George Eliot's Religious Imagination

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Conclusion

The Word Continuously Incarnated

“I can’t help laughing at the imbecility of that pious dictum—that if Shelley had lived till now he would have been a Christian—that is, he would have been old woman enough for it by this time.”¹ This biting comment from Marian Evans to her friend Sara Sophia Hennell in 1853 stands as a warning to anyone who dares to reopen the question of George Eliot’s attitude to religion. But while I have suggested the possibility of George Eliot’s return to a renewed understanding of religious faith in the “anatheistic” sense put forward by Richard Kearney, there would not be anything “old womanish” in the terms of her engagement. Rather, I have found throughout her writings evidence of an exploration of possible forms of religious consciousness that is pursued with the same rigorous skepticism that she expresses in this early comment.

As I have argued throughout, George Eliot considered her writing a religious vocation. From her first fictional work until the last, as well as in all of her poems, she is living out this calling in terms of an aesthetic that is incarnational: she creates characters, stories, and ideas in words that bring spirit to life by honoring and celebrating natural beings, including the human. And in doing so she invests the natural and the human with a sense of sacred value and significance.

George Eliot continues to develop this aesthetic practice throughout her career, as she continues to learn through her writing what it means that it is her holy calling to sanctify the ordinary. Such paradoxes abound in the mystical way of thinking, and it is this mystical practice that takes her aesthetic to a deeper level as she comes to question the distinction between the sacred and the secular and to experiment further with mystical ideas, particularly the holiness of everything and the ubiquitous presence of the sacred.

Daniel Deronda particularly is rife with experiments in mystical consciousness as she conjures with such nonrational concepts as coincidence, second sight, wish-fulfillment, and timely rescue. But this is only a bolder exploration of the kind of supranatural events and insights that appear throughout her writing. We need only think of little Eppie coming like an angel to save Silas. And in The Mill on the Floss we find the narrator urging...
readers to open themselves to a way of thinking that is beyond “maxims” and “general rules”: “the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and ... to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy.” In human relations, as in our relations with nature—as we saw in her response to Darwin—mystery hints at the divine, if we would only not repress it.

As I argued in chapter 5, George Eliot is always and increasingly illustrating the essential role of interpretation in shaping consciousness and belief. Along with all the other approaches to religious thinking I mention here, her understanding of interpretation reflects what has come to be called “evolutionary spirituality.” As I have tried to show, evolutionary spirituality both recovers ancient, often forgotten or overlooked ways of expressing religious thinking and points to an ever-evolving, ever-emergent “religion of the future” that is in constant need of reinterpretation. This understanding is based upon Teilhard’s notion, as we noted in chapter 5, that evolution is “a general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must bow and which they must satisfy henceforward if they are to be thinkable and true.”

This need for reinterpretation extends even to the key doctrines and texts of Christianity. Jesus himself models this mindset. For example, when the two disciples meet the resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus, he reveals his identity through the scriptures, showing them that they must reinterpret the text now that he has come. He then deepens their understanding by revealing himself in the ritual act of breaking the bread, offering himself as food for their journey, for they must continue to walk after he has left them. The truth becomes inward for them in a literal way when they eat the bread he has become. As Diarmuid O’Murchu says, he does not vanish into thin air when their eyes are opened—as if he is not meant to subsist in their more fully conscious perception—but rather he vanishes into them, becoming one with their consciousnesses, just as the bread becomes part of their bodies.

When these two disciples tell their story to the community they are acting on Teilhard’s notion of what Savary calls “the continuous Incarnation of the great Christ body.” The resurrection appearances, particularly those recounted in Luke’s stories and in John’s account of Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Jesus at the tomb, emphasize that believers take up responsibility for telling the story and, by adding their contributions, transform both the story and themselves. They thus become part of the story; in this way future readers learn that they too must tell their story of God, that God’s story cannot be told without them. More mysteriously still, they learn that they are God’s stories, that they are the stories God tells. In this way they embody the continuous Incarnation of Christ.

Evolutionary spirituality explores the mysterious relationship between Christ and the believer by expounding the distinction between Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ whose body is comprised of believers. Louis Savary
explains that, according to Teilhard, the traditional focus on an individualistic relationship between a believer and God must evolve into a spirituality that is “collective” and “relational” so as to participate in “the full emergence of Christ as a Cosmic Christ.” This evolutionary perspective can help us toward a fuller understanding of George Eliot’s religious imagination. For whereas she has typically been understood as simply denying the divinity of Jesus, we might instead see her as dissatisfied with the traditional explanations. When in 1869 Renan’s *Vie de Jésus*, a book that proposed to assert the human and minimize the Jewish identity of Jesus, was making quite a stir, George Eliot wrote to a friend that it “can furnish no new result”:

> It seems to me that the soul of Christianity lies not at all in the facts of an individual life, but in the ideas of which that life was the meeting-point and the new starting-point. We can never have a satisfactory basis for the history of the man Jesus, but the negation does not affect the Idea of the Christ either in its historical influence or its great symbolic meanings.

The distinction George Eliot makes here between “the man Jesus” and “the Idea of the Christ,” rather than articulating an abstract spiritual concept, points instead to her sense that we must act on what we know—that is, as in the letter to Stowe cited at the beginning of chapter 5, “the difficulty of the human lot”—as we wait for what Teilhard would call “the full emergence of Christ as a Cosmic Christ.” Even her affirmation of the “great symbolic meanings” of the Christ Idea, rather than an abstraction, is better seen in light of Coleridge’s definition of the symbol as characterized “by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal” and as always partaking of “the Reality which it renders intelligible.”

Six months before this letter, after hearing a performance of *Messiah*, George Eliot wrote to her friend Sarah Sophia Hennell of the “acme of poetry” achieved in Christianity in “the conception of the suffering Messiah” and “the final triumph ‘He shall reign for ever and ever.’” She goes on: “The Prometheus is a very imperfect foreshadowing of that symbol wrought out in the long history of the Jewish and Christian ages.” While the explanations of evolutionary Christianity were unavailable to George Eliot, then, her imagination responded to “the Idea of the Christ” and its evolution as represented symbolically and poetically and musically. And as we have seen throughout, it is at this profound imaginative level that George Eliot’s consciousness embraced deeply felt ideas.