SOWING WHEAT AMONG TARES:
GEORGE ELIOT'S UNAMBIVALENT TREATMENT
OF RELIGION IN HER EARLY FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

George Eliot's early fiction consistently undermines belief in a supernatural being distinct from man when this belief is inseparably associated with morality in men's minds. In the lives of her religious characters, such belief proves to be dangerously simplistic, misleading, restrictive, and responsible for a great deal of evil. But whereas Eliot's criticism is seen readily in her penetrating depictions of Evangelical hypocrisy, critics have overlooked the presence of a carefully crafted, potentially more lethal criticism of belief in God in her apparently sympathetic dramatizations of Evangelical Christianity. Far from feeling ambivalent toward the religion of her adolescence, Eliot has a perfectly clear vision of what she approves and disapproves in it and draws a clear line between the two in her writing. She carefully sets up her sympathetically drawn characters as legitimate representatives of Evangelicalism, draws attention to their tremendous impact for good, allows them to speak freely of their behavior and impact in terms of their beliefs, and then systematically discredits the supernatural content of those beliefs by demonstrating the essentially human rather than divine character of all that is good, admirable, and successful in their persons and ministries. Where these characters embrace humanist values, Eliot approves warmly within the text, clearly linking their successes to these values. But wherever they espouse belief in the supernatural, she undermines it, explaining away that
belief in psychological terms. Each time her characters act on insight they have acquired through personal experience and careful observation, they cope successfully with the complexities of life. But when they rely upon divine revelation or aid, they stumble badly.

It is this cautious, sensitive, indirect approach which creates the illusion that Eliot's feelings toward religious belief are ambivalent, but her approach is at least as devastating as an open attack in that it destroys the basis for belief in God in the mind of the inquiring reader. But, unlike an open attack, it does not run the risk of alienating the unenlightened reader or of destroying his morality along with his superstitious beliefs. In Eliot's own words, "the best and only way of fulfilling our mission [to free morality from superstition] is to sow good seed in good (i.e., prepared) ground, and not to inevitably gather all the wheat with them."

Eliot's covert attack against belief in a supernatural being flounders in "Janet's Repentance, "Adam Bede, and The Mill on The Floss, because none of the characters, Edgar Tryan, Dinah Morris, or Maggie Tulliver, is a convincing representative of sincere Evangelical belief. Eliot repeatedly informs us that these characters believe what they say about God and their relationship to him. But their behavior consistently and fundamentally destroys their credibility and ruins Eliot's attempt to offer a convincing case for a purely humanistic interpretation of religion in her early fiction.
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I. SOWING WHEAT AMONG TARES:

In her treatment of Edgar Tryan's Evangelicalism in "Janet's Repentance," \(^1\) Dinah Morris' Methodism in *Adam Bede*, \(^2\) and Maggie Tulliver's religion in *The Mill On The Floss*, \(^3\) George Eliot consistently undermines belief in a supernatural being distinct from man by demonstrating that such belief is misleading, restrictive, and dangerous when it becomes insep- *

arably associated with morality in men's thinking. She carefully sets up Tryan and Morris as credible representatives of Evangelical Christian belief, draws attention to their tremendous impact for good, permits them to speak freely of their behavior and impact on people in terms of religious belief, and then discredits the supernatural aspect of that belief by demonstrating the essentially human rather than divine character of all that is good, admirable, and successful in their persons and ministries.

Through Maggie Tulliver's experiences, Eliot attempts to show that any moral scheme is simplistic and dangerous which does not derive its authority and credibility from the unfe- *

ttered exercise of reason and the constant check of human experience. Maggie is ruined by her unquestioning acceptance of a rigid moral code which attempts to define the relation between passion and duty under all circumstances without reference to reason or experience. Each time Edgar, Dinah, and Maggie act on insight which they have acquired through personal experience and careful observation, they cope
successfully with the problems confronting them. But when they rely upon divine revelation or the promise of supernatural aid, they stumble badly. This pattern, consistent throughout Eliot's early fiction, along with her habit of entering the narrative at crucial points in order to explain apparently religious phenomena in purely human terms, rules out the possibility that Eliot feels ambivalently about the supernatural aspect of Evangelical belief. She clearly values much of the moral behavior and positive character transformation which such belief activates and sustains. But Eliot has no use for the supernatural foundation of that belief. Basic to her moral outlook is the conviction "that the fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not dependent on conceptions of what is not man: and that the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e., an exaltation of the human."  

This outlook, very much the same as Ludwig Feuerbach's view that "Religion is the relation of man to his own nature," and that "in the origin of religion there is no qualitative distinction whatever between God and Man," places Eliot in that class of nineteenth-century humanists who attempted to place Christianity on a purely human, secular foundation. Men like Hennell, Strauss, and Feuerbach did not want to repudiate Christianity in its entirety. They wanted to disassociate what they valued in Christianity from what they perceived to be the superstitious element of belief.
in the supernatural, in order to salvage what they valued. And Eliot follows their lead in her early fiction by attempting to discredit the supernatural aspect of the belief of the religion of her adolescence in order to place on a purely human, rational foundation, what she values in that belief. She feels ambivalently about Evangelical Christianity as a whole because she recognizes that it has brought about considerable good in her society and that it contains a great deal of moral thought of which she can wholeheartedly approve. But her treatment of religion in her fiction shows that Eliot has a very clear idea of what she approves and disapproves of in it.

In keeping with her goal of salvaging as much of Christianity's ethical system as possible while disassociating it from superstition, Eliot expresses her disbelief of the supernatural aspect of religious belief, cautiously. Writing to Miss Sara Hennell on October 19, 1843, Eliot suggests that "the best and only way of fulfilling our mission [to free morality from superstition] is to sow good seed in good (i.e., prepared) ground, and not to root up tares where we must inevitably gather all the wheat with them" (GEL, i, 162-63). From this letter, it is clear that Eliot valued a great deal of what she saw in traditional Christian belief, but also saw the need to alert the enlightened reader about the presence of tares in that body of belief. By planting rational, entirely human explanations of traditionally religious beliefs and experiences apparently arising out of those
beliefs, alongside those beliefs and experiences, Eliot attempts to give her readers "a clearer conception of those vital elements which bind men together and give a higher worthiness to their existence; and also to help them in gradually dissociating these elements from the more transient forms on which an outworn teaching tends to make them dependent" (GEL, iv, 472). She apparently feels that this cautious expression of her disbelief circumvents the danger of alienating the unenlightened reader and destroying his morality along with the superstitious aspect of his belief, while simultaneously permitting her to communicate her insight directly to the enlightened reader.

A serious problem arises in Eliot's handling of Evangelical and Methodist belief related to her failure to create a credible representation of "the secret and core of Evangelical position," namely, that sense of deep, personal commitment to a God who is involved intimately and recognizably in men's lives. Tryan, Dinah, and to a lesser extent, Janet say the right things when they speak of their belief in God and of His direct involvement in their lives. But at too many crucial points, their behavior shows clearly that they fail to understand, or simply do not believe, what they say. In spite of Eliot's concentrated and obvious effort to make them credible representatives of Evangelical Christian belief, these characters are not convincing representatives of such belief. The problem is not that Dinah and Tryan's behavior fails to be entirely consistent with what they claim to
believe: no one is that consistent in life or fiction. The problem is that their conduct violates the most fundamental tenets of the belief they are supposed to represent, despite the fact that they teach those tenets with a clarity that would shame most preachers. If it is true that Dinah and Tryan are not credible representatives of belief in a God who exists distinct from man and has revealed truth to them, then Eliot has succeeded only in undermining the supernatural aspect of a religion peculiar to her characters. She has not succeeded in undermining the supernatural aspect of Evangelical Christian belief at large. Given Eliot's energetic attempt to make these characters representative of such belief, given the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of her attempt to show the pitfalls she sees in the religious habit of basing morality on belief in a supernatural being distinct from man, given her intensive effort to demonstrate the importance of basing morality on reason and human experience alone, and given the prominent role that Evangelical characters play in her early fiction, it is clear that she intended to do the latter. While her failure to achieve this objective in her fiction does not mean that Eliot is a failure as a novelist or that her characters fail to be convincing in other respects, it does mean that she has failed in an area that was very important to her. She has not successfully undermined the supernatural aspect of religious belief in her early fiction; she has not even engaged it.

My own Evangelical perspective undoubtedly influences my
reading of Eliot's fiction. I am not indifferent to her attempt to place Christianity upon a purely human, rational footing, but this thesis is not intended to be read as a polemic against Eliot's position or a defense of my own. I have endeavoured to show that Eliot systematically attempts to undermine the credibility of the supernatural aspect of sincere religious belief in her early fiction, and that this attempt impairs her characterization. Tryan and Dinah Morris are not nearly as convincing, complex, and fascinating as Maggie Tulliver, not just because Eliot has matured as a writer by the time she creates Maggie, but also because Eliot seems to be much less concerned about exposing specific religious beliefs as tares, and concentrates almost entirely upon planting the wheat of her own humanistic insight, from The Mill On The Floss on. The result is, in my judgment, much more satisfying fiction, and considerably more complex, fascinating characterization.
Notes


Early in "Janet's Repentance," George Eliot advises us that Evangelicalism's effect on Milby parish is not easily determined because "Religious ideas have the fate of melodies, which, once set afloat in the world, are taken up by all sorts of instruments, some of them woefully coarse, feeble, or out of tune, until people are in danger of crying out that the melody itself is detestable." She gives several examples of Milby residents who distort Evangelical Christianity's "melody" by imposing their own faults, desires, and weaknesses on it and then suggests that the primary message of that religious movement is, after the distortion has been stripped away, "that idea of duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self" (p. 320). Embodying that idea of duty in the person of a young curate, Edgar Tryan, Eliot then proceeds to develop what first appears to be a sympathetic treatment of Evangelicalism. At great personal sacrifice, Tryan influences many people for good but no one benefits more dramatically from his assistance than Janet Dempster, who is converted from a nightmare of alcoholism and despair to a life filled with meaning, hope, and loving service to others in need about her. However, that apparently sympathetic portrayal of Tryan's religion contains a criticism far more effective than could be inflicted by an open attack on Evangelical belief. Eliot carefully sets up Tryan as a credible representative of such belief, draws attention to his
tremendous impact for good on the people he ministers to, permits him to speak of his behavior and impact in terms of his religious beliefs, and then systematically discredits the supernatural basis of his religion by demonstrating the essentially human rather than divine character of all that is good, admirable, and successful in his person and ministry. Eliot clearly approves of Tryan's morality, but she is careful to disassociate that morality from belief in the supernatural. Her point is that what is valuable in Tryan's moral outlook can be explained much more satisfactorily in terms of reason and human experience.

Through Janet's conversion, Eliot makes it unmistakably clear that Tryan's effectiveness can be explained solely in terms of his ability to enter sympathetically and imaginatively into people's suffering and help them with insight he has gained through his own experience of sorrow. His Evangelical beliefs, about which he is very articulate, and the God he ostensibly represents, have no practical effect on his ministry apart from giving it a religious aura. As Thomas A. Noble argues, "it is not Mr. Tryan's specific belief that touches Janet but his humanity."² Tryan may appear to be Evangelical, "but his religion is essentially a religion of humanity; he has the characteristic Evangelical beliefs and expresses them in the characteristic manner, but it is through a doctrine of sympathy purely human that Janet is saved" (Noble, p. 77). Janet responds, not to the idea of divine pity and understanding, but to the human equivalent
embodied in Tryan as Eliot suggests in a brief explanation of the curate's effect on Janet:

Blessed influence of one true loving human soul on another! Not calculable by algebra, not deducible by logic, but mysterious, effectual, mighty as the hidden process by which the tiny seed is quickened, and bursts forth into tall stem and broad leaf, and glowing tassled flower. Ideas are often poor ghosts; our sin-filled eyes cannot discern them; they pass athwart us in thin vapour, and cannot make themselves felt. But sometimes they are made flesh; they breathe upon us with warm breath, they touch us with soft responsive hands, they look at us with sad sincere eyes, and speak to us in appealing tones; they are clothed in a living human soul, with all its conflicts, its faith, and its love. Then their presence is a power, then they shake us like a passion, and we are drawn after them with gentle compulsion, as flame is drawn to flame. (p. 364)

When a "true loving human soul" like Tryan internalizes the idea of duty and compassionately enters into the experiences of his fellow-men in order to help them, a miracle takes place—the suffering are helped by a process as hidden and inexplicable as that which accounts for natural growth. But the miracle does not involve anything that is not human, a point which Eliot emphasizes relentlessly throughout her portrayal of Tryan's religion.

Tryan acquired his ability to help people as he does through "the initiation of suffering," wrestling insight and learning compassion from his own struggle with sin and pain (p. 374). He is not perfect, and like Luther and Bunyan, two notable dissenters of an earlier era, Tryan would not satisfy "the modern demand for an ideal hero, who believes nothing but what is true, feels nothing but what is exalted, and does nothing but what is graceful" (p. 321). But with all their
flaws and inconsistencies, these men are "real heroes" by Eliot's definition, possessing along with a "natural heritage of love and conscience," a knowledge of "one or two of those deep spiritual truths which are only to be won by long wrestling with their own sins and their own sorrows" (p. 321).

Her view puts all men on the same footing morally and postulates faith and strength as qualities earned through personal struggle rather than given by divine favor. Eliot says further,

\[
\text{... they have earned faith and strength so far as they have done genuine work; but the rest is dry barren theory, blank prejudice, vague hearsay. Their insight is blended with mere opinion; their sympathy is perhaps confined in narrow conduits of doctrine, instead of flowing forth with the freedom of a stream that blesses every weed in its course; obstinacy or self-assertion will often interfuse itself with their grandest impulses; and their very deeds of self-sacrifice are sometimes only the rebound of passionate egoism. (p. 321)}
\]

Divine revelation and supernatural assistance have no place in this vision of life and service; these men live, learn, and minister on a purely human level despite a surface of religious rhetoric from Eliot's viewpoint. Any knowledge they claim as their own which does not arise directly out of their own experience must be considered suspect: dry barren theory, blank prejudice, vague hearsay, and mere opinion. Where her fiction touches on religion, particularly Evangelicalism with its heavy emphasis on God and divine revelation, Eliot attempts to demonstrate the validity of her view by showing that the supernatural element in religion exists only in the minds and rhetoric of characters who believe in it and
by showing that her religious characters are effective only when they act on insight they hav earned through hard experi-
ence.

That Eliot intended Tryan to be representative of Evangelical Christian belief is seen in the way she introduces him and his ministry. Shortly after establishing Tryan as the curate of Paddiford Common, Eliot summarizes the reaction of Milby parish to his coming and his beliefs:

It was soon notorious in Milby that Mr. Tryan held pecu-
liar opinions; that he preached extempore; that he was founding a religious lending library in his remote cor-
ner of the parish; that he expounded the Scriptures in cottages; and that his preaching was attracting the Dissenters, and filling the very aisles of his church. The rumor sprang up that Evangelicalism had invaded Milby parish. (p. 263)

After reporting the Milbyite reaction to Tryan's coming, Eliot gives her own evaluation, suggesting that "Milby was one of the last spots to be reached by the wave of a new movement; and it was only now, when the tide was just on the turn, that the limpets got a "sprinkling" and describing Tryan as "the first Evangelical clergyman who had risen above the Milby horizon" (p. 263). After briefly comparing Tryan, Luther, and Bunyan, Eliot advises us that Tryan and Evangelicalism gave to Milby "something to reverence" and "brought into palpable existence and operation in Milby society that idea of duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self" (p. 320). Warning us that Tryan is not without his share of weaknesses, Eliot suggests that "anyone looking at him with the bird's-eye
glance of the critic might perhaps say that he made the mistake of identifying Christianity with a too narrow doctrinal system; that he saw God's work too exclusively in antagonism to the world, the flesh, and the devil; that his intellectual culture was too limited—and so on; making Mr. Tryan the text for a wise discourse on the characteristics of the Evangelical school in his day" (p. 322). And she advises us further that a disciple of Henry Venn, an early leader of the Evangelical movement in the Church of England, would probably say of Tryan, "Not a remarkable specimen; the anatomy and habits of his species have been determined long ago" (p. 322). Thus, early in the story, Eliot firmly establishes Tryan as a legitimate representative of Evangelical Christian belief: behaviorally, doctrinally, and historically.

Tryan certainly sounds like an Evangelical. Shortly after he comes to Milby, we overhear a conversation in the Linnet parlour concerning the curate's views on the possibility that man can earn God's favor and win salvation by his own efforts. Tryan flatly rejects this possibility on the grounds that it denies "the great doctrine of justification by faith" (p. 270). His belief in man's utter dependency upon the grace of God for salvation is typically Evangelical as Donald C. Masters' brief sketch of Evangelical belief shows. Describing both Methodists and Anglican Evangelicals, "both of them heirs to the Protestant Reformation and to the Evangelical revival of the eighteenth century," Masters says: 3
Their basic position was clear. The believed that man is a sinner, unable to rescue himself from his plight; that salvation has been made available for many by the fact that God took human form and died on man's behalf. They believed that man can avail himself of salvation by appropriating Christ and His sacrifice to himself in faith. This appropriation they believed to be made possible by divine grace. They believed in the necessity of repentance from sin, but maintained that man cannot earn salvation by the performance of good works.

That Tryan teaches the doctrine of justification by faith alone is also made clear by the kind of criticism he draws from Milby's residents: Janet thinks initially that he has "an odious self-complacency in believing himself a peculiar child of God" and judges him for talking about "faith and grace, and all that, making people believe they are better than others, and that God loves them more than he does the rest of the world" (pp. 332, 330); Mr. Tomlinson, the miller, accuses Tryan of "hypocritical cant" (p. 248); and according to lawyer Dempster, Tryan "preaches against good works; says good works are not necessary to salvation--a Sectarian, antinomian, anabaptist doctrine. Tell a man he is not saved by his works, and you open the floodgates of all immorality" (p. 251). All of which Eliot deftly and humorously undercuts by observing that "The shafts of Milby ridicule were made more formidable by being poisoned with calumny; and very ugly stories, narrated with circumstantial minuteness, were soon in circulation concerning Mr. Tryan and his hearers, from which stories it was plainly deducible that Evangelicalism led by a necessary consequence to hypocritical indulgence in vice" (p. 316). Tryan may be deluded in thinking that he is
God's representative to Milby parish and that Evangelical doctrine is the correct interpretation of divinely revealed truth, but he is not a hypocrite as far as Eliot is concerned. What his critics say is not to be taken at face value.

The idea of duty, introduced to Milby by Tryan and Evangelicalism, is advanced by Eliot as extremely valuable because it brings to man's outlook on life "a principle of subordination, of self-mastery" so that he rises from being "a mere bundle of impressions, desires, and impulses" to become a moral creature who bases his actions upon what is best for everyone concerned rather than solely upon what will gratify him most (p. 320). Apparently believing that it is his duty to serve God by rescuing suffering men and women from temporal and eternal ruin, Tryan practises self-denial in order to keep his desire for personal satisfaction from interfering with that responsibility. When Mr. Jerome attempts to ease Tryan's hardship by providing him with a horse, the curate insists that he has "much more than a single man needs," assures Jerome that he is not refusing the offer out of pride, and admits "if my heart were less rebellious, and if I were less liable to temptation, I should not need that sort of self-denial" (p. 327; italics added). Tryan clearly longs for the comforts and pleasures he denies himself but he so fears gratifying self that he permits himself only what he needs to survive and gives himself entirely to satisfying God's will. So relentlessly does he drive
himself in fulfilling his responsibilities, that even his "most unfriendly observers [are] obliged to admit that he gave himself no rest" and his friends note that he seems "bent on wearing himself out" (pp. 322-23). To Janet, he speaks of this self-denial in terms of submission to the will of God, suggesting that "As long as we live in rebellion against God, desiring to have our own will, seeking happiness in the things of this world, it is as if we shut ourselves up in a crowded stifling room, where we breathe only poisoned air" (p. 361). The alternative to self gratification is, in Tryan's opinion, complete submission to the will of God---"There is nothing that becomes us but entire submission, perfect resignation"--and he argues that we create a wall between ourselves and God's love when "we set up our own will and our wisdom against God's" (p. 362). Feeling a conflict between his commitment to serve God and his growing love for Janet, Tryan struggles desperately in the closing months of his life to keep that love firmly under control so that it will not interfere with his commitment to God: "He struggled with it because he felt it to be an indication that earthly affection was beginning to have too strong a hold on him, and he prayed more earnestly for a more perfect submission, and for a more absorbing delight in the Divine Presence as the chief good" (p. 407). In each of these examples of his self-denial, Tryan appears to be motivated by a clear vision of his responsibilities to God and to his fellowman. At no point does self-denial become an end in itself, a point of
pride with him as a measure of his moral and spiritual stature. Self-denial is, to Tryan, simply a proven tool which he uses to keep in check anything which threatens to interfere with those responsibilities.

Tryan apparently believes further that God is a person who can be known intimately by men, enjoyed, and approached with confidence for specific guidance. The curate appears to be so convinced that God has called him personally to minister in Milby that he will not be intimidated by persecution: "God has sent me to this place, and by His blessing, I'll not shrink from anything I may have to encounter in doing His work among the people" (p. 308). His statement certainly finds support in the narrator's observation that Tryan is not a gratuitous martyr who enjoys opposition and conveniently calls it persecution.

With a power of persistence which had been often blamed as obstinacy, he had an acute sensibility to the very hatred or ridicule he did not flinch from provoking. Every form of disapproval jarred him painfully; and, though he fronted his opponents manfully, and often with considerable warmth of temper, he had no pugnacious pleasure in the contest. It was one of the weaknesses of his nature to be too keenly alive to every harsh wind of opinion; to wince under the frowns of the foolish; to be irritated by the injustice of those who could not possibly have the elements indispensable for judging him rightly; and with all this acute sensibility to blame, this dependence on sympathy, he had for years been constrained into a position of antagonism. (p. 310)

Tryan is very much aware of the negative reaction his ministry provokes, and he feels the rejection keenly. But he persists because he believes in what he is doing and because he seems to be convinced that God personally called him to
There are other indications that Tryan believes in a personal God who is involved deeply in human affairs. Discussing Janet's dismal past in terms of divine guidance, Tryan says, "How can you tell but that the hardest trials you have known have been only the road by which He was leading you to that complete sense of your own sin and helplessness, without which you would never have renounced all other hopes, and trusted in His love alone?" (p. 358). To Sally Martin who is dying of tuberculosis, he says, "God seems to support you under it wonderfully. Pray for me Sally, that I may have strength too when the hour of suffering comes" (p. 331).

Sharing his own experience of sorrow and self denial with Janet, Tryan admits that "It has often been a hard struggle—but God has been with me" (p. 364). He goes on to describe this life as preparation for serving others and for eternally enjoying God's love:

See what work there is to be done in life, both in our own souls and for others. Surely it matters little whether we have more or less of this world's comfort in these short years, when God is training us for the eternal enjoyment of his love. Keep that great end of life before you, and your troubles will seem only the small hardships of a journey. (p. 364).

Arguing for submission to God's will over self gratification, Tryan suggests that "as soon as we submit ourselves to his will... we are fed with his spirit, which gives us new strength" and insists that "as soon as we lay ourselves entirely at his feet, we have enough light given us to guide our own steps" (p. 362). Anticipating Janet's objection that
full submission is extremely difficult, Tryan counters with an admission that she is right but promises that God will enter fully into her difficulties and assist her supernaturally:

I know it is hard—the hardest thing of all, perhaps—to flesh and blood. But to carry that difficulty to the Saviour along with all your other sins and weaknesses, and ask him to pour into you a spirit of submission. He enters into your struggles; he has drunk the cup of our suffering to the dregs; he knows the hard wrestling it costs us to say, "Not my will, but Thine be done." (p. 363)

Tryan's God apparently is one who strengthens the suffering, fully understands and enters into human difficulty, aids men and women in the struggle to submit to His will, guides servant and searcher alike, loves and prepares believers for the eternal enjoyment of His love, refreshes and releases people from bondage to selfish desire, and brings good out of the most dismal circumstances.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of Tryan's apparent belief in a personal experience of the grace of God and in a conscious relationship between Christ and the repentant sinner is found in a conversation with Janet about his conversion. He tells of feeling utterly wretched about what he had done to Lucy and of looking to "celebrated preachers" and into religious books for relief but finding none: "The faith which puts the sinner in possession of salvation seemed, as I understood it, to be quite out of my reach. I had no faith, I felt utterly wretched, under the power of habits and dispositions which had wrought a hideous evil" (p. 361). At
this point, a friend whose "very deep experience" has pre-
pared him to help Tryan, tells him that his sense of guilt
and helplessness is "the only preparation for coming to
Christ" and describes the process of conversion as follows:

You are weary and heavy-laden; well, it is you Christ
invites to come to him and find rest. He asks you to
cling to him, to lean on him; he does not command you to
to walk alone without stumbling. He does not tell you, as
your fellow-men do, that you must first merit his love;
he neither condemns nor reproaches you for the past, he
only bids you come to him that you may have life: he
bids you stretch out your hands, and take of the fulness
of his love. You have only to rest on him as a child
rests on its mother's arms, and you will be upborne by
his divine strength. That is what is meant by faith.
Your evil habits, you feel, are too strong for you; you
are unable to wrestle with them; you know beforehand you
shall fall. But when once we feel our helplessness in
that way, and go to the Saviour, desiring to be freed
from the power as well as the punishment of sin, we are
no longer left to our own strength. (p. 361)

This friend is introducing Tryan, not to a creed or a philo-
sophical view of life, but to a person who compassionately
invites him to accept forgiveness, love, and companionship.
Tryan is not to be left alone to live up to a code of ethics
but will be guided personally and assisted by this person
through this life in preparation for enjoyment of the next.
To Janet, Tryan suggests that the same forgiveness, love, and
personal care are available. She has only to respond in
faith to Christ's overtures and submit to God's will as Tryan
does.

Janet Dempster is precisely the kind of person who needs
to hear and experience what Tryan is describing. Her experi-
ence of life argues loudly against the existence of the kind
of Saviour Tryan claims to represent.
All her early gladness, all her bright hopes and illusions, all her gifts of beauty and affection, served only to darken the riddle of her life; they were the betraying promises of a cruel destiny which had brought out those sweet blossoms only that the winds and storms might have a greater work of desolation, which had nursed her like a pet fawn into tenderness and fond expectation, only that she might feel a keener terror in the clutch of the panther. Her mother had sometimes said that troubles were sent to make us better and draw us nearer to God. What mockery that seemed to Janet! Her troubles had been sinking her lower from year to year, pressing upon her like heavy fever-laden vapours, and perverting the very plenitude of her nature into a deeper source of disease. Her wretchedness had been a perpetually tightening instrument of torture, which had gradually absorbed all the other sensibilities of her nature into the sense of pain and the maddened craving for relief. Oh, if some ray of hope, of pity, of consolation, would pierce through the horrible gloom, she might believe then in a Divine love—in a heavenly Father who cared for His children. (p. 344)

Abused mercilessly by her husband and friendless except for a mother buried under her own load of unrelieved troubles, Janet feels desperately alone, betrayed by men and God. Life is a torturous riddle to her: on the one hand, her nature spills over with promise, while on the other hand, life mercilessly and brutally refutes that promise. Religion fails to give the strength she needs to reach the standards it sets for her and she is tired to trying to live by impersonal principles. Janet wants the immediate strength that comes through an intimate relationship with someone, human or divine, who understands her predicament and knows how to help her out of it.

She was tired, she was sick of that barren exhortation—Do right, and keep a clear conscience, and God will reward you, and your troubles will be easier to bear. She wanted strength to do right—she wanted something to rely on besides her own resolutions; for was not the path behind her all strewn with broken resolutions? How
could she trust new ones? (p. 351)

In Tryan, Janet finds something refreshingly different but it has nothing to do with his Evangelical beliefs or the Saviour he ostensibly represents. It is to Tryan himself that Janet is drawn and she enters into the kind of relationship with him that he has promised she could enjoy with God.

Janet is first attracted to Tryan by "his voice, his words, his look which told her he knew sorrow" (p. 350). She overhears him comforting, encouraging, and identifying with Sally Martin in her suffering and is surprised by what she hears.

There was none of the self-satisfied unction of the teacher, quoting or exhorting, or expounding, for the benefit of the hearer, but a simple appeal for help, a confession of weakness. Mr. Tryan had his deeply-felt troubles, then? Mr. Tryan, too, like herself, knew what it was to tremble at a forseen trial—to shudder at an impending burthen, heavier than he felt able to bear? The most brilliant deed of virtue could not have inclined Janet's good-will towards Mr. Tryan so much as this fellowship in suffering . . . (p. 331)

Janet is surprised by his honesty and humility. Tryan makes no attempt to hide his weaknesses. In fact, he freely admits them so that he can help people from alongside as a fellow sufferer and sinner rather than correct and lecture them from the elevated position of a judge and teacher. He is not a threat to people in difficulty because he accepts them as they are and, as an equal, sincerely and compassionately tries to help them from his own experience of trouble, thus participating in both the struggle and the solution. All the while, he affirms the need for mutual, sympathetic identifi-
cation by appealing to those he ministers to for help in his own troubles. By example and insight gained through experience, Tryan leads the way towards the sympathetic interdependency he values so highly. As Tryan steps out of the room past Janet, their eyes meet for a moment and the narrator says,

There is a power in the direct glance of a sincere and living human soul, which will do more to dissipate prejudice and kindle charity than the most elaborate arguments. The fullest exposition of Mr. Tryan's doctrine might not have sufficed to convince Janet that he had not an odious self-complacency in believing himself a peculiar child of God; but one direct, pathetic look of his had dissociated him with that conception for ever. (pp. 331-32)

It is Tryan's humanity rather than a correct understanding of his religious beliefs that draws Janet to him.

Struck by evidence of a deep experience of sorrow in Tryan's bearing and by his ability to maintain belief and to encourage others to believe inspite of that sorrow, Janet hopes that he has "some message of comfort different from the feeble words she had been used to hear from others" and she comes to Tryan for help when Dempster throws her out into the street (p. 350). But more than a message, she needs a sympathetic friend who will dispel the terrible loneliness which cripples her attempts to deal with her problems.

Janet felt that she was alone: no human soul had measured her anguish, had understood her self-despair, had entered into her sorrows and her sins with that deep-sighted sympathy which is wiser than all blame, more potent than all reproof—such sympathy as had swelled her own heart for many a sufferer. And if there was any Divine pity, she could not feel it, it kept aloof from her, it poured no balm into her wounds, it stretched out no hand to bear up her weak resolve, to fortify her
fainting courage. (p. 345)

Here Eliot begins to lay the ground for showing that despite its religious appearance, Janet's conversion is completely secular, brought about by human means and based on human values. Janet needs to be measured, understood, and comforted by a "human soul;" she needs to feel a sympathy that does not reprove as a judgment would and which she herself has felt for other sufferers: a sympathy of human origin and expression. Any thought of divine pity is secondary, a very remote possibility if a possibility at all. Tryan becomes that friend to her and gives her everything she had assumed divine pity was withholding from her: balm for her wounds, strength to do right, and encouragement. She does not need God because Tryan effectively takes His place in her life. Just as it was a man, Dempster, rather than a cruel destiny which led Janet into despair, so it is another man, Tryan rather than God, who leads her out of despair into a life of meaning and hope.

Apart from briefly sharing his own conversion experience and recommending that Janet submit to God's will, Tryan ministers to her on a purely human level and Janet responds in kind. Before he speaks to her of "the Divine Pity," Tryan feels it necessary to assure Janet of his sympathy: "She must be made to feel that her anguish was not strange to him; that he entered into the only half-expressed secrets of her spiritual weakness, before any other message of consolation could find its way to her heart" (p. 358). He enters into
her suffering so convincingly that Janet is soon able to say, "It is wonderful how I feel able to speak to him as I never have done to any one before; and how every word he says to me enters my heart and has a new meaning for me" (p. 366). But once Tryan has assured Janet of his sympathy, he does not lead her into faith in that further message of divine consolation and dependency on supernatural strength. Instead, he encourages her to lean on people who will not betray her and to find strength within herself to overcome her problems. When Janet asks Tryan how long he waited for the inner peace and strength she craves, he qualifies what he has just told her about Christ and the promise of supernatural aid by replying, "not perfect peace for a long while, but hope and trust, which is strength" (p. 361, italics added). This is quite different from receiving strength from a compassionate, all-powerful Saviour in whom one hopes and trusts. No longer is the combination of hope and trust the means by which Janet can appropriate divine strength, it is now the end, the strength itself. In other words, she is to find strength within herself and God will function simply as an idea to help her locate and use that inner strength. There is no personal assistance from God; Tryan has been speaking figuratively when describing Christ's aid in such intimate, concrete terms.

A remarkable change takes place in Janet which Eliot explains in terms of Tryan and his humanity with only incidental reference to his religion. According to Eliot,
Janet's transformation occurs as a result of "the influence of one true loving soul on another," and the narrator further suggests that the idea of hope and trust embodied in Tryan "is a power" which shakes Janet out of her despairing stupor and draws her towards itself "with gentle compulsion, as flame is drawn to flame" until "a delicious hope--the hope of purification and inward peace" enters Janet's soul and becomes the catalyst for positive change in her behavior (pp. 364-65). Eliot makes it clear that God has nothing to do with Tryan's success in helping Janet through a return bout with depression by pointing out that it is his experience--the fact that he had "gone through the initiation of suffering"--that enables him "to divine... that the hopefulness of the morning would be followed by a return of depression and discouragement" (p. 374). After noting that Tryan turns to prayer in order to relieve his anxiety over Janet, Eliot offers the following, condescending defence of his action:

There are unseen elements which often frustrate our wisest calculations--which raise up the sufferer from the edge of the grave, contradicting the prophecies of the clear-sighted physician, and fulfilling the blind and clinging hopes of affection; such unseen elements Mr. Tryan called the Divine Will, and filled up the margin of ignorance which surrounds all our knowledge with the feelings of trust and resignation. Perhaps the profoundest philosophy could hardly fill it up better. (p. 374)

Tryan obviously feels that Janet's chances of recovery are slim. Eliot has just presented Tryan as a man with sufficiently broad experience to be able to judge realistically how firm a hold on hope Janet has and he is very worried
about her future. Out of that experience, he has advised her to avoid temptation and to reach out to sympathetic people for help in her struggle to overcome her past:

"... open your heart as much as you can to your mother and Mrs. Pettifer. Cast away from you the pride that makes us shrink from acknowledging our weakness to our friends. Ask them to help you in guarding yourself from the least approach of the sin you most dread. Deprive yourself as far as possible of the very means and opportunity of committing it." (p. 363)

But he hears that she will need more help than this advice will give her and so he prays. At this point, Eliot interjects her own explanation of what is happening and advises us that Tryan's God is nothing more than a creation of his mind: a personification of those inexplicable, unseen elements of life which alter life in ways which defy reason; a substitute for philosophical speculation about what lies beyond the perimeters of his knowledge. The fact that Tryan believes in someone who exists only in his mind makes his belief a poor alternative to "profound philosophy" but it does have value in that it gives Tryan "feelings of trust and resignation" which in turn strengthen him to minister compassionately to people in need like Janet. This is the equivalent of patting a deluded child on the head, approving of him despite the delusion because it is harmless and because the pleasure it gives him is infectious.

Eliot suggests that through exposure to Tryan's compassion and sympathetic understanding, Janet is prepared for "that stronger leap by which faith grasps the idea of Divine sympathy" and comes to believe "the message of mercy" for
herself (p. 397). But does Janet ever make that leap or does she come to depend instead on Tryan and fail to develop a faith of her own in God? There is evidence that she attempts to make the leap. When she visits Dempster's sick room, Janet vows to win him back with love, confident that the "Divine Love that had already shone upon her would be with her" and determined to "lift up her soul continually for help," secure in the belief that "she could never be drawn back into that cold damp vault of sin and despair again; she had felt the morning sun, she had tasted the sweet pure air of trust and penitence and submission" (p. 385). But when temptation strikes again, we discover that Janet has very little confidence in Tryan's God though a great deal in Tryan himself. Struggling with "impetuous desire," she goes alone to a graveyard in a macabre attempt to remind herself of what she has escaped from and to find strength to overcome that desire: "She wanted to lash the demon out of her soul with the stinging memories of by-gone misery; she wanted to renew the old horror and the old anguish, that she might throw herself with the more desperate clinging energy at the foot of the cross, where the Divine Sufferer would impart divine strength" (p. 395; italics added). Already, Janet has lost sight of the Saviour of Tryan's belief: this Saviour is not eager to help her; she must extract help from Him. When He fails to give relief, she attempts to re-live "the blessed hours of hope and joy and peace that had come to her of late," but finds that this effort accentuates the temptation
and leaves her despondent and fearful of future onslaughts which might "overmaster" her when the desire passes. Eliot tells us that Janet tries to pray but flounders because "fear predominated over trust" and she "had no confidence that the aid she sought would be given" (p. 396). She runs to Tryan and in confessing her weakness to him, feels "half her burden removed" (p. 397). We are told that the other half of her burden is removed when she makes the leap of faith which brings her to belief in God's love for her: "When Mr. Tryan spoke words of consolation and encouragement, she could now believe the message of mercy; the waterfloods that had threatened to overwhelm her rolled back again, and life once more spread its heaven-covered spaces before her" (p. 397). When she walks home, she feels that the "Divine Presence" is no longer out of her reach but near and caring for her: "She felt like a little child whose hand is firmly grasped by its father, as its frail limbs make their way over the rough ground; if it should stumble, the father will not let it go" (p. 398). Here Eliot tells us that this "was the last terrible crisis of temptation Janet had to pass through" and we are not given another opportunity to see Janet's faith tested (p. 400). We do know that she associates the thought of Tryan with "repose from the conflict of emotion, with trust in the unchangeable, with the influx of a power to subdue self" and she does feel that Tryan is the primary source of her strength—a feeling which persists throughout her life: "But the great source of courage, the great help to persever-
ance, was the sense that she had a friend and teacher in Mr. Tryan: she could confess her difficulties to him; she knew he prayed for her; she had always before her the prospect of soon seeing him, and hearing words of admonition and comfort, that came to her charged with a divine power such as she had never found in human words before" (pp. 409, 393). After Tryan's death, we are told that Janet walks "in the presence of unseen witnesses--of the Divine Love that had rescued her, of the human love that waited for its eternal repose until it had seen her endure to the end," sustained by his memory and by Divine Love (p. 412). But from Janet's lips we hear nothing of a consciousness of God or of a faith in God that is distinctly her own and not just an extension of Tryan's. Her one post-conversion bout with temptation shows clearly that her faith lies in Tryan rather than God, contrary to what she thinks before that temptation strikes. After that test of her faith, we are told much about her reliance on Tryan, practically nothing about her faith in God, and given no further test of her faith from which to judge whether she has since managed the leap of faith which Eliot claims for her. In the end, we are left only with Eliot's word that Janet makes that leap of faith which carries her from faith in Tryan to faith in God. Given the devastating criticism of Evangelicalism which Eliot implies through her portrayal of Janet's conversion and Tryan's ministry, her word is not enough. She has failed to establish Janet as a legitimate convert to Evangelical Christianity.
That Eliot intended to discredit the supernatural basis of Evangelical belief in her portrayal of Janet's conversion, is clear from her comments at crucial points in that conversion. Shortly after Dempster dies, Eliot informs us that his passing is largely responsible for the change in Janet because it frees her from his brutality and opens the door to satisfying, affectionate relationships with other people.

All this friendliness was very precious to Janet. She was conscious of the aid it gave her in the self-conquest which was the blessing she prayed for with every fresh morning. The chief strength of her nature lay in her affection, which colored all the rest of her mind: it gave a personal sisterly tenderness to her acts of benevolence; it made her cling with tenacity to every object that had once stirred her kindly emotions. Alas! it was unsatisfied, wounded affection that had made her trouble greater than she could bear. And now there was no check to the full flow of that plenteous current in her nature--no gnawing secret anguish--no overhanging terror--no inward shame. Friendly faces beamed on her; she felt that friendly hearts were approving her, and wishing her well, and that mild sunshine of goodwill fell beneficently on her new hopes and efforts, as the clear shining after rain falls on the tender leaf-buds of spring, and wins them from promise to fulfilment.

(p. 392)

On the one hand, we hear briefly of Janet's praying for self-conquest but on the other hand and in much greater detail, we hear of the positive effect of sympathetic people on Janet's own nature. The early promise, latent in "the very plentitude of her nature" but brutally betrayed by Janet's experience of life until now, is now being won to fulfilment by the approval of sympathetic people (p. 344). It is not the infusion of divine aid or encouragement drawn from the story of divine pity which accounts for Janet's transformation. Rather, it is the unfettering of her own benevolent nature.
brought about by Dempster's passing, and the release of her own new hopes and efforts under the warm approval of new, sympathetic friends that is responsible for the dramatic change in Janet's outlook and behavior. The idea of God acts as a temporary crutch early in the process of transformation, supporting Janet's first, tentative steps out of self-despair, but warm, understanding, human relationships quickly take its place as the real and continuing force behind her conversion.

When Janet visits Dempster's sickroom just before his death and is deeply moved to help the man who was responsible for her pain, Eliot stresses the fact that this desire has nothing to do with God or theology or anything apart from Janet's own nature. It is perfectly natural for Janet to feel as she does toward her husband now that her own plenteous nature has been unfettered because, in the sickroom,

\[ \ldots \text{ where a human being lies prostrate, thrown on the tender mercies of his fellow, the moral relation of man to man is reduced to its utmost clearness and simplicity: bigotry cannot confuse it, theory cannot pervert it, passion, awed into quiescence, can neither pollute nor perturb it. As we bend over the sick-bed, all the forces of our nature rush towards the channels of pity, of patience, and of love, and sweep down the miserable choking drift of our quarrels, our debates, our would-be wisdom, and our clamorous selfish desires. This blessing of serene freedom from the importunities of opinion lies in all simple direct acts of mercy, and is one source of that sweet calm which is often felt by the watcher in the sick-room, even when the duties there are of a hard and terrible kind. (pp. 383-84; italics added) } \]

Underneath all the fighting—intellectual and physical, religious and philosophical—lies a common bond between men which is brought sharply into focus by suffering. Both the helper
and the helped brush aside theories, self-questionings, doubts, casuistries, propositional truths, questions of consequence, etc., and reach out to each other, affirming the existence of their shared humanity and their deeply rooted dependence on each other and the values they have in common. This is why suffering occupies such an important place in Eliot's moral scheme. It brings sharply into focus those primary, human values which are firmly rooted in human nature and thus applicable to all men, and it pushes aside what is irrelevant and unimportant but which so occupies men's hearts and minds that they will fight incessantly until suffering makes them aware of their need of each other. Janet is simply responding to the benign impulse of her unfettered nature, affirming the primary bond between her and her husband, recognizing and acting on their common humanity. In this arena, God is an intruder; men create the problems that divide them and men must work out the solutions to those problems without outside interference.

Eliot offers the same criticism of the supernatural in Evangelical belief in her study of Tryan's ministry. She explains Tryan's success solely in terms of his remarkable ability to enter imaginatively and convincingly into the lives of those he ministers to and she makes it abundantly clear that this ability was learned through hard experience rather than received from God. People like Janet and Mrs. Pettifer respond to Tryan's humanity rather than to any of his religious beliefs. They also respond to Tryan because
they can see that he is willing to share in their hardships. He not only ministers at Paddiford Common which is "a dismal district where you hear the rattle of the handloom, and breathe the smoke of coal pits," he chooses to live "in those small close rooms on the common, among heaps of dirty cottages, for the sake of being near the poor people" (p. 263, 271). Eliot describes his study, emphasizing its ugliness, and confirms Mrs. Pettifer's observation that Tryan lives as he does in order to be near the poor:

. . . Mr. Tryan's study was a very ugly little room indeed, with an ugly slap-dash pattern on the walls, and ugly carpet on the floor, and an ugly view of cottage roofs and cabbage-gardens from the window. His own person, his writing-table, and his bookcase, were the only objects in the room that had the slightest air of refinement; and the sole provision for comfort was a clumsy straight-backed chair covered with faded chintz. The man who could live in such a room, unconstrained by poverty, must either have his vision fed from within by an intense passion, or he must have chosen that least attractive form of self-mortification which wears no haircloth and has no meagre days, but accepts the vulgar, the commonplace, and the ugly, whenever the highest duty seems to lie among them. (p. 325; italics added)

We know that a significant degree of self-mortification is involved in Tryan's decision to live as he does and that his decision is motivated by a sense of duty from what he says to Mr. Jerome about his living conditions: "My way of living is quite of my own choosing, and I am doing nothing but what I feel bound to do, quite apart from money considerations" (p. 327). Touched by such graphic evidence of Tryan's deep commitment to help them and by his compassion for them as they are, people respond to his ministry from their hearts, prompting Mary Linnet to say, "When I see all the faces
turned up to him in Paddiford Church, I often think how hard it would be for any clergymen who had to come after him; he has made the people love him so” (p. 329). Those who visit him on his deathbed, regard him with a “venerating affection,” thinking of him, not as a representative of God and a teacher of divinely revealed truths about God, but as a close friend, a fellow human being who is deeply involved in their lives because this is precisely how he behaves towards them.

We also know that Tryan’s vision of rescuing people from ruin is fed from within by intense passion but it is a passion fed by his remorse over what he did to Lucy rather than by a sense of the awfulness of sin and of God’s love for sinners. Speaking to Janet about the moment he discovered the extent of the ruin he had brought upon Lucy, Tryan says,

There was only one thing that could make life tolerable to me; that was, to spend all the rest of it in trying to save others from the ruin I had brought on one. But how was that possible for me? I had no comfort, no strength, no wisdom in my own soul; how could I give them to others. (p. 360)

Tryan sees religion as a vehicle for atoning for his sin against Lucy and as a comfort and a strength for overcoming his own crippling sense of guilt over what he did to her. He does not see his sin against Lucy as a symptom of a much greater rebellion against God; he conceives of sin as isolated acts rather than as the basic condition of his life which expresses itself in many separate acts of sin. To Janet he admits that he feels considerably more pain over what he did to Lucy than over his sinful rebellion against
No sense of pardon for myself could do away with the pain I had in thinking what I had helped to bring on another. My friend used to urge upon me that my sin against God was greater than my sin against her; but—it may be from want of deeper spiritual feeling—that has remained to this hour the sin which causes me the bitterest pang. (pp. 361-62)

Tryan's conversion lacks the deep sense of sinfulness as pervading all aspects of his life and constituting an affront to a righteous, personal God that characterized the conversion of that noted Evangelical of whom Eliot thought very highly, John Wesley. Wesley describes his sense of sinfulness as the condition of his life rather than in terms of isolated acts—

I see that God's law is holy, righteous, and good. I know that every thought, every movement of my heart should bear God's image. But how deep I have fallen! How far I am from God's glory! I feel that I am sold under sin. I know that I deserve only wrath. . . . God is holy. I am sinful. God is a consuming fire; it must devour me the sinner.

and relates his conversion as a personal encounter with a God who is alive, knowable, and very much involved in men's lives—

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

This experience is basic to Evangelical conversion: a deep sense of one's sinful state and of one's inability to correct it followed by an equally deep, conscious experience of the
grace of God which leads to freedom from the penalty and the power of sin. Yet neither Tryan nor Janet experience anything like this. Tryan speaks of God as one who strengthens the suffering, fully understands and enters into human difficulties, assists men and women in the struggle to submit to His will, guides the searcher to truth, directs and enables His servants, loves and prepares his followers for the eternal enjoyment of His love, refreshes and releases people from bondage to selfish desires, and brings good out of the most wretched circumstances. But when Janet presses him on the point of immediate concern for her—that of supernatural aid—Tryan quickly qualifies what he has just said about God and advises her that faith in God is that aid, leading Janet to find the strength she craves within herself. Since this is the only instance where Tryan is pressed to explain the Evangelical beliefs which he articulates so clearly at several points in the novel, we are denied further opportunity to discover whether he believes literally anything he says about God or whether he is speaking figuratively and metaphorically in all of his religious dialogue. In the end, we are left with Eliot's word only that Tryan is an accurate representation of Evangelical belief just as we are left only with her word that Janet makes the leap from faith in Tryan to faith in God. Given Eliot's attempt to undermine the credibility of the supernatural aspects of their religion, her word alone is not enough. The problem is not that Eliot has created characters whose behavior is not entirely consistent with
what they say; no one's behavior is completely consistent
with what they claim to believe. But she has called Evangel-
cical, characters who lack that complete personal commitment
to a God they genuinely believe is deeply involved in their
lives, a commitment that Donald Masters has correctly called
"the secret and core of the Evangelical position" (Masters, 505). Eliot has left out the most important ingredient in
her Evangelical characters and that omission cripples her
attempt to discredit the supernatural basis of Evangelical
thought and practice. She may be right in agreeing with
Feuerbach that "Religion is the relation of man to his own
nature," that God simply is a projection of what men most
value and venerate in themselves, and that "in the origin of
religion there is no qualitative distinction whatever between
God and man."5 But if Eliot wishes to demonstrate the valid-
ity of this view in her fiction by dramatizing the Evangel-
cical consciousness for the purpose of exposing and explaining
it in human terms rather than supernatural, then she must use
characters who do believe that God exists apart from men, has
revealed Himself to them miraculously, and presently guides
their lives. We have only Eliot's word that Tryan and Janet
do.
Notes


III. DINAH MORRIS' METHODISM: Piteously Inefficacious But Beneficent

George Eliot's treatment of Dinah Morris' Methodism in *Adam Bede*, 1 published in 1859, continues to distinguish between humanist and supernatural values in order to praise the former and dismiss the latter as inconsequential and misleading. As she does with Tryan, Eliot presents Dinah as a legitimate representative of Evangelical Christianity, advising us that Seth and Dinah were "Methodists . . . of a very old-fashioned kind" who "believed in present miracles, in instantaneous conversions, in revelations by dreams and visions; they drew lots, and sought for Divine guidance by opening the Bible at hazard; having a literal way of interpreting the Scriptures, which is not at all sanctioned by approved commentators; and it is impossible for me to represent their diction as correct, or their instruction as liberal" (p. 35). Her view that Seth and Dinah are good people but deluded, surfaces immediately when Eliot argues that "it is possible, thank Heaven! to have very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings" and compares the literal content of Methodism to Molly's raw bacon cure for a child's fits, suggesting that either cure "may be a piteously inefficacious remedy; but the generous stirring of neighbourly kindness that [prompts] the deed has a beneficent radiation that is not lost" (p. 36). The value of Dinah's religion lies in the love that prompts her to share it with others in need. Her religion will not cure anyone but the feelings of
love with which she shares it, will have a "beneficent radiation" which will not be lost.

Eliot then leads us into a close study of Dinah's character and ministry, articulating a great deal of Evangelical belief through Dinah but emphasizing above everything else the tremendous feeling with which she ministers. She loves people without qualification or restriction and they sense it. The stranger on horseback, through whose eyes we first see Dinah, is struck by "the total absence of self-consciousness in her demeanor" and misses the "smile of conscious saintship" or the look of "denunciatory bitterness" which he has come to expect on the faces of Methodists (p. 19). After noting and explaining the stranger's surprise in this way, Eliot provides us with a description of Dinah's face which reveals her utter lack of self-consciousness, and her complete sincerity and love:

There was no keenness in the eyes; they seemed rather to be shedding love than making observations; they had the liquid look which tells that the mind is full of what it has to give out, rather than impressed by external objects. . . . The eyes had no peculiar beauty, beyond that of expression; they looked so simple, so candid, so gravely loving, that no accusing scowl, no light sneer could help melting away before their glance. (pp. 19-20)

Later, Lisbeth Bede draws peace and comfort from those "loving grey eyes," the touch of Dinah's hand which "bore the traces of labour from her childhood upwards," and "the soothing influence of Dinah's face and voice" quite apart from anything religious Dinah says (pp. 110, 113). Eliot's explanation of Dinah's success in quieting Lisbeth completely
discounts the supernatural aspect of Dinah's religion and stresses the importance of her sympathetic identification with the grieving wife.

Dinah and Seth were both inwardly offering thanks for the greater quietness of spirit that had come over Lisbeth. This was what Dinah had been trying to bring about, through all her still sympathy and absence from exhortation. From her girlhood upwards she had had experience among the sick and the mourning, among minds hardened and shrivelled through poverty and ignorance, and had gained the subtlest perception of the mode in which they could best be touched, and softened into willingness to receive words of spiritual consolation or warning. As Dinah expressed it, "she was never left to herself; but it was always given her when to keep silence and when to speak." And do we not all agree to call rapid thought and noble impulse by the name of inspiration? After our subtlest analysis of the mental process, we must still say, as Dinah did, that our highest thoughts and our best deeds are all given to us. (pp. 114-15)

From extensive experience with sufferers, Dinah has learned the fine art of preparing all kinds of reluctant hearers to receive her message of spiritual consolation or warning. She manages to bring about this quietness in Lisbeth, simply by letting the older woman feel her "still sympathy" and by refraining from giving any spiritual counsel until she is sure that Lisbeth is ready to receive it. Dinah feels that the wisdom to know what to say and when, is given to her by God but Eliot advises us that this wisdom arises out of Dinah's extensive experience and can be explained without any reference to God. According to Eliot, what Dinah calls divine inspiration is actually that "rapid thought and noble impulse" which stimulates our "highest thoughts and our best deeds" and which occurs so quickly and comes from so deep in
our experience that we have the sense that they are given to us. Our subtlest analysis of the mental process cannot trace the source and development of those thoughts and impulses; we only become aware of them when they surface in our consciousness. By focusing our attention on this varied but confused response to Dinah's eloquent presentation of Methodist belief, Eliot successfully undermines the credibility and relevance of that belief while encouraging us to admire and sympathize with Dinah. We are attracted to her person but discouraged from taking her message seriously.

Dinah's spiritual counsel is not what Lisbeth responds to. She fails to understand that counsel or Dinah's prayers, but "without grasping any distinct idea, without going through any course of religious emotions, [she feels] a vague sense of goodness and love, and of something right lying underneath and beyond all this sorrowing life" and begins to endure quietly the sorrow she does not understand "under the subduing influence of Dinah's spirit" (p. 115). The old woman cannot understand Dinah's specific religious beliefs, far less make them her own, but she is deeply affected by Dinah's humanity as it is expressed through sympathy.

The initial sermon of the novel, also seen through the eyes of the stranger on horseback, provides us with another illustration of Eliot's practice of distinguishing between humanist and supernatural values in her portrayals of religion in order to praise the former and dismiss the latter as inconsequential and misleading. Dinah's sermon begins with
a prayer that anticipates an unresponsive audience, but instead of threatening her hearers with the spectre of divine judgment, appeals to God to open their eyes to the suffering love of His Son so that they can receive his forgiveness and escape that judgment. In the sermon itself, Dinah quickly establishes common ground with the villagers as "just the sort of people who want to hear good news" by identifying with their poverty and the kinds of hardship these people encounter daily. From this they know that she is not a theoretician who deals in abstract ideas; Dinah knows their problems, their thinking patterns, and how they feel and she tailors her message to meet their specific and immediate needs. Anticipating the doubts which poor men might feel about the Creator's personal interest in them—"Can God take much notice of us poor people?"—Dinah stresses the fact that "Jesus spent his time almost all in doing good to poor people," healing the sick, feeding the hungry because he pitied them, and speaking "very tenderly to poor sinners that were sorry for their sins." Then she brings Christ into the experience with the question, "Ah! wouldn't you love such a man if you saw him—if he was here in this village?", inviting her listeners to love and enjoy Him as a kind-hearted friend and pleasant teacher (pp. 22-23). When she deals with sin, Dinah does so in a compassionate rather than a denunciatory way, pleading with her friends to repent of it as something which hurts them in this life, leads inevitably to divine judgment, and separates them from the best friend
they could ever have. She doesn't mince words on "their wilful darkness, their state of disobedience to God . . . the hatefulness of sin, the Divine holiness, and the sufferings of the Saviour," but these people are "lost sheep" to her rather than hateful sinners and she appeals to them, "beseeching them with tears to turn to God while there [is] yet time; painting to them the desolation of their souls, lost in sin, feeding on the husks of this miserable world, far away from God their Father; and then the love of the Saviour, who [is] waiting and watching for their return" (pp. 25-25). Finally, Dinah speaks of the joys "in store for the penitent" and speaks simply about "the divine peace and love with which the soul of the believer is filled—how the sense of God's love turns poverty into riches, and satisfies the soul, so that no uneasy desire vexes it, no fear alarms it: how, at last, the very temptation to sin is extinguished, and heaven is begun upon earth, because no cloud passes between the soul and God, who is its eternal sun" (pp. 28-29).

Throughout, her message is distinctly Evangelical in its doctrinal content, developed out of a literal interpretation of Scripture and centered upon a God who deeply loves men and is very much involved in their affairs. But the doctrinal content of the message is unimportant in the eyes of the residents of Hayslope, the stranger, and the author. What is important is how Dinah feels about what she is saying, how she conveys this feeling to her audience, and how those people respond to her.
The villagers respond to Dinah in different ways but none of them is directly or permanently affected by her message. Even before she begins to speak, a number of the men are deeply impressed by the candid, unpretentious, "gravely loving" expression in her eyes: "Joshua Rann gave a long cough, as if he were clearing his throat in order to come to a new understanding with himself; Chad Cranage lifted up his leather skull-cap and scratched his head; and Wiry Ben wondered how Seth has the pluck to think of courting her" (p. 20). There is something about Dinah's person which simultaneously attracts and puzzles these men and they remain puzzled and attracted throughout her message. Wiry Ben feels uneasy and "almost" wishes that he had not stopped to listen to her, "Yet he couldn't help liking to look at her and listen to her, though he dreaded every moment that she would fix her eyes on him, and address him in particular" (p. 25). When Dinah does address Sandy Jim, his confused response shows clearly that her specific religious beliefs fail to touch him although she certainly arouses in him the desire to be a better man—"the big soft-hearted man had rubbed away some tears with his fist, with a confused intention of being a better fellow, going less to the Holly Bush down by the Stone Pits, and cleaning himself more regularly of a Sunday" (pp. 25-26). He responds to Dinah on the level of feeling but he applies none of her beliefs to his own life and continues to live by his own conception of goodness. Bessy Cranage is preoccupied with Dinah's appearance until gradually she
becomes aware of a change in Dinah's tone of voice and begins to listen to what she is saying: "The gentle tones, the loving persuasion, did not touch her, but when the more severe appeals came she began to be frightened" (p. 26).

That Bessy is frightened by Dinah's tone of voice rather than what she is saying, is made clear by Bessy's concept of evil:

Poor Bessy had always been considered a naughty girl; she was conscious of it; if it was necessary to be very good, it was clear she must be in a bad way. She couldn't find her places at church as Sally Rann could; she had often been tittering when she "curcheyed" to Mr. Irwine; and these religious deficiencies were accompanied by a corresponding slackness in the minor morals, for Bessy belonged unquestionably to that unsoaped, lazy class of feminine characters with whom you may venture to "eat an egg, an apple, or a nut." All this she was generally conscious of, and hitherto had not been greatly ashamed of it. But now she began to feel very much as if the constable had come to take her up and carry her before the justice for some undefined offence. (p. 26; italics added)

Dinah has been speaking fervently about guilt, wilful darkness, the villagers' state of disobedience to God, the hatefulness of sin, Divine holiness, the sufferings of the Saviour, the desolation of the soul far away from God, and the love of the Saviour--none of which registers in Bessy's consciousness. Her concept of evil is as far removed from Dinah's message as Sandy Jim's concept of good. Others, too, are responding on the level of feeling without understanding what Dinah is saying, and the overall response of the villagers is a confused one, ranging from tears in "some of the hardest of eyes" to "a little smouldering vague anxiety, that might easily die out again" and does (pp. 24-25). Dinah is soon heard to say
I've noticed, that in these villages where the people lead a quiet life among the green pastures and the still waters, tilling the ground and tending the cattle, there's a strange deadness to the Word, as different as can be from the great towns, like Leeds, . . . where you seem to walk as in a prison yard, and the ear is deafened with the sounds of worldly toil. I think maybe it is because the promise is sweeter when this life is so dark and weary, and the soul gets more hungry when the body is ill at ease. (p. 92)

She senses that the villagers feel no need of the gospel she brings to them and tries to explain their failure to respond to her message in terms of the kind of life they lead, missing the fact that they are unable to identify with her vision of their sin and consequent need of God's promise of forgiveness and eternal life. The villagers are confused by her message rather than dead to it. While it may be true that they are much more content with their lot in life than their urban counterparts, Hayslope's residents fail to respond favourably to Dinah's sermon primarily because they do not understand how it applies to them.

The stranger on horseback follows the course of Dinah's sermon as "the development of a drama," constantly comparing her performance to what he has come to expect from Methodist preachers (p. 29). He pays not the slightest attention to the message itself. When he first sees Dinah, he is surprised:

not so much at the feminine delicacy of her appearance, as at the total absence of self-consciousness in her demeanour. He had made up his mind to see her advance with a measured step, and a demure solemnity of countenance; he had felt sure that her face would be mantled with the smile of conscious saintship, or else charged with denunciatory bitterness. He knew but two types of Methodist—the ecstatic and the bilious. But
Dinah walked as simply as if she were going to market, and seemed as unconscious of her outward appearance as a little boy: there was no blush, no tremulousness, which said, "I know you think me a pretty woman, too young to preach;" no casting up or down of the eyelids, no compression of the lips, no attitude of the arms, that said, "But you must think of me as a saint." She held no book in her ungloved hands, but let them hang down lightly crossed before her, as she stood and turned her grey eyes on the people. (p. 19)

Whatever Dinah is, and whatever criticisms can be made of her and her religion, there is no questioning her sincerity. Favorably impressed with her but reluctant to surrender his idea of how a Methodist preacher looks and behaves, the traveller says to himself, "A sweet woman . . . but surely nature never meant her for a preacher" (p. 20). Her performance changes his mind and he soon has to admit to a third kind of preacher in spite of himself.

Hitherto the traveller had been chained to the spot against his will by the charm of Dinah's mellow treble tones, which had a variety of modulation like that of a fine instrument touched with the unconscious skill of musical instinct. The simple things she said seemed like novelties, as a melody strikes us with new feeling when we hear it sung by the pure voice of a boyish chorister; the quiet depth of conviction with which she spoke seemed in itself an evidence for the truth of her message. (p. 24; italics added)

Looking about himself, the stranger notices that Dinah has also "thoroughly arrested her hearers" and that the villagers have "pressed nearer to her" with "no longer anything but grave attention on all faces" (p. 24). The key to Dinah's performance is her voice: it captivates her audience; under its influence, simple things sound fresh and provoke new feeling in people; the quiet confidence behind it seems to vouch for the message's truthfulness; it carries the full
weight of her message and emotions, unaided by gesture or grimace; and it reflects the unconscious, instinctive way in which Dinah ministers to people. She communicates on the level of feeling, "speaking directly from her own emotions, and under the inspiration of her own simple faith" (p. 25, italics added). Dinah's message is simply one point of contact with her audience, and a poor one at that; it is one means of communicating the tremendous range of her feeling to people she wishes to help. The stranger treats her message just as a bridge to what is of prime importance to him, the inner drama of Dinah's emotions. He listens to her appeal to the villagers and wonders "whether she could have that power of rousing their more violent emotions, which must surely be a necessary seal of her vocation as a Methodist preacher" until she begins to speak of the villagers' lost condition as sinners and convinces him that she has that power (p. 24).

But, even then, he continues to evaluate her preaching style and ignores the message itself, expressing surprise over the continuing lack of gesture in her delivery and concluding that "Nothing could be less like the ordinary type of Ranter than Dinah" because she imitates no one's preaching style, speaking instead with feeling and a faith which is her own (p. 25). The feeling is genuine because she is speaking sincerely; her delivery is not the least bit theatrical. When Dinah concludes her sermon and appeals to her hearers to respond to what she has said about God and their condition before Him, the stranger leaves because the drama has
finished for him. He is interested only in Dinah's perfor-
mance; her message means nothing to him. At no point during
the sermon has he evaluated its doctrinal content and he
makes no move to do so now when she invites it.

Eliot draws our attention away from what Dinah is saying
to how and why she says it by presenting her sermon almost
entirely through the consciousness of a man who is interested
only in the dramatic quality of her delivery—a subtle but
very effective way of minimizing the importance of the mes-
sage while drawing close attention to the humanity of the
speaker. Advising us that the traveller's response is to be
expected "for there is this sort of fascination in all sin-
cere unpremeditated eloquence, which opens to one the inward
drama of the speaker's emotions," Eliot focuses our attention
on the emotive force behind Dinah's delivery as it is
expressed through tonal changes in her voice. We are told
that Dinah first addresses the villagers "in a clear but not
loud voice" and that she prays "in the same moderate tone, as
if speaking to someone quite near her" (p. 20). All of our
attention is on Dinah's person and her sincerity rather than
on the prayer. Then we are told that Dinah raises her voice
only slightly when she begins her sermon and that during the
course of it, she unconsciously and instinctively charms her
audience with "mellow and treble tones" which make simple
things sound "like novelties" and which convey a sense of
"quiet depth of conviction" about what she is saying (p. 24).
Her voice is creating an illusion because simple things
remain simple regardless of how they are made to sound, and a sense of deep conviction about what she is saying is not evidence "for the truthfulness of her message" (p. 24). Throughout her sermon, Dinah's tone of voice changes constantly in response to rapidly changing currents of feeling within her. She speaks of death "in such a tone of plaintive appeal" that tears come into "some of the hardest eyes" (p. 24). When she speaks of Christ's compassionate ministry to the poor, it is with "gentle tones" and "loving persuasion" (p. 26). The lost condition of the villagers fills her with "yearning desire" to help them and we hear her "beseeching them with tears to turn to God" (p. 25). In a "tone of pleading reproach," she tells of the sufferings of Christ, but in all this is unable to move the villagers beyond some tears, a little vague, smouldering anxiety, and a confused response on the part of individuals like Sandy Jim and Bessy Cranage. As a preacher she has failed, but only because people cannot relate to her message. They have been touched by her deep compassion and unquestionable sincerity: the villagers admire and respect her; the traveller is fascinated by her; and the narrator clearly approves of her. But her religion stops each from a much closer relationship with her byclouding with seemingly irrelevant and confusing information, her sympathetic identification with them. Dinah's humanity attracts people but her Methodism confuses and alienates them.

Dinah's religion also repeatedly interferes with her
attempts to help Hetty. In "The Two Bed-Chambers" scene, Dinah's habit of thinking only in religious terms ruins her attempt to understand the girl. While meditating in the room directly below Hetty's and brooding over having to leave people she loves deeply, Dinah is startled by the sound of something falling to the floor above her. After listening briefly, she concludes that Hetty is in no danger and prepares to go bed. But Dinah's anxiety over Hetty's future has been aroused and she begins to imagine the worst for her:

"the solemn duties of the wife and mother--and her mind so unprepared for them all; bent merely on little foolish, selfish pleasures, like a child hugging its toys in the beginning of a long toilsome journey, in which it will have to bear hunger and cold and unsheltered darkness" (p. 160). The image of a child naively facing suffering with misplaced values quickly develops a religious perspective and by the time Dinah is ready for bed, Hetty has become the lost sheep in one of Jesus' parables, acutely aware of its plight and struggling desperately to free itself from "a thorny thicket of sin and sorrow," "torn and bleeding," and "looking with tears for rescue and finding none" (p. 160). To this, Eliot adds, "It was in this way that Dinah's imagination and sympathy acted and reacted habitually, each heightening the other" (p. 160; italics added). Eliot has already given us evidence of Dinah's sympathetic identification with the people she ministers to and of her ability to enter imaginatively and convincingly into their lives in the sermon at the
outset of the novel. Just as her religion interfered with her attempts to help the residents of Hayslope by confusing them, here it completely misleads Dinah as to Hetty's plight and state of mind. Dinah's vision of Hetty as a self-centered child who is blissfully unaware of the pain and sorrow ahead is accurate and penetrating but Hetty is not at all conscious of being trapped in a thorny thicket of sin and sorrow and she certainly is not looking for anyone to rescue her from what she believes to be her future with Arthur. For Dinah, what began as a simple question about Hetty's immediate well-being, developed into an anxious concern over her lack of preparation for the roles of wife and mother, and became a vivid visualization of what Dinah believes to be Hetty's eternal danger, has now taken on the importance of a mission of divine mercy for which she needs divine sanction. Opening her Bible at random, Dinah finds a passage\(^2\) which applies to her situation only in the loosest possible way but which becomes, for her, the divine sanction she seeks:

The first words she looked at were those at the top of the left-hand page: "And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him." That was enough for Dinah; she had opened on that memorable parting at Ephesus, when Paul had felt bound to open his heart in a last exhortation and warning. She hesitated no longer . . . . (p. 161)

An artist as careful about accuracy as Eliot, would certainly be aware of the significant disparity between Dinah's situation and Paul's: Paul is delivering final instructions to the spiritual leaders of a church which he spent several years establishing in the Christian faith while Dinah is
contemplating speaking to a girl with whom she has no spiritual past and no mutually recognized grounds for warning and exhorting her. But Dinah, who reads her Bible with such frequency that it is "worn quite round at the edges" and knows its contents so well that she recognizes "the physiognomy of every page" and can tell exactly what book she opens to and sometimes the chapter without seeing title or number," sees only the surface similarity between what Paul did and what she would like to do and immediately concludes that God is directing her to go to Hetty (p. 161). To Hetty, Dinah says, "it has been borne upon my mind tonight that you may someday be in trouble" and suggests that trouble comes when "we set our hearts on things which it isn't God's will for us to have" with a tone of voice which ranges from "solemn pathetic distinctness" to "tender anxious pleading" until Hetty becomes frightened and begins to cry (pp. 162-63). Mistaking Hetty's response for "the stirring of a divine impulse," Dinah kisses her and begins "to cry with her for grateful joy" (p. 163). But her delusion ends abruptly when Hetty pushes Dinah away in irritation and Eliot says,

It is our habit to say that while the lower nature can never understand the higher, the higher nature commands a complete view of the lower. But I think the higher nature has to learn this comprehension, as we learn the art of vision, by a good deal of hard experience, often with bruises and gashes incurred in taking things up by the wrong end, and fancying our space wider than it is. (p. 163)

Dinah's lack of experience with individuals of Hetty's outlook and temperament accounts only partially for her failure
to understand and help Hetty. Dinah's religion interferes with the insight she has gained through experience by supplying her imagination with data which is misleading and by leading her to adopt irrational means or reaching decisions that Eliot systematically shows are misguided.

Earlier in the novel, Eliot argues that what Dinah believes is divine inspiration is in fact that process of "rapid thought and noble impulse" which is developed through extensive experience and which escapes our "subtlest analysis of the mental process," creating the impression that "our highest thoughts and our best deeds are all given to us" (p. 114-15). There, Eliot also insists that through extensive experience with suffering people, Dinah "had gained the subtlest perception of the mode in which they could best be touched, and softened into willingness to receive words of spiritual consolation or warning" (p. 114). From that experience, Dinah had developed an instinctive sense of what, when, and how to minister to people who are at least initially resistant to her message. But here, in her "deep longing to go now and pour into Hetty's ear all the words of tender warning and appeal that rushed into her mind," Dinah ignores that instinct which tells her that Hetty is "weary, and that going to her now in an unseasonable moment would only tend to close her heart more obstinately" (p. 160) in favour of supernatural guidance which fails her badly. Hetty is first irritated, then frightened and angered by Dinah's insensitive approach. Had Dinah obeyed the voice of instinct, she would
not have alienated Hetty and left her friendless when she was about to need a friend the most.

This pattern of success where Dinah responds to the voice of instinct sharpened by experience and of failure where she acts on the dictates of her religion, persists in the prison scenes. When the two women meet again for the first time in prison, Dinah "unconsciously" opens her arms and reaches out to Hetty in a gesture of love and protection and says, "I'm come to be with you Hetty--not to leave you--to stay with you--to be your sister to the last" (p. 458). There is no mention of God or religion here; Dinah is acting on instinct. Hetty responds slowly but steps into Dinah's arms and Eliot advises us that it is "the human contact" that Hetty clings to (p. 458). Throughout what follows, Hetty responds more and more to Dinah's compassionate humanity while Dinah, seemingly unaware of what Hetty is responding to, begins to speak more and more of God, sin, and eternity and of Hetty's need to confess her sin to God and ask for His forgiveness, believing that Hetty is becoming progressively more responsive to her religious counsel.

Dinah's counsel is soundly Evangelical. When Hetty insists that she "can't know anything about" God's love for her, Dinah advises her that she cannot know God's forgiveness and love as long as she clings to sin:

God's love and mercy can overcome all things--our ignorance, and weakness, and all the burthen of our past wickedness--all things but our wilful sin; sin that we cling to, and will not give up. . . . Don't shut God's love out in that way, by clinging to sin. . . . He can't
bless you while you have one falsehood in your soul; his pardoning mercy can't reach you until you open your heart to him, and say, "I have done this great wickedness; O God, save me, make me pure from sin." (pp. 459-60)

Then Dinah presses Hetty to "confess the wickedness you have done--the sin you have been guilty of against your heavenly Father," kneeling as she does so (p. 460). Hetty kneels, too, but in response to "Dinah's movement" rather than because of anything she says (p. 460). When Dinah again presses her to confess, Hetty says, "I can't feel anything like you... my heart is hard," admitting that so little of what Dinah has said has registered with her that she does not even feel the need to confess. Dinah has told her that her sin is against her "heavenly Father" but this does not make sense to Hetty. All that she can think of is the hanging on Monday and the fact that there appears to be no way of escaping it. At this point, Dinah abruptly changes her approach and appeals to God for help, diagnosing Hetty's problem as failure to appreciate the awfulness of her sin and its eternal consequences and asking God to make Hetty aware of the need to confess her sin, of the consequences if she does not, and of the limited time she has to receive divine pardon:

Fear and trembling have taken hold on her; but she trembles only at the pain and death of the body: breathe upon her thy life-giving Spirit, and put a new fear within her--the fear of her sin. Make her dread to keep the accursed thing within her soul: make her feel the presence of the living God, who beholds all the past, to whom the darkness is as noonday; who is waiting now at the eleventh hour, for her to turn to him, and confess her sin, and cry for mercy--now, before the
night of death comes, and the moment of pardon is forever fled, like yesterday that returneth not. (p. 461)

Discounting her own efforts to help Hetty as inadequate and weak, Dinah affirms her own dependency upon divine aid and reaffirms Hetty's need of supernatural assistance before she will be able to confess her sin against God "with her whole soul" and receive divine pardon:

Saviour! it is yet time--time to snatch this poor soul from everlasting darkness. I believe--I believe in thy infinite love. What is my love or my pleading? It is quenched in thine. I can only clasp her in my weak arms, and urge her with my weak pity. Thou--thou wilt breathe on the dead soul, and it shall arise from the unanswering sleep of death. (p. 461)

Like Bessy Cranage, Hetty breaks when Dinah begins to dramatize the presence of the Saviour, speaking of him as if he is visible to her: "Yea, Lord, I see thee, coming through the darkness" (p. 461). But Hetty confesses to Dinah rather than to God and, completely missing the point of Dinah's counsel about sin as an affront to God with eternal consequences, asks if God will take away the accusing memory of her crime now that she has confessed about leaving the child to die. Like Tryan at the moment of his conversion, Hetty does not see that her sin against the baby is only one symptom of a sinful nature that needs to be forgiven and purified by God. We never hear her come to that realization and sue for mercy and transformation. As was the case with Tryan and Janet, there is no hard evidence that Hetty is converted to belief in Dinah's God. Dinah's clearly stated beliefs have no effect on Hetty; Dinah's compassion and fervor account for
the change in Hetty.

In a conversation with Adam on the eve of Hetty's execution, Dinah attempts to excuse the lack of evidence that Hetty has come to trust in God for herself as Dinah does, arguing that

Although [Hetty's] poor soul is very dark, and discerns little beyond the things of the flesh, she is no longer hard: she is contrite--she has confessed all to me. The pride of her heart has given way, and she leans on me for help, and desires to be taught. This fills me with trust; for I cannot but think that the brethren sometimes err in measuring the Divine love by the sinner's knowledge. (p. 467; italics added)

But there is a serious discrepancy, in terms of Evangelical teaching, between what Dinah said earlier while urging Hetty to repent of her sin and what she is saying now about the girl's conversion. Earlier, Dinah had urged Hetty to "confess the wickedness you have done--the sin you have been guilty of against your heavenly Father" promising that God would then enter her soul, bringing "strength and peace" and insisting that "there is light and blessedness for us as soon as we cast it [our sin] off" (p. 460; italics added). Clearly, Dinah was leading Hetty into the kind of personal, conscious relationship with God that Tryan's friend pressed him to enter, holding out the promise of immediate, personal, and supernatural aid from God. Hetty's sin was against God, her pardon had to come from God, and the strength to live her new life as his child had also to come from God. In the wake of the girl's confession to her, Dinah apparently led Hetty to confess to God as well with the words, "Let us pray, poor
sinner: let us fall on our knees again, and pray to the God of all mercy" (p. 465). But here, no evidence emerges that Hetty has done so or that she is experiencing what Dinah has insisted she must. Hetty tries to forgive Arthur because "Dinah says, I should forgive him ... for else God won't forgive me," and on the way to the gallows, she clings to Dinah "as the only visible sign of love and pity" (pp. 467, 472; italics added). Hetty gives no evidence of a faith of her own in God although she expresses a great deal in Dinah. More importantly, Dinah is no longer speaking of God in such intimate, knowable terms in relation to Hetty. It is now Hetty's relationship to Dinah that "fills [Dinah] with trust" and is the source of her joy:

I must hasten back to her, for it is wonderful how she clings now, and was not willing to let me out of her sight. She never used to make any return to my affection before, but now tribulation has opened her heart. (p. 467)

As Tryan did with Janet, Dinah has taken God's place in Hetty's conversion; she has become to Hetty what she promised God would be. In so doing, Dinah loses her credibility as a representative of Evangelical belief and practice. She does not understand or does not believe what she says about God and man's condition before Him. If she did, Dinah would be gravely concerned about Hetty's response to her rather than to the God who can save her from "everlasting fire".

The problem is not that Dinah fails to live up to some standard of Evangelical belief and practice outside the novel or that her behaviour is not entirely consistent with her
religious beliefs. Rather, the problem is that Dinah's behavior is not consistent with the most basic aspects of what she says about God and man's fallen state before him despite the fact that she is very articulate about those beliefs in her sermon and her counsel to Hetty. Eliot has failed to create a credible Evangelical character in Dinah Morris—credible in terms of the standard raised by Eliot herself within the novel. If we examine closely the doctrinal content of Dinah's sermon and counsel, the fundamental nature of Eliot's failure can be seen clearly.

In her sermon, Dinah professes belief in a historical, miracle-performing Jesus who was God in human flesh, expressing himself to men in terms they could understand readily:

Well, dear friends, who was this man? Was he only a good man—a very good man, and no more—like our dear Mr. Wesley, who has been taken from us? . . . . He was the Son of God—'in the image of the Father,' the Bible says; that means, just like God, who is the beginning and the end of all things—the God we want to know about. So then, all the love that Jesus showed to the poor is the same love that God has for us. We can understand what Jesus felt, because he came in a body like ours, and spoke words such as we speak to each other . . . . our blessed Saviour has showed us what God is in a way us poor ignorant people can understand; he has showed us what God's heart is, what are his feelings towards us. (pp. 23-24)

Her God is real, deeply interested in men, and has revealed himself to them; her authority for this "good news" is the Bible. On the same authority, she also believes that men are lost sinners facing God's judgment and "everlasting fire" unless they repent of their sin and appeal to God for pardon (p. 28). That Dinah believes what she is saying about man's
sinful state and fiery destiny appears to be borne out by both her facial expressions and her tone of voice while she is speaking. At least, Eliot would have us believe that Dinah is sincere. When she turns to the topic of sin with the exclamation, "Lost!—Sinners!", Eliot tells us that there was a great change in her voice and manner. She had made a long pause before the exclamation, and the pause seemed to be filled by agitating thoughts that showed themselves in her features. Her pale face became paler; the circles under her eyes deepened, as they do when tears half gather without falling; and the mild loving eyes took an expression of appalled pity, as if she had suddenly discerned a destroying angel hovering over the heads of the people. Her voice became deep and muffled . . . . (pp. 24-25)

Eliot also informs us that Dinah becomes "less calm, her utterance more rapid and agitated" as she attempts to make Hayslope's residents aware of "their guilt, their wilful darkness, their state of disobedience to God . . . the hatefulness of sin, the Divine holiness, and the sufferings of the Saviour, by which a way had been opened for their salvation" (p. 25). In her desperation to convince her hearers of their danger, Dinah appeals to them individually "with tears to turn to God while there [is] yet time," communicating "irresistibly to her hearers" her own belief "in visible manifestations of Jesus, which is common among the Methodists" until the villagers feel that Jesus is "among them bodily, and might at any moment show himself to them in some way that would strike anguish and penitence into their hearts" (pp. 25, 26-27). Her graphic descriptions of Jesus' suffering on the cross, related with considerable detail and
feeling, suggest a very simple, direct faith in someone who is very real to Dinah and Eliot supports this with numerous descriptions of Dinah consciously enjoying a sense of God's presence, among them one which occurs the night before Dinah leaves Hayslope for Snowfield:

She closed her eyes, that she might feel more intensely the presence of a Love and Sympathy deeper and more tender than was breathed from the earth and sky. That was often Dinah's mode of praying in solitude. Simply to close her eyes, and to feel herself enclosed by the Divine Presence; then gradually her fears, her yearning anxieties for others, melted away like ice-crystals in a warm ocean. (p. 159)

What for Dinah is God, is for Eliot human feelings of love and sympathy personified until they take on God-like, universal qualities and applications. But the point being made by Eliot, regardless of her humanistic explanation of Dinah's religious experience, is that Dinah does believe completely in a God who communes with and directs her. Deluded she may be, but a hypocrite she is not.

Dinah's prison conversations with Hetty concentrate on her need to confess her sinfulness to God and to sue for the pardon he has provided through Jesus Christ. She repeatedly pressing Hetty to repent because sin deliberately clung to is the only obstacle which God's love and mercy cannot overcome: "his pardoning mercy can't reach you until you open your heart to him, and say, 'I have done this great wickedness; O God, save me, make me pure from sin!'" (pp. 459-60). If Hetty dies before receiving God's pardon, we gather from Dinah's sermon that the girl faces the specter of divine wrath and
the torment of "everlasting fire" (p. 28). We hear Dinah pleading with God to create in Hetty a sense of her sinfulness and consequent accountability to God "at the eleventh hour" so that Hetty will "turn to him, and confess her sin, and cry for mercy--now, before the night of death comes, and the moment of pardon is for ever fled, like yesterday that returneth not" (p. 461). According to Eliot, Dinah makes this appeal with "all her soul," which is to be expected if she believes what she is saying--Hetty is in grave danger and only vaguely aware of it.

Suddenly, against this background of clearly articulated Evangelical doctrine and authorial commentary emphasizing Dinah's sincerity, Eliot gives us a Dinah who is delighted with Hetty's new, affectionate dependency on her and who shows no alarm over the fact that Hetty shows no evidence of that personal faith in God which the earlier Dinah insisted was Hetty's only escape from divine judgment and eternal damnation. How are we to reconcile this new Dinah who is quite content to be a substitute for Christ in Hetty's "salvation" with the earlier Dinah who spoke of Christ with such vigorous faith and believed so completely that men's eternal destiny was determined solely by how they responded to Christ's offer of pardon? Her inconsistency on this fundamental point of Evangelical belief destroys Dinah's credibility as a representative of such belief.

Eliot's poor handling of Dinah's religion is equally pronounced in her treatment of the Seth-Dinah-Adam love
triangle. Explaining why she cannot marry Seth, Dinah says, "But my heart is not free to marry. . . . God has called me to minister to others, not to have any joys or sorrows of my own" and later, "My life is too short, and God's work is too great for me to think of making a home for myself in this world" (pp. 32, 33). She admits that she first thought that Seth's love for her "might be a leading of Providence for me to change my way of life" but found that whenever I tried to fix my mind on marriage and our living together, other thoughts always came in—the times when I've prayed by the sick and dying and the happy hours I've had preaching, when my heart was filled with love, and the Word was given to me abundantly. And when I've opened the Bible for direction, I've always lighted on some clear word to tell me where my work lay. . . . I see that our marriage is not God's will—he draws my heart another way. I seem to have no room in my soul for wants and fears of my own, it has pleased God to fill my heart so full with the wants and sufferings of his poor people. (p. 33)

Her final word to Seth on the matter is,

Do nothing without the Lord's clear bidding. . . . We mustn't be in a hurry to fix and choose our own lot; we must wait to be guided. . . . It isn't for you and me to lay plans; we've nothing to do but to obey and to trust. (p. 34)

Once more we hear Dinah speaking fervently about a conscious relationship with God which takes precedence over all human relationships and a divine call to set aside personal satisfaction in favor of preaching a divinely revealed gospel to the poor. When she preaches, the message is "given" to her by God and from the Bible she "always" receives "clear" guidance for her life and ministry. So conscious is she of a call from God to preach that Dinah rules out the possibility
of marriage for herself, assuming that it will conflict with His will for her life. To Seth she speaks with conviction about the need to wait patiently for divine guidance, of the necessity of complete submission to God's will, and of the importance of obedience to and trust in God. One would be hard pressed to find a more explicit summary of Evangelical teaching about the believer's relationship with and responsibilities towards God.

Dinah attempts to reject Adam's proposal of marriage on the same grounds on which she successfully rejects Seth's. She advises Adam that they must part because "we must submit to another Will" but Adam, unlike Seth who shares Dinah's view of divine guidance, presses Dinah on the question of whether she loves him (p. 519). Here Eliot advises us that Dinah is "too entirely reliant on the Supreme guidance to attempt to achieve any end by a deceptive concealment" and we hear Dinah say,

my heart is drawn strongly towards you; and of my own will, if I had no clear showing to the contrary, I could find my happiness in being near you, and ministering to you continually. I fear I should forget to rejoice and weep with others; nay, I fear I should forget the Divine presence, and seek no love but yours. (p. 519)

Later she argues,

I have been led towards another path; all my peace and my joy have come from having no life of my own, no wants, no wishes for myself, and living only in God and those of his creatures whose sorrows and joys he has given me to know. Those have been very blessed years to me, and I feel that if I was to listen to any voice that would draw me aside from that path, I should be turning my back on the light that has shone upon me, and darkness and doubt
would take hold of me. (p. 519)

Up to this point, Dinah has spoken of her divine call as if it is unmistakably clear and Eliot has emphasized the fact that Dinah is sincere in this profession. But now, under continuing pressure from Adam to acknowledge the supremacy of her love for him over all other considerations, Dinah begins to hedge and Eliot's dramatization of Dinah's religion begins to crack. Unlike the Dinah who earlier claimed to have undisputably clear divine guidance which excluded marriage and whose sincerity Eliot repeatedly vouched for, this new Dinah begins to flounder badly in the face of Adam's very thin argument that their love precludes constraints from all other sources, human or divine. What real counter to Dinah's argument has Adam offered? All he does is continue to insist that their love for each other is more important than any other consideration without offering any support for or justification of that assumption while Dinah in the same breath fluctuates between insisting that "the command was clear that I must go away" and admitting that "my mind is full of questionings about that; for now, since you tell me of your strong love towards me, what was clear to me, has become dark again" (p. 520). But when she says,

a great fear is upon me. It seems to me as if you were stretching out your arms to me, and beckoning me to come and take my ease, and live for my own delight, and Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, was standing looking towards me, and pointing to the sinful, and suffering, and afflicted. I have seen that again and again when I have been sitting in the stillness and darkness, and a great terror has come upon me lest I should become hard, and a lover of self, and
no more bear willingly the Redeemer's cross. (p. 520)

Dinah is describing the choice exactly as it is if she genuinely believes what she has been saying all along about her God and her religion. If God has called her to minister to "the sinful, and suffering, and afflicted," a decision to choose marriage over that call is selfish, a flagrant denial of her duty to her Creator and Saviour, and a refusal to minister the divine offer of eternal life to men facing eternal damnation unless they repent and accept God's offer of pardon.

Given her religious beliefs, Dinah is facing a choice between the greatest possible mission of love and mercy which has eternal consequences for her and for her hearers and the lesser duty of loving devotion to one other human being in this life. Apparently oblivious to the glaring contradiction between what she has claimed to believe and what she says now, Dinah proposes a test of her guidance and of Adam's love which effectively denies the value or need of divine guidance:

We must submit ourselves, Adam. With time, our duty will be made clear. It may be, when I have entered on my former life, I shall find all these new thoughts and wishes vanish, and become as things that were not. Then I shall know that my calling is not towards marriage. (p. 522)

What is being tested is the permanence of Dinah and Adam's love for each other rather than the clarity or validity of Dinah's call from God to preach. Underneath the surface of religious rhetoric, the decision to marry will be based on
whether or not Dinah's love for Adam persists during their separation. It persists and they marry; divine guidance does not enter the picture despite Dinah's feeble attempt to explain in religious terms, her decision to marry Adam:

Adam . . . it is the Divine Will. My soul is so knit to yours that it is but a divided life I live without you. And at this moment, now you are with me, and I feel that our hearts are filled with the same love, I have a fulness of strength to bear and do our heavenly Father's Will, that I had lost before. (p. 544)

The problem is not that Methodists cannot fall in love or require special divine guidance to marry. But Dinah claimed from God a "clear showing" which denied her marriage to anyone and involved her "having no life of my own, no wants, no wishes for myself, and living only in God and those of his creatures whose sorrows and joys he has given me to know" (p. 519). Emphasizing just how real and important this guidance is to Dinah, Eliot has informed us that Dinah is "too entirely reliant on the Supreme guidance to attempt to achieve any end by a deceptive concealment" (p. 519). Now Dinah suddenly announces that "it is the Divine Will" that she marry Adam without any further guidance or even an admission that she misunderstood the earlier leading (p. 519). Her attempt to justify her dependence on Adam's love by suggesting that this human love which once threatened her devotion to God has now become the very foundation of her strength to do God's will, can hardly be satisfying without some explanation of how this has happened which will resolve the sharp conflict between her call to preach and her love for Adam: that conflict which
Dinah described in such stark terms earlier. Without that explanation, Dinah's decision to marry Adam destroys her credibility as a believable representative of Methodist belief and undermines Eliot's attempt to re-explain the supernatural aspect of Dinah's religion in purely human terms.

Eliot concludes her treatment of Dinah's religion by postulating the rhetorical question, "What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life—to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?" Obviously, Eliot feels that she has shown that the Feuerbachian explanation of religion is true, not just of Dinah's experience, but of all religious experience. Until Dinah meets Adam, she feels that there is something unique about what she feels for God. But when Adam comes along, Dinah discovers that there is no qualitative distinction between loving God and loving a man. She has been motivated by her feeling for God, not a "call" from Him to serve. Now that Adam has aroused in her the same feeling of love and devotion, Dinah takes her first step away from belief in a God who exists apart from man. It is no accident that by the end of the novel, Dinah is no longer preaching and is devoting herself entirely to Adam and their children. The edict against women preaching only hurries a process which begins when Dinah discovers that her
love for Adam is the same as her love for God. Her discovery has brought Dinah to within one step of realizing that her religion has always had a secular, human foundation. The reader does not see Dinah take that final step, but he has been carefully prepared for it himself by Eliot's careful exposition of the secular, human basis of Dinah's Methodism. However, as we noted earlier, Dinah fails to be a convincing representation of the most basic of Methodist beliefs. While she is a convincing dramatization of many Methodists, she falls short of being convincingly representative of the belief itself and thus cripples Eliot's attempt to show that even the most fundamental forms of religious belief have a secular foundation.
Notes


IV. MAGGIE TULLIVER'S RELIGION: Simplistic and Ruinous

In her study of Maggie Tulliver's religion in *The Mill on The Floss*, George Eliot attempts to show that any moral scheme is unrealistic and simplistic which does not depend upon the unfettered use of human reason and the test of human experience for its credibility and authority. At the heart of Maggie's struggle to make sense out of her life, lies what Eliot has called "The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty" (p. 435). Maggie attempts to deal with this problem by embracing a self-destructive form of renunciation based upon her unquestioning acceptance of several underlined passages in a fifteenth-century monk's collection of 114 devotional essays entitled, *The Imitation of Christ*. Maggie's failure to allow for a shifting relation between passion and duty and her decision to live by a rigid, moral standard ruins her life. Thomas à Kempis, the fifteenth-century monk from whose writings Maggie acquires this rigid outlook, may have been able to practise successfully this form of renunciation behind the sheltering walls of a secluded monastery, but Maggie is destroyed by her attempt to do the same in the very real, unsheltered world of St. Oggs and its surroundings.

Eliot flatly denies the existence of a moral standard that is able to define the relation between passion and duty under all circumstances. Advising us that no one who is able to discern that relation can see it clearly, Eliot insists that moral judgments "must remain false and hollow unless
they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot" (p. 435). She contends that life is far too complex and mysterious for any one master-key to fit all cases, and rejects the maxims which master-key approaches develop on the grounds that they "repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy" (p. 425). Clearly, Eliot's use of the word "divine" has no supernatural implications in that these promptings and inspirations grow out of human experience rather than through exposure to divine revelation. Her criticism of any form of knowledge which does not arise out of difficult human experience, is made explicit in her conclusion that "the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made, patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality, without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide, fellow feeling with all that is human" (p. 435). The master-key, maxim approach fails to offer real solutions for real problems, presenting an escape from life rather than an explanation of its complexity and simplifying life only by doing for the mind and soul what a strait jacket does for the body.

Maggie's acceptance of such a rigid, moralistic approach
is understandable and even predictable given the experiences of her childhood and the environment of her adolescence, an observation shared by several critics. Bernard J. Paris's essay, "The Inner Conflicts of Maggie Tulliver: A Horneyan Analysis," traces the development of neurotic tensions within Maggie throughout her unhappy and repressed childhood and examines the profound insecurity that arises out of those inner conflicts which are unresolved at the time of her conversion. In "Maggie Tulliver's Long Suicide," Elizabeth Ermarth argues that Maggie's internalization of the sexist, social norms of St. Oggs is what cripples her and makes it impossible for her to work out a balance between respecting others' rights and enjoying her own. Ermarth suggests that in à Kempis Maggie finds the opportunity to do to herself what everyone else has been doing to her. Furthermore, throughout her childhood Maggie has been made acutely aware of the inferior status of women in her society and of the need to be compliant and bland like her cousin Lucy in order to be accepted by that society. There is no respectable social outlet for the tempestuous, clever Maggie; she cannot be herself in her society. When financial ruin strikes the Tulliver household, Maggie's problem is intensified by the removal of the few diversionary enjoyments she did have and by the gloomy prospect of all intelligent but poor women in nineteenth-century England. Orthodox religion is about the only means of self-expression which her society will allow her.
Maggie's religious conversion is preceded by a period of deep depression. Her sense of loneliness and "utter privation of joy" is heightened rather than alleviated by the "brightness of advancing spring" and her favorite outdoor nooks are now cheerless, causing her pain like an exposed nerve because they remind her of the loss of what joy she did have. The Tulliver household is now devoid of music and Maggie knows her collection of school books "to be barren of comfort" because she knows their contents too well and the opportunity for fresh discovery in them is forever gone. Even at school when encountering them for the first time, she had wished for books with more in them because "everything she learned there seemed like long threads that snapped immediately." Maggie now finds dream worlds no more satisfying than "the hard, dry questions" of Christian doctrine and despite the fact that she attempts to find "happiness enough to dull her sensibility to her actual daily life" by periodically immersing herself in Scott's novels and Byron's poetry, she finds that this too only increases her despair (pp. 250-51). She does not wish to escape her hard life; she wants an explanation of it which will enable her to endure it. Searching for this explanation in "masculine wisdom" and hoping to find the knowledge which makes men" contented, even glad to live," Maggie is motivated partly by a genuine hunger for wisdom and partly by a driving hunger for recognition and acceptance which were both denied her in childhood (p. 251). Soon she discovers the search to be "thirsty, trackless,
uncertain" and abandons it when she experiences, while reading Aldrich's *Logic* in a meadow, "a startled sense that the relation between Aldrich and this living world was extremely remote for her" (p. 252). Maggie's pursuit of masculine wisdom ceases at this point but her search goes on for that elusive key by which she hopes to unlock the puzzle of her life. Driven by a deep hunger which she is unable to explain or satisfy, Maggie begins to think "that it was part of the hardship of her life that there was laid upon her the burden of larger wants than others seemed to feel, that she had to endure this wide hopeless yearning for that something, whatever it was, that was the greatest and best on this earth" and wishes, at times, for Bob Jakin's "easily satisfied ignorance" or the narrow vision and clearly defined duties of her brother Tom "who had something to do on which he could fix his mind and disregard everything else," but this only deepens her depression (p. 252).

At this point, Eliot suggests that Maggie is unprepared for life's inevitable struggles because she is "quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her which governing the habits, becomes morality and, developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion" (pp. 252-53). Clearly, Eliot is indicating that Maggie's answer lies in the direction of a humanistic interpretation of religion. The discovery through experience of those irreversible laws which are intrinsically part of her own nature and of those around her and which dictate the
inevitable consequences of specific actions, will form the basis of moral choice for Maggie as she learns how to order habitually her behavior in terms of what will do the most good, result in the best consequences, for everyone involved. This is a morality based entirely upon an understanding of the cause-and-effect principle involved in human behavior and the rational choice of actions based on the knowledge of the effects they will produce. Divine revelation has nothing to do with this moral scheme; it is developed exclusively out of the process of learning through analysis, trial, and error, what kinds of actions bring the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people. As this growing knowledge of those laws is validated through time and continuing experience, it gradually becomes religion as men learn to trust and act on it more and more. Implicit in this explanation of morality and of the origin of religion, is the warning that any standards which do not arise directly out of and stand the continual test of human experience are not to be trusted. Feuerbach, who had tremendous impact on Eliot's moral thinking, puts it succinctly in The Essence of Christianity when he says, "Religion is the relation of man to his own nature,—therein lies its truth and its power of moral amelioration;—but to his nature not recognized as his own, but regarded as another nature, separate, nay, contradistinguished from his own: herein lies its untruth, its limitation, its contradiction to reason and morality; herein lies the noxious source of religious fanaticism, the chief metaphysical
principle of human sacrifices, in a word, the **prima materia** of all the atrocities, all the horrible scenes, in the tragedy of religious history" (p. 197; italics added).

Maggie needs to understand herself, to gain through experience, "that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her," and develop the habit of choosing what that knowledge has taught her is good. Otherwise, she will be susceptible all her life to being controlled by changing passion or to the fanaticism, self-destruction, and perversion of her nature which results from holding a religious faith which is not based on human nature and reason, and thus rules out the necessity of self-understanding and rational inquiry into the consequences of and evidence for that faith, in favor of an arbitrary standard of right and wrong which cannot be challenged.

Maggie's search leads to the writings of à Kempis and a religious experience which Eliot convincingly shows to be misleading. First she advises us that Maggie's exposure to the monk's teaching is second hand in that she follows the leading of "Some hand, now forever quiet" that had "made at certain passages strong pen and ink marks" in her first reading of *The Imitation of Christ* (p. 253). Eliot then describes the reading in terms of a trance, informing us that Maggie feels a strange thrill of awe "as if she had been wakened in the night by a strain of solemn music, telling of beings whose souls had been astir while hers was in stupor" (p. 254). The conversion itself takes place in the wake of a
"sudden vision" which "flashed" through her like the suddenly apprehended solution to a difficult problem and Maggie thinks that she has discovered the object of her search and determines to "renounce all other secrets" in favor of this one which will permit her to reach "sublime heights" without external aid and to gain insight, strength, and conquest by means "entirely within her own soul" (p. 254). While she cannot control her circumstances, she can control her response to them.

Diagnosing as the root cause of all her misery, her habit of "fixing her heart on her own pleasure as if that were the central necessity of the universe," Maggie concludes that ending her misery will involve "taking her stand out of herself and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely guided whole" (p. 254; italics added). The key word in her statement is "insignificant." The self counts for nothing in this view, not even in the sight of God. What does count is the divine plan into which each insignificant part fits. Maggie's solution involves nothing more than mental gymnastics in that nothing is changed by it other than her view of the problem. Eliot emphasizes the superficiality of Maggie's solution by telling us that "With all the hurry of an imagination that could never rest in the present, she sat in the deepening twilight forming plans of self-humiliation and entire devotedness; and in the ardour of first discovery, renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain"
Maggie has not yet learned to bring her imagination to bear on the reality of the present, concentrating on the very real problems of the present until she has worked out a genuine solution for them. Because of her haste and inexperience, renunciation seems to be the way to the satisfaction she craves, but of course it cannot be because renunciation denies desire instead of gratifying it. Eliot stresses this fact as well when she says of Maggie, "She had not perceived--how could she until she had lived longer?--the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings: that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly" (p. 255). In other words, à Kempis' statements are not to be interpreted literally. Using the knowledge she has gained from experience, Maggie must sift for the "inmost truth" of his writings. But as Eliot points out, Maggie has not lived long enough to know how to recognize what is of lasting value in à Kempis' thinking and what specific truths can be applied directly to her life. Consequently, she is doomed to fail in her attempt to construct a faith for herself out of his teaching whether she takes what he says at face value or tries to interpret what he says in the light of her limited experience of life. As it is, Maggie takes what he says literally, receiving as "an unquestioned message," the underlined portions of the book (p. 255).

For Eliot, the Imitation's value lies in the fact that it communicates directly "a human soul's belief and experience" (p. 255). Comparing à Kempis' book to more recent
publications of sermons and devotional essays, Eliot tells us that it still "works miracles" because

It was written down by a hand that waited for the heart's prompting; it is the chronicle of a solitary, hidden anguish, struggle, trust and triumph—not written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones. And so it remains to all time a lasting record of human needs and human consolations: the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced—in the cloister, perhaps, with serge gown and tonsured head, with much chanting and long fasts, and with a fashion of speech different from ours—but under the same silent far-off heavens, and with the same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same failures, the same weariness. (p. 255; italics added)

Eliot dismisses as irrelevant the supernatural aspect of à Kempis' teaching, praising only the distinctly human facets of his book and advising us that in this record of "an experience springing out of the deepest need," Maggie finds "an effort and a hope" that enables her to make out "a faith for herself without the aid of established authorities and appointed guides" (p. 256). However, as Eliot warned us earlier, Maggie's faith proves to be inadequate because she has not yet lived long enough to discover that renunciation cannot yield satisfaction, and the solution she thinks she has found for her misery in fact only masks her problems.

Through a series of conversations between Maggie and Philip, Eliot convincingly discredits the self-destructive form of renunciation which Maggie embraces after reading the à Kempis essays. Since her conversion, Maggie has discovered that her desires are interrelated. If she is to escape pain and inner turmoil by means of renunciation, it is an all or
nothing proposition. When she argues for permanently breaking off her friendship with Philip, she tells him that renunciation is like death. I must part with everything I cared for when I was a child. And I must part with you; we must never take any notice of each other again. (p. 263)

It is like death in that it cuts her off from the catalysts to personal growth and completely breaks her ties with the world. When Philip cuts to the heart of the matter of their parting and argues that "it is not right to sacrifice everything to other people's unreasonable feelings," Maggie counters with a deterministic view of life which "makes the mind very free when we give up wishing and only think of bearing what is laid upon us and doing what is given us to do" (p. 264; italics added). Philip's concept of what is right is based firmly on reason while Maggie's is based on revelation. And Maggie's religion, as much as her fear of Tom and her father, is keeping her from grappling with the moral problem involved in permitting them to destroy her legitimate relationship with Philip because of their questionable hatred for his father. She is actually reinforcing their resentment for Wakem by allowing it to fester unchallenged. The unquestioning, blind way in which she accepts Kempis' teaching is precisely the way in which she accepts what Tom and her father insist is her duty towards them. She has no conception of the effect of that definition of duty on herself or others and feels no need to find out. Duty is
simply a set of attitudes and procedures which others prescribe for her and which she acts on without question. Maggie exercises no genuine control over her life; her morality is not her own because she permits others to determine for her what is right.

When Maggie advances the notion that freedom of mind is contingent on accepting a prescribed morality and giving up wishing, Philip counters with the observation that "we can never give up longing and wishing while we are thoroughly alive" (p. 264). Gratified or not, the wish or longing is the catalyst to learning and opens the door to emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth by creating the opportunity to extend oneself beyond one's present experience. By creating the possibility of satisfaction, it also creates the possibility of pain of which Maggie is so fearful. If Maggie tries to avoid pain by killing desire which might lead to it, she will also kill the possibility of satisfaction and doom herself to a life of mere, static existence. But, as Philip points out, she cannot kill all desire; she can only suppress it.

We see the dangerous side of Maggie's form of renunciation when Philip begs her to take his copy of *The Pirate* to read and she refuses on the grounds that "It would make me in love with this world again, as I used to be; it would make me long to see and know many things; it would make me long for a full life" (p. 267). Maggie reacts this strongly because the memory of reading *The Pirate* comes upon her with "overmaster-
ing force" and she is frightened by its ability to control her. Eliot has already warned us within the novel that Maggie's renunciation has not dealt permanently with her passions and is only masking and suppressing them: "That new inward life of hers, notwithstanding some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions, yet shone out in her face with a tender soft light . . ." (p. 257; italics added). Despite her calm exterior, Maggie is like a volcano which is steadily approaching the point of eruption, periodically giving faint warnings of what is to follow. The explosion can be delayed by renunciation but it cannot be prevented.

Eliot prefaces Maggie's return to the Red Deeps to meet Philip by restating her fear that "by forsaking the simple rule of renunciation she was throwing herself under the seductive guidance of illimitable wants" (p. 284; italics added). Maggie likes the simplicity which renunciation's strait jacket brings to her life; she fears the complexity involved in making moral choices based on reason and experience and, like a child, prefers to be told what to do. In effect, Maggie is refusing to grow up and accept full responsibility for her actions. She can see that her friendship with Philip is "blameless, so good" and is aware of the fact that her family's resentment towards the Wakems is "unreasonable" and "unchristian" but she so fears the complexity of a morality based on reason that she suppresses even the awareness that what her family requires of her in the name of duty is immoral, and chooses simplicity of life and escape from pain
over what she realizes faintly would be morally the correct choice: that is, an open friendship with Philip. Significantly, she stops trying to defend her renunciation to Philip at this point and tries instead to convince him that renunciation has considerably improved her enjoyment of life, advising him that in subduing her will, she has found "great peace" and "even joy" (p. 286). Philip abruptly and bluntly challenges this new tack with the charge that Maggie is confusing resignation with stupification, insisting that resignation involves the "willing endurance of pain that is not allayed, that you don't expect to be allayed" and warning Maggie that "You are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of your nature" (p. 286). The validity of Philip's charge is established by the fact that Maggie recognizes "some truth" in what he says but pulls back from acting on his warnings because of her fear of pain: "and yet there was a deeper consciousness that, for any immediate application it had to her conduct, it was no better than falsity" (pp. 286-87). Given her present circumstances, Maggie cannot see any hope of realizing self-fulfilment through the exercise of "the highest powers" of her nature and the courageous acceptance of pain as an inevitable and meaningful part of life. So she sidesteps Philip's arguments and feebly tries to parry his thrust by suggesting that it is better for her to do without "earthly happiness" altogether because she is "never satisfied with a
little of anything" (p. 287). Not to be put off so easily, Philip replies with a penetrating insight which is both chillingly accurate and prophetic:

It is mere cowardice to seek safety in negations. No character becomes strong in that way. You will be thrown into the world someday, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now will assault you like a savage appetite. (p. 287; italics added)

Maggie lacks the courage to come to terms with her passionate nature and genuinely master it through self-understanding. She is assuming that her desires are too strong to be controlled and will not go through the rational process that Philip begs her to in order to become strong enough to control them. Instead, she tries to escape from them by hiding behind a moral prescription which denies their right to satisfaction under any circumstances. Repressed rather than dealt with, those desires are steadily intensified under the pressure of renunciation until they eventually ruin Maggie's life and she begins to crave the relief of death as fervently as she once wished for a full life.

The price Maggie pays for clinging to renunciation as an escape from pain is a perverted, mutilated nature. Philip had warned her that this would happen when he said,

You want to find out a mode of renunciation that will be an escape from pain. I tell you again, there is no such escape possible except by perverting or mutilating one's nature. (p. 361)

In one of his rare moments of insight, Tom had pointed out evidence of her lack of control over the passions she fears and so desperately wants to subdue, saying, "At one time you
take pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial, and at
another you have not the resolution to resist a thing that
you know to be wrong" (p. 343). By the time she meets and
becomes attracted to Stephen, Maggie's renunciation is sus-
tained by nothing more than the mutilated remnants of her
once passionate nature. When Stephen impulsively kisses her
arm, Maggie is spurred to vigorous renunciation by wounded
pride: "All the pride of her nature was stung into activity;
the hateful weakness which had dragged her within reach of
this wound to her self-respect had at least wrought its own
cure" (p. 388). Her smouldering sexuality is so mutilated
and perverted by continual suppression that she regards it as
a hateful assailant which drags her into a vulnerable posi-
tion rather than as a valuable and important expression of
her identity as a young woman who wishes to be appreciated
and loved. Stephen is wrong to kiss her given his commitment
to Lucy, but Maggie overreacts to his impulsive act. She
returns to the sterile, isolated world of renunciation sup-
ported by pride and anger, determined to make duty easy once
more and peace possible by killing the desire that made her
vulnerable to Stephen's advances:

The thoughts and temptations of the last month
should all be flung away into an unvisited chamber
of memory; there was nothing to allure her now; duty
would be easy, and all the old calm purposes would
reign peacefully once more. She reentered . . .
with a sense of the proud self-command that defied
anything to agitate her. (p. 388; italics added)

Her return is provoked ultimately by the desire for an easy
solution to the moral dilemma created by her attraction to
her cousin's fiancé and is supported by "reactionary excitement that gave her a proud self-mastery" (p. 389; italics added). Maggie still does not control her response to events around her; she reacts to them, fluctuating between self-destructive renunciation and surrender to her imprisoned passions until both her self-respect and her reputation are gone. Reluctant to renounce Stephen because she loves him yet unable to bring herself to marry him because of his formal tie to Lucy, Maggie becomes neurotic in her frustrated inactivity. In a moment of surrender to passion, she drifts down the river with Stephen, only to feel that "She had rent the ties that had given meaning to duty and had made herself an outlawed soul, with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion" (p. 413; italics added). Her sense of duty and commitment is admirable but what that duty is based upon is not: the unquestioning acceptance of a rigid moral standard prescribed for her by others and applied inflexibly to all situations without any attention to their individual differences and complexities. She cannot conceive of a shifting relation between passion and duty; she can only conceive of them in opposition to each other. Because the moral standard upon which she bases her sense of duty is founded on faith rather than reason, Maggie is unable to resolve the terrible crisis which each new expression of passion arouses in her mind and can only cling to renunciation as the only means she knows will bring relief. When Stephen argues for a reevaluation of Maggie's duty on the grounds that
We have proved that it is impossible to keep our resolutions. We have proved that the feeling which draws us towards each other is too strong to be overcome, that natural law surmounts every other, Maggie can only wail in reply, "If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment" (p. 417). She does not know how to weigh the new demands of individual situations and reason her way through the additional information to a redefinition of her duty. She wants the security of being bound by a code of duty prescribed for her by others; she has no idea of the criteria upon which a moral scheme is constructed, no philosophy of duty which can be applied flexibly and rationally to life's problems because it takes into account the complexities of human existence. Ultimately, death is the only release for Maggie because she cannot resolve the endless conflict between the rigid constraints of the moral code which she has accepted without question from others and the legitimate demands of her own passionate nature as they are aroused by new circumstances. Her life is "one long suicide," as Philip so accurately describes it, because she clings to a rigid moral code which systematically destroys her.

Through Maggie Tulliver's experiences, Eliot has demonstrated the dangers and weaknesses inherent in one moral scheme which does not derive its authority and credibility from the unfettered exercise of reason and the test of human experience. But she has not shown that these dangers and
weaknesses are shared by all moral schemes which derive their authority and credibility from any other source. Maggie does not believe in God and she does not subscribe to any coherent body of principles which attempt to define the relationship between passion and duty under all circumstances. She does not believe in anything; she simply renounces in order to escape pain. Consequently, she cannot be representative of any moral outlook other than her own. Her experience has no bearing on a moral scheme which depends upon belief in God for its authority and coherency.

God is not involved in Maggie's conversion or her subsequent thought and behavior. Unlike à Kempis who renounced passion which conflicted with what he perceived to be the will of a God he fully believed in and loved, Maggie uses renunciation to escape from pain. The ten quotations from *Imitation* which Eliot cites sequentially in her novel, are drawn from eight different essays which are scattered throughout à Kempis' book and which treat renunciation as one means of dealing with passion which clearly interferes with one's devotion to and love for God. A Kempis is not at all concerned with avoiding pain; he is deeply concerned with ridding himself of any desires or habits which interfere with his intense desire to imitate Christ's outlook and behavior. Awed by his model, à Kempis does consider himself and his life as, to use Maggie's words, "an insignificant part of a divinely guided whole" (p. 254) but is overjoyed by that special attention he receives from Christ who so vastly out-
classes him and Kempis eagerly repudiates everything which interferes with his devotion to Christ out of gratitude for Christ's love for him. This is a radically different outlook from the one which Maggie Tulliver adopts. This is also very different from what Eliot suggests is "the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings: that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly" (p. 255). While Eliot treats the teachings of Kempis as "the direct communication of a human soul's belief and experience" and the "lasting record of human needs and human consolations," the fact remains that Kempis' belief and behavior is focused entirely on God, a fact which neither Eliot nor Maggie engages in the novel. In fact, Eliot misrepresents the old monk's outlook by reproducing only his statements which deal with the how of renunciation; she never looks at why he practices renunciation. Not surprisingly, Maggie also sidesteps the supernatural aspect of Kempis' teaching and reduces what he says about renunciation to a strictly human level before applying it to her life. Because of this, Maggie misses the healing, fulfilling aspect of his teaching, and is left with a rigid, demanding code which takes away everything she values without giving her anything in return. Apart from one fleeting reference to regarding her life as an insignificant part of a divine whole, Maggie never approaches anything like the personal awareness of God which Tryan, Dinah, and Kempis claim for themselves. Maggie has simply extracted what is of immediate, human value to her from a much broader
body of religious belief. Because she takes only the negative aspect of Kempis' teaching, Maggie gains nothing from her encounter with Kempis, and loses a great deal. Eliot is able to discredit Maggie's belief because she ignores the supernatural, healing aspect of his teaching, takes only the negative side of his writings, but still expects to find the satisfaction he promises. Far from reinforcing the credibility of her own humanistic interpretation of religion through an exposure of the inconsistencies and dangers of any moral scheme which does not rest entirely upon reason and the test of human experience, Eliot has simply exposed the weaknesses of one pathetic form of escapism which pays lip service to belief in God and the concept of divinely revealed truth but has nothing to do with either.

This is not to say that the Evangelical characters of Eliot's early fiction are unconvincing in every respect. There are problems in the characterization of Tryan, Dempster, and Morris which go beyond Eliot's mishandling of their religious beliefs. In many respects, these characters are convincing dramatizations of the thought and behavior of the era they represent. Maggie Tulliver is a considerably more complex, convincing, and fascinating character in every respect. One of the reasons for this significant improvement in Eliot's characterization, besides the obvious fact that she has matured considerably as a writer by the time she writes The Mill On The Floss, is the fact that she makes no
attempt to link Maggie to any particular body of belief. At no point in the novel does Eliot insist that Maggie is an Evangelical, as she does with Tryan, or inform us that Maggie is a Methodist, as she does with Dinah Morris. Eliot seems to be much less concerned with exposing specific religious beliefs as tares in her fiction, and concentrates almost entirely on planting wheat, from Maggie Tulliver on.

The wheat of secular humanism which Eliot sows in *Adam Bede* and "Janet's Repentance," is not discredited because Eliot fails to demonstrate that genuine belief in God is tare and not wheat. But the complete victory for secular humanism which Eliot would have achieved had she been able to discredit such belief as tare while showing that secular humanism is to be valued as wheat, is denied her in these novels because she fails to create credible representatives of such belief though which to discredit it and demonstrate the superiority of secular humanism. In *The Mill On The Floss*, Eliot moves away from such a concentrated attempt to discredit specific religious beliefs, and devotes her attention to sowing what she believes to be true, with only passing reference to the alternative. The result is much more satisfying fiction, and considerably more convincing characterization.
Notes


5The eight essays from which the quotations are drawn are as follows: a, b from "Private Love Hinders the Chiepest Good," (III, 27); c from "The King's Highway of the Holy Cross," (II, 11); e from "Endurance of Injuries. Who is Patient?" (III, 19); f from "Christ Speaks To The Faithful," (III, 1); g from "The Inward Life," (II, 1); h from "Lovers of The Cross of Jesus," (II, 11); i, j from "Resignation to Freedom of Heart," (III, 37). The first number in the parentheses refers to the section of the book in which the essay is found while the second indicates the essay number in the section.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


