

The conflict between 'Faith' and "Doubt" in the Victorian Era

...for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

Matthew Arnold

Even many earnest seekers of worthwhile living find that they are often flinched in their progress. Try as they might, they become stuck to an agonising world of pretence, absurdities and mediocrity, having to cohabit, interact and pull on with attendant shallow relationships and absurdities. They know that they are trapped in this 'dead' world, feeling also inexplicable obstacles overcome them, which prevent their natural And cherished world from being born to reality.

The Crisis of Faith refers to an event in the Victorian era in which much of Europe's middle class begins to doubt what is written in the book of Genesis as a reliable source in accordance of how the universe was created (Flynn). An important work to consider is written in 1802 by William Paley called Natural Theology: Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature. Paley writes in the belief that God is the sole creator of the universe and that all existing species were created by God perfectly for his intended universal balance. Needless to say, this ideology denounces the possibility of evolution which would be suggested later by Charles Darwin in his work entitled On the Origin of Species in 1859.

A relatively new science, geology, becomes popular in the Victorian Age which, like Darwin, diverts people's opinions away from the ideologies of Paley. Geologists begin to discover concrete evidence of earth's processes which did not add up to the events written about in the book of Genesis. In particular, there is a breakthrough in geology proving that the earth is at least a thousand years older than the Bible suggests (Flynn). Accordingly, a tension emerges between the opposing religious men and newly popular men of science. Consider the way in which Richard Helmstadeter

describes the crisis of faith as: *“an intellectual and emotional upheaval, stemming from challenges to the historicity of the Bible, discoveries in geology and biology, and concerns about morality, or rather, the apparent lack of it, in nature. Science and religion, more precisely science and theology, were deemed to be ‘in conflict’, the battle lines clearly drawn.”* However, this is certainly not to speak on behalf of every scientist and religious expert of the time. Evidently, even certain Evangelical religious figures begin to agree that the book of Genesis should not be taken literally over the recent scientific studies. There is, needless to say, with the emergence of the growing popularity in geology in England, correspondingly religious geologists. Their study of geology ties to a greater purpose in interpreting the book of Genesis over again so as to keep the faith from being abandoned due to gaps in religious credibility.

Consider this excerpt from Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” emphasizing his bewilderment over his nation’s willing loss of its religious soul...

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

*“Now our science tells our faith that she is shameful, and our Hopes that they are dupes;
our Reverence for truth leads to conclusions that make all reverence a falsehood” -
William James*

To elaborate on what was hinted upon above regarding the ideas of William Paley, it is important to note that his perception of the universe is very cut and dry; it could be described as very mechanical even. He opens his book by creating his argument in chapter one by hypothetically, describing an instance in which he stumbles across a stone in a vast heath. In asking the question how that stone got there, he says that

for all he knew, the stone could have been there for ever. Then he hypothetically alludes to a scene where he stumbles across a watch, and inquiring again how it got there. The answer is more involved: the main idea that Paley is hinting at in this watch example here is that every species was created by God perfectly for a reason, providing balance in the universe. The idea is that every part of the watch has a purpose which contributes to the greater use of telling time. Paley is describing his view of how the universe works by comparing it to how a watch function. He does state the notion more specifically to species, saying that “No animal, for instance, can have contrived its own limbs and senses; can have been the author to itself of the design with which they were constructed”.

“There is Grandeur in this view of life with its several powers having been originally breathed by the creator into a few forms or into one...from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being”
(Charles Darwin)

Contradicting the idea of God being a sufficient explanation for the way the universe is balanced, Charles Darwin would challenge the ideals preceding his in Paley’s book. Darwin argues directly against the idea that everything was created by God perfectly, and the idea that evolving species would throw off the balance of the universe. Think back to the watch example from Paley; he says that every part of the watch serves a purpose for its greater use. Darwin’s ideals suggest that it is unrealistic to tie the universe to such a mechanical connotation as unchanging and the notion that change would bring about great disorder. Consider the following passage, suggesting the evolution of species: *“In considering the Origin of Species, it is quite conceivable that a naturalist, reflecting on the mutual affinities of organic beings, on their embryological relations, their geographical distribution, geological succession, and other such facts, might come to the conclusion that each species had not been independently created, but had descended, like varieties, from other species. Nevertheless, such a conclusion, even if well founded, would be unsatisfactory, until it could be shown how the innumerable species inhabiting this world have been modified so as to acquire that perfection of structure and co-adaptation which most justly excites our admiration”*(Darwin) This passage shows on the personal level of Darwin, a criticism of the Naturalistic views that he formally accepted to be true; and also, how greatly he

is to be credited for contributing to such a time of modernizing scientific study which brought new light to mankind's knowledge of the world.

The opening line in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* sets up his contrast to Paley: "WHEN on board H.M.S. Beagle, as naturalist, I was much struck with certain facts in the distribution of the inhabitants of South America..." (Darwin). This quote is crucial in that it demonstrates the doubt of Naturalistic theory from the standpoint of someone who was once of the Naturalistic faith, but found it non-sensible to continue following, with much to be credited to the scientific advancement that he certainly is a part of. Further, it describes the voyage Darwin embarks on between 1831-1836 in which he set out to study different species from different areas of the earth. A particular species of interest to Darwin, he would find on the Galapagos Islands, the finch. Regarding the finch, Darwin alludes that although uncommon to those which are found on the mainland, it has evolved into its uniqueness and is still the same species. The foundation Darwin uses to demonstrate this is that their beak has been specifically accommodated in accordance to their diet, thus demonstrating the notion of evolving species (Darwin and Evolution).

Though the extent of the so-called Victorian "crisis of faith" is still in dispute, it was, nevertheless, a phenomenon rooted in the previous century. Confronted with unsettling discoveries in science, new academic approaches to scripture, and a church bitterly divided over how best to worship, many of England's most influential thinkers lost their faith in traditional Christianity. This chapter explores a topical approach to teaching the literature produced by the Victorian faith conflict. It surveys a diverse group of texts: novels by Trollope and Hardy; poems by Arnold, Tennyson, Hopkins, Swinburne, and Rossetti; autobiographies by Newman, Oliphant, Gosse and others; works of science by Darwin, Huxley, Lyell and others; works of theology by Jowett, Colenso, and Strauss; along with contemporary hymns and paintings; and a 1992 novel—Graham Swift's *Ever After*—that looks back on the faith conflicts of the age.