



MODES OF FAITH

Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief

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## P R E F A C E

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Can any thoughtful person at the beginning of the twenty-first century, believer or not, doubt that religious faith constitutes a powerful and often fateful force in the affairs of our modern, widely secularized world? As I draft these lines, the news carries reports of violent conflicts between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq, between Hindus and Muslims in India, between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Egypt, and between Palestinians and Israelis in Gaza. Recent weeks saw huge demonstrations in the Middle East protesting cartoons published in a Danish newspaper that were believed to denigrate Mohammed and Islamic faith. Less publicity accompanied the case reported a year earlier in the *New York Times* (29 March 2005) of a museum curator in Moscow convicted and fined for inciting religious hatred with an exhibition of paintings and sculptures that allegedly ridiculed the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time the Vatican and the governments of several Catholic countries have expressed their dismay because the new constitution of the European Union omits any mention of the Christian heritage of their cultures.

The controversy is of course not restricted to Europe and the Middle East. The U.S. Supreme Court recently turned down an atheist's challenge to the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. Frequent protests mark the national debates over abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, polygamy, the teaching of evolution, and other issues that bring religious beliefs into conflict with constitutional law. A computer game called "Civilization IV" (and hailed by *Time* in 2005 as a Top Pick) challenges the players to convert their neighbors or to destroy them in crusading wars. According to the *New York Times* (21 June 2004), religion is a more accurate predictor of voting preferences in the United States than income, education, gender, or any other social or demographic factor except race.

The phenomenon has not failed to catch the eye of scholars here and abroad. In May 2005 the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies in Washington, D.C., sponsored a conference on the “God Gap” separating the United States and Germany. In the summer of that same year the Humboldt University in Berlin created an interdisciplinary research center on “Religion und Politik” charged with investigating the newly labile relationships between church and state in a globalized world. Religious faith matters, whether we like it or not. In a provocative book entitled *The God Gene* (2004) the geneticist Dean Hamer even argued that faith is hardwired into our genes.

Faith is of course not limited to religion. To believe in something—a deity, a nation, a race, art, sex, money, sports teams—appears to be a fundamental human need. Forty years ago, in his essay “Wells, Hitler, and the World State,” George Orwell argued that “the energy that actually shapes the world springs from emotions—racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war—which liberal intellectuals mechanically write off as anachronisms.” The emotions that Orwell cites do not necessarily coexist with religious belief. In what Pope Benedict XVI recently labeled the “aggressive secularism” of our age they often function as surrogates when religious faith has been lost—surrogates to which individuals transfer the psychic energy formerly reserved for religion and in which they seek the same gratifications, and often the same forms and rituals, as previously afforded by religion.

Conflicts of faith have occupied my thoughts and imagination for many years and provided a significant theme in several of my books since *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (1972). *The Mirror of Justice* (1997) focused on legal crises arising specifically from the conflict between systems of belief as reflected in literary works from antiquity to the present. *The Sin of Knowledge* (2000) considered three archetypal myths—Adam, Prometheus, Faust—in which religious faith is challenged by knowledge. *Hesitant Heroes* (2004) traced literary heroes from Orestes and Aeneas by way of the medieval Parzival to Hamlet and beyond, whose crucial moment of hesitation exposes a clash between the existing value system and an emerging one.

Issues and interests of this sort prompted me, finally and almost inevitably, to explore the crisis of faith that shook Europe in the decades before and after World War I and the responses that crisis elicited as individuals sought surrogates to fill the spiritual emptiness in their minds and souls. This modern crisis differed appreciably from earlier ones inasmuch as the prevailing religious faith was threatened not by a single new one—monotheism in antiquity, the Reformation in the late Middle Ages,

the Enlightenment in early modern centuries—but by a congeries of possibilities: Marxism, modern science, Nietzschean ideas, and critical theology among others. These reflections gained relevance and poignancy for me from the fact that, according to many reports and surveys, society in the United States at the turn of the millennium is experiencing a crisis of faith remarkably similar to the one that tormented European minds a century ago—and often responding to it in astonishingly similar ways.

I have singled out five “modes of faith” that were particularly conspicuous in the first third of the twentieth century: art for art’s sake, the flight to India, socialism, myth, and utopian vision. These five surrogates are not exhaustive, but they are representative to the extent that they attracted to their ranks many of the most thoughtful minds of the twentieth century. I have emphasized the literary reflections of these crises because poets and writers have dealt sensitively, articulately, and vividly with individual cases rather than with sociological or theoretical generalities.

Since “faith” and its loss or recovery are essentially individual and private matters, the biographical documentation demanded my attention in every case. A pattern emerged showing that the loss of faith was triggered in most cases by a trivial childhood incident, and that initial doubt was then broadened and channeled by subsequent intellectual experiences. I have focused on late nineteenth-century childhoods, but the pattern is a timeless one, extending back to Augustine’s *Confessions*. Most of the chapters required historical contextualization because the “modes of faith” did not always spring into existence for the first time in the twentieth century but were adapted by individuals to suit their circumstances. In some cases—notably “myth” and “utopia”—it seemed useful to explore the intellectual background informing the literary responses because those surrogates have often engaged some of the most provocative and imaginative minds of our century, philosophical as well as literary. Because these “modes of faith” are perennial and not time-bound I also sought, whenever it seemed relevant, to trace their survival into our own time. Since my primary interest in this book revolves around intellectual and cultural history, I have emphasized those substantive aspects of the works covered, and not their purely literary value.

Needless to say, I have made grateful use of the vast secondary literature surrounding the thirty-odd writers here discussed as well as the major rubrics under which I have included them. To emphasize the fact that the loss of religious faith and the turn to surrogates was a general European phenomenon, and not limited to a single national culture, I have chosen

examples from several literatures—principally English, German, and French, but also Italian and Russian. In most cases I chose to make my own translations in order to bring out most clearly the thematic connections evident in the language. Elsewhere I have used existing translations, taking the liberty, as indicated from case to case, of modifying them for consistency.



I am enormously indebted to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for its generous support of this project since its inception. Thanks to a Mellon Emeritus Fellowship I have been able to carry out my research extensively in Europe as well as in libraries here in the United States. The Princeton University Library with its resourceful staff—in Reference, in Rare Books, in Interlibrary Loan, and elsewhere—has afforded me for some forty years ideal circumstances for scholarly research. For several years I have also spent many pleasant and profitable weeks annually in the majestic premises of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Unter den Linden.

Alan G. Thomas of the University of Chicago Press shepherded my manuscript through the editorial process with professional skill and personal encouragement. I am especially grateful to him for his initiative in finding two readers whose thoughtful responses and insightful comments contributed significantly to the sharpening of my argument at several points. My manuscript benefited especially from Susan Tarcov's meticulous and sensitive editorial eye.

On this occasion I would like to remember with affection and admiration Alfred Owen Aldridge, a distinguished scholar of comparative literature, in whose stimulating seminar on eighteenth-century English poetry over fifty years ago at Duke University I first read the great poem from which I have borrowed my title.

Finally, I want once again to thank my family—my wife, Yetta; my daughter, my two sons, and their spouses; and my seven grandchildren: a truly ecumenical family in which several religions are practiced and *all* faiths are respected and studied—for their constant inspiration, help, and support.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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# Introduction

Alexander Pope, that sly skeptic, understood that “graceless zealots” have always fought over the modes of faith. The history of Western civilization amounts in a significant sense to a catalog of epochs in which the breakdown of traditional systems of belief opened the way for more or less violent conflicts among competing value systems—conflicts that in an inevitable dialectic generated the emergence of a new dominant faith and, often, the concomitant production of cultural monuments commemorating these epochs. Several of the most notable texts of Greek literature—for instance, Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and Sophocles’ *Antigone*—document the crucial moment in preclassical Greece when cultic religion began to give way to civil law.<sup>1</sup> Orestes is torn between the primitive culture of blood vengeance and the emerging polity of law and justice, while Antigone upholds the values of an archaic matriarchal cult of the dead against the injunctions of Creon’s progressive secular state.

In the first centuries of the Common Era until the establishment of the New Testament canon and the Christianization of the Roman Empire, one appeal of Christianity was the novelty of its simple faith. Before the late first century CE, the terms *pistis* and *fides* had for the Roman mind no association with belief in gods and conveyed no meaning beyond the legalistic notion of reliability in keeping oaths.<sup>2</sup> Romans had long been accustomed to a religion of ritual without doctrine, of knowledge rather than faith, of orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> Their polytheistic religion invoked the principle known as *evocatio* to incorporate ever more new gods as the empire’s borders expanded, thereby accelerating the diffusion of any primal religious sense. Conversely, their satisfaction with polytheism inspired substantial Roman opposition to the Judeo-Christian idea of monotheism, as in the anti-Jewish critiques of Juvenal and the anti-Christian polemics of

Celsus.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile considerable dispute arose among the early Christian sects before something resembling a unified church emerged following the Council of Nicaea in 325.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is increasingly recognized by scholars that there were many continuities as well as a notable reciprocity of influence between paganism and Christianity on various points of ideology, such as resurrection.<sup>6</sup> Yet the desire for faith ultimately prevailed, laying the spiritual foundation for the works of Saint Augustine and other documents of early Christianity that established the doctrines of the new belief. This is the situation and the process outlined by Hegel in the penultimate chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* ("Revealed Religion"), which posits the exhaustion of Roman Stoicism as the necessary precondition for the rise of Christianity.

The High Middle Ages witnessed an ongoing struggle for power between popes and emperors, a struggle epitomized in the spiritual turmoil of the eponymous hero in Wolfram von Eschenbach's verse epic *Parzival*, who as a naive youth is confused by the conflicting values of religion and knighthood.<sup>7</sup> The friction between the church and secular culture in the late Middle Ages generated much of the intellectual and cultural energy that precipitated the Reformation and informed the Renaissance. In the eighteenth century a bland orthodox Christianity, challenged by the extremes of rationalist skepticism and Pietism's spiritual intensity, brought forth Voltaire and Kant on the one hand and German Romanticism on the other.

The erosion of Christian faith accelerated in the course of the nineteenth century as the Creation narrative was undermined by spectacular findings in geology and by Darwin's biological reordering of the descent of man, as the Higher Criticism of the Bible and its startling historical and anthropological discoveries qualified the understanding of Jesus and early Christianity, and as the social criticism of such radically different thinkers as Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche tore at the ideological roots of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The resulting growth of secularism—a term coined in 1851 by the English atheist George Holyoke as a designation for the belief that religion should play no role in the temporal affairs of the state—reached a peak in 1914.<sup>9</sup> By 1922 the perceptive social critic Siegfried Kracauer was able to identify what he termed a generation in waiting: "They are suffering to the core from their expulsion from the religious sphere, from the enormous alienation prevailing between their spirit and the absolute. They have lost faith, indeed almost the capacity for faith, and the religious truths have become for them colorless thoughts which they are capable only of thinking."<sup>10</sup>

The tensions that these issues raised, most bitterly perhaps within families, produced a conspicuous surge of autobiographies and autobiographical



novels revolving around the crisis of faith as experienced by thoughtful individuals from England across Europe to Russia. Successive waves of literary works in the years up to and following World War I recorded the responses, the modes of secular faith, that individuals sought to replace the religious faith that had been challenged and often destroyed by the nineteenth century.

The first wave bore individuals inward, to aesthetic realms they discovered within themselves, and outward, on a flight to find new faiths in exotic places. But the cataclysm of 1914 forced many thoughtful people to the realization that the leisure and liberty that supported or tolerated their aesthetic realms and exotic flights had depended heavily on the traditional forms and values that had been destroyed by World War I. They therefore turned from individual to sociopolitical collective modes of faith, such as socialism, myth, and utopia—initiatives that produced yet another wave of literary responses.

At the same time traditional Christianity, whose inability to prevent the ravages of politics and war had been exposed anew, came under fresh attack from other quarters. Among the most obvious examples of the new threat to faith were the Russian Revolution, which disestablished the Orthodox Church and campaigned zealously against religion; the pronounced secularist tendency among many Zionists; the movement toward modernization in Turkey and other Muslim lands; explicit programs of radical secularization in most European socialist parties; and the Scopes trial in the United States, in which the traditional biblical version of Creation was publicly challenged.



The dilemma of the decade was persuasively analyzed by Sigmund Freud in his book with the provocative title *The Future of an Illusion* (*Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, 1927). It is Freud's argument (chap. 3) that religion traditionally had a threefold task: to exorcize the terrors of nature; to reconcile men to the cruelty of fate; and to compensate humankind for the sufferings imposed by civilization—tasks more than adequately appropriated in the twentieth century by science and human reason. Religion's claim to belief is based on tradition, on proofs handed down from antiquity, and on the prohibition of questioning their validity (chap. 5). Freud maintains that these beliefs are illusions, grounded on teachings and not on experience or thought; they represent no more than fulfillments of humankind's own desires (chap. 6). It would be nice, Freud concedes, if there were a God who created the world and a moral order governing the universe; but this belief is only a consolatory wish-dream. It is time to replace religious faith with convictions stemming

from the operation of the intellect and to find rational grounds for the precepts of civilization (chap. 8). Freud's rhetorical antagonist objects that if religion is expelled from European civilization, it will simply be replaced by another system of doctrines, which would take on all the psychological characteristics of religion: sanctimoniousness, rigidity of form and belief, and intolerance of free thought (chap. 10). Freud agrees that it is difficult to avoid illusions: humankind requires faith in some form. But unlike religious *delusions*, the illusions produced by reason and intellect are capable of constant correction. If the delusions of religion are discredited, the world of the believer collapses and nothing is left but despair. But science, being modified by ever new understanding, is not a delusion and provides a firmer basis for modern civilization than does religion.

Freud and the very real challenges he defined and exemplified provoked a powerful counterreaction: a worldwide upsurge of fundamentalism in the 1920s, when the term "fundamentalism" in its current sense was coined by conservative Protestants in the United States.<sup>11</sup> A wave of conversions to Catholicism among European intellectuals engulfed England and the continent. Others were attracted to the radically antidemocratic and antimodern Traditionalism proposed by the charismatic René Guénon, who argued in several influential works that "the crisis of the modern world" could be averted, at least in the Occident, only by an "élite intellectuelle" recovering the "traditional spirit" and true "universality" of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church.<sup>12</sup> About the same time such conservative groups as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt were formed, along with the Rashtriya Savayamsevak Sangh in India and similar movements elsewhere. The literature of the 1920s again fulfilled its traditional role by incorporating and reflecting the spirit of the times, its turn to mysticism, its (re)conversions, and its search for new modes of religious faith.



Many observers would say that our society today in the United States is undergoing a spiritual crisis and transition similar to that of the 1920s, as the growing interest in Islam, Buddhism, Zen, Kabbala, Gnosticism, Scientology, Wicca, and a well-nigh unsurvivable congeries of neopagan and New Age fads challenges traditional Christian beliefs and calls forth in response a new fundamentalism. The recent revival of interest in the apocryphal gospels of early Christianity can in no small measure be attributed to the search for faith or, at least, a reaffirmation of faith.<sup>13</sup>

The situation in the United States differs conspicuously from that in

Western Europe. According to a Gallup survey of spirituality in the early twenty-first century, 96 percent of Americans believe in God or a universal spirit. The authors of the survey conclude that “the United States is unique in that it has one of the highest levels of formal education in the world, and at the same time, one of the highest levels of religious faith.”<sup>14</sup> The statistical generalization is borne out by the spectacular attraction of Mel Gibson’s 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* or the apocalyptic novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their series “Left Behind,” which sell rampantly in the Bible Belt and elsewhere.

The U.S. figures contrast sharply with those of a Gallup Millennium Survey of religious attitudes around the world, according to which a growing secularism prevails among contemporary Europeans. Roughly half of the Scandinavians surveyed said that God did not matter to them.<sup>15</sup> In 2003, a scandal was aroused in Denmark by a popular Lutheran minister who asserted that he did not believe in a physical God, in the afterlife, in the resurrection, or in the Virgin Mary.<sup>16</sup> In June of that same year, at the convention to draft a constitution for the European Union, the most hotly debated topic dividing its members concerned religion. Should God or Christianity be cited among the sources of the values constituting the common European culture and heritage?<sup>17</sup> The preamble approved by the majority contented itself with vague and inoffensive references to “the cultural, religious, and humanist inheritance of Europe,” prompting a prominent constitutional lawyer to speak of a current European “Christophobia.”<sup>18</sup> In 2004 a cover story in the *New Statesman* opened with the assertion that “Europe is a godless quarter of the globe and Britain the most atheistic part of it,” even though “the government is anxious to keep God onside” and “religion is also a baleful presence in education.”<sup>19</sup>

In France, according to recent polls, only 13 percent of the population considers a belief in God necessary to morality.<sup>20</sup> The official government policy of a self-consciously secular state antagonized many citizens by prohibiting the wearing of any explicitly religious apparel in public schools—Muslim veils, Jewish yarmulkes, or conspicuous Catholic crosses. “Religion is frightening,” began a front-page article on the 2003 Church Congress in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, “—at least to nonbelievers and those of other beliefs, to the TV viewers, to enlightened Europe.” In a country where Muslim head scarves arouse nervousness, the piece continues, “religion has again raised its head in the midst of modernity, and the visage that it displays is grim and threatening.” A land where Christianity is little more than “a museum with associated charitable functions” lacks all understanding for such spiritual phenomena as American piety, Turkish fundamentalism,

and militant Israeli policies.<sup>21</sup> When the newly elected Pope Benedict XVI visited his native Germany in the summer of 2005 the newsweekly *Spiegel* headed its cover story "Return to an Unchristian Land."<sup>22</sup> And yet, as the story in the *New Statesman* observed, "In one of the world's most secular societies, ministers tremble at an archbishop's words and give clergy a hand in forming policy" (18), and the leaders of secular states flock to Rome to confer with the pope, to receive his benediction, and to be photographed with him for the newspapers back home.

If issues of faith are once again à la mode—the debate in the United States over school prayer and abortion, or in Muslim countries the rise of radical movements such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban—the roots of the debate can be traced back at least for a century, and its offshoots have sprouted again at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Freud recognized that humankind requires some sort of sustaining faith or "illusions." The same fundamental human need has been acknowledged by thinkers across the centuries. The generations that lived prior to Christianity, when religion was based on ritual and not belief, had their own modes of "faith." Believers in the various non-Christian religions around the contemporary world share different "faiths" that may or may not have anything in common with Christian values. Max Weber observed in 1915 that there are many possibilities of faith, but inevitably they constitute "a response to something in the real world that is felt to be specifically 'meaningless'" and hence implicitly a demand "that the world order [*Weltgefüge*] in its totality be somehow a meaningful 'cosmos.'"<sup>23</sup> As T. S. Eliot phrased it more cogently in *Four Quartets* (1943), "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality."<sup>24</sup>

If the preceding analysis is valid, then our contemporary age of spiritual crisis—of conflict between faith and unbelief, of strife between fundamentalism and secularism, of the search for nontraditional sustaining values—would do well to contemplate the period that marked the starting point for our situation today, to analyze the various modes through which those predecessors responded to their loss of faith, and to ponder the shift through which some of them regained some sort of faith that could be called religious. As was the case in Greek antiquity, in early Christianity, in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Age of Enlightenment, the situation of decline and loss followed by the search for a new faith produced as testimony and reflection of the process a wave of often outstanding and always revealing literary documents. Whether we look back as believers seeking to counter nonreligious modes of faith or as skeptics considering alternatives to religious belief, the comparison can be illuminating. What will turn out to be the "modes of faith" in the twenty-first century?



CHAPTER TWO

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## The Melancholy, Long, Withdrawing Roar

Matthew Arnold heard the signals. Writing “Dover Beach” (from *New Poems*, 1867) in the decade following the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), he lamented the ebbing of the tide of Christian faith by which, for all his reverence of Greek antiquity and his affection for such great nonbelievers as Goethe and Heine, he remained consoled until his death in 1888. But some of his younger contemporaries reacted differently.

The bleak vision of James Thomson’s masterpiece *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), which according to Edmund Blunden “after fifty years retains its dark splendour” and may be “the most anticipative poem of his time,” amounts to a cry of despair in twenty-one cantos for faith lost.<sup>1</sup> It may be true that Thomson, despite the alcoholism that finally destroyed him, was by temperament a genial, charming, and often merry man.<sup>2</sup> Certainly his religious doubts emerged in stages, graduating from a traditional Christian upbringing through theism to atheism and the furious war on Christianity that he waged in a series of biting essays published principally in Charles Bradlaugh’s *National Reformer*.<sup>3</sup> By 1870, when he wrote the first sections of *The City of Dreadful Night*, his loss of faith was absolute and militant. Why does he “evoke the spectres of black night” and “disinter dead faith from mouldering hidden?” he asks in the poem.

Because a cold rage seizes one at whiles  
To show the bitter old and wrinkled truth  
Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles,  
False dreams, false hopes, false masks and modes of youth;  
Because it gives some sense of power and passion  
In helpless impotence to try to fashion  
Our woe in living words howe’er uncouth.

Thomson's City is dominated by the image of Dürer's Melancholia, who sits "stupendous, superhuman," gazing forth "in bronze sublimity" over subjects ruled by "renewed assurance / And confirmation of the old despair" (section 21). "There is no God," he exclaims (section 16).

I find no hint throughout the Universe  
Of good or ill, of blessing or of curse;  
I find alone Necessity Supreme.  
(section 14)

As is often the case, the poets were among the first to sense the mood of the age. The nineteenth-century loss of faith finds its earliest literary expression, whether elegiacally or mordantly, in such poems of the late 1860s and 1870s as those by Arnold and Thomson. A decade later the same spirit shows up on the stage, where cassocks and collars fall to the right and the left as clergymen come to feel that intellectual responsibility and social reform and all the other grand ideals of humanity are unattainable within conventional ecclesiastical structures. Henrik Ibsen's Johannes Rosmer (*Rosmersholm*, 1886), the scion of two centuries of Norwegian ministers, shocks his brother-in-law by proclaiming grandly toward the end of act 1 that he has "given up his faith." Turning to the "great world of truth and freedom" that has been revealed to him in a grand epiphany, he resolves to devote his life to "the creation of a true democracy." Similarly, Gerhart Hauptmann's Johannes Vockerat (*Lonely Lives*, 1891) dismays his pious parents by renouncing his promising career as a theologian in order to dedicate himself to his "philosophical" work. In these dramas the loss of faith is already a fait accompli. As in the earlier poems, we do not witness or experience the process of disenchantment by which the various speakers or protagonists are led from faith through doubt to disbelief. That task is left for the more analytical fictions that began to appear in the first years of the new century.

### The Contest of Faith and Reason

The intellectual history of the nineteenth century is in one sense a chronicle of the steadily intensifying contest of faith and reason—a process registered in such contemporary accounts as John W. Draper's *The Conflict between Science and Religion* (1874) and Andrew Dickson White's classic *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). At the fin de siècle Ernst Haeckel, in his enormously popular theory of a world unified by a "monistic" philosophy based on Darwin, proclaimed that "one of the most

distinctive features of the expiring century is the increasing vehemence of the opposition between science and Christianity"<sup>4</sup>—a view seconded by his English translator, who added that later ages will probably regard the conflict of theology with philosophy and science as "the most salient feature of the nineteenth century" (xi).

The assault on traditional Christian beliefs came in waves and from various quarters. The Old Testament version of the Creation, which Archbishop James Ussher had confidently and authoritatively dated to the year 4004 BCE, was undermined by a series of geological findings beginning in the late eighteenth century with the dispute between the Neptunists and the Vulcanists—that is, whether the formation of the earth's crust was aqueous or igneous, whether it was gradual or cataclysmic.<sup>5</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, responsible scientists had almost without exception abandoned their belief in the Mosaic account of Creation, including notably the biblical flood. The conspicuous exception was Philip Gosse (the father of Edmund Gosse, to whom we shall return), an otherwise distinguished zoologist who with his book *Omphalos* (1857) left the solid terrain of his discipline in the futile attempt to reconcile science with his fundamentalist Christian beliefs.

While the biblical story of the Creation was being challenged by geology, scholars in the new field of comparative philology undermined the theologically based theories of language: that Hebrew was the original language in which God spoke to man, that the names of all created things (except fishes) were bestowed by Adam, that the divergence of languages stems from the Tower of Babel. August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel's recognition of the antiquity of Sanskrit, Franz Bopp's establishment of the relationship among the Indo-European languages, Jacob Grimm's laws concerning the evolution of language, Wilhelm von Humboldt's fascination with such non-Indo-European languages as Basque and Malayan-Polynesian—these studies effectively put an end to the theory of language implicit in the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the more relaxed attitude toward religion and the Bible engendered by the Enlightenment produced a liberal view of Jesus among such thinkers as Voltaire and Thomas Paine, who regarded him as a great ethical teacher rather than as the divine Son of God.<sup>7</sup> The first systematic criticism of the Gospels was the work of a professor of Oriental languages, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, who argued in daring studies (published posthumously, 1774–78) that Jesus was a Jewish nationalist who was executed for political reasons and whose death was redefined after the fact by his admirers as an act of spiritual self-sacrifice. Fictionalizing works by more adventuresome writers such as Karl Friedrich Bahrdt and Karl Heinrich

Venturini—works more akin to Gothic romances than to scholarly biographies—depicted Jesus as a member of a secret society resembling such eighteenth-century associations as the Freemasons and Illuminati, which trained him to carry out its mission. Meanwhile, scholars of the more academic school of “thoroughgoing rationalism” sought to find rational explanations for the miracles reported in the New Testament. The Heidelberg professor H. E. G. Paulus wrote a two-volume life of Jesus “as the basis of a pure history of early Christianity” (*Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums*, 1828) which succeeded in explaining away every wonder in the Gospels except the Virgin birth.

These developments precluded one of the most brilliant intellectual accomplishments of the nineteenth century, David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (*Das Leben Jesu*, 1835). Strauss, a lecturer at Tübingen and a Hegelian by temperament and training, sought to synthesize the supernatural and the rational approaches through a mythic interpretation of the Gospels. Rather than accepting the miracles on faith or explaining them away by reason, he argued that these elements were literary conventions added to accounts of the life of Jesus by the authors of the Gospels, who wanted to make of the historical individual a figure corresponding in every respect to the predictions of the prophets.

It is difficult to overemphasize the impact of Strauss's two volumes, which George Eliot, at the suggestion of her freethinking friends, translated into English (1846) and which the contributors to *Essays and Reviews* (1860) incorporated into their controversial discussion of problems aroused by the Higher Criticism. Strauss was the first scholar to distinguish systematically between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, who can be reached only by stripping away the “mythic” additives from the recorded life. Yet it was not Strauss's work, exciting but intellectually demanding, that commanded broad public attention, but Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (*Vie de Jésus*, 1863), a volume whose critical inadequacies are matched by its literary charm.

Destined for the priesthood, Renan left the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris in 1845, his faith corroded by German critical theology and by the ideas of Paulus and Strauss to which he had been exposed. Following a decade of further studies, in 1862 he assumed the professorship of Semitic languages at the Collège de France, from which he was promptly removed because of the unorthodox views advanced in his *Life of Jesus*. Based not so much on rigorous scholarship as on his personal experiences in Syria, Renan's work portrays an amiable young carpenter wandering through the lovely Galilean countryside in the company of gentle fisherfolk and urging upon his listeners a “délicieuse théologie d'amour.” For all its theological



inadequacies, Renan's readable *Life* determined more than any other work of the nineteenth century the public image of Jesus as a man rather than a god—a Jesus of reason and history rather than a Christ of faith. In harmony with Renan, Matthew Arnold introduced the notion of the “sweet reasonableness” of a very human Jesus in a series of works beginning with *St. Paul and Protestantism* (1870).<sup>8</sup>

Already at mid-century, Arthur Schopenhauer observed in one of his *Parerga and Paralipomena* devoted to religion (“Über Religion,” 1851) that “[i]n the nineteenth century we see Christianity significantly weakened, almost wholly deserted by serious faith, yes, already struggling for its very existence.” “All in all,” he concludes, “and undermined constantly by the sciences, Christianity is gradually moving toward its end.”<sup>9</sup> In the second half of the century many fields of intellectual endeavor made advances that contributed directly or indirectly to undermine further any literal understanding of the Bible and that relativized the tenets of Christian faith. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which flatly contradicted the biblical teachings on the creation of man, became a cause célèbre and ignited a controversy that has lasted into the twenty-first century. The field of anthropology produced results which, as summarized and elaborated by James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890), exposed many of the beliefs and practices of traditional Christianity as superstitions. “It is indeed a melancholy and in some respects thankless task,” Frazer confessed in the author's introduction to the second edition (1900),

to strike at the foundations of beliefs in which, as in a strong tower, the hopes and aspiration of humanity through long ages have sought a refuge from the storm and stress of life. Yet sooner or later it is inevitable that the battery of the comparative method should breach these venerable walls, mantled over with the ivy and mosses and wild flowers of a thousand tender and sacred associations.<sup>10</sup>

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) William James analyzed the “faith-state” as a biological as well as a psychological condition and surveyed the various forms of its manifestations, which when carried to an extreme can even become pathological.<sup>11</sup> Max Weber concluded in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (*Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, 1904) that the rationalized capitalism of 1900, especially in the United States, had been stripped of all religious and ethical meaning.<sup>12</sup> As capitalism grows increasingly rational and pragmatic, religious faith wanes in an inverse proportion.

There is no need to rehearse in detail the manifold reasons for “the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of religious faith, which include findings from fields ranging from astronomy and archaeology to world history and the history of medicine, and which have been thoroughly explored.<sup>13</sup> Not all believers lost their faith as a result of these various intellectual challenges from every direction: witness the case of Philip Gosse. Such representative documents as the perennially popular *Diary* of Robert Francis Kilvert (1840–79), a country curate, display not the slightest trace of spiritual doubt or, indeed, of the fierce religious controversies raging elsewhere in England.<sup>14</sup> Many devout believers simply ignored, and continue to ignore, the findings of science: witness the laws in certain of the United States which still require the biblical account of the Creation to be taught alongside the “unproved theory” of Darwinism.

Others, in contrast, found their faith purified and enhanced by the elimination of superstition and myth. It was Andrew Dickson White’s conviction, as he expressed it in the introduction to his *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*,

that Science, though it has evidently conquered Dogmatic Theology based on biblical texts and ancient modes of thought, will go hand in hand with Religion; and that, although theological control will continue to diminish, Religion, as seen in the recognition of “a Power in the universe, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness,” and in the love of God and of our neighbor, will steadily grow stronger and stronger, not only in the American institutions of learning but in the world at large.  
(1: xii)

William James, while perhaps not so sanguine about “the Divine Power in the Universe” as was White (2: 395), nevertheless ended the postscript to his book with the confession that “the practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideas. All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves” (396). In everyday life, he concludes in his essay “The Will to Believe,” “the *chance* of salvation is enough. No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance”—a thought consistent with his defense of Pascal’s wager (the notion that, other things being equal, it is better to cover one’s bets by believing: after all, what have you got to lose?).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the essays in *The Will to Believe* (1897), as James states in his preface,

“are largely concerned with defending the legitimacy of religious faith” for the members of a Harvard student club, in whom “paralysis of their naive capacity for faith” represents a special form of mental weakness in academic audiences (x). “I do not think that any one can accuse me of preaching reckless faith. I have preached the right of the individual to indulge his personal faith at his personal risk” (xi).

Albert Schweitzer emerged from his magisterial survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies of the historical Jesus (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, 1906) convinced that “it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it. Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from Him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly Frazer, despite his introductory admonition that “whatever comes of it, wherever it leads us, we must follow truth alone” (xxvii), ends his epoch-making work with “the sound of the church bells of Rome ringing the Angelus” across the marshes of the Campagna to the sacred grove of Nemi, where his account of ancient myth began. “*Le roi est mort, vive le roi! Ave Maria!*” (II: 309).

Yet despite the protestations of lingering faith among these authors, the mood of doubt pervading the turn of the century is evident from the titles of their celebrated works: *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, or *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Indeed, cultural historians now understand that “doubt is ubiquitous in the discourse of the Victorians.”<sup>17</sup>

Historians do well to remind us that intellectuals and scientists constituted only a minority among freethinkers of the late nineteenth century. The loss of faith among working-class agnostics and atheists was based less on intellectual conclusions than on moral and social concerns.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the assaults on conventional faith by rationalism and science produced often violent counterattacks from religious authorities. The papacy responded with its dogma on the immaculate conception (1854), with the encyclical of 1864 condemning modern culture and anathematizing the rationalistic principles of science, and with the pronouncement on papal infallibility (1870). The so-called *Kulturkampf* was mounted from 1872 to 1878 by Bismarck in an attempt to reduce the power of the Catholic Church in Germany where the “liturgical movement” sought to respond to the increasing alienation of Catholics by combining social, cultural, and religious aspects in liturgy as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>19</sup> These various controversies were almost immediately reflected in the literature of the age.

## Religion in Nineteenth-Century Literature

Earlier European literature, to the extent that it was not simply devotional, did not often feature religion centrally. In the novels of personal cultivation (*Bildungsromane*) that became increasingly popular in nineteenth-century Germany and England, religion rarely plays a role in the young protagonist's experience. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96), which provided the master pattern for the genre, deals with religion and faith only in its subtle case study of religious hysteria in book 6, the "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul."<sup>20</sup> In Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830), whose hero is a seminarian, Julien Sorel chooses the church over a military career not for reasons of faith but because he shrewdly concludes that, in the post-Napoleonic world, greater power and glory could be achieved in the cloth than in the uniform (chap. 5). The situation was slightly different in Victorian England; but even there J. Hillis Miller had to isolate for his purposes five writers who, unlike most of their contemporaries, belonged to a "romantic" tradition that still believed in God (De Quincey, Arnold, Browning, Hopkins, and Emily Brontë).<sup>21</sup>

The pattern at mid-century was sometimes a return to faith through doubt, for which Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) provides the archetypical model in England. "There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds" (section 96), we read. Yet ultimately "We have but faith: we cannot know; / For knowledge is of things we see" (prologue). A year later Melville's Ishmael calls himself "a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" (52); yet he learns from the "wild idolator" Queequeg that "even Christians could be both miserable and wicked; infinitely more so, than all his father's heathens."<sup>22</sup> By the end of his voyage on the *Pequod*, Ishmael has discovered that "there is no steady unretracing progress in life" with a fixed conclusion. Instead, after passing through certain "fixed gradation"—"infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If"—we are destined to begin the eternal round all over again (486). Similarly Raskolnikov, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), asserts before Nietzsche that "There is no God" (in his theological conversation with Sonia in book 4, chapter 4). He later tells his saddened mother that, like so many other young men of the period, he is "not a believer" (bk. 6, chap. 7). In the Siberian prison camp he is attacked by fellow inmates as an atheist (epilogue). Yet despite the Napoleonic theory that motivates his murder of the old pawnshop owner—his hope of using the money to undertake a grand

work for humanity—he is reconverted on the last page of the novel by his love for the devout Sonia.



But for most of the major nineteenth-century novelists, many of whom had lost—or never gained—their faith, religion was simply one among many aspects of the societies that they were depicting. For Flaubert's *Emma Bovary* (1857), religion is little more than an occasional transitory infatuation. As a thirteen-year-old girl, she initially experiences a romantic pleasure in the exaltations of her convent but, soon tiring of the routine, "continued from habit first, then out of vanity." The nuns, "who had been so sure of her vocation, perceived with great astonishment that Mademoiselle Rouault seemed to be slipping from them."<sup>23</sup> Later, in the course of a prolonged illness, she undergoes a temporary relapse into religiosity with a mystical vision in which she fancies "she heard in space the music of seraphic harps, and perceived in an azure sky, on a golden throne in the midst of saints holding green palms, God the Father, resplendent with majesty, who ordered to earth angels with wings of fire to carry her away in their arms" (154). Generally, in Flaubert's fictional world, religious faith is restricted to the delusions of emotional adolescents and hysterical patients (or, as later in Flaubert's story *A Simple Heart*, to such simpleminded folk as the servant woman Félicité).

In the rich social fabric of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872)—even though it is set in the rural England of 1829–32, well before the mid-century challenges to faith—religion provides at most a single strand, which is treated with a delicious irony.<sup>24</sup> Casaubon, the unimaginative scholar pursuing the "Key to All Mythologies," is used as the model for the painted head of Saint Thomas Aquinas; the banker Bulstrode is generally disliked and distrusted for his "religious tone," which is ultimately exposed as being no more than a hypocritical mask for his disreputable past; the young Dorothea Brooke is characterized by an "excessive religiousness" that she wastes upon the false idol Casaubon. Altogether, religion concerns the community of *Middlemarch* only to the extent that it becomes a political issue—either national (the "Catholic Question") or local (the dispute over the hospital chaplaincy). Faith never enters the discussion. Looking back at English society as it existed some fifty years earlier, George Eliot perceives what U. C. Knoepfelmacher has called "a 'middle' march between religious despair and religious affirmation," a compromise based on her essential humanism.<sup>25</sup>

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878) is only seemingly at odds with the general pattern. For most of the novel, an essentially ritualized religion

constitutes only one facet in the glittering life of upper-class Russians in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and on country estates. We hear about Kitty's exposure to spiritual life through her acquaintance with the Pietist Madame Stahl (pt. 2, chap. 33). Indeed, Kitty is the single genuinely Christian spirit in the vast cast of characters although even her spirituality is implicit rather than explicit. Anna, in contrast, is a thoroughly secularized figure. As the misery of her circumstances as a "fallen woman" becomes apparent, "[t]he idea of seeking help in her difficulty in religion was as remote from her as seeking help from Aleksey Aleksandrovich himself, although she had never had doubts of the faith in which she had been brought up. She knew that the support of religion was possible only upon condition of renouncing what made up for her the whole meaning of life" (pt. 3, chap. 15).<sup>26</sup> Her lover, Vronsky, is mindlessly areligious. The more thoughtful Levin, "an unbeliever who respected the beliefs of others," finds it "exceedingly disagreeable to be present at and take part in church ceremonies" (pt. 5, chap. 1)—and, accordingly, no such ceremonies are depicted in the novel's hundreds of pages. Levin's brother, a skeptic, experiences a deathbed reconversion; yet Levin understands that "his present return to faith was not a legitimate one, . . . but simply a temporary, selfish return to faith in desperate hope of recovery" (pt. 5, chap. 20). Generally speaking, most of the figures in the novel are freethinkers—either like the true freethinker of former days, "who had been brought up in ideas of religion, law, and morality, and only through conflict and struggle became a freethinker"; or like the uncouth modern breed, described contemptuously, "who are reared *d'emblée* in theories of atheism, skepticism, and materialism" and negate everything (pt. 5, chap. 9).

Tolstoy originally meant to conclude the novel with Anna's suicide beneath the wheels of the freight train. He added the last section, which portrays Levin's return to faith, in response to his own spiritual crisis, which he was soon to describe in greater detail in his autobiographical account *A Confession*.<sup>27</sup> In the two years after his brother's death, the freethinking Levin begins to reconsider questions of life and death "in the light of these new convictions, as he called them, which had during the period from his twentieth to his thirty-fourth year imperceptibly replaced his childish and youthful beliefs." His thinking is further jolted by the extraordinary circumstance that, during his wife Kitty's labor of childbirth, "he, an unbeliever, had fallen into praying" (pt. 8, chap. 8). In the effort to resolve his doubts, he studies philosophical and theological works, but can "find no answer to the questions and [is] reduced to despair" (pt. 8, chap. 10). A chance conversation about a peasant who "lives for his soul" and "remembers God" triggers an epiphany (pt. 8, chap. 11). Levin considers his own life and comes to the

realization that “that joyful knowledge, shared with the peasant, that alone gives peace to my soul” has always come, wittingly or not, from his “faith in God, in goodness, as the one goal of man’s destiny” (pt. 8, chap. 13). Levin realizes that his character will not change—that he will continue to lose his temper, quarrel with his wife, and fail to understand with his reason why he prays. “But my life now, my whole life apart from anything that can happen to me, every minute of it is no longer meaningless, as it was before, but it has an unquestionable meaning of the goodness which I have the power to put into it.” With this insight, which has been anticipated by nothing in its first seven parts, the novel ends.

If we turn to Theodor Fontane’s *Effi Briest* (1895), a masterpiece of German nineteenth-century realism and the last of the three great novels of adultery, we encounter a similar indifference toward religion and questions of faith. The heroine of the novel, often known as the German Madame Bovary, has been much affected by her father, a freethinking Prussian landowner “to whom nothing is sacred.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, when the newly married girl of eighteen years first arrives in the Baltic coastal town with her much older husband, her “rationalistic” tendencies cause the local aristocrats with their “Christian-Germanic rigor of faith” (253) to regard her as an “atheist” (159). Effi displays no religious beliefs whatsoever—only an adolescent tendency toward superstition (her fear of the ghostly Chinaman reputed to haunt the attic). The late nineteenth-century society of the novel, rejecting divine judgment as “nonsense,” accepts as its idolatry an “honor cult” (322) which first necessitates the duel in which Effi’s husband kills her lover and then forces her through divorce into a life of disgrace and an early death. It is an utterly mundane world in which “Bible jokes” are the latest rage (281) and in which “churchly questions” are treated with the utmost irony. Characteristically, the church is invoked only for marriages and baptisms—ritual occasions which are disposed of almost *en passant* in a single sentence. The only figure demonstrating Christian humility and love is Effi’s faithful maidservant, Roswitha, who calls herself “a bad Catholic” (203).

A conspicuous variant is evident in the well-known Christian socialist novels of the period—for instance, Eliza Lynn Linton’s appallingly bad but sensationally successful *True History of Joshua Davidson* (1872) and Mrs. Humphry Ward’s controversial but highly literary bestseller *Robert Elsmere* (1888), which is based on an acquaintance with Renan as well as Strauss and the German Higher Criticism. These works are not expressions of doubt, much less loss of faith, but attacks on the sterile theology and self-centered clericalism of the times. The response of Joshua Davidson and Robert Elsmere is a turn to a primitive Christian faith outside the framework

of the traditional church.<sup>29</sup> Such modern “imitations of Christ,” featuring heroes who try to lead an authentic Christian life outside their respective churches, were written not just in England but all over Europe, Protestant and Catholic alike: Benito Pérez Galdós’s *Nazarín*, Hans von Kahlenberg’s (pseud. for Helene Kessler) *Der Fremde* (1901; *The stranger*), Antonio Fogazzaro’s *The Saint* (*Il santo*, 1905), and other less popular examples.



It is a curious fact of German literary history that many of its writers since 1750 have been trained theologians or the sons of Lutheran ministers—a fact that inspired Robert Minder to write a classic essay on “the image of the vicarage in German literature from Jean Paul to Gottfried Benn.”<sup>30</sup> As a result, Minder concluded, “Germany has produced no anticlerical Protestant writers of universal reputation” (58). Rather the contrary, since at times of threat to the nation the vicarage has often constituted the cell of intellectual resistance, as evidenced most recently in the opposition movement to the communist government in 1989 in the German Democratic Republic. Even those few who broke with the Christian faith—the pastors’ sons Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Friedrich Nietzsche and the intended theologian Friedrich Hölderlin—continued to appreciate the discipline and warmth experienced in their childhood. Thus in 1881 Nietzsche reminisced in a letter to Peter Gast about his childhood in the vicarage: “It is the best example of ideal life that I have ever known; from childhood on I have pursued it, into many corners, and I believe that I have never in my heart opposed it.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet if the traditional attitude toward Christianity, in contrast to the coziness of the vicarage, was radically modified among many intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century, it was due in no small measure to the growing influence of Nietzsche’s ideas. Only a year after his letter to Peter Gast, Nietzsche published *The Gay Science* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882) where for the first time, and fifteen years after Dostoevsky, he proclaimed that “God is dead.” “The greatest modern event—that ‘God is dead,’ that the belief in the Christian God has become untenable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows across Europe.”<sup>32</sup> In his posthumously published notes from that period he joked that “nowadays we would treat any tendency toward religious raptures with laxatives.” The *religion nouvelle* he envisaged would have “no God, no Beyond, no reward and punishment.”<sup>33</sup> And in his notes on religion he observed that “[e]very church is the stone on the grave of a god-man: it wants at any cost to prevent him from being resurrected.



God suffocated from theology."<sup>34</sup> Inevitably, these tensions between faith and doubt began to surface in a broad spectrum of autobiographical accounts of the later nineteenth century.

## Two Lives

The conflict of faith and reason was resolved in the case of Leo Tolstoy into a renewal of faith. Tolstoy was baptized and raised in the Orthodox Christian faith, he informs us in the opening paragraph of *A Confession* (1879), and instructed in that faith throughout his childhood and youth. "But when I abandoned the second course of the university at the age of eighteen I no longer believed any of the things I had been taught." Tolstoy presents his lapse from faith as typical among his intellectual peers—as represented, as we have seen, by Levin in *Anna Karenina*. That is to say, he never seriously thought about the things he was taught but simply repeated the catechism by rote and received his certificate of communion. But

religious doctrine, accepted on trust and supported by external pressure, thaws away gradually under the influence of knowledge and experience of life which conflict with it, and a man very often lives on, imagining that he still holds intact the religious doctrine imparted to him in childhood whereas in fact not a trace of it remains.<sup>35</sup>

By the time he was sixteen Tolstoy had stopped praying and going to church, and his rejection of religious doctrine was a conscious one reinforced by his reading of philosophical works.

In *A Confession*, however, Tolstoy does not analyze the process of rejection. Apart from a glancing reference to Immanuel Kant's arguments against the possibility of proving the existence of a deity (62), he does not discuss the intellectual sources for his loss of faith. He passes quickly over his ten years of passion (ambition, love of power, covetousness, lasciviousness, pride, anger, violence), another six years during which his "religion" amounted to no more than faith in poetry and a Goethean personal cultivation, and fifteen years of family life.

Then about the age of fifty something strange happened: he began to experience "moments of perplexity and arrest of life" (15), moments that gradually occurred more frequently and with greater intensity. Although he rotely maintained the basic acts of living, he came to the conclusion that, despite his success and good fortune, life is meaningless (17). "I knew

I could find nothing along the path of reasonable knowledge except a denial of life; and there—in faith—was nothing but a denial of reason, which was yet more impossible for me than a denial of life” (47). Following these brief preliminaries, the remaining pages of *A Confession* deal with Tolstoy’s return to a faith that offered meaning to life—a profound and simple faith inspired by the belief of the simple Russian folk (not unlike the romanticism that was later to send such European seekers as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil to Harlem churches in search of authentic American religion), purged of the superficialities of Orthodoxy, and based on his own reading, translation, and interpretation of the Gospels. “I lived in the world for fifty-five years,” he summarizes in his introduction to *What I Believe* (1884), “and after the first fourteen or fifteen years of childhood I was for thirty-five years a nihilist in the real meaning of that word, . . . a nihilist in the sense of an absence of any belief. Five years ago I came to believe in Christ’s teaching, and my life suddenly changed” (307). In sum, Tolstoy’s religious writings, his principal occupation during the years between the completion of *Anna Karenina* and the publication of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886), mention his loss of faith and years of nihilism as the prerequisite, but he is concerned almost entirely with the recovery of his faith and its nature.



The difference is immediately clear when we turn to the celebrated spiritual autobiography by a younger contemporary of Tolstoy, Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907). The bulk of *A Confession* is devoted to Tolstoy’s renewal of faith from age fifty to fifty-five; his life up to that point is reported hastily as mere background. *Father and Son*, in contrast, covers only the years from 1849 to 1867—from Gosse’s birth up to his departure from home in Devon to London, where for the first time he lived independently and worked as a librarian in the British Museum. Gosse (1849–1928), the son of the zoologist Philip Gosse, was a distinguished translator, critic, and literary historian who, among other accomplishments, introduced Henrik Ibsen to the English public through his translations and a life of the Norwegian dramatist (1907). Gosse had already written an admiring positivistic biography of his father (1890), focusing on his scientific achievements (principally in the field of marine biology). *Father and Son*, in contrast, is explicitly *not* an autobiography, eschewing such aspects as “the cold and shrouded details of my uninteresting school life.”<sup>36</sup>

“This book is the record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences and almost two epochs,” it begins (1). Gosse portrays his

parents, who based their every action and belief on a literal reading of the Scriptures, as “perhaps the latest consistent exemplars . . . of a state of soul once not uncommon in Protestant Europe” (15). “Here was perfect purity, perfect intrepidity, perfect abnegation; yet there was also narrowness, isolation, an absence of perspective, let it be boldly admitted, an absence of humanity.” It was his parents’ “Great Scheme” and his mother’s aspiration that his life be dedicated “to the manifest and uninterrupted and uncompromised ‘service of the Lord’” (289). Contrary to the common assumption that a life so wholly dedicated to religion is dreary, Gosse stresses that his early childhood prior to his mother’s death was “cheerful and often gay” (29).

Gosse exposes with frankness and subtlety the first cracks in the wall of his faith, the earliest stirrings of doubt in his mind, which began at age six when he realized for the first time—as the result of an utterly trivial mistake his father made—that his father was not omniscient (36); and, for equally innocent reasons, that he could deceive his parents. “My Father, as a deity, as a natural force of immense prestige, fell in my eyes to a human level” (38). About the same time he began to question the efficacy of prayer, simply because he was told not to pray for simple things like toys. The happiest hours in this childhood dominated by “rigid and iconoclastic literalness” (71) and by incessant religious instruction came at those times “when the spectre of Religion ceased to overshadow us for a little while, when my Father forgot the Apocalypse and dropped his austere phraseology” to sing or laugh.

Gosse’s life changed upon his mother’s death in his seventh year and the family’s ensuing move from London to Devonshire. “I do not think that at any part of our lives my Father and I were drawn so close to one another as we were in that summer of 1857” (90). But 1857 was also a year of scientific crisis, when his father, attending meetings at the British Museum and the Royal Society, became aware of the ideas of evolution which had been growing for the past thirty years.

There is a peculiar agony in the paradox that truth has two forms, each of them indisputable, yet each antagonistic to the other. It was this discovery, that there were two theories of physical life, each of which was true, but the truth of each incompatible with the truth of the other, which shook the spirit of my Father with perturbation. (111)

In the unrealistic hope of settling the scientific controversy he wrote his ill-fated *Omphalos*, whose crudely literalist and fanatical interpretation of the Creation—he argued among other things that Adam, though he came

from no womb, had a navel, the *omphalos* of the title—provoked ridicule among scientists and in the popular press.<sup>37</sup>

Disappointed in his hope of reconciling science and religion, the elder Gosse retreated into the community of “Saints,” the Wesleyan Brethren, in their Devonshire village and into his collections and study of marine biology. Gradually his troubled mind formed the idea that his son was an *âme d’élite*, “a being to whom the mysteries of salvation had been divinely revealed” (167), and he insisted on having him at age ten examined, baptized, and accepted into the religious community as an adult—scenes that Gosse describes with comic irony. “I saw myself imprisoned forever in the religious system which had caught me and would whirl my helpless spirit as in the concentric wheels of my nightly vision” (217). Yet through it all and despite his seeming meekness the boy “clung to a hard nut of individuality, deep down in my childish nature” (219).

His life changed yet again when his father married for a second time and his stepmother, devout but no fanatic, encouraged the boy to lead a more normal, healthy life. While he did not resort to open rebellion and, “young coward that I was, let sleeping dogmas lie” (246), he began to rebel in trivial ways against the tyranny of the religious life. Fascinated by his first glimpse of illustrations of the Greek gods, he was appalled by his father’s “Puritan fury.” “My Father’s prestige was by this time considerably lessened in my mind” (277).

When the boy was sent off to an academy run by the Plymouth Brethren, he was exposed for the first time to secular poetry, and specifically to the poems of Christopher Marlowe. This extension of his intellectual horizons did not stir doubts in his young mind. “On the contrary, at first there came a considerable quickening of fervour” (319). But his father, on discovering among Edmund’s books a volume containing Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, burned it, arguing that his son’s landlady, when he went off to London, would immediately mark him as a profligate should she find such a sinful book in his possession. “I began to perceive, without animosity, the strange narrowness of my Father’s system” (319). Though still not inclined to skepticism and doubt, he began to wonder about the doctrines of other churches, believing that it was unlikely that “a secret of such stupendous importance should have been entrusted to a little group of Plymouth Brethren, and have been hidden from millions of disinterested and pious theologians” (320). He returned to his last year at school “full of strange discords” (324) and conflating Keats and the Book of Revelation, John Wesley’s hymns and Shakespeare. “In my hot and silly brain, Jesus and Pan held sway together, as in a way-side chapel discordantly and impishly consecrated to Pagan and to Christian

rites" (324). One summer afternoon, "the highest moment of my religious life, the apex of my striving after holiness" (326), he prayed fervently for an epiphany. Nothing happened. Evening came. The bell rang for tea.

"The Lord has not come, the Lord will never come," I muttered, and in my heart the artificial edifice of extravagant faith began to totter and crumble. From that moment forth my Father and I, though the fact was long successfully concealed from him and even from myself, walked in opposite hemispheres of the soul, with "the thick o' the world between us." (326–27)

Gosse's account of his youthful doubts ends at this point. He leaves for London, his faith undermined and his belief in his father's authority dashed. An elegiac tone pervades the pages of the epilogue—a refrain, he stresses, that he was to repeat over and over as the years passed: "what a charming companion, what a delightful parent, what a courteous and engaging friend, my Father would have been, and would pre-eminently have been to me, if it had not been for this stringent piety which ruined it all" (348). Gosse loved and respected his father, but given his father's inflexible views no compromise was possible. It was a case of "Everything or Nothing," the book ends;

and thus desperately challenged, the young man's conscience threw off once for all the yoke of his "dedication," and, as respectfully as he could, without parade or remonstrance, he took a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself.

The stupendous success of the book signals a new climate of opinion marking the beginning of the twentieth century. The first edition and five further impressions sold out within the first year. Having almost immediately established itself as a classic of English literature, it was rapidly translated into other languages. His book was "a call to people," as he wrote to an admiring reader, "to face the fact that the old faith is now impossible to sincere and intelligent minds, and that we must courageously face the difficulty of following entirely different ideals in moving towards the higher life."<sup>38</sup>



Such "deconversion" experiences as Gosse's were not uncommon in the second half of the nineteenth century. Robert Graves, for instance, recalls in his autobiography: "I had great religious fervor, which persisted until shortly

after my confirmation at the age of sixteen, and remember the incredulity with which I first heard that there actually were people, people baptized like myself into the Church of England, who did not believe in Jesus's divinity. I had never met an unbeliever."<sup>39</sup> However, the accounts were usually brief statements, often in obituary notices of secularists in freethinking journals, rather than detailed literary narratives.<sup>40</sup> But similar experiences gradually began to make themselves felt in the literary works of the period, as writers, having lost their faith through their reading of Nietzsche as well as the other scholars of doubt, began to look back at their earliest years in a new way. Childhood and youth were now analyzed as the period during which doubt leading to a final loss of faith began. This was a new development, conspicuously different from the attitudes of those earlier contemporaries Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), George Eliot (1819–80), and Theodor Fontane (1819–98). Flaubert, the son of a surgeon and himself initially a student of law, had grown up in a wholly secular atmosphere. Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), liberated at an early age from the religious views of her Warwickshire peers, was translating David Friedrich Strauss's freethinking *Life of Jesus* in her early twenties. Fontane, the son of an apothecary, was educated in rationalistic Berlin and worked there as a pharmacist and minor civil servant before becoming a journalist and independent writer. Although Fontane outlived the others by two decades and produced his finest novels in the 1890s, the views of all three were determined by the skepticism of their intellectual generation—a skepticism that was born of rationalism rather than Darwinism, that they took for granted as their intellectual heritage, and that saturated the texture of their social fabrics.

The extremes of absolute deconversion and of deconversion followed by reconversion, as represented in the contrasting autobiographical accounts of Gosse and Tolstoy, exemplify the principal patterns evident in several of the major novels of lost faith that begin to be written and published at the beginning of the twentieth century.