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Kathryn Hughes

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WREATH-LAYING IN POETS' CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY

22 JULY 2010

The Guest of Honour was Kathryn Hughes, Professor of Life Writing at the University of East Anglia. She gave the following Address:

It seems extraordinary to think that 150 years ago Mary Ann Evans, a young woman with very few resources apart from a strong conscience and an enquiring mind, almost ruined her life by revealing to her father that she was no longer certain that the Bible was the literal word of God. Might it not instead be the work of men, she wondered, reaching out to report their sense of God at work in their own lives? Was it not, in fact, a record of human rather than divine history?

For this piece of heresy, as we know, Mary Ann endured a painful estrangement from her family which never really quite healed. Thirty years later, in the closing days of 1880, the Dean of Westminster made it discreetly but firmly clear that the Abbey could not receive her body, the resting place of so many other great literary artists including Samuel Johnson and Charles Dickens.

George Eliot, as she now was, had made a career – a great one – by creating a moral universe in her novels in which goodness was not dependent on belief in God. Instead, acts of kindness towards other people and an endurance of the pain and suffering that everyday life brings were, for her, the real spiritual teachers.

In the years following Eliot's death churchmen – from non-conformist backgrounds as well as Anglican – debated keenly whether or not she was in fact a Christian manqué. Her first cousin once removed, William Mottram, a Methodist turned Congregationalist minister, wrestled with the problem in a book he wrote in 1905, clearly wishing desperately that Eliot could be counted a Christian but, being also a man of strict conscience, having to admit regretfully that she was not. Still he was able to console himself with the thought that

In her darkest hour of unbelief I am of opinion that George Eliot was much more Christian than she knew, and that the influence of her past Christian experience was never entirely lost.

A family letter, belonging to the George Eliot Fellowship, reveals that Eliot's Anglican relatives were having the exact same conversation amongst themselves. In one such letter written in the 1890s her niece's husband, the Rev Griffiths writes to his brother-in-law, Rev Frederick Evans of Bedworth, saying

I quite think with you that George Eliot was on her way back [to the Church] and indeed that she had never really wandered so far as she seemed even herself to have done.

Such debates seems extraordinary to us now. For it is quite possible that today Eliot's blend of reverence towards the founding texts of Christianity together with a whole-hearted endorsement of its teachings would mean that she would be welcomed as a member of any Sunday Congregation. Indeed, had she not had strong views about the role of women in public

life, it's not impossible to imagine her today ordained as a priest or, who knows, eventually consecrated a Bishop.

And yet, perhaps we should not regret too much that in 1880 her body could not be received at the Abbey. For, as the situation stands, we have a perfect representation both of her life and her legacy. There is the non-conformist side, represented by what used to be colloquially known as the Unbelievers bit of Highgate Cemetery where many of you were earlier this afternoon. Here Eliot lies in unconsecrated ground amongst the skeptics and the rebels, the questioners and the provocateurs. She also, of course, lies adjacent to George Henry Lewes, the man whom she loved for twenty-five years. It was in truth her irregular, that is unmarried, relationship with him that was, perhaps, more of a sticking point with the Anglican Establishment than her precise position on revealed religion.

Yet now, for the past thirty years, thanks to the generosity of Westminster Abbey, Eliot is also commemorated with this plaque, taking her place amongst the Immortals and, perhaps just as crucially, allowing us to acknowledge how important Christianity remained in her life and thought, both as an inherited culture and habit of feeling, but also as a continuing source of intellectual and spiritual nourishment. And also, it is worth recalling, as a kind of literary model. Right through her life she read the Bible, so that its particular rhythms and cadences became grafted onto her own stately style.

Perhaps, though, we should not worry too much about these distinctions, this duality. For it was exactly this kind of intellectual, cultural and theological hair-splitting that Eliot found not simply distasteful but actually beside the point. In her books she shows us time after time that what matters is not dogma, which tends always to be divisive, but rather those human sympathies that bring us all closer together. Who can forget those odd alliances across canyons of faith, gender or class which Eliot shows us to be nourishing and vital, perhaps precisely because of their unlikeliness? Rev Irwine and Dinah Morris, Janet Dempster and Rev Tryan, Dolly Winthrop and Silas Marner, Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth.

Although we are drawn, naturally and properly, to commemorate Eliot in particular places such as Highgate Cemetery and Westminster Abbey, we know that although, for her, place was paramount, it was people who actually mattered. If she could be said to have a religion it was perhaps the religion of Humanity, not in the rather grand way that other philosophers used the term in the nineteenth century, but in an everyday sense that we can all understand. Here, in a passage from her first novel *Adam Bede*, George Eliot explains that the most fundamental aspect of any faith, no matter what particular name you care to give it, is sympathy for people just as they are rather than how we would like them to be.

These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people—amongst whom your life is passed—that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience.