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The Twenty-Third George Eliot Memorial Lecture- 1994

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THE TWENTY-THIRD GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE - 1994

Delivered by Canon Michael Sadgrove, Vice-Provost and Precentor of Coventry Cathedral

'MARY ANN DID NOT GO': Why George Eliot Stayed Away from Church

On Sunday, 2 January 1842, Mary Ann Evans's father wrote in his diary: 'Went to Trinity Church in the forenoon. Miss Lewis went with me. Mary Ann did not go. I stopd the sacrement (sic) and Miss Lewis stopd also.' Two weeks later, again: 'Went to church in the forenoon. Mary Ann did not go to church'.[1]

Robert Evans was perhaps principally interested in making sure that his daughter behaved as was proper for a middle class young woman with eligible prospects. Her scruples may have concerned him less. But there is no disguising the genuine grief he felt at this wayward act of subversion. He and his daughter were barely on speaking terms for two months, communicating only by letter. She wrote to him:

> Such being my very strong convictions, it cannot be a question with any mind of strict integrity, whatever judgment may be passed on their truth, that I could not without vile hypocrisy and a miserable truckling to the smile of the world for the sake of my supposed interests, profess to join in worship which I wholly disapprove. This, and this alone I will not do even for your sake.[2]

What she called her 'holy war' lasted four months. After that, she agreed to conform and resume churchgoing. But for Marian, nothing had changed. She had not reverted to orthodox Christian belief: far from it. For this profoundly inward woman had been rocked to her foundations by a deep spiritual crisis, after which things could never be the same again.

What happened to Marian Evans in Coventry in 1842 was, I believe, of the profoundest importance for her career. Whereas it was Nuneaton that gave the world the woman, it was Coventry, and her loss of faith, that conceived the writer. After that, it was Lewes, the best literary midwife of the nineteenth century, who brought the novelist to birth. For Marian's crisis brought to the surface hitherto repressed energies. It marked the beginning of her true creativity, which must surely be connected to her relentless questioning of both the personal and public *status quo*.

Marian's great refusal is of a piece with her later life. It prefigured the outrage she caused when she chose to live with George Henry Lewes. We could say that life for her was more complex, more elusive, than conventional wisdom could see, entailing a difficult balanc-

ing act between public morality and private faith, a frequent theme in her novels. As she has Romola put it,

> The law was sacred, yes; but the rebellion might be sacred too. It flashed upon her mind that the problem before her was .... the problem where the sacredness of obedience ended, and where the sacredness of rebellion began.

It is at least plausible that had Marian Evans gone to church that day, we might never have had George Eliot the novelist. Instead, we should have had a virtuous woman of impeccable evangelical orthodoxy and irreproachable habits. She would have married well and borne seven children. But she might have left not the slightest trace in history at all.

....

The decade of the 1840s was a time of bitter religious dispute. The churches were already losing their grip on the population, partly as a result of the industrial revolution and the growth of cities. But for many, the difficulties with religion were more intellectual. Charles Darwin had yet to write *The Origin of Species* that was to bring the science-and-religion debate to a head. But Charles Lyell's *Elements of Geology* had been published in the early 1830s. This book suggested that the evidence of geology pointed to a world far older than the six thousand years suggested by Genesis. What science was disclosing was that the observable universe no longer fitted the narrow categories of conventional dogma.

This crisis of faith brought its own regrets. Matthew Arnold, born three years after Marian Evans, became the spokesman of this spiritual malaise:

> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world.

There is no poem that so perceptively catches the mood of the nineteenth century's religious *Angst* as *Dover Beach*: both its despair at ever finding meaning in the modern world; and its incurable nostalgia for the certainties of the past. Like Matthew Arnold, Marian found herself on Dover Beach, gazing into the void. She had Coventry to thank for that. In 1841, when she had lived at Bird Grove for only a few months, she met Charles and Cara Bray, and Cara's family the Hennells. At the Brays' home at Rosehill, she fell under the influence of free thought. It was said that 'everyone who came to Coventry with a queer mission....or was supposed to be a "little cracked" was sent up to Rosehill, where

they all sat on a bearskin under an acacia tree, talking endlessly about phrenology, labour co-operatives, the repeal of the Corn Laws and how the new science of geology had undermined the sanctity of holy writ.'[2]

Charles Hennell's book *An Inquiry concerning the Origins of Christianity* had been published in 1838. This painstakingly researched book was a key influence on the young woman's mind. So was the German theologian David Friedrich Strauss's book, *Das Leben Jesu*, a pioneering work in the new discipline of higher criticism. Strauss attempted to reinterpret Christianity in a non-supernatural way by removing the mythological accretions he saw in the gospels, so as to discover a historical Jesus nineteenth century people could believe in. In 1839, at Charles Hennell's invitation, Marian began to translate it into English. We can safely assume that by then she was moving swiftly away from Calvinism. Her evangelical friends tried to win her back, but in vain.

....

In Mary Ann's letter to her father, she talks about her loathing of hypocrisy. There is an almost apostolic zeal here that owes more than a little to what she had learned at the evangelical school of Mrs Wallington, and the Calvinistic establishment of the Misses Franklin. Evangelical belief looked for a personal relationship with God, a radical honesty that refused to hide behind rituals or dogmas. Churchgoing as such was of no virtue at all, said the leaders of the evangelical awakening at the end of the eighteenth century, unless it expressed 'truth in the inward parts'. The perennial danger of organized religion was that it so easily led to hypocrisy, literally 'play acting'. From this well of self-examination of inward motive and disposition, Marian had drunk deep.

Moreover, evangelicalism taught that in Christ, every human being was equal before God, accepted not because of their status or achievements but solely on account of God's love. It stressed the value of each individual, and emphasized the importance of subjective feeling. It proclaimed that no one else could believe on your behalf, do your thinking for you. This is very much a hall-mark of Marian's world view. She wrote in the following year to Sarah Hennell:

> Speculative truth begins to appear but a shadow of individual minds, agreement between intellects seems unattainable, and we turn to the truth of feeling as the only universal bond of union.[3]

Organized religion was just too facile. 'Falsehood is so easy, truth is so difficult' she writes in *Adam Bede*. For her, as for John Henry Newman on the brink of joining the Church of Rome three years later, it was 'the parting of friends'.

But evangelical belief was still on the agenda in the 1850s. From the period of *Scenes of Clerical Life* comes the piece of writing that first convinced George Henry Lewes of her genius.

> Given, a man with moderate intellect, a moral standard not higher than the average, some rhetorical affluence and great glibness of speech, what is the career in which, without the aid of birth and money, he may most easily attain power and reputation in English society? What is the Goshen of mediocrity in which a smattering of science and learning will pass for profound instruction, where platitudes will be accepted as wisdom, bigoted narrowness as holy zeal, unctuous egoism as God-given piety? Let such a man become an evangelical preacher; he will then find it possible to reconcile small ability with great ambition, superficial knowledge with the prestige of erudition, a middling morale with a high reputation for sanctity.[4]

What occasioned this piece was the preaching of Dr John Cumming, a Scottish Presbyterian who drew large crowds at his London chapel through his extravagant account of Bible prophecy. Mary Ann Evans is unsparing in her condemnation of Dr Cumming, of the rhetoric of what we now call fundamentalism with its preoccupation with hell, its lack of charity, its superficial notion of truth and its subversion of personal responsibility and public morality. But what we also overhear is Mary Ann Evans confronting her own past, the convert freethinker disowning what she perhaps only half realizes will always be a part of herself.

What, then, *was* the faith of the mature Marian Evans?

I have suggested that George Eliot's journey from faith to doubt embodies the profound changes in a society wrestling with the great religious questions of the nineteenth century. It is difficult to be too precise, however, about the exact nature of her own beliefs. On the one hand, there are plenty of indications that she abandoned all belief in a supernatural God, adopting instead a positivist, Comtean 'religion of humanity' in which the ethic of Christianity, shorn of its metaphysic, becomes the governing principle. In the article I have just quoted, she writes:

> The idea of God is really moral in its influence – it really cherishes all that is best and loveliest in man when God is contemplated as sympathizing with the pure elements of human feeling, as possessing infinitely all those attributes which we recognize to be moral in humanity. In this light, the idea of God and the sense of His presence intensify all noble feeling, and encourage all noble effort.

There is the famous story recounted by Frederic Myers of their meeting in 1873:

> Taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet calls of men - the words *God, Immortality, Duty,* pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first* how unbelievable was the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the

> *third*.... I seemed to be gazing on a sanctuary with no Presence to hallow it, and heaven left empty of a God.[5]

Finally, there is the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach's book *The Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach believed that religion could be collapsed into 'consciousness', and 'God' was but the outward projection of human awareness. Marian's translation of this book was occupying her in the 1850s, a decade during which her convictions were arriving at stability after the foment of the 1840s. Significantly, this is her only book to bear her own name on the title page – as if to say that the Feuerbachian version of religion was, so far as she was concerned, her final position.

On the other hand, her interest in the figure of Jesus is an important clue to her inner self. There is the well known story of how Marian, immersed in Strauss and getting bogged down, like Casaubon, in this key to all mythologies, became 'Strauss-sick'. Her antidote was to contemplate a statue of Christ. This resonates with the scene in *Mill on the Floss*, where Maggie, in the aftermath of the crisis that has ruined the Tullivers, goes in search of something to read. Her brother's trunk of school books yields only Latin, Euclid and Logic. But on the window sill, unnoticed until now, she finds 'a little, old, clumsy book' which turns out to be Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*.

> A strange thrill of awe passed through Maggie while she read, as if she had been wakened in the night by a strain of solemn music, telling of beings whose souls had been astir while hers was in stupor....Here...was a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets – here was a sublime height to be reached...here was insight and strength.

There is more than an echo here of the classic experience of evangelical conversion, as John Wesley had recounted it when he told of his heart being 'strangely warmed' at Aldersgate Street. Maggie's soul, adrift on the chaotic streams of her emotional life, begins to find an anchor. She discovers the strength to renounce Stephen's seductions, to rescue Tom. In *The Mill*, George Eliot quotes the text of *The Imitation of Christ* at length. It is said that this well-thumbed book was found by George Eliot when she died, along with her Bible. She could, it seems, endorse the moral and spiritual insights she saw in Christ's teaching, even if she could not worship him.

Despite the clear autobiographical material in *The Mill*, we must not assume that Maggie's faith is necessarily that of Marian Evans. Nevertheless, in the sympathetic light in which personal religion is portrayed in her novels, 'atheism' seems too crude a word to describe her own finely nuanced religious position. From the portrayal of clergy in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Graham Handley concludes that 'fifteen years after her rejection of her faith George Eliot could look back with tolerance, compassion, understanding and irony to what she had left behind.'[6] The highly personal mysticism of 'The Choir Invisible', while hardly an orthodox Christian statement, cannot easily be described as pure Feuerbach either. Religion seems to have meant the call she heard in the teaching of Jesus to personal

responsibility and moral seriousness. It was easy for Matthew Arnold to caricature that kind of religion as 'morality tinged with emotion'. But for Marian, the word 'duty' connoted the life task of achieving personal authenticity. It was a profoundly religious vocation.

What happened to Marian Evans in 1842 when she 'did not go' to church cannot simply be described as a rejection of faith, for it was also the prelude to a new religious awareness. As a novelist, hers is a somewhat different greatness from Charles Dickens, whose novels strike one as remarkably untouched by any spiritual vision, despite their marvellous perception of the often unobserved fortunes of men, women and children. She is different again from another supreme humourist, Anthony Trollope, whose interest in religion is somehow the more detached view of the professional clergy-watcher. Perhaps she is more akin to Thomas Hardy who, like her, had lost confidence in orthodox religion; but not his perception, albeit deeply pessimistic, of that mysterious presence – call it God, call it destiny – at work in the inscrutable changes and chances of life.

The art of both novelist and priest is to read the map of the human heart, to glimpse what *Daniel Deronda* calls the 'larger life' that transcends our present existence. The common vocation is to explore meanings, make connections. George Eliot's world view is not religious in the conventional sense. But there is a fire in the belly that is religious in all but name. Our own vision of life would be the poorer without her.

Notes

1. Robert Evans's Journal 1842; cited Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot. A Biography* (Harmondsworth, 1985), 40.

2. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), I, 128-30.

3. *Letters*, I, 162

4. 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming' (1855) in *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford, 1992), 138.

5. *Century Magazine* 23, November 1881, 62-3; cited Haight, *op. cit.*, 464.

6. Graham Handley, *George Eliot's Midlands: Passion in Exile* (London, 1991), 109.

Michael Sadgrove has had to omit a great deal from the edited version of his lecture. However, he has provided the Fellowship with the full text, which can be borrowed from the Secretary.