George Eliot's Religious Imagination
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Writing is part of my religion.

This book reexamines religion and related questions in the work of George Eliot. It is conceived as a study of her “religious imagination” because at the center of the argument is the conviction that George Eliot’s idea of religion is an outgrowth of her imaginative work, which is in turn an outgrowth of her mind and life. One of the key principles of the present study imitates one of the key principles of George Eliot herself: integration. *Middlemarch*, generally held up as her masterpiece, represents the climax of her fictional work because it embodies this principle of integration almost as perfectly as any novel could. The web has long been noted as a predominant metaphor of *Middlemarch*, and it is so important exactly because it figures so beautifully the impossible complexity of the task before any writer—of George Eliot to explore the world of the recent past without unraveling it, and of the present writer to explore the world of George Eliot’s writing life with a similar delicacy.

The project I have set myself is to take seriously George Eliot’s own words, first, as in the epigraph above, her deep conviction that her calling as a writer is a religious one. This book is an exploration of what she means by “religion.” At least as challenging is to take seriously her conviction of the unknowability of human beings, including herself, even to herself. In her first story, “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton,” her narrator exposes the myth of self-knowledge and the corresponding need for “dear friendly illusion” to allow us “to dream that we are charming.” Here too she expresses the subjectivity of all of our knowledge and our reliance on one another’s faith: “no miracle can be wrought without faith—without the worker’s faith in himself, as well as the recipient’s faith in him. And the greater part of the worker’s faith in himself is made up of the faith that others believe in him.”

This epistemological paradox helps explain the intense difficulty of her writing process; this too speaks of integration in that “the mystery of human sorrow” she speaks of in her first novel and explores throughout her career is also her own.

I focus on George Eliot’s religious imagination because she implicitly accepts the Romantic view of the imagination as the predominant human faculty, famously defined by Coleridge as the great repeater of the creator’s
power and the unifying force of all experience. Indeed, it is because of this imagination that George Eliot’s work can be both realistic and idealistic. It is because of this imagination, with its compulsion to think and feel together, that she has always been criticized by some purists for importing philosophy into fiction. Like Coleridge she sees life as an integrated whole, refusing to make a separation between mind and soul and heart. I call her work “theopoetical” because, rather than writing theology, she can be numbered among poets such as Coleridge, Shelley, Hopkins, Blake, and Dante, whose imaginative work shapes and expresses their response to God.

George Eliot’s understanding of imagination is remarkably consistent throughout her career. In several of her early essays, as I discuss in chapter 1, she castigates writers who mistake weakened, fanciful intelligence for imagination. And in her very last essays, collected as Impressions of Theophrastus Such, she is only more articulate and pointed about this. In “How We Come to Give False Testimonials, and Believe in Them,” George Eliot uses the voice of Theophrastus to try once more to clarify that a “fine imagination” is not opposed to intelligent perception but is instead dependent upon it. Her reiteration of the point could readily pass for a gloss on Coleridge’s definition of imagination:

It is worth repeating that powerful imagination is not false outward vision, but intense inward representation, and a creative energy constantly fed by susceptibility to the veriest minutiae of experience, which it reproduces and constructs in fresh and fresh wholes; not the habitual confusion of provable fact with the fictions of fancy and transient inclination, but a breadth of ideal association which informs every material object, every incidental fact with far-reaching memories and stored residues of passion, bringing into new light the less obvious relations of human existence.

To illustrate this understanding of imagination, Theophrastus turns to Dante, further supporting the idea that George Eliot belongs among practitioners of theopoetics.

The principle of integration that undergirds the Coleridgean sense of wholeness of being and Dante’s artistic practice is fundamental to George Eliot’s religious imagination. Equally important is the notion of incarnation, both in its ethical and sacred modeling of integrated humanity and in its modeling of the aesthetic goal of making the words of her art become flesh, in a figurative sense. For, despite her withdrawal from the institutional church, she continues to believe in the incarnation as the basis for human values and relations. As an artist she believes not only in the ethical imperative to live one’s beliefs but also in the aesthetic imperative to “show, not tell” one’s ideas.

The interrelation of integration, integrity, and incarnation reveals itself as a deeply personal idea in the course of George Eliot’s writing: in the process
of bringing her characters and ideas to life in fiction, she discovers that she herself, as their creator, must bear their suffering in her own body. This process is fundamentally integrating because it is not an idea that she decides to demonstrate; instead it is an experience that she learns to believe. In Christian terms, one might say that belief in the incarnation is fundamental to the possibility of integrated humanity; George Eliot lives out this notion in the course of her career. In the deepest sense then, her imagination is religious and her theopoetics is comprised of and energized by love.

The principle of integration also explains the deceptively simple design of this book, which takes seriously George Eliot’s own understanding of her career as a developing continuum. While interspersing comments on works from every period of her career, I trace the growth of her religious imagination as it evolves, with the exception of reserving my analysis of the early work *Silas Marner* for chapter 5. As I will try to show, her central beliefs—always founded on a sense of ultimate mystery—change only in the sense of growing and deepening, thereby demonstrating again the fundamental importance of integration.

Indeed, the other essential element of George Eliot’s religious imagination is her belief in evolution as fundamental to all of life, including consciousness. Failure to understand the importance of George Eliot’s belief in evolution is responsible for the notion that she “lost her faith” as a young woman, a view that has been the mainstay of a secular dismissal or misunderstanding of her serious religious concerns. Basil Willey seems to have lost the argument he took up in his *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, published in 1955, when he famously disputed Lord David Cecil’s claim that George Eliot was “not religious.” Willey argued that religious was “just what she was,” contending that “the whole predicament that she represents was that of the religious temperament cut off by the *Zeitgeist* from the traditional objects of veneration, and the traditional intellectual formulations.” His voice was drowned out in the secularizing tide, however, such that much critical work on George Eliot is founded on the assumption that Cecil was correct. As recently as 2001, for example, Barry Qualls’s chapter “George Eliot and Religion” in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, while thorough and subtle, began by stating that George Eliot maintained her connection to biblical texts and language “when she lost her faith,” without his feeling the need to defend or explain this premise. Willey supported his claim by citing George Eliot’s sustained attention to “righteousness,” “renunciation,” and “reverence.” These are key themes for my argument as well, and in a way I am able to take up where he left off because the Zeitgeist has shifted toward more openness to exploring religious experience and beliefs.

Indeed, while it is true that the discovery of evolution constituted the major challenge to traditional Christianity in the nineteenth century, this was only the beginning of a process of revisioning religious beliefs, experience, and consciousness in the context of scientific discoveries. For some, it is true,
the scientific challenge led to abandoning religion, as belief in reason replaced religious faith. The climate of intellectual skepticism did become widespread and came to feed the pervasive secularism following the World Wars; it is only now in the twenty-first century that what has been called “the religious turn” has given us a wider perspective in which to consider the nineteenth-century response to evolution. One of my aims is to contribute, along with such books as Peter Hodgson’s *The Mystery Beneath the Real: Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot* and J. Russell Perkin’s *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, to a reconsideration of the complexities of nineteenth-century religion, in the hope that we might begin to recognize that it is just as complex as that of our own century.

It is in the context of an evolutionary understanding that I try to clarify what George Eliot meant by faith and religion. By examining the way that she lived out their meaning in her writing, I wish to show how inadequate, even useless and misleading, is the concept of a lost faith as applied to George Eliot. Fundamental to my argument is the idea that in her work George Eliot is anticipating ways of reconciling faith and reason, mainly through the action of imagination, which had yet to be theorized or adequately understood. I therefore enlist the aid of several thinkers whose work she did not know, most because she predated them and, in the case of Kierkegaard, because she never happened (as far as I know) to encounter his work. Kierkegaard’s arguments for the truth of subjectivity and the subjectivity of truth are fundamental to my approach.

Since one of the most important catalysts of George Eliot’s evolution with regard to religion occurred when she encountered Roman Catholic art in Europe, it seems apt that most of the thinkers I invoke are from that tradition. My work benefits greatly from the insights of the Catholic philosopher Richard Kearney. I particularly draw from his understanding of imagination as a force that, in allowing for the possibility of the unseen, awakens the human potential for change by actualizing goodness, beauty, and truth, as well as his theory of “anatheism”—the process by which one may come back to God in a new way. Kearney’s teacher, Paul Ricoeur, helps me develop an idea of George Eliot’s “narrative identity” in chapter 2. For chapters 3 and 4 I rely on Karl Rahner and Evelyn Underhill (the latter a member of the Church of England) for their understanding of mysticism.

Perhaps most controversial is the use I make of the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, since it is here that I act upon Kierkegaard’s affirmation of the subjectivity of truth to claim that Teilhard’s reconciliation of science and faith might have effected George Eliot’s own “anatheistic” return to a newly understood God. In my effort to support this claim I am grateful for the work of Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, as well as, of course, the work of the great Italian master himself. George Eliot did read and love Dante’s work, a fact that I read as testament to her intuition concerning what there was to believe and what it meant to believe.
Chapter 1, “Incarnation and Inwardness: George Eliot’s Early Works in the Context of Contemporary Religious Debates,” begins with an outline of the early life of Mary Anne Evans—later George Eliot—and her movement from the evangelical Christianity of her youth toward the noninstitutional religious attitude of her mature life. I discuss several key essays she wrote before venturing into fiction. I refute the standard view that George Eliot accepted Strauss’s demythologized Jesus and embraced Feuerbach’s “religion of humanity”—both of whose key works she famously translated—by showing the importance to her of the individual as a spiritual being. While acknowledging that George Eliot did not know his work, I propose Kierkegaard’s idea of the individual as a better model. The chapter argues that two key concepts of Christianity, incarnation and inwardness, inform George Eliot’s work from the start. The importance of integration is evident from the beginning as well, as I show by introducing the notion of incarnation as a principle that underlies the understanding of fiction as well as the understanding of faith at this time. My main focuses for illustrative analysis in this chapter are “Janet’s Repentance” (the last story in the Scenes of Clerical Life), Adam Bede, and The Mill on the Floss.

Chapter 2, “‘Even Our Failures Are a Prophecy’: Toward a Post-Evangelical Aesthetic,” covers George Eliot’s middle period between two major successes, the publication of The Mill on the Floss in 1860 and that of Middlemarch in 1871–72. Generally understood as a time of experiment if not outright failure, this period sees the publication of two major works that deal directly with religion in a historical, European context—the novel Romola and the long dramatic poem The Spanish Gypsy—as well as a novel, Felix Holt, the Radical, which seeks to create a secular saint in near-contemporary England. This is also the period when George Eliot writes lesser-known poetical works, several of which investigate the value of art and the role of the artist. My argument in this chapter is that, having finished in The Mill on the Floss with the evangelical Christian landscape of her youth, George Eliot is seeking in this period a new terrain for her fiction. Because, as quoted above, writing is part of her religion, this means seeking a religious terrain and a way to affirm the artist as a kind of religious figure. In this context, these works take on a profound importance in helping her to work out the implications of her calling as an artist and in mapping out the landscape of future works.

Central to this chapter is a consideration of the idea of suffering, which, while a key theme from the beginning, takes on a new meaning in this context. The major figure here is that of the martyr, and, as throughout the study, integration will be seen to be an important clue to how George Eliot’s religious imagination is developing in this period. Integration will also provide the clue as to why she begins to explore different literary forms: not only does she write more and more poems, but she also writes about tragedy. Incarnation again comes into play in that, though she keeps at bay any suggestion that her own physical and emotional suffering has an ultimate meaning, we
see her own view of suffering change as her experience grows to embrace what might be seen as artistic failure.

In chapter 3, “Religion in a Secular World: Middlemarch and the Mysticism of the Everyday,” I argue that Middlemarch, as an almost flawlessly integrated whole, demonstrates how central integration is to George Eliot’s religious imagination. Middlemarch not only explores the way in which integrity manifests as integration but also itself represents George Eliot’s own achievement of personal and artistic integration. Even its status as both a critical and popular success demonstrates a triumph of integration. As in the previous chapter, I turn first to two poems of this period—“The Legend of Jubal” and “Armgart”—in this case poems that focus on the role of the artist. In them George Eliot expresses a Romantic, idealistic view of the artist so that she is able to ground her prose—or, in other words, to subordinate her own need for idealism—in order to incarnate her ideas and ideals in realistic characters and situations. This approach sets the pattern for her novel Middlemarch as Dorothea must learn a similar kind of grounding, which involves a shift in her understanding of religion when her experience with Casaubon drives her from the apostolic, idealistic, doctrinally pure Christianity of her youthful dreams to a religion that is based on love in action and practical goodness. I argue that in this Dorothea is learning what might be called the theology of integration that is the basis of the mysticism of everyday life.

This chapter also includes a brief survey of the clergy of nineteenth-century Britain and their representatives in George Eliot’s novelistic world. The theology of integration is crucial again in that fundamental to her religious imagination at this time is the belief that religion is an integral part of society. Through her fictional clerics in Middlemarch George Eliot demonstrates that the clergy are at their best integrated into society and that, like men and women of every profession and role, they are called to manifest integrity by living out their faith in their daily lives and integrating themselves into the life around them.

Chapter 4, “The Religion of the Future: Daniel Deronda and the Mystical Imagination,” shows George Eliot further pursuing the ideas and concerns of Middlemarch as she sets a novel for the first time in her own time and city, confronting the sense of jaded purposelessness and anxious hopelessness that pervades her culture in the wake of its loss of a religious center. She offers religion as a solution by reclaiming three kinds of religious life—the everyday mysticism modeled by Dorothea, the ancient Jewish mystical tradition, and the Romantic understanding of imagination. All three of these attitudes exemplify the mystical notion that faith transforms the ordinary world into a realm of poetry and possibility. With these three mystical possibilities George Eliot gestures toward “the religion of the future” that she refers to in a letter of this time. Her sense of the future clearly incorporates religious ideas from the past, is grounded in present action, and envisions the future as something other than the afterlife that is present-day religion’s preoccupation. In Daniel
Deronda we also see George Eliot furthering her efforts toward integration by writing a novel in which religion, poetry, art, and music are thematized.

In chapter 5, “Evolutionary Spirituality and the Theopoetical Imagination: George Eliot and Teilhard de Chardin,” I move to the conclusion of this study by speculating about how very deeply evolutionary and religious George Eliot’s attitude was. I do so by placing her in a continuum of theopoetical thinkers, with Dante as her ancestor and Teilhard de Chardin as her heir. I show in Daniel Deronda three specific cultural illustrations of the religious imagination at work, and I analyze Silas Marner in light of Teilhard’s evolutionary spirituality in order to show that underlying George Eliot’s novels is her appeal to ways of religious being that are at once ancient and ever-evolving. The discussion in this chapter is framed by my contention that Teilhard’s ideas on evolutionary spirituality, particularly those concerning the convergence of science and faith and the evolution of consciousness, along with his radical perspectives on interpretation and on the meaning of suffering, can help us to understand George Eliot’s religious imagination. As I have argued from the beginning, George Eliot’s affirmation of subjective, individual, evolving ways of knowing is central to her religious imagination. Here, I develop this notion by briefly exploring some of the ways in which subjective, individual, evolving ways of interpretation have always been central to Christian thought.

In a brief “Conclusion,” I suggest that George Eliot’s ever-evolving religious imagination finds an echo in the contemporary understanding of “The Word Continuously Incarnated.”