



Introduction: Religion and Victorian Popular Literature

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Abstract

The introduction to this special issue of the *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal*, “Religion and Victorian Popular Literature,” opens by using Mary Ward’s best-seller *Robert Elsmere* (1888) as a case study for considering how recent critical strategies for engaging with popular texts enable us to paint a different and more complex picture of the Victorian religious landscape. We then explain the different ways in which our international network of contributors reconceptualises the relationship of religion to popular literary genres including the transatlantic social gospel, science writing for children, and popular yoga texts. We identify how topics as diverse as astronomy, copyright, and disaster fiction, which have often been examined through a primarily secular lens, can be better understood by considering the role religion played in their formation and articulation within and through popular literature. Drawing together threads shared between the seven articles in the special issue, we outline its key thematic contributions in exploring the role of religion to the formation of new literary markets and genres, revising the “conflict thesis” between religion and science, and the importance of popular literary forms in constructing and communicating theological ideas, as well as responding to recent calls to decolonise Victorian Studies.

Keywords

religion; Victorian popular literature; postsecular; theologies; literary markets; genre; science; decolonising; *Robert Elsmere*; “crisis of faith”

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Introduction: Religion and Victorian Popular Literature

Naomi Hetherington and Clare Stainthorp

Alone at night in the dark lane, Robert Elsmere experiences the “wreck and loss” of his faith in miracles and the divinity of Christ as his “years of happy spiritual certainty” give way to “a most bitter pang of human misery” (Ward [1888] 2018: 383, 384). Precipitated by his reading of scientific texts and the Higher Criticism, Elsmere’s spiritual crisis has come to epitomise the struggle between faith and doubt that for a time characterised the scholarly view of religion in Victorian Britain. Written by Mary Ward, the niece of Matthew Arnold, *Robert Elsmere* (1888) was “arguably the highest-selling novel” of the Victorian period (Powell 2011). Its immense success has come to signify the fragmentation of Christianity in the late nineteenth century that has commonly been identified by secularisation theory. Resigning his clerical seat, Elsmere eventually goes on to found a humanist church, the New Brotherhood of Christ, rooted in “a purely human Christ” and an “explicable” Christianity (Ward [1888] 2018: 363). Elsmere’s moment of revelation is likened to “some dream country wherein we see all the familiar objects of life in new relations and perspectives” (363). This evocation of transformation, rather than collapse, corroborates David Nash’s view of Victorian culture as characterised by “religious and moral ‘seeking’” that prioritised “ideological openness and change” over binary oppositions (2011: 82).

In perhaps the most influential recent account of the secular, Charles Taylor identifies the long nineteenth century as a period distinguished by a growing sense of an unordered and disenchanted universe, which led to the proliferation of “cosmic imaginaries” that expanded the realms of belief (2007: 375). In Taylor’s narrative, this era was the fulcrum upon which the West shifted “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (3). For Taylor, *Robert Elsmere* illustrates the search for “a new positive form of religion” (363). He attributes its success to its vivid portrayal of “the inner conflict, the intense suffering, which accompanied this deconversion and reconstruction” (385). In her introduction to the recent edition of the novel for Victorian Secrets, Miriam Burstein similarly notes how Elsmere’s spiritual journey unfolds through a series of emotional clashes with those close to him (2018: 6). Making the case for bringing *Robert Elsmere* back into print, she laments that it has acquired a “reputation for theological clunkiness” that “bears little relationship to the actual novel” (6). Despite its iconic status, *Robert Elsmere* is seldom read today, even within the academy, except by scholars of Victorian religion. In this introduction,

we therefore use Ward's novel to illustrate how more recent critical strategies for engaging with popular texts enable us to paint a different and more complex picture of the Victorian religious landscape.

Elsmere's crisis is precipitated, in part, by reading the Bible through the lens of Higher Criticism, which prioritised the question of locating truth within the text. However, it should be recognised that few nineteenth-century Christians "cleave[d] to the literal truth of scripture" (LaPorte 2013: 282). As Erin A. Smith observes, by reconceiving the Bible as one narrative to be retold among many, Ward's novel replaces orthodoxy with "a celebration of the power of stories (true and untrue) – from across history and throughout the world – to move the human heart" (2007: 196). Smith's alternative reading of *Robert Elsmere* as an early social gospel novel on account of the protagonist's proposal of a religion of humanity helps to explain its American popularity. Ward's novel entered and shaped a literary marketplace receptive to models of socially orientated Christianity and writing that offered a "'take-home message' for action in the world" (Smith 2007: 208). Considering reading practices of the time, Anne DeWitt contends that the novel's popularity cannot simply be attributed to the protagonist's experiences and attitudes resonating with its Victorian readers. Instead, she argues, the novel enabled readers' exploration of a wide variety of faith positions as represented by its cast of characters: "the devout Anglicanism of Robert's wife, Catherine; the scornful atheism of Squire Wendover, whose scholarship plays a key role in Robert's conversion; and the religious indifference of Catherine's sister Rose, a talented violinist" (2022: 357). These recent reappraisals of the novel's contemporary appeal illustrate the benefits of scholarship that combines expertise in both Victorian religion and the development of popular genres and markets. They show how such a methodology can correct a previous tendency to read Victorian religion directly from popular texts rather than attuning ourselves to the ways in which they would have been circulated and received.

This special issue brings together an international network of scholars to consider new ways of conceptualising the relationships between religion and popular literary genres.¹ Religion is utilised in different ways by contributors to the special issue: as belief, practice, culture, social identity, community, doctrine, ethics, feeling, ideology, discourse, and rhetoric. This breadth of interpretation reflects the now-established scholarly recognition that the meaning of the term religion is far from self-evident. The modern category of religion has been shown to have arisen in the nineteenth century in opposition to the secular and to be largely Western in origin (Casanova 2011: 61-6). Recent work on nineteenth-century Hindu reformism has highlighted the transcolonial traffic that shaped early frameworks for the study of religion (Scott 2019). Indeed, in this issue, Éadaoin Agnew identifies a new strand to this dynamic by highlighting how Swami Vivekananda's emphasis on experience influenced William James's

¹ In 2020-21 we co-ran two Victorian Popular Fiction Association events: an online "Twitter Taster #VPFAReligion" event in May 2020 (a record of which can be accessed here: <https://victorianpopularfiction.org/studyday/vpfareligion-twitter-taster-2020/>) and an online colloquium on "Religion and Victorian Popular Literature and Culture" in May 2021. The success of these events demonstrated that there was substantial interest in, and exciting new scholarly thinking about, the relationship between religion and popular literature. This special issue was inspired by those events, and we thank those who participated, especially our keynote speakers Anne-Marie Beller and Kerry Featherstone. We are grateful to the British Association for Victorian Studies for a grant to support the events. We would also like to acknowledge the encouragement and intellectual and practical support of the late Nickianne Moody, a dear friend to many in the VPFA, in the planning of the original study day. Her early work on Marie Corelli was instrumental to the serious scholarly enquiry of both religion and popular fiction within Victorian literary studies.

privileging of experience as a way of understanding religion. Attempting to move beyond existing paradigms of the religious and the secular, the recent “postsecular turn” in humanities develops “new vocabularies and frameworks for raising previously unasked questions about the complex connections between religion and secularism in modernity” (Branch and Knight 2018: 494). In her critical introduction to postsecular theory, Shuhita Bhattacharjee uses New Woman fiction, *fin-de-siècle* scientific romances, and Anglo-Indian colonial novels to model how this approach can be applied to literary texts (2023: 118-211). Denae Dyck’s contribution to this special issue reads Olive Schreiner’s experimental allegories through the lens of the postsecular to reveal how they refashion religious symbols in moving beyond literary and canonical boundaries.

The special issue opens with Helena Goodwyn’s examination of the synergy between the social gospel movement and new journalism at the end of the nineteenth century. The social gospel took inspiration from the investigative practices of new journalism, with its sensationalised and undercover reporting, but these journals also provided an important outlet for its message. Goodwyn argues for the centrality of W. T. Stead’s successful *Review of Reviews* to his vision of a transnational Anglophone network that would put into action the social gospel outlined in his *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1894). Goodwyn’s article outlines the troubled relationship between Stead’s text and the bestselling novel *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (1896) by the American minister Charles Monroe Sheldon. Sheldon’s debt to Stead is made evident on the title page of the republication of Stead’s work five years later, which reads: “The Precursor of ‘In His Steps’/ If Christ came to Chicago!... / What Would Jesus Do?”. Goodwyn contends that the collective ethos of the social gospel movement enabled Sheldon to dramatise much of what was in Stead’s work without facing repercussions. Social gospel texts were comprised of stock tropes, most notably the idea of Christ visiting incognito, taken directly from Matthew’s gospel. This made for a high degree of replication between texts, mirroring the reporting and borrowing between texts typical of new journalism and its related practice of scissors-and-paste.

The significance of religion to the formation of new literary markets and genres is explored in different ways by Steve Asselin, Niyati Sharma, and Agnew in their contributions to the special issue. Asselin and Sharma reveal the importance of religious frameworks to the development of new genres of popular fiction. Asselin establishes the place of divine providence in disaster fiction of the late nineteenth century, identifying a pattern whereby the outcome of the catastrophe is that a small population of White survivors must repopulate the globe and asking how this precedent set the parameters of a now-familiar genre. Reassessing the literary output and cultural significance of the best-selling American novelist and short story writer F. Marion Crawford, Sharma demonstrates how his unusual mystical notion of the “Ideal” enabled him to develop, in *Mr. Isaacs* (1882), a new generic form that merges romance and realism in the pursuit of a novel that prioritises the experiences and interpretations of the reader. While Crawford offers a Western perspective that hybridises Buddhism, in Agnew’s reading Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga* (1896) popularises the ancient Indian Yoga sutras by the sage Patanjali as part of a series of anticolonial exchanges between East and West at the *fin de siècle*. The book combines an accessible explanation of yoga philosophy with a practical guide for achieving Raja yoga’s goal of universal unity. Selling well in Britain, America, and India, it established a new literary market by moving between different registers to appeal to a popular readership in contrast to previous Anglophone yoga texts which were dense and academic.

Other contributions to the special issue extend its examination of the role of the periodical press in shaping nineteenth-century religious culture. Periodicals helped to establish and maintain diverse communities of religious thought and practice in the Victorian period and

“offered one of the most important sites for reporting and shaping religious discourse” (Knight 2016: 263). Dyck and Adele Guyton demonstrate how different categories of periodicals, for women and children respectively, constructed a shared religious identity and purpose. Dyck resituates Schreiner’s allegories, later collected in *Dreams* (1890), within the periodical contexts in which they were first published, including Oscar Wilde’s *Woman’s World* and the British and American women’s advocacy papers – the *Women’s Penny Paper* and the *Woman’s Tribune*. Her article demonstrates how the heteroglossic context of the *Women’s Penny Paper* helped to shape Schreiner’s spiritual vision. Emphasising collective wisdom over individual epiphany, Schreiner created a new feminist spirituality, which rejected a unified and linear model of revelation. Guyton’s reading of scientific fiction and non-fiction within the *Boy’s Own Paper* in the late 1880s and 1890s highlights how the Religious Tract Society’s cheap weekly magazine drew upon the authority of astronomy to inspire muscular Christian moral improvement in its young male readership.

Guyton’s article is one of several in this issue to revise the conflict thesis that pitted religion against science. A viewpoint that cohered around, and was in many ways established by, John William Draper’s influential *History of the Conflict between Science and Religion* (1874), it has been robustly challenged by recent scholarship that instead frames the relationship between religion and science in terms of transnational dialogues and complexity (see Lightman 2019). Contributors explore how a range of scientific discourses underpin works written with both explicit and implicit religious purpose. Guyton emphasises how writers for the *Boy’s Own Paper* took advantage of flexibility within the rhetoric and authority of astronomy as a discipline. *A Marvellous Conquest: A Story of the Bayouda* (1889), a serialised scientific romance by André Laurie (who frequently collaborated with Jules Verne), is read alongside the contents of science columns to illuminate how narratives of muscular Christianity and colonial dominance were bolstered by astronomical narratives that prioritised a religious message over scientific accuracy. Asselin’s analysis of disaster fiction reveals how neo-Malthusian and Darwinian rhetoric was employed in the service of religious narratives of apocalypse and racial purification. In the imperial agendas of popular apocalyptic fiction, such as George Griffith’s *Olga Romanoff* (1894), Robert Barr’s “Within an Ace of the End of the World” (1900), and M. P. Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Asselin identifies a complicity, rather than conflict, between evolution and the divine. By contrast, Agnew argues that, in *Raja Yoga*, Vivekananda resisted imperialist assumptions of superiority through synthesising religion and science. Its articulation of interrelations between matter and energy within and beyond the self both draws upon and feeds into the realm of contemporary physics. Scientific language and imagery are used to express “cosmic interrelations” of universal spiritual concepts, transcending essentialising dichotomies of East and West, religion and science, the spiritual and the material.

Sharma reveals how Crawford arrived at a new mystical position on the Idealism-materialism question in *Mr. Isaacs* by placing elements from Buddhism, Theosophy, and Catholicism in conversation with one another. She is, thus, able to correct a previous impression that his fiction does not engage with theological arguments. The role of popular literature in the construction of and communication of theological ideas is a key aspect of the special issue. Describing Schreiner’s allegories as “literary theology,” Dyck positions herself within a growing body of literary and theological scholarship which recognises the importance of popular literary forms as a vehicle for theological enquiry (see McFague 1975, 1982; Styler 2010). Schreiner’s literary experiment and acts of rewriting reclaim both embodiment and imagination as modes of revelation, anticipating the work of late twentieth-century feminist theologians such as Sallie McFague and Carol P. Christ. As Rebecca Styler argues, it was necessary for women writers to “create ‘literary theology’” in the nineteenth century because

they were “denied any formal theological role in the church and the academy” (2010: 1). Historically, the formal study of Jewish sacred texts has also been practiced solely by men (Dwor 2019: 209). Richa Dwor demonstrates that writing by some Jewish women of the period “constitutes a unique theological genre” because it deploys religious affect in secular literary forms (2019: 209). Dwor’s contribution to this issue reveals, for the first time, the influence upon the popular Jewish writer Grace Aguilar of the theological writings of her great-grandfather Benjamin Dias Fernandes. Helping to restore his reputation as a Jewish theologian after his death by republishing his writings, Aguilar draws on his Messianic vision in her historical fiction to represent Britain anachronistically as a site of redemption and an endpoint for Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition.

The intellectual legacy of Dias Fernandes is only one aspect of Aguilar’s heritage as the London-born descendent of two Sephardic families, the Aguilars and the Dias Fernandes, who both owned sugar plantations in Jamaica and whose descendants profited from the proceeds of slavery. In exposing both Aguilar’s ties to the Caribbean and her omission of the Jewish Caribbean world from her Inquisition fiction, Dwor’s contribution concludes this special issue by responding to calls to decolonise Victorian Studies, made more urgent in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests, following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, and the toppling of the statue of transatlantic slave-trader Edward Colston. As David Lowell Smith and Nonia Williams argue, “decolonisation, as a process of critical disciplinary self-reflection, is too often dismissed as a form of so-called ‘cancel culture,’” when “it is about working to enlarge, and complicate, our cultural assumptions” (2021: 213). Exploring possible reasons behind Aguilar’s decision to excise British colonial contexts from her fiction, Dwor complicates her insistence on British tolerance and liberty. The eschatological function of Britain as a site of redemption for persecuted Sephardim in these stories provides an explanation for Aguilar’s apparent lack of interest in the historical reality of the emancipation of enslaved Africans in Jamaica. Aguilar has received considerable critical attention as “the most popular Jewish author of her time” (Dwor 2019: 216; see also, Galchinsky 1996: 135-90). Her critical recovery must now reckon with her privileging of Jewish enfranchisement at the expense of a Black African diaspora. Dwor contends that, in deploying the Exodus story as a framework for her Inquisition stories, Aguilar claims it exclusively for Jews despite its frequent use by contemporary anti-slavery campaigners. The need for historical accountability is also key to Asselin’s argument about the use of divine providence in disaster fiction to absolve characters of moral responsibility for genocide. These fictional narratives, which demonstrate how religious rhetoric can be used to fulfil damaging Utopian fantasies, take on increased significance in the light of the religiously and ethnically-motivated atrocities occurring in Gaza at the time of writing, and the rise of the far right in many national contexts.

Taken together, these seven articles demonstrate religion to be a crucial and generative topic of study within popular literature. Theories of secularisation and narratives of faith versus doubt arose out of, and adhered themselves to, nineteenth-century culture and subsequent scholarship concerning the period. However, Victorian society was permeated by religion, in its many and diverse forms. This special issue shows that perspectives upon theologies of immanence, transcendental philosophies, messianic redemption, and new materialism can be nuanced and extended by paying attention to how such ideas were explored in popular publications. Furthermore, topics as diverse as astronomy, copyright, and disaster fiction, which have often been examined through a primarily secular lens, can be better understood by considering the role religion played in their formation and articulation within and through popular literature. Truly, as Goodwyn asserts in the title of her contribution, “Religion Sells.”

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