtrodden of their own sex.'

Men are not exempt from the responsibility of acquiring such a 'maternal' perspective, but women are generally more qualified to lead the way.

As an intensification of her belief that a rising popular voice was God's spirit moving, Butler specifically associates women's marginalized viewpoint with spiritual insight. It was with women, she points out, that Jesus shared the news of his resurrection, which the male disciples in their convention-bound thinking dismissed as 'idle tales'.

This idea forms part of her iconography of the prostitute, whom she closely links with Jesus. In her account of the 'woman who sinned' and, to the disciples' horror, anointed Jesus' feet, she points out that she finds divine approval while Simon does not. Bothered as he is with 'firmly holding his position in society', he is too invested in the social system to be able to detach himself from

96 The Education and Employment of Women, p. 18.
97 Woman's Work and Woman's Culture, pp. xxxvii, xxxviii.
98 'Address in Craige Hall', Jordan, p. 312.
99 The Lady of Shunem, p. 5.
100 Ibid., pp. 3, 7-8.
102 Woman's Work and Woman's Culture, p. ivii.
its prejudices. Butler demonstrates this in her own reading of Abraham and Sarah’s expulsion of the concubine Hagar into the wilderness with her baby and food and water to last only a day. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, reads the story as a salvation allegory, contrasting the state under law and under grace. Hagar’s experience is spiritualised to have typical value. This reading, she argues, encourages ‘complacency’ regarding Abraham and Sarah’s cruelty and blanches it of ‘its character of meanness and unmercifulness’. Butler reads the story, like the collective biographers, by focusing on the human story rather than the grand theological plan. She overtly sets her marginalized perspective in opposition to that of the canonical male theologian par excellence:

I continue to regard this and every part of Abraham’s history from the human side, while trying to read it truly, as under the eye of God. My reading of it may only be a motherly, a womanly reading of it, and theologically worthless. Be it so! St. Paul was not a father, nor was the human heart of the man stirring in him – at the moment when he wrote to the Galatians – in the direction of pity for the outcast woman. In any case, the facts remain. There they are – the other side of the picture.  

This disingenuous claim to theological worthlessness barely disguises the alternative authority she claims for a viewpoint which conventional theology excludes. A ‘womanly’ reading restores the human dimension and thus makes the Bible a text which has much to say on social injustice – a marginalized topic in the conservative Christianity of the powerful. Butler extends this privileged insight to another excluded group, black slaves, who, ‘crouching among the sugar canes’ found in their secret readings of the Bible arguments against slavery to which their ‘masters’ were insensitive. In all of these, Butler suggests that the very experience of powerlessness enables a person to rediscover the radical potential of the religious tradition. But in the end she prioritises gender over class in countering the voices of institutionally authorised theologians:

It may be that God will give grace to some woman when the time comes, and to reveal to others, some truth which theologians have hitherto failed to see in all its fulness’.  

In the rise of the voice of the marginalised, and in the growth of a humane ethic to counter the forces of materialism, Butler sees the hope of a full and final salvation:

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103 'The Lovers of the Lost', Sharp, p. 95.  
104 The Lady of Shunem, p. 74.  
105 Woman's Work and Woman's Culture, p. iv.  
106 Woman's Work and Woman's Culture, p. lvii.  

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I believe that the conflict between good and evil, so far from dying out, will become keener and fiercer as time goes on; but that the faithful and uninterrupted efforts of the servants of God ... will be finally crowned by an act of the Divine will, whereby the principle of evil itself will be expelled from the earth, and the reign of righteousness will be established.  

Human as well as divine action will bring humanity's redemption. Butler writes of her own personal redemption through seeking to bring about others'. In reflections on her campaign work, she felt she had often 'kneed, in spirit, side by side with our Lord in the garden of Gethsemane', wept over lost cities, and harrowed hell in the extremes of abuse and misery she encountered. But this deep identification with suffering people and the passion of Christ brings a kind of healing:

The God who answers prayer had mercy on me; he did not deny me my request – that he would show me of his own heart's love for sinners, and reveal to me his one, his constant attitude towards his lost world; and when he makes this revelation, he does more; he makes the inquiring soul a partaker of his own heart's love for the world ...we are then nearest to the solution of every painful mystery when we have drawn nigh, and heard from him the secrets of his heart of love.

Her identification with society's victims becomes an antidote to the 'solitude and isolation' of the modern condition, and an existential solution to the mystery of suffering. In liberating others, she finds her own liberation.

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Through her speeches and pamphlets on the Contagious Diseases Acts, Butler redefines traditional Christian concepts. She asserts that sin and redemption are socially created phenomena and have a collective as well as personal dimension. She pronounces a salvation which is to be realised in present social reality and not postponed to a spiritual afterlife. She anticipates the work of later recognised liberation theologians by 'raising, not merely a new theological subject, but a new way of doing theology' in that social effectiveness is the criterion for judging a theology, not doctrinal correctness. Correlating with this view, she makes the Bible meaningful by applying it directly to the immediate

107 Sursum Corda, p. 6.
108 'A Word to Christian Sceptics', Sharp, p.288. In a personal letter Butler wrote 'There is no need for anyone to press upon me the reality of hell, as the early Calvinists did with stony hearts. For I have been in hell.' Reprinted in Sharp, pp. 299-300.
109 The Hour Before the Dawn, p. 97.
110 Ibid., p. 99.
111 As Bonino claims for modern liberation theology, p. 62.
situation 'with little concern for hermeneutic niceties'.\textsuperscript{112} Faith equals optimism to fulfil the Bible's redemptive vision in all aspects of life – political, personal, spiritual, material. Butler argues with all the traditional emphases of the nineteenth-century Protestant tradition – conceptual, individualistic, politically conservative. She rewrites the very purpose of religion in a troubled world, announcing that 'theology has to stop explaining the world and start transforming it'.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{112} Rowland, p. 135.

\textsuperscript{113} Bonino, p. 81.
Conclusion

These studies show something of the variety and richness of women's participation in theological debate in the nineteenth century. While I have sought to do justice to each writer's individual contribution, some common concerns emerge across the disparate writing forms and doctrinal backgrounds. Gender is a concern, not only in terms of the fate of women, but the fate of Christianity itself. Several of the writers de-gender Christian values, applying universally those qualities characterised as feminine. Worboise creates romanticised fictions of a redeemed masculine world which accords with the same moral probity, compassion and humility that were idealised in domestic relations. Her biography of Thomas Arnold finds a more concrete, historical example of the same theme. Collective biographers find that women of the Bible and of Christian history show spiritual values to have a public, challenging dimension. Butler takes this to its full logical conclusion by arguing explicitly against the very concept of separate spheres – feminine/masculine, private/public, spiritual/secular – as fundamentally non-Christian. These writers demonstrate a shared concern to resist the compartmentalisation of religion into the private world, and to sanctify the whole of the nation's life.

Liberalism and Protestantism's individualistic ethos finds expression in various ways in the theology discussed. Worboise suggests that women can find an independent identity even within limiting social circumstances, while for some of the collective biographers Christianity demanded an expanded role for women in the project to redeem society. Martineau advocates a 'do it yourself' theology, equipping readers to pursue their own religious course. An independent perspective led some women to evaluate their spiritual heritage critically. Martineau, Cobbe and Besant in their autobiographies reject tradition almost on principle to discover an independent spiritual and professional maturity as women. The collective biographers, separating their scripture from its traditional interpreters, find in it new meanings and the confidence to challenge cultural restrictions and stereotypes. Butler goes further, deconstructing the political ideology of established theology and finding powerful meanings which, she argues, had long been suppressed. In these latter two cases, Victorian writers anticipate twentieth-century developments in feminist and liberation theology.

Other writers express independence in their experiential argument with established belief. Brontë voices a constant debate between the ideals of divine-human communion and her inability to experience them subjectively. Oliphant's resistance to the consolations of
spiritual biography similarly finds life to be essentially an agnostic experience, while continuing a position of faith. Emotional adequacy is also the keynote in Howitt's search for a spiritual truth which is tangible in this life. All evaluate and rework Christian beliefs, seeking adequate forms of faith for the personal, intellectual and social challenges of their lives.

Another aspect of this reworking is the creation of more human-centred images of God to suit contemporary sensibilities. Humanist reasoning comes to the fore in Brontë's sense of God's moral reasonableness, and in Martineau and Cobbe's belief in God as the epitome of ethics. The 'otherness' of divinity is diminished as human experience is valued as the key to it. In particular, female images of the divine speak of different aspects of God. Worboise's Alice, and Butler's prostitutes, identify the passive suffering of Christ with female experience, and also suggest that God is to be encountered within the immediate human situation. Female divinity becomes strong, as well as gentle, in Jameson's studies of women saints and gospel figures, and both she, Charles and Butler render the female normative, rather than marginal, by making it divine. In these experiential forms of literary theology, human needs and ideals become the starting point for theological thought.

In this enterprise, some of these writers effectively redefine the role of theology and the theologian. Their use of lay forms of literature results in strategies and themes outside those of 'official' theology. Since their reflections are embedded in experience, their theology is more contextualised and politicised. Martineau constructs a Unitarianism which specifically addresses a rising middle-class citizenry. The collective biographers interpret the Bible in relation to the contemporary needs of women. For Butler, theology means finding redemptive possibilities in legalised prostitution, a transformative rather than theoretical activity. On a less political level, Worboise renews Christian meanings in the context of domestic and legal relationships. All, by necessity if not by preference, create a theology which does not so much claim abstract, transcendent truths, but discovers religious meanings within the contemporary situation. Martineau, Cobbe, Besant and Butler explicitly claim a role of female spiritual leadership, but this is implicit in all the writers. Literature allows them to claim it as a cultural role if not an institutionalised one, earned by merit and ordained by their audience. They rethought belief and the theological enterprise itself as they searched for and created adequate forms of spirituality for themselves and for their age.
Fig. 1

Mary Magdalene by Timoteo Della Vite (Sacred and Legendary Art vol. I, p.350)
Mary Preaching to King René and His Court attr. King René of Provence

(*Sacred and Legendary Art* vol. I, p. 364)
The Five Virgins [anon.] (Sacred and Legendary Art vol. II, frontispiece)
SPECIAL NOTE

The Following Pages Are Scanned As Seen.

Marks on Page Are As Per Original.
La Madonna di Misericordia by Piero della Francesca (*Legends of the Madonna*, p.33)

The Assumption by Titian (*Legends of the Madonna*, p.329)

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