George Eliot's Religious Imagination

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I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl.
—Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, 4:39, 387

When I think of how I came to produce this book, I find myself encountering a number of friends, mentors, colleagues, and family members who have lighted my way. I think of Teilhard de Chardin’s idea—whose affinity with George Eliot in reference to this and much else I discuss in chapter 5—that while each individual consciousness is an “absolutely original centre,” each center becomes more and more itself as it is drawn constantly and increasingly “into association with all the centres”; each self becomes more and more, not less and less, itself “by convergence” with other selves.¹

If I have become more myself by converging with other selves I have also come to understand, in the course of writing this book, more about convergence itself, a concept that increasingly delighted and enthralled George Eliot and is a key theme in her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. Convergence, Teilhard would say, increases complexity, and increased complexity leads, for those who are open to it, to increased consciousness. Indeed, coming to understand this and learning how to act upon this awareness is one way of describing the evolution that Dorothea undergoes in *Middlemarch*.

George Eliot’s ever-increasing understanding of and belief in convergence, which I explore mainly in chapter 4, is one of the key elements of what I am calling her “religious imagination.” Convergence is crucial to her religious imagination particularly because she sees it as affirming the power of imagination in various forms. Along with convergence, the three main components of her religious imagination are inwardness, incarnation, and integration. All four of these elements develop according to evolution, which Teilhard calls “the light illuminating all facts.”² Inwardness and incarnation are my two main themes in chapter 1, but in chapter 2 I show how George Eliot’s understanding of them evolves such that they move from being themes in her work to becoming essential to her own being and practice. Another way to describe what she learns through her writing at this stage is the power of integration (my main focus in chapter 3), as she comes to experience her own integral relation with her characters and their stories. This insight comes at a cost, and underlying and informing George Eliot’s religious imagination in all four of these elements is an ever-evolving understanding of suffering. From the start of her career she shares Kierkegaard’s understanding that suffering,
when turned inward, constitutes growth; she furthers this understanding until she arrives at the insight that Teilhard will later develop, that suffering, turned inward, produces energy for good.

These four elements—inwardness, incarnation, integration, and convergence, but in no particular order and often all at once—have also been fundamental to my experience of writing this book. That I was able to begin at all, at least as we conventionally understand beginning, was because of an insight that allowed me to recognize and to set free my own process of integration: this was the realization, initially only intuitive, that my scholarly journey and my spiritual journey were one and the same. Even the impulse to pursue that intuition until it became articulate and productive is a manifestation of the sense of convergence and the belief in a suprarational consciousness that George Eliot embraces. For key to my own process was the ongoing discovery of convergence between my work and hers.

Crucial to this insight into the convergence and integration of my scholarly and my spiritual lives was my compulsion—at first in spite of myself—to find spiritual retreats to be the sites of scholarly work and, conversely, to find in scholarly work much spiritual worth. On one such retreat, early in this process when I was working toward what turned out to be chapter 1, I was given instruction in inwardness by an unlikely teacher: walking meditatively and repetitively the winding, mulch-covered paths of the tiny but wondrous grounds of what was the Queenswood Centre in Victoria, British Columbia, I took a seat on a small makeshift wooden perch facing the pathway. Though my eyes were wide open all the while, it was nonetheless at least ten minutes before I realized that staring back at me from the other side of the pathway, nestled in his own comfy enclosure, was a large buck. Though it was not unusual to see deer even on the streets of Victoria (to the chagrin of gardeners and drivers), it was unusual to see a large, solitary buck, much less in peaceful repose. From this encounter I took the lesson that if I was intending to write about inwardness, I had better find out what it was.

There is no need to report on how I also needed to internalize and make my own the lesson I show George Eliot learning in chapter 2, that even failures can be prophecies, or the lesson of her whole career that suffering turned inward produces energy for good. It will already be clear, I think, that what I was learning in the course of my writing was the nature of my own religious imagination, or what a fellow traveler on another retreat called the spirituality of intellect.

It remains for me simply to thank those fellow travelers, dead and alive, who have played Virgil to my Dante and at times allowed me to do the same for them. Thank you for accompanying me on this journey, sharing your bread and wine with me and lightening my load by lighting my way with lots of alliterative love and laughter, mixed with tears too deep for words.
But as my sight by seeing learned to see
The transformation which in me took place
Transformed the single changeless form for me.

—Dante, Paradiso, 33: 112–14