Chapter 3

Religion in a Secular World

*Middlemarch* and the Mysticism of the Everyday

... for the soul can grow,
As embryos, that live and move but blindly,
Burst from the dark, emerge regenerate
And lead a life of vision and of choice.


By any measure, *Middlemarch* is an extraordinary book. It brings to the reader the world of mid-nineteenth-century Britain, while conjuring a sense of the most intimate experience of individual lives. The novel is all the more remarkable for creating this profound sense of intimacy while maintaining strict discretion: readers are not invited into the bedrooms of its characters, but into their hearts and minds, as well as, I would argue, their souls. For while *Middlemarch* is less overtly concerned with religion than is *Romola* or *Adam Bede*, it is a radically more religious novel than either because with it George Eliot aims to redefine the notion and practice of religion for a society in which, as she says in the novel’s “Prelude,” there is “no coherent social faith and order.”¹ She does this in large part by reminding readers, in a rather Kierkegaardian fashion, that they have souls.

There are three main vehicles for religious ideas in the novel: Dorothea herself, whose changing understanding of religion the reader is invited to monitor; the actual clerics: Casaubon, Cadwallader, and Farebrother, along with the latter’s rival, Tyke, and Casaubon’s curate, Mr. Tucker; and the hypocritically religious Bulstrode. In all three of these strands of the novel’s narrative web religion is less a designated theme than a means of developing an exploration of the idea of personal integrity. But just here is where we find George Eliot’s important statement about religion: rather than its being a force that stands outside of and apart from ordinary human life, religion must be seen as integral. Religious concerns must be seen as integrated with personal and social concerns and bound up with the pursuit of integrity.
The Vocation of the Artist: “The Legend of Jubal” and “Armgart”

George Eliot’s key imaginative way of expressing the complexity of these ideas is through the metaphor of the web that pervades the novel, and her awareness that this complexity is reflexive—that she herself is caught in this web—is evident in two poems that herald its writing, “The Legend of Jubal” and “Armgart.” These poems offer insight into George Eliot’s self-understanding as an artist, and in doing so they provide a means of self-expression that both allows her to disentangle some of the knots of her own life’s web and prevents these personal strands from becoming enmeshed in the novel’s narrative web. Indeed, this process of what I would call self-integration depends on a triangular relation among the novel-in-process, the poems, and her own lived experience. *Middlemarch* has such profound integrity in a formal and in a thematic sense because while it is a realistic account of mid-century life and emerges out of George Eliot’s own experience—or, more accurately that of Marian Evans Lewes—this realism is made authentic and more than merely personal by the mediation of the idealizing, Romantic perspective of the poems. The poems represent the mysterious transmuting power of art in that, by allowing George Eliot a more nakedly personal exploration of the nature of art and the role of the artist, they afford—in the sense made famous by that other Eliot—an impersonality that frees her to write this novel.

The wrestling with form that occupied George Eliot’s imagination through the 1860s continues into the following decade with an intense period of poetic activity, starting in 1869 with two rather whimsical pieces, “Agatha” and “How Lisa Loved the King,” followed in that same year by the highly personal series of sonnets on her childhood, which came to be called “Brother and Sister.” By this time she is already meditating characters for a new novel she is calling *Middlemarch*, which she first mentions in her journal on the first day of 1869 and begins in August. Between October 1869 and January 1870 she writes “The Legend of Jubal,” and then “Armgart” in August and September 1870. At the beginning of December that year she mentions working on a story she is calling “Miss Brooke”; two days later she has changed her plans, having decided to combine “Middlemarch” (which had focused on Lydgate) and the story of Dorothea into one novel. 2 When we contemplate this process, particularly in light of the poetic activity that punctuated it, we might see George Eliot’s artistry as seeking to give shape to the “coherent social faith and order” that she notes as lacking for her heroine. Intriguing as well is the fact that the theme of integration that emerges as central in the story of the Middlemarchers is given form in *Middlemarch* itself. For, originating as it does from two separate ideas, the novel is nonetheless, as Joan Bennett remarks, “a single organism” that “gives a remarkable impression of unity” founded upon “singleness of vision.” 3
With apparent singleness of purpose then, George Eliot dedicates herself to this work until its completion at the end of 1872. But while one might sense the novel relentlessly taking shape during this period, the debilitating illness and self-doubt discussed in the last chapter continue to plague her. She is physically more seriously ill for longer than ever before, and she expresses in her journal her fear of never again being able to write a novel as good as *Felix Holt*. In this state of psychological dis-ease the poems serve a number of useful purposes. For one thing, they may be seen to be “priming the creative pump,” as she is able to produce shorter works that stimulate her imagination and gird up her confidence. And “Jubal” and “Armgarth,” in taking the artist figure as their main character, explore the nature of art in a more direct, more daring, and more Romantic way than she allows herself to do in her novels. In these two poems George Eliot allows herself to voice her fears, her feelings, and her fantasies about being an artist.

Both these poems deal with the art of music. Born on the feast day of Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, George Eliot had a keen interest in music and was a skilled pianist and a regular concert- and operagoer. Maggie Tulliver’s passion for music reflects her own, but she avoided constructing a novel around the artist figure, coming nearest to this focus with singers, Caterina, from her second story in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story”; and Mirah and Alcharisi, as well as the artist and teacher Klesmer from her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. She pays some attention to painters as well, in Will’s friend Naumann in *Middlemarch*, and Daniel’s friend Hans in *Daniel Deronda*. It is thus significant that only in poems does she give artists, Jubal and Armgarth, center stage.

George Eliot builds her long poem “The Legend of Jubal” from the single reference in Genesis to one of the sons of the exiled Cain, who was “the father of all such as handle harp and organ” (Genesis 4.21), following a medieval tradition and references by Chaucer and Dryden. George Eliot’s poem is fascinating firstly in the way that she spins a myth of cultural origin out of the legend of Jubal. The poem begins with Cain, banished by Jehovah for murdering his brother, seeking a land ruled by “wild joyous gods, who winked at faults and folly / And could be pitiful and melancholy.” The narrator goes on to note that Cain never doubted the existence of such gods since “he looked within, and saw them mirrored there.” Cain’s people live in a kind of Paradise, where “time was but leisure” and love reigns, because no one but Cain knows of Death. When an accidental death occurs, everything changes. With this Fall, “Death was now lord of Life,” Content became marred by Haste, “Work grew eager, and Device was born”; but, as if in compensation, everything in the world takes on a “new dearness” from its vulnerability to death. Then, with the new sense of “dread” of loss comes “Memory,” which gives Jubal, who had already begun “the pastoral life” by extending the “ties that bind the family” to include animals, the idea to “fashion acts that are to be / When we shall lie in darkness silently.”
Thus, “in that home of Cain the Arts began.” The poem traces Jubal’s inspiration to construct the first musical instrument and then create the first song as he begins to find music around him, first in his half-brother Tubal’s pounding of metal, then in the birds, then in human voices and animal sounds, “Till thought self-luminous flamed from memory, / And in creative vision wandered free.” George Eliot strains to represent the source and process of inspiration as metaphysical:

It was his thought he saw: the presence fair  
Of unachieved achievement, the high task,  
The struggling unborn spirit that doth ask  
With irresistible cry for blood and breath,  
Till feeding its great life we sink in death.

The narrator thus foretells Jubal’s fate as, after his music becomes so popular that all he hears is his own songs, he leaves his homeland in search of fresh melodies. When he returns after many years, his own people fail to recognize him; instead they scorn and mock the old man while enthusiastically singing the praises of the now-mythic Jubal. In a final apotheosis, death does not after all have the last word: instead, Jubal is taken up into heaven by a “face” who identifies herself as “thy loved Past, / The soul that makes thee one from first to last.”

Indeed, a prophet has no honor in his own country, but George Eliot makes the parallel to Christ explicit when “the face” asks whether anyone could ask more “from any god / Whether with gleaming feet on earth he trod / Or thundered through the skies” than to bear the pain involved in binding himself to the solitary task of providing music to accompany the “sweet unrest” of humanity. The face goes on to explain:

Thy fate  
Was human music’s self incorporate  
Thy senses’ keenness and thy passionate strife  
Were flesh of her flesh and her womb of life.

Jubal, then, gave birth to and died for human music—he incarnated it—and must “atone” with his final suffering at the hands of these same humans for the offense of having “too much” to give.

Clearly, this poem tells of a legend and a myth, but it is also an allegory about the role of the artist. Most fascinating is the fact that with this poem George Eliot reintroduces the martyr figure, here as an artist. Thus in the figure of Jubal she incarnates the notion of art as religion, laying explicit claim to the high calling of the artist that she has articulated otherwise only in letters and personal writings. Familiar here from her earlier fiction, however, is George Eliot’s preoccupation with the high price
of any sense of special calling and the worthiness that must be proven by suffering.

“Armgart” pursues similar themes in a very different way. This is a dramatic poem in five short scenes, taking the titular character from glorious triumph as a successful classical singer, whose performances show her to be not simply a singer and performer but an artist, to an illness that damages her throat so that she is driven to leave the stage and languishes in despair before deciding to become a teacher. On one hand, this is a tale of hubris being humbled as Armgart moves from her proud scorn of being anything but the best and of jeopardizing her greatness by becoming a wife to a recognition of the aspirations and talents of those around her—whom she has heretofore seen only as the supporting characters in the drama of her life—and an acceptance of her own ordinariness. In a way, George Eliot is subtly confronting here the contradiction inherent in the notion that it takes a special person to recognize and explain the value of the ordinary. As a writer who takes as her life’s work the celebration of the significance of ordinary life, she must practice a kind of doublethink whereby she forgets that her own work requires a special gift. It is for this reason, in part, that she speaks of her writing as both a high calling and as merely the work that she, like anyone else, does in the best way she can and with just as much labor, heartache, and pain.

Like Jubal, Armgart must suffer a kind of death, but first George Eliot indulges a fantastic vision of a powerful, supremely gifted female artist whose narcissistic egoism and perfectionist, all-or-nothing expectations for herself are sustained by her companions and teacher and buoyed up by the applause of an adoring public. But she is a more complex figure than this would at first suggest. A true descendant of Maggie Tulliver, she is aware of a “rage” within that would wreak havoc on the world if she did not have her singing voice to “channel” it. Moreover, though her lover admires her talent, he sees it as reflecting an “ambition” in conflict with her womanhood, and Armgart is right to judge that as his wife she would not be free to pursue her career. Likewise she knows that the audience would turn on her and condemn her for impropriety if they were not swept away by her singing. Further, though she exudes such confidence, she is at the same time embroiled in a conflict between the demands of pure artistry and the appeal of performing virtuoso trills that imitate the birds but alarm her teacher (and are perhaps the reason for her eventual throat damage).

All these struggles over ambition, propriety, love vs. career, and art vs. popularity seem but surface ripples, however, compared to the depths of Armgart’s artistic passion. For, while she may give the impression of vanity, George Eliot wants us to believe that Armgart, like Jubal, is a god of music. Her performance of Gluck’s Orpheus, her teacher says, makes pleasure indistinguishable from pain; it does away with the music’s writer and the singer’s teacher: “Orpheus was Armgart, Armgart, Orpheus.” Returning to the stage after her performance, she is like a shy bride, says Leo, and Armgart concurs:
“I was a bride / As nuns are at their espousals.”

Armgart agrees that her ambition includes adulation—even what might be seen as the blasphemous “gifts, / Gold, incense, myrrh”—but affirms something other than “mean vanity” in her enjoyment. Not a prima donna, she says,

No, but a happy spiritual star
Such as old Dante saw, wrought in a rose
Of light in Paradise, whose only self
Was consciousness of glory wide-diffused,
Music, life, power—I moving in the midst
With a sublime necessity of good.

George Eliot affirms Armgart’s sense that she was born an artist with a spiritual calling. Like Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, Armgart rejects her suitor’s proposal because she knows that she cannot be both a wife and an artist; she sees in her art a “supreme vocation” that affirms womanhood but precludes the “wife’s renunciation.”

But the similarity stops there. Barrett Browning permits her heroine to reform and then to marry a chastened Romney, but George Eliot has her heroine reject the marital renunciation only to choose a more difficult one. Here, it is another woman who teaches the heroine her true calling. Armgart’s teacher is her devoted cousin, Walpurga, whose limp makes physical and seemingly reasonable her role of helpmate to the gifted artist. When Armgart, having lost her sublime voice, acts out her new chosen role of tragic heroine, Walpurga shows her the puerility of the melodrama and the shamefulness of her egoism. And when Armgart despises her new role as voice teacher, giving it the sarcastic title “The Woman’s Lot: a Tale of Everyday,” Walpurga turns on her, berating Armgart for her narcissistic arrogance—always the speaker, never the listener; always the star, never the friend. She is fierce about the depths of “ruthless Nature’s charry average” to which Armgart scorns to sink and where Walpurga has always had to live. Walpurga calls her to recognize her own moral lameness, to call this change not a defeat but a “new birth—birth from that monstrous Self.” And in the end Armgart acknowledges her blindness toward others and graciously accepts her new “humble work” as teacher.

In this poem George Eliot allows herself to air some of her deepest fears and anxieties, which, rather than being dispelled by her undeniable success, simply adapt themselves to this new stage and mutate to reveal the dark side of fame and success. As she begins Middlemarch, she wonders if her popularity actually means that she has succumbed to the temptation to a kind of a virtuosic trilling that has destroyed her true voice. She wonders how she can reconcile her respect for the “everyday” with her contempt for mediocrity, and how she can avoid mediocrity in her writing without obsessing about
perfection. In Armgart's explosion of grief over her lost talent, George Eliot expresses her own fear that she might be asked to exchange the pain of suffering as a gifted artist in the pursuit of her “one high function”—which comes with the consolation of knowing that she has been set apart—for the more ordinary pain of an unremarkable calling, which comes with the more acute pain of living without that sense of special purpose. And yet, again, how can her need for such a sense be other than hypocritical in one whose calling is to celebrate the everyday?

The answer to these doubts takes what George Eliot would call a religious form. For while Armgart will no longer perform as an artist, she is determined not to contribute to the fund of “mediocrity” by “doing great tasks ill”; instead she chooses to “take humble work and do it well.” In other words, George Eliot reaffirms Armgart’s sense of integrity in her changed role, the same sense that had sustained her sense of purpose as an artist. As she has told Walpurga, her “joy” as an artist was not in being separate from the world.

All my good
Was that I touched the world and made a part
In the world’s dower of beauty, strength, and bliss;
It was the glimpse of consciousness divine
Which pours out day and sees the day is good.

This implied comparison of her own creative work to that of the God of Genesis might be seen as arrogant but must also be seen as the source of the sense of meaning and purpose that undergirds George Eliot’s own sense of calling.

These two poems prepare George Eliot psychologically for the work of *Middlemarch* by allowing her to celebrate and affirm the purpose and joy of art and her sense of herself as an artist, while at the same time expressing all of the doubts and fears attached to that sense of herself as an artist and the equally strong doubts and fears that she might not, after all, be a true artist. Importantly, this includes the bold affirmation of the role of the artist as a holy calling, a religious activity, which is for George Eliot an utterly necessary conviction. The profundity of the psychological exploration that she achieves in *Middlemarch* is rooted in the depths of her own psychological struggles and self-analysis, and these poems provide her with an outlet for that self-attention, which the novel can use to tell a story that both is and is not her own. Important as well is her understanding that mediocrity does not consist in doing something ordinary, or in her case writing of the ordinary, but in doing badly whatever one is doing. Conversely, doing the ordinary well and with the intention of contributing one’s own “good” to the general good offers what Armgart calls a “glimpse of consciousness divine.”
Chapter 3

Social Order and Professional Integrity

One way of looking at Armgart’s dilemma is to say that she is challenged to reframe her sense of integrity in terms of integration—to sacrifice her sense of a special calling for the sake of performing a duty to and in the everyday, by integrating her own good into the web of social good. The theme that we found in earlier works is here again in new form: renunciation. It is this call to reframe one’s own desires and interests for the good of the whole that is the burden of the key players in *Middlemarch*. “Armgart” helps us to see that for George Eliot this theme is profoundly religious, reflecting both her personal project of integration as professional writer, artist, and woman and her exploration of the place of religion in her world.

In *Middlemarch* her challenge is to explore the place of religion in public and private life in a world that lacks a “coherent social faith and order.” But it is interesting, that, unlike Trollope in his *Barchester Chronicles*, George Eliot does not focus on the politics of the religious structures of the day (although we certainly learn something about this), but continues instead to write of clerics as human beings and as citizens of the human community and of their work as part of the whole work of that community. For, while she acknowledges that clerics are still traditionally considered to have a special role, she is concerned to show their influence in the everyday. For example, early in the novel she shows us that Mrs. Cadwallader, though she is more renowned for her intrusiveness and stinginess than for her piety, is primarily a good neighbor, whose foibles and eccentricities give more pleasure than grief to her husband’s parishioners and tenants.

This notion of tenants introduces a key issue that comes into focus for George Eliot at this period. For in this middle period of her career, which culminates in her writing of *Middlemarch*, with its focus on the agitation surrounding the passing of the First Reform Bill in 1832, she turns her attention to the issue that has just resulted—in 1867—in the passing of the Second Reform Bill: the issue of class. In terms of my argument, this means that this novel’s exploration of the question of integrity revolves around the treatment of the lower classes by their social superiors and the problem of mistaking rank for merit; and the movement toward reform, in these terms, is a movement away from hierarchy and segregation toward a more integrated structuring of society. Central to George Eliot’s interrogation of these themes is the question of whether a religious response could have a bearing on these contemporary debates and what forms it might take.

George Eliot’s move to looking at the construction of contemporary society shapes the narrative arc that extends from *Felix Holt* through *Middlemarch* and becomes a meditation on the notion of order and its role in forging the link between public and private life. Turning her attention for the first time to contemporary sociopolitical matters, she explores in these two novels the pressing questions of personal integrity and the vulnerability
of the individual in the context of public unrest. For while she is always the author of personal lives, she makes explicit here the principle that informs her approach when the narrator of *Felix Holt* notes that “there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life,” a statement broadened and deepened by the narrator of *Middlemarch* to become: “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside of it.”

George Eliot addresses the question of social order in *Felix Holt* directly by embroiling her peace-loving hero in a situation of violent disorder, which results in a killing for which he is inadvertently responsible. But, interestingly, she examines the question of the relation between private life and public order primarily as an issue of gender, as she entangles her naive heroine, Esther, in a legal morass that almost results in a marriage of Gothic dimensions. Here we see how George Eliot demonstrates the social reality that women are social beings only through marriage, an idea whose implications she will confront more directly still in her last two novels. And it is fascinating that, in her own state of unwedded, technically adulterous bliss, George Eliot passionately believes in marriage, to the point that she goes so far as to articulate Esther’s awakening to the possible felicities of marrying Felix with explicitly religious language. Although Esther is believed to be the beloved daughter of a devoutly religious minister, she is indifferent toward religion. And while Felix is a deliberately nonreligious man, George Eliot gives his selfless passion for justice a holy fervor, describing his countenance as he addresses the workingmen, for example, as “worthy to be called ‘the human face divine.’” Further, George Eliot describes Esther’s turn from the Byronic “Childe Harold” to Felix as a conversion that entails “the first religious experience of her life—the first self-questioning, the first voluntary subjection, the first longing to acquire the strength of greater motives and obey the more strenuous rule.” While the man’s primary interest is in the sociopolitical order, then, the woman’s is in obedience to the good man’s “law” and adoption of the “rule” of his order.

George Eliot’s explicit designation of the man’s influence for good and the woman’s submission to a good man as religious is reinforced in “Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt,” which was hoped by her publisher, John Blackwood, to have a moderating influence on workers agitating for reform in 1867. This piece merges the rhetoric used by Felix in the novel to promote orderly change through education with the rhetoric used by the novel’s narrator to promote what is called the order of wedlock: in his address Felix advocates patience, “obedience,” and adherence to the “rules of fellowship” as a kind of “religion” that will produce a harmonious and indeed sacred social order.

Written as it is in the period surrounding the Second Reform Bill and dealing as it does with the period leading up to the First Reform Bill, it is not surprising that this question of order is a major preoccupation of
Middlemarch. But George Eliot shares with Percy Shelley’s Defence of Poetry the view that there is a deep human longing for order that goes beyond politics. As the epigraph for chapter 9, Book I, of Middlemarch has it, “human souls” have always been the theater for “the struggle” for “order and the perfect rule.” Of the many meanings of “order” in the Oxford English Dictionary, number 17 outlines the idea that is a starting point for both these novels, with Middlemarch teetering on the brink between traditional society and the imminent reforms that will irrevocably change the inflection of the definition: “The state in which the laws or rules regulating the relationship of individuals to the community, and the public conduct of members within a community, are maintained and observed and authority is obeyed; the rule of law or constituted authority; social cohesion; absence of riot, anarchy, or violent crime.”

Having set Felix Holt in the period immediately following the passage of the 1832 Bill, when order has given way to riot and violence, George Eliot moves backwards in Middlemarch to the time leading up to the bill’s passing and to a world in which the “social cohesion” included in definition number 17 is giving way. Here her concern is to probe more deeply the meaning—and the meanings—of order. The society of Middlemarch offers a cross-section of the burgeoning, diverse middle class of the mid-century English Midlands. As such it is a world preoccupied with the Oxford English Dictionary’s seventh meaning of “order,” which is defined by “social class” and “specific rank.” While it can be said that the most admirable people in the novel avoid this obsession and accept their own rank, several of the best of them are compromised by their inability to recognize the extent to which their superior social rank constitutes a privilege and, in being taken for granted, becomes a hindrance to self-understanding and growth. Others less fortunate (because of less fortune) see nothing but their own lower status and are desperate to leave it behind for what the narrator calls “that middle-class heaven, rank.”

This comment slyly alludes to the supreme power of rank, which is so seductive that it becomes a satisfactory replacement for religion, generating an almost metaphysical aura that readily blurs the concept of “order” into meanings 14—“the condition in which everything has its correct or appropriate place, and performs its proper functions; the force for harmony and regularity in the universe”—and 15: “the fixed arrangement found in the existing state of things; a natural, moral, spiritual, or social system in which things proceed according to definite, established, or constituted laws.” This facility to project onto order, as manifest in rank, a “natural,” “moral,” or even “spiritual” good that is seen to be reflected in and sanctioned by the cosmic order underlies the preoccupation in this middle-class world with the great guarantor of heavenly bliss—and the source of so much calamity in the novel—marriage. It is this facility to blur meanings that turns marriage into an ultimate good that is necessary not only for social but also for cosmic order and turns this constructed order and the ranking system that upholds
it into religion. And it is the religious power of such language that insidiously defines the “correct or appropriate place” and the “proper functions” of women in terms of their domestic relations with men.

I think it is clear that order was supremely seductive for George Eliot herself, and this is why she writes of its abuses, excesses, and mystifications with such compassion and subtlety. What the narrator says of her heroine, Dorothea, could be said of George Eliot herself: “Permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve, was not possible to her.”

In this her most ambitious novel to date, George Eliot takes on the whole social order of mid-century Britain, sustained as it still is by the money and power of the landed gentry and flirting or threatened with reform on almost every side. The issue of medical reform is a main thematic focus, and George Eliot represents Lydgate’s work as bound up with his quest for one kind of order and his corresponding ignorance of another. His passionate longing is “to demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure, and help define men’s thought more accurately after the true order.”

Ironically, however, Lydgate’s study of “certain primary webs or tissues” has blinded him to his own enmeshment in a social and sexual web spun out of female wiles and middle-class and professional envy. Like a fish that can’t recognize its own dependence on the water it swims in, Lydgate is oblivious to his entrenchment in a particular place in the social order that controls his actions and even his feelings. His egoism blinds him, to the point that he ends up trapped in a marital structure that is devoid of true “intimate relations” and leaves the doctor virtually taking orders from an anatomically perfect but perfectly shallow, vain, materialistic wife. There is a certain poetic justice in Lydgate’s hen-pecked, soul-destroying fate in that his foolish sense of his own power has included a deep scorn for women as persons. Nonetheless, readers are left to mourn him as an almost classical hero, because George Eliot makes clear that he was indeed of a different order and surely deserved a less cruel fate.

Social Order and Holy Orders

Despite Lydgate’s romanticism and misogyny, George Eliot encourages readers to admire his pursuit of “the true order” and to sympathize with his quixotic self-image as a knight of the order of physicians. For George Eliot, this sense of professional integrity, shared as well by Caleb Garth in relation to “business,” does amount to membership in a kind of sacred order. Indeed, the men in the novel whose profession is “holy orders” in the traditional sense are held to the same standard. In this respect we can say that George Eliot treats clerics in the novel as part of the social order and asks the reader to assess them in terms of their integrity with respect to their calling, which notably does not include a distinguishable sense of a spiritual life.
In other words, George Eliot represents the novel’s clerics as members of a particular profession, like medicine and business, rather than as set apart for religious life.

While George Eliot did not dedicate her career to an extended series of “Scenes of Clerical Life,” she did include such scenes in almost all of her fiction, and *Middlemarch* represents a culmination of these representations. It will be useful at this point to sketch some of the major shifts that occurred in the role and function of the church of her day and its clergy.

The church historian R. A. Solway tells us that Anglican clergymen were “an integral part of the traditionally landed social and political establishment that governed the country throughout the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century.”40 This mutual establishment of Church and State was completely entrenched in class, of course, as Trollope has illustrated so memorably, with ecclesiastical appointments having more to do with “whom one knew and whom one was related to” than standards of “merit and virtue.”41 Party and family alliance extended to university education as well. Nonetheless, while patronage told much of the story, the climate of reform helped encourage a higher standard in university education in general and in theological training in particular, such that there was some overall improvement over this period in the intellectual quality, and sometimes the sense of spiritual vocation, of clergy.42

The period leading up to and immediately following the passage of the First Reform Bill saw crucial changes in the role and function of the clergy. As W. M. Jacob puts it,

> Until about 1835 the parish was the critical unit of government in people’s lives. . . . The parish was the backbone of the State. The key figure in a parish, exercising both a civil and ecclesiastical function, was the parish priest, the rector, vicar, or perpetual curate. Clergy and local elites were closely involved together in the civil and ecclesiastical government of a parish where there was little distinction between what was later distinguished as religious and secular.43

After the 1830s, Jacob goes on, the increasing separation of church and state brought about by reform meant that the role of clergy gradually became “spiritualized.”44 He points out that later centuries interpret the clerics’ close integration in their society as secularizing and their withdrawal as spiritualizing, with the ironic effect being the loss of the bonds of understanding they once had. Another factor in these changes was urbanization and the concentration of working people in towns, a situation that contributed to the increasing politicization of the working class and sealed their disaffection from the established church.

George Eliot’s fiction serves as a record of the changing function and role of the church, as embodied in each of the clergymen she depicts. From the
first *Scenes to Middlemarch* she portrays a range of clerics, all of whom work in parishes as they were in the pre-1835 period described by the historians above, when the vicar “still enjoyed a great deal of prestige and influence.” In her earliest works of fiction—the three *Scenes* and *Adam Bede*—George Eliot represents clerics from the time of her youth, and from stories she heard as a youth. Mr. Gilfil, from her second story, set in the 1780s, might be seen to exemplify what J. R. H. Moorman calls the “typical” parish priest of this period: “He lived the comfortable life of a small country squire, took the necessary services on Sundays, visited where there was sickness, and spent his evenings playing cards or dining with his neighbours.” In the traditional fashion, Mr. Gilfil’s clerical life is centered around his role as chaplain to the gentry, for whom he conducts family prayers. What is distinctive about George Eliot’s depiction of Mr. Gilfil, of course, is her desire to show the heartache that has shaped his life and belies his apparent ease.

From the 1830s of Mary Anne Evans’s youth, we have the hapless Amos Barton, who might fit Moorman’s profile of one of “a large number of simple men who carried out their modest duties with reasonable efficiency,” and the self-sacrificing Mr. Tryan from “Janet’s Repentance,” one of the “few really devoted parish priests,” in this case one who, in this crucial time of social change, is extending his work to the poor in the towns. In *Adam Bede*, we see this picture developed, in the context of a glimpse at the comparative work of the established church and one of its dissenting brethren in the first decade of the century, as Dinah works among the urban poor while Mr. Irwine devotes himself to the rural parish and lives closely (albeit in relative poverty) with the landed gentry. Mr. Irwine is typical of the pre-1835 period in serving a multifaceted social role entailing officiating at or giving assistance to parishioners in legal, financial, and medical matters, as described by W. M. Jacob. Mr. Irwine and Amos Barton also instantiate nicely another aspect of the shift occurring around this time: the classics-steeped Irwine represents the cleric more typical of the earlier age, who, according to Jacob, was often “in the forefront of intellectual life,” while Amos is more typical of the curate whose origins in the lower class means in part that he serves his parishioners without notable intellectual gifts or theological training. Mr. Irwine also shares with Dr. Kenn, from *The Mill on the Floss*, the qualities of compassion and wisdom that make the local clergyman the person to whom Adam (in the first decade of the 1800s) and Maggie (a decade or so later) turn in their trouble.

The relationship between established churchman and Dissenter that we find in *Adam Bede* is given another turn in *Felix Holt*, set at the very moment of Reform in 1832. Like Dinah, the devout Mr. Lyon is well versed in the Bible and is dedicated to the poor and working folk, but he is at the same time a man of his political time, working for changes that will benefit the working class. His ecclesiastical adversary, the Reverend Augustus Debarry, as a member of the ruling family (as “always”), is what the narrator calls a “fine
specimen of the old-fashioned aristocratic clergyman.” The ironic voice of the narrator makes clear that such a specimen does not demonstrate theological knowledge or much pastoral care, but this doesn’t matter in any case since the farmers’ presence at church, where there is room for Debarry tombs but not for parishioners, is at best “exceptional.” Debarry thus embodies the incumbents that, according to Solway, were still most prevalent in the 1840s: “ambitious, pleasure-seeking, mediocre party-men who owed their advancement to family and friends.” Despite the fact that Mr. Lyon’s earnest spirituality and absent-mindedness make him a laughingstock to many, George Eliot leaves the reader in no doubt about her own respect for such men as he and about the fact that it is the Reverend Debarry who has more to answer for with respect to the decline of religious observance.

In *Middlemarch* it is as if George Eliot brings these various clerical figures together to take up familiar roles on this larger stage. But while most of them played central roles in their previous appearances, here they are all, except for the miserable Rev. Casaubon, just part of the social web—significant players, one or two quite important, and all of them worthy of interest, but none a major focus of narrative attention. Certainly George Eliot’s main object from the start has been to show clergy as men like other men, but here she sharpens her attention to the fact that each of them is no more important than any other person. This might be George Eliot’s strongest statement about the parish clergy of 1832: the idea that, whether they know it or not, they are becoming less and less important, less and less influential. Still, she represents them with the deepest respect and evenhanded tolerance.

One might think that she has a soft spot for poor clergymen, and perhaps she does, but in fact, as Solway notes, the church of this period was served by “thousands of curates eking out a bare subsistence serving several parishes for pluralistic non-residents, many of whom were themselves holding additional cures to obtain an adequate income.” As George Eliot’s ironic narrator puts it in introducing Amos Barton, curate at Shepperton Church, and his rather large family: “Those were days when a man could hold three small livings, starve a curate a-piece on two of them, and live badly himself on the third.” In *Middlemarch* all the clerics except the miserable Casaubon are poor. George Eliot’s favorite among them, Farebrother, is like Reverend Irvine in being prevented from marrying because all of his meager income goes to support his mother and unmarried sister and aunt. Farebrother is also similar to his ecclesiastical forebear from *Adam Bede* in being an intellectual, but times have changed in that, while Irvine’s intellectual passion was classical literature and language, Farebrother’s is science. Similar as well is their pastoral ability; Irvine’s, as we saw in chapter 1, is of a practical, wise kind without much regard for doctrinal purity or theological rigor. Farebrother demonstrates a similar pastoral skill and care for his flock and is like Irvine too in not being drawn into doctrinal debates and in delivering sermons that, according to Lydgate and others, are worth listening to.
But in the later novel George Eliot is interested in constructing a more complicated clerical figure. For Farebrother takes the neighborly card-playing mentioned above to another level in being driven by his poor financial state to gambling. Also unlike with Irwine, we get a glimpse of his internal state when he struggles with and finally resists the temptation to compete for the affection of the woman he can finally afford to marry, and when he admits, at least in private, that he is pursuing the wrong calling and would rather have been a man of science than a man of the cloth.

Another churchman in *Middlemarch* whose calling we might wonder about is the Reverend Cadwallader, rector of Freshitt and Tipton, who nonetheless shares with Irwine and Farebrother the ability to preach well. He too is a poor man but has been luckier than the other two in being able to marry the woman he loved, a “high-born” woman who romantically defied her family by marrying a destitute clergyman, and who not only loves him and keeps his household with a stringent attention to their modest pocketbook but tolerates his lackadaisical ways and even enjoys his sermons. Cadwallader’s professional abilities remain otherwise obscure to the reader since, though he is a good-natured man, he avoids getting involved in the lives of his parishioners and giving unsought opinions on any subject other than fishing, his true passion. Though we hear the irony, the narrator seems to resemble Cadwallader himself in her response, not seeming to see any reason to pass judgment on a harmless man “who take[s] life easily,” the most severe adjective that is used against him being his wife’s epithet, “charitable.”

George Eliot uses Farebrother to bring to light another feature of clerical life, when he competes with clerical colleagues for vacant ecclesiastical positions. Where once a clergyman depended on family and friends for advancement, the new social structures mean that they now depend more on business and professional people of the middle classes. In this respect clergymen are in a position very similar to members of other professions, with medical men being George Eliot’s particular focus in *Middlemarch*. While there is no reason other than his good will, common sense, and high intellectual standards—rather than any religious sense that we are made aware of—to credit Lydgate’s opinion on these matters, George Eliot’s narrator takes his admiration of Farebrother’s sermons and character as enough to ground Dorothea’s willingness to consider him for the living at Lowick. Lydgate calls Farebrother’s the best preaching he has heard, full of “plain, easy eloquence” in the style of Hugh Latimer. Neither he nor Dorothea can see any use in the “apostolic” style of his rival, Tyke, or the latter’s propensity to preach on obscure doctrinal matters.

This brings us to the cleric whose vacant living Farebrother will fill, Mr. Casaubon. Although we are never made privy to the subjects or quality of his sermons, his scholarly bent suggests that they would involve a lot of etymology and historical documentation, rather than attempting to provide the “wider blessing” Dorothea is hoping for in the sermons of his successor.
As mentioned, Casaubon is the only clergyman in *Middlemarch* who is not poor, and his wealth allows him to employ a curate to do the parish work, as is standard practice, leaving him free from clerical duties other than Sunday sermons. By the time the reader visits Lowick, in chapter 9 of Book I, everyone except Dorothea already knows that Casaubon has no room in his tiny consciousness for the people of his parish. Instead, Mr. Tucker, like Amos in being blessed with many children and noted by the ironic narrator as “one of the ‘inferior clergy,’” is “able to answer all [Dorothea’s] questions about the villagers and the other parishioners.” Only someone as insistently blind as Dorothea could fail to see that Casaubon is not concerned with goodness, in other than a strictly moralistic sense, nor with anything to do with the well-being of others, except as a Christian duty, nor with any matters that might be called spiritual, except in the most church-bound sense. As such Casaubon serves as almost a caricature through which George Eliot can exemplify the deplorable state of the Christian clerical system. In going through the motions of religious service, Casaubon can be seen to represent a type of clergyman that Solway claims is typical, whose generosity was “often a matter of role obligation essentially split off from any genuine emotional involvement with the suffering poor.”

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Nonclerical Religious Life

Dorothea’s unique blindness concerning this “dried bookworm towards fifty” is fascinating and indeed almost unbelievable, a fact that leads attentive readers to the conclusion that George Eliot has particular cause for making her heroine unlike anyone else. Her sister, the knowing Celia, knows that Dorothea “always sees what nobody else sees” and misses what everyone else sees. In this respect Dorothea is a true see in the tradition of Tiresias, of the nineteen-year-old, female, nineteenth-century variety. She shares with Lydgate the social blindness that is the corollary of a deep insight into a high, true order—in his case an order of science, in hers of religion—that others fail to see. And while Casaubon is almost a caricature and Dorothea is almost an ideal, together they make a thoroughly believable unhappy marriage. One of the reasons Dorothea mis-sees him is her intense idealism, which includes a desire for goodness and truth that is so palpable that it takes on substance for her in the form of the first person in her small world who appears, like herself, not to belong in the social order of Middlemarch described above.
Casaubon is devoted to something different than are the usual male suspects of her acquaintance, and her desire easily reconstructs his obsession with his studies as a passion for an ideal of truth and goodness that is beyond the ordinary world of her experience.

As mentioned, George Eliot herself knew the seductions of the pursuit of order, including one that would explain the universe. In *Middlemarch* we find her replaying Maggie’s relationship with Thomas à Kempis, whose voice, speaking across time as if alive in his *Imitation of Christ*, promises “a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets,” the “key” to happiness. Her successor in this quest, Dorothea is attracted to a living man who is in pursuit of the “Key to all Mythologies,” but the narrator makes clear that his quest is so blighted by his “morbid consciousness” and “melancholy absence of passion” as to be a pursuit of death. According to the principles of George Eliot’s own religious code, Casaubon is the worst of sinners in being, not just obsessed with his work and blind to his own failings—as most of us are—but in being ruled by loveless ego to the point of seeking absolute power over his wife, not only in his lifetime but after his death. Sir James is correct to call their marriage “horrible”: Casaubon is indeed, as the jealous suitor says, “a mummy” but also proves a veritable Gothic villain, whose desire is to control his wife even after she has become his widow.

Perhaps Dorothea is duped partly because Casaubon’s duplicity is so deep-seated that he himself mistakes it for integrity. And in this we find George Eliot’s subtle commentary on the worst flaws of the clerical system, in that while she herself in creating a realistic picture must represent clergy as just another profession, there is still a sense in which this profession is meant to be different. This is why Casaubon’s failure, like that of the church he serves, has such dire consequences. Because he is a priest (something readers might be forgiven for forgetting) his obsessiveness becomes all the darker—more Gothic and more deplorable—for his way of turning his profession of holy orders into a cover for what Walpurga called “monstrous Self.”

Casaubon’s profession must be seen as crucial to the naive Dorothea’s attraction to him. George Eliot makes clear that her intensely religious nature puts her at odds with the predominantly secular world in which she lives. But it is important that Dorothea does conform in the matter of the key expectation for a young woman: to be in need of a husband. Somewhat oddly to many readers, the novel is prefaced by a “Prelude” in which George Eliot explains why a nineteenth-century woman may not imitate the sixteenth-century Saint Theresa, who “found her epos in the reform of a religious order” rather than marry. Perhaps George Eliot feels the need to explain why she makes marriage the central event of her heroine’s life. She ranks her heroine among many unfulfilled Theresas, whose “ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood” and then casts Dorothea’s fate as ultimately determined by the latter. Given that, George Eliot constructs Dorothea as a woman who, since she must marry, will seek a
religious man. And in Casaubon she believes she has found “a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety . . . a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint.”

Dorothea’s desire for a holy husband follows from her devout nature: her beauty has the appeal of “the Blessed Virgin,” and her style of dress “gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible.” In marriage she is “yearning” for a context in which to practice “her own rule of conduct.” Filled with a sense of her own uselessness, she longs for “the submergence of self in communion with Divine perfection” and mistakes Casaubon’s seriousness for the wisdom that will facilitate it. If it were not so tragic, her quixotic determination to see the dried-up old scholar, not as a knight in shining armor but as “a modern Augustine” mixed with Pascal, would be laughable. From the silly vanity of the more ordinary Esther we have moved to the almost pathological self-loathing of the beautiful young girl who looks to this grotesque “union” to “deliver her from her own girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path.”

For although Dorothea is full of illusions about her future husband, she has no illusions about her dependency as a woman. Though she is different from most women—and the virtual opposite of Esther—in combining an “intensity of religious disposition” with a “passionate desire to know and to think” and an equally passionate concern for “doing good,” at the age of nineteen she has already learned the limits of gender. Her large, ardent nature feels “hemmed in” by “a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths” that require her to follow “rules which were never acted upon.” She wishes to exchange a rule of life that she sees as petty and meaningless for one that is “grand” and purposeful: the rule of married life. Her “faith” fatally transforms Casaubon’s “frigid rhetoric” of courtship into an invitation to the purposeful, shared life of her imaginings, such that she sees in his work the “Key” to her finally discovering “a binding theory which could bring her own life and doctrine into strict connexion with that amazing past, and give the remotest sources of knowledge some bearing on her actions.”

More than a husband, the narrator says, Dorothea wants “a sort of father” and teacher, a wise older man to conduct her, via Latin and Greek and perhaps even a smattering of Hebrew, to those revered “provinces of masculine knowledge” that “seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly.” She believes that knowledge must be the means to wisdom, goodness, and the power of action, and, having perhaps learned from Maggie to moderate her desire, accepts that she will attain such knowledge through her husband. In this way she hopes to “arrive at the core of things, and judge soundly on the social duties of the Christian.” Although the narrator notes that Dorothea would be content to be a humble “lamp-holder” for her husband’s explorations, she also observes that the young
woman “had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband: she wished, poor child, to be wise herself.”

At the same time though, it is not merely intellectual improvement Dorothea longs for.

She did not want to deck herself with knowledge—to wear it loose from the nerves and blood that fed her action; and if she had written a book she must have done it as Saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience. But something she yearned for by which her life might be filled with action at once rational and ardent; and since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayer heightened yearning but not instruction, what lamp was there but knowledge? Surely learned men kept the only oil; and who more learned than Mr. Casaubon?

While she does hope to get to “the core of things,” then, Dorothea more urgently seeks to engage her whole being, to become part of a greater order. As the novel’s “Prelude” informs us, this heroine is no Saint Theresa, but she is nonetheless on a spiritual quest, yearning with her whole being for “something” that will connect knowledge and action, mind and body, reason and passion. Dorothea believes that marriage to a good and learned man is her ticket to that “something”—the necessary conduit to link the woman to the world and give sanction and legitimacy to her action. Sadly, of course, she is even less able to act once she is married. Bound by “the gentlewoman’s oppressive liberty,” she finds herself after her marriage “in a moral imprisonment” in which “her religious faith was a solitary cry” and her hope for a purposeful life is sustained only by an “inward vision.”

In Dorothea’s plight George Eliot replays the comedy of a blind, romantic girl falling for a man devoted to his cause to the point of farce and then tragedy. We are thrust from Jane Austen to William Blake here however, as the innocent, “childlike” Dorothea—God’s gift—is forced by her marriage to chant the dirge of experience. The reason for this has everything to do with order, in that, like Lydgate, Dorothea overlooks the everyday power of social and conventional order and is at the same time duped by a belief that in marriage she is submitting to the rule of a holy order that will sanctify and bless her submission by turning it into good action. And indeed this is just what does happen for Esther, so that with the triangulation of these three texts—Middlemarch, Felix Holt, and Felix’s “Address to the Working Man”—we catch a glimpse of the complexity of George Eliot’s response to the question of order. For what Felix is exhorting the workingmen to adopt is modeled by the “voluntary submission” of Esther and Dorothea, and the religious resonance of his language suggests that adopting such “rules of fellowship” will produce a harmonious, and indeed sacred, social order.
But for the heroine of *Middlemarch* the situation is more complicated. At crucial moments in the novel, George Eliot compares Dorothea to Saint Theresa, whose “passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life,” but she does so, as mentioned above, in order to make clear that such a life is forbidden to her nineteenth-century heroine. This is because of the contemporary requirement of marriage for a woman and Dorothea’s misguided choice of husband, along with the fact that in her society religion has been replaced by secular values to the point where there is “no coherent social faith and vision” to help her.

It is interesting, however, that both *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* in the end represent the same vision of marital joy: two young people deep in love and conversation. For Dorothea, who had “looked up gratefully” to the Reverend Mr. Casaubon believing he could “understand the higher inward life” and join with her in “some spiritual communion,” finds a true lover and soul mate in Will Ladislaw, a young man with whom she can talk and even laugh. When Casaubon is disposed of, Dorothea’s friends continue to believe that another “husband is the best thing to keep her in order,” and her second marriage might on the outside look as if it is satisfying this convention, for Ladislaw does become “an ardent public man” and she, a mother and dutiful wife whose life seems to “have been absorbed into the life of another.”

But George Eliot carefully designs Ladislaw as a husband who, being what Middlemarchers call a “gypsy” who belongs to “no class,” will not perpetuate the existing social or marital order. Instead, George Eliot makes clear that their private life, “hidden” from the eye of the world and from the reader, is a relationship of the highest order that two human beings can achieve. She thus seems to confirm the pronouncement of Philip Wakem’s father: “We don’t ask what a woman does—we ask whom she belongs to.” But she puts forward the idea, first in a rather bald way in *Felix Holt* and then in a fuller way in *Middlemarch*, that wedlock may actually be the holy order of a contemporary religion. In a “Finale” that answers the “Prelude,” George Eliot suggests that her heroine’s apparent insignificance as the wife of Will Ladislaw and the mother of his children is representative of all—even ourselves and the author herself—whose vital influence for good is both “unhistoric” and endlessly fruitful.

**Dorothea and the Mysticism of Everyday Life**

George Eliot’s invocation of Saint Theresa reminds us that though she scorned the various forms of spiritualism that were gaining prominence in the later years of her life, this period also marked the beginnings of her renewed interest in ancient traditions of mysticism. In *Middlemarch*, we see George Eliot tentatively but certainly engaging with religious mysticism in a way that anticipates the great modernist thinkers on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill and William James. In Dorothea, George Eliot creates a neo-Theresa, whose
“hidden life” as the unheralded influence for “growing good” provides a model for the reader. Dorothea follows George Eliot’s Renaissance heroine, Romola, in finding a new way for faith after her disillusionment with clerical, institutional Christianity; and the religious practice she develops could be understood in terms of Karl Rahner’s description of a mysticism of everyday faith.

Dorothea’s spiritual odyssey and its significance for George Eliot’s religious imagination may also be understood in the context of some recent ideas of the philosopher Richard Kearney, including his consideration of how various mystical traditions have responded to disillusionment with the familiar idea of God. In his 2010 book *Anatheism* Kearney asks: what happens “for those who—after ridding themselves of ‘God’—still seek God?” Crucial to Kearney’s purpose here is to challenge the post-Enlightenment claim that societies and individuals “grow up” and grow out of faith, replacing religious belief with rationality; in response, Kearney is arguing that we grow indeed—not necessarily away from God, however, but from one kind of God to another.

Kearney’s subtitle is *Returning to God after God*, and he eloquently encapsulates his idea of a return to theism with the prefix “ana,” which in its compound meaning—“up, back, again”—conjures the notion of a constant movement towards, away from, back to, and around the divine in a kind of cosmic and intimate dance. Kearney explores many forms of this return in our post-religious, post-secular age, and it is key that it is a return of what was once known, a retrieval of what has been—a recognition, rather than a discovery of something new. Religion, in one of its meanings, is about links and bonds, and Kearney’s conception here is of a link to something outside oneself—not simply a subjective sense—that is already known and thus recognized. Important too, and resonant with the Christian terms of the resurrection story, is the necessity for a departure that will afford a recognition and a revelation of meaning that couldn’t be known by continued presence. It is necessary, in other words, that there be a withdrawal, a detachment, in order for there to be the new perspective that allows for true belief by awakening passive reception to active engagement. And sometimes, says Kearney, we need to hear stories of the death of God and experience the absence of God—just as Jesus did on the cross—in order to find out about and enact God’s living presence.

Kearney’s ideas pertain to cultural as well as personal development, and, indeed, the micro and macro levels of religious experience mutually inhere in and facilitate each other. At both levels the return he is heralding is marked by two essential shifts in religious understanding that resonate with George Eliot’s thinking to the extent that we can see her as anticipating Kearney’s anatheistic approach. These are the shift in understanding from the sovereign God to the suffering God, and the concurrent shift from “my God” and “our God” to the God of all. The first of these is taking shape, as I will outline here,
from the beginning of George Eliot’s fiction; from this follows her exploration of the second of these shifts in her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*. This process demonstrates a crucial idea that George Eliot shares with Kearney—that religious understanding evolves and indeed must evolve if any faith is to claim to be alive, an idea that I will develop more fully in chapter 5.

Kearney argues that all religions hold a view of both a sovereign and a suffering version of God and that they have emphasized the former at the expense of the latter. Christianity holds to a “God of power and might” (as the Anglican tradition celebrates in its liturgy) because we need to believe in a God who is powerful; and while we also believe in a suffering God—manifest primarily in the person of Christ—we underplay this vulnerable aspect because of the dominant culture of fear. In simple terms, one could say that a culture must “grow up”—leaving behind the god who demands blood sacrifice and provides inspiration and strength and warrant for war and other forms of cultural dominance—and instead model the god who suffers and dies for others. Along with this, a culture must surrender the notion of a god whose interests are identified with one’s own and embrace instead a god who is there for everyone, even one’s enemies.

In George Eliot’s early work we can see an exploration of the divine in terms of a dialectic of sovereignty and suffering. Particularly in several of her early essays we see a positively vitriolic response to the narrow, smug claim to a god who rewards me and my religious fellows while punishing all others unmercifully. Typically for George Eliot, the vitriol is poured out as much because of the intellectual as the moral and spiritual stupidity of this mind-set, which sees salvation as the end, rather than the beginning, of a movement toward holiness and the unfolding of God’s will. George Eliot’s early works of fiction all re-create her experience as a young Christian in a far more positive light than do these essays, and the sympathy she evidently feels and encourages from her reader is taken by most critics as what one calls “a piety about the past”, that is, a kind of pious memorializing of religious piety. Most readers recognize in *Adam Bede*, for example, a reframing of biblical images and parables that works to either sacralize the ordinary or naturalize the sacred (or both). And the narrator also takes great pains to make early Methodism comprehensible to the sophisticated, urban, even unchurched contemporary reader. While for many readers Dinah never loses her ultra-pious and thus unrealistic and unsympathetic quality, Adam’s and the narrator’s love for her almost succeeds in bringing her down to earth. And while Dinah’s preaching may grate on us, her prayerful, visionary sensibility is more readily acceptable for the ease with which it can be reframed in nonreligious terms as a superior kind of intuition. As if knowing how unpalatable all of this is to a modern day reader, the narrator intervenes with a double-edged injunction, asking readers both to understand that things were different back then and to recognize that their own perspective is not as rationally unimpeachable as they might like to think.
As has often been discussed, the germ of *Adam Bede* is the story told to Mary Anne Evans as a girl by her Methodist aunt, and the novel that results is redolent with re-created memories of her girlhood. For the purposes of my argument here, it is interesting to think of this childhood origin as a kind of metonymy for the idea of a progressive cultural consciousness; George Eliot is here telling a story of her own religious origins as well as those of her culture. In a way she is saying, “Don’t you see how valuable and important and rare this traditional religious view was?” And, conversely, “Now I’m grown up, I’m rational and sophisticated, just like you.” Of course it is not an either/or for George Eliot, and the point is more to say, “I experienced and believed in this religious consciousness, and now along with my rationality and intelligence I have a deep sense of something more.” In other words, I think we can say that at this point in George Eliot’s career and life, she endorsed the post-Enlightenment rationalist view and realized that she had grown out of faith. Importantly, however, her fictional work belied the simplicity of this shift and revealed instead that there was still something more to be said. We find clues throughout her first novel, but the real truth-teller comes in another narratorial interlude when she is speaking of Hetty’s lost-sheep wanderings and refers to the image of the crucified Christ, which she says is never to be found along the lanes of her enlightened English Protestant countryside but only in Europe. It is as if the narrator is pulled up short in her own wanderings here as she exclaims, “No wonder man’s religion has much suffering in it: no wonder he needs a suffering God.” It seems to me that it is her knowledge of the truth of suffering that makes the post-Enlightenment claim that persons and cultures grow out of faith implausible for George Eliot.

Another key signpost on this journey is the struggle that the heroine of *The Mill on the Floss* undergoes. Here we see George Eliot, as discussed in previous chapters, leaving her childhood past behind; as we know, instead of growing up Maggie drowns, but her death is the crucial sacrifice that allows her creator not only to live and to write but also to move beyond childhood territory and avoid the compulsion to return. In Maggie we see a childish need to be loved by and to please the sovereign father, and her best efforts to overcome this need to submit are thwarted again and again by the insidious guilt-producing introjections that prevent her acting in her own best interests and according to her own feelings. Here too we witness an intuitive understanding that suffering is the true touchstone, but Maggie is trapped in a kind of double stereotype—of gender and of extreme religion—that makes her see herself as the one who must suffer.

George Eliot’s other heroines, notably Romola and Fedalma, work out her trademark tragedy of renunciation in less tragic though still deeply costly ways, but it is in Dorothea that we see George Eliot arriving at what I will call a mystical solution. Like Maggie, Dorothea is seduced by the idea of sovereign authority, which she thinks she finds in Casaubon, who is obviously more of a father figure and teacher than a lover or companion. Like Maggie
too, Dorothea is convinced of her need to be taught; she has a pressing need to find a way to be of use in the world, and it is her enforced acquiescence to the cultural view that women find usefulness through their husbands that leads to her severe humbling and then her maturity. Like Maggie too, she is almost betrayed into voluntarily walking into “a virtual tomb” by the insidious allure of guilt and pity. The danger of this belief in sovereign power and the complicity of social forces to ensure its reign even into the future are given ghoulish weight when Casaubon tries to control his wife from beyond the grave, through his will.

But Dorothea is not Maggie; neither is she Dinah. Like Dinah, however, Dorothea is unusually pious, but it is the suffering caused by her marriage that reveals an otherwise unsuspected depth of inwardness, which she experiences in her disillusionment as “spiritual emptiness and discontent.” When we first find the newly married Dorothea in tears, the narrator claims that we cannot be expected to regard the young bride’s marital misery as “tragic” despite its sublime Roman background. But she nonetheless convinces us that it is tragic—could we bear to recognize it—because of “the very fact of frequency.” It is indeed Dorothea’s tragic destiny to learn just how painful unseen tragedy can be: in short, it is Dorothea’s destiny to grow up, to leave behind the belief in a husband who will be a benevolent, powerful guide. But, the narrator hastens to tell us, it is not in Dorothea’s nature to rebel: “Permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve, was not possible to her.” And so at this point and in this way she is like Maggie, but George Eliot does not leave her here, for she is now ready to develop the next stage in this progression of religious experience.

Eighteen months or so into Dorothea’s miserable marriage, after her husband has repeatedly rebuffed any overtures of intimacy, we witness another deep inward crisis. Now however, Dorothea experiences “a rebellious anger” which forbids tears in favor of words (to herself) of self-defense. The sound of her own words shocks her into acknowledging the destruction of “her young hope” and the abandonment of “her best soul in prison, [where she could pay it] only hidden visits.” It is fascinating here to see Dorothea taking another huge step toward maturity when she recognizes in herself the desire for vindication by a sovereign god: “Her anger said, as anger is apt to say, that God was with her—that all heaven, though it were crowded with spirits watching them, must be on her side.” The wording here suggests the childishness of this perspective, however human for us all and however permanent it might remain for many of us. This is a dark night of the soul for Dorothea, and “the struggle changed continually” through that night, until her anger is transmuted to pity, subdued by the “shadowy monitor” that her husband still embodies. “It cost her a litany of pictured sorrows and of silent cries that she might be the mercy for [his] sorrows—but the resolved submission did come . . .”—to the disappointment of most readers perhaps, but true to the nature of this heroine.
But her creator isn’t finished with her yet. Whether by means of a deus ex machina or poetic justice or a sovereign but merciful author, Dorothea is rescued from this miserable fate because there are better things in store for her. For the next step in her process of maturing is through the independence afforded by a wealthy widowhood that allows her to experience and model a different kind of power. Every reader is familiar with the eulogy to the insignificant with which the novel ends, but I want to focus on one of Dorothea’s life-changing yet “unhistoric acts.” After her husband’s death, one responsibility she has is to bequeath the clerical living at Lowick. In a beautiful touch, George Eliot allows Lydgate, the physician who is himself inwardly ailing, to diagnose Dorothea’s deepest need: “She wants perfect freedom,” he says, “more than any other prescription.”

Lydgate is right, because Dorothea has moved beyond the need for sovereign power, and she must start experiencing in grown-up fashion the conundrum that Lydgate too is confronting. Dorothea’s innocent question concerning Farebrother, “Why has he not done more?” casts a glaring light on Lydgate’s own failings, but he replies simply, “It’s uncommonly difficult to make the right thing work: there are so many strings pulling at once.”

When it comes to her decision about the living, Dorothea experiences the same difficulty but in nicely (for my purposes) ecclesiastical terms: “She was wishing it were possible to restore the times of primitive zeal,” the narrator notes, “and yet . . .” This “and yet” tells it all, because Dorothea has learned by now that she is living in a new era when she must take responsibility for trying “to make the right thing work” as best she can. She also knows that Mr. Tyke’s so-called “apostolic” affiliation represents a dead kind of traditionalism that is more focused on claiming a link to the past than developing a connection with his parishioners. Instead of doctrinal pronouncements, Dorothea states a preference for Farebrother’s way of teaching Christianity, which “makes it a wider blessing than any other . . .—I mean that which takes in the most good of all kinds, and brings in the most people as sharers in it.” Even her difficulty in expressing this desire signals a shift to a more complex and mature attitude that witnesses her discovery of an indescribable depth in ordinary religious practice.

In this small scene between Dorothea and Lydgate we see a number of important things: the friendship between two people, a man and a woman, who recognize in each other a will to do good in a way that brings them together and has far-reaching effects. In part, each has been brought to this understanding and mutual respect by marital disappointment; each has learned something that helps create a bond between them and allows them to intervene to improve a worthy clergyman’s life and the lives of the people who will be his parishioners. For Lydgate, the painful education in the power of a woman has meant a new understanding of this woman’s grace. For Dorothea, the religious idealism of her youth remains, but she is now prepared to put aside those ideals in favor of a visible and practical good. Still,
she is granted the power to “rescue” Farebrother, and later is able to help Lydgate in a way that enforces the sense of a new religious order, sustained by a desire for the good that is not bound by doctrinal definition.

Although George Eliot allows her heroine only a temporary period as husbandless disposer of her own life, here we see her giving Dorothea an opportunity to act under her own power. In this, George Eliot is expanding an idea she introduced in *The Mill on the Floss*, when Maggie recognized in Dr. Kenn’s face a sympathetic response. The narrator pauses then to reflect on the importance of such a connection:

> The middle-aged, who have lived through their strongest emotions, but are yet in the time when memory is still half-passionate and not merely contemplative, should surely be a sort of natural priesthood, whom life has disciplined and consecrated to be the refuge and rescue of early stumblers and victims of self-despair. Most of us, at some moment in our young lives, would have welcomed a priest of that natural order in any sort of canonicals or uncanonicals, but had to scramble upwards into all the difficulties of nineteen entirely without aid, as Maggie did.

Here George Eliot gestures toward a new religious order—“natural” yet “disciplined” and “consecrated”—consisting of one human being helping another. And it is important that Dorothea is a member of this order, her gender and her relative youth notwithstanding.

Dorothea’s growth away from a sovereign, private god enshrined in a doctrinal code toward a Christianity that is focused on addressing the suffering of all through love accords with Kearney’s ideas on “anatheism.” It also, I think, further defines George Eliot’s rejection of a theologically based understanding of faith in favor of something akin to what Evelyn Underhill called “practical mysticism.” Relevant here too is Karl Rahner’s understanding of “the mystical way in everyday life.” Rahner’s idea of “the experience of God” as “the experience of grace in everyday life” could describe Dorothea’s influence—herself “the gift of God” to those with whom she lives. And Rahner’s identification of this everyday mysticism as a “wintry spirituality,” which is “closely allied with the torments of atheists’ and modern rationalism” accords with Kearney’s ideas concerning a middle ground between theism and atheism.

There are three main elements of mysticism, at least as Underhill and Rahner propose it, which could be seen to resonate with George Eliot’s religious position. First, there is the combination of idealism and pragmatism. George Eliot rejected various forms of spiritualism because they did not represent what she called “a practical religion”; conversely, as Rosemary Ashton says, “George Eliot was not at all [impatient] with the beliefs of those who strove after some genuine but ideal object.” Second, as Kearney
demonstrates, there is the common ground shared by various mystical traditions that speak of a widening scope not only within but beyond their own tradition. We see George Eliot’s further exploration of this common ground in her next novel. Third, and perhaps most deeply appealing to George Eliot, would be the commingling in mysticism of knowledge and feeling; that is, a way of knowing that is not discursive but almost indistinguishable from feeling. As Adam Bede has said to Dinah, “feeling’s a sort o’ knowledge,” and George Eliot continues to demonstrate her own agreement with him throughout her career until she is explicitly proposing the idea of “emotional intellect” in her final novel.

As the narrator of *Middlemarch* says of its heroine, she was incapable of “permanent rebellion”; and I would propose the same for her creator. Indeed, among the beautifully subtle hints of the constantly evolving religious feeling in this novel is George Eliot’s gifting to Dorothea—an earnest, naive, idealistic young woman—not only the name “gift of God” but the gifting of a clerical living; that is, the ordaining, in practical terms, of the clergyman to serve her community. According to Kearney, “Theresa of Avila argued that true mystical experience testifies to the sacramental movement from mystical meditation back to the ordinary universe.” Dorothea’s radical yet relatively “hidden” and “unhistoric” gift to Farebrother, I would argue, is an expression of just such a mystical movement.