Trollope, Liberalism and Scripture

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Résumé

Si au début de sa carrière littéraire Trollope était un partisan de la théologie anglo-catholique et antilibérale des Tractariens, il devint au fil des années sensible aux arguments des théologiens libéraux de la Broad Church. En effet, tous ses prêtres modèles après 1867 appartiennent à cette « Église large » (par opposition aux héros tractariens de ses premiers romans) et il écrivit au cours des années 1865-1866 une série d’articles pour des revues libérales (PMG, Fornightly Review) dans lesquelles il devait notamment soutenir l’évêque Colenso et son interprétation critique du Pentateuque. Trollope dénonce à présent le littéralisme biblique et soutient par ailleurs que le doute, aussi douloureux soit-il, est salutaire. Comment expliquer un tel revirement ? (Newman et les libéraux étaient après tout les pires ennemis). Les facteurs explicatifs sont nombreux et relèvent tant de la biographie que de l’évolution générale du climat intellectuel, avec en particulier la publication de The Origin of Species en 1859 et des Essays and Reviews en 1860. Anglican convaincu, Trollope ne devait toutefois jamais perdre la foi, contrairement à certains de ses amis libres penseurs tels que George Eliot ou G. H. Lewes.

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Like many of his contemporaries, Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) had an extensive knowledge of Scripture and, although no theologian, was more conversant with divinity than has sometimes been assumed. If most of his “ecclesiastical” works are primarily concerned with clerical life and partisan battles, what he wrote on some controversial issues in the field of theology distinctly echoed the views and preoccupations of an increasing number of educated laymen: a brilliant chronicler, he had indeed the gift of capturing the life of his contemporaries, but his fiction also reveals a sharp awareness of emerging trends, especially in the realm of religious thought. He was also (which is less known) a talented essayist who wrote with conviction on a wide range of topics, including religion. Clergymen and Church issues being prominent in many of his writings—The Chronicles of Barsetshire (1855-1867) deal mostly with clerical feuds—, much has indeed been written on his religious sympathies. If all critics agree on his well-known dislike of the Evangelicals, a party which, for both familial and sociological reasons, he satirised mercilessly, they are at variance when assessing his affinities. Richard Mullen and Ruth apRoberts have for instance portrayed him as a moderate High Churchman, while others, like N. John Hall and David J. Kenney, clearly view him as a supporter of the Broad Church1. Trollope’s admiration for

the Tractarians—which, admittedly, is far from consistent with his other sympathies mentioned above—has also been noted. One can indeed be baffled by such critical cacophony. John Sutherland aptly summarizes the perplexity of most critics: “In Church affairs [Trollope] could be described as a radical, but still a traditional reformist—very hard to pin down, in other words.” The purpose of this article is therefore to resolve some apparent contradictions in Trollope’s religious outlook and to retrace the path that led him from Tractarianism to an open endorsement of the Broad Church’s endeavours to reassess Scripture and adapt faith to the modern world.

Trollope’s affinities

Those critics who view Trollope as a High Churchman usually substantiate their claim with elements of his biography and a study of his characters. Trollope, they rightly argue, had genteel origins, came from a religiously conservative background and his parents’ connections were mostly High Church. It is also true that Trollope’s High Church ministers are more often than not enticing characters (Dr Grantly in Barchester Towers being a case in point) and that his narrative voice is laden with nostalgia when conjuring up the Church’s ancient traditions. But does that make Trollope a traditional High Churchman? Not necessarily. The first thing to consider is that Trollope’s nostalgia is systematically tinged with irony as the following passage from Framley Parsonage, devoted to clerical incomes, exemplifies:

Our present arrangement of parochial incomes is beloved as being time-honoured, gentlemanlike, English and picturesque. We would fain adhere to it closely as long as we can, but we know that we do so by the force of our prejudices, and not by that of our judgment. A time-honoured, gentlemanlike, English, picturesque arrangement is so far very delightful. But are there not other attributes very desirable—nay, absolutely necessary—in respect to which this time-honoured, picturesque arrangement is so far very deficient?


4 On Trollope’s alleged High Church sympathies, also see Jill Durey’s recent Trollope and the Church of England, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, 136.

5 Both Trollope’s grandfathers were clergymen of the old school and Fanny Trollope’s aversion to the Evangelicals is well known. Among the Trollopes’ High Church acquaintances in Harrow were the Drurys.

Construing such lines as coming from a defender of tradition would amount to grossly misreading a text which, on the contrary, reveals an author sharply aware of (and amused by) his own prejudices who in fact supported Church reform. As for Trollope’s so-called ambivalence between nostalgia and faith in progress, one could argue that it is simply—and characteristically—Victorian. Furthermore, Trollope’s scathing indictment (in both his novels and his essays) of such clerical abuses as corruption, absenteeism, idleness or nepotism clearly invalidates the claim that he had High Church sympathies. Indeed, the perpetrators of abuses in his fiction are precisely and without exception High Church clergymen, his denunciation of those scandals being an indirect—but unambiguous—condemnation of that party.7

By contrast, Trollope’s sympathy for the Tractarians is beyond doubt. As a young man, he had met Newman in Oxford and had been deeply impressed by him. The author’s correspondence also reveals a number of prominent Tractarians among his friends or acquaintances such as Henry Manning, John Mason Neale, James Edward Sewell and, of course, Newman himself, to name only a few. Indeed, on several occasions, Trollope praised the Tractarians’ efforts to regenerate the Church:

Dr. Newman has gone to Rome, and Dr. Pusey has perhaps helped to send many thither; but these men, and their brethren of the Tracts, stirred up throughout the country so strong a feeling of religion, gave rise by their works to so much thought on a matter which had been allowed for years to go on almost without any thought, that it may be said of them that they made episcopal idleness impossible, and clerical idleness rare.8

Model clergymen are rare in Trollope: among his ninety-seven clerical characters only six can be considered as thoroughly good priests, three of them being, if not Tractarians, at least sympathisers with the Oxford Movement (they appear mostly in The Chronicles of Barsetshire). Francis Arabin, the well-known protagonist of Barchester Towers, was in all likelihood modelled on Newman himself. Septimus Harding, the meek, humble and saintly hero of The Warden, has much in common with another Tractarian leader, John Keble, whose humility, kindness and piety were legendary. Although sometimes mistakenly construed as an Evangelical, Josiah Crawley, the zealous, hard-working curate of Hoggstock in The Last Chronicle of Barset, is a Tractarian slum priest who, like his friend Arabin, was educated at Lazarus College, the fictional equivalent of Oriel, the cradle of the Oxford Movement. Most of

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7 The best-known example is of course Dr Stanhope in Barchester Towers, but Henry Clavering in The Claverings and Mark Robarts in Framley Parsonage are not exactly models of clerical virtue.

Trollope’s favourite clergymen, therefore, are one way or another connected to Tractarianism\(^9\). This provides a significant clue as to where his sympathies lay, especially as explicit references to the Oxford Movement in *The Chronicles of Barsetshire*, although rather rare, are always full of praise:

> We are much too apt to look at schism in our church as an unmitigated evil. Moderate schism, if there may be such a thing, at any rate calls attention to the subject, draws in supporters who would otherwise have been inattentive to the matter, and teaches men to think upon religion. How great an amount of good of this description has followed that movement in the Church of England which commenced with the publication of Froude’s *Remains*\(^{10}\)

One cannot help thinking when reading such lines that, had he been able to study at Oxford in his youth, Trollope would probably have become a “Puseyite.”

**In support of Colenso**

If Trollope’s admiration for the leaders of the Oxford Movement is unquestionable, his sympathy for the Broad Church was just as real and, arguably, difficult to reconcile with his Tractarian leanings. Indeed, Newman and his followers despised liberalism and if the Oxford Movement can in some respects be viewed as revolutionary, it was also reactionary in its heavy, almost obsessive emphasis on authority and tradition. Subjecting Scripture to reason, as the Latitudinarians, and in their wake the liberals, had always done, was anathema to Newman who systematically exposed the errors of liberalism in his best-known work and literary masterpiece, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*:

> Liberalism then is the mistake of subjecting to human judgment those revealed doctrines which are in their nature beyond and independent of it, and of claiming to determine on intrinsic grounds the truth and value of propositions which rest for their reception simply on the external authority of the Divine Word\(^{11}\).

This repugnance for liberalism (there were indeed several clashes between Tractarians and liberals at Oxford in the 1830s) was also shared by the Evangelicals who were equally strict in matters of dogma and had in fact influenced some major figures of the Oxford Movement, including

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\(^9\) For a detailed study of Trollope’s Tractarian heroes, see Hervé Picton, “Trollope and Tractarianism,” *op. cit.*, 94-101.

\(^{10}\) Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers, op. cit.*, 169.

Newman himself. In a letter addressed to her son Robert Isaac, who was a student at Oxford in the 1820s and later became a Tractarian, the Evangelical Barbara Wilberforce once wrote: “I fear lest the spiritual, the evangelical, the biblical growth of your mind should be hurt [. . .] from too much attention being drawn to learning and not time enough taken daily for God and religion”12. The Tractarians’ deep-seated suspicion of reason, therefore, clearly echoed Shaftesbury’s famous motto: “Satan reigns in the intellect; God in the heart of man,” as it turns out, it owed just as much, if not more, to the Evangelical tradition as to High Church conservatism.

If the contradiction between Trollope’s Tractarian sympathies and his support for theological liberalism is—to say the least—perplexing, it can nevertheless be solved provided one examines his works from a chronological (or, more fittingly, “evolutionary”) perspective, as opposed to the thematic approach adopted by most critics so far. His early novels reveal that, although curious and well-informed about the issues raised by biblical criticism, he remained deeply sceptical about liberal theology and its attempts to reinterpret Scripture. His scathing satire of the Low-Church13 bishop Dr Proudie in *Barchester Towers* (1857) is in this respect significant:

Dr Proudie was one among those who early in life adapted himself to the views held by the Whigs on most theological and religious subjects. He bore with the idolatry of Rome, tolerated even the infidelity of Socinianism, and was hand in glove with the Presbyterian Synods of Scotland and Ulster14.

At this point, Trollope clearly felt nothing but contempt for liberalism which he equated with both political opportunism and infidelity, his passing mention of Socinianism being a discreet—but unmistakable—skit on F. D. Maurice whose Unitarianism and unorthodox views on eternal punishment had cost him his Chair of Divinity at King’s College (Cambridge) in 1853.

The next crucial step in the development of Trollope’s views on liberal divinity was the publication of *The Bertrams* in 1859. The novel’s eponymous hero, George Bertram, is forced to resign his Oxford fellowship following the publication of two iconoclastic works in which the young and talented author presents Old Testament texts as myth. Trollope had in all likelihood been inspired by Francis Newman and James Anthony Froude who had both recently experienced similar

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13 In the 18th-century sense of the word, *i.e.* latitudinarian.

predicaments\footnote{James Anthony Froude, Hurrell Froude’s younger brother, had been forced to resign his fellowship at Exeter College after the publication of The Nemesis of Faith in 1848. As for John Henry Newman’s brother, Francis, it was the publication of A History of the Hebrew Monarchy (1847) and Phases of Faith (1850) that cost him his fellowship at Balliol.}. In his preface to The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined, the liberal Bishop J. W. Colenso aptly summarized the qualms of such young clergymen in honest search of the truth and torn between the requirements of their faith and those of reason:

The very condition of a young man’s entering the Ministry of the Church of England is, that he surrender henceforth all freedom of thought, or, at least, of utterance, upon the great questions which the age is rife in, and solemnly bind himself for life to “believe unfeignedly all the Canonical Scriptures;” while he probably knows enough already of geology, at all events, if not of the results of critical enquiry, to feel that he cannot honestly profess to believe in them implicitly\footnote{Anthony Cockshut (ed.), Religious Controversies of the Nineteenth Century, London: Methuen, 1966, 231-232.}.

The views of Trollope’s young protagonist on the biblical account of Creation are thus summarized:

The early history of which he spoke was altogether Bible history, and the fallacies to which he alluded were the plainest statements of the book of Genesis. Nay, he had called the whole story of creation a myth; the whole story as there given: so at least said the rabbis of Oxford, and among them outspoke more loudly than any others the outraged and very learned rabbis of Oriel\footnote{Anthony Trollope, The Bertrams, Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1986, 234. Interestingly, the deep antagonism between Pusey’s party and the liberals is confirmed and Trollope even has a dig at the former (“the rabbis of Oriel”) whose doctrinal intransigence he deplored.}.

Some critics, who look upon George Bertram as the author’s mouthpiece, have somewhat rashly construed The Bertrams as Trollope’s definitive and unambiguous endorsement of religious liberalism. Such is for example the case of David J. Kenney who argues that when he was living in Ireland, Trollope might have been influenced by the liberal Archbishop of Dublin Richard Whately:

I believe that Whately’s views are Trollope’s as well as Bertram’s. Without writing polemics, the novelist manages to show that George’s views have much to offer. He avoids possible censure by using humor [. . . ] and by putting his “Higher Criticism” in the mouth of a young, and therefore in the eyes of the average reader a naïve character\footnote{David J. Kenney, “Anthony Trollope’s Theology,” American Notes & Queries, 9, 1970, 53.}. 
However, there is, to start with, no evidence that Trollope ever met Whately, or even heard any of his sermons as Kenney suggests\textsuperscript{19}. Moreover, concerning George Bertram, things are not quite so simple: if this admittedly congenial protagonist is indeed portrayed as a brilliant academic, he also turns out to be an impulsive and whimsical young man who, we are told at the end of the novel, has now disowned his writings:

He had already written and was known as a writer; but he had written under impulse, carelessly, without due regard to his words or due thought as to his conclusions. He had written things of which he was already ashamed, and had put forth with the \textit{ex cathedra} air of an established master ideas which had already ceased to be his own\textsuperscript{20}.

Considering Bertram as Trollope’s spokesman, therefore, seems a little far-fetched, the only certainty in this matter being that the author was still suspicious of biblical criticism when he wrote \textit{The Bertrams}. The novel, which was published shortly before \textit{Essays and Reviews}, reveals at most that Trollope was perfectly aware of—and curious about—the formidable challenges posed to religion by the latest findings of science and history.

From the mid-1860s onwards, as he grew more sensitive to religious liberalism, Trollope started to openly support the Broad Church and its exponents who had to cope with the hostility of both public opinion and Church authorities. Two articles published in \textit{The Pall Mall Gazette (PMG)} in 1865-66 clearly reveal a shift in the author’s views. “The Zulu in London,” published in May 1865, is a plea in favour of religious tolerance in which the controversial author of \textit{The Pentateuch}, Bishop Colenso of Natal, is described as “an excellent pastor” and “an ardent missionary in the cause of Christianity”\textsuperscript{21}. Logically, Trollope inveighs against biblical literalism and directly challenges the authority of Scripture when referring for instance to “the physical impossibility of certain occurrences related in the Old Testament.” The doctrinal narrow-mindedness of the Evangelicals, who satisfy their doubts by blindly adhering to the letter of the Old Testament, is equally criticized. Their obscurantist teaching is thus parodied:

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 52-53.

\textsuperscript{20} Anthony Trollope, \textit{The Bertrams, op. cit.}, 416.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Pall Mall Gazette, 10 May 1865}. Colenso’s polemic book, \textit{The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined}, was published in 1862. It was for the most part a rather heavy-handed attempt to demonstrate mathematically that the Old Testament had no historical basis. A scandal soon erupted and the bishop was dismissed by the South African Synod. Trollope subscribed to a fund that helped the unfortunate prelate to appeal against the decision of his peers which was eventually overturned by the Privy Council in 1864 (Darwin and Lyell were among the numerous donators). Trollope only met Colenso in 1877 when he was invited to stay at the Bishop’s home while touring South Africa.
And what was [this] teaching? It can be told in a word. OUR SAVIOUR had said that the Scriptures cannot be broken, and therefore [...] every word in the Old Testament, as translated into English, must be true. The moon did stand still, and by inference the sun did ordinarily, in the days of Joshua, move round the earth, seeing that it is declared to have stood still miraculously upon one occasion only22.

In “The clergyman who subscribes for Colenso,” an article published in the Pall Mall Gazette a few months later, Trollope’s liberalism becomes even more specific:

We know that there are some things which we do not like in the teaching to which we have been hitherto subjected;—that fulminating clause, for instance, which tells us that nobody can be saved unless he believes a great deal which we find it impossible to understand; the ceremonial Sabbath which we know that we do not observe, though we go on professing that its observance is a thing necessary for us;—the incompatibility of the teaching of the Old Testament records with the new teachings of the rocks and stones23.

The damnatory clauses of the Athanasian Creed (“that fulminating clause”) had for some time been the subject of a controversy initiated in part by F. D. Maurice’s somewhat specious attempt to interpret the doctrine of eternal punishment in a liberal way24. Like Arthur Stanley, the liberal Dean of Westminster, many Broad Churchmen even thought that the Athanasian Creed, which strongly emphasized everlasting punishment for those who had done evil or did not adhere to such core doctrines as the Trinity and the Incarnation, should be omitted from the Prayer Book. At the very least, they argued, the damnatory clauses should be disused25. It was not until the 1880s, however, that the doctrine of eternal punishment was massively rejected by public opinion, so that Trollope—along with a few others—was spearheading the attack on that admittedly grim doctrine. Interestingly, it was on purely moral grounds—quite independent of science—that the public began to challenge that New Testament dogma26: indeed, the paradox of an infinitely kind and loving God willing to condemn all sorts of unbelievers

22 PMG, 10 May 1865. Trollope clearly alludes to Colenso’s endeavours to demonstrate the physical impossibility of the Old Testament episode recounted in Joshua 10. 13 (see Anthony Cockshut, op. cit., 222).


24 He had actually played on words, arguing that New Testament occurrences of the word “eternal” referred not to endless punishment, but to punishment in eternity.

25 In 1862, the liberal clergyman H. B. Wilson was suspended from his benefice by an ecclesiastical court for having denied eternal punishment in his contribution to Essays and Reviews (1860).

26 References to “everlasting punishment” and “everlasting fire” are numerous in the New Testament. See in particular Matt. 5.22, 25.41 and 25.46, 2 Thess. 1.9, or Rev. 14. 10-11.
to hellfire was increasingly difficult to digest. As Herbert Spencer aptly put it in his autobiography: “Nor had I in those days [around 1840] perceived the astounding nature of the creed which offers for profoundest worship, a being who calmly looks on while myriads of his creatures are suffering eternal torments.” Not surprisingly, Trollope’s essays and his fiction are remarkably consistent. In “The Spotted Dog,” a short story published in Saint Paul’s Magazine in 1870, his narrator expresses liberal views on suicide, refusing to believe that everlasting punishment is the price to pay for taking one’s life. When the unhappy hero—a failed writer and an alcoholic—commits suicide, a well-intentioned priest remarks that “the mercy of God is infinite,” to which the narrator quickly adds: “to threaten while the life is in the man is human. To believe in the execution of those threats when the life has passed away is almost beyond the power of humanity.” The two other points mentioned in the PMG article, Sabbath observance and the incompatibility of Scripture with modern geology were equally “burning” issues and are especially relevant here. In the same text, Trollope brilliantly summarizes the qualms of many of his contemporaries torn between the comfort of old beliefs and the anxiety of doubt:

If one could stay, if one could only have a choice in the matter, if one could only really believe that the old shore is best, who would leave it? Who would not wish to be secure if he knew where security lay? But this new teacher, who has come among us […] has made it impossible for us to stay. With hands outstretched towards the old places, with sorrowing hearts, —with hearts which still love the old teachings which the mind will no longer accept,—we, too, cut our ropes, and go out in our little boats, and search for a land that will be new to us, though how far new,—new in how many things we do not know. Who would not stay behind if it were possible to him?

Trollope’s “new teacher” is of course a Broad Church clergyman who, with his numerous misgivings and “ill-defined doctrines,” has sown the seeds of doubt in the minds of his parishioners. He has “long since given up Bible chronology, has given up many of the miracles” and is naturally despised by those conservative clergymen Trollope most fittingly—and repeatedly—refers to as “antediluvian rectors.” The author’s liberal convictions at this point are not in doubt: biblical

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28 Quoted in Gerald Parsons, op. cit., 168.
31 Ibid., 120.
32 Ibid., 122.
literalism was now untenable, Scripture had to be reinterpreted in the light of modern science, and Christian faith—however painful the process—adapted to the modern world.

“The Fourth Commandment,” published in the Fortnightly Review on January 15, 1866, is an interesting case in point. The article was Trollope’s contribution to a theological controversy triggered off by Norman Macleod’s plea for some relaxation of Sabbath rules and a more liberal interpretation of the Fourth Commandment. For staunch Evangelicals adhering blindly to biblical prescriptions, not only work but recreational activities and travelling should be banned on Sunday which was to be devoted to prayer and “serious” reading exclusively. A friend of Macleod’s and a strong advocate of tolerance, Trollope entered the fray and produced his own careful, detailed and well-informed interpretation of the biblical text which, as one will remember, reads as follows:

But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, not thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Trollope’s first argument to counter MacLeod’s Evangelical critics was that the Protestant interpretation of the Fourth Commandment was far too restrictive insofar as Scripture in no way prohibits leisure activities on the Lord’s Day: “there is no word in it forbidding amusement.” On the contrary, the Law strongly prescribes rest which, according to Trollope, does not at all preclude amusement: “the old law insists upon rest, and insists upon nothing else.” Strict Sabbath observance, as advocated by Evangelicals, becomes in fact a chore. Indeed, the long prayers and tedious sermons, as well as the reading of pious writings are “a burden of work” actually worse than work itself: “the Sunday prescribed to us has, in fact, been a day of work so hard as to make it a day of torment.”

33 A Presbyterian minister with moderate evangelical views, Macleod was the editor of Good Words. Strict Sabbath observance, advocated by most Evangelicals, was then a recurrent issue. In June 1855, 150,000 people had demonstrated in London to protest against a Bill aimed at limiting Sunday activities. The Bill was eventually dropped.

34 Exod. 20. 10-11.


36 Ibid., 532. Interestingly, many Victorians who had received a strict evangelical upbringing turned to atheism (sometimes also to Catholicism) in their adult age, George Eliot and Samuel Butler being the most famous examples. The tedious “Evangelical Sunday” encapsulated all the unpleasant aspects of Evangelicalism and was particularly hard on children. Trollope believed that excessive rigour in religion might be counterproductive and, on several
Trollope also raises an interesting objection in the form of a paradox: what is so rigidly and blindly advocated by the Protestants is not even contained in the Law, whereas the letter of the Law itself—a complete cessation of all forms of labour—is impossible to enforce, especially in modern society: “What most rigid Sabbatarian in Scotland or elsewhere has ever even attempted to carry out the law”37. The charge of hypocrisy (or, more to the point, pharisaism), an accusation frequently levelled at the Evangelicals, is all but explicit. With his second argument, Trollope adopts a historical approach based on a consideration of the context in which the Fourth Commandment was written: wasn’t the Decalogue meant after all exclusively for the people of Israel? What strongly suggests this, Trollope argues, is the references to Egypt and bondage contained in the second verse. The Commandments should therefore be interpreted as “an historical record of what the Jews were required to do”, which does not apply to Christians. He also insists that the Decalogue is anyway much too restrictive as it does not teach genuine Christian duties such as charity, love and forgiveness. Moreover, the Fourth Commandment is not even confirmed by the New Testament and Trollope points out that according to Macleod, one cannot “discover one syllable in all the epistles and all the pastorals of the apostles, against the sin of Sabbath-breaking, or about the special duties to be performed on the Sabbath”38. No need to add that according to the Gospels, it is indeed Christ himself who is repeatedly accused by the Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath… Trollope’s conception of history is, quite characteristically, evolutionary, the Jews of the Old Testament being repeatedly compared to “children” whose blind obedience was demanded, as opposed to the superior state of “manhood” reached by the Christians39. If this clearly echoes the teachings of Paul40, it is also, and by implication, an evolutionary conception of Revelation which is defended by the author: as men and society “grow,” Scripture has to be constantly reinterpreted in the light of new knowledge. By the 1860s, that idea of a “progressive appropriation of revelation by the people of God”41 was upheld by most

occasions, blamed Evangelical narrow-mindedness for his contemporaries’ increasing disaffection towards Christianity.

37 Ibid., 531.
38 Ibid., 536
39 Ibid., 531, 535.
40 Gal. 3. 23-25.
41 Horton Davies, Worship and Theology in England, vol. IV, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996, 182. A. P. Stanley, for instance, strongly emphasized “the slow ‘increasing purpose’ of Revelation, through ‘sundry times and divers manners’,” considering that “each succeeding age [should] have the eyes and ears of its mind open to the reception of Light and Truth” (Anthony Cockshut, op. cit., 249).
liberal theologians and was gaining credence among educated laymen. Logically, Trollope also challenges verbal inspiration—a central Evangelical doctrine—when he ventures to remark that he and his contemporaries have never really dared to ask themselves “whether such instructions have really come to us from God”\(^\text{42}\). The implication is clear: the Old Testament and its teachings should no longer be taken at their face value and should be reassessed bearing in mind the social and historical context in which they were written; it was a belief increasingly shared by Trollope’s most enlightened contemporaries.

One last thing deserves mention: if Trollope’s concern when he wrote “The Fourth Commandment” was primarily to support his friend MacLeod’s liberal interpretation of Scripture, it was also to write in defence of the Church of England whose membership, as the 1851 census had revealed, showed alarming signs of decline:

But they among us [...] whose feelings of reverence are averse to any change in things that have been revered,—will gradually learn to perceive that the removal of burdens which are unendurable will make the religion which they love possible to many who now find it to be for them a thing impossible\(^\text{43}\).

Trollope, therefore, shared the apologetic concerns of the liberal theologians: adapting faith to the modern world and, along the way, making it more palatable to the people, was the most effective way to stop the slow but inexorable decline of Christianity. This, incidentally, was precisely Colenso’s view: “The Church of England must fall to the ground by its own internal weakness,—by losing its hold upon the growing intelligence of all classes,—unless some remedy be very soon applied to this state of things”\(^\text{44}\). The present situation, he went on, was “unworthy of the Truth itself”\(^\text{45}\) and things could no longer be kept quiet.

It should at this point be clear that by 1866, Trollope’s liberal views were firm and devoid of any ambiguity. It seems difficult, therefore, to share Jill Durey’s unsubstantiated contention that “[the Broad Church’s] extreme breadth of tolerance attracted Trollope’s contempt,”\(^\text{46}\) especially as his model clergymen after 1867 are all characterized by tolerance in matters of dogma and a practical conception of Christianity, the very hallmarks of the Broad Church. A case in point is the courageous and charitable hero of *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870), Frank Fenwick, who “talked more of life with its sorrows, and vices, and chances of happiness,

\(^{42}\) Anthony Trollope, “The Fourth Commandment”, *op. cit.*, 536.


\(^{44}\) Anthony Cockshut, *op. cit.*, 232.

\(^{45}\) *Ibidem*.

and possibilities of goodness, than he did of the requirements of his religion”\textsuperscript{47}. In the same way, the good, kindly Bishop Yeld in The Way We Live Now (1875) is regarded as a model bishop “by such clergy of his diocese as were not enthusiastic in their theology either on the one side or on the other” and “was never known to declare to man or woman that the human soul must live or die for ever according to his faith”\textsuperscript{48}. Such doctrinal latitude obviously reflects Trollope’s own views on eternal punishment, and the narrator’s praise of the Broad Church bishop leaves no doubt as to Trollope’s brand of churchmanship at the end of his life:

He was diligent in his preaching – moral sermons that were short, pithy and useful. He was never weary in furthering the welfare of clergymen. His house was open to them and to their wives. The edifice of every church in his diocese was a care to him. He laboured at schools, and was zealous in improving the social comforts of the poor […]. Perhaps there was no bishop in England more loved or more useful in his diocese than the Bishop of Elmham\textsuperscript{49}.

The sharp contrast between this panegyric and the satirical portrait of Bishop Proudie, written twenty years earlier in Barchester Towers, is a telling illustration of Trollope’s progression from an overtly anti-liberal stance in the 1850s to his unambiguous endorsement of Broad Church theology from the mid-60s onward.

Trollope was to give his unwavering support to theological liberalism until the end of his life. In 1879, the now ageing author refused to collaborate with the SPCK, a High Church organization much too conservative to his liking. The letter he wrote on that occasion is worth quoting:

Creeping doubts have become common among members of the Church of England, clergy as well as laity, which, 30 or 40 years since, would, if declared, have been received by churchmen with scorn. I am inclined to welcome such doubts rather than to repudiate them, (not being a clergyman) and to think, whether I share them or not, that they are doing good\textsuperscript{50}.

Although uncomfortable, doubt was indeed salutary and preferable to the dogmatism—sometimes verging on obscurantism—of Evangelicals and High Churchmen alike\textsuperscript{51}. Not surprisingly, two of Trollope’s


\textsuperscript{48} Anthony Trollope, The Way we Live Now, Ware: Wordsworth, 2001, 122.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibidem.


\textsuperscript{51} Obscurantism was not the preserve of Evangelicalism. The heated controversy over Darwin’s theory of evolution that opposed the Bishop of Oxford Samuel Wilberforce to Thomas Huxley in 1860 shows that High Churchmen could be just as opinionated and dogmatic as their Low-Church brethren.
recurrent topics in his fiction are moral courage and honesty. One of his later characters, the eponymous hero of *Dr Wortle’s School* (1881), is a Broad Church clergyman whose main virtues are precisely courage and sincerity, the very qualities evinced by liberal Churchmen in an age of doubt, anxiety and fierce doctrinal battles.

**A “logical” progression**

What could explain Trollope’s apparently radical change in outlook? What, in other words, caused him to gradually shift his allegiance from Newman to Colenso? There is first of all the fact that by the 1850s, the Tractarian movement had turned ritualistic and, as such, become unpalatable to Trollope who hated all kinds of excesses\(^{52}\). His mild but unmistakable satire of ritualistic practices in *The New Zealander*, a collection of essays written in 1855-56, or his ironic treatment of the young priest Caleb Oriel in *Doctor Thorne* (1858), amply demonstrate that Trollope had little sympathy with Tractarian excesses. The author of *Barchester Towers* in fact admired the *early* Tractarians whose preoccupations were above all doctrinal and spiritual and whom—it should be noted—he always praised in the past tense. Secondly, he could not abide the increasing narrow-mindedness and literalism of the Evangelicals, a Church party he thoroughly despised. What had caused the Evangelicals to gradually sink into doctrinal intolerance was, on the one hand, the Tractarians’ romanizing drift (compound by the “papal aggression” of 1850\(^{53}\)) and, on the other hand, the mounting assaults of liberal divinity against dogma, in a climate of scandals and doctrinal infighting. More importantly, by the 1860s, no sincere intellectual (especially if a political Liberal) could ignore the groundbreaking findings of natural science and the painful readjustments urged by history and biblical criticism. A certain number of works published shortly after *The Bertrams* (at a time when, as we have seen, Trollope still had misgivings about biblical criticism) directly challenged the authority of the Bible. Like most educated laymen, Trollope was familiar with the content of *The Origin of Species* published in 1859, and there is strong evidence that he had read *Essays and Reviews*, the “liberal bible” published the following year. He also possessed a copy of John Seeley’s *Ecce Homo* (published anonymously in 1865) but, although convinced the Old Testament had to be reinterpreted, strongly disapproved of all attempts to minimize the

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\(^{53}\) The reintroduction of a Roman Catholic hierarchy in England in that year caused a wave of anti-Catholic hysteria.
divinity of Christ\textsuperscript{54}. He was in fact adamant on this point and remained a staunch Anglican until the end of his life, his liberalism being all in all of a moderate kind. Equally crucial is the fact that in 1859 Trollope moved from Ireland (where he worked for the Post Office) to London where he started to write for liberal reviews (\textit{PMG}, \textit{Saint Paul's Magazine} and \textit{Forthnightly Review}) in a climate arguably more open to religious tolerance. As a matter of fact, he soon became a member of the \textit{Athenaeum}, a club known for its liberal atmosphere which boasted such prominent members as Darwin, Huxley and Dickens. In London, Trollope also made friends with a number of free-thinkers—George Eliot and G. H. Lewes in particular—who may have influenced him. What is certain at any rate is that his new religious outlook was more in tune with his well-known and long-standing political convictions as a Liberal.

\textbf{Conclusion}

What needs to be pointed out in conclusion is that although Trollope clearly espoused the Broad Church's cause in the second half of his literary career, he never actually renounced his early Tractarian sympathies and always remained faithful to a "high" conception of the Church's role in society; he could as a result be regarded as an intuitive forerunner of Charles Gore's liberal Anglo-Catholicism as expressed in \textit{Lux Mundi}, a collection of essays published in 1889, at a time when the Church had finally begun to absorb the teachings of Lyell and Darwin\textsuperscript{55}. There is in any case a lot more subtlety and complexity in Trollope than has sometimes been written, his progression from a rather traditional view of religion and Scripture to an openly liberal outlook in these matters being in a sense representative of contemporary trends. More than ever, therefore, and independently of his often underrated literary merits, Trollope can be seen as a unique and invaluable witness to his times.

\textbf{Bibliography:}


\textsuperscript{54} When the \textit{Forthnightly Review} was launched in 1865, Trollope unsuccessfully tried to convince his partners that no contribution denying or even questioning the divinity of Christ should be published in the review (\textit{An Autobiography}, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980, 189-190).

\textsuperscript{55} Trollope died in December 1882.


---, “The Zulu in London,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 May 1865.


