

The Long, Withdrawing Roar: The Crisis of Faith and Nineteenth-Century English Poetry by Edwin McCloughan

Abstract

The following paper was originally submitted to my Modern English tutor in University College, Dublin at the end of 1991 as part of my final year's study for a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Language and Literature. It was my Bahá'í-orientated response to the argument that the crisis of faith in the late nineteenth century was conditioned by historical circumstances and has therefore little relevance for a contemporary reader. It has subsequently been much revised and, it is hoped, much improved. Biblical citations are from the King James Version of the Bible; the dates after most of the cited poems are of the year of their composition rather than publication.

Continuing Crises

To contemporary students of literature, the so-called Victorian age (1832–1901)¹ can pose difficulties of evaluation because of its relative closeness to our own. As G.D. Klingopulos has observed: “The kinds of problem which confronted them [the Victorians] – political, educational, religious, cultural – bear a strong resemblance to, and are often continuous with, the problems which confront us at the present time”.² It therefore requires considerable effort to see this period in a way that is objective and that avoids negative preconceptions: in making assessments about the issues which thrust into doubt many of the long-cherished attitudes and assumptions common to “the Bible-reading, church-going, sabbatarian generation”³ of the Victorian era, we are in effect making assessments about issues that have continued to absorb and to plague all strata of society right down to the present. Indeed, it is increasingly evident that the gradual loss of religious assurance during the second half of

the nineteenth century has served to ensure that religion – understood as a belief system or “voluntary submission to a Higher Power”⁴ and which has played so preponderant a role in shaping and defining the values, mores and structures of civilisation – no longer remains a potent force ministering effectively to the urgent needs of an extremely distressed world: as of this writing, at least 1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, 40 per cent of the world’s population is threatened with malaria and some 40 million people have AIDS. Instead, religious beliefs have, for increasing numbers of people, been more or less relegated to obsolescence,⁵ dismissed as otherworldly superstitions, displaced by rationalism and science or ousted by a plethora of New Age disciplines; as a direct consequence of the import now attached to scientific discoveries, a strongly secular worldview has emerged and become dominant. Its intellectual prestige and social relevance having been eclipsed, religion, alternating with upsurges in fundamentalism which poison the wells of tolerance,⁶ has, in many cases, degenerated “into a decent formula wherewith to embellish a comfortable life”.⁷

In this paper, I will try to show that the decay of religion as a stabilising social force in the twentieth century originated most markedly during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), and that certain historical circumstances have coalesced to determine the secular, relativistic, postmodernist worldview that is so distinctive a feature of present-day intellectual life. This decay, I will venture, resulted from both the apparent failure of Messianic expectations in the first half of the nineteenth century and the disappointment resulting therefrom and, to a more noticeable extent, in the unprecedented and supremely “destructive”⁸ conflict that erupted between religion and science soon after the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* in late 1859.

In the canon of English literature, this crisis of faith and doubt finds its most eloquent, incisive and memorable expression in much of the poetry of the period, and the paper throughout will cite the work of mainly nineteenth-century poets who responded to this crisis in ways that are still relevant to both students of literary history and contemporary readers of poetry.

The Sea of Faith Ebbs

In the opening chapter of *The Imperishable Dominion*, Udo Schaefer singles out four European thinkers whose views contributed immensely to diminishing the enormous authority that had been wielded by religion (or rather by religious institutions), and who thereby laid the foundations for the construction of the secular world in which we now live: Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche.⁹ Each had rigorously interrogated and boldly rewritten what Karen Armstrong calls “the dialogue between an absolute, ineffable reality and mundane events”,¹⁰ and reached such inevitably controversial conclusions as seeing religion as “a degrading form of alienation” (Feuerbach), “the opium of the people” (Marx) and “the outcome of infantile desires in adults who long for the shelter of childhood” (Freud). Most pungently, Nietzsche had pronounced that ““God is Dead,”” a pronouncement whose repercussions were articulated in Thomas Hardy’s *God’s Funeral* (1908–10):

XI

‘How sweet is was in years far hied
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,
To lie down liegely at the eventide
And feel a blest assurance he [God] was there!

XII

‘And who or what shall fill his place?
Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes

For some fixed star to stimulate their pace
Towards the goal of their enterprise?' ...

A social system or philosophy based explicitly on divine precepts was challenged and incrementally replaced by the thesis that economics and politics were the only aspects of civilisation deemed to be of any substantive or enduring significance. Marx, for example, had asserted that recorded history, rather than being “an epic written by the finger of God”,¹¹ amounted essentially to a long and bitter series of class struggles.¹²

Before such a materialistic conception of human history became embedded in the twentieth-century consciousness, however, institutionalised religion, especially since the dissemination of relativist, empirical Enlightenment philosophies as an alternative to absolutist religious worldviews during the eighteenth century, was steadily relinquishing its ability to satisfy the yearnings of the mind and heart. Hardy, for instance, had mused that the “faiths by which my comrades stand / Seem fantasies to me” (*The Impercipient – At a Cathedral Service*, 3–4) while in *Hap*, dating from 1866, he ponders a world devoid of benign or providential guidance:

– Crass casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing time for gladness casts a moan ... (11–12).

Emily Brontë wrote on January 2nd, 1846 a paean to her Creator (subsequently titled *No Coward Soul is Mine*) in which appears the forthright declaration:

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men’s hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Of idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality (9–16).

On the other side of the Atlantic in 1861, Emily Dickinson, who similarly achieved posthumous literary celebrity, wryly presented the traditional Christian belief in the physical resurrection thus:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
Untouched by Morning –
And untouched by Noon –
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!
Grand go the Years – in the Crescent – above them –
Worlds scoop their Arcs –
And Firmaments – row –
Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender –
Soundless as flakes – on a Disc of Snow – (1–10).

“God’s in his heaven – / All’s right with the world!” are among the most quoted lines from Victorian poetry. Yet they appear in *Pippa Passes* (1841), the first of Robert Browning’s collection of squalid tales about a heroine who, working in a sweatshop 364 days a year, is about to be sent to Rome as a prostitute; a man and woman living in adultery have just murdered the woman’s husband; a peevish set of bohemians has tricked a youth into marriage: the overall poem, despite Pippa’s affirmation, by no means verifies that all is right with the world. Many readings of Browning’s *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* (1852) find it more expressive of contemporary despair than of the confidence now casually associated with burgeoning Victorian progress, the landscape of the eponymous questing knight being grim and nightmarish, betokening those found in such a poem as T.S. Eliot’s *The*

Hollow Men (1925); at times Roland's quest verges on the horrific: " – It may have been a water-rat I speared, / But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek" (125–6). In *Hymn to Prosperine* (1866), with its tension between the libertine splendours of paganism and the sterility of state-sponsored Christianity, Algernon Charles Swinburne included iconoclastic lines like the following (spoken by a Roman patrician and poet influenced by Julian the Apostate):

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world
has grown grey from thy breath...
...Yet thy kingdom shall pass, Galilean, thy dead
shall go down to thee dead...

And in the rhyming couplets of *The Latest Decalogue* and of *XII* respectively, Arthur Hugh Clough and A.E. Housman satirised the hypocritical constraints imposed by religio-social injunctions:

The sum of all is, thou shalt not love,
If anybody, God above.
At any rate shall never labour
More than thyself to love thy neighbour (21–4).

And since, my soul, we cannot fly
To Saturn nor to Mercury,
Keep we must, if keep we can,
These foreign laws of God and man (21–4).

Schaefer summarises this attitude of disillusionment when he states: "The dominant role which science has assumed in modern society has tended to turn religious conviction into a private matter and expel it from the socio-political sphere".¹³ If anything, the advances made by science and technology have been coterminous with the retreat of religion, as mourned by

Matthew Arnold in the elaborate metaphor of his most famous poem, *Dover Beach* (1851):

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar
Retreating to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world (21–8).

Yet in the midst of the worst excesses of British industrialisation – “And all is seared with trade, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod” (*God's Grandeur*, 6–8) – the Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, drew consolation from the myriad wonders of “dearest” natural freshness and the dove-like Holy Ghost brooding “over the bent / World ... with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” (13–14).

Decades after the French Revolution, Christianity, the religion of transcendent redemption *par excellence*, was to become transformed into a number of surrogate faiths: one has only to read Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) – published in London on the eve of an outbreak of political revolutions in Paris, Rome, Venice, Berlin and other European cities – to notice the way in which the fundamental Judaeo-Christian doctrine of the salvation of the soul had come to be replaced by the perception of the human being as a socio-economic functionary (rather than an essentially spiritual being) and by the salvation inscribed in Communist tenets which would lead ultimately to the realisation of an egalitarian order consequent upon the victory of the proletariat hitherto oppressed and exploited by bourgeois capitalism:

In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.

In all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time.

Finally, they labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries.

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!¹⁴

One possible reason this transformation should have occurred in the Christian West lies with an examination of the teachings revealed by Jesus Christ Himself.

New Wine, Old Wineskins

Christ's Revelation was one directed primarily at the individual, at his or her relations with other individuals, and focused itself on the moulding of personal moral conduct and a striving for spiritual excellence through conscious discipline:

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Matthew 5:14–16).

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

This emphasis on God's passionate interest in, and concern for, the individual personality, on the worth of "slave or free, male or female, gentile or Jew",¹⁵ was extremely radical in "a world where the poor little man was only a pawn in a game he could not control".¹⁶ This, and the love of God for all (John 4:42, John 8:12, John 10:16, Matthew 28:19) – not alone the chosen people to whom Christ ministered – were crucial to His teachings, which laid much greater stress on service to others and the cultivation of the "gentler virtues of pity and forgiveness, of charity and self-sacrifice"¹⁷ than on the external, meticulous observance of such religious duties as prayer, fasting and almsgiving: for Christ, the correct *intention* on the part of the individual was paramount. This differentiation was further extended by St Paul's formulation, in his appeal to Gentile audiences in the Diaspora, of a doctrine of antinomianism (anti-legalism) and of acknowledging the messianic, salvific figure of Jesus, through Whom God had been reconciled to postlapsarian humanity: "As in Adam all shall die, so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22); "For it pleased the Father that in him [Jesus] should all fulness dwell; And having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself, by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven" (Colossians 1:19–20).

"That ye have love one to another" (John 13:35) became the criterion of Christian discipleship, even if another should be a Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37, Luke 17:15–17, John 4:3–42), a Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5–13), a Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20), a Syro-Phoenician Gentile woman (Mark 7:25–30), a woman whose condition made her unclean and a social outcast (Mark 5:25–34), a prostitute (Luke 7:24–30), an adulteress (John 8:1–11), a tax-collector (Matthew 9:10–13, 21, 31 and 32), a child (Mark 10:13–16) or a penitent criminal (Luke 23:40–43). Two of the Mosaic social laws He explicitly modified were the

loosening of strict Sabbath observance (Mark 2:23–28) and the tightening of divorce (Matthew 12:1–8). Nowhere in the four canonical Gospel accounts did Christ impart any definitive guidance about how the communities of His followers should be governed and administered, however. The civilisation that arose upon His Teachings and example and that reached its zenith in the fourth century¹⁸ was thus strong in the case of individual morality but fragile in terms of social co-ordination. Shunning affairs of state (John 6:14–15, Matthew 22:17–22, John 18:36) and, like His forerunner, John the Baptist, reserving some of His sternest condemnations for sacerdotal hypocrisy and venality (Matthew 23:13–36, Luke 11:37–52, 12:1), Christ founded no institutions, though the subsequent institutions that bore His Name were derived for the most part by inference or invention from His utterances as recorded in the Gospel.¹⁹ Of this Professor John Hatcher has commented:

... virtually at the moment of Christ's death, major difficulties arose as to how radically different this institution would be from what had preceded it, how the institution should be formed, how administered, how sustained. And because Christ left little explicit guidance about how these tasks should be accomplished, it is not hard to trace in the early history of the Christian church how the good intentions of the apostles and the patristic fathers, coupled with the confusion about the question of Christology (the nature and station of Christ), almost immediately distracted and perverted the essential teachings of Christ to the extent that by the fourth century, the Christian institution as the body of Christ was irreparably severed from the spiritual verities that constituted the soul of Christ's ministry. The wineskin, mutilated beyond repair, allowed the wine to trickle upon the earth and thus become mixed with baser stuff.²⁰

After, say, the Industrial Revolution in the later eighteenth century, Western civilisation found itself struggling to evolve a system that successfully integrated Christian personal ethics with social justice necessitated by the accelerating interdependence of nation-states and by the new frameworks of democratic government which had emerged upon the collapse of the feudal order. It was this cleavage between individual and collective morality – in the broadest sense between the best interests and rights of the individual and those of all nations and races – that called for a religious paradigm corresponding to the relatively sophisticated degree of social and cultural progress that had been achieved at that stage in humanity’s evolution. As pointed out by Horace Holley, the “man-to-God and ... man-to-man revelation”²¹ that was orthodox Christianity came under intense pressure during the nineteenth century, an age of “strenuous activity and dynamic change, of ferment of ideas and recurrent social unrest, of great inventiveness and expansion”,²² one that demanded what Holley generically terms “a man-to-men revelation.” Hence the birth and proliferation of so many man-made polities, ideologies and utopian and social reform movements during a period that witnessed large-scale endeavours to create a just society with the abolition of serfdom and slavery, the unfoldment of the national state and the development and spread of democracy.²³

If religion was to be relevant or meaningful now, it should address humankind as a whole, specifically its “collective spiritual consciousness”;²⁴ as Count Leo Tolstoy put it:

I believe that at this very hour the great revolution is beginning which has been preparing for two thousand years in the religious world – the revolution which will substitute for corrupted religion, and the system of domination which proceeds therefrom, the true religion, the basis of equality between men, and the true liberty to which all beings endowed with reason aspire.²⁵

He Cometh With Clouds

... When it is evening, ye say, it will be fair weather; for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites [Pharisees and Sadducees], ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times? (Matthew 16:2–3).

... Kill not the Moth nor the Butterfly,
For the last Judgment draweth nigh ...

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence* (39–40, c. 1803)

“The nineteenth century,” notes Michael Sours, “witnessed what was probably the most dramatic period of Messianic expectation in Christian history”.²⁶ The Second Coming of Christ had been a prominent feature of belief during the ministries of Peter and Paul and the early centuries of Christianity. But by the fifth century – marked by the establishment of a hierarchical ecclesiastical order – it had more or less disappeared. During the Renaissance, a similarly vivid interest was once again shown in the Day of Judgment: Nicolás Florentino has a painting of it in what is now the Old Cathedral of Salamanca and Michaelangelo a fresco of it in the Sistine Chapel dating from 1541.

By the eighteenth century, the return of Christ again came to the fore in circles of Christian thought: Isaac Newton and Charles Wesley, among others, had written of its imminence. The French Revolution of 1789 was construed by those versed in Scripture as being the prelude to the long-awaited Biblical apocalypse (as detailed in the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation). In the words of Geoffrey Nash: “It was not merely a political event, or even the destruction of an old order; it was a new advent, the point of genesis of a new age and a new world”.²⁷ William Wordsworth recollected the initial

significance of the Revolution there in the Ninth Book of *The Prelude* (1805):

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven! O times ...
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,
A prime Enchantress – to assist the work
Which then was going forward in her name!
Not favoured spots alone, but *the whole earth*
The beauty wore of promise – that which sets
(As at some moments might not be unfelt
Among the bowers of Paradise itself)
The budding rose above the rose full blown.
What temper at the prospect did not wake
To happiness unthought of? The inert
Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!
(108–9, 14–24, emphasis added).

A cataclysmic event like the French Revolution prefigured the advent of a Messiah: Emperor Louis Napoleon in France, the Irish Catholic Liberator, Daniel O’Connell, and Italian patriots, Mazzini and Garibaldi, were but four figures of messianic charisma who rose to leadership in Europe. (The same trend was repeated in the twentieth century with totalitarian dictators like Mussolini, Franco, Hitler and Stalin, though with devastating consequences.) Numerous Romantic writers produced theories which “admitted the possibility of the entrance of a universal Messiah”.²⁸

Probably the most sustained and daring expression of this grand theoretical strain was seen in the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley, who portrayed such a possibility in his Lyrical Drama, *Prometheus Unbound* (1819–20), in whose *Preface* was stated: “Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends”.²⁹ Revered by early humankind as the mediator of many useful

arts and sciences, Prometheus, outwitting Zeus, the chief Olympian, climbed the heavens and stole fire from the gods from the chariot of the sun and was punished by being chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus until rescued from his torture by Hercules; writing in 1841, Marx hailed him as “the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher’s calendar”.³⁰ It seemed the liberation of Prometheus from the tyrannical captivity of Jupiter (Act III, Scene 1), like that experienced by citizens in America and then in France from British and monarchical rule respectively, symbolised the ultimate triumph of the forces of human progress and an all-compelling sense of humanity’s regeneration:

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed – but man:
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, – the King
Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man:
Passionless? no – yet free from guilt or pain,
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance and death and mutability,
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended heaven,
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane (193–204).

In the figure of Prometheus’ consort, Asia, as remarked by Professor Ross Woodman, Shelley achieves his apocalyptic desire: her unveiling (“Some good change / Is working in the elements which suffer / Thy presence thus unveiled,” II. v. 18–20), which prefigures the Revelation of Christ returned in the glory of the Father, is “a vision of the New Jerusalem [Revelation 21:2] descending as a bride to earth, which is, by virtue of her descent, recreated into an earthly paradise”³¹ Shelley concluded his Lyrical Drama, *Hellas*, written in 1821 and inspired by the Greek proclamation of independence,

followed by the war of deliverance from the Turks, with a female Chorus combining a celebration and an entreaty:

The world's great age begins anew
The golden years return,
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn;
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream ...

O cease! must hate and death return?
Cease! must men kill and die?
Cease! Drain not to its dregs the urn
Of bitter prophecy.
The world is weary of the past,
O might it die or rest at last! (1–6, 37–42).

An unmistakable note of apocalyptic excitement also runs through Shelley's most accomplished lyric, *Ode to the West Wind* (1819), which ends:

... Be through my lips to unawakened earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (68–70).

This eschatological theme was continued in poems by James Russell Lowell, Edward Marshall, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and a venerable, nationalistic hymn for North America by Julia Ward Howe:

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood for the good or evil side.
Some great Cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the
bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever, 'twixt that darkness and that
light

(The Present Crisis, 5–8).

By your greater selves; and by the love I see flowing surely
from you to me;
By these I put all evil aside ...
I show you the inheritance of riches of all time.
Yet sorrow, the best of gifts, revealer of eternal joy, I give you
not:
But One shall come in the night-time, bringing it, to transmute
the world for you,
Taking you by the hand, even while you live, through the great
gate of Death, into Elsyian fields
(Towards Democracy).

Ring out the shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be
(In Memoriam A.H.H., Section 106, 25–32).

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are
stor'd;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword
His truth is marching on
(The Battle-Hymn of the Republic, 1–4).

Something of this excitement is even evident in the final stanza of Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1875), commemorating the death by drowning of five Franciscan nuns exiled from Germany:

Dame, at our door
 Drowned, and among our shoals,
 Remember us in the roads, the heaven-haven of the
 Reward:
 Our King back, oh, upon English souls!
 Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us,
 be a crimson-cressed east,
 More brightening her, rare-dear Britain, as his reign rolls,
 Pride, rose, prince, hero of us, high-priest,
 Our hearts' charity's hearth's fire, our thoughts' chivalry's
 throng's
 Lord.

Adventist movements were started, the most famous of which (and the inspiration for Lowell's above poem) was that headed by William Miller, a farmer and former atheist from Vermont, New England, whose intensive reading of the Book of Daniel and other prophecies from the Old and New Testaments had firmly convinced him that the return of Christ was at hand. He fixed the date of the return at 1843–4 (other variations being 1836 and 1866).

Like the Jews who eagerly awaited their Messiah but whose religious leaders, attentive to the letter but heedless of the spirit of Moses' Revelation (John 5:46–7, Matthew 23:37–8), had refused to recognise and accept the Divinity manifested by Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:11, 1:29, 6:41–2, 7:25–36, Luke 7:18–23, 14:16–30, Matthew 5:17, Matthew 23:37, John 26:59–66), Christian millenarians misapprehended their Scriptures by misreading their figurative language. Thus Christ's prophecy – "... then they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30) – was understood to be literal with the result that "on one notorious occasion a concourse of votaries assembled at a designated spot to watch the clouds from which

before nightfall a white-robed Messiah was to descend to earth”.³² Moreover, the followers of the diverse Christian denominations and sects had all contrived their own Messiah, Someone Who would conform solely to the expectations which they themselves had conceived.

When these fervent hopes and expectations were not realised – when no white-robed Messiah was seen to descend on a cloud to earth – disappointment filled the hearts of Christians and enthusiasm died away. (The Seventh-Day Adventists, as Miller’s followers thereafter styled themselves, refer to this period as “the Great Disappointment.”) The unparalleled millenarian zeal that had animated so many people was “channelled into the creation of nation states and the class politics that represented centres of mass power”:³³ absolute national sovereignty, though inseparably part of an unprecedented process of what is now called globalisation, became a fetish.

A telling comparison can be made between the optimistic hopes pervading the excerpts of eschatological verse quoted above and the poignancy, irony and cynicism so evident in the poems of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Isaac Rosenberg – which graphically exposed the reality of the First World War’s trench battles – and in T.S. Eliot’s gloomy masterpiece, *The Waste Land* (1921), one of whose speakers concedes, “I can connect / Nothing with nothing” (“The Fire Sermon,” 301–2), to see just how the embers of millenarianism had been kindled into the world-devouring conflagration of chauvinistic aggression. In other words, the jubilant prospects that had galvanised millenarianism became those that spawned imperialism and the aggrandisement and vaunted superiority of the white race, epitomised by this paragraph from the Introduction to H.A.L. Fisher’s *A History of Modern Europe*:

It is, moreover, to European man that the world owes the incomparable gifts of modern science. To the conquest of nature through knowledge the contributions made by

Asiatics have been negligible and by Africans (Egyptians excluded) non-existent. The printing press and the telescope, the steam-engine, the internal combustion engine and the aeroplane, the telegraph and the telephone, wireless broadcasting, the cinematograph, and the gramophone and television, together with all the leading discoveries in physiology, the circulation of the blood, the laws of respiration and the like, are the result of researches carried out by white men of European stock. It is hardly excessive to say that the material fabric of modern civilized life is the result of the intellectual daring and tenacity of the European peoples.³⁴

For American expatriate Ezra Pound, however, writing in the aftermath of the First World War in 1919, civilisation was damned by his poet-persona, Hugh Selwyn Mauberly, “out of key with his time” (I, 1), as “botched,” “an old bitch gone in the teeth” (*Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, V, 89–90). W.B. Yeats in *The Second Coming*, referring to the Russian Revolution of 1917 (“Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed”) and unconsciously predicting the rise of Italian Fascism in the early 1920s, bemoaned the decline of civilisation:

... and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity (5–8).

For him, the Second Coming – in stark contrast to Shelley’s rhapsodic, melodious vision of universal regeneration in the Fourth Act of *Prometheus Unbound*, a book Yeats regarded as “sacred” – was a mysterious and terrible event, a nightmare similar to that depicted in the Fifth Section of *The Waste Land*:

... And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born (21–2)?

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces that sneer and snarl
From doors of mudcracked houses
If there were water
("What the Thunder Said," 331–46).

However distorted its energies had been by the ruthless colonisation of territories in Africa, South America and much of the Middle and parts of the Far East, initially under the guise of a tremendous missionary effort, millenarianism was at some level an intuitive response to "a new spiritual force"³⁵ that had suddenly swept across Europe and North America, leading irresistibly to an unshakeable conviction that, commencing with the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolutions, a New Age had dawned and that the Kingdom heralded by Christ (Matthew 4:17, 6:9–10), together with the "new heaven and [the] new earth" (Revelation 21:1) anticipated by St John the Divine, was very soon to be established upon earth. Apart from reading Scriptural verses in an exclusively literal manner, the majority of millenarians did not look to the Eastern hemisphere where the sun of religion – Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism,

Judaism, Christianity and Islam – had always risen. For it was in Iran (Persia), a nation darkened by religious obscurantism, political corruption and an appalling decadence, that a young merchant from the city of Shiraz, Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad (a lineal descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), assumed the title of Báb (Arabic for “Gate”) in 1844 and subsequently made claims to be both an independent Messenger of God and the Herald of “Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest,” the Promised One of all religions. His revolutionary Cause spread rapidly throughout Iran and neighbouring Iraq, and He was publicly executed by firing squad in 1850. This martyrdom “made a great impression on late nineteenth-century Europe ... Monographs and literary works touching on the Báb and His martyrdom were published in a number of European countries ...”.³⁶ Following an assassination attempt on the Shah by a handful of deranged Bábís, a pogrom of martyrdoms ensued in the autumn of 1852.

The One for Whose advent the Báb had made ready the way and Who would usher in a divine, global civilisation was one of His own followers, Bahá’u’lláh (the Glory of God), an Iranian nobleman and the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith. Despite being stripped of His wealth and possessions and suffering torture, persecution, imprisonment, the relentless opposition of two of the Middle East’s most powerful despots, four designedly repressive exiles, the treachery of His half-brother and the death of His younger son, He revealed the equivalent of one hundred volumes of Scripture and summoned the world’s sovereigns and rulers – including Louis Napoleon III, Kaiser William I, Pope Pius IX, Czar Alexander II and Queen Victoria – to reconcile their differences and, through the holding of “an all-embracing assemblage”,³⁷ to implement measures that would lead to the creation and maintenance of world peace; the twentieth century would reap the whirlwind of ignoring Baha’u’llah’s dire warnings to these and various other political and religious leaders against injustice, tyranny and corruption. During His own ministry He had established

His religion in fifteen countries; today the community of His followers represents a microcosm of the human race, second only to Christianity in geographical range.³⁸

Bahá'u'lláh's pivotal teaching was the oneness and the inevitable unity of the entire human race in what He designated a "new World Order",³⁹ which is to be the vehicle of a spiritual commonwealth. To Professor E.G. Browne, an English orientalist from Pembroke College, Cambridge, He addressed the following words two years before His death from fever in the Holy Land in 1892:

That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and difference of race be annulled – what harm is there in this? ... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come ... Do not you in Europe need this also? ... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind ...⁴⁰

On September 23rd, 1893 at the inaugural World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, this statement was read from a paper by Reverend Henry Jessup, who wished to share the "Christ-like sentiments" uttered by the "famous Persian Sage" with his audience.⁴¹

Representing a "challenge, at once bold and universal"⁴² to sexist, national, racial, economic, political and religious creeds, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, comprehensive and far-sighted in its outlook (the "wine" of His ethical and spiritual counsels) and precise yet flexible in its methodology (the "wineskins" required to contain and convey those counsels in upraising a divine social edifice), and with its view of humankind as "an organic unit which has undergone a growth process similar to that of the individual",⁴³ fell for the most

part on deaf ears: the clarion call had been sounded, but Christendom, whose custodians had been bidden to keep wakeful lest the Lord upon his return come and go like a thief in the night (Matthew 24:42–4, 50, Thessalonians 5:2–4, II Peter 3:10, 13), slumbered on leaving God to pass by.

Dancing to DNA's Music?

The antagonism between religion and science began in earnest in 1543 with the publication of Polish canon Nicolas Copernicus' theories of a heliocentric universe, which ran totally counter to the Ptolemaic theory of a geocentric universe which had long been supported by the Churches. The title of his work was *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*The Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*), of which has been cogently remarked: "Not only was [it] about the revolutionary motions of astral bodies, it was also revolutionary in itself in its effects on human self-awareness and imagination".⁴⁴

So it was that in spite of hypotheses grounded on ever-more scrupulous observation and systematic classification and collation of diverse phenomena – Johannes Kepler's three laws establishing that the earth is but a minor planet rather than the centre of the universe and that all of the planets travel around the sun in mathematically predictable elliptical orbits, William Harvey's lectures in 1616 in which he first put forward his view on the circulation of the blood and Carl Linnaeus's new, simplified rules for the taxonomy of flora and fauna published in *Systema Naturae* in 1735 – Christians were enjoined by their clerical leaders to continue to understand the Bible literally. What might have been abstract or spiritual realities clothed in the garments of symbol and metaphor – Christ's prophetic discourses or the scintillating, bizarre imagery in the Book of Revelation, for example – were held to be strictly literal and, because inspired by the Almighty, unalterably true: since God's natural laws were fixed and immutable, it was reasoned, so must be the comprehension of those laws. This intransigence also extended to all non-Christian religions. Had

not God definitively revealed His Will and Purpose through Jesus Christ alone and until the end of time?

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth (John 1:14) (emphasis added).

I am the way, and the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me ... (John 14:6).

Neither is there any salvation in any other [than Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ]: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 6:15–16).

This narrow perspective on Revelation, already disproved by the succession of towering Luminaries, Abraham, Moses and Christ, recounted in the Bible itself, conjoined with Christ's pointed statement to His disciples on the relativity of religious truth – "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye are not fit to bear them now" (John 16:12) – made the recognition and acceptance of any subsequent Luminary – the prime example being Muhammad – impossible for those wielding ecclesiastical authority.

These Churches, irreconcilably divided by Christological and theological doctrines and dogmas since the fourth and fifth centuries and by internal disputes over authority (exemplified by the Great Schism, when there were rival Popes in Avignon and in Rome between 1378 and 1417), showed themselves more preoccupied with temporal influence than in the genuine spiritual nurturing and empowerment of the laity; hence they maintained rigid orthodoxies. Scientists or, as they were then

known, natural philosophers, followed the courageous example set by Galileo Galilei – who, heretically enthusiastic about Copernicus’ theory and having greatly improved the telescope, was forced to recant before the Inquisition in Rome after the publication of his masterwork, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* [Ptolemaic and Copernican] in 1632 and who ended his days under house arrest at his Florence estate nine years later – began to read the universe as a text whose pages could disclose much about the interconnectedness and interdependence of all created things and, eventually, something of the origin of humanity: science became a revelatory discipline while religion, in the hands of authoritarian, self-serving and uninhibitedly worldly churchmen, already reeling under the Reformation, closed its doors to knowledge and discovery. Both Copernicus’ and Galileo’s books were banned by the Catholic Church until 1835, the Vatican officially absolving Galileo of his “heretical” astronomical discoveries only in 1993; it burnt Giordano Bruno, whom it had imprisoned and tried for eight years, at the stake in Rome in 1600 for insisting that the stars were actually suns: “Innumerable suns exist; innumerable earths revolve about these suns ... ” By the time of the Industrial Revolution, science had proved itself an extremely effective instrument for social betterment – as, for example, in the utilisation of steam by James Watt in 1769 for steamship transport and, after his death, for railway transport in 1825 (by 1870 England alone had 13,000 miles of railway); by confining itself to an anti-heretical code of morality and the absolution of innately sinful souls through the purchase of exclusive ecclesiastical mediation – “There is but one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church outside of which there is no salvation ... ” (Pope Boniface VIII’s *Unam Sanctum*) – religion was increasingly seen to be of little or no practical value by those with eyes to see. The public focus began “to shift ... to an eager stress on the present combined with an impatient hope for a social heaven on earth in the near future”.⁴⁵

It remains the view that the Victorian age was unusually puritanical, one in which religion, at least of the conventional kind, was largely evangelical in character and purpose and in which austere moral conduct – whether social (propriety, conformity, respectability, decorum, discretion, obedience to authority) or sexual (women stereotyped as Madonnas or whores and, like children, subordinated to men in almost every sphere of public endeavour) – was the necessary straitjacket for carnal impulses to the extent that “erotically charged” table and piano legs were draped when ladies and gentlemen dined and conversed together. Despite its overtly prudish ethos and its severe gender and class stratifications, society had attained a state of confidence, as conveyed in the speech of Prince Albert at the opening of the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in Hyde Park in 1851:

We are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish to that great end to which indeed all history points – the realization of the unity of mankind.⁴⁶

Nine years before, the speaker of Tennyson’s monologue, *Locksley Hall*, had “dipped into the future” (119) and seen “a vision” of the denouement to the world’s conflicts and wars in what he termed “the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world” (128); this note had earlier been sounded by Scotland’s Robert Burns: “It’s coming yet, for a’ that / That man to man the warld o’er / Shall brothers be for a’ that” (*For a’ that and a’ that*). Londoner William Blake and New Yorker Walt Whitman (both self-published), in taut metre and rhyme and incantatory expansiveness respectively, had proclaimed this universality some sixty years apart:

Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,

Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew.
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.
(*The Divine Image*, 13–20, 1789).

You, whoever you are!
You, daughter or son of England!
You of the mighty Slavic tribes and empires!
You Russ in Russia!
You dim-descended, black, divine-souled African, large,
fine-headed,
Nobly-formed, superbly destined, on equal terms with
me!...
...All you continentals of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia,
indifferent of place!
All you on the numberless islands of the archipelagoes of
the sea!
And you of centuries hence, when you listen to me!
And you, each and everywhere, whom I specify not, but
include just the same!
Health to you!
Good will to you all – from me and America sent.
Each of us inevitable;
Each of us limitless – each of us with his or her right upon the
earth;
Each of us allowed the eternal purports of the earth;
Each of us here as divinely as any is here
(*Salute to the Whole World*).

Ever since Samuel B. Morse had sent the first telegram (bearing the words *What Hath God Wrought?*) from Washington, D.C. to his business partner, Alfred Vail, in Baltimore on May 24th, 1844, it seemed the world could at long last be shrunk to a

neighbourhood in terms of communication. This possibility, however ambitious it appeared then, bore witness to the strides that could and would be achieved exponentially in so many fields of technology and science, that first telegram being the prototype for today's speed-of-light telecommunications.

It was during this period of peace in Britain (disrupted by the Crimean War of 1854–6), yet confronted with the squalor of mining and the ugliness of industrial cities, the ravages of the countryside, the menace of mass unemployment, escalating poverty allied to unsanitary, overcrowded slums as well as high rates of infant mortality and contagious, often fatal disease and the terror of economic crisis, that naturalist Charles Darwin's theories of physical evolution were published. These theories were based on collections and reflections on the similarities and differences between various animal species garnered during his five-year voyage upon *HMS Beagle* to map the South American coast and delayed for twenty years for fear of adverse reaction. Not since Copernicus's *De revolutionibus* in 1543 (also delayed in its publication), which removed planet Earth and, by implication, man, its prime representative, from the centre of the known cosmos, had such a thunderbolt struck.

Two of the postulates advanced by Darwin in *The Origin of Species* that so perplexed and outraged church-going members of the English-speaking public were that by a long and very gradual process of "Natural Selection," or as he preferred to call it, "Survival of the Fittest," the millions of species of organic life on earth had developed from previously existing species and that at the stem of a very complex family tree there is probably one simple form of life – thus contradicting the traditional belief in God's creation of the universe in six days (Genesis 1:1–31) – and that human beings and apes are descended from a common but now extinct primate ancestor – thus contradicting the origin of humanity as illustrated by the story of the creation of Adam, the first man (Genesis 2:7), and of Eve, his "helpmeet" (2:18–23). Caricatured in the print media as a primate, he also won fierce

denunciations from conservative pulpits, instigating often heated debate and disagreement between creationists and evolutionists which continue to this day. With polemical gusto, Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's best-known "disciple," stated in an essay in 1860:

Who shall number the patient and earnest seekers after truth, from the days of Galileo until now, whose lives have been embittered and their good name blasted by the mistaken zeal of Bibiolators? Who shall count the host of weaker men whose sense of truth has been destroyed in the attempt to harmonize impossibilities – whose life has been wasted in the attempt to force the generous new wine of Science into the old bottles of Judaism, compelled by the same strong party?

... Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules; and history records that whenever science and orthodoxy have been fairly opposed, the latter has been forced to retire from the lists, bleeding and crushed, if not annihilated; scotched, if not slain.

Darwin held to his discoveries when he stated in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871):

... man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his *godlike* intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system – with all these exalted powers – Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his *lowly* origin (emphasis added).⁴⁷

What was perhaps most startling about Darwin's theories was that evolution was without purpose (which approximated,

as he himself acknowledged, to philosophical speculation rather than scientific inquiry). Tennyson had entertained grave doubts about teleological certainty after reading Charles Lyell's *The Principles of Geology* (1830–3) which, with the vast collections of geological and fossil data available, indicated a longer history of the earth than that of four to six thousand years deduced from Scripture and taught by the Churches:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life,

That I, considering everywhere,
Her secret meaning in her deeds,
And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar stairs
That slope through darkness up to God,

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope
(*In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Section 55, 5–20).

However providential the fall of a sparrow (Matthew 10:29), chance, autonomy and, by implication, chaos, governed the operations of the universe, itself the work of what Oxford zoologist, leading Darwinist and best-selling author, Professor Richard Dawkins, sardonically terms a Blind Watchmaker.

“DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music,” he states in *River Out of Eden* (1995).

According to true religion, as opposed to the superstitious fancies, false imaginings and unquestioning adherence to monolithic but outmoded customs that represent the winter of religion castigated by, for instance, Feuerbach and Marx, evolution has been designed and orchestrated by God, and is not the outcome of blind chance or chaos. Dr Anjam Khursheed invokes two analogies – based on talks given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest Son of Bahá’u’lláh and the appointed Interpreter of His Revelation, in about 1905 – to help explain humanity’s origin.

First, the human species developed like the seed of a tree. This seed was distinct and different from the seeds of other plants from the very beginning, though there may have been a time when other seeds physically resembled it. In analogous terms, the fact that the human species evolved directly after certain other species (invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals) does not necessarily mean that it was derived from them.⁴⁸ Second, human evolution resembled that of a child in the womb of its mother. Although this child passes through various stages until it attains maturity – at one time an embryo and at another a foetus – it always follows one single line of development. Similarly although the human species evolved through different phases – those of an amphibian and of an anthropoid, for example – it was always a distinct species, uniquely endowed with the reasoning faculty, undergoing a continuous process of refinement.⁴⁹

Scientists in general, and biologists and naturalists in particular, now recognise that a basic genetic unity underlies all diversities of organic life: “We are one species, one people. Every individual on this earth is a member of ‘homo sapiens sapiens’, and the geographical variations we see among peoples are simply biological nuances on the basic theme”.⁵⁰ Interestingly, the concise, anthropomorphic account of creation in the First Chapter of Genesis accords with the findings of

biologists on evolutionary process: mineral (lines 1–10), vegetable (line 11), animal (lines 20–5) and humanity (line 26). Life itself is now estimated to have emerged near the beginning of Precambrian time, the first of twelve distinct periods of geological time, about 3.8 billion years ago.⁵¹

As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who defined faith as conscious knowledge expressed as virtuous deeds,⁵² stated at a public talk in Paris in November 1911:

Religion and science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism ...⁵³

When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there will be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles – and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God.⁵⁴

The restoration of the ancient harmony between religion and science, faith and reason (sensibilities, as it were, dissassociated since the Renaissance), the two complementary pathways which can lead to a clearer understanding and more intelligent and beneficial knowledge of reality, was spelt out by Max Planck and Albert Einstein, two pre-eminent and highly influential twentieth-century physicists:

Religion and natural science do not exclude each other, as many contemporaries of ours believe or fear; they mutually supplement and condition each other.

Religion without science is blind. Science without religion is lame.⁵⁵

Some Blessèd Hope

Fusing the subjective prerogatives of Romanticism with the sensitive analysing of the nation's health (or lack of it), Victorian poets, deeply conscious of their role as spokesmen, sought to occupy a middle-ground: stemming from his anguish at the death of Arthur Henry Hallam, his closest friend at Cambridge, at the age of 22, Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (published in 1850) also addressed the mounting crisis of faith and doubt besetting his public; moving in an episodic sequence from the poet's own numb grief and profound questioning at his friend's untimely death to final recovery of hope and faith in God's omnipresent Will in the "Epilogue," it became the most widely read poem in Victorian Britain, its popularity undoubtedly helped by Tennyson's status as Poet Laureate – and his sheer poetic skill.

If much Romantic poetry had been visionary, therapeutic, celebratory and, in the case of Blake, prescriptive, that of Victoria's reign was unabashedly nostalgic (e.g. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Browning's *A Toccata of Galluppi's*, Arnold's *The Scholar Gypsy*, Swinburne's *The Lake of Gaube*, many of Housman's lyrics) and often consolatory. Thus Arnold closed *Dover Beach* with pained, morbid resignation (the "ignorant armies" of the final line perhaps an allusion to the revolutions of 1848–9):

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night (28–37).

William Ernest Henley composed the much-anthologised *Invictus* (1875), its four elegant quatrains crystallising in archetypal imagery his fortitude under the crippling tuberculosis of the bone he had suffered:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul (13–16).

In retrospect, the poet's dilemma was how, in a social milieu censured by Arnold for "its sick hurry / And divided aims" (*The Scholar Gypsy*, lines 203–04) and growing indifferent to anything but material comfort and satisfied with the guarantee of an ever-expanding Empire on which the sun would never set, he could in fact be master of his fate (nigh-impossible in any case) if, on the one hand, God played dice with His creation or, on the other, be master of his soul if he was so closely related to mere apes.

By far the most striking, if not altogether original, religious poetry of this later period is that which dramatises the individual's wrestle with God (the work of seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets Donne, Herbert and Vaughan constituting a notable precedent). Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* (1890–2) is a superb allegorical rendering in long, breathless stanzas of this inner turmoil, of his soul's petulant refusal to accept the benevolence and compassion vouchsafed by its Creator:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed slopes I sped;
Adown Titantic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat – and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet –
“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me” (1–15).

Exhausted but still restless after “that long pursuit” (155), the errant Thompson, who had been addicted to opium and had lived in poverty in London for years, finally acquiesces:

“Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom Thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me” (180–1).

The mature poetic career of Hopkins enacts in microcosm the shift from certitude to incertitude that occurred during the second half of Victoria’s reign, when Britain had established itself as the world’s foremost industrial, economic and colonial power. The sequence of sonnets celebrating nature as the intricate, awe-inspiring handiwork of God as observed in Wales and completed in 1877 (*The Starlight Night, Spring, Pied Beauty, The Windhover, Hurrahing in Harvest*), the year of his ordination, seems the more starkly radiant when juxtaposed with the “dark” or “terrible” sonnets written during Hopkins’s deeply unhappy tenure as professor of classics at University College, Dublin, four years before his premature death there at the age of 44 in 1889. Of this opus – edited and first published in book form by his friend and fellow poet, Robert Bridges, in 1918 – these late sonnets have subsequently been acclaimed the peak of his genius, so emblematic are they of the human being’s wilful separation from and, it would seem,

abandonment by God (“ ... my lament / Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away” – *I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, Not Day*), so uncannily prescient of both the existentialist angst, alienation and sense of absurdity and futility typified by much modernist literature and the clouds of despair with which the world’s horizon came to be shrouded in the wake of two global wars, the Great Depression, the Nazi Holocaust, the Great Purges in Stalin’s Soviet Union and the nuclear bombing of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the latter a signal instance of the moral choices available through the use or, indeed, misuse of one of the most sophisticated of all scientific technologies.

There then emerged the post-Victorian or modernist view that the individual – made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) and poised above the beasts but beneath the angels – as a single and unified whole, a stable entity, was no longer valid. Freud did much to promulgate this view. In 1900, while assistant professor of neuropathology at the University of Vienna, he published *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*). Dreams or nocturnal visions were to Freud windows on the subconscious mind, a singular blend of recent experiences (manifest content) and wish fulfilment (latent content). With proper analysis, the dream can be broken down into its component parts and interpreted to reveal long-suppressed desires, phobias, aspirations and fears. More could be learned by dissecting the not always rational workings of the mind and sublimated sexuality than from moralistic imperatives derived from Scripture and credal formulae⁵⁶ cloaked in mythology, superstition, fanaticism and ultimately barbarism (the Crusades, the Inquisition, Europe’s sixteenth-century religious wars, prevalent misogyny, millennia-long anti-Semitism that would culminate in the Holocaust): psychoanalysis and psychotherapy could succeed in identifying and healing neuroses where sacerdotalism and sacraments had failed.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the idealism so cherished by such Romantic poets as Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley succumbed to pragmatism, itself euphemistic of the brutal colonisation and domination of foreign lands and the exploitation of their “inferior” peoples; noble, practicable ideals of the eighteenth century – those of Democratic Justice and of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) respectively – were defaced by attitudes which were hegemonic, as evidenced in the lead taken by France and Britain to expand their colonies militarily in much of Africa during the 1880s. The promises of the American Revolution became blighted by racial discrimination towards, and segregation of, Native Americans and African-Americans (particularly in its secessionist Southern states in the case of the latter), and which would not be properly addressed at government level until the 1960s; those in France darkened into the Reign of Terror (1792) and, under Robespierre and Emperor Napoleon, a bloodstained “civilisation” predicated on the illusion of a Glorious Republic. The foundations of national, class and racial conflicts of the near future were laid or rather bolstered. Religious leaders perpetuated the misunderstandings and confusion perpetrated in the name of religion by failing to perceive the divine Educators of humanity’s “collective childhood as the agents of one civilising process”;⁵⁷ by stubbornly clinging to “unintelligent dogmas”,⁵⁸ they “erect[ed] artificial barriers between faith and reason”⁵⁹ which have largely persisted to the present. Imperialism, the offspring of millenarian motivations and energies, and the leitmotif of the second half of Victoria’s momentous reign of one quarter of the earth’s inhabitants, gained a deeper root throughout the world and loyalties to peace, justice and unity waxed and waned. Despite the historic interfaith fellowship inaugurated by the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, the early twentieth century was ripe for world war, particularly in Europe, which by then was primed for mass

destruction, as had been foreseen by Bahá'u'lláh when He observed to E.G. Browne in 1890: “Yet do we see your kings and rulers lavishing their treasures more freely on means for the destruction of the human race than on that which would conduce to the happiness of mankind ... ”.⁶⁰ The League of Nations, the prototype for both Tennyson’s “federation of the world” and the “mighty convocation”⁶¹ of the world’s political and religious leaders prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh as a means of resolving international conflict, was formed only after the involvement of over 30 nations and 90 per cent of the earth’s population in warfare and the deaths of at least 10 million men and the wounding of 21 million, with tens of thousands of soldiers slaughtered in the space of only days during the three stages of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916.

The bleakness of the end of the year and of the nineteenth century was deftly evoked by Thomas Hardy in *The Darkling Thrush*:

The land’s sharp features seemed to be
The century’s corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I (9–16).

Listening to the “happy good-night air” (line 30) of “an aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small” (line 21), the poet is “unaware” of “Some blessèd Hope” (line 31). With so much strife, uncertainty, alienation, violence, terrorism, greed, corruption, dehumanisation, dysfunction and misery engendered by the erosion of transcendence and the deification of a callow, hedonistic individualism and a rampant, enervating materialism – characterised in the West by a rabid consumerism and the divorce of values from facts (which has left in its wake moral,

social and intellectual bankruptcy) – the key word for many then, as now, was “hope.” However fleeting or illusory, this hope was that, though the vitality of belief in God and of His religion as an efficacious social paradigm was being corroded in every land, humanity, the finest fruit of a majestic evolution stretching back billions of years, could yet be renewed. In the words of Bahá’u’lláh:

The whole earth is now in a state of pregnancy. The day is approaching when it will have yielded its noblest fruits, when from it will have sprung forth the loftiest trees, the most enchanting blossoms, the most heavenly blessings
...⁶²

1991–2002

References

1. So-called, because although Queen Victoria succeeded to the British Throne in June 1837, this period dates from the passing of the first Reform Bill (which gave the middle classes a strong influence upon elections in Britain, hitherto dominated by the peerage) five years previously and ends with her death in 1901, marking the opening of the twentieth century.
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