

GEORGE ELIOT AND THE ANGLICAN READER

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Abstract

Eliot uses Anglican frameworks for her representation of Dissenters, Catholics and Jews. These frameworks are variously explicit, implied and found in the general form of Eliot's depiction of religion in the space of literature. While Eliot appears to favour a tempered, socially practical Anglicanism, these frameworks probably tell us little about Eliot's own views on religion. They do however highlight the literary techniques that Eliot used to represent religion as a difficult and ever shifting relation between enthusiasm, egoism and ethics.

I. RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

In a letter from 1865, George Eliot observes 'as to its origin historically, and as a system of thought, it is my conviction that the Church of England is the least dignified of all forms of Christianity'. However, Eliot goes on to say, 'but as a portion of my earliest associations and most poetic memories, it would be more likely to tempt me into partiality than any form of dissent'.¹ Whether for personal, pedagogical or commercial reasons, Eliot remained especially conscious of her Anglican readers. This article is concerned with Eliot's use of the literary device of framing a chapter, an encounter between characters or an ongoing dialogue when it comes to the question of religion. In the opening chapters of her first novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), she offers a subtle but evident framing of her representation of Dissenters. This framework is explicitly Anglican. Seven years later in *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), the Anglican content may be absent but the *form* of the framework is still apparent in representation of heterodox Protestantism.

These framing devices function as a literary technique and as a stable container for exploring the possibilities and limitations of religion outside of the Anglican dispensation. In *Romola* (1862), the Anglican framing of the representation of late-Renaissance Catholicism takes on the structure of a *via media* between pre-Reformation superstition and Renaissance humanism. The most significant modulation in this literary device occurs in *Daniel Deronda* (1876). How much this association of Anglicanism with these framing techniques can tell us about Eliot's attitude toward the religion into which she was born is debatable. At the

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same time, the figure of the Rev. Camden Farebrother in *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871–72) gives us a favourable representation of a tempered and socially practical Anglicanism.

As one would expect from a writer who treats religion primarily as a question of ‘natural history’, or ‘the study of men, as they have appeared in different ages, and under various social conditions’, Eliot charts with a clear eye the origins of Protestantism and the limitations of Anglicanism as the established church in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain.² In her studies of the often tragic clash of religious enthusiasm, the search for a better ethics and the unavoidable claims of egoism, she also offers critical but sympathetic support for the tradition of belief that remained most ‘likely to tempt’ her ‘into partiality’. However, before turning to examine Eliot’s different calibrations of Anglican awareness in her literary fictions, a brief overview is needed of her relation to religion and philosophy.³

Born into an Anglican family, from the age of fifteen to twenty-two George Eliot (1819–80) was under the sway of ‘Evangelical Christianity’ and became ‘a strong Calvinist’, though she remained within the Anglican Church.⁴ It is generally agreed that Eliot’s loss of orthodox faith was precipitated in 1841 by reading Charles Hennell’s *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838). Hennell, who was a Unitarian, concludes that there can be no supernatural events in ‘the true account of the life of Jesus Christ’.⁵ Once liberated from the ‘fables’ surrounding its origins, he argues, Christianity can be ‘regarded as a system of elevated thought and feeling’.⁶ Writing in 1852, Eliot praised Hennell’s *Inquiry* as an early contribution to ‘free religious discussion’ in England.⁷

In a series of letters from 1842, it is apparent that Eliot rejected the supernatural trappings of punishment and reward, while still embracing what is in ‘conformity with the will of the Supreme’.⁸ She regards the Bible as ‘histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction’ and prayer as ‘a vain offering’.⁹ Though she later modified her youthful vehemence against orthodoxy, by and large her position appears to have remained unchanged for the rest of her life.¹⁰ The later reading of Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, Spencer, Comte, Lewes, Darwin and others merely confirmed her own clear-sighted resolutions at the age of twenty-two. Writing in 1859 to an old friend, she reiterates: ‘I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity—to the acceptance of any set of doctrines as a creed, and a superhuman revelation of the Unseen.’¹¹

Though Norman Vance’s recent argument—that our new-found ‘post-secular awareness’ should allow for a ‘refinement’ in the rigorously secular interpretation of nineteenth-century novelists—certainly allows us to question Gillian Beer’s influential contention that Eliot only wrote her great novels when she had ‘fully assimilated the implications of evolutionary ideas’, it is still more accurate to speak of Eliot’s ‘post-Christian ethics’.¹² One does not need to follow Peter Hodgson’s eloquent case for Eliot’s search for a ‘nondogmatic, noncreedal form of Christianity’ to recognise the basic patterns and lingering echoes of Christianity

that Frank Kermode persuasively identified almost fifty years ago in *The Sense of an Ending*.¹³

Hodgson's emphatic call for a viable theology in Eliot's novels forces him to dismiss the tangible influence of Strauss, Feuerbach and Comte.¹⁴ This may be a useful corrective to readings of the novels that have treated Eliot's philosophical engagement as the proverbial 'key to all mythologies'. As early as 1863, critics have tried to encompass Eliot's literary fictions in a programmatic philosophy.¹⁵ As the translator of David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835), she may have agreed that by understanding the 'transmitted traditions' or myths that emerged from 'the spirit of a people or a community' it was possible to 'respect the original sense' of biblical narratives without needing to give them historical validity.¹⁶ As the translator of Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), she may have accepted that God is 'the nature of man made objective' and that the Incarnation shows us that love, mercy and sympathy are to be celebrated as human God-like qualities.¹⁷ It is also possible that she concurred with Auguste Comte's utopian call for a new religion in which 'Humanity' is an 'aggregate Being' that gives us a tangible object to believe in and love while reinforcing the importance of scientific advances and the moral imperative 'to live for others'.¹⁸ All of these possible acts of philosophical adherence can only be stated conditionally because, as Oliver Lovesey justly remarks, 'it is nearly impossible . . . to determine the exact nature of the heterodox secular humanism to which the mature George Eliot subscribed'.¹⁹

One can easily forget Eliot's discriminating reading of philosophy when using it as a broad brush-stroke for the ethos of the novels.²⁰ David Carroll has come closest to showing us that Eliot is a deft hermeneutical thinker who embraces complexity and is cautious about any method, theory or system that exceeds the contingent demands of 'a working hypothesis'.²¹ If we can say that Eliot no longer accepted the dogmas of Christianity and was a sceptical reader of philosophy, it still remains a fact that many of Eliot's literary characters believe, to varying degrees of fervour, certainty and doubt, in a divine agency. These varieties of belief enable us to treat Eliot's novels as something more than an act of philosophical application.²²

At the same time, in my view, when it comes to thinking about Eliot's treatment of religion we must not confuse theology with religion. In introducing John Blackwood to Eliot's first story, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton', George Lewes draws a similar distinction, declaring that it treats the 'country clergy . . . solely in its *human* and *not at all* in its *theological* aspect'.²³ In her treatment of religion as a historical phenomenon that changes over time and varies in different social, cultural and political contexts, Eliot's novels are examples of an insufficient theology.²⁴ Her literary fictions provide a unique space to explore the possibilities and limitations of traditions of belief through the lives of others.²⁵ It should not be surprising that the boundary to these literary representations was often overtly Anglican. This makes the attachment to the Anglican tradition in her novels—

whether autobiographical or strategic—neither a theological or philosophical question but a literary question.

II. ADAM BEDE AND THE ANGLICAN HYMN

Eliot's notebooks demonstrate that her first novel relied as much on sustained research as anecdotal experience.²⁶ If we go beyond the biographical motivation, why does Eliot focus on Methodism in her first novel? Wesleyan Methodism may have attracted Eliot for its emphatic rejection of Calvinistic predestination and constant prompting to better fellowship.²⁷ On the other hand, the widespread antipathy to the Methodists was prompted by Wesley's 'open avowal of direct divine intervention in the world', which led to charges of extraordinary egoism and religious enthusiasm.²⁸

Eliot's attitude towards Methodism has been treated as both courageously sympathetic and devastatingly critical. Valentine Cunningham argues that *Adam Bede* is evidence of 'enormous compassion' for an excluded and penalised religious belief.²⁹ At the same time, he observes, one could say that Eliot's 'demonstration that Feuerbachian humanism is the essence of Dissent may in fact be more subversive than the frontal attacks of Dickens'.³⁰ In this varied context, it is helpful to note that when Lewes defended Eliot's introduction of Jewish characters in *Daniel Deronda* in an 1876 letter to John Blackwood, he adds: 'I have reflected that [as] she formerly contrived to make one love Methodists, there was no reason why she should not conquer the prejudice against Jews.'³¹ Eliot gives us a dispassionate picture of this young English religion. It contains the possibility of a better ethics and the failings of misguided enthusiasm. Eliot's particular insight is that these contrary aspects of the religious character can co-exist. One can 'love Methodists' in *Adam Bede* because it offers a generous and a critical depiction of Wesleyan Methodism.

In the opening chapter, we see that Seth Bede the Methodist is absent-minded in his work because he is the would-be lover of the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris. The failure to judge that he has not completed his work prompts Wiry Ben's ridicule and the blindness of religious enthusiasm is confirmed. Ben's attempted humiliation of Seth would be a comforting opening of the book to most Anglican readers.³² However, Seth Bede is already a more straightforward character than his Anglican brother Adam who resorts in this first chapter to physical force, expounds the tolerant views of the local Anglican minister and forbids the use of the words of the Bible for anything but respect and piety. Despite these complexities of character, the events in the workshop begin with Adam singing with robust vigour from the Anglican hymnal. Singing the morning hymn 'Awake my soul, and with the sun' in the

afternoon, his song is a call to work at the ending of the day and an affirmation of 'conscience as the noonday clear' (1: 9–10).

Written by Thomas Ken and based on Psalm 108, this hymn not only opens but also closes this first chapter.³³ It functions as a reassuring Anglican book-ending to the representation of Methodism. We cannot know if this is an astute act of a would-be novelist to secure the widest possible readership or the indication of a personal preference or nostalgia. However, we can treat this Anglican framing as a literary boundary that gives an implicit stability at the outset to both the form and content of this representation of Dissenters. Echoing the lines of the hymn, Adam offers the reader Anglican criteria for judging religious non-conformity.³⁴ As a morning hymn that 'had all day long been running in his head', he attempts to give the late afternoon conversation about religion a 'noonday' clarity. His idealistic call for a union between religious observance and the working life is reinforced by the hymn (1: 13–14). It is not Seth, but Adam who is the visionary. Adam walks home across the fields, once again singing 'Awake my soul', with the addition of two lines at the close of the chapter: 'For God's all-seeing eye surveys / Thy secret thoughts, thy works and ways' (1: 17). The working day closes with Adam's tempered hope for a unity between 'thy works and ways'.

In Chapter 2, 'The Preaching', Eliot once again takes care to place her depiction of Methodism within a reassuring Anglican framework. Bounded by the Green, the Methodists are an indistinguishable group only registered by their disapproving 'melancholy compassion' (2: 23–4). From the perspective of the villagers, who are given distinct identities, the Methodists appear as the Anglican reader of 1859 would expect: a Puritan herd. While Dinah Morris' connection to the Poysers and to Seth Bede allows for the threshold to be porous, it is the anonymous traveller who first crosses the boundary between Anglicans and Methodists. The traveller plays the conventional role of the disinterested spectator.³⁵

The emphasis on this Anglican framework for representing Dissenters is reinforced by Eliot's reference to the *Book of Common Prayer*. As Margaret Reynolds notes, the parish clerk Joshua Rann's quotation from Psalm 136 is given in the version from the *Book of Common Prayer*, which differs slightly from the version in the King James Bible (2: 24).³⁶ When Dinah Morris begins her sermon she uses Luke 4:18: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.' As Eliot takes care in letting us know that it is 18 June 1799, the daily readings from the *Book of Common Prayer* return to Luke for the morning prayers on 17 June.³⁷ Anglicans in the 1790s – and in the 1850s – would have already started reading Luke, when Dinah Morris evokes Luke 4:18 in her Methodist sermon, following the same text used by Wesley in his first outdoor sermon in 1739.³⁸

At the same time, the choice of Luke 4:18 is suggestive of Eliot's complex circumspection when it comes to religious hermeneutics. Luke 4:18 recounts

Jesus attending a synagogue in Nazareth and reading a passage from Isaiah 61:1.³⁹ This scene of biblical exegesis would have evoked the new biblical criticism that Eliot had encountered in Hennell and Strauss. Hennell refers to Luke 4:18 in his critique of the origins of biblical typology, the retrospective anticipation of the New Testament in the Old Testament.⁴⁰ As Hennell observes, ‘imagination found abundance of connexions which common sense alone would never have discovered’.⁴¹ This suggests that Eliot is also able to speak, even if only obliquely, to her more sceptical or free-thinking readers.

More persuasively, readers of *Adam Bede* today who have access to a vast archival apparatus also know that Eliot strongly objected to a religion that promised personal consolation and would have been critical of Dinah Morris’ imperative in her sermon to make God ‘our friend’ in view of human finitude (2: 30–1).⁴² As Feuerbach argued, the ideas of Providence, of God’s care and divinely inspired foresight, are no more than ‘my self-love deified’.⁴³ Eliot herself wrote to Sara Hennell in 1869: ‘It seems to me that the conception of religion as chiefly valuable for the personal consolations that may be extracted from it, is among the most active sources of falsity. The test of a higher religion might be, that it should enable the believer to do without the consolations which his egoism would demand.’⁴⁴

Eliot’s critical attitude toward Dinah Morris is also apparent in the interventions of the narrator in this chapter.⁴⁵ Before Dinah Morris begins to speak, Eliot records the thoughts of the traveller: “‘A sweet woman,” the stranger said to himself, “but surely nature never meant for her to be a preacher”” (2: 28). At this point, the narrator observes: ‘Perhaps he was one of those who think that nature has theatrical properties, and, with the considerate view of facilitating art and psychology, “makes up” her characters, so that there may be no mistake about them’ (2: 28). The tone here is different from the narrator as the judicious overseer at the start of the chapter of the roads and byways of Hayslope: it is knowing, modern and sarcastic.⁴⁶

The implications are considerable. The authority of the stranger’s view of Dinah Morris as ‘a sweet woman’ is undermined and it is clear that ‘nature’ here is not theatrical, does not assist art and psychology and does not help us avoid making mistakes about character. One need not be a reader of Darwin, whose *The Origin of Species* was read by Eliot a year after she completed *Adam Bede*, to appreciate that insisting on nature’s entirely random distribution of human characteristics has theological implications.⁴⁷ This ironic intervention by the narrator operates as a very different framing device to the Anglican hymn. The intended reader here may be the intellectual elites that Eliot had been familiar with since 1852 when she began editing the *Westminster Review*.⁴⁸ At the same time, this flash of scepticism reinforces the wider critique of the ineffective fervour of Dissent established by the Anglican framing in the first two chapters.

Dinah Morris wins the approval of the traveller, but she has little impact on the villagers of Hayslope (2: 33). The fact that it is only Chad's Bess who is prompted to action by the sermon to remove her earrings can be taken as an ironic comment on the entire undertaking, but seems more a dispassionate statement on the limits of this particular tradition of belief in this particular social environment (2: 33–6). Dinah's righteous pity, with its accompanying evocations of the loss of God's mercy and the fires and pits of hell, is directed against a pair of earrings and the thoughtlessness of adolescent vanity (we can have no thoughts yet of Hetty Sorrel). The final vision that we are given of Dinah Morris in this chapter is of an enthusiast who believes that 'great blessedness' has given her the assurance of an absolute equilibrium: 'Think what it is—not to hate anything but sin; to be full of love to every creature; to be frightened at nothing' (2: 36–7). As seen within a discrete but readily apparent Anglican framing, Dinah Morris' Methodism appears as the possibility of both fellowship and fanaticism, of ethics and enthusiastic egoism.

III. FELIX HOLT AND DIFFICULT BLESSEDNESS

The opening chapters of *Adam Bede* could be taken as the slightly laboured strategies of a first-time novelist. However, three novels and seven years later, Eliot undertakes a similar, if more challenging exercise in the balancing of form and content when it comes to the representation of religion in *Felix Holt*. The novel opens with a justly celebrated framing overview of Britain before Catholic Emancipation in 1829, when the majority of Protestants lived quite 'safely in the *via media* of indifference'.⁴⁹ As Eliot had already observed in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), which opens in 1830: 'Protestantism sat at ease, unmindful of schisms, careless of proselytism . . . But with the Catholic Question had come a slight wind of controversy to break the calm.'⁵⁰ Though imbued with a historical perspective that gathers religion into its panoramic natural history of Britain, the prologue of *Felix Holt* offers an Anglican framework for its representation of Dissenters. As the narrator observes, in the manufacturing towns of the midlands there were already 'multitudinous men and women aware that their religion was not exactly the religion of their rulers' (Intro. 6). Eliot touches on the central challenge for the Church of England in the 1830s. As Owen Chadwick remarks, the Reform Act of 1832 raised the fundamental question of 'whether representative government was compatible with an established church; that is, how religious inequality could be married to political equality'.⁵¹

While Eliot offers a portrait of Anglicanism under pressure in a historically volatile period, the *form* of her depiction of the 'radical' views of Felix Holt replicate the Anglican framework first established in *Adam Bede*. Mrs Transome values 'the admirable doctrines and ritual of the Church of

England' because they are 'equally remote from Puritanism and Popery' (1: 29). She has found a *via media* in the Anglican Church. However, her son Harold Transome explains his surprising decision to run as a 'radical' for the local parliamentary seats by arguing that 'British Toryism' has been 'entirely extinct' since Catholic Emancipation (2: 34). His quixotic attempt to be 'equally remote' from both Tories and Whigs is already apparent when he says that he will not attack the Church but will criticise 'the incomes of the bishops' (2: 34, 43).

Both Harold Transome and Felix Holt name themselves as 'radicals' and both have difficulty explaining this self-definition to others. When Felix meets Harold at Rufus Lyon's house he offers a description of his radicalism saying: 'I'm a Radical myself, and mean to work all my life long against privilege, monopoly, and oppression' (16: 182). Harold distances himself from what he sees as the enthusiastic aspects of Felix's radicalism, with its 'impracticable notions of loftiness and purity' (16: 182). The narrator then makes a striking intervention, specifically in defence of Rufus Lyon's religious sensibilities: 'For what we call illusions are often, in truth, a wider vision of past and present realities—a willing movement of a man's soul with the larger sweep of the world's forces—a movement towards a more assured end than the chances of a single life' (16: 184). Eliot is more confident here about giving voice to the idealism and vision of the Dissenters. At the same time, as a Congregational Dissenter from an established tradition of belief, the benign Lyon will act as a reference point for the reader when presented with Felix Holt's idiosyncratic dissent from both Anglicans and Dissenters.

This is apparent in Chapter 5, when Felix Holt visits Rufus Lyon. Holt belongs to no religious denomination and has reached his sense of 'higher' ethics by looking 'life fairly in the face to see what was to be done with it' (5: 62). This chapter offers an extended encounter between two Dissenters. However, the reassuring befuddlement of Rufus Lyon as he tries to understand Holt and the interventions of the narrator show that Eliot is still framing her portraits of Dissent. Significantly, there is no doctrinal meeting of minds. The Calvinist preacher feels 'a great enlargement' in Holt's presence, while Holt likes Lyon for his 'quaint looks and ways' but is untouched by his Calvinism (5: 73, 67). Holt's own spiritual beliefs—or lack of them—remain unclear; a question that certainly worried Eliot's first reviewers.⁵²

In the heady days of 1832, the link between Holt and Rufus Lyon is political.⁵³ However, Holt's well-intentioned but disastrous actions to identify with 'the unlucky' and to prevent murder during the election riots show the limitations of his political idealism (27: 259). When he is in prison, Holt is more circumspect about the practical effects of his ethical decisions and social actions observing, 'as to just the amount of result' a man 'may see from his particular work—that's a tremendous uncertainty: the universe has not been

arranged for the gratification of his feelings' (45: 434). Felix Holt is an enthusiast who has managed to articulate, if not demonstrate, an ethics that is free of religious egoism.⁵⁴ As Darwin suggested, there may be an unavoidable chance in human progress, but Eliot affirms that the ethical man will still strive for 'some great good' (45: 434).⁵⁵ Eliot's Anglican readers could take comfort in the recognition that an established tradition of belief that is tempered by time and history is still the most reliable framework for examining the possibilities and limitations of Felix Holt's radicalism. Esther Lyon comes to see that a life lived with Holt would be 'a sort of difficult blessedness' (22: 228).⁵⁶

IV. ROMOLA AND THE VIA MEDIA

Eliot gave her Anglican readers a very different challenge when it came to representing non-Protestant traditions of belief in her literary fictions. *Romola* depicts late-Renaissance Catholicism while *Daniel Deronda* portrays mid-nineteenth century Judaism.⁵⁷ However, the emphatic framing of pre-Reformation Catholicism differs from the more equivocal representation of the contemporary Anglican-Jew Daniel Deronda. In the Proem of *Romola*, which acts as a similar framing device to the later prologue in *Felix Holt*, the narrator thinks of her Anglican readers, High and Low Church, and prepares them for a pre-Protestant world. 'A man of the fifteenth century,' the narrator observes, will 'hang up a waxen image or double of himself under the protection of the Madonna Annuziata' and 'do penance for his sins in large gifts to the shrines of saints.'⁵⁸ Having established the well-known limitations of Catholicism, the narrator goes on to offer an account of the superstitions of the times, which bordered on doubt and scepticism (Proem: 5). One could either accept that 'all things' were 'charged with occult virtues' or look back to the Pagan materialists and speculate that: 'Lucretius might be right' (Proem: 5). The fifteenth century is marked at once by 'Epicurean levity and fetischistic dread' (Proem: 6).

As most Anglican readers would know, if *Romola* opens in the early 1490s we are only twenty-five years away from Luther's literal reading of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans and the start of the Protestant Reformation.⁵⁹ This anachronistic reading of *Romola* is unavoidable. The Proem ends with Savonarola denouncing 'the worldliness and vicious habits of the clergy' (Proem: 6). Eliot ensures that her book will appeal to the Anglican reader by reinforcing the inevitability of the Protestant Reformation.⁶⁰ At the same time, Eliot offers a varied and complex representation of the *humanista* of the late fifteenth century.⁶¹ The 'cultured and sceptical' do not provide a simple alternative to 'Christian barbarism' (11: 117; 3: 33). The implicit framing of Eliot's most historical novel is a *via media*—evoking the Anglican ideal—that

can find a vantage point from which to view the limitations of 'Epicurean levity and fetischistic dread.'

It is also hard not to believe that Eliot's Anglican readers would share Romola's 'unconquerable repulsion' in Chapter 15 when she is called to San Marco, the Dominican stronghold of Savonarola, to see her long-lost brother, the dying Fra Luca (15: 152). Guided as we are by Romola, who has 'not been bred up to devotional observances', it is a secular response to monastic Catholicism that opens this chapter (13: 133). Tonsured, aged and transfixed, the dying Dino is branded by a religious enthusiasm that transcends natural filial duty (15: 152). The clear intent to avoid an easy contrast between religious egoism and secular virtue is apparent when Eliot allows Fra Luca to justify his rejection of the *humanista* ideal—his father Bardo is exacting and self-centred—while criticising his definition of the pinnacle of religious experience as an ideal stasis in which there will be 'no tormenting questions, no fear of suffering' (15: 155).

Eliot suggests this fervent faith is a form of blinded egoism that avoids the great truth: one can never escape suffering. As much as he claims an absolute renunciation, Fra Luca's calling to the ascetic and missionary life has personal motives and consolations; asceticism is as an indulgence.⁶² As a woman with a 'vivid intellect', Romola is at first able to think that her brother's terrible vision of her marriage to a man with a blank face as 'no more than a dream, fed by youthful memories and ideal convictions' (15: 158). However, the reader later learns that this vision is approximately correct. Why does Eliot give some apparent credence to the fanatical vision of Fra Luca? In part because Romola is also a product of the times in which she lives. She has not been brought up as a Christian but she has been born into a Catholic world. It is her own superstition that will give credence to her brother's vision. It is another unavoidable anachronism that Eliot frames her literary representation of this Catholic world from the vantage point of 'the judicious Hooker'.⁶³

V. DANIEL DERONDA, SUPERSTITION AND JUDAISM

Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* is also driven by superstition. When we first see Gwendolen—in *media res* as Daniel watches her—she is gambling.⁶⁴ One could see Eliot's evident condemnation of gambling as some kind of heavy-handed Victorian moralism, but it can be argued that Eliot treats it as a form of religious superstition, where chance events or actions are given unrealistic patterns or deluded significance.⁶⁵ Gwendolen, who sees herself 'a goddess of luck', will be plagued by superstitious fears throughout the novel (1: 10). Daniel Deronda may not walk off with Gwendolen at the end, choosing the Jewish singer Mira Lapidoth as his partner, but the

Christian and Jewish narratives are already entwined in the romance of Catherine Arrowpoint and the musician Herr Klesmer. Together, they launch ‘an insurrection against the established order of things’ (22: 237).⁶⁶ The two strands of the story are linked most forcefully by a study of the modern superstition of Gwendolen Harleth and the contemporary mysticism of Mordecai Cohen.

Gwendolen’s modern superstition does not take on an obvious religious form (6: 63). Nonetheless, Eliot describes the expression of Gwendolen’s deep-seated fears as ‘fits of spiritual dread’ (6: 63). Deronda, the educated Anglican who discovers his Jewish origins, acts for the reader as a reassuring frame for representing both the excessive fears of Gwendolen and the fervent hopes of Mordecai. This is Eliot’s most sophisticated use of Anglican framing, as she allows Daniel to resist the superstition of Gwendolen while partly embracing the enthusiasm of Mordecai.

Gwendolen’s superstition is a powerful instance of the pathetic fallacy (6: 56–7).⁶⁷ She is such an egoist that she can only see Deronda as an almost non-human ethical or moral guide. It is Gwendolen who turns Deronda ‘into a priest’ (35: 430). She undergoes her personal Copernican revolution when Deronda announces his departure for the Middle East at the end of the novel. She felt ‘for the first time’ that she was ‘being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world’ and encounters a religion ‘which is something else than a private consolation’ (69: 804). Daniel’s relation to Gwendolen is marked by his own slightly debilitating propensity to ‘plenteous, flexible sympathy’ (32: 364) but primarily functions as a stable and almost abstract framing to represent modern superstition. Eliot counterbalances this form of framing with the more dynamic and interactive relation between Daniel and Mordecai.

It would be easy to treat Mordecai as one more enthusiast in a long line of Eliot’s religious enthusiasts. But Mordecai is different. The timescale of his influence on Deronda is not one of brief catharsis or dramatic conversion that will be undermined through later ethical failings. Isolated and dying, he wants to pass on a legacy and a life-long vocation to Deronda (38: 472). However, Deronda soon finds Mordecai ‘rather imperious’ and begins to feel ‘a subduing influence [coming] over him in the tenacious certitude of the fragile creature before him’ (40: 503). This leads Deronda to reflect on issues of superstition and enthusiasm. This explicit level of self-reflection distinguishes Deronda from Eliot’s other characters—such as Hetty Sorel, Romola, Esther Lyon and Dorothea Brooke—who are subdued in one way or another by an enthusiast.

When Deronda meets Mordecai in Chapter 40 at sunset on the Thames and ‘the fragile creature’ insists that Deronda will be his ‘new life’ and ‘new self’, Deronda thinks: ‘I suppose I am in a state of complete superstition’ (40: 495). In

contrast to Gwendolen's superstitious dread, Deronda means a form of credulity. In contrast to Romola, Deronda decides for himself what he can gain from his relation with Mordecai. Worried that he is already 'half dominated' by Mordecai's 'energetic certitude' and 'fervent trust', Deronda does not want to allow 'a reverential pity for spiritual struggle to hurry him along a dimly seen path' (41: 509–10). He reflects that because of not knowing his own parentage, he has long been accustomed 'to be in a state of suspense which was also one of emotive activity and scruple' (41: 512). This 'state of suspense' will allow him to negotiate with Mordecai's 'extravagant demand of discipleship' (41: 512).

As much as this 'state of suspense' has hampered Deronda's development, Eliot suggests a new, and perhaps modern, strategy for responding to enthusiasm. As Deronda explains to Mrs Meyrick:

He is not what I should call fanatical. I call a man fanatical when his enthusiasm is narrow and hoodwinked, so that he has no sense of proportions, and becomes unjust and unsympathetic to men who are out of his own track. Mordecai is an enthusiast: I should like to keep that word for the highest order of minds—those who care supremely for grand and general benefits to mankind. (46: 567)

This may be the enthusiasm of the scientist or the engineer, but it could also be the enthusiasm of the preacher or the rabbi. *Daniel Deronda* uses the space of literary fiction to warn against the rise of new superstitions and to advocate the possibilities of a modern enthusiasm.

Eliot's last novel also demonstrates that the need for a framing or container to represent and inhabit religious sensibilities outside of the Anglican tradition has evolved from the neat Anglican bookending of the first chapter of *Adam Bede* to Daniel Deronda himself as an Anglo-Jewish figure that stands between the limitations of secular superstition and the possibilities of a tempered enthusiasm that can embrace both a practical geo-political dream and an ethics that is compatible with a renewed tradition of belief. Rather than treating the literary form of framing as Aristotle's ideal of the untouchable container, *Daniel Deronda* leaves us with the intimation of a hermeneutical gesture in which the act of 'external' framing also finds itself 'inside' the frame and discovers a new, dynamic relation.⁶⁸

VI. MIDDLEMARCH AND PRACTICAL ANGLICANISM

Having looked at Eliot's varied techniques for framing her portraits of Dissenters, Catholics and Jews, I would like to end with a brief examination of Eliot's treatment of the Anglican clergy in *Middlemarch* and, especially, the Rev. Camden Farebrother. Edward Casaubon gives us one of many portraits of a clergyman in the early 1830s before the Whig government has begun its

reforms of the Church of England.⁶⁹ They have the university education, the scholarly ambitions and doctrinal convictions, but little capacity for pastoral care and the needs of their parish.⁷⁰ In 'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton' (1856), Barton fails as clergyman in part because he is unable to 'bring his geographical, chronological, exegetical mind' near enough to the 'point of view' of the weaver, miner and the pauper (2: 22). Eliot contrasts the Barton to the Rev. Martin Cleves, a 'true parish priest, the pastor beloved, consulted, relied on by his flock' (6: 46). The 'great deal of humour and feeling playing in his grey eyes' is evidence of his capacity to reach 'the wheelwright and the blacksmith' (6: 47). It is the Reverend Cleves who comes to Amos Barton's assistance when his wife dies (9: 59, 61).

In *Middlemarch*, the reader suspects almost from the start that Dorothea Brooke—for whom we are told 'the hereditary strain of Puritan energy . . . glowed alike through [her] faults and virtues'—is mistaken about the Reverend Casaubon.⁷¹ 'It would be like marrying Pascal,' she thinks (3: 29). Chapter 18 of *Middlemarch* offers the most sustained reflection on an Anglican clergyman since the Rev. Adolphus Irwine in *Adam Bede*. Like Farebrother, Irwine is distinguished by his love for his family and sacrifice on their behalf. Critically, in *Adam Bede* it is this renunciation of personal desires that reinforces that Irwine has 'no enthusiasm'.⁷² As one would expect, the Reverend Irwine of 1799 is more the complacent gentleman clergyman than the Reverend Farebrother of 1831. Neither fit the 'sound theories of the clerical office', but they are both fine clergymen.⁷³ Farebrother's interest in 'natural history' and frank admission that he has 'always been too lax, and have been uneasy in consequence', make him very much a clergyman of the nineteenth century (52: 512).

In Chapter 13 of *Middlemarch*, Dr Lydgate meets Nicholas Bulstrode to discuss the creation of 'a fine fever hospital' (13: 124). Filled with a 'fearless expectation of success' Lydgate has hopes of 'medical reforms' (13: 124). Concerned with the 'spiritual interests' of the patients, Bulstrode wants to use the new hospital as an opportunity to remove the Rev. Camden Farebrother from his clerical duties and replace him with the Rev. Walter Tyke (13: 126). 'I hope I shall have nothing to do with clerical disputes', Lydgate remarks (13: 126). By Chapter 16, it is precisely these 'clerical disputes' that have become 'an exciting topic to the Middlemarchers' (16: 155). The narrator gives the reader insight into the conflict by openly stating that Bulstrode uses his charitable work 'to gain as much power as possible, that he might use it for the glory of God' (16: 155–6). Bulstrode is Eliot's most emphatic portrait of the interdependence of religious enthusiasm and rampant egoism.

In Chapter 16 we first meet Farebrother, 'a handsome, broad-chested but otherwise small man' (16: 161). He has an easy manner and his arrival is 'like a

pleasant change in the light' (16: 162). We mostly see Farebrother through the eyes of Lydgate, who notes that he does not drink punch, but does play whist (16: 163). Lydgate goes to visit Farebrother and discovers that he is not only a minister of the church but also an amateur naturalist who supports his mother, aunt and sister on his small income (17: 168). Farebrother is interested in 'natural history' (17: 172). This suggests, if not a happy union, at least a productive interaction between 'Religion' and 'Science', whose conflict became a public issue in Britain in the mid 1860s.⁷⁴

Farebrother has undertaken an 'exhaustive study of the entomology of this district' and says candidly that he 'felt himself not altogether in the right vocation' (17: 171–2). They eventually come to discuss the imminent vote. Farebrother's assessment of his rival, Mr Tyke, is that he is 'a zealous fellow: not very learned, and not very wise' (17: 171). Farebrother magnanimously warns Lydgate that he will 'offend Bulstrode' if he votes for him (17: 175). Farebrother adds, 'I don't translate my own convenience into other people's duties' (17: 175). Despite his self-deprecating statement that he is 'only a decent makeshift' clergyman, we are given a portrait of a non-enthusiast religious man who has a clear-eyed sense of the dangers of egoism.

In Chapter 18, the eventual voting over the appointment of the chaplaincy for the hospital ends in a tie and Lydgate casts the deciding vote for Tyke (18: 186). Bulstrode has brought for support the only clergyman present at the vote, the Rev. Edward Thesiger, a 'moderate evangelical', and Mr Brooke (18: 185). What is remarkable about this chapter is that it depicts a reforming and ostensibly secular body assessing difficult issues of spiritual integrity and remuneration for pastoral duties. The hospital board in effect makes a clerical decision. This was itself a very contentious aspect of the 1830s, as various committees and commissions were appointed by Parliament to reform the Church of England.⁷⁵

That this commendable reform in Middlemarch, the payment of the chaplain for the new hospital, ends up being a highly politicised and sectarian decision reflects Eliot's dispassionate attitude towards the invariably unjust mixture of power, personal interests and religion. The narrator makes it clear that there has been an injustice, observing of Camden Farebrother, 'by dint of admitting of himself that he was too much as other men were, he had become remarkable unlike them in this—that he could excuse others for thinking slightly of him, and could judge impartially of their conduct even when it told against him' (18: 187). The Reverend Farebrother is the only disinterested man in a swirling sea of interests.

After the death of the Reverend Casaubon, it is appropriate that the failing reformer Dr Lydgate brings the virtues of the Reverend Farebrother to Dorothea's attention. Emerging from 'the strain and conflict of self-repression' during her marriage, she has the opportunity to judge for herself who should

fill the living at Lowick (50: 492). Dorothea initially represents the choice between Tyke and Farebrother as the possibility of restoring ‘the times of primitive zeal’ or rescuing Farebrother ‘from his chance-gotten money’ (50: 494–5). She has been reading Tyke’s sermons and agrees that his sermons ‘would be of no use at Lowick’ (50: 495). Pragmatism and a wider perspective of ethics wins the day over religious enthusiasm and Farebrother gains the living at Lowick. The good fortunes of the Rev. Camden Farebrother leave us with the viable possibilities of a tempered Anglicanism in an age of reform.

As Simon During has justly observed, without the academic apparatus we have today and a detailed knowledge of Eliot’s personal life, one can read Eliot’s work as a practical guide for vicars to ‘become more effective parish leaders’.⁷⁶ We should be able to keep the Anglican reader in sight as much as the academic specialist of today. As During remarks, this awareness of the Anglican reader—of Eliot’s need for a variety of Anglican frames to enable her vivid literary depictions of other religious perspectives—and the attention given in the novels to both reassure and challenge, can still be seen in terms of a ‘non-Christian re-vitalizing project’.⁷⁷ Eliot’s secularism directs her to the Church as a historical, social and cultural institution.⁷⁸ As Caleb Garth treats ‘business’ as ‘a religion without the aid of theology’, Eliot treats Anglicanism in the space of literature as ‘a religion without the aid of theology (24: 251).⁷⁹

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- Lovesey, *The Clerical Character in George Eliot's Fiction*.
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