

The Fictional World of George Eliot and Her Idea of The Religion of Humanity

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Altruism is a major phenomenon in almost all the chief protagonists of Eliot and her major protagonists, mainly Maggie, Dorothea and to some extent Romola share her intellectual and temperamental characteristics.¹ Goaded by this altruistic urge her protagonists come in conflict with the society since their idea of befitting into the society failed to meet the demand of the society itself. So they suffer inwardly. Hence being a chronicler of suffering in loneliness Eliot has delineated how they made endeavours to mould themselves to fit in to the needs of the society and come out from their preconceived ideas as, though refuted by the society they have not lost faith in themselves since their faith originated from their innate love for humanity. In this context we may quote Joan Bennet, who points out “And love for them all meant the opportunity for self-devotion as well as the assurance of being beloved. Like them also she suffered (until she found her own vocation) from the narrowness of opportunities in her day for a young woman to develop and use intellectual powers. Mary Ann Evans would have welcomed such a suitor as Casaubon with the same feeling as did Dorothea. She may indeed have felt something similar (allowing for the different circumstances) for Dr. Brabant when he handed over to her the wearisome task of translating Strauss’s *Leben Jesu*. She was as ready as Dorothea to accept the scholar at his own valuation and to find joy in devoted service to his illusory grandeur of mind and soul.”² But before that, let us take a look on how Eliot got inspired by this idea and what inspired her to interpret the term from a newer angle. Before she started her career as a writer of fiction under the pseudonym of George Eliot she was known as Mary Anne Evans or Marian Evans. She was the third

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child born to Christiana and Robert Evans on the 22nd day of November, 1819. Her childhood and the ideas she acquired on religion indeed had a great impact on her later life when she was fully engaged in her intellectual quest. The first and foremost influence she had on her was that of her own father. Though the primary identity of Robert Evans was that he was an agent to the Newdigate family and manager of their Warwickshire Estate, he was a devout Christian and maintained religiosity of the old fashioned and high-and-dry sort in his family. He never troubled his head with questions of doctrine albeit his younger brother Samuel and his wife were converted to Methodism in their youth. After the demise of his first wife he married Christiana Pearson and the Pearsons can easily be identified with the Dodsons in *The Mill on the Floss*, only unlike the Dodsons they were not farmers but wealthy men.

Ironic enough it seems that the critical attitude towards orthodox notions of Christianity later to be developed in Eliot, its seeds were sown in her mind by her father who lavishly indulged her in her intellectual quest. “After her mother’s death in 1836 and her sister’s marriage in 1837, Mary Ann was left at home in full charge of the domestic arrangements; of course there were servants, but she did get involved in messy things like jam-making. Her father encouraged her intellectual ambitions by paying for private tutors to visit the house; their fees seem quite expensive for the time. There were lessons for several years in Italian, German and Latin. In addition her father allowed her to buy as many books as she needed, and she was able to keep up with new publications by ordering them when they first appeared as part-works. She was allowed to use the library at Arbury Hall, described by Haight as ‘a great library...which had been growing steadily since Queen Elizabeth’s day’.” Even before that when she used to come back from her boarding school (Miss Latham’s school at Attleborough) being terribly homesick, at that age of six or seven, she used to spend more time with her father and buried herself in books like the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Vicar of Wakefield*, *Aesop’s Fables*, *History of Devil* by Defoe or *Joe Miller’s Jest Book*. It will not be unjustified that it was the influence of her father that made her the woman she

was. “He was for her the living embodiment of the principles of duty and responsibility”. She paid homage to her father by portraying the characters of Adam in Adam Bede and Caleb Garth in Middlemarch in his resemblance. Robert Evans was, as told earlier, an orthodox Christian and when Eliot in her later life withdrew her from church-going, he was really shocked and a kind of rift appeared in between the father and the daughter: “Marian’s life and career were to take paths that Robert Evans could scarcely have conceived, paths that led straight into the most dangerous and nefarious radicalism and dissent.” A kind of ‘Holy War’ emerged between the two on this issue. Marian confessed her own convictions in a letter as she thought that her efforts in conversation had failed in making her father aware of the real nature of her sentiment and the immediate response of Mr. Evans was to put up the house for sale. But fortunately there was a compromise and Eliot will start to attend Church, though she retained her own belief. Perhaps the impression she gathered upon her father helped her to maintain a balance between her newly acquired intellectual ideas towards the fanaticism and bigotry of orthodox Christianity and her compassionate attitude towards its followers. That is why she can write to Madame Bodichon (20th November, 1862): “Pray, don’t ever ask me again to rob a man of his religious belief, as if you thought my mind tended to such robbery. I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith and the spiritual blight that comes with No-faith, to have any negative propagandism in me”. More so that she had drawn the character of Mr. Irwine in Adam Bede, the churchman and representative of the orthodox Christian doctrines in antithesis with the strict Mr. Ryde who succeeds him with genteel sympathy that he has won hearts of the parishioners by the virtue of his tolerance and good will.

Another formative influence on Eliot in her childhood was at the age of nine when she after attending the dame school and a boarding school in a nearby village was moved to Miss Wallington’s establishment at the Church Lane in Nuneaton. The school had thirty boarders and it was a Church of England school. There she came under the direct influence of Miss Maria Lewis, an earnest Evangelical. She got quite attached to this gentle principal

governess and this close relationship would later continue for almost fourteen years: “An immediate effect was that Mary Ann plunged into the fervent Evangelicalism which dominated her adolescence, following her enthusiastic young teacher who was a keen supporter of the stirring preacher John Jones.(John’s lecture at the parish church in 1828 led to riots in the town and to weeks of violent debate, whose mood was later to be brilliantly evoked in ‘Janet’s Repentance’). She was an intelligent child and when she was thirteen her father was advised to send her to the best school for girls in the neighbourhood run by the two sisters Mary and Rebecca Franklin at Coventry. Here she was taught to drop the local dialect and accent. She exchanged them for an exceptionally compelling ‘low voice’ in imitation of Rebecca’s meticulous, carefully weighed prose style. This added gravity to Mary Ann’s natural solemnity and she gained confidence in herself. She was an avid reader of books- from Milton to Scott, became quite proficient in other branches of arts like painting, she proved her talent in both English and French composition. It was the period when she consciously maintained a saintly behavior: she led prayer meetings and renounced all kinds of pleasure. She was a strict follower of Evangelical tenets and sometimes her Calvinism seemed to be more rigorous than her mentors. “She believed that even for the ‘elect’ few the true life of the spirit could only develop from a profound recognition of the essential sinfulness and unworthiness of the self. Care for the soul must predominate over care for the body and cultivation of the mind, and one should live through good works and renunciation.” So there is nothing surprising in her growing intimacy with Maria Lewis whom she frequently called on during the holidays. It may be noted here that she had a fit of hysterics when she first visited London with her brother Isaac in 1838 as she refused to go to the theatre, abandoned sightseeing and bought only a copy of Josephus’s History of the Jews, and all these were outcome of her overwhelming Evangelicalism. Perhaps she in her later life came to understand the shallowness of such behavior and so she poignantly satirized such idealism through Dorothea’s reflection on the jewelry to her sister Celia in Middlemarch: “A cross is the last thing I would wear as a trinket.” But spiritual throes were creeping into her mind during this period. In between 1836

and 1838, as mentioned earlier, after her mother's death and sister's marriage she became an avid reader of books and interesting enough, these included especially evangelical biographies and essays. She was of all praise to Isaac Taylor's controversial study of Ancient Christianity and the Doctrines of the Oxford Tracts. But at the same time, some books on theology, particularly Carlyle's *Chartism* and Sartor Resartus threw challenges before her intellectual acceptance of religious doctrines. These paved the way for what she was after she got acquainted with the intellectual London circle through Charles Bray, with the positivist philosophy of Comte through G.H.Lewis, and her translation of Strauss and Feurbach and her gradually getting closer to the doctrine of 'Religion of Humanity'.

After his retirement in March 1841 Robert Evans and Mary Ann moved to the house of Bird Grove in the Foleshill Road. Still she led a kind of constricted life and now it would prove to be an immense widening of her intellectual horizon. Their neighbour was Abijah Pears and his wife Elizabeth. Elizabeth was one of Charles Bray's seven Evangelical sisters. So within two months Mary Ann met the Brays at the Pears' next door. Bray was brought up an Evangelical in his childhood and at seventeen he came to meet the family of James Hennell. The family was Unitarian and so a little more acceptable than unbelievers to an Evangelical. Bray, then being an enthusiastic Evangelical, tried to convert their ministers and he got converted and in 1836 he married Charlotte, the daughter of Samuel Hennell who was again the brother of James. At first Elizabeth did not show much interest in the arrival of Mary Ann though she was quite aware of her fervent Evangelicalism. But later it might have come to her mind that she could win Charles back to Christianity. But it happened otherwise as it happened to Charles after his meeting with the Hennells. Now after going through Charles Hennell's, the brother of Charlotte, *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity*, both Mr. and Mrs. Bray decided to give up attending church. This book also made an author out of Charles Bray and in 1841, the year he met Marian, his *The Philosophy of Necessity* was published and the central doctrine of his book was that there was no free-will and everything acted necessarily accord-

ing to its nature and there was neither virtue nor sin in action that was determined. After Mary Ann met Bray for the first time he left his place with his *The Philosophy of Necessity* in her arms. In his *Philosophy of Necessity* Bray maintained that the only reality is the Great Unknown which we name God that all natural laws are actions of the first cause. He proclaimed that the world is created in our own minds, the result of some unknown cause without us, which we call matter; but it is thus God mirrors him to us. Matter is known to us only as the cause of sensations, while soul is the principle of sensation, dependent upon the nervous system; the nervous system depending upon life, and life upon organization. All knowledge comes to man through the action of the external world upon the senses; all truth, all progress, come to us out of experience. To him reason is dependent for its exercise upon experience, and experience is nothing more than the knowledge of the invariable order of nature, of the relations of cause and effect. Matter is mind solidified: matter is force as revealed by senses. It is the body, force is the soul. In nature, as in man, body and soul are once and indivisible. Mind builds up organisms. There is a living will, conscious or unconscious, in all things. The One and All requires the resignation of the individuals and personal, of all that is selfish, to the Infinite whole. Necessity rules the actions of men, their ideas of right and wrong is an outcome of their experience of pain and happiness is the test of all moral actions. He discarded any idea of sin or evil and replaced them with pains and pleasure. Evil is the natural and necessary limitation of human faculties and his consequent liability to error; and pain, which is otherwise called evil, is its corrective. Morality is the chemistry of mind, its attractions and repulsions, likes and dislikes. There is no good but pleasure and any evil but pain. Death, in a separate chapter is shown as good and a necessary aid to progress. Society is regarded as an organism, and man is to seek its highest life in the life of others. To him death and birth, which seems to echo the teachings of Lord Krishna as recorded in *The Gita*, are means of renewal and succession, bear the same relation to the body of society as the system of waste and reproduction do to the human body; the old and useless and decayed material is carried out, and fresh substituted, and thus the frame is renovated and rendered capable of

ever increasing happiness. To Bray society is the great body of humanity (considered as an individual), with its soul, the principle of sensation, is ever fresh and vigorous and increasing in enjoyment.

Charles Bray lived in Rosehill, at the outskirts of the city and it was as Walter Allen refers “...much more than merely the centre of local intellectual life. It was, as it were, a station on the underground railway by which advanced ideas spread across the world.” Here Eliot came in contact with the philanthropist Robert Owen, the economist and journalist Harriet Martineau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Sibrees and obviously G.H.Lewes with whom she would live an intellectually adventurous life till his death. Here the Brays would spread a bearskin on the turf under an old acacia tree for their guests, which was an ideal podium for easy intercourse and uninhibited discussion. The instant effect on Mary Ann was obvious- ‘it was liberation of spirit, a re-discovery of youth’. Mary Ann was now caught in between a severe spiritual throe, between her duty to her conscience which now was awakened by her newly acquired ideas and her love toward her father. She decided to give up attending church which was outrageous and unforgivable in the eyes of Robert Evans, but for her “the discarding of her old beliefs seems to have been like stepping out of the husks of a chrysalis. She was, as she said years later, “in a crude state of free-thinking”; but, in fact, change in belief had not altered her moral certainties. There was, of course, the problem of her adjustment to her new principles, and it is plain that for several months she found its solution agonizingly difficult.”

The most formative influences on George Eliot towards her clinging to the ‘Religion of Humanity’ and her eulogizing the indulgence of altruistic practices in society, as can be inferred, were by Herbert Spencer, G.H.Lewes, Comte, Hennell, Strauss and Feurbach. Mary Ann met Lewes first on the 6th of October in the year 1851. Already Eliot has been influenced by Herbert Spencer’s doctrine of ‘organicism’ where society is conceived of as an organism that evolves in a manner of organic beings and functions through the action and interaction of its internal constituents (of which the protagonist’s inner psyche is one) with its environment.

Spencer proposed a way of defining individualism with his organicist approach. In this he differed sharply from Comte, who, it will be remembered, was basically anti-individualistic in his general philosophy and developed an organicist theory in which the individual was conceived as firmly subordinated to society. Spencer, in contrast, not only conceived of the origins of society in individualistic and utilitarian terms, but saw society as a vehicle for the enhancement of the purposes of individuals.

According to Spencer, men had originally banded together because it was advantageous for them to do so because, according to him living together was proved more advantageous to each than living apart and as a result society had come into being. In line with his individualistic perspective, he saw the quality of a society as depending to a large extent on the quality of the individuals who formed it. He held the view that there is no way of coming at a true theory of society, but by inquiry into the nature of its component individuals. Every phenomenon exhibited by an aggregation of men originates in some quality of man himself. Spencer held as a general principle that the properties of the units determine the properties of the aggregate.

In spite of these individualistic underpinnings of his philosophy, Spencer developed an overall system in which the organicist analogy is pursued with even more rigor than in Comte's work. Spencer attempted to overcome the basic incompatibility between individualism and organicism. After having shown the similarity between social and biological organisms, he turned to show how they were unlike each other. A biological organism is encased in a skin, but a society is bound together by the medium of language. The parts of an animal form a concrete whole, but the parts of society form a whole which is discrete. While the living units composing the one are bound together in close contact, the living unit composing the other are free, are not in contact, and are more or less widely dispersed. Though coherence among its parts is a prerequisite to that cooperation by which the life of an individual organism is carried on, and though the members of a social organism, not forming a concrete whole, cannot maintain cooperation by means of physical influences directly propagated

from part to part, yet they can and do maintain cooperation by another agency. Not in contact, they nevertheless affect one another through intervening spaces, both by emotional language and by the language, oral and written of the intellect. That is to say, the internuncial function, not achievable by stimuli physically transferred, is nevertheless achieved by language. The medium of language enables societies, though formed of discrete units, to exhibit a permanence of relations between component parts. But there is a more important difference still.

In the biological organism consciousness is concentrated in a small part of the aggregate. In the social organism it is diffused throughout the aggregate: all the units possess the capacity for happiness and misery, if not in equal degree, still in degrees that approximate. As, then, there is no social sensorium, the welfare of the aggregate, considered apart from that of the units, is not an end to be sought. The society exists for the benefit of its members; not its members for the benefit of society. However, we are not to judge whether Spencer really managed to reconcile his individualism and his organicism but we are concerned with his view that despite functional differentiations between men, they all still aspired to a measure of "happiness" and satisfaction. And this is the idea what Eliot had conceived and tried to manipulate in her fictions and her protagonists like Silas Marner, Dorothea, Maggie or Deronda in their own way prove that they have to be the part of the society if they want to benefit its members, rather act as individuals for the benefit of the society from outside.

From the autumn of 1852 she started taking him seriously and in September, 1853 she started to live together with him, and then they left for Germany on 20th of July, 1854 and Eliot started to introduce herself as his wife. Lewes was already married and though the marriage had broken down he continued to support his family as divorce had been too expensive for him. Both had to suffer hard days, both economically and socially even after their return to England in March, 1855. Conditions turned to be better from 1856 when Lewes engaged himself in his scientific work on 'Seaside Studies'. What is important is that, at this time Lewes encouraged Mary Ann to try her hand at fiction. But further important event was that Eliot got influenced by Comte through

Lewes. It was not that she did not read Comte earlier but the real influence of Comte started from the year 1853 with the publication of Comte's *Positive Philosophy* and Lewes was an ardent Comtean. Lewes is credited with the doctrine of the dependence of the human mind on the social medium. It had been very well developed by Spencer and Comte, but Lewes gave it a wider and profounder interpretation. Like Spencer he held the view that human mind is the product of experience in contact with the outer world, that experience is transmitted by heredity and built up into mental processes and conclusions, but he maintained that the social medium is a much greater and important factor. The past makes the present; the social life develops the individual. Our language, our thought, as individuals are product of the collective life of the race. As much as any zealous Christian believer he accepted man's need of spiritual culture and religious development. At the same time, his philosophy rejected a substantive absolute, or any other spiritual realities or existences apart from the universe given in feeling and consciousness. Accordingly, man must find his ideal satisfactions, his spiritual realities and moral ideals, within the limits of the universe as known to philosophy, and in the organic life of the race. Eliot had certainly been strongly influenced by Lewes' teachings as we are quite able to find the reflection of Lewes' ideas in what Eliot intends to show in her *Daniel Deronda* where the eponymous protagonist seeks happiness in the light of spiritual realities inherited through tradition and dissolving him to the organic life of the race to which he belonged.

Eliot was also largely influenced by the teachings of Auguste Comte. The place he assigned to positive knowledge and the inductive method, to feeling, to development and influence of the past upon the present, were all accepted by her in an enthusiastic spirit. Altruism commanded her hearty belief, and to its principle she devoted her life. Comte's conceptions in regard to sentiment, and the vital importance of religion and social organization, had her entire assent. Comte was a French philosopher who preached the doctrine of positivism. He developed the positive philosophy under the influence of the Utopian socialist Henri Saint-Simon in an

attempt to remedy the social malaise of the French Revolution. His concept of sociology and social evolutionism set the tone for early social theorists and anthropologists such as Harriet Martineau and Herbert Spencer. His theories culminated in 'the religion of humanity', which was influential to the development of religious humanist and Secular Humanist organizations in the 19th century. Comte likewise coined the term 'altruism'. Comte propounded two major ideas. The first one was the philosophy of positivism. This idea discarded all kinds of metaphysical speculation and preached that true knowledge can be achieved through verifications obtained by scientific observations and experiments. It abandoned the notion of God and stressed on pursuit of scientific truth. In his second idea he proposed a kind of new religion which would adhere to the tenets of positivism and called it 'religion of humanity'. George Eliot agreed entirely to the first idea and liked the idea of 'religion of humanity' and Comte's injunction to "vivre pour autrui" (live for others), from which comes the word altruism.

Eliot's idea of 'religion of humanity', though inspired by Comte, had a slight difference. The cumulative effects of other philosophers like Feurbach, Strauss and Hennell and their doctrines related with altruism did influence her no less. According to Feurbach religion is the relation between human beings based on the affections, the relation based on the heart, which relation until now has sought its truth in a fantastic mirror image of reality- in the mediation of one or many gods, the fantastic mirror images of human qualities- but now finds it directly and without any mediation in the love between 'I' and 'Thou'. Like Bray Feurbach also holds the idea that man creates the outer world in consciousness; all that is out of man which he can know, is but a reflection of what is in him. To him religion is based on the difference between man and the brute; man has consciousness, it is his essential nature and an object of thought. Man thinks, converses with him, is at once 'I' and 'thou', can put himself in the place of another. Religion is identical with self-consciousness and expresses man's sense of the infinitude of his own faculties. Consciousness marks the self-satisfaction, self-perfection of man that all truth is in him. As feeling is cause of the outward world, or of that notion of it

man has, it becomes the organ of religion. The nature of God is nothing else than an expression of the nature of feeling.

Feurbach's idealism consists in the fact that he does not simply accept mutual relations based on reciprocal inclinations of human beings, such as sex, love, friendship, compassion, self-sacrifice, etc., as what they are in themselves- without associating them with any particular religion which to him, belongs to the past; but instead he asserts that they will attain their full value only after when consecrated by the name of religion. The chief for him is not that these purely human relations exist, but that they shall be conceived of as new, true, religion. They are to have full value only after they have been marked with a religious stamp. Religion is derived from the word religare (to bind) and meant, originally, a bond. Therefore, every bond between two people is a religion. The only religion which Feurbach examines seriously is Christianity, the word religion of the Occident, based upon monotheism. He proves that the Christian God is only a fantastic reflection, a mirror image, of man. Now, this god is, however, himself the product of a tedious process of abstraction, the concentrated quintessence of the numerous earlier tribal and national gods. And man, whose image this god is, is therefore also not a real man, but likewise the quintessence of the numerous real men, man in abstract, therefore himself again a mental image. God is like our thoughts and dispositions; consciousness of God is self-conscious, knowledge of God is self-knowledge. Religion is the unveiling of a man's hidden treasures, the revelation of his intimate thoughts, and the open confession of his love secrets. It is to the understanding Feurbach attributes to man's capacity for objectifying himself or of attributing to the outward world those qualities which really exist only within. Man's consciousness of God is nothing else than his consciousness of his species. Man feels nothing towards God which he does not also feel towards man. What Feurbach tells about morality is that the urge towards happiness is innate in man, and must therefore form the basis of all morality. But the urge towards happiness is subject to a double correction. First, by the natural consequences of our actions: after the debauch comes the blues and habitual excess is followed by illness. Secondly, by its social consequences: if we do not respect the similar urge of other people towards happiness

they will defend themselves, and so interfere with our own urge toward happiness. Consequently, in order to satisfy our urge, we must be in a position to appreciate rightly the results of our conduct and must likewise allow others an equal right to seek happiness. Rational self restraint with regard to us, and love, and love only- in our intercourse with others, are the basic laws of Feurbach's morality which is the basic essence of Christianity.

The dogmas of Christianity are interpreted by Feurbach from the standpoint of conceiving religion as a projection of feeling upon the outward world. So he explains the incarnation as man's love for man, man's yearning to help his fellows, the renunciation and suffering man undergoes for man. The passion of Christ represents freely accepted suffering for others in love of them. Faith in providence is faith in one's own worth; it indicates the divine reality and significance of our own being. Prayer is an expression of the power of feeling and faith is the miracle of feeling. The power of miracle is the power of the imagination, for imagination corresponds to personal feeling; it sets aside all limits, all laws painful to the feelings, and thus makes objective to man the immediate, absolutely unlimited satisfaction of his subjective wishes. The belief in miracle accepts wishes as realities. In fact, the fundamental dogmas of Christianity are simply realized wishes of heart. This is true, because the highest law of feeling is the immediate unity of will and deed, of wishing and reality. To religion, what is felt or wished is regarded as real. Thus for Eliot, who looked upon Christ as a moral exemplar, such notions should have a fervent appeal to her beyond any doubt.

That Christ was a more a moral exemplar than a Messiah with superhuman prowess and his activities are historically rooted, perhaps struck Eliot when she came through Charles Hennell's *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) much before she happened to meet Bray. Basil Willey points towards what Hennell himself tells about the investigation of the four gospels in the Preface to the *Inquiry*: "...pursued for some time with the expectation that, at least, the principal miraculous facts supposed to lie at the foundation of Christianity would be found to be impregn-

able, but it was continued with a gradually increasing conviction that the true account of the life of Jesus Christ, and of the spread of his religion, would be found to contain no deviation from the known laws of nature, nor to require, for their explanation, more than the operation of human motives and feelings, acted upon by the peculiar circumstances of the age and country whence the religion originated.” Hennell stresses on the fact that the idea of Jesus as a Messiah was an outcome of the political vicissitudes of the Hebrew race and a lack of leadership. He further stressed that the miracles committed by Jesus, as we are aware of, were nothing but products of pious imagination. What Hennell told in support of his argument was that, in a ‘scientific’ and ‘positive’ century supernatural and miraculous events are out of the order of nature and hence miracles do not happen or ever happened, the only universal thing is the operation of natural law. But, at the same time, he points to the fact that the ‘essence’ of Christianity will ever remain unaffected even though its miraculous foundations are obliterated, and the hidden message in the ‘essence’ is that instead of God and Heaven, individuals will find a substitute in their worldly duties, through scientific pursuits, in strengthening their character by calmly facing the odds of life and through the discovery of the ‘Father and Son’ relationship in unraveling the mystery of universe and seek truth in it. Such tenets laid down by Hennell affected Eliot so much that when Dr. Brabant’s daughter, wife of Hennell, persuaded Eliot to translate David Strauss’s *Leben Jesu* (Life of Jesus) into English, she readily agreed because there was so much common in Hennell and Strauss that she felt it as her duty towards humanity.

Strauss’s book does not differ from that of Hennell’s in actual conclusion. Strauss while presenting his arguments keeps a distance from both the ‘supernatural’ and the ‘rationalist’ school of biblical criticism. These two schools either considered Jesus’ life as some kind of supernatural history or tried to give rational explanations behind the miracles. What comes out from these that both these schools, in some way or other, take the miracles for granted. But Strauss points to the facts that belief in miracles is an outcome of demonstrable facts of human nature and the study of all primitive histories, either divinely attested or secular, should be

treated alike. He says that due to lack of knowledge in natural laws and exuberance of overwhelming religiosity of the age when Christianity originated, it is not at all unnatural that the people of that age would always seek some kind of divine intervention behind every action. Strauss stresses on the fact that belief in supernatural in the primitive age is quite spontaneous but we have to translate the language of that age according to the requirement of the days which we live in. He further comments on the Christian myths that it was very natural because myths are products of strong religiosity and the essence of religion never exposes naked truth but presents the truth in the guise of image and symbol. Thus, though he discards the miracles of Christ, he advocates in favour of the essence of Christianity: 'love thy neighbour', through the actions of Christ.

George Eliot's idea of 'religion of humanity' combines in itself the theological ideas propounded by Feurbach, Strauss or Hennell and Comte's scientific approach towards morality and in some respect the shadow of her earlier Evangelical upbringing casts its shadow over it. That is the reason for which, when she deals with the question of religion in her fiction with respect to some protagonist, we do not find any sternness or rigour, rather it is blended with sympathy and compassion and clearly shows that she is eager to delineate the best that Christianity is capable to serve to the society. She seldom set the backdrop of her fiction in the mid 19th century when newer ideas were surging in, rather in times when none questioned faith and led the life of a Christian in the traditional sense of the term. Never at any point in her fiction she is too loud to preach for it or makes any authorial intervention. She manipulated her fiction as individual case study. In Adam Bede for Adam duty and work is true religion, Reverend Irwine though presented as a spokesperson of the orthodox Christianity, wins the heart of people merely by his amiable behaviour (it clearly shows that Eliot 'kinder and tolerant towards these elder representatives of the Church of England: she has learnt to appreciate their ethical wisdom, and can joke about them because she has come to respect their wide humanity). In Middlemarch Mr. Farebrother besides her job as a cleric shares scientific interests as well as remunerative card playing and Dinah cannot but stretch her hand towards poor

Hetty although she committed an unchristian act. Through Mr. Irwine or Farebrother, Eliot epitomizes those clergy of the 18th century who sincerely believed that it was their duty to enhance social behaviour. In *Silas Marner* Silas who withdrew himself from society, through Eppie came to understand that the society which maltreated him is at once the soothing balm to his injury. He returns to society and starts attending the church. John Purkis makes clear the intention of Eliot: "This again is also carefully emptied of religious significance; the church is simply the appropriate 'social' nexus at the time in which the story is set. The whole story of *Silas* is explicable in human terms; it is by human beings that he is saved and restored to a fully human life." In the *Scenes from Clerical Life* Amos Barton realizes the futility of preaching dry sermons devoid of any warmth of feeling and Janet realizes after Tryan's untimely demise that 'the first condition of human goodness is something to love; the second, something to reverence'. *Romola* at the end is able to shed off the spell of fanaticism cast by Savonarola (indeed she had looked upon Savonarola as someone grand and saintly, but she realizes the vacuity of orthodox religious practices when he did not want to save her godfather's life) and finds her real home and solace among the group of destitute. She decides to stay outside of the 'God's kingdom' preached by Savonarola with the beings that she loved. Daniel Deronda sacrifices his self interests in search of a happy homeland for his clan and Gwendolen learns that if she wants to be a good woman, she has to be good to others. Dorothea in 'Middlemarch' too understands that in spite of her good will to serve the society she will be rejected by it unless she stops to burden her own wishes over it but has to appreciate their own idea of what is good for them.

Thus it is evident through her fiction that Eliot had skillfully dealt with the spiritual throe that emerged from the antithetical presence of her past beliefs and newly acquired scientific ideas. Basil Willey has nicely summed up her attitude: "the tension in George Eliot's mind between ideal and actual, action and reaction, ambition and renunciation, appears in her preoccupation with the theme of the 'egoistical sublime', her recurrent treatment of efforts after sanctity, Great and signal service

or self-realization- efforts which are thwarted by circumstances, ‘the gradual action of ordinary causes’, the blight of the commonplace. We have noted the spiritual ambitiousness of her own evangelical youth- her emulation of Hannah More and St. Paul, her anxiety ‘to be doing some little [i.e. a very great deal] toward the regeneration of this groaning, travelling creation’. The content of this ambition was changed after her ‘conversion’ (or perversion) to the Religion of Humanity, but it never left her; it remained in the form of that ‘terrible earnestness’ we have spoken of, that sense of the peremptoriness, of Duty- of duty whose claims were all the more absolute because its ‘divine’ sanction had been destroyed. It remained, after she had found that her service must be rendered through fiction, in her haunting sense of responsibility to mankind in all that she wrote...” It will be very clear after we closely analyse her major novels that in spite of writing from the viewpoint of a newly acquired ideology, she has tried best to retain the truth of traditional Christianity. The newer ideas came as a threat to the older religion, but amidst such a period of religious crises Eliot never yield to personal anxiety and despair, rather she upheld her ideology beyond personal feeling and response. She bridged the gap between the essence of traditional religiosity and the scientific interpretation of it through her fiction which at the same time exhibit that the key to social harmony is to bridge the gap between two individuals through the bond of love.

References:

1. Of these three Maggie comes nearest to her circumstantial situation and the other two express her altruistic notion
2. Bennet Joan: *George Eliot-Her Mind and Her Art* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press,1962,1948) p.5
3. Purkis, John: *A Preface to George Eliot*; England: Longman Group Ltd., 1985, p.22
4. Allen, Walter: *George Eliot* (NY:Macmillan,1964) p.18
5. Ibid, p.20
6. Cross, J.W.: *George Eliot’s Life as related in her Letters and Journals* (Vol-2)

7. Uglow, Jenny : George Eliot (England: Virago Press, 2008,1987) p.28-29
8. Ibid, p.30
9. Allen, p.37
10. Ibid, p.37
11. Ibid, p.39
12. Willey, Basil : Nineteenth Century Studies, Coleridge to Mathew Arnold (GBR: Penguin Books,1964; Chatto & Windus 1949) p.220
13. Here, at this point, it may be noted that Eliot eulogises Methodism in the time of Wesley in sharp contrast to its present state in her days in Adam Bede (Ch.3) may be she had understood the earnestness that lies at the core of Methodism for social improvement as she had seen it in his Uncle Samuel and her wife.
14. Purkis, p29
15. Ibid, p.47
16. Willey, p.256-257