Literature and Victorian Religion

Most of the high profile female writers of this period were committed Christians. The Broad Church Brontës, the Unitarian Mrs Gaskell and the systematically unconventional Emily Dickinson made much use of their faith in their work. So did George Eliot, supersaturated with a religion in which she no longer believed, yet an accomplished theologian. The male writers were often committed believers too, despite the apparently worldly outlook of many, including apparently cynical Thackeray and robustly conventional Trollope.

Throughout Victoria's reign, religious controversy simmers, not only among journalists but poets and novelists too. These Christian turf wars are sometimes edited out of readings of Victorian texts because they might not feel relevant to modern studies. Marianne Thormählen in *The Brontës and Religion* sees it differently: ?The Christian life is a foreign country to most people today and I believe it serves some purpose to be reminded that to the Brontës it was home.?

Even readers who are wary of theological discourse in Victorian literature pick up the impact of Science on faith in the period. Scientifically minded ?Natural? theologians had argued Creation needs a designer, as a watch needs a watchmaker (Paley, 1802). The contrasting view, that nature developed itself by some sort of evolutionary (or ?alterative?) process, was distrusted. The changes, Paley argued, were too ?slow to be perceived? and the procedure too wasteful for the ??conomy? of the Deity (Paley was a Utilitarian). But when Darwin supplied a plausible mechanism for ?Transmutation? of one species into another with his theory of natural selection (1859), writers were quick to reimagine nature as godless and ?red in tooth and claw?, as does Hardy in *The Woodlanders* (1886) where his characters scrape and sigh against one another like trees in the plantation, ?jostle each other most closely? as Darwin put it. The popular scientist Philip Henry Gosse, a fundamentalist Christian, astonished everyone with his treatise *Omphalos* (1857) by arguing that the world had been created with its fossil record already intact, ?creation with the appearance of pre-existence?, in other words God was out to deceive scientists. Unlike him, most Christians embraced evolution and abandoned the Biblical time-span of six thousand years from Creation to Crucifixion, expanding it to millions (many, many millions) of years. Tennyson grasped the implications in the magnificent 131st section of *In Memoriam*: ?The hills are shadows, and they flow / From form to form, and nothing stands.?

A much greater problem for Victorian belief was the application of critical solvents to Biblical texts, particularly in German universities, from the 1830s on. The pages of the Gospel had hitherto been treated with some reverence, often by a coterie of like-minded believers. Now theologians argued that where the scriptures contained errors or contradictions, the words must be of human, not divine origin. Descriptions of miracles, it was claimed, had been doctored or invented for purposes of evangelism. George Eliot (as Mary Ann Evans) translated the most influential of these theological works, Strauss?s *Das Leben Jesu* from the German in 1846, dropping her hereditary low-church Anglicanism and moving to a new ?positivist? creed, entirely compatible with the laws of nature. Her journey from a scripturally based faith to a humanist philosophy inspired by Christian thought is very typical of early Victorian intellectuals.

Not everyone was as willing as she was to hold on to Christian moral structures. James Thomson?s *City of Dreadful Night* (1870), one of the most outspoken post-Christian poems, ironically imagines a godless modern Dante writing about an alienated Victorian City. Fitzgerald?s *Rubaiyat*, a loose translation of an Iranian text apparently advocating hedonism and atheism, appealed to readers who looked to indulge their senses now that God was gone; at the end of the period A. E. Housman?s tearful and often blasphemous lyricism in *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) won an even larger following. In his satirical utopia *Erewhon* (1873) Samuel Butler argued that Victorian religion had become a cover for hypocrisy. While most people pretended to put their ?treasure? in the ?Musical Banks? (the Church) they really kept it hidden at home. Freethinking writers of every kind gathered to trash the New Puritanism, with its double standards and censorious outlook, which has come for many to typify the mainstream of Victorian religion today. Low-churchers urged repressive legislation, advocating temperance and deploring Sunday opening, and preached a conservative sexual morality. Major Victorian texts give these Anglican Evangelicals a hard time, satirising them in the pompous Drusilla Clack in Wilkie Collins?s thriller *The Moonstone* (1868), in the self-justifying swindler Bulstrode in George Eliot?s *Middlemarch* (1873) and the slimy apparatchik Slope in Trollope?s Barchester Towers (1857).

If liberal authors deplored the narrowness and sometimes the hypocrisy of low-church views, some of the most durable writing about faith comes from the Catholic or Anglo-Catholic end of the theological spectrum. Cardinal Newman is a prose-stylist and controversialist to match any in the language, particularly incisive when analysing the way the believing mind actually works (*The Grammar of Assent* (1870)) or the dangers of a bowdlerised Christian syllabus:

?If Literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian Literature. It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless Literature of a sinful man? (*The Idea of a University* (1852)).

Another major writer of the Catholic Revival is the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose work remained unpublished until 1918. Hopkins is probably the greatest English sonneteer since Milton, the best reporter of spiritual anguish since Donne, and a wonderful celebrant of Christ?s status as motor of the universe, often in poems now read through an ecocritical lens. The Tractarian poet Christina Rossetti?s view of this life and the next is rather bleaker, but her subtle corrugations in thinking and metre have won her melodious spiritual poems a whole new audience in the wake of second wave feminism.

So rather than imagining Victorians as iconoclasts kicking over the traces of conventional religion, it might be better to think of them as engaged in a regretful vigil. Matthew Arnold in ?Dover Beach? writes quietly but ominously of the ?eternal note of sadness? that will remain when the Medieval ?sea of faith? finally retreats from Christian shores. Thomas Hardy too sounds a note of elegy in his difficult, solid poem, ?God?s Funeral?, where it proves so difficult to bury the ?disappeared God? and walk away from the Churchyard. In ?Afternoon Service at Mellstock? he remembers droning out the Psalms in church as a boy. But the congregation swayed ?like the trees? as they sang them and the poem famously finishes:

So mindless were those outpourings! -
Though I am not aware

That I have gained by subtle thought on things
Since we stood psalming there.

Even Victorian unbelief was not happy to give up Christianity, to accept the implications of George Meredith?s ?Dirge in Woods?:

Overhead, overhead
Rushes life in a race,
As the clouds the clouds chase;
And we go,
And we drop like the fruits of the tree,
Even we,
Even so.

References and further reading on this topic:
William Paley, *Natural Theology* (1802).
J. A. Froude, *Nemesis of Faith* (1849)
A. H. Clough, *Dipsychus*, Part 1 Scene 5: 'I dreamt a dream' (1850); 'The Latest Decalogue' (published 1869).
Bl. John Henry, Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852), *The Grammar of Assent* (1870)
Matthew Arnold, ?Dover Beach? (circa 1853).
George Eliot, 'Janet?s Repentance' in *Scenes from Clerical Life* (1857).
E. Fizgerald, *Rubaiyat of Omar Khyyam, translated from the Persian* (1859).
Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859).
Christina Rossetti, 'The Lowest Place', 'Shut Out', 'Despised and Rejected', 'Good Friday' (from 1860).
Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Heaven-Haven', 'Pied Beauty', 'The Windhover', 'No worst, there is none', 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day', 'Binsey Poplars', 'Spring and Fall: To a Young Child' (written 1864-85)
Emily Dickinson, 'There?s a certain slant of light', 'This world is not conclusion', 'Departed ? to the Judgment', 'The brain is wider than the sky', 'Some keep the Sabbath going to Church ?', 'Faith is the Pierless Bridge', 'I stepped from plank to plank' (mostly written 1860s)
James Thomson ('B.V.') (1834-82), 'The City of Dreadful Night' (1870ff)
Samuel Butler (1835-1902), *Erewhon* (1873)
George Meredith, 'Lucifer in Starlight' (1883) and 'Dirge in Woods' (1887).
Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1886) and the poem 'In a Wood'; also 'The Oxen', 'God?s Funeral', 'Afternoon Service at Melstock'
A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (1896)
Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son* (1908). Account of conflict between a loving extreme Christian father and his slightly sneaky disbelieving son. Dennis Potter adapted the book into a TV play, *Where Adam Stood*
