

BETWEEN FAITH AND DOUBT: THE ROLE OF FICTION

In Samuel Butler's impressive novel, *The Way of All Flesh*, published posthumously in 1903, we are presented with the life story of a young British student of theology at Cambridge University, who in the late 1850s, is confronted with recent results of science. We are told that up till that moment he had never felt any doubts concerning his Christian faith. Never had he seen anyone who had doubts, nor had he read anything which made him doubt the historical character of the miracles in the Old and New Testament.

Now, however, this will change. Seeds of scepticism will be sown in his mind due to Darwin's *Origin of Species* of 1859, soon to be followed by *Essays and Reviews* of 1860, that famous collection of seven essays that made England fully aware of the inroads made in traditional theology by German Higher Criticism. Contemporaries liked to call the authors of those essays 'Seven Against Christ'. To be 'against Christ' is characteristic of the manner in which people looked upon scholars who propagated the new biblical criticism.

The effects of new scientific advances, exemplified by Darwinism and Higher Criticism, sooner or later made themselves felt in the lives of nineteenth-century students of theology. In the case of Butler's hero, Ernest Pontifex, these effects manifested themselves somewhat later, after he had first explored Evangelicalism and then was attracted to High Church sentiments. His deconversion, as we may call his farewell to traditional faith, took place as the result of reading subversive books, including a slightly older work by Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*

– a book of 1844 but still widely read in later decades. There is also the deep impact of a conversation with a freethinker who admonishes him to compare the Gospel stories on the Resurrection of Jesus. In the end Ernest Pontifex decides to leave the ministry, and starts living a life of secular happiness.

The Way of All Flesh is partly an autobiographical account and among other things, tells of Samuel Butler's own battle against Christianity. Butler started to write this novel about 1872, working intermittently on it during the next decades; he never saw it in print, as it was published a year after he died. *The Way of All Flesh* is regarded by literary historians as 'an extremely sharp portrait of a Victorian clerical family'. More specifically, it is a sharp portrait of the hostile relationship between father and son, a clerical father whose tyrannical behaviour marks his son's personality from the moment he first sets foot on earth ('My father hated me and I hated him'). Somehow this enmity between father and son is echoed in Butler's battle against religion, in which the earthly father and the Heavenly Father have become mixed up.

The most elaborate expression of this theme, the hostile relationship between a father and son within a religious context, we find in an autobiographical novel that appeared only four years after Butler's *Way of all Flesh*, and which is simply entitled *Father and Son* (1907), written by Edmond Gosse, son of the eminent botanist Philip Gosse, a friend of Darwin's. It is, as the sub-title says, 'a study of two temperaments', and the motto that adorns the title-page is a quote of Schopenhauer's: 'Der Glaube ist wie die Liebe; er lässt sich nicht erzwingen' -- a motto that would apply to so many nineteenth-century novels on religion. If we wish to feel the effects of science, and of Darwinism in particular, upon nineteenth-century individuals who had been reared in an atmosphere of strict Calvinism, Gosse's *Father and Son* can serve as the perfect introduction.

Novels such as *The Way of All Flesh* and *Father and Son* appealed to a wide reading public, and they still have that appeal a century later. They revolve around the problems with belief in Christianity that were so much on the minds of people living in the Victorian era. By 1850 religious faith had become a major problem indeed, much more so, it seems, than in any preceding era. The issue of Christianity's credibility had become acute. Or, as a contemporary observed in the early 1870s, 'the balance of parties in Christendom has gradually changed during the last few generations – the Church losing, and "Free Thought" gaining; so that by far the large proportion of intellectual activity now stands outside Christianity in all the most civilized countries of Europe'. It seemed as if Christianity was finally to disappear from the world's stage. Some went so far as to announce 'God's funeral', as Thomas Hardy did in one of his famous poems. A godless world seemed to loom on the horizon.

Now contemporary scholars were well aware that, whether they liked it or not, the status of the Christian religion, its role in society, underwent serious changes. However, many scholars preferred to keep their knowledge about new scientific developments to themselves – at any rate for the time being. They preferred not to see, so they tell us, the populace confronted with all sorts of doubts and questions about the Christian faith – to which they were subjected themselves.

But that was not to be: popularization of science was high on the cultural agenda of the Victorian era. Popularization of science (taken in the broadest sense) is, in fact, a significant feature of nineteenth-century cultural and social history. Results of science were made known to the general public, through various means such as public lectures (we know from autobiographical accounts the great impact of attendance of such public

lectures on individuals), periodicals, cheap pamphlets and brochures, and, last but not least, through fiction.

This last instrument of popularization of science brings me to the topic of my paper. Restricting myself to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I think that fiction of that period can throw can be particularly illuminating for the crisis of christendom in that era. The question whether secularization did in fact take place in the Victorian era, or the question whether the concept of secularization makes any sense at all -- questions which lately have been hotly debated by sociologists and historians now that God's funeral seems to have been delayed --, may be further clarified by including contemporary fiction in our historical research.

Fiction has been largely neglected by historians of Christianity, which is a pity since novels can be very instructive to those of us who want to get to know the impact of theology, of religion, on everyday life, on individuals, on families, on communities. Novels provide us with abundant details about the conflicts, doubts, and the painful decisions occurring in so many Victorian lives due to scientific and technological advances, so that it seems hard to deny any feelings of religious crisis -- whether we label it secularization or not.

Reading nineteenth-century fiction makes one realize the far-reaching implications of theological quarrels, of church schisms, of the role of clergymen. Its tone can be moving or brilliantly ironic, at any rate, the religious scene is depicted in a manner that surpasses any scholarly textbook. Of course there is no doubt that fiction and academic textbooks are two quite different genres, and should be read and assessed in different ways. Yet academic religious history would undoubtedly benefit from a study of religious fiction and it is from this perspective of religious and cultural history

that I wish to approach the topic. So I fully agree with the English historian Bernard Reardon who remarks that 'to appreciate fully the Victorians' concern over the problem of religious belief one must look beyond the theologians and philosophers to the writers of imaginative literature, to the poets and novelists of the age'.

Role of Victorian novels: documents of their age

The nineteenth century was the era in which the novel, a literary genre born in the eighteenth century, came of age. Through this genre novelists had an opportunity to disseminate their views on religious, social and moral topics among a wide audience, thus contributing to a considerable extent to the public opinion. The formation of public opinion - a phenomenon so well-known and much-used in our own day - was then beginning to receive the full attention of intellectuals and policy makers. They realized the importance of mobilizing public opinion. Novels could - and did - play a role in this process.

Of course, many authors wrote novels with purely literary intentions. Yet there were quite a few novelists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who regarded the novel as a suitable vehicle for their own message. Such 'novels with a message' or didactical novels (in Dutch: 'tendensromans'; French: 'romans à thèse') can be considered significant documents of their age. Their literary merit varied: from a literary perspective these novels are often dismissed as being of no value, and we do not find them listed in the literary canon. They did not stand the test of time and most novels are now safely tucked away on shelves in university libraries - or one can stumble across them in second-hand bookshops where they are in a heap on the floor.

Only a few novels are still being reprinted; apparently some publishers feel that today there are still readers for them out there.

Whatever their literary status, these Victorian 'novels with a message' allow us to get the feel of the religious temperament of their age. Let us not forget that numerous novels that today are completely forgotten today enjoyed an immense popularity in the past, being the talk of the day, occasioning fierce controversies, going through many editions and being translated into various languages, while their authors went on triumphant lecture tours in Europe and the United States. From this we can infer, among other things, that to be listed in a literary canon is merely one criterium to measure success; it also makes us acutely aware that maybe in a hundred years nobody will have the slightest idea who Dan Brown was.

Victorian fiction affords us insight into fundamental issues that were hotly debated in the nineteenth century. It serves as a mirror of mentalities, of religious sensibilities and moods, reflecting important changes in the religious domain. But that is only one side of the coin. Books have readers, and readers are affected by what they read. Thus fiction appears actively to contribute to cultural and religious changes, both in the lives of individuals and in society at large. Here we meet with the intricate problem of the dynamics between author and reader, text and society, a matter which is quite complicated and which I will leave aside in this lecture.

However, let me mention one instance to illustrate the impact of reading on an individual and, consequently, on Dutch society. A young Protestant minister, who in Leiden had come under the spell of modern theology and had become a fervent adherent of religious liberalism/modernism, changed his theological mind after reading an English novel – a famous novel at that time, by the novelist Charlotte Yonge, entitled *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853). It was

this religious novel which radically and permanently transformed that Dutch clergyman's notions on the role of the church. He said goodbye to modernism and went on to become the great protagonist of neo-Calvinism in our country – a neo-Calvinism which he propagated by such modern means as a political party, a university, periodicals and weeklies. Some of you will have guessed by now whom is meant here: Abraham Kuyper. This prominent theologian and politician always acknowledged the role of *The Heir of Redclyffe* in his religious transformation; a transformation which had such profound effects on Dutch society.

Contemporaries were quite aware of the impact of fiction. Orthodox believers feared the continuous stream of novels in which, for example, the story of disintegration of faith was told as shown to have a happy ending, especially if clergymen were closely involved in this loss of faith. Loss of faith is a central theme in the religious novel of the Victorian era. But besides loss there is also gain. What is gained by this farewell to the faith of one's childhood? That is one of the basic questions in many novels. The reader follows the quest of the novels' heroes and heroines for attractive alternatives to fill the spiritual vacuum. Among those alternatives we find religious liberalism – or modernism, as it was often called -, agnosticism (a label coined in the nineteenth century) or outright atheism, socialism or Christian Science, theosophy or buddhism, spiritism, all those 'little religions' ('les petites religions', Jules Bois), or even, after a spiritual odyssey, a return to the (seemingly) safe haven of orthodox faith.

The choice for any of these alternatives is described as a relief, yet we often detect feelings of nostalgia for what has been lost forever. That nostalgic sentiment runs through the novels of the nineteenth-century expert on loss of faith, George Eliot, or Mary Ann/Marian Evans (1819-1880). George Eliot

makes us feel the pain caused by those changes from old to new worlds, never in an imposing manner, but always with great subtlety hinting at a nostalgia for a pious past. She herself grew up in a pious Evangelical home.



George Eliot

In the 1840s, when she was in her twenties, Marian Evans turned her back on the Church and never returned. She was the one who translated David Friedrich Strauss' *Life of Jesus*, Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* as well as Spinoza's *Ethics* into English, thus introducing these three heroes of the new, modern world to the English public. She knew German, which was exceptional at the time for someone living in England, and she kept abreast of German biblical criticism (as she did of Judaism in Germany, as can be inferred from her novel *Daniel Deronda*, 1876). In *Middlemarch*, her novel of 1872 ('one of the few English novels written for grown-up people', Virginia Woolf), she manages to put her own scholarship to good use. And in this novel it is German biblical criticism that serves as an instrument to undermine traditional belief.

Why did traditionalist believers fear novels about loss of faith? Maybe we sometimes tend to forget that until recent times in Western culture religion was seen as closely related to morality. Religion guaranteed a stable moral society.

Traditional belief and moral conduct were thought to be inextricably linked. This implied that loss of traditional belief meant loss of morality. Or, to say it positively, freethought, agnosticism, atheism, meant sheer immorality. However, in quite a few nineteenth-century novels we encounter freethinking or agnostic protagonists acting according to high moral standards, while orthodox Christians tend to be depicted as despicable examples of immoral behaviour.

This supposed link between religion and morality explains the orthodox fear of the so-called modern novel. In the Netherlands, for example, there was a call for book censure in the early twentieth century, and so *De Boekenschouw* was established in 1906, a Roman Catholic periodical with the sole aim of warning its readers for modern and/or obscene fiction. Although nobody advocated public burnings of novels as had happened some fifty years earlier in Oxford to *The Nemesis of Faith* by James Anthony Froude (1849), or the more recent burning of Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure* by an Anglican Bishop (1896), we still feel that early twentieth-century orthodox Christianity in the Netherlands, both of Roman Catholic and Protestant origins, considered fiction on 'modern' topics a great danger to society.

The upsurge of religious modernism

As I said just now, when people abandoned traditional Christian belief they were confronted with an impressive array of alternatives to traditional Christianity. Religious liberalism or modernism was one of those alternatives. In numerous novels of the Victorian era men – and a few women – turn to modernism, which is depicted as the outcome of the growing doubts to which they had fallen prey. Modernism may be put forward as a definite state of mind, but quite often it turns out to be merely a

phase of transition to agnosticism, scepticism, freethought, or socialism; on the other hand, it might even end in a return to orthodox faith.

What does this so-called modernism represent? Let me just quote the famous English literary critic and educationalist Matthew Arnold, who, in the 1870s, in an assessment of the state of contemporary society, made the following observation: 'Two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to any body with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do without it; the other, that they cannot do with it as it is'. So, according to Matthew Arnold the Christian religion should be preserved, yet it should be preserved in a fresh version. If Christianity were to be maintained - and he was convinced that it should be -, it ought to be made up-to-date, that is, it should be adapted to the 'needs of the times', to the 'Zeitgeist' - whatever that might imply.

Matthew Arnold's observation can be taken as the programme of religious modernism in a nutshell: the wish to maintain the Christian religion but in a novel fashion adapted to the modern era. Arnold's view was shared by many all over Europe and the United States. Their movement is commonly labelled 'religious liberalism' or '(religious) modernism'. Now we should be careful when using those labels. It should be remembered, for example, that in the Roman Catholic tradition liberalism and modernism mean something quite different as compared to Protestantism. And in a wider sense, a similar observation can be made with regard to other religions, such as Judaism and Islam. So there is an impressive diversity, at times even a confusing diversity, of liberalisms and modernisms in nineteenth- and twentieth-century religion.

The ideal of modernism was to design a fresh version of Christianity, accommodated to modern times. One thing was clear: modernization implied that religion ought to keep up with modern science, that is, with the advances

of historical, biblical, natural social sciences. The natural sciences were looked upon as a methodological model for the humanities, including theology. Moreover, a growing number of believers felt that recent results of sciences such as geology, paleontology, zoology, biology and anatomy, should be incorporated into religious thought. Geology in particular became a formidable factor in discussions about religion. As a consequence, the modernists discarded any supernatural element from their faith. They rejected Christ's divinity, regarding Jesus as a mere human being, they desacralized the Bible, taking it as a human, secular book to be studied with the philological and literary instruments of secular scholarship.

All in all, we may say that the desacralization is a major feature of religious modernism. What struck contemporary onlookers as highly surprising, if not entirely incomprehensible, is that those modernists wanted to remain loyal members of the Church. It was their strenuous effort to combine science, faith, and ecclesiastical loyalty which made modernism a popular object of polemics in the hands of both orthodox Christians and freethinkers. Both accused the modernizers, who disbelieved basic tenets of the Christian faith yet clung to the Church, of dishonest conduct.

Religious modernism and the novel in the Netherlands

The modernist longing for a viable faith, consonant with modern science, is a recurring theme in nineteenth-century fiction. Novelists treat the modernist ideal either with sympathy, or they denounce it as an intellectually and morally unhealthy compromise between religion and science. In the Netherlands we see both attitudes.

Interestingly, it has been a novel that had made known the ideals of modernism to the wider Dutch public. The *Letters about the Bible*, first

published in a serialized version in a newspaper/periodical, and later made into a book, popularized modern views in an accessible manner. The author of this epistolary novel was Conrad Busken Huet, minister of the Walloon Church at Haarlem. His *Letters about the Bible*, which were published in 1857 and 1858, contain the literary exchanges between a brother and sister, the latter asking her brother questions about actual theological issues such as miracles, contradictions in the Bible etcetera. He answers her confidently as a true adherent of modernism. Together with the *Leekedichtjens* by the poet and clergyman De Genestet, Busken Huet's *Letters about the Bible* have been the major instrument in popularizing modernism in the Netherlands.

Other adherents of the modernist movement followed in Busken Huet's footsteps. His friend and colleague Allard Pierson, for example, tried his hand at a novel which appeared in 1866, under the title *Adriaan de Merival*. As a literary work the novel is disappointing, which is a bit of a surprise as Allard Pierson was a gifted writer. However, for us, students of religious history, the novel is not without interest in its description of the inner development of a young Protestant minister of liberal views who is landed in a traditional, orthodox-minded congregation in rural surroundings. There are conversations with the old minister who is on the brink of retirement, conversations that show the growing gap between old and new worlds. We also listen in on discussions between the young liberal clergyman and a local freethinker. This amiable freethinker, Dr. Beelen, belongs to the medical profession.

Here we meet with one of the clichés of nineteenth-century religious fiction. Harking back to an age-old tradition, medical doctors are portrayed as freethinkers and atheists. We find an explanation for this position in the misery with which doctors are confronted due to their profession. The

confrontation with deep misery makes doctors wonder about God's intentions with his Creation and his creatures; doubts arise as to whether there is a God at all. So it is the question on theodicy that turns medical people away from belief. Their farewell to faith does not imply loose morals. On the contrary, doctors are commonly described as individuals with the highest moral standards. The compatibility of agnosticism or atheism and superb ethics starts even to make orthodox people doubt about their own belief, as we see, for example, in novels by the Dutch author Anna de Savornin Lohman (1868-1930) (the 'Dutch George Eliot').

The freethinking doctor in Allard Pierson's *Adriaan de Merival* seems to pronounce statements not unlike those of Pierson himself. Now this novel was published a year after Allard Pierson had discarded the cloth. In 1865 he laid down the ministry of the Walloon Church at Rotterdam. Here he also followed in Busken Huet's footsteps, since Busken Huet had taken the same decision three years earlier. Both former modernist ministers would convert to agnosticism in due time.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that both Busken Huet and Allard Pierson, first as modernists and then as freethinkers, highly admired the work of George Eliot and wished to introduce her work to the Dutch public. Busken Huet appears to have translated Eliot's literary debut *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857/58) into Dutch; it appeared under the title *Herders en schapen* (1861). Busken Huet's fiancé and soon to be wife, Anne van den Tholl, devoted her energies to a Dutch translation of another acclaimed novel by George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, a translation which she undertook on the request of Allard Pierson. And it was Pierson who wrote the preface to her Dutch version of *Adam Bede*, in which he revealed why one might appreciate George Eliot's work. 'Reading George Eliot', Pierson writes, 'ensures the reader a sense of

reconciliation, and at times even more than that: it gives one a sense of heightened zest for living; its least effect is an inclination to that irony which is an indispensable element of wisdom'.

As Busken Huet and Pierson show, modern theologians, including modern theologians who turned to freethought and agnosticism, took up the art of writing novels themselves while they also took care of making foreign literature known to their countrymen through translations, recommendations, articles, reviews etcetera. The translation industry was flourishing indeed in the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. It should be interesting to make an inventory of novels on the crisis of the Christian faith that so abundantly came on the market in translations, as well as investigate the background of the translators, among whom were a striking number of women.

Robert Elsmere: the prototypical modern theologian

Talking of women, one of the most successful novels on questions about belief and unbelief in the second half of the nineteenth century was written by a woman. It was entitled *Robert Elsmere*, after the hero of the story. Its author is Mary Arnold, a niece of Matthew Arnold, usually known (after her marriage to Humphry Ward) as Mrs Humphry Ward. In 1888 Mary Ward became a national and international celebrity when *Robert Elsmere* was published. It became a bestseller. Within a year the novel was reprinted twenty times in England. It was also a great success on the Continent and especially in the United States, where hundreds of thousands of copies were sold within a year. In 1908 Mary Ward, on a visit to the United States and Canada, was received at the White House where president Theodore Roosevelt had a talk with her about religion and theology. In 1910 he returned the visit and came to see her in

London. All this because of her novel of 1888, *Robert Elsmere*. What made it such a huge success?



Mary Ward

In *Robert Elsmere* Mary Ward shows us how a young, optimistic Anglican vicar in a small village in the countryside turns into the founder of a non-denominational brotherhood for the working class in London's East End. He is married to a devout Evangelical wife, Catherine. Her serious piety is an important element in the novel as it will clash with Elsmere's changing religious views. We see him gradually being haunted by religious doubts. Elsmere's 'honest doubt' is caused by his study of early French history. When reading stories about saintly bishops and their miracles, he begins to wonder whether the testimonies of those miracles are sound enough. Or do we have to regard such stories about saints as an expression of superstition? Slowly Elsmere starts to realize that similar questions should be asked with regard to the Biblical stories. It leads him to the rather painful conclusion that he should consider Biblical miracles as a merely natural product of the human imagination. Moreover, Jesus becomes a special human being, an ethical example par excellence. Whatever is discarded of traditional belief, the ethical moment of Christianity is fully maintained. The conflicts in Elsmere's mind and soul, the conflicts with Catherine's Evangelical orthodox faith – she cannot embrace

Elsmere's newly found religion – are very well depicted in the novel. It is in those passages that we deeply feel the human dimension of the theological transformations of the Victorian era.

Bible criticism is of the utmost importance in Elsmere's crisis. Of course the two heroes of nineteenth-century biblical criticism are present in the novel: David Friedrich Strauss and Ernest Renan, the French Catholic scholar, author of an equally famous *Vie de Jésus* (1863). Ernest Renan, whom Mary Ward knew personally, thought he had – at least partly – served as a model for Robert Elsmere. Perhaps it comes as a bit of a surprise that Darwinism does not play a primary role in Elsmere's religious crisis. Certainly, Darwin's ideas are, as he says, a revelation to him, but it is a revelation which cannot save man: 'we are not saved by Darwinism'.

At any rate, in line with Matthew Arnold's observation (the author's uncle), Elsmere wants to preserve the Christian religion but not in the form as it is. The trouble is, of course, that if you devise a fresh version, you start to wonder whether that new version can still be called Christian. Elsmere's new creed is a non-theological, humanist form of Christendom. In London, where he establishes his 'New Brotherhood of Christ', he starts several projects, among them a scientific Sunday school where pupils could occupy themselves with chemical and electrical experiments. He also established a botany class. Both projects are a huge success. And in order to counter freethinkers who appreciate Socrates or Buddha or Marcus Aurelius higher than Jesus, he also gives talks on the 'claim of Jesus upon modern life'. All these successful activities, however, are not to last long: soon Mary Ward has Elsmere dying from tuberculosis.

Robert Elsmere became the subject of sermons, articles, and a play (in the United States). Its impact was even greater when the prime minister

William Gladstone wrote a lengthy review of the novel in the prominent periodical *The Nineteenth Century*. While applauding Mary Ward's talents, Gladstone also criticised her for having made the arguments of the sceptic much stronger than that of the traditional Christian: 'It must be obvious to every reader that in the great duel between the old faith and the new, as it is fought in *Robert Elsmere*, there is a great inequality in the distribution of arms. Reasoning is the weapon of the new scheme; emotion the sole resource of the old'. Gladstone was obsessed with the novel, so his friends tell us, and he had a personal talk with its author in Keble College, Oxford. She stood up to his criticism, both verbally and in print.

On the wave of Mary Ward's success similar stories about elsmesian figures appeared on the literary market; let me just mention the famous American novel by Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, 1896. 'Elsemerism' became the label for the phenomenon of ministers who left the ministry due to their deconversion to agnosticism or, as in *Elsmere's* case, a kind of socialism.

Here we encounter an interesting aspect of *Elsmere*: the turn from modernist views to a form of socialism. The notion of socialism came to be introduced in fiction from the 1870s onwards, it seems. Readers of fiction had become fully aware of the social consequences of on reading *The History of Joshua Davidson*, by yet again another female novelist, Eliza Lynn Linton. Her story became a huge success, and created quite an upheaval. It was the prominent Dutch freethinker Carel Vosmaer who took care of a Dutch translation, while the Leiden modernist professor of Church History, L.W.E. Rauwenhoff toured the country delivering lectures on Linton's novel. Eliza Lynn Linton's story is seen as prelude to *Elsmere*. Modernism was thus portrayed as a phase of transition on the road to socialism.

In the Netherlands *Robert Elsmere* was received well. The Amsterdam minister of the liberal 'Vrije Gemeente' Petrus Hugenholtz was a great admirer of *Robert Elsmere*. He warmly recommended the Dutch translation. The novel should particularly be read, Hugenholtz said, by those modernists who wished to remain within the Church. Others thought, however, that the theme of *Robert Elsmere* had become obsolete: the novel described a state of affairs which the Dutch had already left behind them, as the well-known author and literary critic Lodewijk van Deyszel remarked. Yet Mary Ward's *Robert Elsmere* was still regarded in some Dutch circles as dangerous stuff, in particular for young ladies.

Conclusion

Studying the role of fiction in relation to prominent questions about belief and unbelief in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries leads one to conclude that, firstly, there is the significant number of women participating in the debate on the crisis of faith, these women make use of the medium of fiction to propagate their views. Women writers had become a new force on the cultural and religious stage since the late eighteenth century (for example, Belle van Zuylen/Mme de Charrière, Mme de Staël, Elizabeth Wolff-Bekker and Agatha Deken).

This trend of female participation through novels, plays, poems, continued in the nineteenth century. Some women writers sided with traditionalist belief, but there was a far greater number of female authors who supported liberal views on religion, or even became freethinkers. As J.M. Robertson states in his interesting *History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (1929; re-printed 2001), women writers often were much more able than theological philosophers to refute claims of traditionalist belief. A similar

observation was made by contemporaries such as Robert Ingersoll, the most formidable freethinker produced by the United States in the nineteenth century. Ingersoll pointed to the role of women as 'destructors' of the Church; he liked them all the more for it.

There was indeed an impressive number of women, both as writers and translators or reviewers, in Europe and the United States whose contribution undoubtedly needs further investigation. Of course, there is a massive literature on such figures as George Eliot and Mary Ward, or, for that matter, on Marie Corelli and George Sand, but there is a host of other, less well-known authors who are of great interest to our theme.

A second interesting aspect is the impact of fiction on the debates about religion, an impact that is closely related to popularization. Precisely because fiction popularized religious debates, it could have a deep impact on a wide readership, especially when books came to be sold in quite cheap editions. It is a kind of educational propaganda, which in most cases does not heighten the literary worth. But for all its shortcomings, didactical fiction deserves credit for having made known to a large public current issues about theology and religion.

Thirdly, and lastly, we can conclude that fiction of the Victorian era helps us to clarify questions about the relationship between national and international contexts of debates on religion. The cosmopolitan aspect of the processes in the nineteenth century prominently presents itself. Translations were a blossoming industry. Yet we may well ask why people wanted to read about crises of faith, the loss of faith, or about the successful quest for alternative religions written about by foreign authors, usually set in the home country of the foreign author. Did one want to know about it because it resembled one own's situation? Or was it exactly the other way around? Did

one wish to read international fiction, precisely because it did not resemble problems at home? Whatever the reasons may have been of the immense popularity of this kind of fiction, from those many novels we can infer that the crisis of faith was felt everywhere in the Western world, whether one sided with those who turned away from church or sought to establish, or re-establish, orthodox belief.

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