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## GEORGE ELIOT AND THE EVANGELICALS

THE ENGLISH EVANGELICALS were badly treated by the novelists of the nineteenth century. Almost invariably they were presented in an unfavourable light; usually they were regarded with patronizing contempt. A notable example of this attitude occurs in *The Newcomes* when Thackeray gives a biting description of Miss Sophia Alethea Hobson and the Clapham Sect. Anthony Trollope, more dispassionate, did not express the same contempt for Evangelicals as a class. He probably disliked certain of his characters as people rather than as Evangelicals; but since some of his most repulsive characters, notably the Bishop and Mrs. Proudie and the Rev. Obadiah Slope, were Evangelicals they tended inevitably to discredit Evangelicalism. Dickens' attitude to Evangelicals was indicated by his description of the experiences of Mr. Weller Senior with his second wife and her pious friends in *The Pickwick Papers*. "She's too good a creature for me, Sammy . . .", complained Mr. Weller. "I should wery much like to see your mother-in-law born again. Wouldn't I put her out to nurse!"

While George Eliot (1819-1880) came to dislike the Evangelical viewpoint, her treatment of Evangelicals, particularly in her early novels, was much more sympathetic than that of other Victorian novelists. This kindness was in part the result of Eliot's Evangelical upbringing. Although her parents were not Evangelicals, she attended two Evangelical schools: Mrs. Wallingford's school, Nuneaton, where Maria Lewis, a strong Anglican Evangelical, was principal, and the Misses Franklins' school at Coventry. The Misses Franklin were daughters of a Baptist minister. As a result of the influence of these teachers, George Eliot became an Evangelical and a Calvinist. Her early letters, however, suggest that her acceptance of Evangelical principles was merely an intellectual process. She never made the complete personal commitment that is the secret and core of the Evangelical position.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually she came to doubt the soundness of the Evangelical position. This process of doubt began somewhat before 1841. She had probably begun to realize

that Evangelicalism did not accord with her temperament and her ideas. At any rate she had already begun to turn to "greater freedom of thought in religious opinion" when she became friendly with a group of positivists, especially the Charles Brays and Mrs. Bray's brother, Charles Hennell, the author of *The Inquiry concerning the Origin of Christianity*<sup>2</sup>. The new friends hastened her conversion. In a number of letters written at this time she announced her abandonment of orthodox Evangelical opinions. She had lost faith in the Bible, the essential basis of the Evangelical position, and described it in a letter to her father on February 28, 1842, as "histories consisting of mangled truth and fiction."<sup>3</sup> Loss of faith in the Bible had brought about the abandonment of her whole previous theological position. "I cannot rank among my principles of action a fear of vengeance eternal, gratitude for predestined salvation, or a revelation of future glories as a reward," she wrote on January 28, 1842.<sup>4</sup>

After that, she moved steadily along the road to rational positivism. The trend of her thinking was indicated by her first important literary task, which was to complete the translation of Strauss's *Leben Jesu*. This was one of the early efforts to strip the story of Christ of all its supernatural elements and to return to the "historical" Jesus.

George Eliot did not, however, forget her Evangelical background, and it figured prominently in her novels. Although she was critical of the Evangelical position, Eliot spoke in a kindly way of the Evangelicals personally. The Rev. Edgar Tryon, the Evangelical minister in *Janet's Repentance* (1857), was pictured as a sensitive man who suffered keenly under criticism but who persisted in a course which provoked opposition because he regarded it as right. Eliot wrote of him,

Opposition may become sweet to a man when he has christened it persecution: a self-obtrusive, over-hasty reformer complacently disclaiming all merit, while his friends call him a martyr, has not in reality a career the most arduous to the fleshly mind. But Mr. Tryon was not cast in the mould of the gratuitous martyr. With a power of persistence which had been often blamed as obstinacy, he had an acute sensibility to the very hatred or ridicule he did not flinch from provoking. Every form of disapproval jarred him painfully; and, though he fronted his opponents manfully, and often with considerable warmth of temper, he had no pugnacious pleasure in the contest.<sup>5</sup>

Of Seth Bede and Dinah Morris, the Methodists in *Adam Bede* (1858), Eliot wrote:

I cannot pretend that Seth and Dinah were anything else than Methodists . . . They believed in present miracles, in instantaneous conversions, in revelations by dreams and visions; they drew lots, and sought for Divine guidance by opening the Bible at hazard; having a literal way of interpreting the Scriptures which is not at all sanctioned by approved commentators; and it is impossible for me to represent their diction as cor-

rect, or their instruction as liberal. Still—if I have read religious history aright—faith, hope, and charity have not always been found in direct ratio with a sensibility to the three concords and it is possible, thank Heaven! to have very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings.<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Lyon, the dissenting minister in *Felix Holt* (1866), was sympathetically drawn, although this was more because of his common sense and radical politics than of his Evangelical doctrine.

Although many of the authors who made slighting remarks about the Evangelicals were ignorant of Evangelical thinking, and Thackeray was probably incapable of more than a caricature, George Eliot had an accurate understanding of Evangelical doctrine. There were considerable variations of belief among the various groups who called themselves Evangelicals. The term is sometimes used in a loose sense to describe people like Henry Ward Beecher, whose views were certainly not Evangelical judged by the well-understood standards of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism. The term "Evangelicals" in this article is used to denote the Methodists and the Anglican Evangelicals, both of them heirs to the Protestant Reformation and to the Evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. Their basic position was clear. They believed that man is a sinner, unable to rescue himself from his plight; that salvation has been made available for many by the fact that God took human form and died on man's behalf. They believed that man can avail himself of salvation by appropriating Christ and His sacrifice to himself in faith. This appropriation they believed to be made possible by divine grace. They believed in the necessity of repentance from sin, but maintained that man cannot earn salvation by the performance of good works.

Such was the basic position. That George Eliot understood it well was shown by many allusions in *Scenes from Clerical Life* (1857) and in *Adam Bede*. Thus Miss Pratt, one of Mr. Tryon's adherents, refers to justification by faith in *Janet's Repentance*. Mr. Tryon preaches against the idea of justification by works, and the students in one of his Sunday Schools are crammed with phrases about "the blood of cleansing, imputed righteousness, and justification by faith alone."<sup>7</sup>

Two incidents indicate with especial clarity Eliot's grasp of Evangelical doctrine. In *Scenes from Clerical Life*, Janet Dempster describes her conversion through the agency of Edgar Tryon. She brings out such Evangelical concepts as her sense of need and her realization that the satisfaction of this need can only be found in the acceptance of Christ as Saviour. "He made it clear to me," said Janet.

"that the only preparation for coming to Christ and partaking of His salvation, was that very sense of guilt and helplessness that was weighing me down. He said, You

are weary and heavy-laden; well, it is you Christ invites to come to Him and find rest. He asks you to cling to Him, to lean on Him; He does not command you to walk alone without stumbling. He does not tell you, as your fellowmen do, that you must first merit His love; He neither condemns nor reproaches you for the past, He only bids you to come to Him that you may have life: He bids you stretch out your hands, and take of the fulness of His love."<sup>8</sup>

This is the authentic note of Evangelical Christianity.

It is heard too in the second chapter of *Adam Bede* when Dinah Morris conducts a Methodist field meeting. Dinah's prayer (in which she invites sinners to come to Christ) and her sermon indicate even more clearly George Eliot's grasp of Evangelical doctrine. Dinah begins by asserting that everything comes from God, that Christ went about doing good, especially to poor people, that He is the Son of God. Her remarks about the Atonement, about the belief that God assumed human form to rescue his creatures from sin, are especially clear. "Her manner became less calm", continues the narrative, "her utterance more rapid and agitated, as she tried to bring home to the people their guilt, their wilful darkness, their state of disobedience to God—as she dwelt on the hatefulness of sin, the Divine holiness, and the sufferings of the Saviour, by which a way had been opened for their salvation."<sup>9</sup> She closes with an appeal to her hearers to repent and be saved, crying

"All this he bore for you! For you—and you never think of him; for you—and your turn your backs on him; you don't care what he has gone through for you. Yet he is not weary of toiling for you: he has risen from the dead, he is praying for you at the right hand of God—'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And he is upon this earth, too; he is among us; he is there close to you now; I see his wounded body and his look of love."<sup>10</sup>

George Eliot had learned well the creed that she came to abandon. Some of the reasons for this abandonment have been described above; but Eliot also advanced other reasons for disliking the Evangelicals. One of them may, at first glance, appear curious. The Evangelicals were frequently criticized as enthusiasts, people who played upon the emotions and who were essentially irrational. Yet George Eliot criticized them for laying insufficient stress upon the emotions and too much stress upon ideas and doctrines. Both directly and through her characters she expressed her suspicion of doctrines and insisted that feelings are more important.

Adam Bede's opinions resemble those of Eliot herself. Adam disapproves of Mr. Ryde, who "insisted strongly on the doctrines of the Reformation."

"But," said Adam, "I've seen pretty clear, ever since I was a young un, as religion's something else besides notions. It isn't notions sets people doing the right thing—it's feelings. It's the same with the notions in religion as it is with math'matics,—

a man may be able to work problems straight off in 's head as he sits by the fire and smokes his pipe; but if he has to make a machine or a building, he must have a will and a resolution, and love something else better than his own ease."<sup>11</sup>

The concern of the Evangelicals with doctrine and with its derivation from scripture, Adam regarded as so much waste of time.

"I began to see" he said, "as all this weighing and sifting what this text means and that text means, and whether folks are saved all by God's grace, or whether there goes an ounce o' their own will to 't, was no part o' real religion at all."<sup>12</sup>

If we have a resolution to do right, he adds, God gave it to us, "but I see plain enough we shall never do it without a resolution, and that's enough for me."<sup>13</sup>

Of the Rev. Adolphus Irwine, who was *not* an Evangelical, Eliot wrote in *Adam Bede*,

If he had been in the habit of speaking theoretically, he would perhaps have said that the only healthy form religion could take in such minds [his parishioners'] was that of certain dim but strong emotions, suffusing themselves as a hallowing influence over the family affections and neighborly duties.<sup>14</sup>

Emphasis upon the feelings was not a new idea to George Eliot in the late fifties when she wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*. She had already developed this attitude in 1843, as is shown by a letter to her friend Sara Sophia Hennell, dated October 9. Eliot argued that it was often doubtful whether we should try to change people's religious opinions. Truth of feeling she declared to be the only universal bond of union:

Speculative truth begins to appear but a shadow of individual minds, agreement between intellects seems unattainable, and we turn to the *truth of feeling* as the only universal bond of union. We find that the intellectual errors which we once fancied were a mere incrustation have grown into the living body and that we cannot in the majority of cases, wrench them away without destroying vitality. We begin to find that with individuals, as with nations, the only safe revolution is one arising out of the wants which their *own progress* has generated. It is the quackery of infidelity to suppose that it has a nostrum for all mankind, and to say to all and singular, "Swallow my opinions and you shall be whole."<sup>15</sup>

Eliot felt that emphasis on doctrine could be definitely demoralizing. The portrayal of Bulstrode in *Middlemarch* (1871) is a case in point. One cannot call him an Evangelical. "Hypocrite" and "rascal" would be more accurate terms. Yet he had grown up in an Evangelical environment and expounded Evangelical opinions. He has a great capacity to rationalize his desires to accord with his doctrines. Eliot regarded this as a likely tendency on the part of a doctrinaire exponent of

Evangelical opinions. She wrote, "There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men."<sup>16</sup>

Eliot even went so far as to assert that Christian dogma is immoral in its implications. On August 3, 1842, she wrote to the Rev. Francis Watt: "It seems to me that the awful anticipations entailed by a reception of all the dogmas in the New Testament operate unfavourably on moral beauty by disturbing that spontaneity, that choice of the good for its own sake, that answers my ideal."<sup>17</sup> Felix Holt, the Radical, who is characterized by "high principle quite dissociated from sectarian phraseology",<sup>18</sup> was closer to her ideal than any orthodox Christian.

Eliot regarded doctrine as merely the result of feelings—in short, as the products of human experience:

"I look at it," said Adam, "as if the doctrine was like finding names for your feelings, so as you can talk of 'em when you've never known 'em, just as men may talk o' tools when he knows their names, though he's never so much as seen 'em, still less handled 'em."<sup>19</sup>

Presumably Eliot thought it wrong to force the results of one's own experience, that is, one's doctrines, on other people. Her idea of doctrine was, of course, essentially humanist. Doctrine was merely the product of human experience. The Evangelicals regarded doctrine as part of the process of divine revelation. Doctrines, therefore, had a universal validity, and it was right to attempt to persuade others to accept doctrinal truth. The issue between Eliot and the Evangelicals on this point was wide and fundamental.

Eliot's reference in *Middlemarch* to "our morality" is indicative of her eventual philosophic position. Despite her unorthodox ideas about matrimony, she was essentially a moralist. Like many other disillusioned Christians she retained her belief in the Christian ethic. She liked the Evangelicals in spite of their doctrines and what she regarded as their naïveté and narrowness, because they made people better. This was clear in her assessment of Evangelicalism in *Janet's Repentance*. In describing Evangelicalism in the town of Milby, Eliot mentioned its many weaknesses but continued

Nevertheless, Evangelicalism has brought into palpable existence and operation in Milby society that idea of duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self, which is to the moral life what the addition of a great central ganglion is to animal life. No man can begin to mould himself on a faith or an idea without rising to a higher order of experience: a principle of subordination, of self-mastery, has been introduced into his nature; he is no longer a mere bundle of impressions, desires, and impulses.<sup>20</sup>

Eliot's idea of the best type of clergyman was in keeping with her emphasis upon morality. Her model clergyman was a good, kindly, easy-going pastor who did not trouble his parishioners about doctrine, but whose sermons were little moral talks. Examples of this type are Martin Cleves and Mr. Gilfil in *Scenes from Clerical Life*, Adolphus Irwine in *Adam Bede*, and Mr. Farebrother in *Middlemarch*. Of Mr. Gilfil she wrote,

Mr. Gilfil's sermons, as you may imagine were not of a highly doctrinal, still less of a polemical, cast. They perhaps did not search the conscience very powerfully; — but, on the other hand, they made no unreasonable demand on the Shepperton intellect — amounting, indeed, to little more than an expansion of the concise thesis, that those who do wrong will find it the worse for them, and those who do well will find it better for them; the nature of wrong-doing being exposed in special sermons against lying, backbiting, anger, slothfulness, and the like; and well-doing being interpreted as honesty, truthfulness, charity, industry, and other common virtues, lying quite on the surface of life, and having very little to do with deep spiritual doctrine.<sup>21</sup>

George Eliot's religion was essentially a matter of doing good works:

"Ah!" said Adam, "I like to read about Moses best in th' Old Testament. He carried a hard business well through, and died when other folks were going to reap the fruits: a man must have courage to look at his life so, and think what'll come of it after he's dead and gone. A good solid bit o' work lasts: if it's only laying a floor down, somebody's the better for it being done well, besides the man as does it."<sup>22</sup>

Eliot regarded people as essentially good. She said in *Adam Bede*, that by observing the humbler classes in England she had reached the conclusion "that human nature is lovable—the way I have learnt something of its deep pathos, its sublime mysteries—has been by living a great deal among people more or less commonplace and vulgar."<sup>23</sup> Because people are good, presumably they are capable of generous feelings and of a not unsuccessful effort to live the good life. She was essentially an ethical idealist. Unlike some of her modern counterparts, she made no pretence of being Christian.

#### NOTES

1. Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters: Vol. I, 1836-1851* (London, 1954), pp. 19, 49, 59, 73, and 118.
2. Joan Bennett, *George Eliot, Her Mind and Her Art* (Cambridge, 1948), p. 19.
3. Haight, *op. cit.*, I, p. 128.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 125; see also J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, I (New York, 1885), p. 77.
5. *Janet's Repentance*, pp. 271-272. References to George Eliot's novels are to *The Works of George Eliot*, Edition de Luxe (The Nottingham Society, n.d.).

6. *Adam Bede*, pp. 38-39.
7. *Janet's Repentance*, p. 282.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 324-325.
9. *Adam Bede*, p. 28.
10. *Ibid*, p. 31.
11. *Ibid*, p. 184.
12. *Ibid*, p. 186.
13. *Ibid*, p. 187.
14. *Ibid*, p. 70.
15. Haight, *op. cit.*, p. 162; Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.
16. *Middlemarch*, p. 624.
17. Haight, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
18. *Felix Holt*, p. 62.
19. *Adam Bede*, p. 186.
20. *Janet's Repentance*, pp. 282-283.
21. *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story*, p. 85.
22. *Adam Bede*, pp. 489-490.
23. *Ibid*, pp. 187-188.