

The Limits of Orthodoxy in a Secular Age: The Strange Case of Marie Corelli

“I have been brought into contact with many peculiar phases of thought and feeling relating to occultism and clairvoyance ... and people ... seek my acquaintance in the expectation of being initiated into something very strange and mysterious ... Their disappointment is always extreme when they learn that my creed has its foundation in Christ alone ...”

Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*¹

Most scholars are likely to be skeptical about Marie Corelli’s description of her religious position in the introduction to her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886). Not only does her assessment seem to underplay the hotchpotch of mysticism and pseudo-science that the novel refers to as its “Electric Creed” – or, to use the fuller title, the “Electric Principle of Christianity” – but it is hard to reconcile this unambiguous commitment to Christ with the story we commonly tell about how the latter years of the nineteenth century saw a move away from orthodox Christianity.² Whereas the early Victorians were happy to go to church and believe in God, the narrative goes, that had changed by the end of the century, with those still interested in spiritual issues turning away from Christianity to embrace new religious movements such as Theosophy, Spiritualism, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and enthusiastically reading the heterodox accounts of religion offered by writers such as Corelli.

For much of the twentieth century, the theoretical framework used to explain this alleged transformation was secularization: the strange and eclectic spiritual interests of

¹ Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1938), xvii.

² The “Electric Principle of Christianity” is detailed in Chapter XIV of *A Romance of Two Worlds*.

a writer such as Corelli were typically dismissed as a cynical appeal to a popular audience who were yet to be enlightened, or read as a temporary and ultimately incidental suspension of an inevitable trajectory towards secular rationalism. In more recent years, there has been a change in our understanding of the fin de siècle's experimentation with new religious movements. As the secularization narrative has found itself under increasing scrutiny, initially through the work of historians who saw a persistence of religious belief in modernity, and then via the theoretical reflections of thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and Vincent Pecora, scholars have become less dismissive of what Corelli and her contemporaries have to say.³ Although we are yet to see many postsecular readings of fin de siècle writers, the move away from cruder accounts of secularization has made twenty-first-century scholars more patient with late-nineteenth-century writing that engages with mystery, the unknown and the supernatural.⁴ There are other factors at work, too, in the twenty-first-century desire to take Corelli and her contemporaries more seriously. These include a greater sensitivity to the significance of popular fiction and an increased willingness to explore the hinterlands of scientific thought. But the erosion of a strident secularism is part of the reason why critics such as Annette Federico, Jill Galvan, Christine Ferguson, Martin Hipsky and Andrew McCann have been able to write so thoughtfully and

³ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁴ While the term postsecular has become increasingly popular among scholars in recent years, its meaning remains contested. For a helpful survey of usage and a statement of the term's value that accords with the way in which I am using it here, see Lori Branch, "Chapter 8: Postsecular Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*, ed. Mark Knight (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

constructively in the last two decades about Corelli's work.⁵ The retreat from secularism is only partial, however, and suspicion remains about reading Corelli as a Christian writer. Those who acknowledge that being "Christian was key to her self-presentation" remain skeptical about the veracity of Corelli's professions of faith.⁶ And Elaine Hartnell speaks for many when, noting Corelli's inconsistency, she looks beyond early works such as *Thelma* (1887), *Barabbas* (1893) and *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) to later works and concludes that many of them operate "even further outside the conventional paradigm of Christianity."⁷

The idea that esoteric religion was a replacement for Christianity is echoed in readings of other fin de siècle writers and movements. Patrick Brantlinger explains that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle "believed Spiritualism with a capital S was the successor to Christianity"; Nicholas Freeman reads Arthur Machen's "spiritual credo" as being "opposed" to "the workings of an Anglican church Machen considered to have betrayed its divine purpose"; and Alex Owen's study of late-nineteenth-century new occultism explains how her subject "was attractive [to late Victorians] partly because it

⁵ See Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late-Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Martin Hipsky, *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011); Christine Ferguson, *Language, Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de Siècle: The Brutal Tongue* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Jill Galvan, "Corelli's Caliban in a Glass: Realism, Antirealism, and *The Sorrows of Satan*," *English Literature in Transition* 57.3 (2014): 335-360; and Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

⁶ R. Brandon Kershner, "Corelli's Religious Trilogy: *Barabbas*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, and *The Master Christian*," in Pamela Gilbert, ed., *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 598.

⁷ Elaine M. Hartnell, "Morals and Metaphysics: Marie Corelli, Religion and the Gothic," *Women's Writing* 13.2 (2006), 285.

offered a spiritual alternative to religious orthodoxy.”⁸ There are often good reasons for thinking of Corelli and her peers as exploring alternatives to a Christian tradition that had, in some quarters, become rigid and suffocating.⁹ But recognizing these reasons is not the same as accepting Gauri Viswanathan’s claim that the “alternative religious movements that gathered momentum in the nineteenth century as the crisis of faith grew” constitute “a heterodox response to the monochromatic character of mainstream religion.”¹⁰ Those of us who want to break with a more aggressive commitment to the secular need to be cautious about presuming that spiritually-inclined writers of the late-nineteenth century are inevitably post-Christian. Vincent Lloyd is right to remind us that the Christian turbulence of the period “cannot simply be read as a sign of Christian decay (or secularization),” and further reflection on the limits of Christian orthodoxy might lead us to query the idea that this faith tradition was moribund because of its monochromatic quality.¹¹ With these cautions in mind, this article turns to *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886) as a case study for thinking about whether the strange accounts of religion we find in late-nineteenth-century writers are best understood as a new religious movement or the reformation of a Christian orthodoxy that involves more flux than literary critics have often acknowledged. The question is an important one for

⁸ Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 251-52; Nicholas Freeman, “Arthur Machen: Ecstasy and Epiphany,” *Literature and Theology* 24.3 (2010), 244; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 12.

⁹ For a helpful account of how esoteric religion provided women with space for feminist politics and a greater sense of agency, see Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Gauri Viswanathan, “‘Have Animals Souls?’: Theosophy and the Suffering Body,” *PMLA* 126.2 (2011), 441.

¹¹ Vincent Lloyd, “Christianity,” in Michael Saler, ed., *The Fin-De-Siècle World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 568.

Corelli and our reading of her work, but it also invites us to reflect at a meta-critical level on the boundaries we operate with when reading late-nineteenth-century religion.

Corelli's religious eclecticism – “her fictional attempts to reconcile Christianity with reincarnation, karma, astral projection, and other Buddhist, Hindu and mystical topoi,” or, as another critic writes, “her creative blend of science, paganism, the Hebrew God, and quasitheosophical mysticism” – seems to exemplify the pluralism that was so characteristic of religion in the latter years of the nineteenth century.¹² The Protestantism that had proved so integral to British identity earlier in the century gave way to a growing enthusiasm for Roman Catholicism among writers such as Oscar Wilde, J. K. Huysmans, Michael Field and Ernest Dowson; eastern religions became increasingly important to British cultural life, indirectly, through the fascination with oriental cultures, and directly, through figures such as Keshub Chunder Sen and Edwin Arnold, who wrote and spoke in Britain about Hinduism and Buddhism respectively; and there was widespread interest in a myriad of mystical and occult activity, now commonly thought about under the rubric of new religious movements.¹³ It is easy to

¹² Hipsky, *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance*, 69; Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, 131.

¹³ On the Catholic turn, see Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Keshub Chunder Sen's popularity in Britain is discussed by J. Barton Scott's in *Spiritual Despots: Modern Hinduism and the Genealogies of Self-Rule* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), Chapter 3; and the nineteenth-century engagement with Buddhism is explored by J. Jeffrey Franklin in *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). For a selection of work on the interest in the occult, see the book by Alex Owen mentioned previously as well as Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Wilburn, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012); Srdjan Smajic, *Ghosts, Detectives and Spiritualists: Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Diana Barsham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

see why Corelli might be read as a figurehead for these new religious movements. Brantlinger admits to being reminded of Swedenborg when he reads *A Romance of Two Worlds*, and J. Jeffrey Franklin finds traces in Corelli's work of "Spiritualism, Egyptian occultism, Theosophical synthesis, Hindu concepts, and Buddhist doctrines."¹⁴ Corelli returns repeatedly in her fiction to the practices of astral projection, karma and reincarnation, sometimes tying these to related Christian ideas and writings – e.g., the journey of the soul in the afterlife, eternal judgment, and the resurrection of the dead – but struggling to do so in ways that hide her debt to other religious traditions and the late-nineteenth-century reworking of them. According to Franklin, Corelli's attempts "to reconcile her mystical Christian spiritualism with karma/reincarnation ... required deforming both Western and Eastern traditions virtually beyond recognition by practitioners," and the result was a new "fictional hybrid religion" that echoed the eclecticism of theosophy without always following directly in its footsteps.¹⁵

In many ways, the pluralistic turn we find in Corelli reflected the fragmentation of modern life and the greater exposure to different beliefs offered by the growth in publishing and the global networks of Imperial Britain.¹⁶ These modern developments were accompanied by new ways of understanding religion. Whereas the life of faith had previously centered on the practices and doctrines of the Christian church, at least in

¹⁴ Patrick Brantlinger, "Review of Aaron Worth, *Imperial Media: Colonial Networks and Information Technologies in the British Literary Imagination, 1857-1918*," *English Literature in Transition* 58.3 (2015), 444; Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion*, 124. Franklin's discussion covers both Corelli and Rider Haggard.

¹⁵ Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion*, 125, 91.

¹⁶ According to Aaron Worth, Corelli's fiction "not only celebrates Christian faith but also tirelessly collapses it with imperialist sentiment." See *Imperial Media: Colonial Networks and Information Technologies in the British Literary Imagination, 1857-1918* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014).

Britain, there was an increasing desire in some quarters to think about religious content outside of a confessional framework.¹⁷ The latter years of the nineteenth century saw the rise of what came to be known as comparative religion, a methodology which understood itself to be less dogmatic, less Christocentric, less personally invested, and more focused on thinking about religion, not just Christianity, as an academic subject that one might observe and study. Max Müller, one of the key proponents of this new mode of thinking, understood religion “not as doctrine but as experience, intuition, and feeling, what he described as ‘a yearning after a higher and better life – a life in the light of God.’”¹⁸ While this understanding was not entirely new, with earlier precedents in the mystical tradition and the work of Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, it differed from its forbears in Müller’s enthusiasm for (and extensive use of) the newly emergent methodology of the social sciences.

For Gauri Viswanathan, the study of different expressions of religious belief expands our understanding of the modern world. Seeing the “heterogeneous spiritual movements outside mainstream religion” as a disruption to an unhelpfully stable view of belief she considers to be shared by mainstream religion and secularization alike, Viswanathan argues that the alternative practices and movements of the late-nineteenth century “deserve serious study, no matter how eccentric and idiosyncratic they might

¹⁷ For more on the uses of religion in the nineteenth century, see Joshua King and Jade Winter Werner, eds., *Constructing Nineteenth-Century Religion* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Norman Vance, *Bible and Novel: Narrative Authority & the Death of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 169. Vance is quoting here from F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873).

seem to modern readers (as well as to their own contemporary publics, perhaps).¹⁹ The argument is compelling, yet comparative religion is not the only means of registering and thinking about religious pluralism. Despite recognizing that “the disciplinary institutionalization of the scientific study of religion” is “intimately connected” with the “globalization of religion,” José Casonova discourages us from “making an essentialized secular modernity the dynamic causal force of everything.”²⁰ Although it is common to think of the move from confessional theology to comparative religion as the replacement of mainstream religion’s universalizing drive with a new methodology committed to plurality, this is not necessarily the case. History shows us that the same confessional approach to theology that has been held responsible for violent absolutism has, on other occasions, successfully hosted and encouraged different perspectives. And, conversely, the comparative approach to the study of religion that has often been seen as necessary for the maintenance of plurality has sometimes ended up re-

¹⁹ Gauri Viswanathan, “Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy,” *PMLA* 123.2 (2008), 471.

Viswanathan is skeptical about the ability of mainstream religious traditions to explore new religious movements, because of the way that the former “acquire their dominant status by absorbing, eliminating, or adapting subsets and heterodox strains” (473).

²⁰ José Casonova, “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight?” in Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 278.

inscribing universal absolutism by claiming a false position of neutrality and erasing difference in the pursuit of commonality across different religious traditions.²¹

Rather than trying to make a final decision between these two methodological frameworks, Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) takes a different approach to the relation between religion and plurality by examining the conditions of belief in modernity and telling the story of how the reforming impulse of Christianity led to a loss of its exceptional status and a new position as "one human possibility among others."²² The modern western commitment to plurality is, on this reading, the property of a secularity that is, in turn, rooted in older religious accounts, particularly Christianity. While the ambitious historical vista of Taylor's work precedes, and extends beyond, the latter years of the nineteenth century, we can see the loss of exceptionalism he describes in Corelli's eclecticism and the ease with which other writers of the period, including W. B. Yeats, Rider Haggard, Walter Pater, Arthur Machen, Bram Stoker, and Ouida, produced works in which aspects of the Christian tradition commingled with beliefs that were different in many respects and sometimes in outright contradistinction.

²¹ While the term "confessional theology" is typically aligned with Christianity, there are ways of thinking confessionally about other religious traditions, too. On the potential limitations of comparative religion or the study of world religions, see David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2014), and Tomoko Masuzawa in *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Masuzawa remains committed to the possibility of realizing the potential of comparative religion, however, and is too willing, from my perspective, to attribute the drive to absolutism and universality to a residual Christianity, even though she steps back from naming this religious tradition as the ultimate problem. In her concluding remarks, Masuzawa writes: "Today, self-consciously secularist scientists of religion tend to identify the persistence of Christian ideology as the foremost problem in the field of religious studies ... This, to be sure, may be true ... If we are to be serious in our critical intention, the exorcism of an undead Christian absolutism would not suffice. Instead, criticism calls for ... a rigorous historical investigation" (327-28).

²² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

Yet the Christian component of this religious eclecticism has found itself increasingly silenced by the modern critical tradition. Taylor points out that it is a short step from thinking that Christianity has become one option among many to thinking that this particular religious tradition is no longer an option at all, at least in our explanatory accounts of what is going on in the period.²³ The result of taking this step can be seen in much of the criticism on Corelli, which is frequently more attentive to new religious movements and pseudo-science than it is to the endless series of allusions to Christian scripture, theology and practice that we find in her work. It is likely to come as a surprise to readers whose only knowledge of Corelli is via recent criticism to find that she is also the author of *Praise and Prayer: A Simple Home Service* (1923). This short liturgical book contains a series of Christian prayers, hymns and blessings, ranging from the ambiguous-yet-still-conventionally-orthodox opening words of Thanksgiving, "To the Creator of all things visible and invisible let us offer up our gratitude and praise," to the more clearly Christian invocation, "And Thou, O loving Christ, Saviour and Brother of mankind, be Thou our guide."²⁴ Moreover, there are numerous other instances across her work where the Christian scriptures are quoted from and alluded to, often at length. Thus, while Christiane Gannon's smart reading of *The Sorrows of Satan* makes a persuasive case for why we might want to think about the female author as priest in Corelli's work and distinguishes helpfully between Corelli's more devotional model of reading and the detached reading that several critics have

²³ "Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. ... There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they mourn its loss. ... There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility." Ibid., 3.

²⁴ Marie Corelli, *Praise and Prayer: A Simple Home Service* (London: Methuen and Co, Ltd, 1923), 5, 7.

located in other Victorian novels, it surely overstates matters to claim that “for Corelli the good novel replaces the Good Book; the exemplary fictional text supersedes the Bible or Christ as the object of devotion.”²⁵ A similar criticism might be leveled against Hipsky’s description of the literary references in *The Treasure of Heaven* (1906) as “Corelli’s secular scripture,” given that in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, Corelli plays down the idea of such a rivalry when she insists that the “tenets” of the Electric Creed “are completely borne out by the New Testament.”²⁶ And it is hard to accept the second half of J. Jeffrey Franklin’s claim that the use in some of Bulwer Lytton’s fiction of “occult spiritualisms to arrive at an esoteric Christianity from which God, heaven, sin/redemption, and even the word ‘Christianity’ have been, if not removed, then muted” is “a pattern that will be repeated” in the novels of Marie Corelli, especially when we read in her introduction to *A Romance of Two Worlds* that “I affirm, and will most ardently maintain, that in the teachings of Christ will be found all the secrets of occult sciences.”²⁷

The reluctance to talk about Corelli’s Christianity is understandable. Her faith position frequently seems to shift, in personal writings and in the main narrative voice of her fiction, and Christianity is more prominent in some of her works than others. My aim is not to pronounce Corelli an unambiguously Christian writer, but to question

²⁵ Christiane Gannon, “Marie Corelli’s *The Sorrows of Satan*: Literary Professionalism and the Female Author as Priest,” *English Literature in Transition* 56.3 (2013), 378

²⁶ Hipsky, *Modernism and the Woman’s Popular Romance*, 96; Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, xviii. I realize, of course, that Hipsky’s phrase is an allusion to the work of Northrop Frye.

²⁷ J. Jeffrey Franklin, “The Evolution of Occult Spirituality in Victorian England and the Representative Case of Edward Bulwer-Lytton,” in Kontou and Wilburn, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, 138; Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, xxvi.

why the Christian context and possibilities of her work so frequently recede into the critical background and pass unnoticed. The phenomenon is part of a larger blindness to Christianity in our study of the late-nineteenth century and, perhaps more arguably, a reflection of our modern desire for novelty. When Corelli's introduction to *A Romance of Two Worlds* notes how much of the modern interest in spirituality would "rather believe in anything but the too-familiar doctrine of Christianity," it is prescient of our contemporary situation, where the desire for ideas that are new can combine with a concern to correct the prejudice of an earlier epoch, in which Christianity seemed to dominate all cultural discussion at the expense of other religious traditions.²⁸ Against this backdrop, the recent work of Frances Knight, a historian of religion, does a helpful job of reminding us of the vitality of different Christian traditions in the late-nineteenth century. Though aware of the new religious movements that "were becoming extremely influential on the late nineteenth-century scene," Knight focuses on what she describes as mainstream Christian traditions, including Roman Catholicism, the Church of England, and the Free Churches which were, she insists, "at the peak of their social, cultural and political influence" during the *fin de siècle*.²⁹ For those who are immersed in Victorian literary scholarship and have come to see the spiritual scene of the *fin de siècle* as being dominated by esoteric expressions of belief, Knight's scholarship challenges the assumption that the period's religious beliefs, particularly in London, are

²⁸ Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, xix.

²⁹ Frances Knight, *Victorian Christianity at the Fin de Siècle: The Culture of English Religion in a Decadent Age* (London: IB Tauris, 2016), 4, 229.

overwhelmingly and uncontestably marked by departures from a recognizably Christian faith.³⁰

Among the many reasons for the relative invisibility of Christianity in so much modern literary scholarship is the reliance on limited definitions and frames of reference.³¹ In one of the notes to the Hartnell article on Corelli already cited, the test of Christian orthodoxy relies on just two texts: the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.³² This framework is too limited given the importance of biblical translation debates to the different doctrinal positions of Christianity in the nineteenth century and also, even more pertinently, the substantial role that Christian traditions other than Anglicanism played in British life. Several scholars who do not specialize in nineteenth-century religion operate with similarly constricted accounts of Christianity, and make the mistake of thinking that the whole of this religious tradition is absent or under attack when they do not find the narrow, static and uniform expression of the faith that they have come to expect. Frances Knight's observation that, "as in earlier ages, Christian culture provided a particularly rich and malleable vehicle" is an important corrective, reminding us that Christian belief has always sought ways of

³⁰ On a related note, Selina McGuinness foregrounds the role that evangelical belief played in the first Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society in the late-nineteenth century. She explains: "The similarities between evangelicalism and theosophy are best understood ... as part of the 'free cross-over' between the tradition of Dissent, a resonant feature of these Ulster backgrounds, the dissenting space provided by the Dublin Lodge, and fresh dissent within the new fold." Selina McGuinness, "'Protestant Magic' Reappraised: Evangelicalism, Dissent and Theosophy," *Irish University Review* 33.1 (2003), 19.

³¹ I am aware that Christianity continues to enjoy more attention than any of the other major world religions from scholars of nineteenth-century British literature. This seems appropriate given the beliefs of the period, but does not stop me from wanting to also see more work on other religious traditions and their relation to nineteenth-century British literature.

³² Hartnell, "Morals and Metaphysics," 330n7.

adapting to new cultural settings.³³ This quality makes sense given how the faith emerged from a series of overlapping historical contexts (Jewish, Roman, Middle Eastern, etc.) rather than coming down from on high in some sort of pre-cultural transcendent form. Instead, then, of looking for a fixed framework against which Corelli's alleged departures from orthodoxy can be judged, our assessment of her religious position requires a more flexible and capacious understanding of Christianity. Because Christianity is constituted time and again by communities of believers who, though guided by the set of traditions handed down to them, are still tasked with the need for new readings of the historic faith they profess, the limits of orthodoxy are always in a state of flux and continually subject to new interpretations.

Valentine Cunningham draws out the implications of Christianity's continually shifting theology when he writes about the liminal space that exists between the orthodox and the heterodox, and finds a role for heresy within the story of faith: "heretic reading, heretic writing, heretic hermeneutics – of all kinds, sacred or secular, sacred segueing into secular – are not only inevitable (they have occurred, do occur, will occur), but are to be tolerated as important, even essential, to the business of reading."³⁴ While Christian traditions often work hard to police their borders – through the formation of the biblical canon, the use of creeds, the role of sermons, and various denominational efforts at doctrinal clarification, including the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles – these efforts inevitably result in further disagreement and

³³ Knight, *Victorian Christianity at the Fin de Siècle*, 226.

³⁴ Valentine Cunningham, "Introduction: The Necessity of Heresy," in Andrew Dix and Jonathan Taylor, eds., *Figures of Heresy: Radical Theology in English and American Writing 1800-2000* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), 2.

discussion. This point is familiar territory for those steeped in the history of theology, with John Henry Newman offering one of the many attempts to admit the developmental nature of Christian doctrine but insist on its underlying cohesion.³⁵ But while Newman found an answer to his search for theological cohesion and unity in the magisterium of the Roman Catholic church, as did G. K. Chesterton, Alice Meynell and others a few decades later, the dissenting tradition, on which Cunningham's argument focuses, has greater difficulty deciding what constitutes a revision of Christian faith from the inside and what is a genuinely new departure:

Arius and Nestor and Co., Calvin, John Wesley, Mary Baker Eddy (found of Christian Science), J. N. Darby (founding father of the Plymouth Brethren) did not for one second think they were stepping outside the zone, the *eruv* as it were, of Christian belief. In fact they believed themselves to be enhancing belief, making Christian faith and practice stronger, because more authentic, closer to the sacred text, and to the origin, and so forth.³⁶

This dissenting tradition, so frequently underplayed in scholarly accounts of nineteenth-century religion, finds itself in a similar position to the new religious movements of the late-nineteenth century, with sects deemed inside and outside the Christian tradition all having to resolve the nature of their relationship to more

³⁵ See John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845). It is worth noting that Newman's own theological position underwent several changes over the course of his life.

³⁶ Cunningham, "The Necessity of Heresy," 4.

traditional expressions of religious belief.³⁷ New religious movements often came to be thought of as being largely on the outside, as was the case with Theosophy. But such judgments relied on general consensus rather universal agreement, and many of the groups deemed to sit on the outside of the church bore an uncomfortable resemblance to others, such as the Salvation Army, that were largely thought to reside inside Christendom.³⁸

With most dissenting sects seeking to rest their authority on a fresher and allegedly more faithful reading of scripture than that offered by the group from which they separated, Corelli's interest in what constitutes a legitimate reading ties her work into the reflections of this branch of Protestantism. That may seem a strange claim given that Corelli identified personally with the Church of England and has Heliobas, the spiritual guru who features in *A Romance of Two Worlds, Ardath* (1889) and *The Soul of Lilith* (1892), speak against religious fragmentation: "In Sectarianism, for instance, there is no shred of Christianity. Lovers of God and followers of Christ must, in the first

³⁷ I agree with Viswanathan's claim that "the mistake is to homogenize religion and understate the degree to which it comprises competing beliefs, some of which were historically marginalized, other obliterated, and still others assimilated to a dominant religious system." My point of disagreement is over her insistence on resisting homogenization by always turning to new religion movements: while doing so can be illuminating, as her work makes clear, one can also resist the homogenization of religion by remaining with Christianity and exploring its diversity and variation. See Viswanathan, "Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy," 469.

³⁸ Frances Knight cites the emergence of the Salvation Army as a sign of the vitality of Christianity in the late-nineteenth century Britain. While she is right to do so, it is worth remembering first, that the early history of this movement involved considerable soul-searching by the movement's leaders over whether it should think about itself as a church rather than a missionary group, and second, that members of more established churches were initially suspicious about whether this new sect could be considered Christian. For a useful account of the role that religious figures played in the broader opposition to the Salvation Army, see Pamela J. Walker, *Pulling the Devil's Kingdom Down: The Salvation Army in Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), Chapter 7.

place, have perfect Unity.”³⁹ Heliobas makes similar claims elsewhere in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, railing against the religious failings of other Christians – “Religion is split into hundreds of cold and narrow sects, gatherings assembled for the practice of hypocrisy, lipservice and lies” – and insisting that his own grasp of spiritual truth is more genuine.⁴⁰ And Corelli’s desire to reform the thought of her fellow believers is further evident in the preface to a later edition of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, where she writes that her intention for the novel had always been “a desire to rouse some of my fellow-creatures out of the strange torpor and spiritual lethargy in which they lie.”⁴¹

The mixed messages we find in Corelli regarding unity and reform are common to Dissent, with many religious figures in that tradition calling for unity but complaining about the inauthenticity of those whose attachment to faith is lukewarm and insisting that the reforming position being proclaimed is the only means of bringing about a more authentic faith. Like so many other figures in the dissenting tradition, Corelli’s confidence in her message is accompanied a recognition that it is not always easy to determine whether new spiritual insights can be thought of as Christian. When Heliobas gives the narrator an unnamed book by a Dead Musician, the narrator finds herself in an argument with a friend, Amy Everard, about whether the book is Christian:

Here Amy threw down the book with a sort of contempt, and said to me:

³⁹ Hipsky makes reference to Corelli’s broad Anglicanism, see *Modernism and the Women’s Popular Romance*, 74; Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 242-43.

⁴⁰ Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 129.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xi.

“If you are going to muddle your mind with the ravings of a lunatic, you are not what I took you for. Why, it’s regular spiritualism! Kingdoms of the air indeed! And his cloud of witnesses! Rubbish!”

“He quotes the *cloud of witnesses* from St. Paul,” I remarked.

“More shame for him!” replied my friend, with the usual inconsistent indignation that good Protestants invariably display when their pet corn, the Bible, is accidentally trodden on. “It has been very well said that the devil can quote Scripture, and this musician (a good job he *is* dead, I’m sure) is perfectly blasphemous to quote the Testament in support of his ridiculous ideas! St. Paul did not mean by a ‘cloud of witnesses’ a lot of ‘air multitudes’ and ‘burning immutable eyes,’ and all that nonsense.”

“Well, what *did* he mean?” I gently persisted.⁴²

The conversation is left unresolved, with the first-person narrator changing the subject to avoid falling out with her friend, but the narrator takes steps throughout the novel to ensure that the question persists for readers, even if her friend is unwilling to consider it further. By returning to Christian ideas throughout and tying them to the new spiritual insights articulated by Heliobas, the narrator pushes her readers to consider the possibility that the latest religious ideas might be seen as a reformation of Christianity rather than a replacement for it. And her reference in the exchange above to St. Paul, whose own role within the early Church was marked by his controversial call for reformation, stakes a claim for thinking about these radical changes as orthodox.

The definitional problem faced by a religious tradition with such a strong history of reformation is highlighted in Carolyn Burdett’s discussion of Rider Haggard, one of Corelli’s peers. Like Corelli, Haggard’s work moves freely between Christianity and other traditions of religious and mystical thought, and, as is the case with Corelli, it is not always clear what we are to make of this eclecticism. Commenting on the

⁴² Ibid., 39-40.

transcendental message in *Ayesha* (1905), Burdett writes that it “is Christian, certainly, but it is a Christianity revitalized and reanimated by the doctrine of reincarnation.”⁴³ The claim here is reasonable, but is still worth parsing carefully. Christian theology is always in a state of revision, with even the most conventional and fervent evangelical sermons of the nineteenth century acknowledging the need for biblical texts to be continually re-read and reinterpreted for a new audience. But not every means of revision is considered legitimate by the various communities of faith which, as Gerard Loughlin explains, “discern a unified story in the biblical narratives and other writings.”⁴⁴ Haggard’s appeal to a concept of reincarnation that, for the most part, has and continues to stand outside of common Christian teaching makes the episode in question one where we might be tempted to think about religious hybridity rather than a revision from within. At the same time, our adjudication of Haggard’s Christian legitimacy has to remain provisional as we recognize that no theological position can ever lay claim to being wholly definitive. As Taylor puts it, “there are clearly wrong versions of Christian faith. But it doesn’t mean that we can give a single right version to replace them. ... we operate with a certain amount of unclarity [sic] and confusion. This is the condition of doing theology.”⁴⁵

There are moments in Corelli’s text where her use of religious language embraces a lack of definitional clarity, such as the scene where Raffaello Cellini, the artist who

⁴³ Carolyn Burdett, “Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard,” in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell, eds., *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 229.

⁴⁴ Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 79. Loughlin argues that the orthodoxy of the Christian tradition rests on “the performance of its story” (21) rather than the uses of reason.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 643,

first speaks to the narrator about the Electric Creed, describes his own spiritual journey and talks about prayer. As he explains it, prayer is the uncertain language that enables him to move from a dogmatic skepticism to the possibility of beliefs that he cannot fully explain. "I tried, I longed to pray. Yet to whom? To what?"⁴⁶ But relying too heavily on the ambiguity and incapacity of language to avoid a closed conception of religion only takes us so far. In the case of Cellini, the uncertainty proves too hard to bear: his failure to find any answers leads him to attempt suicide, and he is only prevented from succeeding in this endeavor by the intervention of Heliobas. But Heliobas, in turn, reveals another problem with looking to the uncertainty of language to solve the problems of religion. Relying on linguistic nuance that is only available to the educated few is liable to result in beliefs that are even more exclusive and intolerant of others. The danger is epitomized in the elevated talk of Heliobas, whose spiritual "wisdom" is marred by arrogance and dogmatic expressions of knowledge. His explanation of the Electric Creed insists that "it can be proved from the statements of the New Testament that in Christ was an Embodied Electric Spirit," and this is far from being the only moment where Heliobas claims to speak with a certainty and knowledge that others do not possess.⁴⁷ Recognizing the complexity of language will help us avoid pronouncing too readily on the distinction between Christianity orthodoxy and a heterodoxy marked by religious hybridity, but it is only part of the answer. Thus, Stanley Hauerwas and

⁴⁶ Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 63. For further discussion of the role of prayer in "strange" tales from the nineteenth century, see Mark Knight, "A Purely Pure Prayer would be Deadly: Religious Discourse in the Early Novels of *All the Year Round*," in Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman, eds., *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700-2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁴⁷ Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 235.

Romand Coles are right, in their response to Taylor's work, to think about language more broadly in terms of the "daily practices and rituals" that take us "beyond the impasses and closures of this secular age" and "allow us ... to open in vulnerable ways to the unwonted lessons we need to learn in order to love our neighbors."⁴⁸

This article has made the case for Christianity, rather than new religious movements, as the most appropriate frame through which to consider the strange explorations of spirituality that we find in Corelli's fiction. There are, however, moments of apparent discontinuity between the Christian faith and the religious vision imagined by Corelli. Although Corelli's narrator is at pains to point out how "thoroughly" her *Electric Principle of Christianity* "harmonizes" with the teaching of the Christian Church, the views seem to diverge when Heliobas rejects a more welcoming understanding of grace to insist instead that his religious insights be kept under "lock and key" because they "can only be explained to the few."⁴⁹ Some within the Christian tradition have joined Heliobas in seeing grace as a divine gift that is only made available to the elect, but this more exclusive view of grace does not represent the position of all believers, and it cannot be said to occupy the only Christian space available. Acknowledging a plurality and contestation of beliefs within the Christian tradition is vital, for if a narrow and intolerant secularism lies behind the presumption that Corelli's religious eclecticism is automatically beyond the limits of Christianity, then the answer cannot be to fall into

⁴⁸ Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on *A Secular Age*," *Modern Theology* 26.3 (2010), 357.

⁴⁹ Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 237, 203.

the same mistake on the opposite side and insist that a revised account of theology is necessarily right and capable of resolving every alleged difference between Corelli and the rest of the church. Accepting the fluidity and breadth of Christianity does not prevent us from making theological judgments about Corelli's novel, but it does mean that we need to offer those judgments from a position of epistemic humility and recognize that all religious experience, inside and outside fiction, exceeds the categories of knowledge we bring to bear upon it.

Adopting a position of epistemic humility when we draw and redraw the boundaries of Christian belief in the late-nineteenth century is no easy task. But we might take some inspiration from the glimpses of humility that we find in *A Romance of Two Worlds*. While there are moments in the novel when the narrator seeks to assimilate other traditions – “All religions, as known to us, are mere types of Christianity” – or express intolerance towards ideas she locates firmly on the outside of the Christian faith, there are other occasions when the text draws on Christian sources to support looking outside this tradition in pursuit of religious truth.⁵⁰ The most memorable occurs early on in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, when Heliobas says that he descends “directly from one of those ‘wise men of the East’ ... who, being wide awake, happened to notice the birth-star of Christ on the horizon before the rest of the world’s inhabitants had as much as rubbed their eyes.”⁵¹ There is more than a touch of hubris to Heliobas’s remark, yet perhaps more interesting is the underlying theological significance of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 233.

⁵¹ Ibid., 66.

Matthew's decision to include the wise men in his gospel. A major subtext of the Christian Scriptures is the idea that revelation can come from unexpected places, from people who have hitherto been deemed to exist outside the boundaries of the faith: the recognition of a thief on the cross, the faith of a Roman centurion, the goodwill of a Samaritan traveler, the curiosity of an Ethiopian eunuch, and so on. Given the role that the outsider plays in the Christian story, it may not matter overly whether we accept Corelli's profession of Christian faith at face value or decide that her religion eclecticism stretches the boundaries of Christianity too far. Either way, her reworking of the Christian story reminds us how this tradition is capable of listening to voices on the outside and hosting those "dissonant strains in religious history" that have sometimes been thought to belong exclusively to the practices of new religious movements.⁵²

⁵² Viswanathan, "Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy," 476.