

SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

I have no doubt that religion indicates where the ultimate source of spiritual authority is.¹

The controversies surrounding Victorian religion involve technical issues of Biblical criticism, scientific discoveries and ecclesiastical tradition. All of these subjects, I propose, arise out of the central dilemma of essential, or spiritual, authority. This essay examines the forms of religious doubt that were experienced by Victorians and argues that the focal point for these concerns was the authority of the Christian Bible. A brief introduction to the complex religious temper of the Victorian era provides a background upon which to discuss the philosophical and hermeneutical *fracas* over the Scriptures. As the formerly unequivocal core of Christian faith lost its unique status, other traditions attempted to replace the Bible as the source of essential authority. The endeavours of three traditions - science, church and humanism - to fill the authoritative space left vacant by the Bible are reviewed in the second section of the article.

Although many of the religious issues of the age were academic, they had powerful effects upon individual Victorian lives. The article concludes by examining two important pseudo-autobiographies, Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* and William Hale White's *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*. These accounts of personal religious upheaval demonstrate the effects of the loss of spiritual authority upon the beliefs of the individual, generating a portrait of humanity that endured well into the twentieth century.

The Religious Temper of the Age

The Victorian era was a time of religious and emotional paradoxes. It was characterised by conformity and dogmatism, but equally represented by doubt, fear, upheaval and rebellion. Near its onset, Carlyle described the age using biblical rhetoric:

The Old has passed away but, alas the New appears not in its stead; the Time is still in pangs of travail with the New. ²

¹ Frye, "The Problem of Spiritual Authority in the Nineteenth Century", p136.

In 1881, nearer its close, Hale White echoed Carlyle's words, suggesting that fifty years had passed while society remained in this state of limbo. The enduring sense of transition generated three broad and conflicting attitudes, which convey the complex *Zeitgeist*.

Confidence

There were two types of religious confidence for Victorians. The first might be called the confidence of the establishment or, to use a term loaded with negative connotations, dogmatism. There was a commitment in the early Victorian mind to the concept of absolute law, universal principles in politics, morality, economics and theology. The church based this commitment upon the Scriptures, given by God as the canon, or rule, for every aspect of life. The very atmosphere of transition encouraged dogmatism among some; as people search for a new foundation, they readily rush to extremes. Religious dogmatism was as much an emotional reaction to watching the Bible being pushed aside by doubting scholars as it was the nature of traditional religion itself. Paradoxically, doubting led to postures of confidence.

The second type of Victorian confidence might be called the *ascent* of man. Humanism, the belief in science, in political reform and progress pervaded Victorian thinking. Utilitarians, for example, preached the unlimited improvement of the social, moral and intellectual condition of humanity by reason and education. In Carlyle's *Signs of the Times*, we recognise the expectation that a better age is approaching—an 'onward and upward' model of human history. Science headed in this same direction, as Darwin assured readers of *Origin of Species* that his theory of evolution "works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection."³

Relief

The losing of faith, for each individual, is a process which is fluid, amorphous, singular and confused almost by definition: difficult often for even the subject to analyse or to recall accurately once it has passed. For some, the loss of faith was clearly something like a spiritual disaster; others claimed to find the process easy

² Carlyle, "Characteristics", p32, quoted in Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, p9.

³ quoted in Houghton, p37,38.

and natural. ⁴

The challenging, and consequent abandoning, of traditional religious beliefs might be considered as the trademark of Victorian intellectuals. For many, the casting off of the old Puritanical Christianity left a sense of optimism and a new quest, a ‘glorious crusade that is seeking to set Truth’s Holy Sepulchre free from a usurped dominion’⁵. Harriet Martineau, for example, spoke of her conversion to unbelief with almost mystical ecstasy:

My labouring brain and beating heart grew quiet
and something more like peace than I had ever
yet known settled down upon my anxious mind...
A new vigour pervaded my whole life, a new
light spread through my mind, and I began to
experience a steady growth in self-command,
courage, and consequent integrity and disintere-
stedness. ⁶

The discomforts of belief were being destroyed and a mood of civility - in many cases smug superiority - radiated from those who had relinquished the ‘barbarous farrago of legends’⁷.

Fear

Such optimism and relief was not, however, universal. Carlyle was shocked at the proud humour and mockery with which scientific writers championed atheism. Charlotte Brönte responded to the changes with bewilderment: “The strangest thing is, that we are called on to rejoice over this hopeless blank...to welcome this unutterable desolation as a state of pleasant freedom.”⁸ Where some were relieved of the intellectual strain of religion, others replaced their fear of a wrathful God and an assured salvation with a fear of empty materialism. Springing from this were social anxieties which contrasted with the mood of confidence. People predicted that moral standards would collapse with the spread of atheism. Huxley recognised the great emotional burden cast upon the consciousness of a transforming society: “...they are alarmed lest man’s moral nature be debased by the increase of his wisdom”⁹. The once sacrosanct home was being violated because of religious differences. A number

⁴ Lerner, *The Victorians*, p162.

⁵ George Eliot, quoted in Houghton, p50.

⁶ Martineau, *Autobiography*, quoted in Houghton, p52.

⁷ Cockshut, *Anglican Attitudes*, p19.

⁸ Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, quoted in Houghton, p52.

⁹ Huxley, *Method*, quoted in Houghton, p71.

of important figures who were instrumental in the crises of this time, such as George Eliot and John Henry Newman, were raised in Evangelical homes that were torn asunder by the ensuing changes. Walter Pater poignantly noted amongst his friends, “that inexhaustible discontent, languor and home-sickness, that endless regret, the chords of which ring all through our modern literature.”¹⁰. Further fear of loss was evidenced by Ruskin, who suggested that even Victorian architecture sought to remind the ‘prodigals’ of the solemnity and grandeur of Nature, or of God.

¹⁰ quoted in Houghton, p64.

Biblical Criticism

The religious dilemmas of the nineteenth century traverse a broad expanse of intellectual disciplines. However, they all orbit the issue of the authority and inspiration of the Bible. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, the most stable of Christian dogmas was that the Bible was the Word of God, infallible and authoritative to speak the truth upon whatever subject it addressed. In the first eight centuries of Christianity, only one respected church figure (Theodore of Mopsuetsia) could be cited as not believing in the complete inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures.¹¹ This unanimity was shattered in Victorian England, leading to virtually a Copernican revolution in religious belief.

Lower Criticism

From early in the century, there was increasing interest amongst historians and archaeologists in the manuscripts of the Bible. The discovery in 1859 of the Codex Sinaiticus in a monastery on Mount Sinai, and the researcher Tischendorf's 1962 edition of the Codex Vaticanus made possible textual analysis of the older translations of the Bible. Scholars became acutely aware of faults in both the translations and the many intermediate manuscripts. After 1840, the probable text of the Greek New Testament began rapidly to diverge from the publicly accepted King James translation. From a more positive perspective, close textual scrutiny allowed many errors of past transmission to be rectified, and the exploration of the linguistic and general history of the New Testament cast new light upon the meaning of the Biblical message. Nevertheless, within twenty years, this scholarly confusion had permeated the churches and there was in the mind of the average believer a sense of insecurity regarding the previously infallible Holy Bible.

Under the impetus of writers such as Lessing and von Herder, Germany had produced a host of 'lower critics' who investigated the Scriptures at the level of grammar, philology and text. Such close examination, previously unapplied to sacred books, led to claims that the traditional indications of authorship in the Bible, particularly the attribution of the Pentateuch to Moses, could not be trusted. By 1860, the examination of the Biblical text had proceeded far enough for scholars to be aware of a multitude of new questions open before the enquirer: Is the Bible trustworthy, in what sense can it now be considered true and, if we doubt the Bible, from where shall our authority come?

Higher Criticism

¹¹ Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, p235.

The most influential movements in biblical criticism originated in Germany. Early work produced nothing less than shockwaves among its readership. The Old Testament first came under attack owing to the work of the critic, Julius Wellhausen. Wellhausen saw the Old Testament as a patchwork of Hebrew religion, knitted together by stories spanning different stages in the history of Israel from its primitive, nomadic times to the elaborate, institutionalised ritualism of the century before Christ. Its value as a source document for knowledge of God was seriously undermined.

The greatest upset caused by biblical criticism concerned the character of Christ. History was beginning to usurp the Bible as the source of truth. History demanded natural explanations as imperiously as science. Even the life of Christ had to be naturalised. The middle decades saw a wave of biographies which stripped Jesus of his 'otherness' and portrayed him as a romantic man of the times. In 1846, George Eliot anonymously translated D.F. Strauss' famous Life of Jesus. Strauss subjected the internal consistency and historical plausibility of the gospel narratives to intensive scrutiny, concluding that there was scant literal truth to be found in them. Whilst the gospels were emptied of historical veracity, Strauss proclaimed in his Preface that "The dogmatic significance of the life of Jesus remains inviolate"¹². He took the Hegelian notion of the universe as the unfolding of the Absolute, to say that Christ was not one human, but the essence of humanity as a whole. This was a radical and highly influential departure from traditional gospel understanding. For distressed intellectuals, such as George Eliot, it provided release from repressive, increasingly unbelievable Evangelicalism without compulsion to accept irreligious materialism:

It seems to me the soul of Christianity lies not at all in the facts of an individual life, but in the ideas of which that life was the meeting- point and the new starting-point. We can never have a satisfactory basis for the history of the man Jesus, but that negation does not affect the idea of the Christ either in its historical significance or in its great symbolic meanings.¹³

Perhaps the most notorious of nineteenth century biblical critics was Strauss' former teacher, F.C. Baur. Again, in obsequiously Hegelian terms, Baur explained that the New Testament arose out of the conflict between the Jewish apostle, Peter, and the Greek-influenced apostle to the Gentiles, Paul. With such a hermeneutic, Baur would accept as genuine only those New Testament books which reflected this dialectic. Doubt over the canonicity of the New Testament intensified.

¹² Schneewind, *Backgrounds of English Victorian Literature*, p68.

¹³ B.B.C., *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, p163.

In the Anglican church, the peak of argument over the Higher criticism came in the early nineties, with the publication of a collection of essays entitled *Lux Mundi*. Thirty years earlier, a group of mainly Anglican churchmen (later labelled the Seven Against Christ!) had, in *Essays and Reviews*, published some of the results of recent German criticism and developed their own liberal interpretations of traditional doctrines. This book offended both Evangelicals—as it undermined their nostalgic yearning for a church governed by infallible Scripture—and the High Church, who saw its rejection of their longed-for Episcopalian authority. However, it raised what Kingsley called ‘doubts and puzzles’ in the minds of many clergy who read it. The *Lux Mundi* essays found, then, an audience primed to respond to further speculation over Biblical matters. They contained radical conclusions that the Old Testament could not have been inspired, that it was chiefly the myths of a primitive people unfit for application in refined Britannia and, in objection to Liddon (see following section), that Christ was ignorant of the authorship of Old Testament books because he shared the sciential limitations common to mankind. An increasing number of Anglo-Catholics were led to accept biblical criticism as a result of *Lux Mundi*.

In the final analysis, it becomes apparent that much of the enquiry into the validity and truth of the Scriptures was motivated not by academic concern or philological development, but by moral incensement at the traditional doctrines of Christianity. The biblical themes of punishment, total depravity and submission to a divine will clashed with the *Zeitgeist*. People turned away from the portrait of God in the Scriptures, which they had borne with fear for so long, and were, like J.S. Mill, willing to accept almost any consequence:

I will call no being good who is not what I mean
when I apply the epithet to my fellow-creatures
and if such a Being can sentence me to Hell for
not so calling Him, then to Hell I will go.¹⁴

Defence

Although the doubt over Scriptural authority which germinated in Germany and sprouted in English academic circles had, by the end of the century, flowered throughout the Christian church, it did so with some rebuff from both church and university voices. In his 1864 commentary on Daniel, E.S. Pusey, the prominent Anglican scholar, made the important observation that the opposing conclusions of ‘critics’ and ‘puritans’ rested not upon conflicting evidences but on rival axioms. The

¹⁴ *Ideas and Beliefs*, p153.

critics dated Daniel to the second century because it prophesies events which took place then. Their evidence for this dating was not evidence, but an axiom: miraculous prophesies cannot happen. The tension within the mind of the nineteenth century critical thinker was enormous. The devout felt compelled to divide their minds with a seemingly arbitrary line between the method of reading the Scripture and of reading secular books. There was a widening gap between the religious use and academic study of the Bible. The religious education of children, by teaching them ‘the necessity, on pain of reprobation in this world and damnation in the next, of accepting, in the strict and literal sense, every statement contained in the Protestant Bible’¹⁵, demonstrates the rearguard action taken by many Evangelicals.

Not all defence against the Bible critics involved recoil to dogmatism. The 1866 Bampton Lectures at Oxford, delivered by H.P. Liddon, were considered by many to be the age’s finest apology for conservative Victorian religion. Liddon refuted Baur and Strauss for each having ‘a morbidly active imagination which cannot acquiesce in the idea of fixed and unalterable truth’¹⁶. His strongest point was to appeal to the Christ-essence ‘itself’, in order to refute his liberal opponents. Liddon argued that, since Jesus believed Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch, and Jonah to have lived in the whale, and Adam to have been the first existing human, then to disbelieve any of these facts is to convict the Christ-ideal of error—to call the Lord a liar. Either the Scriptures be trusted, or allegiance to Christ be abandoned; Liddon allowed no middle ground.¹⁷

¹⁵ see Houghton, p106.

¹⁶ Hutton, *Aspects of Religious and Scientific Thought*, quoted in Houghton, p18.

¹⁷ This section gleaned from Chadwick, *The Victorian Church (Vol II)*, p75f.

By What Authority?

Whilst it is hard to exaggerate the effects of biblical criticism upon religious belief, it is contended that, during the upheavals of the second half of the century, the article of the Anglican church that states “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation” was rarely denied. The issue at stake was Scriptural interpretation and authority, not religious worth. This qualification can be, somewhat simplistically, summarised as the rejection of the Bible *as* God’s Word, but preservation of confidence that the Word of God can be found *in* the Bible. Thus, the Bible was de-centralised as a religious authority, leaving a void which other disciplines sought to fill. In this quest for a replacement central authority, three candidates made bids: the church, science and humanism.

The Church

There were two primary movements in the Victorian church, Evangelicalism and the Oxford Movement. Evangelicalism was a form of puritanical Christianity, grounded in reformation theology, as preached in the late eighteenth century by such leaders as Charles Wesley, John Newton and William Wilberforce. It stressed personal conversion rather than baptism as a pre-requisite for entry into the church. It stressed Scripture over tradition for testing religious truth. It stressed God’s work through preaching and prayer rather than the sacraments. Championing the Reformation slogan, ‘Justification by faith alone’, Evangelicals stood for the fallen nature of humanity and the need for salvation from God’s impending judgement. They were staunchly opposed to the new criticism and refused to admit that any real challenge to the ultimate authority of the Bible was at hand. Groups such as the Plymouth Brethren in *Father and Son* and the Independent chapel in Hale White’s autobiography can be considered as sects of the broader Evangelical church.

The Oxford Movement is the name given to the turmoil at Oxford during the twenties and thirties, fired by dissent from the doctrine and practice of the Church of England. Whereas the Evangelicals remained in the wake of the Reformationist rejection of the church as a religious authority, a few influential men at Oxford sought to re-establish the meaning of the clause in the Apostle’s creed, “I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church”. The two major figures in this movement were John Keble and the more revolutionary John Henry Newman. Strongly affected by the sacramentalism of seventeenth century Anglicans, as well as the Romantic Movement, these men emphasised the divinely appointed authority of church tradition beyond the authority of the Scriptures. Behind the movement was Newman’s *disciplina arcana*, the doctrine expressing the church’s role in religious instruction.

Newman wished to remain within the Church of England, but to instil it with the sense of mystery and awe which he believed to be lacking amongst the Evangelical clergy. He attempted to reconcile the Roman church with the Church of England by interpreting the Thirty-Nine Articles in a Catholic sense. However, his proposal resulted in a furore and the Bishop of Oxford forbade further publications by Newman.¹⁸ The desertion of Newman to the Roman church in 1845 is testimony to his struggle to locate a religious authority which he could not find solely within the Scriptures.

¹⁸ see Best, "Evangelicalism and the Victorians" in *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*, pp37f & 84f. Also, see "The Oxford Movement" in *The History of Christianity*, p524-526.

Humanism

Not many church leaders were convinced that a centre to religion could be once again found in the Church. Instead, they undertook what Gosse called 'Hero Worship'. In no other age was youth so regularly encouraged to imitate Great Men. Biographies flourished during the Victorian era, and interest in heroic myth was at its peak. The relationship between hero worship and religion can be approached via a passage from Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*:

Great men are the inspired (speaking and acting)
Texts of that divine BOOK OF REVELATION, wher-
eof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch,
and by some named HISTORY.¹⁹

The hero became a secular messiah, a revelation, by act and word, of the meaning of History. Hero worship became a form of religion which pays homage to the potential of humanity. Ultimately, this is a type of Romanticism which exalts the individual who is the creator of history. To a great extent, the form of Christian religion was retained—the ideal of Christ, the prophet and the religious meaning of history—but Christ and His Book were dethroned to install manifestations of nobility. Auguste Comte considered that humanity had progressed through the infantile stages of supernaturalism and metaphysics into the final age of positivism, where the human mind is at last free to discover the truth. Comte even designed a calendar of great men of the age to replace the Catholic calendar of saints²⁰. There was a tremendous confidence, particularly amongst political thinkers, that mankind could authorise its own development; no external reservoir of truth was required because 'those who can read the signs of the times read in them that the kingdom of Man is at hand'²¹.

¹⁹ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, BkII, quoted in Houghton, p314.

²⁰ see Houghton, p322-23.

²¹ Tennyson, quoted in Houghton, p34.

Science

I myself have little doubt that in England it was geology and the theory of evolution that changed us from a Christian to a pagan nation.²²

Probably the most significant development in nineteenth century intellectual history was the extension of scientific assumptions and methodology from the physical world to the whole study of humanity. An ecstatic faith in science as the means of human perfection rapidly developed throughout the universities. This confidence can be understood as a desire for religious authority. The Utopian claims made by Science's new converts were nothing short of fanatical. Science would bring humanity to glory :

Finally, men will master the forces of Nature; they will become themselves architects of systems, manufacturers of worlds. Man will then be perfect; he will then be a Creator; he will therefore be what the vulgar worship as a God.²³

Geology was the science which caused the deepest fear within the established church. In *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), Charles Lyell questioned whether science could proceed unless the course of nature in the history of the earth was considered to be uniform, without miraculous catastrophic interventions. However, Lyell could not have imagined the degree to which his publication would eventually affect the Christian community. Although the scope of this article forbids a detailed account of the intricacies of the relationship between nineteenth century science and religion, the responses within the church to these issues need to be noted.

By the time of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, Christians were divided over the impact of the new Science. Some Christian apologists argued that geological evidence supported the traditional chronology and literal interpretation of Genesis. The poet, William Cowper, was quoted in the Scripture's defence:

Some drill and bore

²² Taylor, "Geology Changes The Outlook" in *Ideas and Beliefs*, p195.

²³ Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man*, quoted in Houghton, p35.

The solid earth and from the strata there
Extract a register, by which we learn
That He who made it and revealed its date
To Moses, was mistaken in its age.²⁴

Perhaps this was simple-minded, but many recognised that the exclusion of all non-material causes from nature, towards which they understood both geology and the evolution theory to be leading, did more than threaten the creation story of Genesis; the integrity of the Creator and the hope for moral meaning to life were under assault. Not every churchman rushed to this extreme. In writing about the relationship between science and religion, Frederick Temple, later the Archbishop of Canterbury, consoled frantic believers:

We cannot find that Science, in teaching Evolution, has yet asserted anything that is inconsistent with Revelation, unless we assume that Revelation was intended not to teach spiritual truth only, but physical truth also.²⁵

This 'Natural Theology' proposed that a synthesis of Scripture and science was not necessary. Science laid no claim to the faith of a believer. It was even suggested that, if anything, evolution might strengthen the argument for an intelligent, governing Creator. The old theistic proof from design could be reinstated in a dynamic way.

The real issue behind the debate over evolution is demonstrated by those who sought to appropriate evolutionism for their own purposes. For instance, Karl Marx declared that Darwin had provide a biological basis for communism. Marx was replacing the opiate of spiritual authority with messianic Science. However, Darwin was reticent to allow such a situation, politely refusing to accept the dedication of *Das Kapital* to himself, lest he be associated with attacks upon Theism. It was the recognition that the fundamental concern of Science is authority that led Philip Gosse to formulate his fantastical 'Omphalos' theory. For the Evangelical, the centrality of the biblical revelation had to be retained at all costs. In fact, all parties in the evolution debate wished to side with the angels whilst at the same time being true to the principles and data of the new authority, Science.

²⁴ quoted in *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*, p18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p26.

The Place of Reckoning

Spiritual Authority in Nineteenth Century Biography

The effects upon individuals of the turmoil over spiritual authority can be seen in the many autobiographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They are characterised by their religious concerns, the atmosphere of doubt and transition, and the often bitter resentment at religious manipulation during childhood. Gosse's *Father and Son* reveals a boy who turned against his fundamentalist education and towards the liberation of the mind, providing an apt microcosm of Victorian religious revolution. Hale White's *Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* is a more deeply anguished record of the personal demise resulting from a loss of spiritual authority.

FATHER AND SON

Rejection of the Father

Father and Son is an account of a boy's rejection of his father's world-view. Edmund's struggle with spiritual authority is made concrete in terms of his relationship with his father. From a very early age, Gosse felt depressed and stifled by the direction of his education—towards “bleeding for his Lord in heathen parts”. Before he was ten years old, Gosse had determined that, “whatever happened, I would not, not, *not* go out to preach the Gospel among horrid, tropical niggers” (p100)²⁶. His father's burning desire was Edmund's deepest resentment. The son felt trapped by a religious system for which he had none of the mystic's rapture and little faith:

I saw myself imprisoned forever in the religious system which had caught me and would whirl my helpless spirit as in the concentric wheels of my nightly vision. (p139,140).

Early in *Father and Son*, Edmund confesses to confusing admiration for his father with belief in God. The disruption of this common childhood delusion contributed greatly to de-stabilising Edmund's spiritual convictions. The first incident of enlightenment occurred when Philip reported a fact that Edmund knew to be untrue: “The shock was not caused by any suspicion that he was not telling the truth, as it appeared to him, but by the awful proof that he was not, as I had supposed, omniscient.” (p28)

²⁶ All references to *Father and Son* are to the 1949 Penguin paperback edition.

Other examples are more humorous, such as, when praying for the Lord's will to be done concerning his attending the Brown's party, the boy reports in "high-piping accents of despair" that the Lord says he may go (p171). His father stormed out of the room and Edmund realised that the authority he had worshipped was not impregnable.

The suspicion of the impotency of his father's religion was compounded by a questioning of its morality. The beetle incident, for example, during which Edmund disturbs his father's prayer because he is frightened by a beetle, confirmed a turgidness to Philip's beliefs which Edmund could not bear:

The theory of extreme Puritanism can surely offer no quainter example of its fallacy than this idea that the omnipotent Jehovah could be seriously offended, and could stoop to revenge, because a little, nervous child of nine had disturbed a prayer by being frightened at a beetle. (p107)

Questioning the Scriptures

Paralleling the developments among clergy and scholars at the time, Edmund's rejection of spiritual authority was founded upon doubts concerning the Scriptures. His parents were extreme literalists and inerrantists, believing in 'the absolute, unmodified and historical veracity, in its direct and obvious sense, of every statement contained within the covers of the Bible.' (p50). Edmund, however, had an increasing distaste for the holy book. His doubts were first an outcome of personal displeasure, later accompanied by intellectual queries. He claimed to desire to have continued delight in those sacred pages, but could not overcome the 'colourless triteness of a story told a hundred times' (p213).

In his letters to his father whilst working in London, Gosse details his objections to the fundamentalist doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. He concludes that the inspiration of the Bible is one of tenor and matter, but not of word. However, he will not side with much of the German criticism, for it denies the Godhead of Christ. Edmund is decided on the importance of the divine Christ, if there is to be a genuine centre to religious belief: "If Christ was man and no God, I am driven back into chaos. I can see no scheme of the world's history."²⁷ This was not

²⁷ Charteris, *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse*, p56.

sufficient to satisfy his father, who saw his son to be ‘sailing down the rapid tide of time towards Eternity, without a single authoritative guide (having cast your chart overboard), except what you might fashion and forge on your own anvil’ (p223). In this flurry of metaphors, Philip makes it clear that he considers the authority of Scripture to be central to the Christian faith.

The views of father and son regarding biblical prophecy provide insight into the broader differences in their mindsets. As is common with sects, the Plymouth Brethren to which the Gosse family belonged took a strongly literal approach to prophecy. Edmund relates the way his father and mother, of one mind, could glean doctrine from the most elusive of passages in Revelation:

...they did not admit for a moment that these vivid mental pictures were of a poetic character, but they regarded them as positive statements, in guarded language, describing events which were to happen, and could be recognised when they did happen. (p50)

For the parents, the Bible was of a piece, a divine message without qualification regarding human language or literary type. It was God’s word, impervious to human interference and straight-forward in its intended effect. Edmund developed a very different attitude to language, even to that which he considered to originate from heaven: “There came a time when neither spoke the same language as the other.” (p7). The son sought a new authority to replace the bland deference to Scripture, which he bemoaned in his parents.

Escape to Literature

I was not consciously in any revolt against the strict faith in which I had been brought up, but I could not fail to be aware of the fact that literature tempted me to stray up innumerable paths which meandered in directions at right angles to that direct strait way which leadeth to salvation. (p195)

From his childhood, Edmund cannot recall any reference made by his parents to the world of the imagination. It is not surprising, then, that he gained an addiction

to the intoxicating pleasures of Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. He found in literature “a sort of glimmering hope, very vaguely felt at first...that I should escape at last from the narrowness of the life we led at home, from this bondage to the Law and the Prophets” (p143). Where his parents read to be instructed, Edmund’s interest was words and images themselves. He was an aesthete at heart, ‘busy providing myself with words before I had any ideas to express with them.’ (p192). The romance of language held more importance than any message it might convey. Edmund was eventually to extend this youthful aestheticism into a lectureship in English Literature at Cambridge and a prominent position amongst the critics of his day.

The usurping of biblical authority by the romance of literature is evident in the structure of *Father and Son*. The biography itself can be seen as a story of salvation, of the exodus of Edmund from slavery to Puritanism, and of conversion, not by the Word of God but by the secular words of literature. The typology Gosse employs to record his liberation from religion is more often consciously selected from fairy tales and plays than from the Scriptures. For instance, he describes his ‘captivity’ with images of Princess Blanche in her marble fortress and Fatima, from the *Mother Goose Tales*, shut up in a tower.²⁸ However, when describing his father’s intentions for him, Edmund’s images are almost always biblical: his dedication to the Lord is paralleled with the prophet Samuel, his debate over inspiration compared to Job’s conflict with his foolish sons. The title of the book is obviously typological: God the father and His Son, the Lamb of God. The lamb image is a profitable one, for it symbolizes sacrifice. In a subversion of its usual meaning, Gosse the lamb jumps off the altar, refusing to be sacrificed to his parents’ fundamentalism, but retaining the symbol’s liberating significance! Gosse identifies himself with the ‘cornered’ figures of literature, whilst undermining possible representations of himself in biblical characters. Ultimately, he subverts typological claims to authority, to establish his own personality under an alternative system, that of literature.

The Road to Modernism

Father and Son is Gosse’s rewriting of his parents’ version of salvation history. The final third of the book is chiefly concerned with Edmund’s gradual discovery of the literature to which he would devote the rest of his life. He has thoroughly replaced the spiritual authority of Puritanism with the pleasures of literature. He finds miracles in Virgil (p116), glory and mystical joy in *Tom Cringle’s*

²⁸ see “Rewriting Revelation: The Autobiographer as Idolater in Gosse’s *Father and Son*” in Henderson, *The Victorian Self*, p121.

Log (p143). The final triumph for literature is the writing of Gosse's biography/autobiography itself. In doing so, Gosse authorises his own existence, taking what he calls "a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself" (p224). Some critics, such as Ann Thwaite, Gosse's recent biographer, have challenged the author's claim to be writing a book that is 'scrupulously true' (p5). The biography is so neat, so pregnant with literary conventions that at times it seems fictive. It was through literature that Edmund escaped his father and it is literary, rather than literal, truth which Gosse promotes. As a youth he wandered a 'lonely and exquisite highway', reading the voluptuous Marlowe and changing his loyalties. In writing *Father and Son*, he returns to that romantic road, journeying towards modernism.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK RUTHERFORD

The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford is a semi-fictional account of the spiritual yearning and dissatisfaction of a nineteenth century clergyman. Although published twenty-six years before *Father and Son*, Hale White's book portrays a soul even more tightly in the clutches of modern ennui and doubt than was Edmund Gosse. There are many similarities between the situations of the two men. However, Rutherford's story dwells upon the spiritual condition of its subject and is, therefore, a powerful example of how the decay of spiritual authority affected the sensitive individual during the Victorian period.

Swords of Lath

Rutherford's parents were members of the 'Bunyan Meeting', a local stronghold of Independency. Independent chapels were strictly Calvinistic regarding their doctrine and Puritanical in their church practices. During childhood, Rutherford suffered long Sundays congested with excruciatingly boring church services. He reports undergoing a teenage 'conversion', which he knew to be untrue. As Gosse was to later repeat, Rutherford felt no increased vividness of belief or spiritual fervour upon formal entry into the body of believers. He felt himself obliged to become convinced of doctrinal truths which were to him merely phrases. Like Gosse, he was intended for the ministry from his youth. Like Gosse, Rutherford had a 'Road to Damascus' experience upon discovering literature, particularly Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. Like Gosse, and in contrast to its religious counterpart, this literary conversion was thorough and heart-felt. He spoke of it as a shattering of the old self, a stripping away of the Calvinist trappings that shrouded his spirit:

...it excited a movement and a growth which
went on till, by degrees, all the systems which
enveloped me like a body gradually decayed
from me and fell away to nothing. (p23) ²⁹

Rutherford was singularly unimpressed with the theological training he received at the local Dissenting College. He found the lectures which were supposed to be a "triumphant confutation of the sceptic" were in reality as penetrating as a "sword of lath". His conversion through Wordsworth to 'literary truth' had destroyed his

²⁹ All references to *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* are to the Libris edition, 1988.

capacity for accepting “inscrutable external dogmatic guarantees”³⁰—Rutherford’s childhood education had given him a “rigid regard for truthfulness” (p14), springing from the Calvinist doctrine of the verbal inerrancy of the Scriptures. He had even compared himself to the prophet Balaam, who would speak no word save that which the Lord gave him (p42). However, this strictness became a burden to him, leading him directly into the religious turmoil of the age.

The Infinite Abyss

No theory of the world is possible.³¹

Throughout his autobiography, Rutherford struggles with the concept of an authority, a centre to the world and the understanding of it. He confesses to having a “multitude of maxims” by which he could make decisions, but is powerless to decide between them. He has some affinity for evolution theories, stating in one place that “the law of the universe everywhere is rather the perpetual rise from the lower to the higher; an immortality of aspiration after more perfect types” (p69). Other comments suggest he was favourably acquainted with Hegel and some of the German biblical criticism; indeed, his conception of Christ and his opinion on New Testament miracles is based upon the Christ-biographies of Strauss and Renan. He recognised these developments to be addressing the basic human need for a foundation of hope:

I cannot too earnestly insist upon the need of our holding, each man for himself, by some faith which shall anchor him.³²

This hope became increasingly elusive for Rutherford, overwhelmed by his sense of personal inadequacy and comprehensive scepticism. By the time of his resignation as a Dissenting minister, he had come to see life as replete with insurmountable perplexities, and recourse to a benevolent authority as an impossibility:

Nakeder and nakeder had I become with the passage of every year, and I trembled to anticipate the complete emptiness to which before long I should be reduced. (p75)

³⁰ see Preface to *Autobiography*, pxvii.

³¹ White, *Deliverance*, 193, quoted in Stone, *Religion and Art of William Hale White*, p95.

³² White, *Deliverance*, quoted in Harland, *Mark Rutherford*, p182.

Rutherford is an exceedingly melancholic figure. Mardon detected the intellectual explanation for the minister's despondency: "You do not know what you believe; consequently, you do not know how to act." (p77). However, as with Gosse's 'study of two temperaments' in *Father and Son*, it is Rutherford's disposition rather than any particular academic discovery which causes him to despair. His dread takes an intellectual shape, but should not be mistaken for studied loss of conviction. Although Rutherford's statements of belief are emptied of all their content by Mardon, Rutherford recognises that his religious anguish is primarily, "a momentary revelation of the infinite abyss which surrounds us..."³³

'Truth Lies in Relation'

Rutherford is a religious *outcast*, a wandering minister whom no-one loves, believes or befriends, as he would tell us. He feels impotent, plagued with rank self-doubt, "the feeling of my own utter worthlessness, and the longing for death as the cancellation of the blunder of my existence,"(p113). Rutherford's deepest desire is for unconditional love. His autobiography is the record of his failure to find it. He longs for the companionship, the security, the centralisation of the self which come with human love. He delightedly recalls from his youth images of carefree friendship, such as when he lay naked in "solitary meadows" with his schoolfriends (p11). Later, when he is overcome by his ineptitude, even as a publisher's assistant, he breaks down in Theresa's lap (p114). He describes the fact that she does not immediately repel him as a "dream of Paradise". Quickly, he devotes himself to her, claiming to worship her with "unhesitating, absorbing love".

The autobiography is brimming with failed relationships. Miss Arbour's marriage is the prime example; a matching made for convenience rather than passion and ending in misery, provides a parallel to Rutherford's relationship with the church. From Mardon to the butterfly collector to the odious Mr Snale, Rutherford portrays human relationships as bitter, tragic and unfulfilling. The only relationship within the book which seems to work is that of Theresa (said to represent George Eliot) and her uncle; it succeeds because of its unconventionality.

Ultimately, Rutherford is seeking security in a spiritual relationship. His need for a spiritual authority, which is rapidly being withdrawn from him, urges a reinterpretation of his childhood Calvinism:

Our gregarious instinct is so strong that it is
the most difficult thing for us to be satisfied

³³ White, *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*, p136, quoted in Harland, p74.

with suspended judgment. (p21).

As liberal clergyman were doing, he attaches himself to the Christ-ideal. He envisages Christ as a 'poor solitary thinker' and Christianity as the religion of 'the unknown and of the lonely; of those who are not a success' (p37). Mardon's 'dissolution of Jesus into mythologic vapour' for Rutherford was like 'the death of a friend dearer to me than any other friend whom I knew' (p52). He champions the notion of an 'in-dwelling Christ' who associates with human suffering and grief. Spiritual authority becomes, then, not something which governs *over* people, but something which is *within* them. Rutherford hopes for a re-instalment of spiritual truth within the individual such that a centre to authority, such as an infallible Bible, is no longer required. But he does not achieve this religious ambition in *Autobiography*. Instead, the book ends with that which mocks human enquiry into things spiritual— death. With the funeral of Edward Mardon, who believed in no authority upon which to base a hope of immortality, Rutherford uncomfortably closes his testimony to what we now call the modern human condition, where 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'³⁴.

³⁴ from Yeats, "The Second Coming".

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