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## TO PRAY OR NOT TO PRAY

by Kathleen Adams

No-one who has read George Eliot's novels can be unaware of her interest in the clergy as characters for her fiction - Amos Barton, Mr. Gilfil, Mr. Tryan, Mr. Irwine, Rufus Lyon - or of her knowledge of various expressions of faith - Evangelical, Methodist, Independent, through to Judaism in her final novel, Daniel Deronda. She writes of the clergy with a minimum of caricature, some criticism, but she is never without compassion.

Reading her letters confirms this interest as well as her life-long search for knowledge of the subject and, because her quest is so well documented, her views and her doubts appear to lay her wide open both to her admirers and her critics. Many of her admirers belong to the George Eliot Fellowship; her critics often do not. But critics, both inside and outside the membership, have made their views known about what they see as an indulgence by the Fellowship in religious practice - from Grace before the Birthday Luncheon to the placing of a memorial in a church. We were soundly scolded for putting a plaque in Chilvers Coton Church (her 'Shepperton' Church in Scenes of Clerical Life) and for being associated with the one in Holy Trinity, Coventry. The memorial stone in Westminster Abbey caused a storm of protest, not least in The Guardian. We know that we have members who stay away from our Wreath-laying Ceremonies because of their religious content - not because of their own religious feelings but what they believe to be George Eliot's. At the Nuneaton ceremony we have usually celebrated George Eliot with assistance from the clergy and choir of her baptismal church of Chilvers Coton. At Westminster Abbey the presence of the clergy and some form of religious service is unavoidable. If the nation's national literary shrine were to be somewhere other than Westminster Abbey, our celebration would be, doubtless, without benefit of clergy - like George Eliot's union with G. H. Lewes!

We have tried to answer each protest as it has arisen and hope that our answers have been convincing. The latest criticism arose in the New Humanist, whose editor, Jim Herrick, attended the Celebration Luncheon after the unveiling of the George Eliot statue in Nuneaton last March. He wrote, 'Less appropriately, the lunch began with grace. . . . Although George Eliot was far from being a radical free-thinker, grace at a celebration in her honour is surely a betrayal of the principles of a woman who suffered considerably in order to remain true to her agnosticism.' My dictionary includes in the meaning of 'agnostic': one who accepts knowledge of material phenomena only. This alone can hardly relate to George Eliot, but there is neither time nor space to go more deeply into meanings here.

Again, the Fellowship Council looked into its corporate soul to see if we could rightly be accused of betraying George Eliot's principles. An exhaustive search into what she wrote on the subject would provide material for a lengthy thesis; what others wrote and continue to write about her beliefs, or lack of them, would furnish another. Perhaps this is something that might yet be done for us, but we felt that, at present, this was not part of our brief. Instead, we read some of her later letters and hoped that we were not dodging the issue and just looking for reassurance. Her earlier letters we rejected for these show clearly her youthful anguish; it is her later ones which reflect the more mature George Eliot.

In 1861 (when she was 42) she wrote to Barbara Bodichon:

'As for the forms and ceremonies, I feel no regret that any should turn to them for comfort if they can find comfort in them; sympathetically I enjoy them myself.'

Twelve years later, in a letter to John Cross, she wrote:

'All the great religions of the world, historically considered, are rightly the objects of deep reverence and sympathy - they are the record of spiritual struggles, which are the types of our own. This is to me pre-eminently true of Hebrewism and Christianity, on which my own youth was nourished.'

And in this sense I have no antagonism towards any religious belief, but a strong outflow of sympathy. Every community met to worship the highest Good (which is understood to be expressed by God) carries me along in its main current; and if there were not reasons against my following such an inclination, I should go to church or chapel, constantly for the sake of the delightful emotions of fellowship which come over me in religious assemblies - the very nature of such assemblies being the recognition of a binding belief or spiritual law, which is to lift us into willing obedience, and save us from the slavery of unregulated passion or impulse. And with regard to other people, it seems to me that those who have no definite conviction which constitutes a protesting faith, may often more beneficially cherish the good within them and be better members of society by a conformity, based on the recognised good in the public belief, than by a nonconformity which has nothing but negatives to utter. '

No doubt our critics will find other letters which are, to them, an answer to what we have used as the basis for our reply to criticism. And who can say which of us is right? We can all load our barrels with samples of opposing views and continue to aim them; the person who knew all the answers cannot be asked the questions, but we feel that she would have not been overtly critical of our continued association with the ecclesiastical buildings which were part of her Warwickshire childhood, that she would have been proud to be commemorated in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner in the twentieth century, even though the more rigid and intransigent nineteenth century Westminster Abbey rejected her, and that she would have understood the wishes of a majority to use a traditional Grace, to offer the occasional prayer to a God (or Good) she may not fully have accepted. She must have associated herself with something similar at Lewes's funeral, and her marriage in St. George's, Hanover Square to John Cross in 1880.

She wrote to Barbara Bodichon, 'The "highest calling and election" is to do without opium, and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance'.

We are also very much aware of her views on  
Immortality and of those 'who live again in minds made  
better by their presence', but we do not feel that  
she would have felt betrayed by our 'emotions of  
fellowship'.

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