CRITICISMS OF THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL: 1870–1900

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American novelists writing between 1870 and 1900 were, on the whole, critical of the American Protestant church. Most of the sixty novels on which this paper is based reflect strong disapproval of institutional Protestantism. Even Harriet Beecher Stowe's comment in My Wife and I (1871) that for the young man "who wants shelter and nourishment and shade for the development of his fine moral sensibilities . . . there is nothing better, as yet to be found, than a union with some of the many bodies . . . calling themselves Christian Churches" is qualified with the recognition that due allowance must be made for the ignorance, prejudice and even the willful hypocrisy which must always exist in such connections.[1] John Bamford seems to be the only novelist to have no reservations about the salutary influence of the church on men's character. In Elias Power of Ease-in-Zion (New York, 1886) he takes for granted that at least the Wesleyan Methodist Church (about which and for whose members he is writing) is a sacred organization, almost beyond censure.

But such reverence toward the church is rare indeed in the fiction of the last third of the nineteenth century. While American novelists of this period were sanguine about the perfectibility of man and the goodness of God, they were convinced that the church as an institution was not flawless. They were, indeed, much more willing to trust the individual's response to the voice of God speaking directly to the human heart than to accept the authority of any church. G. R. Alden in As in a Mirror (Boston, 1879), E. P. Roe in Opening a Chestnut Burr (New York, 1874) and Barriers Burned Away (New York, 1872), and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in Hedged In (Boston, 1870) all wrote novels, undeniably religious in nature, in which the church is rarely, and in some cases never, mentioned and in which it is assumed that the church is not necessary for the religious life. In their utopian novels Amos K. Fiske in Beyond the Bourn (New York, 1891, 133) and Edward Bellamy in Looking Backward (Boston, 1887) and its sequel Equality (New York, 1897) agree with the Reverend Mr. Barton in Equality, that while mankind will never outgrow the need for religion, the people in Utopia "have outgrown the ceremonial side of religion" (258) and "have little or no use for churches at all" (255).

The dissatisfaction of the American novelists with the American Protestant church was extensive and pervasive, but in this paper, I shall consider only two aspects of their censure of the church: (1) their critical descriptions of the church buildings and services and (2) their condemnation of the adverse effect of orthodox creeds on the character of the members of the church.

On the frontier economic considerations outweighed aesthetic requirements in building churches, and the only concern was to get the congregation under a roof and within walls which would keep out the weather. Thus Edward Eggleston in Roxy (New York, 1878) finds the churches in Ohio in the 1840's shabby and uninviting, bare of any adornments, provided with stiff, hard benches, a crude pulpit and heated by an old pot-bellied stove. More than one author -- Edward Eggleston, Charles Egbert Craddock, Minot Judson Savage -- echoes Hamlin Garland's unflattering description in Other Main-Travelled Roads (New York, 1892) of the congregation of women nursing querulous children -- men and women separated by an aisle -- of grim-looking men with grizzled faces hardened with toil and poverty. Nor does he forget the "reek of stable-stained coats and boots, the smell of strong tobacco, the effuvia of many breaths" (33), so overpowering in the small over-heated churches of the Middle Border.

Mark Twain took delight in showing his readers the essential inanity of the Protestant church service in the West. In a typical Twain portrayal there is usually a visiting dignitary -- Senator Dilworthy in the Gilded Age[2] and Judge Thatcher in Tom Sawyer (XII, 47-54) -- for whom the boys show off. There is the "tittering, whispering choir" (Ibid., 49) with the gay, young soprano in ribbons and curls and feathers; the quiet alto; the grim middle-aged bass; and the smirking, ineffable tenor, who is always conceited. The choir "hurls its soul into a 'Voluntary' -- one of those things where the melodeon pumps, and strains, and groans, and wails a bit, and then the soprano pipes a reedy solo, the alto drops in a little after, then the bass bursts in, then the pealing tenor -- then a wild chase, one trampling on the heels of the other -- then a grand discordant confusion that sets one's teeth on edge -- and finally a triumphant "Oh, praise the L-o-r-d! in a unison of unutterable anguish -- and the crime is consummated. It is Herod's slaughter of the babes set to music."[3]

A hymn follows; the choir, with the help of the congregation, "raves," "roars," "pulls," "hauls," "rends" and "flays" the song (Ibid., 11). After the minister reads the notices, he prays a long generous prayer from which nothing is excluded. Finally he drones out a monotonous sermon about "limitless fire and brimstone," which thins "the predestined elect down to a company so small as to be hardly worth the saving" (Writings, XII, 51). The beginning of the sermon is the signal for a boy to occupy himself catching flies, for the engaged couple to whisper and laugh behind the hymn book, for the boys in the gallery to move closer together with spit ball designs on

the bald-headed men dozing below, and for the three or four old, white-headed men and women to settle down to listen to the sermon.

Other novelists like Charles M. Sheldon (In His Steps [Chicago, 1897]), A. D. T. Whitney (Real Folks [Boston, 1871]), W. M. Baker (His Majesty Myself [Boston, 1879]) and Sarah B. Elliott (The Felmers [New York, 1879]), who were writing about the churches of the more established areas, found fault not with the primitive setting and unaesthetic service but with the conspicuous expenditure lavished on the sanctuaries of the wealthier churches and with church services which consisted of nothing more than dressing in expensive clothes, going to a handsomely respectable church, sitting in comfortable pews surrounded by accessories of song and stained glass windows, engaging in intermittent moods of emotional fervor embellished with occasional but undemanding charities and listening to a comfortable sermon by an oratorical rector reading the service as though he were conferring a favor on the Lord. The Rev. Mr. T. DeWitt Talmage, pastor of one of the wealthiest churches -- Brooklyn's Central Presbyterian church -- had aroused the ire of Mark Twain in 1870 when he said that the odor of workingmen among his congregation was offensive to more genteel nostrils.

But the American novelist writing between 1870 and 1900 reserved his most severe strictures for the deleterious and stultifying effects of a narrow creed on the churches as institutions and on the character of church members.

The novelists felt that an illiberal and rigid creed, because it allowed no provision for any new truth, made the church an outmoded and ossified institution. Celia Woolley in Love and Theology (Boston, 1887) felt that too few of the church members were in sympathy with the "idea of a progressive church, keeping pace with the advancing thought of the day, and making room within itself for every new discovery of truth" (349). Henry Wood in Edward Burton (Boston, 1890) repudiated the churches which leave no room "for independent thought, research or advance" (213). Minot Judson Savage in Bluffton (Boston, 1887) argues that the narrow creeds make it a crime for the preachers to learn anything new, and a virtue for them to refuse to speak any new word of the Lord that may come to them. And he concludes with an echo of Emerson's "Divinity School Address": "Do you think that God is dead, or that he has no way of getting access to human hearts today?" (182).

In addition to insulating the church against new truth, too rigid concern for orthodox doctrine made the church intolerant of anyone who disagreed with its view, whether he was a nonchurch member, a member of a splinter group within the sect or a member of another denomination. In Arthur Bonnicastle (New York, 1873) Josiah Holland regrets the decision of the Congregational Church not to admit Mr. Bradford, a man of impeccable character, into membership simply because he cannot accept its complicated creed. Mr. Bradford predicts that as long as the church requires adherence to the creed for membership, only the young who do not think, the

mature who will not try to think, and women will constitute the majority of the church members. "'In the meantime, the thinking men -- the strong, influential, practical men of society -- the men of culture, enterprise, and executive power -- will remain outside of the church -- shut out forever by a creed which their reason refuses to accept.'" (176).

Many novelists, moreover, deplore the sectarian strife engendered by the restrictive creeds. Edward Eggleston, concerned with the internal arguments which led to the proliferation of denominations, wrote humorously in Roxy of the struggle for the control of a meeting house built as a union church in which all sects were to worship by turns. The Methodists, who were to use the church on the second and fourth Sundays, had divided into two warring groups -- the Episcopal Methodists and the Methodist Protestants -- both of which felt that they were entitled to use the church on the Methodist Sundays. The regular Baptists, on the other hand, were hard pressed by the Hardshells or Anti-means Baptists, who felt that they ought to have services during the time regularly allotted to the Baptists. To complicate matters the Two-Seed Baptists, the Free-Wills, the New Lights, and the Disciples entered the fight. The result was that the benches had been carried off first by one party, then by another, and there had been locks and padlocks innumerable broken from the door (180).

Charles M. Sheldon and others felt that orthodoxy impeded the spirit of ecumenicity and tolerance which was developing in the late nineteenth century. In The Miracle at Markham (Chicago, 1899) Sheldon shows how the Reverend John Proctor managed to unite the twelve churches in his town by emphasizing their common interest in bettering the conditions of humanity and by ignoring their differences of doctrine, custom and creed.

Katherine Pearson Woods and Amelia E. Barr plead for tolerance between Protestant and Catholic and Protestant and Jew. In Woods' Metzerott, Shoemaker (New York, 1899), the Catholic priest in the novel thinks that maybe God doesn't "'see the difference between Catholic and Protestant that some of us do here below'" (167). In Barr's A Bow of Orange Ribbon (New York, 1886) Joris Van Heemskirk is not perturbed when his son Bram falls in love with Miriam Cohen, a beautiful young Jewess. "'I have known Jews,'" he tells his daughter, "'that were better Christians than some baptized in the name of Christ and John Calvin -- Jews who, like the great Jew, loved God and did their fellow-creatures as they wished to be done by'" (254).

Elizabeth Phipps Train in Doctor Lamar (New York, 1891) condemns the churches for their inability to see that Christianity is "'a broad and generous mantle to envelop all the members of Christ's body, not a short, narrow waistcoat for a single portion to hug itself in'" (181). The sectarianism of the churches was deplored, therefore, because the climate of opinion singled out love as the most important religious emotion and because it preferred an ethical to a creedal religion.

A second reason American novelists criticized the creeds of the American Protestant churches was that rigid orthodoxy had, so far as the

novelists could see, no perceptible effect on a man's character. Emphasizing the ethical element of religion, the novelists objected to a church with a creed which allowed a good man to be excommunicated while a bad man could be a member in good standing as long as he accepted the doctrines of the church. In James Lane Allen's The Reign of Law (New York, 1900) both David and his grandfather are expelled from the church, not for any flaw in their character, but for their heresies (29). But Mr. Smiley in Savage's Bluffton, though traditionally orthodox and always ready to detect unorthodoxy, especially in a preacher, is, nevertheless, a disreputable businessman. His malpractices in business, however, neither keep him from being a deacon, from being active in the Sunday School, nor from being the most loquacious speaker and pious suppliant at prayer meetings (70-71). Zury in Joseph Kirkland's novel,[4] though the meanest man in Spring County, could, nevertheless, still be active in and welcomed by the church, for he accepted its creed.

Helen Gardner in Is This Your Son My Lord? (Boston, 1892) is vitriolic in showing the hypocrisy of those who use their creed to give them an appearance of righteousness. Mr. Mansfield in the novel, fearing that his son is becoming involved in homosexual activities, seduces an innocent girl, Minnie Kent, in order to make her more readily available for his son's use. The little stratagem succeeds only too well, and the son becomes an even greater lecher than the father. Both the father and son continue to be members in good standing in the Episcopal Church. Mr. Mansfield is not concerned with Minnie's ruin, nor with the perfidy of his deed, for he knows that eternal life will be his because of his faith in a creed. He need not worry about Minnie either because she, too, can have eternal life "by a simple act of faith" (205). The plot is bizarre, but Mrs. Gardner's anger is clear.

Perhaps the most damning denunciation of the effects of a restrictive creed on men's character is in Harold Frederic's The Damnation of Theron Ware (New York, 1896). Frederic does not tell the reader, or even have his characters tell the reader, that too great a concern for a creed inhibits the essential humanity of men, but he shows the reader how the narrowness, the fanaticism, the emotionalism and the ignorance of the church blight the lives of its members. Theron Ware, the trustees and members of his church in Octavius, even Brother and Sister Soulsby, are case histories of the crippling effect of a stultifying orthodoxy on men's lives.

Other novelists censure the preaching of conventional doctrines because such preaching seems to have no perceptible effect on the ethics of a community. Kirkland cannot see that denunciation by a frontier preacher of the unnamed and almost unnamable miscreants and blasphemers who dare to question the existence of a triune God has done anything to make the frontier more civilized (279). Annie Slosson in The Heresy of Mehitable Clark (New York, 1892) has her narrator, though orthodox herself, admit that Elder Welcome did not improve the ethical standards of Sugar Hill much

with his two long discourses a week on the doctrines of "'Free will and fore-ordination and effectual callin', perseverance of the saints, the futur' state of unbaptized infants, and above all, the nature and duration of eternal punishment'" (15-16). And Huck Finn points out that though the preacher in the church attended by the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons preaches sound doctrines of faith, good works, free grace, and "'preforeordestination'" and though the Grangerfords' doctrine is orthodox, they still come to church with their guns handy in case the Shepherdsons, whose doctrine presumably is also sound, might prove recalcitrant to the preacher's appeal for brotherly love (Twain, Writings, XIII, 151).

Sound doctrine, these authors felt, did not guarantee that a man's character would be sound. Indeed, it seemed more likely that heretical views would result in Christian character. Thus Matthew Braile in Howells' The Leatherwood God (New York, 1916) is more Christian in his actions, though he is skeptical in his beliefs, than the Christians in the novel who are concerned with the traditional creed. In A Modern Instance (Boston, 1882) Squire Gaylord, who clung to his deistical opinions, maintained his integrity to a greater extent than Ben Halleck, who returned to a church "as to a city of refuge" and who "rested in his inherited belief" (510). In Annie Kilburn (New York, 1899), Julius Peck, though he is accused of heresy by the self-made businessman and leader of the church, Mr. Gerrish, is almost a Christlike figure. Edgar Watson Howe's Lytle Biggs in The Story of a Country Town (Boston, 1883) is a man of more rectitude than the orthodox Reverend John Westlock. Jonas Harrison in Edward Eggleston's The End of the World (New York, 1872), though a New Light Methodist and therefore somewhat dubious in his theology in the eyes of the regular Methodists, is absolutely trustworthy morally. Jonas has no use for those who believe in a religion "that thinks a good deal more of its being sound in doctrine than of the danger of being rotten in life" (230). Dr. Richards, in Katherine Pearson Woods' Metzerott, Shoemaker, is an infidel, but more important is the fact that "'he acts like a mighty good Christian'" (115).

The pervasiveness of the criticisms against a narrow creed and of the concern for tolerance is obvious when one considers the religious bias of the novelists. One would expect writers like Gardener, Howe, Twain and Frederic, who were critical of all organized religion, to show the deleterious influence of restrictive creeds. Nor is one surprised to discover Howells and Kirkland, who wrote from no particular sectarian point of view, objecting to the stultifying effects of a narrow creed. It is not even surprising to discover the Unitarians (Woolley, Wood, Hepworth and Savage) concerned for a less creedal religion. But even those novelists belonging to churches more concerned with a confessional religion -- Woods (Episcopalian), Roe and Teal (Presbyterian), Phelps, Barr, Holland and Sheldon (Congregational), and Eggleston (Methodist) -- are outspoken in condemning the

nefarious effects of orthodox creeds on the church and its members, indeed, on the very foundation of religion itself.

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Footnotes:

[1] Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe (Boston, 1900), Vol. XII, My Wife and I, 134.

[2] The Writings of Mark Twain (New York, 1901), X, 231 -- hereafter cited as Writings.

[3] Quoted in Clara Clemens, My Father, Mark Twain (New York, 1931), 10.

[4] The Meanest Man in Spring County (Urbana, 1956). First published in 1887.