

**NAUGHTY STORIES: NARRATIVE AND THEODICY IN THE
WRITINGS OF
ANNIE BESANT AND CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN**

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Abstract

By recovering non-canonical works of female social reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and reading them in light of more recent historical research on late-Victorian secularisation and religion, Darwinism and the women's movement, this dissertation examines the intellectual histories of Annie Besant and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose works reflect a predominant concern with religious matters. Heavily influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, Besant and Gilman also develop views on the social applications of scientific methods and incorporate these into their theodicies, or solutions to the evils they perceive in society. Formal choices and rhetorical modes employed by Besant and Gilman in the interests of redefining gender and thereby reforming society include autobiographies, novels, tracts, pamphlets, speeches or sermons and poetry. These are intended to bring audiences and readers to a conversion to principles established by the authors' respective ethical systems. However, relationships between theory and practice, ethics and doctrine are shown to be determined largely by choices of narrative and genre, which are paradoxically dependent on pre-existing concepts of progress or degeneration and the use of religion in the interest of legislating for the body.

Chapter One examines similarities and differences between Besant and Gilman, the conflict of science and religion, the secularisation

debate, and issues of social reform pertaining to feminism more generally. Chapter Two discusses Besant's autobiographies as proselytising works of sage writing. Chapter Three describes Theosophy's development in light of Judeo-Christian rhetoric and ideology and how it helps fulfil Besant's theological and political mission. Chapter Four introduces Gilman's sociology of women and details the influence of Christianity and science on Gilman's philosophy through non-fiction prose, short stories and poetry. Chapter Five explores concepts of utopia and Gilman's early utopias. Chapter Six discusses sexual difference in Gilman's most famous utopian novel, *Herland* (1915).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Annie Besant:

- AA *An Autobiography*, 1893
- AS *Autobiographical Sketches*, 1885

Works by Charlotte Perkins Gilman:

- H *Herland*, 1915
- HH *His Religion and Hers*, 1923
- Living* *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 1935.
- MTM *Moving the Mountain*, 1911
- MMW *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture*,
1911
- WE *Women and Economics*, 1898

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INTRODUCTION

Much Western political philosophy of the last two and a half centuries or so implies that church and state may be segregate institutions without detriment to concepts of citizenship and peaceful society. That religion does not need to play the major role in the formation of the character and behaviour of the citizens of a nation has been accepted in France, in England and North America without much legal dispute.¹ When the concept of organised traditional religion is challenged and then modified, removed, or replaced with something else, the process has been called secularisation. But what are the ethical implications of ecumenical or even secular thought and are they a practicable ethics amongst increasingly diverse and ostensibly democratic Western societies? How, amongst such religious diversity, is consistency to be obtained, if a truly harmonious, embracing and universally beneficial system of belief and practice is in fact deemed desirable and possible? In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the notion of an Esperanto-like solution in the discovery or composition of a universal religion or at least universal solidarity of some kind did not seem absurd to many. But in order to see why such apparent

¹ A notable exception to this, of course, is the continuing controversy over abortion rights in the United States which rights are challenged from a religious point of view. Very few complain about the more general ideal ensconced in the Pledge of Allegiance, memorised by every child at school, and repeated often as effective rhetoric in political campaign speeches: that Americans are 'one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.'

idealism was possible, it is necessary to sketch out some very general details.

Experiencing the pressures of increasing immigration and post-Civil War politics on one side of the Atlantic and the consequences of imperial rule and the conquest of nations and cultures on the other, the relatively homogenous American and English societies of the late-nineteenth century, where those of white, Northern European descent were still in the majority, formed crucibles for religious and social change which has been documented and studied, especially in more recent decades.² The increased activism of women, who were sometimes involved on all of these fronts while simultaneously making a case for their own literal and figurative emancipation, applied the lens of gender to such questions. This confrontation with other religions and social and religious histories was occurring while two somewhat allied currents in Western intellectual history came to cross each other: the rationalism championed by eighteenth-century scholars of 'Enlightenment' which produced schism in the churches and progress in the sciences and the Romantic reaction of the poets and philosophers

² See, for example, William Ralph Inge, *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), Warren Sylvester Smith, *The London Heretics, 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1967), Hugh McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London: Croom Helm, 1974), Owen Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), Donna A. Behnke, *Religious Issues in Nineteenth-Century Feminism* (Troy, NY: The Whitsun Publishing Co., 1982), Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman, ed., *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), Frank M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), John Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland 1843-1945* (London: Routledge, 1994), S.J.D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and experience in industrial Yorkshire 1870-1920* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

who refused to deny man his own individual destiny and purpose in the universe.

The influence of the Enlightenment created alternative views of faith, including the classic example of religious ecumenism found in eighteenth-century Freemasonry³ and also what has been called 'natural religion' or Deism. A prominent affiliation amongst scientists, philosophers, and other sceptics in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Deism negates revelation and asserts a rational and materialist approach to divinity, allowing natural phenomena to determine the attributes of an immanent God who has created but does not intervene in the universe. Interested in revealing rather than disproving God, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) or Isaac Newton (1642-1727) determined the success of their efforts through the illumination of divinity in nature.⁴ Revealing the ways of God to men through science was a solution which would effectively disallow the supernatural in favour of earthly reality and individual intellectual sovereignty while maintaining a divine presence and source. But empiricism and the emphasis on creation rather than being would continually challenge the

³ Freemasonry, the Free and Accepted Masons founded in London, 1717, remains a large, decentralised fraternal institution ostensibly based on the traditions of the builders of King Solomon's temple and medieval stoneworkers guilds, or, as some would argue, on the ritual and ideology of the actual Knights Templar. It possesses no dogma (and does not allow members to discuss religion at meetings), however, offers no sacraments, and does not offer salvation by any means. It does encourage religion, however, in the sense that it expects each member to follow a faith as well as the moral teaching of Freemasonry, which is essentially the principle of Brotherly Love, acceptable to all religions, or so Freemasonry claims. For extensive history of the relationship of the organisation to the Knights Templar, especially as pertaining to the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, see John J. Robinson, *Born in Blood: The Lost Secrets of Freemasonry* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1989). For detail on English Freemasonry see John Hamill, *The Craft: A History of English Freemasonry* (London: Aquarian Press, 1986).

notion of God. Historian Jon Roberts argues that Protestant thinkers made a choice to concern themselves with teleological rather than ontological questions, and instead of considering 'God as Being Itself and the beings that inhabit the universe' they focused on 'the relationship between Creator and creation grounded on the discoveries disclosed by science concerning the structure and behavior of phenomena.'⁵ This would accomplish the transfer of a tremendous amount of intellectual authority to science. By the nineteenth century, the application of positivist terms to the understanding of all natural phenomena made such interpretation seem 'ever more authoritative, even irrefutable.'⁶ Yet it is well-documented that many of those scientists working during the decades of fallout after the publication of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection would still consider themselves religious and were definitely not championing a belligerent atheism.⁷

Applying empirically inspired analytical methods to religious texts, the twenty or more Protestant faculties teaching theology in Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced scholars like

⁴ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine, 1991) 300.

⁵ Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution 1859-1914* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) xv.

⁶ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985) 119.

⁷ James Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A study of the Protestant struggle to come to terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America 1870-1900* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979) 109, 252-298, 348-349, 392. Warren Wagar, ed., *The Secular Mind: Transformations of Faith in Modern Europe* (New York, London: Holmes and Meier, 1982) *passim*. See also Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*, and Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, above.

J. G. Eichorn (1752-1827), W.M.L. de Wette (1780-1849), and J. Wellhausen (1844-1918) who professionalized the study of the Bible, continuing the work of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Jean Astruc (1684-1766), and Richard Simon (1638-1712), and encouraged the further subjection of scripture to literal examination. Such scholars created completely new and sensational versions of High and Low criticism which systematically challenged text, authorship and dates, sources, genres, historicity and doctrinal tendencies. This would eventually doom the project of establishing the historical Jesus for most and found the literary mythological nature of the Bible as an historical and technical fact, a course of study pursued by scholars through the twentieth century.⁸ Here then is evidence of the strengthened attempt to separate doctrine from ethics, assuming that either may stand alone.

Also accommodating the intellectual shift toward a more anthropocentric world view in the nineteenth century were the notable works of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), August Comte (1798-1857), L. A. Feuerbach (1804-1872), J.S. Mill (1806-1873), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). To address the individual theological or metaphysical concerns of these writers is, of course, quite beyond the scope of this essay. Yet their works demonstrate that there remained the possibility of finding a spiritually inspired or theologically informed space within philosophies which prescribed utilitarian or materialist approaches to social

⁸ J. W. Rogerson, *An Introduction to the Bible* (New York: Penguin, 1999) 149-151, 154-158.

problems. Keeping pace with economic and social changes, such intellectuals and ideologues of the nineteenth century perceived and developed more pragmatic needs. More broadly based social and political solutions arose to solve the problems posed by population growth, child labour, urban life and alienation, and included the establishment of many co-operative communities in Europe as well as the United States. Various organisations like the Salvation Army and other temperance groups formed by the energies of the women's movement went forth to rescue and retrain the dissolute. Women's groups devoted to suffrage and other political and social matters (e.g. Karl Pearson's Men and Women's Club) also developed. The need to manage real social concerns required the expression of ethical principles which could sustain such organisations, the Salvation Army being the most obvious example. Christian Socialism and Edward Bellamy's 'religion of solidarity' or Nationalism, which he considered 'a religion in itself' are other patent examples.⁹ Socialism, in general, matured into a major political and, many would argue, religious movement.

But there were also movements which placed themselves directly in the middle of perceived conflict between science and religion.

Spiritualism, a multifaceted phenomenon linked to many of the people and movements animating this period, developed during the 1850s in North-eastern America and spread to Europe, becoming extremely fashionable amongst the middle and upper classes. Reading through

⁹ Arthur E. Morgan, *Edward Bellamy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944) 253-254.

various histories more recently generated on the subject shows that spiritualism of both Christian and anti-Christian varieties, for there were both, provided entertainment for some, real mystical experience for others, but most importantly a bridge between matters earthly and divine through an implied synthesis of religion and science which could be used to challenge one or both authorities.¹⁰ Spiritualism was therefore a very useful, if somewhat awkward, vehicle for women.¹¹

More formally religious but related alternatives had also appeared, like the Christianity of Swedenborg and the various versions of Theosophy, which owes a great debt to spiritualism and to masonry. These kinds of apparent solutions to a perceived lack of religious foundation, motivation or belief or to related problems of political or economic disenfranchisement remain options for many who have and desire to accommodate such needs today. But the existence of such organisations still hinges on universal definitions of what is good or bad for society, what is moral or ethical, and how to thereby categorize evil and good. The proliferation of societies dedicated to moral and social improvement, often aimed at the lower classes, frequently culminated in political activity. Were these organisations therefore secular or

¹⁰ Janet Oppenheim accounts for the practice of spiritualism within the Anglican church as well as the important similarities between Christian and anti-Christian spiritualists in *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985) 67-110.

¹¹ This view is corroborated by Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) 34-37 and by Alex Owen, who writes 'spiritualist mediumship was capable of sabotaging the mechanics of power inherent in the Victorian codification of gender differences' but also emphasises the contradictions of spiritualist practice for women in *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) 11.

religious? How are the secular and the religious to be defined and separated?

The question of secularisation is not merely an historical one, for it is based not simply on inevitably misleading churchgoing statistics or on the perceptions of those historical figures who have tried to effect or have been affected by change and written about it, but also on the categories we use (in both contemporary and historical terms) to define what is religious. These categories, such as the public and private, the individual and state, or religion and blasphemy or non-religion may be taken for granted. Moreover, are people, even scientists, who do not believe in God or any other god necessarily irreligious or non-religious or non-spiritual? Are those who still profess religious beliefs to be considered unenlightened or, dare we say, primitive? Is spirituality necessarily religious or not? If materialism is right and successful, why do we continue to disparage it and insist on our spiritual virtues, especially in the notoriously pragmatic and consumer-oriented culture of the West? Why has 'less is more' become a new mantra?

Our age has not answered these questions definitively, certainly not in any universally acceptable fashion. The evidence of much late nineteenth-century reform writing, and particularly those nearly-forgotten writers studied here, begs that these questions be answered, and not only for the particular historically delimited interests of gender, class, and race with which they concern themselves. The pain of dealing with what was becoming the modern mind, a mind challenged to determine truth for itself and to decide alone the fate of the individual,

has perhaps been numbed by post-modern (I use the term loosely) experience, but this was not the case for the writers studied here, Annie Besant and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The truth finally declared by Jiddu Krishnamurti (1985-1986), that all must find truth for themselves and put away the past in the interest of world unity, is prepared for by the groundwork of the Reformation.¹² Still resilient to notions of alienation or existential horror or complete relativism and subjectivity and the cult of individualism, Besant and Gilman find themselves torn between what is and what ought to be, between objective and subjective, and believe they might work to discover and achieve the right ends.

Creating the most accurate, the most complete account of the convergent intellectual and literary histories of these writers and their contexts should require a vast interdisciplinary study of history, theology and most of the arts and sciences. Perhaps this is not merely a peculiarity of dealing with the nineteenth century, but every path or branch seems to lead to another. This project does not presume to attempt such a study. Rather, I would like to examine how gender-related issues, which may be at the core of determining human behaviour, are addressed in light of questions about religion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I would like to show how those concerned with issues of social reform, in a time when

¹² Krishnamurti, who would finally rebel against Theosophy and his patron, Annie Besant, emphasised individual religious experience as the basis for the discovery of truth and rejected all authority: 'Revolt is essential in order to escape from the narrowness of tradition, from the binding influences of belief, of theories. If you would understand the Truth, you must be in revolt so that you may escape from all these – from books, from theories, from gods, from superstitions – from everything which is not of your own.' J. Krishnamurti, *Life in Freedom* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928) 39.

vocabularies and social roles were also changing on a vast scale, were to convey their insights and agendas through rhetorical modes heavily influenced by just such concerns over faith and morality. How do formal choices related to the project of redefining gender and reforming society correspond to developing views about the applications of scientific, religious, or even global political thinking? Obviously, some small steps will have to be taken in the direction of the aforementioned vast study in order to clarify the variables involved. There are a number of strands in the intellectual history of the nineteenth-century which have a particular tendency to become tangled together, but I will try to address the circumstances with a minimum of fuss while conveying the essential details.

Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) seem to understand the concept of the *use* of religion intuitively, developing agendas for social reform and the legislation of earthly human behaviour which are intentionally based on religious principles. Their respective sociological and feminist positions as reformers may be more concretely elaborated when they are understood to emanate from a religious perspective. This study hopes to illustrate how their work is both liberated and controlled by historical context and their respective educational and intellectual environments and opportunities for activism. Their treatment of the conjunction of the rationalising process of an industrialised economy and the languages of the new 'sciences' within a framework of social values that are steeped

in the rhetoric and ideas of a Judeo-Christian world view leads to writing that demonstrates the inherent difficulties and paradoxes of such an approach, but also reveals unexpected affinities. This is not to claim that the culture of Protestantism is solely responsible for all this, but I would like to suggest that the recognisably feminist or humanist intentions of these writers (as we would describe their programs today) are complicated by the attempt to deal with the apparently conflicting agendas of the same world view. On a purely conceptual level, then, I will examine the way these women writers participate in a predominating culture of liberal Protestantism which both protects and challenges its own ideology.

What should be clear throughout this study is that I am not attempting to show that Gilman and Besant are unsuccessful merely because of the patriarchal languages they are forced to use, although this is an obvious issue (and they are not necessarily unsuccessful). Rather, it is the process of revision itself which creates complications for them. Uncertainty, and therefore complexity, in their writings reveals the way they are themselves changing and redefining gender and how this becomes essential to their ideas about science, ethics, and God. In turn, their project may be seen as the precursor to more recent attempts by feminist theologians of all faiths to determine what is useful or valuable in their own traditions in the similar interest of creating better societies. The project of revising religion for Gilman and Besant is much like that of revising history, on the one hand, but with a fundamental difference, which is that while the majority of religions dealt with in this regard are

text-based, the business of reinterpretation is not simply an academic exercise in re-reading. Indeed, as noted above, historical revisionism was still a radical thing at the turn of the century. That the Bible (or even the Upanishads) might be treated as literature and subjected to further excavation was still a new idea in the nineteenth century, which raises the question of the sacredness of the text, in this case, the religious text. That Besant and Gilman practice such revisionism places them in the category of subversive intellectual radicals. Such work had already been going on, but not in ways which moved very far beyond elite institutions and academic debate. But how far could/can such deconstruction and reconstruction go without recalling the categories against which such readings turn? Applying themselves to the business of analysing and reconstructing human society itself, Besant and Gilman mobilise art and politics for social service, thereby creating unique expressions of religious commitment.

Both Besant and Gilman recognize, in themselves first, it should be said, the ineluctably religious nature of humanity. But what exactly is indicated by 'religion' when Gilman refers to 'this religion of mine' as essential to her sociology and what does Besant's mother, Emily Wood, mean when, as Besant explains in her autobiography, she describes her daughter as 'too religious'? What is Besant claiming when she calls herself 'the most religious of Atheists'? How this religious feeling leads to philosophy and to a practical desire to transform society in the work of these proto-feminist activists begs the already acknowledged question of secularism.

As early social scientists, writing and lecturing during the long stretch between the late Victorian 1880s and the early 1930s, Besant and Gilman share the conviction that it will be impossible to improve, reform, or otherwise restructure society unless the inner being of the human species is willingly changed. Machiavellian, Hobbesian and Lockean ideas about human nature are not irredeemable facts. Hoping to create a new *state of mind* by appealing to that presumed moral or ethical sense of ‘goodness’ which governs the individual relationship to society, each presents a *theodicy*, or solution to problems of evil, injustice, inequality, etc., in ways which may be said to ‘secularise’ mainstream orthodoxies. That is, these theories move, displace, or otherwise transform the role played by traditional doctrines, accommodating them to what may be described as a more worldly world view. But the chicken-and-egg question arises: do they mount the emblem of modern progress on the front of an already formed world view or do they adjust their beliefs according to the latest research or discovery, and do the subsequent effects compromise their intentions or not? A critical understanding of what is meant by ‘secular’ is obviously needed.

To briefly summarise here, in order to emphasise the particular concerns of this essay, the great conflict between science and religion in the nineteenth century has been rather self-explanatory in the past. That the projects and language of reason and a supposedly rational industrial economy overwhelmed the prejudices and backwardness of state religions is attested to by the influential intellectual and political

tradition of the Enlightenment as well as the evidence of so many apparently secular and socially-oriented nineteenth-century organisations, such as the Secularists, Socialists, or Fabians in Britain or the Nationalists and Progressives in America. This has been the standard account of the process of secularisation. The twentieth century inherited the view that science and theology are diametrically opposed, as well as the thesis of assumed secularisation, which has been bolstered by the evidence of declining church memberships and increasing numbers of people ready to admit their apostasy.

More recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that the boundaries between science and religion are not so obvious. That the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin actually grew out of the predominant Christian culture, and that the majority of scientists who professed materialism were, in fact, religiously motivated, are two current assertions.¹³ Throughout the last decade or so of the twentieth-century, prominent nineteenth-century specialists have been re-examining some of these ideas in light of issues of nationhood, for example, or rural history, and have found a vast range of religious experience in Britain which can be defined in both traditional and radical terms.¹⁴ In America, while the role of religion cannot be

¹³ Sydney Eisen, introduction, *Victorian Faith in Crisis*, ed. Helmstadter and Lightman 1-2. James R. Moore, 'Theodicy and Society: The Crisis of the Intelligentsia,' *Victorian Faith in Crisis* 153-186. See also Karl Pearson, *The Grammar of Science* (London: Walter Scott, 1892; London: J. M. Dent, 1937) and Thomas H. Huxley, *Science and Christian Tradition* (1894; London: Macmillan and Co., 1900) as examples of scientists who became concerned with the question of religion as it affects social values.

¹⁴ See note 2. Wolffe helpfully uses the terms 'official' and 'unofficial' religion.

underestimated in any case, the tradition of radical religion presages a rather different tale, for the Protestant churches, after much tussle, were the receiving ground of the doctrines of Darwinism, which became translated into divine purpose, and eventually into the doctrines of Social Darwinism, and this will be discussed in greater depth later.¹⁵

Nevertheless, it is the *perception* of crisis amongst many Victorians which has further complicated our late twentieth-century understanding of how the Victorians dealt with challenges to their beliefs about reality. This crisis, or perception of crisis, seems to have affected the middle classes the most and therefore the pool of writers with whose works we most often come into contact, incidentally reinforcing the secularisation thesis as an apparent resolution. According to historian James R. Moore, this crisis of the intelligentsia 'arose from the necessity laid upon them of prescribing purposive action, or practical measures, for dealing with social conflict in a manner consistent with securing their own status and emoluments in a diversifying economy.' Moore further explains that for the rest of society, crisis lay 'in the social conflicts themselves, arising chiefly from economic change, or in the flux of bourgeois opinion, which tended to undermine personal meaning and coherence.'¹⁶ This applies a more material analysis to the problem of faith, and suggests the link between religious faith and social and

¹⁵ See Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944; Boston: Beacon, 1992) 24-30.

¹⁶ James R. Moore, 'Theodicy and Society: the Crisis of the Intelligentsia', ed. Helmstadter and Lightman 153.

economic conditions and power relationships, thus acknowledging the rather obvious notion that faith is a problem for the material world.

What is compelling about the turn-of-the-century activists is their very idealism, their internalisation of the idea of progress, their optimism and faith in the goodness of human nature or in the possibilities of fixing human nature and of creating a world, in an imperialist age, in which all tribes and their stories could exist peacefully together under one umbrella.¹⁷ The late-Victorian project of reform meant prescribing action and practical measures: temperance, abstinence (or some other solution), purity, welfare, suffrage, education and unionisation.

That socio-economic conditions dictate socio-religious concerns is also the conclusion of Marxist sociologist Bryan S. Turner, who attempts to identify the project of postmodernism as a reaction to the secular version of modernity found within Protestantism, particularly that version of Calvinist Protestantism formed amongst the bourgeois of northern Europe, which assumes a process of 'rationalisation and secularisation within the context of an urban industrial civilisation.'¹⁸ Turner's definition of secularisation is complicated by his view of the operation of Protestant Christian valuation in the process of rationalisation itself, as opposed to the emotionality of alternatives like the aesthetic of the baroque movement. Asserting that feminism and the

¹⁷ While for many this umbrella meant the state, the question of the closeness of religious and nationalist aims is also relevant. See John Wolfe above.

¹⁸ Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 1983) xviii.

green movement may therefore be considered emotional movements that are reacting, rather paradoxically, as a postmodern reaction to the asceticism of traditional Protestantism. Turner assumes that postmodernism is defined by consumer and capitalist culture and is therefore a continuation of the economic results of (Protestant) rationalism.¹⁹ But this challenge to traditional Protestantism (i.e. rationalism, asceticism, anti-magical belief) in the form of consumerist hedonism is answered by new fundamentalisms. What is most useful here, in addition to an intriguing interpretation of Protestantism's contribution to the process of rationalisation, is that Turner's analysis of the source of the religious impulse moves away from simplified notions of man as an ineluctably religious animal and toward the conceptualisation of the *uses* of religion, emphasizing Max Weber's mantra from the introduction to *The Sociology of Religion* that "elementary forms of behavior motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented to *this* world."²⁰ Similarly, our understanding of Victorian social theory should take account of those interesting paradoxes which reveal the relationship of trends in religious and scientific thinking to be less than entirely antagonistic. That those institutions, such as capitalism, the state, marriage, or the church, may dictate the terms with

¹⁹ A similar point of view is shared by Victor Sage in *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), which asserts that it is in fact the Protestant mentality which promotes the rationalising project while protecting its own supernatural world view through the various genres of horror and particularly the Gothic fiction of the nineteenth-century.

²⁰ Turner 2.

which they may be attacked is a conclusion to be borne out by this study.

It is while holding to this idea of the centrality of the body and the material world to religious interpretation and legislation, in light of the apparently contradictory impulses found in Protestantism, that we may turn to the work of nineteenth-century feminist social reformers. While it will become apparent that these writers are ostensibly quite hostile to conservative Protestantism and Evangelicalism, it should become equally clear that positive aspects of their relationships to Judeo-Christian tradition are at the very least ambiguous and usually rather obvious.

Were it not for the challenging intellectual currents flowing from the industrial and Darwinian revolutions and through the latter half of the nineteenth century, the notion of secularism would not be intelligible to us.²¹ That science has to answer for its own formal practice of refusing to concede that any notion of subjectivity enters discourse or pertain to its methods is patent. But this is not a new accusation. Mathematician W. K. Clifford was apparently quite aware of such a problem.²² In addition to Biblical criticism and materialist philosophy, we are also familiar with the streams of inventions and discoveries that seem to

²¹ According to the OED, the words 'secularise' came into use in the early seventeenth century, 'secularisation' in the early eighteenth century, and 'secularism' in the mid-nineteenth century.

²² Clifford writes: "the moment we use language at all, we may make statements which are apparently universal, by which we really only assign the meaning of words." Quoted in George Levine, 'Scientific Discourse as an Alternative to Faith' in Helmstadter and Lightman (1990) from W.K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, 2 vols (London, 1910) 1: 390.

have occurred exponentially during this period leading into the early twentieth century: developments of research into evolutionary theory and the medical sciences, atomic theory, the discovery of elements and the periodic table, photography and film. What these activities accomplished, more than anything else, was the rapid categorisation and classification of the natural world, the reduction of the world to its smallest parts, the production of a way of seeing that purported to be more true, more realistic, of which reductionism many in the late nineteenth century were already complaining.²³ This process (which has not abated and continues today to find ever smaller parts in a seemingly endless deconstruction and demolition project) resulted in a subsequent proliferation of ideologies accounting for how things worked.

Systematising the natural world this way gives the observer control over what is observed, and, as sociologist Abraham Maslow famously observed, may reveal a latent or unconscious fear, presumably of the possibility of disorder, especially as the world becomes increasingly complex due to such increasingly minute observation.²⁴

This seems to be a vicious cycle. The impulse for such an industry has always moved beneath both science and theology and became, in the nineteenth century, what Peter Washington describes as 'the search for a single key that would solve the mysteries of the universe. A key, it was thought, might unlock the source – while, conversely, the source would

²³ Oppenheim 161-162.

²⁴ Theodore Roszak, *The Gendered Atom* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1999) 12. See Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Science* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

provide a key....The idea was not new. On the contrary, explaining apparent diversity in terms of actual unity is the formative principle of most ancient philosophies and religions. But this desire to find unity in diversity became a nineteenth-century obsession in direct proportion to the confusing multiplication of new ideologies.'²⁵ The use of 'ideologies' here aptly describes the consequences of change in the understanding of the natural world for personal beliefs, which very often became systematised themselves.

A by-product of all this expenditure of energy, to use an unintended metaphor, is the gendering of the concepts created and used. That the atom of the physical sciences and the homologous structure of the cell in the biological sciences, for example, are the building blocks on which the material, or real, world is based, is not simply an objective truth. The androcentricity (and bizarre provenance) of these ideas, and the need to change them over for a more integrated and harmonious world view is demonstrated by Theodore Roszak in *The Gendered Atom* (1999).²⁶ It seems likely that 'Madame' Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) intuited something of this when she anticipated the theory of relativity and the infinite divisibility of the atom in her attempt to explain, from an occult perspective, the relatedness and mutability of all matter and mind and the perpetual motion of life, postulating the will as

²⁵ Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* (New York: Schocken, 1993) 9.

²⁶ Roszak's work on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1816) is the basis for this book. Also see the extensive work of Evelyn Fox Keller, for example, *Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender and Science* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

the source of life. By incorporating reason with apparent unreason, Blavatsky asserted authority in both traditionally masculine and feminine terms. The notion of infinite divisibility moves toward the absurdity of a universe made of nothing, for the power to change cannot be seen. Yet it is the recognition in Blavatsky's early theory that science had not accounted for the *relationships* between all forms of matter, visible and invisible, which powers so much research today. Currently, particle physicists are engaged in projects of extraordinarily esoteric proportions which are focused on the often uncontrollable relationships between the bits and pieces of the atoms they smash (Roszak compares this behaviour to that of boys playing roughly with their toys), bits which may exist independently for only a fraction of a millisecond.²⁷

That a notoriously eccentric and androgynous woman Theosophist should have taken hold of the crux of the issue of gender in scientific thinking, perhaps without realising it, is scintillating. Nevertheless, the influence of the sciences, especially as applied during this period of reform, is problematic. Notwithstanding their tremendously useful contributions to the ideological foundations of feminist theory, Besant and Gilman, like Blavatsky, therefore still have a tendency to participate in the familiar discourse they attempt to challenge, complicating but enriching our understanding of their roles in intellectual, literary, and social history.

²⁷ Discussing the language used to describe chemical and biological organisms and properties, Roszak explains that, in describing particles, scientists may now refer to 'webs of relationships,' 'families,' a 'behavior pattern,' a 'communications center,' 'dialogue,' 'cities,' 'governments,' or even 'molecular democracy': 122-129.

At once desiring to free and empower women, races, and classes, Besant and Gilman also desire to purify society of its ills and to create a race of people that is morally, ethically, intellectually and even physically perfect. As good and bad, perfection and imperfection are defined, this project moves toward some questionable policies, often denying the diversity we would now consider valuable for the sake of unity, but this demonstrates that the work of these writers is directed not so much toward the resolution of the relationship between the individual and society, but between society and its counterpart, the ideal society, or paradise. Indeed, the notion of individual difference is largely anathema to their separate utopian visions and politics except so far as the superior individual may guide and instruct by providing an ideal example, or so far as difference enables the categorisation and assignment of social duty. But, given the stated goals, it is very likely that authoritarian positions, which conjure such heinous images for us, are not intended.

Taken as a whole, then, the works of Besant (who is slightly older) and Gilman furnish a mobile landscape of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century intellectual history, inhabited by classical and radically modern ideas and haunted by the peculiarly nineteenth-century project of finding the (usually multifaceted) answer to everything, but always moving forward. They constantly reinterpret, revise and re-present their own ideas and those of others to show more clearly their visions of culminated progress, trying to spur readers and listeners to internalise this transformation and experience their own conversions and

finally act to realise that vision of some perfect life or world. By addressing the idea of modernisation on a rhetorical basis, it is possible to capture both the late-Victorian notion of science as an anti-religious modernising force and what this study considers to be an essentially religious agenda, which sanctions science and scientific methods in order to achieve human progress while paradoxically maintaining control over the definition of progress and concomitant system of ethics.

This project will demonstrate that Besant and Gilman share the goal of creating an ethical system which will promote the transformation of human nature and, consequently, of society. Adapted to an evolutionary perspective which either assumes or promotes this transformation, their systems are imbued with religious purpose, aiming to enable comprehension and implementation of a divine plan which will counter perceived evils. This goal challenges notions of secularisation by creating a millenarian and utopian vision, simultaneously questioning or opposing and incorporating the dominant Judeo-Christian ideology. The use of the rhetoric and ideas of traditional Christian values and narratives are inherently problematic for the expression of their feminist or humanist programs and revaluation of gender roles. To which God(s) do they turn? Ostensibly, each turns to Truth, and truth is intrinsically exclusive, if universal.

The use of a range of genres emphasises reliance on a process of revision as well as the importance of the use of religious writing or expression in the varied purposes of social reform. The extremely popular Roman-style oration, public lecture or sermon is used constantly

by each. Non-fiction prose in the form of journalistic pamphlet, editorial, essay or commentary is employed for didactic and proselytising purposes. Fiction works to create an actual vision of Gilman's utopia, and occasionally Besant's as well, for it is occasionally difficult to see, in Besant, where fact and fiction can be separated. Autobiographies produced by both convey different personalities driven by very similar objectives. Gilman's poetry is entertaining, didactic, and often poignant. Besant's retellings of the stories of saints for children reveal her own conflicting desires.

Organisation of thesis:

Chapter I will describe similarities and differences between the intellectual and social backgrounds of Besant and Gilman and discuss the intersection of science and religion. The relationship of social movements to a changing scientific and theological spectrum will be explained in more detail. Secularisation theory and its detractors will be discussed and the relationship of this subject to the projects of early feminism will be explicated. The project of the theodicy will be presented as a major element of the work of Besant and Gilman, which harmonises scientific social reform with a Judeo-Christian ethical perspective.

Chapter II will discuss the latter two of Besant's three autobiographies as versions of sage-writing which become altered by her new faiths into confessional and proselytising works emphasising her

perception of continuity in her own thought. Besant's revision of her personal history functions as a transitional exercise between her former propagandist tone as a Socialist and Freethinker and her new utopian messianic voice, which will continue to transform the pamphlet and the lecture to serve a higher purpose while exploring the possibilities of the treatise and the exegetical writings of the prophet.

Chapter III will describe the development of Theosophy, its origins in traditional Western philosophy as well as its eighteenth-century variants and its eventual institutionalisation as a direct reaction to Darwinism by H. P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) and her partner Henry Steele Olcott (1832-1907) in America in 1875. The unique way Theosophy combines religious mysticism with (occult) science makes it the perfect vehicle for Besant's teachings.

Besant's versions of Theosophy and the way it functions in her thought as a whole will be explicated. As perceived through a range of genres, this will particularly emphasise Besant's use of Theosophy as a theodicy derived from Hindu, Buddhist and Judeo-Christian teachings as well as her reliance on it as a utopian narrative derived from a predominantly Judeo-Christian world-view. In spite of Theosophy's ecumenical and inclusive principles, it will be shown that Besant subverts evangelistic and practical intentions by concentrating on a simultaneously esoteric and utopian or millenarian vision of the resolution of the story of world history as Theosophy details it.

The project of Indian Nationalism and the recovery of indigenous Indian religion and traditions, to which Besant eventually devoted

herself, may be viewed within this context as well as within the historical context of parallel nineteenth-century philological projects of recovering the 'language of Paradise', of discovering the root of the Indo-European language in the Aryan civilisation of India and removing Christ as much as possible from his Hebrew origins. This project valorised the imaginative polytheism or pantheism of the Aryas against the monotheistic laws of Moses and influenced subsequent sociological and political thinking, particularly amongst those identifying themselves as Aryan, well into the twentieth century.²⁸ Simultaneously active and passive, Theosophy, as Besant uses it, attempts to revolutionise the concept of society and encourages prospects for peace amongst political and religious antagonists in the Indian Nationalist movement, but it also supports the status quo and traditional ethics, even furthering their purposes. Compared and contrasted with the social-engineering strategies of Malthusianism and Socialism, Theosophy makes catholic the intentions of a reforming spirit.

Chapter IV will detail Gilman's intellectual development and the genealogy of her ideas of spiritual equality. Her focus on developing a sociological perspective unites her religious impulse with the insights gained by applying science to society, thereby forming a theodicy. The

²⁸ M. Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) x: 'The comparative philology of the most ancient languages was a quest for origins, an attempt to return to a privileged moment in time when God, man, and natural forces still lived in mutual transparency. This plunge into the distant past in search of 'roots' went hand in hand with a never forgotten faith in a meaningful history, whose course, guided by the Providence of the one God, could be understood only in the light of Christian revelation.' See also Stephen G. Alter, *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image: Language, Race, and Natural Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

relevant peculiarities of her American environment will be explained and the initial phases of Gilman's utopian strategy in her poetry and prose will be outlined, as well as her beliefs in the immanence of God, in inevitable human progress, and in her ability to assist that progress via programs of social reform.

Chapter V will discuss the concept of utopia and the development of Gilman's utopian vision through her early serialized novels and stories. Chapter VI will confront the issue of sexual difference in Gilman's most famous utopian novel, *Herland* (1915). The inability of these projects to perform their intended functions in actually achieving social change will be addressed, particularly in light of Gilman's adherence to Judeo-Christian ideology. As with Besant, the ultimate rejection of modified sexual identities and relationships as well as integrated racial environments leads to the implied acceptance of traditional gender roles and the status quo.

The triumphs and failures of the utopian imagination will be discussed, in the conclusion, as necessarily emanating from a narrative and ideological structure that, albeit with the best of intentions, does not permit individual change or choice and conforms to traditional versions of Protestantism and Catholicism as they legislate for the body. This necessarily portends a battle for the right to govern utopia when the utopians are feminists.

I. A NEW REFORMATION: INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

I am afraid I should not count even these things as marks of success, if I could not hope that I had somewhat helped that movement of opinion which has been called the New Reformation. Thomas Henry Huxley, 'Autobiography' (1889)¹

⊕ 'There is no religion higher than truth'²

Besant and Gilman are truly an ocean apart in many ways. Having come of age during the height of the Victorian period in Britain, amidst much social and economic unrest, Besant (1847-1933) went through various stages of what must be called *conversion* in the process of combining her personal quest for Truth with her sense of civic responsibility and developing belief in the inevitable progress of society. Gilman (1860-1935), thirteen years younger, found her philosophy at a young age amidst a progressive New England familial environment and held on relentlessly to the end. Besant immersed herself in academic study. Taking a First Class degree in botany and animal physiology in 1880 and teaching elementary physiology, she managed to obtain a grant from South Kensington and applied to University College for botany in

¹ Gavin de Beer, ed., *Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley: Autobiographies* (Oxford: OUP, 1983) 109. Huxley's 'Autobiography' is a ten-page brief written for Louis Engel.

² Annie Besant, *Theosophy* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1912) 90. This is the motto of the Theosophical Society.

1883 but, after three attempts, mysteriously failed to obtain a degree in science, though she was allowed to continue teaching at the Hall of Science.³ Gilman had no formal education beyond a year of drawing and painting at the Rhode Island School of Design and essentially became an autodidact, reading the books that came into her possession or were recommended by her father and subjecting herself to a personalised regime of study.

Besant wrote primarily non-fiction prose.⁴ Gilman wrote non-fiction prose, poetry, and fiction. In their writings, each deals with the problem of creating an ethical system in a slightly different way. Gilman does not vary from her original analysis in finding the root of all evil in mistaken beliefs promulgated primarily by men throughout history and leading to the economic subjugation of women. Besant, however, consistently moves from one version of truth to another, labouring to fill in the gaps in her perspective and more definitively answer her questions. Most strikingly, Gilman strives to win her public in the vernacular language of popular journalism, fiction, and poetry. After many years as a journalist and lecturer for Socialism and Secularism, Besant eventually chooses the path of the initiate and an esoteric 'secret doctrine' which provides her with authority and an apparent resolution to a lifelong struggle to integrate her personal convictions and intellectual development with her public life and interests.

³Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant: A Biography* (Oxford, OUP, 1992) 144, 183-84.

⁴ Early examples of Besant's fiction are available in the book *Legends and Tales* (London: Freethought, 1885), which draws on various mythologies to create a series of children's stories reinterpreted for the Freethinker.

Similarities between the two, however, are more revealing. With regard to personal matters, first of all, they both had extraordinarily long lives in which to experience and experiment. Besant lived to eighty-six years and Gilman to seventy-five, when breast cancer made it impossible for her to work or be comfortable any longer and she decided to end her own life. Both Gilman and Besant had religious mothers and fathers who were antagonistic to religion and may have fostered scepticism in their daughters. Both experienced strong evangelical influence during their middle-class upbringings. Gilman was born to the Beechers, an old and enthusiastic Unitarian family (converted from Congregationalism), whose praises she would sing in her autobiography.⁵ Besant, a daughter of less demonstrative Anglican background, became the charge of the strict evangelical Ellen Marryat, sister of Captain Frederick, of whose 'somewhat Calvinistic teaching' she complains, citing this as a major reason for her continued search for a satisfying religious experience.⁶ Both would champion a remote but distinguished European racial heritage. Both would have unlucky marriages and difficulty with the role of wife. As mothers, one would lose and one relinquish custody of her child due to the consequences of her ambition—and both would describe temporarily debilitating depression, 'nervous prostration' (Gilman) and illness associated with

⁵ Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York, London: D. Appleton-Century, 1935) 3-4. 'The immediate line I am really proud of is the Beecher family. Dr. Lyman Beecher was my father's grandfather, his twelve children were world-servers.'

⁶ Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1885) 20.

the mental strain and anguish of fighting against prevailing societal expectations. Both presented their personal struggles, albeit to different effect, in autobiographical form.⁷

Academically, Gilman and Besant became extremely interested in the sciences, including the social sciences of sociology, anthropology and psychology, as well as chemistry and physics. The problem of evil, which both identified as pain, preoccupied each and would stimulate the development of theodicies and ethical systems in terms which reflected scientific interests and methods.⁸

The concept of the duty of service to humanity would also greatly impress both writers. Besant, desiring martyrdom, views self-sacrifice, in her reinterpreted use of the Christian term, as the essential aspect of service. For Gilman, this idea derives from her valorisation of inherent female racial characteristics, that is, her belief that the fundamental characteristics of woman are her nurturing and teaching abilities, which

⁷ Frank Turner explains that evangelical autobiographies were often proselytising and written for friends, while those of doubters tended to portray an arduous struggle toward truth. Having heard certain secular or scientific lecturers or read certain scientific or historical texts, he points out, plays the same role for the unbeliever as hearing certain preachers and reading the scripture for the evangelical: 'Most important, the doubters and sceptics upheld the centrality of the Bible to the experience of unbelief. With the unbeliever as with the evangelical the reading of the scriptures led to the seeking of a new life and a real faith.' 'The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith That was Lost,' *Victorian Faith in Crisis*, ed. Helmstadter and Lightman (1990) 15-16.

As evidenced by the myriad of male and female-authored autobiographies or novels, which illustrated crises of faith, and redemption, or compromise, like the fictional *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (1881) by E. Hale White or *Robert Elsmere* (1888) by Mrs. Humphry Ward, which was immensely successful in both Britain and the United States, religion had become a focal point.

⁸ See both autobiographies addressing the problem of pain. Also Annie Besant, *The Use of Evil* (Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1895) and *The Meaning and the Use of Pain* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1894). *Esoteric Christianity* (Adyar, Madras: TPH, 1901) discusses the doctrine of the Atonement and the relationship of pain to sacrifice; 141-142.

enable her to serve society as a whole. Both see this responsibility as a way of promoting evolution and social redemption.

Both writers also subscribed to an optimistic doctrine of progress and the belief that evolution might be controlled or promoted. Historian Hugh McLeod explains that belief in progress prevailed amongst middle and upper-middle class Victorians (who often held on to pre-Darwinian notions of evolution). Though Darwin personally found the apparent randomness of natural selection to be his most profound and disturbing conclusion, McLeod explains, 'Yet the popular meaning of evolution, for the religious and for the anti-religious, seems to have been the very reverse. It meant the process onward and upward, ordered, progressive, and in most people's opinion, planned. [sic] It is hard to believe that such facile progressivism could have been derived from Darwin—more probable that a garbled version of Darwinism was used to re-inforce pre-existing ideas.'⁹ The pre-existing ideas McLeod refers to would presumably include the Lamarckian theory that acquired characteristics may be inherited.¹⁰ Gilman would be forced to wrestle with this fallacious but powerful argument. Besant seems to have imbibed it

⁹ McLeod 229-230. See also Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) 19-21, which observes the qualities of narrative inherent in Darwin's writing. Beer stresses that the Lamarckian notion of control implied by the inheritance of acquired characteristics persists even after it has been discredited.

¹⁰ Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979) 21-23. Jean Baptiste de Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck (1744-1829) developed principles which were incorporated by Darwin, thus allowing confusion to develop over whether Darwinism was a version of Lamarckianism. Lamarck's theories 'were rooted in profoundly reactionary scientific assumptions. The laws of use and disuse, and the inheritance of acquired characteristics [which Darwin rejected] were corollaries of the view that 'living nature' is the only creative force, seeking perfection of organisation through progressive differentiation.'

unconsciously, carrying it with her to and from the land of the mahatmas.

It is here where two streams of thought seem to converge in McLeod's view. What is variably called the Victorian 'crisis of faith' or 'loss of belief' or 'crisis of legitimacy' amongst the middle and upper-middle classes coincides with the discovery of what may be called the religion of Socialism by the working classes, who were converting to the new creed in increasing numbers.¹¹ The responsiveness of Sydney and Beatrice Webb (as well the younger Besant) to such politics and to ideas of social evolution culminated in Fabian Socialism (the Fabian Society being founded in 1884) which blended their interests in economic and social research in order to promote reform in an anti-Marxian non-revolutionary fashion.¹² Besant became particularly intrigued by the question of evolution as a (peaceful) solution to social problems. She deplored the poverty she saw around her and feared a desperate and disorganised revolution.¹³ It is ironic that the classes did unite, in a sense, in the cause of Socialism, but only to perpetuate hierarchical stereotypes, with the middle-class still predominantly in positions of

¹¹ McLeod 256-257. Beatrice Webb, who subscribed more closely to a religion of science, was initially just as convinced that 'we are at a very early period in man's existence, and that we have only just arrived at the true basis of knowledge: and that bright and glorious days are in store for our successors on earth' though she later acknowledged a lack of moral purpose in science and man's consequent responsibility.

¹² McLeod 256-257.

¹³ Taylor 177-179. Taylor describes Besant's interest in the Fabians as rooted in her interest in their original, more spiritually-centred organisation, the Fellowship of the New Life. Taylor believes Besant then used Socialism as a platform for her millennial vision, beginning with the instigation of political turmoil.

leadership. Besant, for example, worked very hard as a Socialist in the Law and Liberty League, as a Fabian, and later as a red-ribboned member of the Social Democratic Federation and the Metropolitan Radical Federation to which the National Secular Society was affiliated (the Fabians were not as effective as she had hoped), eventually organising marches and demonstrations and leading the famous Bryant & May matchgirls strike.¹⁴ She would become disheartened by the ineffectiveness of Socialist political activism (actively revolutionary or otherwise), however. Much later her concern would develop into a move toward authoritarianism when she rejected democracy in favour of the caste system and Home Rule in India, ironically validating violent retaliation on the part of the Government in certain cases and maintaining an inconsistent record on passive resistance (though she appears to have advocated it long before Mohandas Gandhi). Similarly, during a visit to London in 1912 when she observed striking workers in the East End, she was not sympathetic.¹⁵

Gilman also looked for a brand of socialism which would suit her and found a similarly non-revolutionary form in Edward Bellamy's version of Nationalism (1889-1897), as illustrated in his extremely popular utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888). She would later retreat from

¹⁴ Taylor 213. 'As a result of events Annie had lived through since Bloody Sunday, the SDF [Social Democratic Federation], which she had found so unacceptably militant at the beginning of her Socialist career, was more in sympathy with her mood than the Fabian Society.' One peaceful march for free speech and the unemployed led to 'Bloody Sunday (20 November 1887) in Trafalgar Square (one man died and 150 were taken to hospital with injuries inflicted by the police).

¹⁵ Taylor 314-319.

ostensibly working-class causes, however. As Larry Ceplair explains, Gilman rejected the German Marxism of the Socialist Labor Party: 'she was drawn to a variant of native radicalism, combining Protestant morality as the goad, a collectivistic utopia as the end, and reason and good will as the means,' which Bellamy's fictional bureaucratic and centralised state captured, spawning the movement.¹⁶ Her later attraction to British Fabianism (she joined the society in 1896) is also well-documented. That Besant's Socialism also reflected support of Bellamy has been documented by historian Jill Roe, who describes the range of Besant's rhetoric, 'which stretched from the authoritarian socialism of the Bellamyites across feminism to the spiritualized Darwinism of Madame Blavatsky.' Roe writes that 'In her emphasis on happiness for all when merit governed, she [Besant] harked back to Edward Bellamy and the influential authoritarian socialists of America.'¹⁷ Catherine Tumber, asserting that the broader trend of 'Gnostic Revival' in the Anglo-American context during the period contributes to the ultimate insularity of Bellamy's thought, also cites Theosophical influence on Bellamy, as does Bellamy biographer Arthur Morgan, who explains that Nationalism owed its origin to Theosophists,

¹⁶ Larry Ceplair, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 29-31.

Actually, Bellamy's program implied his inherent mistrust of human reason and emotion. The industrial army of *Looking Backward* magically forms after the equally magical public take-over of consolidated capitalist industries. Nationalism was not about revolutions for proletarians. Ultimately, the Democratic and Republican parties co-opted Bellamy's populist ideas and rhetoric, and the extremely idealistic movement splintered and lost its leadership. See Morgan, *Edward Bellamy*, 287-295.

¹⁷ Jill Roe, *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879-1939* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales UP, 1986) 96-97, 142.

many of whom held major offices in the organisation, but that ultimately the differences between the two creeds were stark. Bellamy believed strongly that men are created by the conditions in which they live, whereas Theosophists believed in reincarnation and karma (to be discussed later).¹⁸

In spite of their different methods, therefore, Besant and Gilman arrive at similar theories regarding the inevitability of social progress. But although this progress, whether through active 'conversion' to a new state of mind, faith in a political movement, or a series of karmic lessons, was assumed to be inevitable, it would occur paradoxically through a changing of human nature in a way which would reflect the values of brotherhood, self-sacrifice (often equated with the idea of service), purity, and perfectibility, all in harmony with a belief in the immanence of the divine. This is not necessarily so inconsistent if it is believed that human agency is a valid element of the path to progress. The active accomplishment of this 'race' improvement and internalisation of values would be the realisation of an ideal society.

But both writers realised that at some level the simple application of the insights of evolutionary biology through sociology and eugenics was not an entirely complete answer. For all of the helpful aura of objectivity and factual information it would provide, math, chemistry, biology and physics could not answer the most important question of

¹⁸ Morgan 260-268. See also Catherine Tumber, 'Edward Bellamy, the Erosion of Public Life, and the Gnostic Revival,' *American Literary History* Vol. 11, 4 (Winter 1999) 610-641: 'Bellamy the religious seeker devised a Gnostic spirituality that served to sacralize his impulse to escape the world' (614).

what the world was to become. Nor could quantitative methods determine the moral direction of social and economic policy. For Gilman, the social and social conditions were commensurate with virtue and ethics; as an individual, man was nothing but an animal subject to the needs of self-preservation and race-preservation and would only become a savage if he were cut off from society. Moreover, defining progress as a duty of society meant that the fact that something was 'natural' did not make it right or normal: 'Monogamy is proven right by social evolution: it is the best way to carry on the human race in social relation; but it is not yet as 'natural' as could be desired.'¹⁹ As early as 1874, Besant was ardent, even as an atheist, about creating an Ideal humanity with which to motivate people to action: 'By the sharp test of "the survival of the fittest," certain actions have been stamped as good, others as bad....Our task now is to correct these "rough and ready" views of morality by a just and careful revision.'²⁰

⊕ *Culture and Anarchy*: Reformers, Secularists, Scientists

Besant and Gilman were certainly not alone in trying to reform society. A myriad of leagues and organisations, some spearheaded by women and some not, for radicalism and socialism of all varieties as well as secularism, evolutionism and eventually also Malthusianism

¹⁹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898; Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1998) 208-209, 319-320; hereafter referred to as WE.

²⁰ Annie Besant, *The True Basis of Morality* (London: Freethought, 1874) 12.

would spring up during the late Victorian period in England and America. Attributing the importance of the 'social purity' movement to the evangelical movement, Unitarianism, and the Quakers and the fact that both nonconformist and Anglican interpretations of women's roles implied that women were or should be passionless moral protectors, Lucy Bland explains that 'social purity' was in fact a euphemistic term for sexual purity, applied to both sexes, and that that movement was intended to affect change in sexual behaviour.²¹ Lesley A. Hall cites debates in the publications *Shafts*, *The Adult*, and *The Freewoman* and the existence of other discussion groups to make the point, however, that involvement with the social purity movement was not the only option a late nineteenth-century feminist might choose and that many such groups were very much about 'policing women who did not conform to the requirements of middle-class respectability, censoring literature, etc.'²²

Gilman and Besant were also caught up in a tide of proliferating post-Darwinian ideologies which stretched across the Atlantic. The inspired Gilman and ambitious Besant would obviously digest many of the popular ideas of their interrelated cultures. Hugh McLeod explains that a striking element of the religious history of eighteenth and nineteenth century Northern Europe and North America is the fact that there is such

²¹ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists* (New York: The New Press, 1995) 52. See also Ceplair, 31-33 on the Women's Christian Temperance movement.

²² Lesley A. Hall, 'Feminist Reconfigurations of Heterosexuality in the 1920s,' *Sexology and Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 136.

a similar chronology of constant change: 'The Great Awakenings of 1800 [the Evangelical Revival in Britain]²³ and the years following had reached all parts of the Protestant world, while temperance had swept across the same countries in the 1830s and the decades following.

Equally international was the reaction of the 1870s and '80s, marked by well-publicised attacks on Christianity, a decline in church attendance and Sunday observance, and the development of liberal theology.'²⁴

Much has been written on the Victorian 'angel in the house' (or the madwoman in the attic) substantiating her particular predicament as protector and representative of the family's spiritual salvation.

Responding to the Victorian cult of the female, Gilman fights squarely against prevailing codes in the interest of economic reform, gender re-evaluation, dress reform, etc. Graphically illustrated by the best-known or most popular piece of her work, the gothic story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), the unequal sexual-economic relation between men and women is yet problematic: infantilised and imprisoned by her husband in an attic room, the protagonist of this story, nevertheless, may additionally reflect a fear of globalization and desire to 'reassert what Gilman understands as the natural, primordial meaning of

²³ There were two periods of 'Great Awakening' in America, one in the 1740s and one during the first third of the nineteenth century, the nature of which evangelical revival influenced antislavery rhetoric between the 1820s and 1860s which subsequently affected the women's movement. See Eric J. Sundquist, 'The Literature of Slavery and African-American Culture,' *Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume Two, Prose Writing 1820-1865*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, New York: CUP, 1995) 272-275.

²⁴ McLeod 284-285.

womanhood.’²⁵ The religion and culture of the isolated women’s country of *Herland* (1915) may substantiate this prophecy. Besant, like her contemporary, economist Harriet Martineau, is notorious about nearly living up to standard but essentially failing to martyr herself. Her mother tends to her every girlish need while her governess trains her piety, and she becomes devout to the point of morbidity. Her clergyman husband is a vicarious substitute, albeit a severe one, for the Christ she worships so devoutly; their failed relationship cannot fully accommodate her need to serve her religious interests. When religious doubt does strike, she is unable to complete her martyrdom, though she tries. As a divorced but free woman, she champions birth control and marriage reform, but her own choice is ultimately the life of a celibate high priestess.

Women on both sides of the Atlantic also became associated with more specifically religious movements such as Christian Evangelism (1860s), the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (1873), the Salvation Army (1875), Christian Science (1880s), and the many varieties of Spiritualism in particular. In America, anti-slavery agitation coupled with evangelical activity created an atmosphere of exchange. White women were able to draw rhetorical and ideological power from the abolitionist movement, which would eventually lead to the formal

²⁵ Thomas Galt Peyser, *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the era of American Realism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998) 74-77.

launching of the women's movement in America by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) in 1848.²⁶

The matter of class should be remembered. That the upper classes and intelligentsia experienced the crisis of legitimacy most keenly and felt the need to take action has been recorded by many historians of feminism and by McLeod, who concurs that a sense of responsibility was often encouraged amongst those born to the well-educated and moderately well-off.²⁷ In *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1902), businessman and social historian Charles Booth describes at firsthand the sense of duty animating the religious of the upper classes of whom the women may 'devote their lives to Church work' as well as less secure women of the upper-middle classes who are more likely to be reactive and 'fling themselves into good works, or rush into extremes of religious doctrines and practices.'²⁸ Maintaining the status quo, or at least stable class relations, was important to the general order and forestalling the fear of unrest among the lower classes.

Into this equation of moral responsibility and middle-class Protestantism came the concept of evolution. While the term 'social-Darwinism' was not prevalent, sociological theory was readily available,

²⁶ See Sundquist, above, on examples of anti-slavery rhetoric and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851; Boston, New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893).

²⁷ McLeod, 151-152. In Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism: 1850-1900* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994) the negative historical bias against Victorian activists being members of the higher educated classes is challenged with material linking activism with the interests of working-class and lower middle-class women.

²⁸ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London. Third Series: Religious Influences, Vol. VII* (1902) in ed. Richard J. Helmstadter and Paul T. Phillips, *Religion in Victorian Society: A Sourcebook of Documents* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1985) 252-253.

especially in America, where it was absorbed through the writings of August Comte (1798-1857), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and William Graham Sumner (1840-1910). Besant studied Comte and Spencer and Gilman was familiar with Comte probably at second-hand, studied Spencer thoroughly and probably had some familiarity with Sumner, the American Spencerian.²⁹

Gilman also followed an alternative path interpreting the theory of evolution, that championed by Lester Frank Ward (1841-1913) and other Reform Darwinists, which would assert the primacy (if not necessarily the ascendance) of the female powers in nature. This theory had earlier been applied to mythology by Bachofen in the 1850s.³⁰ These two positions, ultimately favouring the paternal and maternal respectively, hold similar assumptions regarding evolutionary progress. But Ward seems to emphasise the nurturing aspect of the female more often than Bachofen, who would argue that the primitive female has rightly been usurped by the more advanced masculine intellectual and spiritual mission. Ward also seems fascinated, though, by the ruthlessness of the female, describing a spider's most efficient murder of her husband to demonstrate how the male is not really needed any longer.

²⁹ Ceplair has found no indication that Gilman read Comte, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) or Fredrich Engels (1820-1895), 29.

³⁰ Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen* (1859-1870), trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967).

Ward's theory is not necessarily pro-feminist, but what is most helpful in Ward for his female disciples, like Gilman and the British writer Frances Swiney (b. 1847), in addition to his observations of inherent female power in nature, is his dualistic separation of mental from physical evolution. His incorporation of the aforementioned Lamarckian theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics challenges monistic ideas about natural law and provides the hope that the human mind may have some form of control over the process of evolution. By concentrating on motive and intention, Ward created the new science of sociology and the insight that human intervention through programs of reform could be part of the evolutionary process as well. This and his apparent valorisation of inherent female characteristics provided the tools for the revision of concepts of gender and consequently of gender-relations.

Besant is similarly attracted by the idea of controlling evolution and character and privileging the power of her agency. As a neo-Malthusian in *The Law of Population: Its Consequences and Its Bearing upon Human Conduct and Morals* (1889), she advocated 'checks' (including mechanical methods) to prevent unwanted pregnancies and consequent social dissolution in overburdened populations: 'the human brain is nature's highest product, and all improvements on irrational nature are most purely natural: preventive checks are no more unnatural than every other custom of civilisation.'³¹ Beyond her campaign for sexual

³¹ Besant, *The Law of Population* (London: Freethought, 1889) 38.

morality, she would take the idea of thought-control and purification to extremes in collaboration on (occult) chemical research with her notorious colleague, Charles Webster Leadbeater (1847-1933). The description and discovery of the chemical compositions of various elements was deemed possible through the development of higher faculties of sight and understanding. This could even happen while having picnics in the forests of Germany (i.e. without any special equipment!). On a material level, this meant that science could reach new heights of expertise. On an esoteric and spiritual level, as derived from study of Gnosticism, the fathers of the Church who espoused orthodox Christianity, and from Hinduism, this meant that the higher desire for union with God would overpower other bodily desires, forcing them into submission and creating a new state of mind in which social relations could be conducted. This negative way was nothing new, but Besant's approach to it was definitely less travelled. Similarly, Gilman expressed conflicting attitudes toward birth control, finally advocating the use of sexual activity for reproduction only.

The debate over female power and the proper state of gender relations, which was very much instigated by scientific and pseudo-scientific study into the dynamics of population, sexology and eventually eugenics, would float about the margins of ostensibly less sexually charged reform issues while lending substance to the 'woman question' and essentially validating the emerging New Women. These ladies might then champion the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts or advocate birth control and dress reform and generally make

themselves heard and known. But the growth of middle-class generated reform movements like those mentioned above is also in some ways a matter related to the spread of bourgeois imperialist ideology in the nineteenth century, which takes a paternal attitude, however condescending, racist or even ruthless, to the weak, the less fortunate, and the downright 'degenerate'; Besant, in fact, disparagingly refers to her as yet uneducated 'Whiggish' views of early adulthood.³² How much elements of this point of view persisted into the age of reform, often validated and encouraged by nationalism, imperialism, interpretations of evolution and the work of Francis Galton and other eugenicists, may be observed in some part by the theories Gilman and Besant come to expound.

In spite of their often genuinely egalitarian concerns for the improvement of society for all, the result of such concern by middle and upper-middle class reformers has occasionally been called an 'armchair activism' of talk and no action, for which some have found fault with the Fabians.³³ However, several like General Booth, William Morris, Henry Hyndman, and others formed organisations devoted to the achievement of new social and economic visions and committed to direct practical action, such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Salvation Army. Stimulated by the social researches of the Fabians in particular, which had led to improved understanding of economic conditions in London and the rest of England, the trickle-down notion of

³² Besant, *An Autobiography*, 70-71.

charity was discredited as inefficient or even demeaning and offensive. That the principle of charity derived from a condescending Christian establishment was only more fuel for the fire. Accounting for the causes of poverty and decay and providing the solution was the goal of such investigation, but the lack of cohesion amongst socialists and other groups was such that it was impossible to define socialism, much less a solution to the many-faceted problem of poverty and the related problem of sinister implication: perceived degeneration. The organising continued, however, amidst debate about ends and means. But what really motivated these people? The crisis of faith and loss of belief, and crisis of class-based legitimacy are related issues. Quoting Moncure Conway, an American Emersonian disciple, abolitionist, and eclectic minister of the formerly Unitarian South Place Chapel in London from 1864, modern historian Warren Sylvester Smith (who has little to say about the place of women in these activities) explains that those who opposed orthodoxy, like the Secularists, and who labelled themselves materialists were often misunderstood:

giving up life and fortune in the pursuit of an ideal society...such men are fairly followed today by the men of science, and the positivists and the secularists—men of plain living and high thinking, almost ascetic in their self-denial, and ever dreaming of higher education, of co-

³³Warren Sylvester Smith, *The London Heretics 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1967).

operation, and other schemes for the moral, intellectual, or social advancement of mankind. Such are the men for whom Christian prelates in their palaces sigh, deploring, amid their luxury, the gross materialism of the times!³⁴

Luxurious Christian palaces, of course, probably belong to the High or Catholic churches. The branding 'materialist' by those outside the circle asserted that spiritual values had been abandoned for material ones. Yet Smith asserts these heretical men and women pursued a vision: 'One must ask to what extent they changed the established mind of the Western world, starting with London. It was for this grandiose end that they spilled out their vital energies.'³⁵ Through the pragmatic and often anti-ecclesiastical aims of such agitation, these reformers were beginning to question the very basis of the hierarchical and patriarchal organisation of society but not necessarily those traditional Judeo-Christian values of asceticism, acceptance of fate as God's will, brotherhood, self-sacrifice, almsgiving, purity of life and body, and redemption through faith. The women's movement itself, agitating against the restraints imposed by a domestic sphere legislated by such values, in conjunction with the economic consequences of industrialisation which inevitably helped to delimit that separate sphere, may be considered a religious one. The values and, in fact, the laws prescribing the moral authority and custodianship of women were drawn

³⁴ Smith 22-23. Quotes Conway in *Idols and Ideas* (London, 1877) 17.

directly from the teachings of the church in an increasingly intimate relationship between civic and sexual morality. In the eighteenth century, William Blackstone had set out the definition of marriage in legal language closely following that of Paul in the New Testament: 'By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated in to that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.'³⁶

While the laws on the books reflected an earlier age, the use of scientific principles to determine moral value encouraged public discussion of what had been essentially private matters, further conflating the relationship between public and private, secular and religious.

This does not mean to say that the reformers approved wholeheartedly of science. But however mistaken notions of an inevitable progress may have been, it was impossible to ignore the fact of human agency and how it could affect change. Human inquiry had discovered the evolutionary process, why could it not unlock the mechanisms of nature and, in an increasingly godless world, play God? The power demonstrated in the practice of vivisection, to which Besant first offered limited support that she later recanted, was only the most cruel and barbaric manifestation of this tendency of man to wrangle for control over the natural world, to penetrate its mysteries and thereby

³⁵ Smith 25.

³⁶ Philippa Levine, 134 from K. O'Donovan, 'The Male Appendage - Legal Definitions of Women', ed. S. Burman, *Fit Work for Women* (London, 1979) 136. [presumably from Blackstone's *Commentaries*] See also I Corinthians 11: 3, 8-12.

discover the master key. In the early years of the twentieth century, eugenics, the method developed by Sir Frances Galton (1822-1911) for classifying and improving inherited human characteristics (chiefly by discouraging the 'unfit' and encouraging the 'fit'), became a preferred science. 'Making better people' would be Gilman's mantra, as she tried to focus attention on the lives of people in this world rather than life in some 'vague hereafter'. As Besant would explain in her autobiography, it was the 'religious materialism' of the many which would bother her, crushing her mystical imagination, and not the 'philosophic materialism' of the few³⁷ which came to free her and open her mind to alternatives to a religion of fear, good works, and little else. Besant and Gilman often tend to make philosophy the handmaid of science in a way that Arthur Balfour had already criticised in 1879:

Whenever any faith is held strongly and universally, there is a constant and overpowering tendency to convert Philosophy, which should be its judge, into its servant. It was so formerly, when theology ruled supreme; it is so now that Science has usurped its place...³⁸

Yet Balfour's criticism, trenchant as it is, cannot necessarily resolve the question of knowledge and, characteristically of the perception of a state

³⁷ Besant, *An Autobiography*, 40-41.

³⁸ George Levine, 'Scientific Discourse as an Alternative to Faith,' ed. Helmstadter and Lightman, *Victorian Faith in Crisis*, 231 from Arthur Balfour, *A Defence of Philosophic Doubt: Being an Essay on the Foundations of Belief* (London, 1879) 293-294.

of crisis, assumes that theology plays no part in progress while correlating science with theology as a faith on its own terms with its own bias, the same argument used by science against religion.³⁹ George Levine, like Theodore Roszak, argues that we cannot today think of science as a purely rational activity, and that we cannot accept the unqualified view that 'falsifiability is the determining test of true science,' citing current literary efforts to read science as unprivileged discourse while reminding us that science has provided us with a mandate to do so.⁴⁰ Gillian Beer begins *Darwin's Plots* with the understanding that fact was not really fact until it had been demonstrated consistently to be true.⁴¹ In the meantime, fact-finding was itself a form of narrative or myth-making.

It was important to many mid-century scientists, for example Phillip Henry Gosse (1810-1888), zoologist and strict Protestant fundamentalist of the Plymouth Brethren sect, that science could accommodate the scriptures or at least some idea of a higher power. Moreover, while it is easy to see later Victorian scientists as politically conservative figures, especially with regard to the ominous portents of Galton's (Charles Darwin's cousin, incidentally) ideas on eugenics, this was not necessarily the case. The positivists and the scientists were still considered radicals, threats to the stability of the reigning order in light of the way they seemed to preach anarchy, their affiliation with political

³⁹ Levine 225, 231.

⁴⁰ Levine 231.

⁴¹ Beer 1-2.

conservatism probably arising as a result of joining forces with capitalism (and this begs the question of which came first, scientific professionalism or the economic system that demanded it). The Metaphysical Society of dissident intellectuals, who generally professed agnosticism (T. H. Huxley (1825-1895), John Tyndall (1820-1893), Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), James Martineau (1805-1900), Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (1815-1881), F. D. Maurice (1805-1872), and others) was peopled by individuals who were nevertheless motivated by religious concerns. Huxley and Stephen had written that the root of religion lay in the “depths of man’s nature” and in “enduring instincts which will find expression in one form or another”.⁴² Tyndall would recognise an “impassable gulf” between man the object and man the subject which confounded attempts to interpret the relationship between the development of a nervous system and the “parallel phenomena of sensation and thought”.⁴³

The question of semantics is critical in helping us discover the moral imperative implicit in so much scientific writing. The fear of science and its possible threat to religion and the fabric of daily life was probably experienced in the greatest way by Evangelicals and others who adhered to a literal interpretation of the Bible.⁴⁴ The most fatal of

⁴² James R. Moore, ‘Theodicy and Society: the Crisis of the Intelligentsia’ in Helmstadter and Lightman, *Victorian Faith in Crisis*, 173, n.45, 184; T. H. Huxley from Bernard Lightman, ‘Pope, Huxley and the Church Agnostic: The Religion of Science’, *Historical Papers* (1983) 158 and Leslie Stephen, ‘Religion as a Fine Art’ (1872), *Essays in Freethinking and Plainspeaking* (1873; London, 1907) 81.

⁴³ Levine 236.

⁴⁴ McLeod 229-230 and ed. Helmstadter, *Religion in Victorian Society*, 367.

attacks inherent in the concept of evolution would come at the expense of textual interpretation. German criticism, treating the Bible as any other book, had also provided the groundwork for textual criticism of the Bible. Philology applied apparently scientific methods to language and to history, disputing Jesus as an historical figure and comparing his story to those of other 'pagan Christs.'⁴⁵ Protestant Evangelicalism, encouraging direct interpretation of scripture (within certain limits), had actually made such investigations possible, thereby weakening the textual authority on which its own dogma was based.

But the actual manner of expressing scientific 'truth' was often not very far removed from the manner of expressing a religious one. Essentially, for Huxley, the most obvious and outspoken example, the 'true God is nature, the true worship, science.'⁴⁶ Since Huxley was a propagandist for science, his historical and intellectual climate make the apparent paradox (the use of language which is empirically inexact and subjective in the first place) intelligible. Scientific inquiry (and the professional status of science) had to be protected from established intellectual authority (the Church), thus its promoters tended to use that language most intelligible to that authority.⁴⁷ However, it has also been

⁴⁵ For more on this vast enterprise see Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*. A useful example of the comparative history and mythology published on the figure of Jesus is J. M. Robertson, *Pagan Christs* (1903) (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993). While Robertson is a contemporary of Besant, the essential work for English speakers was probably George Eliot's translation in 1865 of David Freidrich Strauss' *Life of Jesus, composed for the German people* (1864).

⁴⁶ Levine 225.

⁴⁷ Levine 226.

urged that Huxley was not simply using such language surreptitiously, but that he was in fact expressing his own 'scientific Calvinism'.⁴⁸

The mission of the scientist was not necessarily to disprove religion, but to discover truth and to verify that which was seen to be true, providing the grounds for a 'true' ethics. This verification process, in the eyes of empiricists, constituted incontrovertible authority for science, usurping that of the church; but anti-positivists would of course argue against such assumed moral and intellectual bankruptcy of religion. Tyndall's 'gulf', Levine explains, 'did not stop naturalists from attempting to extend the scientific mythos from inorganic, to organic, and finally to human phenomena...they saw not discontinuity of the sage-like sort, between material and spiritual.' So it is not necessarily satire we hear when we read such language, rather a commitment to find an alternative structure while maintaining the values of the religion 'whose power is still manifest in his language.'⁴⁹

The Metaphysical Society was definitely not alone amongst the scores of clubs and organisations dedicated to the study of both science and philosophy. These included the Century Club, the Radical Club which expanded into the National Liberal Club, and later there was the Men's and Women's Club, founded by Karl Pearson, the National Secular Society (Besant joined in 1884), and of course those leagues and organisations associated with women's interests listed above, among many others, perhaps the most interesting being the Society for

⁴⁸ Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies*, 348-349.

Psychical Research (SPR), founded in London in 1882. Explicitly committed to the project of dealing with the unseen, the SPR was highly respected and engaged in the rigorous application of scientific method to the investigation of worlds beyond. Prior to World War I, Oppenheim explains, the evidence shows that those participating in the organisation's researches were committed 'To prove the preamble of all religions.'⁵⁰ Twenty years after its founding, William James, a president of the society, would continue to lecture on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-1902) and 'The reality of the unseen' as proven by individual experience and interpretation. These lectures deal directly with the interrelationship between physical and spiritual states of being and particularly appeal to the need for direct experience in validation of faith. This is admittedly far from a more pragmatic positivism, but it attests to the imaginative application of scientific principles to the study of life experience while addressing the needs of the soul. Concern heightened over that aspect of human experience which cannot be quantified, that element of truth which is beyond words, or simply beyond normal human perception, and which cannot be reduced to physics. According to historian Moore, the 'question, therefore, was not whether Victorian Britain would have a religion, but merely how it would be expressed.'⁵¹ The term secularisation should be understood as meaning the 'continuous displacement of one religion, both

⁴⁹ Levine 236.

⁵⁰ Oppenheim 111-158.

⁵¹ Moore, 'Theodicy and Society,' 173.

ideologically and institutionally, with another.' And this is the way, Moore believes, dissident intellectuals understood what was happening; the terms 'new doctrines,' 'new revelations,' 'new faith,' and 'new gospel' they described added up to a 'New Reformation.'⁵²

As for the notion of secularisation, David Nash explains of the late-Victorian reformers and converts to new ideologies and organisations that 'The readiness of others to throw themselves wholesale into new forms of slavery [i.e. the organisations and denominations mentioned above] was proof that society had not been secularised but rather de-Christianised.' Here, his quality judgement aside, Nash is referring specifically to the Leicester Secular Society and what the popular conception of secularism was at the time at a local level, which interestingly seems to correspond to that of historians who have supported the secularisation thesis.⁵³ The National Secular Society and other Freethought organisations were not the death knell of religion or even of organised religion or of belief in God in general. The presence of churches, sects, cults and other organisations which fulfilled the functions formerly assumed by ecclesiastical institutions is corroborated by historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, who has argued that unbelief led to an intensification of moral pressure and 'displacement of religion –

⁵² Moore, 'Theodicy and Society,' 174-175.

⁵³ David Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom* (Leicester, London: Leicester UP, 1992) 141). See also S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire, 1870-1920* (CUP, 1996) 8: 'so long as modern religious historians adhered to the secularisation thesis, their histories remained wholly compatible with, indeed an integral part of, mainstream modern social and economic history. And that was generally understood to be a good thing.'

which may explain the fanatical quality of their morality, their need to create a Religion of Humanity.’⁵⁴ Historian Frank Turner also claims an intensification of religious activity led to clashes and conflicts, citing the French Revolution (separation of church and state) and subsequent increase in church-building in London, the expounding of natural religion, attacks on the Anglican ‘confessional state’, the resurgence of Roman Catholicism, nonconformist expansion and Evangelical Revival as reasons forcing the theologically minded to define themselves.⁵⁵

According to religious historian Owen Chadwick, the prevailing definition of secularism has been, roughly, ‘a growing tendency in mankind to do without religion, or to try to do without religion.’ Conversely, Chadwick’s rather ambiguous definition of religion is based largely on churchgoing statistics, which method has been disputed.⁵⁶ This definition of doing without religion is found lacking by Chadwick as well, but his book ultimately dismisses the whole idea of definition as ahistorical, while tying various long questions into a very complicated definition. Chadwick’s major premise in writing is that the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was addressed by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), and particularly Auguste Comte, in terms of the

⁵⁴ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968) 303.

⁵⁵ Frank M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) 75.

⁵⁶ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (CUP, 1975) 17. This too, is much like Bachofen. Regarding the method of analyzing church-going statistics, see the theory of ‘sacred relocation’ in Green below. Green disputes this theory in so far as relocationists have failed to provide exact information regarding the type and extent of such relocation but most importantly because they have not established that the relocation has retained the significance of the sacred to the same degree (Green 11).

actual relationship of religion to society for the first time, with Durkheim coming near to inverting the axiom that religion is a social phenomenon into the idea that society is a religious phenomenon.⁵⁷

This premise can turn almost any social interaction into a religious one, therefore, and is not necessarily helpful, though it is important to see how the science of sociology deals with religion. However, the central matter, according to religious historian, Warren Wagar, is 'the residue of religious faith and practice in the faiths and practices of a secularized world.'⁵⁸ The question is what this consists of; it is easy for secularisation theorists to dismiss such 'residue' as a vestigial appendage that will eventually melt away through the process of social adaptation and evolution while presupposing some sort of linear development to begin with.

Other interpretations of secularism, like Chadwick's definition, describe processes rather than actual static conditions. Challenges to the secularisation thesis are inclusive, but are often careful to distinguish between the secular as merely secular and the secular *as* sacred. S. J. D. Green describes alternatives to theories of secularisation in the introduction to his study of industrial Yorkshire between 1870-1920, one of few studies not devoted to the major European city. First, he describes the general theory of secularisation as it has been used by historians.

⁵⁷ Chadwick 6-7.

⁵⁸ Warren Wagar, ed., *The Secular Mind: Transformations of Faith in Modern Europe* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982) 3.

According to Green, the theories themselves focus on the transformation of methods of production and economic organisation which led to a corresponding change in the structure and organisation of members of a society based on division of labour and meritocracy.⁵⁹

The distinction between community and society is also quite important, for it is alleged that: 'Structural differentiation emphasised the fundamental separation of different types of human activity, ensuring that work, family, education, and religion, which had once been intimately bound up with each other in the life of self-sufficient *communities*, evolved into separate activities, staffed by specialised personnel, and discretely practised in complex *societies*.'⁶⁰ Thus, the separation of these elements is challenged by religious concepts. The birth of heterodox society is viewed as another offshoot of industrialisation and urbanisation which divides and institutionalises activities, diluting their importance, including the importance of religion, previously 'the primary socialising agency of mankind' but then 'little more than one amongst many possible outlets'.⁶¹

Dismissing religious influence over a divided and diverted society is perhaps somewhat foolhardy, though Green explains that the secularisation thesis is still highly plausible and is used to explain so many forms of institutional change within an overarching theory of

⁵⁹ Green 6.

⁶⁰ Green 6.

⁶¹ Green 6-7.

social and economic change that it has become quite indispensable.⁶²

Challenges to this thesis have been broached by many historians formerly reluctant to voice objections under the aegis of what Green calls 'a theory of modernisation which neither entails nor requires the corollary of secularisation.' The many theoretical and empirical forms of attack on the secularisation thesis are interrelated, but may be organised into four types: the theory of *transformation*, of *relocation*, of *divergence*, and the theory of *spontaneous renewal*.⁶³

Religious transformation theory is the most radical, arguing that religion is not exclusively concerned with non-empirical ends and supernatural categories but that religion is no more nor less than the sacred bond of society, apparent institutional decline being a process of transformation which transfers sacredness from old forms to new.

Sacred relocation theory acknowledges the commonsense definition of religion, but argues that religious beliefs have relocated themselves 'beyond traditional, declining, ecclesiastical institutions into new developing religious and quasi-religious organisations.'⁶⁴ *Divergence* specifies different dimensions of religious commitment, thereby fleshing out relocation theory while allowing for the significance of particular social contexts. But decline could still be general in spite of specific factors and variations. The theory of *spontaneous renewal* rejects the central premise that religion is in decline in the modern world,

⁶² Green 7-8.

⁶³ Green 8-9.

⁶⁴ Green 16

paradoxically defining and limiting the concept of secularisation by 'directing attention away from the trials of specific churches and towards the concept of a religious economy' and by arguing that 'the rise of particular organisations to political authority and social responsibility necessarily involves a series of institutional and doctrinal compromises with worldly power. Inevitably, such compromises render those religious organisations more worldly: that is, more secular.'⁶⁵

While all of these theories are fascinating and useful, none are entirely adequate, but 'no fair-minded observer can deny that the question of secularisation is now open, where once and not so long ago it seemed resolutely closed.'⁶⁶

Ultimately, Moore prefers a version of relocation theory, the idea of transformation, and the term 'naturalisation' to the idea of removal and 'secularisation': naturalisation meant the transforming of these ideas, values, and institutions so that the equivalent religious power and authority became vested in natural ideas, naturalistic values, and institutions led by professional interpreters of nature. In this process the locus of the sacral moved from the noumenal towards the phenomenal, from the eternal towards the temporal, from another world towards this world.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Green 18.

⁶⁶ Green 16.

⁶⁷ Moore, 'Theodicy and Society,' 155.

This study of Besant and Gilman will tend to verify Moore's idea more generally, though again, the issue is to identify what exactly has been relocated. To comment on our own century, Wagar prefers Nash's more specific term: 'de-Christianization is far from absolute, nor is it necessarily the same thing as doing without religion. Christianity continues to permeate Western high culture...The absence of God in a Kafka novel or a Beckett play is an absence so conspicuous and overwhelming, indeed so God-shaped, that it can do more to awaken religious consciousness than whole libraries of theology.'⁶⁸ Perhaps it is this impending absence which prompts naturalists to anticipate the relocation, transformation, or other movement of the sacred with such rhetoric.

⊕ The Matter with the Spirit: the intersection of narrative with theodicy

'How far can changes in religious beliefs be attributed to new knowledge?' McLeod asks, warning at the end of his study of class and religion in the late-Victorian city, that the terms "industrial society", or "secularisation" may be useful as long as it is recognised that they are no more than concepts and not 'vehicles for a mechanical theory of human motivation, in which human thoughts and actions merely reflect their

⁶⁸ Wagar 8-9.

environment, or those aspects of the environment that the historian chooses to select.’⁶⁹

In spite of relative economic stability in Britain and America, other forces were working for change as well. Socialism created demands for better wages and living standards, hence strikes became common; economic stability did not mean parity. Public education and agitation regarding sexual matters (e.g. Besant’s publication of *The Law of Population* (1877) and the highly controversial *Fruits of Philosophy* (1894), Malthusianism, Neo-Malthusianism) empowered women (and men) to take control of their reproductive capacities, thus more permanently challenging the biblically sanctioned role of sexual activity and creating a whole new set of issues. Urbanisation exerted its own pressures.

It was not necessarily new knowledge, but shifts in perspective which caused religious change, and these shifts included: intensified awareness of the importance and severity of social inequality, an increasing desire to be free of ‘puritan’ restraints’ and disillusionment, and disgust with (Protestant) doctrines of hell which made God seem vindictive and cruel.

Again, this is corroborated by the similar view of Moore that the crisis among the intelligentsia was not one of faith per se, but one of social responsibility and ‘legitimation,’ although there were many (like

⁶⁹ McLeod 285.

Balfour) who felt literal faith was at the root of the issue.⁷⁰ That pragmatic concerns for social welfare and the like were often primary motivations for conversion to new faiths like Socialism is verified by the example of reformers like Besant and Gilman. However, it is not clear that those pragmatic concerns are not in any way sacred. Wagar writes that religious faith has both influenced and been influenced by the growth of other belief systems and institutions in a process which raises questions about how and when secularisation took place and focuses the debate as one between those who see change as a result of events taking place in society at large (pragmatic concerns) or the world of ideas (science, evolution).⁷¹ Moreover, McLeod appears to represent the view criticised by Wagar of 'those who would see the rationalism of the Enlightenment and progress as "modern"'.⁷² Wagar opposes this category with those who would see products of Enlightenment thought as reworkings of medieval beliefs rooted in a Christian world view and view modern civilisation as something 'profoundly different'.⁷³ This again raises the knotty question of what is 'modern,' though Wagar is presumably referring to what Turner calls the post-modern as that "profoundly different" civilisation, and is therefore, like Turner (and Luther himself?) characterising Protestantism as a conservative

⁷⁰ Moore 'Theodicy and Society,' 153: 'Spiritual equipoise, moral rectitude, intellectual integrity – not merely these were at stake, but the very order and progress of society. The Victorian crisis was a crisis of legitimation.'

⁷¹ Wagar 6.

⁷² Wagar 5.

⁷³ Wagar 5.

(modern) movement, though Wagar does not address the issue of free will v. determinism which would perhaps refine this view.

Moore focuses on a much broader struggle to create a theodicy: to 'negotiate new doctrines, new beliefs, new vehicles of consent that would be seen to maintain continuity with and fulfil the best aspirations of older creeds but, at the same time, would serve to order and stabilise class relations more effectively by allowing for new patterns of expectation in a liberalising and "improving" society.⁷⁴ In this sense religion is acted upon by the catalyst of change to become something different, to adapt to a new use in a re-invented form. With reference to the process of 'naturalisation' effected by professional interpreters of nature and the subsequent relocation of sacredness to the phenomenal and things of nature, Moore cites 'meliorism' as the best term the Victorians had to describe this process.

'Meliorism' is famously associated with Thomas Hardy, for example in the poem 'Near Lanivet, 1872' (1917), where the treatment of martyrdom is problematic. A woman walking in Cornwall half knowingly, half randomly leans against a post, dressed in white with palms outstretched. Her partner, the speaker, is at once disturbed by the image created, crying out for her to stop, though she does not hear. Having loosened herself from the position, she regrets having done it, and later explains, 'I did not think how 'twould look in the shade,/When I leant there like one nailed.' Her companion replies, 'lightly,' 'There's

⁷⁴ Moore, 'Theodicy and Society,' 154-155.

nothing in it. For *you*, anyhow'.⁷⁵ Hardy's (he professed an 'evolutionary' meliorism) sense of incongruities within the context of an experience relevant to the subject of martyrdom and the changing roles of women is convenient here. The woman in the poem is aware of the unpleasant feeling, but is still attracted to the idea of crucifixion; perhaps she does not quite believe in a particular cause strongly enough. Perhaps her faith is in transition. In light of the experience of the Great War, this memory joins two periods in uncertain ambivalence.

While the notion of secularisation, naturalisation or meliorism leads to little resolution, other than to say that the question is open and complex, the project of the theodicy is concrete. And the concept of the theodicy, which Moore also ascribes to the Victorians originally, is particularly important to Besant and Gilman.⁷⁶ A theodicy is a solution to the problem of evil that justifies the goodness of the (assumed) deity. The term was first used in 1710 by Gottfried Leibniz (from Greek *theos* or God and *dike* or justice) in an essay dedicated to Queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia, which asserted that evil did not predominate over good and that God had created the best of all possible worlds; therefore, the status quo was sufficient, social inequalities were inevitable, and the money and power of the monarchy were justified.⁷⁷ This is not to

⁷⁵ Thomas Hardy, 'Near Lanivet, 1872,' *The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (*Moments of Vision*, 1917; New York: Macmillan, 1978) 436.

⁷⁶ The OED attributes the origin of the term 'theodicy' to Leibniz in the late eighteenth century: 'The, or a, vindication of the divine attributes, especially justice and holiness in respect to the existence of evil; a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to 'justify the ways of God to men.' *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) substitutes 'divine providence' for 'divine attributes'.

⁷⁷ B. Turner 80-81.

suggest that all theodicies, as organised theological solutions to the problem of evil, are inherently supportive of the dominant class or some sort of oligarchic political situation, but they do, inherently, strive to justify evil in the world as it is. As mentioned before, Moore believes that this is actually part of the process of naturalisation (a continuation of the process of removing sacredness from traditional sources of power and reinstalling it elsewhere – the *sacred relocation* theory of secularisation), reinterpreting the problem of evil in worldly and naturalistic terms. However, the need to defend God against evil necessarily entails justification of that evil; whether this should consequently encourage or discourage social action is another question.

Addressing her initial approaches to dealing with social evil in *An Autobiography* (1893), Besant refers to a particular incident of 1882, her first introduction to Theosophy, in which she is asked, as vice president of the National Secular Society, whether it is appropriate for members of her presumably anti-religious society to join the Theosophists, of whom she had heard only that they held theories of apparitions of the dead and of some extra-physical existence:

I replied, judging from these reports, that ‘while Secularists would have no right to refuse to enroll Theosophists, if they desired it, among their members, there is a radical difference between the mysticism of Theosophy and the scientific materialism of Secularism. The

exclusive devotion to this world implied in the profession of Secularism leaves no room for other-worldism; and consistent members of our body cannot join a society which professes belief therein. (AA 280-281; *National Reformer*, 18 June 1882)

At this early stage, Besant was caught off guard. Though she considered herself religious, she had not yet considered the implication that being an atheist was, in her case, also subscribing to a religion of 'this world' and humanity. Having responded to the opportunity provided a clergyman's recalcitrant and disbelieving wife (she chose expulsion for her heresy) by joining the National Secular Society, Besant found herself challenged again. In August of 1882, her dictum against Secularists joining the Theosophists was answered with a sympathetic enticement from the charismatic Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB):

'Until proofs to the contrary, we prefer to believe that the above lines were dictated to Mrs. Besant by some crafty misrepresentations from Madras, inspired by a mean personal revenge rather than a desire to remain consistent with the principles of "the scientific materialism of Secularism." We beg to assure the Radical editors of the *National Reformer* that they were both very strangely misled by false reports about the as

Radical [sic] editors of the *Theosophist*. The term “supernaturalists” can no more apply to the latter than to Mrs. A. Besant and Mr. C. Bradlaugh.’ (AA 281)

Blavatsky rebuffs materialist criticism by claiming that science is, in fact, what the Theosophists are about, that ‘other-worldism’ is not a relevant term to describe Theosophy. There is no superstition or supernaturalism here, only naturalism, in fact a *complete* science which grants the existence of higher levels of human perception, those supposedly exercised in the practice of spiritualism and more besides, which essentially takes full material account of the unobservable. Therefore, the Theosophical Society is not a conservative, but a ‘Radical’ organisation, like the NSS. Standing corrected by Blavatsky’s suggestion that she had not followed the intellectual argument to the end of the road, Besant would begin to feel insecure with her secular and materialist convictions and gravitate from Atheism toward Socialism and then ‘Home’ to Theosophy, once reassured that membership did not simply require “dreamy, emotional, scholarly interest in the religious-philosophic fancies of the past.”⁷⁸ Yet, NSS president, Charles Bradlaugh, would also direct new member Besant in her definition of Atheist to read one who is ‘without God’, rather than one who believes there is no God. Atheism actually provided Besant with a way to God. More particularly, it provided her with a theodicy or explanation for evil

⁷⁸ Besant, *An Autobiography* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893) 280, 338.

(in ignorance) and a basis for morality: utility.⁷⁹ In 'The Gospel of Atheism' (1876) she explains: 'To the Atheist the terrible problem has in it no figure of despair. Evil comes from ignorance, we say; ignorance of physical and moral facts.' The environment, at the time, was the culprit. Besant goes on to describe the squalid living conditions of families in cities, which lead to 'disease lurking in their veins', poorly developed brains, children inclining 'to the animal rather than to the human', and 'educated into criminality'.⁸⁰

Eventually, she would renounce the Atheist and Materialist components of secularism, but not Secularism or Freethought directly.⁸¹ Thus, Besant's initial understanding of secularism appears to be that definition of non-sacred and this-worldly which historians and others have most often adopted and which has not been much-questioned until recently. Coloured by Theosophy, Besant's understanding of what is religious appears to change dramatically, though she would see little discontinuity in her own intellectual development.

The concept of religion at the end of the nineteenth century seems to possess an elasticity which has the potential of encompassing, for example, both Christianity and spiritualism at once.⁸² The concept of

⁷⁹ Besant, *The True Basis of Morality* (London: Freethought, 1874) 9.

⁸⁰ Besant, *The Gospel of Atheism* (London: Freethought, 1877) 9-11.

⁸¹ Besant, *An Autobiography*, 194.

⁸² Oppenheim discusses at length the similarities between Christian and anti-Christian spiritualists, noting 'the quest for universality...probably derived particular support from contemporary developments in both religious and social thought...Although spiritualists of different perspectives were inclined to argue among themselves whether spiritualism was actually a new religion, a sect, or a common religious principle, there was no doubt in their minds that its application was universal' (108-109).

secularism is equally malleable. Hence the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, building her utopia, and Annie Besant, searching for Truth, justice, and a Universal Brotherhood, might be more readily accommodated in this niche as writers who help redefine the terms of engagement and create not exactly an alternative, but a 'melioristic' re-positioning, reforming, and rewriting of religion as previously understood.

While the groups or views Besant and Gilman represent are rather particular, their project of rewriting religion includes many women such as Anna Kingsford (closely associated with Theosophy, incidentally), Frances Swiney (a proponent of the ideas of Lester Ward, like Gilman), Matilda Joselyn Gage, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton and men including Arthur Conan Doyle for one, who would also contribute to a literature of religious reinterpretations and alternatives, and one might also begin to consider modernist novelists or poets like W. B. Yeats and D. H. Lawrence. As said before, there is certainly a case for expanding into such a vast study. Gilman and Besant are by no means obscure, however; they commanded tremendous followings, wrote and lectured prodigiously, and only then were largely relegated as curiosities. Their didacticism is no longer considered practically useful, but this denies the historical possibilities inherent in such writings.

Using science to create sociological arguments, bolstering ethical philosophies of service and self-sacrifice in the interests of forming a perfected race and society, Gilman and Besant promoted utopian or

post-millenarian projects or even employed 'progressive messianism', perhaps, in the case of Annie Besant.⁸³ Gilman validated her own conclusions, overcoming any conflict between science and religion by reinterpreting utopian tradition to focus on the realisation of a sexual as well as social Ideal in this world exclusively. Besant, as a Theosophist, similarly ascribed to a doctrine of reconciliation, attacking the goals of a science which limited its findings to what was humanly observable when 'psychical research' could prove otherwise. For Besant, science and religion would eventually blend seamlessly in Theosophical doctrines of reincarnation and karma. Accomplishing heaven on earth required development of extra-physical abilities to enable further evolution and a transcendence and reunion of sexual opposites. The direction of a World Teacher or messiah who represented all religions guided all toward Universal Brotherhood. For neither Gilman nor Besant would blind faith be necessary in the face of (apparent) scientific fact. The need for a new narrative drives their writing. The patently

⁸³ See Catherine Lowman Wessinger, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1988). Wessinger identifies as post-millennial [following Peter Toon, *Puritans, Millenarians, and the Future Israel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970)] the belief that Christian agencies would gradually overcome evil so that the millennium would be created on earth following which time Christ would return. Pre-millenarianism denotes the idea of degeneracy and the belief that nature and the world were decaying and becoming corrupt. Christ was expected to return to earth in a catastrophic manner to inhabit it for 1,000 years, following with the Last Judgement. Messianism, of course, refers to the Hebrew doctrine presaging the return of a messiah. Besant's

material aims, ascetic vocation, and moral indeterminacy of science (if there was one) were paradoxically insufficient to the aspirations of two women who believed they were motivated by higher powers to change human nature and society and help create heaven on earth.

belief in both post-millennial salvation on earth through progressive evolution and the guidance of a World Teacher leads Wessinger to call her philosophy 'progressive messianism,' 24-29.

II. FROM PROPAGANDA TO PROPHECY

With all her enthusiasm for the subject, Mrs Besant does not appear to have the intuitive perception, the mystic quality of mind which should enable her to reach the very heart of the old Vedantic teaching. Her intellect, clear and systematic...has little of the poetic or inspirational, and it may be doubted whether it has ever quite fathomed the religious writing with which it has been so much occupied. Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (1916)

Carpenter's judgement of Annie Besant is not unique, and any new reading of her work will make his point clear. However, he also believed that she had done great things in reacting to the 'smug commercialism of the mid-Victorian era' and opening a new world of religious thought.¹ The majority of Besant's Western biographers, like Besterman, Nethercot, and Taylor, take a critical and even slightly sarcastic view of her character while vaunting her autobiography of 1893 as the most admirable piece of her writing. Her other innumerable philosophical works have been considered 'dull' or lacking the 'genuine fire of poetry or inspiration or scientific vision' and of all the four hundred books and pamphlets and more than five thousand articles she produced, Theodore Besterman, writing in 1934, finds 'not one that

¹ Taylor 330.

seems at all likely to go down to posterity.’² The life of a prophet has never been easy.

But it is difficult to read Besant’s works, in which, as biographer Anne Taylor agrees with Carpenter, ‘She always seems to be repeating something, corroborating some preconception, never describing something she had perceived’.³ There is no major industry for Besant scholars, it seems, because the body of her work, which could never be fully assessed in its massive entirety, is a vast and tedious ocean to navigate. But there is a fascination with Besant that persists in Arthur H. Nethercot’s two volumes of biography of the 1960s (appropriately titled *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* and *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* respectively) and Anne Taylor’s biography of 1992 and in more recent works on rhetoric and millenarianism. Academic trends toward interdisciplinarity and the use of social construction theory and an emphasis on historicity allow for interesting and useful combinations of historical and literary perspective.⁴ It is difficult to decide which tone

² Theodore Besterman, *Mrs Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1934) 269.

³ Taylor 332.

⁴ For example, Susan Martha Dobra, ‘Collaboration and Consensus: Constructing a Rhetoric of Abnormal Discourse for Composition from the Esoteric Prose of William Butler Yeats and Annie Wood Besant,’ diss., U of California at Berkeley, 1993. This attempts to create a rhetoric of abnormal discourse for use in the classroom in order to identify helpful challenges to normal or established discourse. Cartesian dualism positing an objective knowledge or transcendent empiricism as ‘the business of philosophy,’ thereby weakened the alliance of rhetoric and philosophy. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century philosophy continued to separate rhetoric from philosophy, denigrating it to the status of sophistic, decorative elocution. But twentieth-century philosophy has overcome this by focusing on the role of language and social construction in the work of Dewey, Adorno, Habermas and Foucault, and, in the case of Derrida, ‘deconstructing the representational nature of knowledge and language’. Such newer epistemological perspectives enable us to contextualize rhetoric in more useful ways. Dobra analyses Besant’s rhetoric as such an alternative discourse.

to take when writing about such an amazing life, such extraordinary work, such tedious writing. And it is easy to be sarcastic. There is a great deal of humour in the adventures and the writings of Annie Besant, and a great deal of inspiration, wonder, and sadness. George Bernard Shaw, an extremely close and admiring friend, always called her Mrs. Besant (as well as dull) and wrote that nothing came to her first as a joke, as irony or paradox, but “stirred her to direct and powerful indignation and to active resistance.”⁵ That two famous contemporaries thought her work dull makes it even easier to complacently dismiss such writing as literarily irrelevant when historical contingencies and intellectual histories are ignored. But Shaw and Carpenter, Beatrice Webb, and many thousands more were simply awed by Besant’s presence and rhetorical talents. We do not have the luxury of hearing her famous voice and can only read her words. Besant had many audiences and wrote for all of them; not being a member of a particular audience does not necessarily mean all is lost for the academic. Besant’s autobiographical writing, the most prized, it seems, is nevertheless a good place to start. It is a transitional exercise, in a sense, which conveys the true spirit of her convictions and reinforces her perceptions of continuity in her own thought while illustrating the obviously paradoxical. The tried and true model of Victorian autobiography is a natural choice, on the one hand, for it is meant to be accessible to a large if sympathetic audience. On the other hand, Besant

⁵ *George Bernard Shaw: An Autobiography, 1856-1898, Selected from His Writings*, ed. S. Weintraub (London: Reinhardt, 1969) 139.

uses this vehicle to convey not only her own perception of the crisis of faith, but the alternative form of belief she has discovered. *An Autobiography* begins to describe the Theosophical outlook within the context of a standard genre.

Of course, in spite of her fascination with Christianity, established religious orthodoxy or the popular response to it was thoroughly unsatisfactory to Besant. In *An Autobiography* (1893), the trauma of setting herself against prevailing religious and social codes reveals personal experience akin to rebirth and conversion, though she says she lamented even as a child that she could never look back on one such soul-defining moment. There are a few versions of Besant's autobiographical writing which include *1875-1891 A Fragment of an Autobiography* (1917), which was actually delivered as a lecture at the Hall of Science in London in 1891, and *Autobiographical Sketches* (1885). This chapter will deal with Besant's most formal version of her autobiography, *An Autobiography* (AA) and also refer to *Autobiographical Sketches* (AS). The 1893 edition, *An Autobiography*, seems to convey a decision that this is *possibly* a final version of what could otherwise simply be autobiographical writing and not autobiography. In other words, there is space open for another personality perhaps, or perhaps the title can be read metaphorically to suggest that the subject is not the whole life, but perhaps one of the nine lives Nethercot describes, a few of which include The Christian Wife, The Atheist Mother, The Martyr of Science, The Socialist Labour

Agitator, and *The Chela of the Mahatmas*.⁶ This is certainly the story of several transmutations of Besant as told by the most final version to date, but the title also suggests that the author has not quite convinced herself that she has written her autobiography and perhaps has written rather less, or something more. Biographer, bibliographer (and former Theosophist) Besterman comments that the publication of *Autobiographical Sketches*, at the height of Besant's Freethought career after she had moved herself away from mentor Charles Bradlaugh into *Our Corner* (her own magazine) must have signalled a change: 'can this have been the result of some awareness of the approaching end of an epoch in her life?'⁷

As the most complete version of her life to 1893, two and a half years after the death of her beloved 'HPB' (Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky) and her ascendance to leadership of the Theosophical Society, it also has a distinct purpose, as the Preface explains:

it may well be that the story of one may help all,
and that the tale of one soul that went out alone
into the darkness and on the other side found
light, that struggled through the Storm and on
the other side found Peace, may bring some ray
of light and of peace into the darkness and the
storm of other lives. (AA 6)

⁶ Arthur Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* (London: Hart-Davis, 1961) and *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* (London: Hart-Davis, 1963).

⁷ Theodore Besterman, *Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1934) 131.

Conflating a traditional, if melodramatic, Platonic metaphor of struggle for enlightenment with a Theosophically informed contemplation of Truth, this framing of her discussion differs significantly in intent from the *Sketches*, which were written 'to satisfy friendly questions and to serve in some measure as defence against unfriendly attack' rather than to convey experience gained on 'the other side' (AS 3). There is now a moral imperative to tell her story.

Having thought that she had finally arrived at her spiritual destination, Besant may have felt it appropriate, in light of requests for information from her followers, to preach. With her Preface, Besant explains that her autobiography is intended to convey an inspired answer to the religious confusion that persists amongst those of her generation; it is an invocation to her congregation of listeners. *An Autobiography* is not intended for readers already familiar with theosophy, but for those who are familiar with the famous Besant. Hunching herself down to the level of the reader, condemning the vanity of the enterprise, she yields to the 'only excuse' to write, which is

that the life, being an average one, reflects many others, and in troublous times like ours may give the experience of many rather than one. And so the autobiographer does his work because he thinks that, at the cost of some unpleasantness to himself, he may throw light on some of the

typical problems that are vexing the souls of his contemporaries.... (AA 5)

At first apocalyptic, the Preface retreats to a self-deprecating tone and then moves back to the visionary, incidentally using standard male pronouns to generalise about the autobiographer's task. Addressing the issue of 'de-Christianising' forces and 'troublous times', Besant places herself both within and beyond the ken of her contemporaries as a voice of reason. For those not advanced enough to speak for themselves, Besant will be their martyr and saviour by revealing her struggles and faults for their sake. Writing in 1893, Besant has clarified her mission and discovered to her own satisfaction the congruities which mark the path she has chosen, and it is with this sober conviction that she sets before the reader the possibilities entertained by one life subject to the same confusions and frustrations as others:

men and women of this restless and eager generation—surrounded by forces we dimly see but cannot as yet understand, discontented with old ideas and half afraid of new, greedy for the material results of the knowledge brought us by Science but looking askance at her agnosticism as regards the soul, fearful of superstition but still more fearful of atheism, turning from the husks of outgrown creeds but filled with desperate hunger for spiritual ideals....(AA 5-6)

Identifying with the liminal perspective of her readers on the one hand, while presenting herself as an example to be followed, she begins to adopt a simultaneously self-deprecating and authoritative posture, which sets the stage for the ensuing narrative. Agnosticism, atheism, but also superstition are negatively perceived. Agnosticism, or lack of knowledge, professed by scientists was not as unsettling as the vagueness or naiveté of 'superstition' or outright atheism, but 'spiritual ideals' might contain any mixture of such ideologies.

The second page of Chapter I, entitled 'Out of the everywhere into the here,' contains Besant's astrological chart (at her birth, 5:39pm on 1 October 1847). Here is a second clue to the author's new motivations. She makes no comment on the chart, except to say that a friendly astrologer has done this and 'I know nothing of astrology, so feel no wiser as I gaze upon my horoscope' (AA 11). This is disingenuously disproved, for the next paragraph correlates the influence of the heavenly bodies on the earth and on the human body and how those born under the different signs of the zodiac therefore possess distinguishing characteristics. 'Types' may be recognised by anyone who is familiar with the Zodiac and who 'may very easily pick out the different types among his own acquaintances...He will very quickly discover that two men of completely opposed types were not born under the same sign, and the invariability of the concurrence will convince him that law, and not chance, is at work' (AA 11).

Her real solution to the problem of the compromised faith she has confronted and which her readers now face begins to show itself in these

opening paragraphs dealing with her horoscope and the truths astrology may offer, though she, of course, is no expert on such matters. She would merely wish to convey, at the outset, the idea (which is quickly dropped) that 'law, and not chance, is at work. We are born into earthly life under certain conditions, just as we were physically affected by them pre-natally, and these will have their bearing on our subsequent physical evolution'(AA 13). Here Besant departs from Bellamy's belief that environmental causes are the instigators of poverty and ignorance.

Propheying the path of Besant's life through the intimation of an esoteric influence beyond 'earthly life', the horoscope indicates a pre-ordained destiny. For Theosophists, this is a strong claim to authority. The personal horoscope diagram is also used, for example, by Ebenezer Sibly, M.D. (1751-1799), an hermetic scholar and follower of Emanuel Swedenborg in *A New and Complete Illustration to the Celestial Science of Astrology* (1784), which also shows a portrait of Sibly in the midst of the zodiacal ring. This work was dedicated to the Freemasons and contained a great deal that was plagiarised, but it was quite popular, and the only readily available work on the subject at the time. It is one of the early examples of what many eighteenth-century minds were trying to do: unite alchemical or astrological knowledge and the hermetic or occult worlds with that of the most recent science.⁸ To those Christians and others as yet unaware of this message (but how could they not be?), the suggestion is either an amusing note, or an

appeal to reformist ambitions for the promotion of physical evolution (which it is) via recognition of the outer influences in the 'everywhere'. In any case, drawing immediate attention to the practice of astrology, a belief system which permeated the ancient world, is a signal that Atheism is no longer providing the moral imperative behind the exposition; in fact, it would suggest that there are other, older elements in control of Besant's destiny.⁹

Initially less willing than Gilman to experiment with her own precepts, Besant explains how sensitive she was as a young girl to the ideas and beliefs of those around her. A happy early childhood spent in idolisation of her mother is interrupted by the death of her father, the first major event in the book. Besant is proud that her sceptical father, a doctor, and her loyal mother, an Irish Anglican, expelled a priest from the father's deathbed in protest against his Roman Catholic mother and sister. But she uses the situation to illustrate her own protest against the establishment which would restrain her in an orthodox complacency. In spite of her loyal action at her husband's bedside, Emily Wood

⁸ Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 107-109. Godwin traces the history of modern Theosophy to the creative scholarship of the eighteenth century.

⁹ For a brief but useful discussion of the importance of astrology see Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1991) 81-84, 294-295: 'In the classical world...mathematical astronomy was not an entirely secular discipline. For the ancient understanding of the heavens as the locus of the gods was inextricably wedded to the rapidly developing astronomy to form what was considered the science of astrology, of which Ptolemy was the...culminating systematizer. Indeed, a large part of the impetus for the development of astronomy derived directly from its ties to astrology...But while its inherent inexactness and susceptibility to error left astrology open to criticism, Ptolemy and his era believed it worked. It shared with astronomy the same focus on the orderly motions of the heavens...possessed a rational foundation and firm principles of operation, which Ptolemy undertook to define.....astrological correspondences were interpreted by the Greek and Roman Stoics as signifying the fundamental determinism of human life by the celestial bodies. Hence astrology was regarded as the best method for interpreting the cosmic will and aligning one's life with the divine reason.'

maintained a sort of lukewarm piety and ‘was wont to reconcile her own piety and his scepticism by holding that “women ought to be religious,” while men had a right to read everything and think as they would, provided that they were upright and honourable in their lives’ (AA 22-23).

Mrs. Wood did foster some liberal viewpoints as a result of her rather superficial perspective, but this was never enough for Annie, who explains that ‘She was of the old *régime*; I of the stuff from which fanatics are made’ and that her mother’s dying words included the comments ‘you have never made me sad or sorry except for your own sake; you have always been too religious’ (AA 24). Besant’s later repudiation of Christianity would be made with religious intensity: ‘If “morality touched by emotion” be religion, then truly was I the most religious of Atheists, finding in this dwelling on and glorifying of the Ideal full satisfaction for the loftiest emotions’ (AA 157). There is a note of apology in this emphasis on her religious (and emotional) nature, with the word ‘fanatics’ and the slight pathos of ‘morality touched by emotion,’ for Theosophy, much like Atheism, materialism, positivism, and secularism, primarily values the intellect and products of reason, and the terms ‘fanatic’ much less ‘superstition,’ do not apply in what is intended as a rational and ecumenical faith; but Besant, beginning with her Atheist phase, is also redefining what it means to be religious. Being a fanatic in her mother’s language is not quite the same as being a Theosophist in her own, though she seems to enjoy being an extremist.

Being truly religious means doing away with any pretences to orthodoxy, in spite of the clichés: 'I went out into the darkness alone not because religion was too good for me, but because it was not good enough...' (AA 13). That religion has not fulfilled its promise and served to its full capacity is an argument that will be used against Christianity even when Besant espouses Theosophy.

Autobiographically, Besant treads a slippery slope between conveying the fragility and prophetic insight of a female Victorian martyr and the strength of the intellectually and spiritually secure Theosophical adept. The author had tried very hard to live up to her given role as a woman. She *might* have been a perfect wife, for example, had her chauvinistic husband been less dominating: 'Harshness roused first incredulous wonder, then a storm of indignant tears...I must have been a very unsatisfactory wife from the beginning, though I think other treatment might gradually have turned me into a fair imitation of the proper conventional article' (AA 81). But it is clear that Besant never wanted to be that article, and probably would have never written her autobiography 'if' things had been different, if she had not realised that her socio-economic position was culturally and politically determined and if she had not been 'too religious.' She therefore attempts to obtain control of her body and her autobiography from the domination of her husband and his expectations with the tool of failed martyrdom. Placing her destiny beyond the control of others and into the 'everywhere' (the first chapter is titled 'Out of the Everywhere into the Here'; *Sketches* had no chapter titles) Besant transcends the

limitations of earthly authority and is no longer responsible for being 'the proper conventional article.'

Her child's memory, she believes, could supply many of the insights she has missed. Memory of a child's first impressions of form derived from chaos, the faces of father and mother in her case, would be invaluable. This paragraph is present in both later versions, and in these separate contexts both materialist and mystical readings are possible:

If only we could remember how things looked when they were first imaged on the retinae; what we felt when we first became conscious of the outer world; what the feeling was as faces of father and mother grew out of the surrounding chaos and became familiar things...if only memory would not become a mist when in later years we strive to throw our glances backward into the darkness of our infancy, what lessons we might learn to help our stumbling psychology, how many questions might be solved whose answers we are groping for [in the West] in vain.

(AA 19-20; AS 7)

The only difference between the two versions is that 'in the West' modifies the final sentence in the 1893 edition, stating that it is really the West which is blind and cannot perceive the answers to questions created by a lifetime which assumes that wisdom comes with age, but gets no wiser. Looking backward, it is suggested, we may find the

truths that elude us. The Theosophical interpretation suggests not only that the past contains the superior insight but that the child's vision is clearest because the newly born is closest to being familiar with the lessons learned in a previous life and has not yet been challenged and hindered by the demands and delusions of corporeal life. The ability to see and to feel so vividly is not entirely lost in Besant's lifetime, however. The event of her father's death also coincides with a demonstration of her mother's psychic or 'extra-physical' ability.

Not having attended her husband's funeral out of grief (and never having been to Kensal Green before), Mrs. Wood fainted when the funeral was over, but later knew exactly where the unmarked grave was, suggesting she had, in fact, been there before:

How she found the grave remained a mystery in the family, as no one believed her straightforward story that she had been present at the funeral. With my present knowledge the matter is simple enough, for I now know that the consciousness can leave the body, take part in events going on at a distance, and, returning, impress on the physical brain what it has experienced. The very fact that she asked to be taken to the chapel is significant, showing that she was picking up a memory of a previous going from that spot to the grave; she could only find the grave if she started from *the place from*

which she had started before. (AA 26; Besant's italics)

Autobiographical Sketches narrates this event quite differently in 1885, when Besant was still an Atheist and member of the National Secular Society:

Her own explanation was that she had seen all the service; what is certain is, that she had never been to Kensal Green before, and that she walked steadily to the grave from the chapel. Whether the spot had been carefully described to her, whether she had heard others talking of its position or not, we could never ascertain; she had no remembrance of any such description and the matter always remained to us a problem. But after a lapse of years a hundred little things may have been forgotten which unconsciously served as guides at the time. She must have been, of course, at that time, in a state of abnormal nervous excitation, a state of which another proof was shortly afterwards given. (AS 10-11)

In the later autobiography, 'my present knowledge', knowledge possessed by Besant, replaces the 'hundred little things' that Mrs. Wood might have known and forgotten as she found her way to her husband's grave from the chapel. The earlier quantifying of the material facts which would logically explain Mrs. Wood's behaviour is admittedly

vague, however, and immediately the catch-all feminine malady of hysteria is, perhaps not surprisingly, invoked to explain it. The chapel, the house of God, a guiding symbol, is singled out in the latter account as the point from which Mrs. Wood had started before, but is only a landmark in the earlier version. Moving toward her husband's buried body in the Theosophically-inspired 1893 narration, Mrs. Wood is no longer in a state of 'abnormal nervous excitation,' but rather logically proceeds to a place she had been before in a different conscious body, having taken the memory of the dress-rehearsal back to her physical body for the observed event. This movement between bodies, out of her physical body to the body of her husband and then physically from the chapel to the grave at once blurs the boundary between worlds and (creates) different forms of consciousness while imparting definite control over the entire relationship to Mrs. Wood.

It is therefore significant that Mrs. Wood is no longer considered to be in an 'abnormal' state. Besant discovers that she had been pathologizing a perfectly normal state of mind (or consciousness). She no longer has to attribute a moment of dementia or even dishonesty to her mother, though this is implied in the first account. Moreover, Mrs. Wood's total recall of her experience banishes the possible medical interpretation that she had simply been hallucinating, sleepwalking or in a state of 'fugue' (a state of psychological amnesia during which the subject seems to behave in a conscious and rational way' but cannot remember the previous period of time when returned to normal

consciousness).¹⁰ Rather, beyond the need of diagnosis and treatment, Mrs. Wood really needs absolution. Incidentally, Madame Blavatsky insisted that she was in complete control of her psychic powers and that any materializations or occurrences taking place under her aegis were the result of her own highly trained powers of perception and any material demonstration of contact with the immaterial world was in any case vulgar and discouraged; Besant confirms, regarding Blavatsky, that ‘all the phenomena she had produced were worked by virtue of a knowledge of nature deeper than that of average people, and by the force of a well-trained mind and will.’¹¹ Of course, Blavatsky’s mediumship would become the focus of sustained investigation, and not to her benefit, which again begs the question of faith.

The earlier account of Mrs. Wood’s experience at the cemetery accentuates the subsequently narrated event as a further ‘proof’ of Mrs. Wood’s nervous state and of the ‘strain of Celtic superstition’ she had harboured. Mrs. Wood also prophesied the death of her infant son, a black bruise from a kiss to the dead child’s forehead being the clearest memory for Besant. This description illustrates Besant’s sensitivity in realising ‘that the mother’s kiss of farewell should have been marked by the first sign of corruption on the child’s face’ and foreshadows the many dead babes she would see as a social activist, as well as those ‘dark spots’ which would soil her belief in God. But Besant also very

¹⁰ Mady Schutzman, *The Real Thing: Performance, Hysteria, and Advertising* (Hanover, London: Wesleyan University Press and University Press of New England, 1999) 116-117.

¹¹ Washington 41-42 and Besant, *An Autobiography*, 354.

significantly ascribes what may now be considered her mother's psychic *power* (rather than her absent-minded nervousness) to her 'Keltic' racial heritage in the 1893 account. Chalked up to a mere superstitious 'strain' in the earlier narrative, there is only the initial reference at the beginning to Besant's 'Irish' heritage within the context of an historico-political reference to the family's 'quaint' legendary relationship to ancient 'Milesian kings' of France. This story is maintained in the later version as well, in which an aunt is playfully described as having chastised the young Mrs. Wood for behaviour unfitting such a distinguished, if dubious, heritage. There is no mention, in the earlier version, of visionary abilities possessed by Besant in childhood.

The element of the unseen is used, in effect, to suggest that there is a kind of fate operating in Besant's life and a racial and psychic inheritance that continues to provide insight, that the series of confusing events that would challenge her materialism to answer without nihilistic consequences could suddenly be attributed to some form of causality. It is perhaps this discovery which enables Besant to add chapter titles and create a more complex narrative in her second autobiography.

Remembering these occurrences of her mother's foresight twice over the course of eight years, Besant sees an opportunity to clarify by reinterpreting them, but makes no reference to her previous narration.

The problems posed by the first account are apparently resolved by the second. Readers of both can see that the second narrative creates ideological continuity and incorporates the story as an integral piece of evidence for Besant's own intellectual and spiritual development, rather

than a simple character analysis of Mrs. Wood and observations of past times in the family circle. The importance of character development is therefore stressed, allowing the autobiography to function in its traditional role as confessional vehicle and tool for sage-like pronouncement, creating a comfortable and already familiar narrative in which to submerge the new radical sub-text.

Juvenile impressions of the importance of her mystical nature follow in discussion of her experience of Evangelicalism and Catholicism. After her widowed mother settled in to running a boarding house at Harrow, Annie was sent to live with Ellen Marryat, also a model of devout womanhood. But she found the Calvinism of Miss Marryat depressing, colourless, and not entirely sincere in its effects; she wished she had been able to experience a dramatic 'conversion' like other sinners but instead continued her 'dreamy longings', inspired by John Milton and her own imagination (unlike Gilman, Besant greatly enjoyed Milton and liked to 'declaim' the speeches of Satan). This led to the dreaming and fairy-tale telling which she attributes to the budding of her own mystical sensibilities, an account not found in *Autobiographical Sketches*:

The dreamy tendency in the child, that on its worldly side is fancy, imagination, on its religious side is the germ of mysticism...But the remorseless materialism of the day—not the philosophic materialism of the few, but the religious materialism of the many—crushes out

all the delicate buddings forth of the childish
 thought, and bandages the eyes that might
 otherwise see. (AA 40)

Discontent with a literal interpretation of the Bible may be at issue here, as well as an unsatisfactory piety (she remembers she too often hoped that she had prayed nicely) rather than philosophic materialism, which was a different matter possessing merits Besant would later appreciate. Materialism, mistaken in not positing a soul or understanding that there are kinds of matter unobservable to humans who had not yet developed the faculty to see, would become a scourge in the end, in her view, but a necessary step towards truth. As a child, though, she would see life in everything about her, animate or otherwise, as well as ghosts and fairies: ‘But there was a more serious side to this dreamful fancy when it joined hands with religion’ (AA 28). Endlessly desiring a grand martyrdom, partly because she was so very religious in the true sense — the radical Protestantism she found around her was, she explains with anaphoric emphasis, ‘too meagre, too commonplace, too little exacting, too bound up with earthly interests, too calculating in its accommodations to social conventionalities’ (AA 24) — but also because of the intense feeling wrought in her by Marryat’s Calvinism. The child regretted she was ‘born so late when no suffering for religion was practicable,’ when there were no shields to be worn and dragons to slay or lions to be faced. She is resentful of how her teaching had affected her, although she was permitted by her family to choose any religious denomination (assuming a choice of Christian denominations) and she describes her sense of

release during a confirmation held in Paris in the spring of 1862, when she was fifteen years old (Mrs. Wood attended):

I could scarcely control myself as I knelt at the altar rails, and felt as though the gentle touch of the aged bishop, which fluttered for an instant on my bowed head, were the very touch of the wing of that 'Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,' whose presence had been so earnestly invoked. Is there anything easier, I wonder, than to make a young and sensitive girl 'intensely religious'? (AA 42-45)

Is it paradoxical that the practice of Catholicism should so appeal to one who would champion what was then called Freethought? By now it should be clear that Besant's patent intention throughout her transformations, as she conveys it in her autobiographical writing, is to discover the highest truth and morality, ambitious but respectable goals. The narrative therefore aims to help us see that radical labels are no disguise for sincere intentions. It is much easier to digest emotional appeals to abstract ideas about truth and justice than to appreciate the intricacies of metaphysical philosophy and cosmologies which lend themselves to earthly political agendas. Pale and lacking in 'cheerfulness,' she had been told, like Gilman, to stop telling 'naughty stories.' But young Annie Wood was immediately 'roused' by the sensuous ceremony of the Catholic Church in France and responded readily to the humanising force of its aesthetic qualities. The

metaphoric use of 'heavenly Dove' in the touch of the bishop is punctuated by the ecstatic phrase 'intensely religious'. Through such aesthetic means her 'Divine Prince' would become transformed into the 'suffering Saviour of Men', presaging her commitment to a Universal Brotherhood and religion of man; the experience of the ritual thrills her, the imagery is breathtakingly lustrous (AA 51-52). But the literal emphasis of Evangelism has left her cold, indeed, 'morbid,' though her mother's 'healthier' attitude counteracts this to some degree.

Autobiographical Sketches is more detailed in this matter of Besant's antipathy to Calvinism, and these paragraphs are significantly cut from the 1893 version of the autobiography; is this in the spirit of ecumenism or would she like to downplay the possibly naïve image created by her various conversions? Or is she is no longer so convinced that she is not a sinner? What is most prominent is Besant's awareness of her own impressionability: 'I was naturally enthusiastic and fanciful, and was apt to throw myself strongly into the current of the emotional life around me, and hence I easily reflected the stern and narrow creed which ruled over my daily life' (AS 19). The emotional element of religion is held above the doctrine itself: 'The sense of sin, the contrition for man's fallen state, which are required by Evangelism, can never be truly felt by any child; but whenever a sensitive, dreamy, and enthusiastic child comes under strong Evangelistic influence, it is sure to manifest "signs of saving grace"' (AS 20). Ultimately, she cannot bring herself to believe that she was a child of sin, and allows her mother's less prescriptive beliefs to mediate. But the emotional experiences of both

kinds of Christian practice affect her, the incarnation itself being the most compelling element. Her mother appears to be the fulcrum upon which her experiences turn. In France, it is not the Virgin Besant turns to as a symbol of female power, for she already idolises her own mother, but to Jesus, the 'Ideal Man'.

Besant wavered over becoming Roman Catholic until she was satisfied, having examined the efforts of the Oxford Movement, that Anglicanism was truly Catholic enough. She had apparently gone too far, in her mother's liberal opinion, by fasting, using the sign of the cross, going to weekly communion, and even experimenting with self-flagellation.¹² But she finally married a very dull minister with a strict Evangelical background, Frank Besant, who would become the Vicar of Sibsey, a village south of London. In what she describes as the inevitable outcome of the sublimated longings of a young girl ('All girls have in them the germ of passion') for union with Jesus 'the one Ideal Man' (and she details at length the most explicitly sexualised prayers which influenced her sublimation; not, one feels, a particularly unusual circumstance for the mystical imagination), she is confronted, in her married life with Frank Besant, with the 'evil' of conjugal sex and the double evil of her own ignorance of such matters (AA 66-72). This horror would encourage her future efforts on behalf of women while verifying that no human man could compete with her ideals of mother and Christ round which 'these budding tendrils of passion' were

¹² Taylor 15.

entwined (AA 67) and which would resurface much later in her Theosophical pairing of World Mother and World Teacher.

Moreover, doubts arise as to the truth of the Gospels. These are quashed by self-condemnation for heresy, inspired by a visit to the revered, severe Dr. E. B. Pusey (1800-1882). This realisation of sin would also give her a reason to escape her marriage. She would become a Theist, an Atheist, break with her marriage as a result of her doubt, lose her children as a result of her scandalous beliefs, write and lecture prodigiously for the National Secular Society and Socialism, champion the causes of free speech, birth control, education and school meals (as long-standing member of the London School Board), and against the beliefs of her most respected colleague, Charles Bradlaugh, become a Theosophist in 1889. None of these conversions are ever considered mistakes, but part of a natural development. Butting against her mother's edicts, Besant emphasises the dreaminess and emotion of her religious temperament while condemning the dogma and orthodoxy of her mother and Miss Marryat for their 'materialism', oppression, and lack of intellectual rigor. The question of Besant's own intellectual rigor aside, allusions to hereditary psychic powers and a treasured fantasy world rescued by Theosophy signal her conversion to a new faith, which 'realised the dreams of childhood on the higher plane of intellectual womanhood' (AA 345).

⊕ 'Saint Athanasius in petticoats'

Throughout her autobiography, Besant confronts the ideological structure which would keep her a pious and pure bourgeois Christian wife and mother and a writer of novels, perhaps, of 'purely domestic interest,' describing her harrowing struggle through darkness to the light of Theosophy (AA 85-86). In the end, as T. L. Broughton has argued, it is the description of a failed martyrdom which enables Besant to write her autobiography, while both fulfilling expectations of the Victorian cult of womanhood and simultaneously subverting those expectations in 'a series of classically structured (de)conversions.'¹³ As a female 'convert' to Catholicism, Theism, Atheism, Socialism, or Theosophy, Besant's credibility should be steadily eroded by the fact of her writing, for as Broughton explains, conversion in the context of Victorian autobiographical writing is concomitant with experience, maturity, knowledge, hence authority. These qualities are not compatible with a construction of the feminine which is against the historical framework of the Victorian concept of ideal femininity, which emphasises qualities similar to that of martyrdom, such as chastity, youth, and innocence, even masochism, as well as moral and physical beauty, silence, and restraint. Citing Marina Warner on Joan of Arc, Broughton argues that for a woman of Besant's period, change means deterioration. Hence

¹³ T. L. Broughton, 'Women's Autobiography: The Self at Stake?' *Prose Studies* Vol. 14, 1 (May 1991): 79.

'Ideal femininity and change are incompatible,' for if a woman is to purchase her identity as an autobiographer at the price of conversion, she must martyr herself (which is impossible, if she is to write) in order to maintain her credibility. A failed martyrdom enables her to conform to historical expectations of her role as female and to perform as autobiographer.

On these grounds, *Autobiographical Sketches* is much less successful, for it will end with the author in the midst of her failing custody battle for her daughter, locked in combat against the system which defines her and renders her powerless. If we accept the assumption that conversion leads to authority and autobiography in a traditional male-dominated Victorian formula, then Besant's representation of herself in *An Autobiography* is also inevitably compromised unless we refer to the fact that it is as a Theosophist that she writes. Theosophy, in theory, accepts members of all religious persuasions as long as all submit to continued search and study. Besant's many changes may be considered experiences which grant her the authority she seeks, following the traditionally male model of convert. But Besant's physical, intellectual and rhetorical position outside the tradition in which she writes, and partly outside the society she addresses, enables her to manipulate convention to her own device, using it in the service of protest and reform. Besant thus rescues herself from the formula that change equals deterioration by arguing that

change is the new ideal and that the evolution of consciousness and character are controllable.

Nevertheless, the earlier Besant is aware of the potential consequences of calling herself a Freethinker and Social Reformer, especially the possibility of endangering her custody of Mabel, her daughter. But she nevertheless continues her activities as a Socialist while writing often torrid prose, which in this case would prompt the response 'St. Athanasius in petticoats': 'The *Zeitgeist* has its mouth in those of its children who have brain to understand, voice to proclaim, courage to stand alone....Some new truth then peals out...Truth condemns some hoary Lie... and thus the race makes progress and humanity climbs ever upwards towards the perfect life.'¹⁴ Indulging in the language of martyrdom (in *An Autobiography*), the author engages the reader's sympathies and promotes her credibility as a woman, a woman who *might* have been perfect but ends up a sage:

I counted the cost ere I determined this step...I knew that an Atheist was outside the law, obnoxious to its penalties, but deprived of its protection...But the desire to spread liberty and truer thought among men, to war against bigotry and superstition, to make the world freer and better than I found it—all this impelled me with a force that would not be denied....Very solemn

¹⁴ Taylor quotes from an essay in *Our Corner* entitled 'Modern Socialism,' 178-179.

to me is the responsibility of the public teacher, standing forth...to partly mould the thought of his time, swaying thousands of readers and hearers year after year. No weightier [sic] responsibility can any take, no more sacred charge. The written and the spoken word start forces none may measure, set working brain after brain, influence numbers unknown...work for good or evil all down the stream of time. (AA 188-189)

Sage writing, described by John Holloway, George P. Landow, Linda H. Peterson, and others, includes techniques such as: the use of self-deprecating language (the martyr complex) to obtain credibility, attacks on the audience which chastise them for neglecting their faith, the use of grotesque set-pieces which disturb the reader and provide a point of reference for the sage's vast argument, and the satiric and idiosyncratic redefinition of terms which make them conform to the sage's particular argument. Also significant is the sage's identification of a 'sign of the times' as a point of departure, the call to attention of the audience's terrible present condition, the promise of further misery should the audience fail to return to the ways of God, and the offering of a vision of bliss listeners might realise if they do return to the fold.¹⁵ The combination of seeking credibility through self-deprecation, the use of

¹⁵ George P. Landow, *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1986) 23-26.

the grotesque (the dark spot on the baby's forehead or Besant's father's death, brought about because of an infected cut from the breastbone of a cadaver who had died from consumption), her redefinition of terms such as 'religious' and 'superstitious' and the emphasis on her hidden life of fantasy and dreams which ultimately validate Besant's authority characterise her own adaptation of this method.

Landow's discussion of sage writing, however, with the exception of Florence Nightingale, illustrates it primarily through the work of the most significant (and male) sages (i.e. Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold) and it is the Victorian sage to which Landow refers as the inventor of the genre, though these techniques are also found in the novel and in autobiography. Perhaps unconsciously drawn from the tradition of the Old Testament prophet, the genre of sage writing is similar to but differs from wisdom writing (such as the Book of Proverbs or Book of Jeremiah) in the sense that the wisdom writer confidently writes with the understanding that the words embody the accepted wisdom of a whole society, while 'the biblical prophet and Victorian sage begin with the assumption that, however traditional their messages may once have been, they are now forgotten or actively opposed by society'.¹⁶ The perception of the position of wisdom speaker at the social and cultural centre is essential to his style, tone and presentation, but the sage is outside this centre: 'it is, to use a Ruskinian etymological reminder, an eccentric voice, one off center....When a people can no longer follow its

¹⁶ Landow 23.

own wisdom literature, then it needs the writings of the sage. When a people ignores the wisdom that lies at the heart of its society and institutions, then the sage recalls that people to it.’¹⁷

While discussing the female sage, Florence Nightingale, in her *Cassandra* (1852), Landow further explains that it is important to realise that without the intimate understanding of the Bible the Victorians possessed, ‘we miss many allusive gestures toward scripture that not only provide so much of Victorian imagery...but also serve as genre signals that tell us how to read.’¹⁸ This unfortunate circumstance is not easily remedied, but our familiarity with biblical and prophetic language and rhetorical emphasis can certainly provide those of us who do not know our Bible so well with clues for interpretation. Besant’s use of these signals becomes more obvious in her theosophical writings.

Besant obviously knew her Bible (and her Milton) well, but found herself at tremendous odds with Christianity for many of the same reasons as Gilman. The broken promises, the obsession with heaven and hell, and the general neglect of this world were all sources of injustice, in her view. Indeed, McLeod urges that the concept of hell was one of the most important factors in all incidences of attrition from the Christian fold during the nineteenth century and which ultimately led to a more optimistic view and direct criticism of Christianity: ‘In the late

¹⁷ Landow 23

¹⁸ George P. Landow, ‘Aggressive (Re) interpretations of the Female Sage: Florence Nightingale’s *Cassandra*’ in ed. Thais E. Morgan, *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1990) 32-45.

nineteenth century both human and natural sciences were, indeed, making spectacular progress. But the criticism of Christianity depended less on new discoveries than on arguments of an *a priori* nature, often current for a century or more.¹⁹ Besant's natural idealism would be disappointed in a creed which never delivered its messiah and justified as predetermined the most horrible evils in death and destruction; and Christian faith also brought her into a miserable marriage. The injustice of it all, particularly after the near death of her child Mabel from whooping cough, from which Besant rescued her, prompted the conversion to Atheism: 'It was not a desire for moral licence which gave me the impulse that finally landed me in Atheism,' she explains, 'it was the sense of outraged justice and insulted right. I was a wife and mother, blameless in moral life, with a deep sense of duty and a proud self-respect; it was while I was this that doubt struck me...' (AA 100). Rising from the stain of her doubt, Besant assumes a new authority.

Besant would also question the deity of Christ, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul (AA 99). These were inevitable outcomes, but she wants her readers to see that she is blameless. She was not the only person asking theological questions, but she also clearly sees the challenge this presents to public perception of her

¹⁹ McLeod 228: 'The foundations of this humanitarian optimism lay more in new unargued assumptions than in new knowledge. H. R. Murphy and Susan Budd have shown relatively isolated individuals questioning 'orthodox' tenets that conflicted with their ethical assumptions, and only subsequently discovering the scientific basis for an alternative system.' No reference for H. R. Murphy is to be found in the bibliography or notes, however Susan Budd is referenced: 'The British Humanist Movement, c. 1860-1966,' diss., University of Oxford, 1969. Also Susan Budd, 'The Loss of Faith,' *Past and Present* 36 (April 1967). See also Max Weber's discussion of German workers who lost faith not as a result of scientific arguments against the idea of God, but through an inability to reconcile immediate suffering with the power of God.

womanhood. Her references and biblical allusions to the images of martyrs, of herself as a beleaguered Jonah, serve to bolster her image as a pious Anglican in her youth. But her prose is equally zealous throughout her period as Atheist, in which fold she believed she had found a higher morality. Later she would recant her diatribes against Christianity. In *Esoteric Christianity or The Lesser Mysteries* (1901) she recovers and reasserts a mystical interpretation of Christian doctrine to substantiate the essential truths of Christianity and the way they relate to Theosophy, at once an eccentric and traditional allegorical reading of the Bible and the doctrines of Christianity, but one which will hopefully help her readers recognise lost but universal truths. Looking back to the moral high ground of Gnosticism would remind believers of the truths of Christianity (never mind that gnosticism was considered a heresy, adherents were privy to more universal truths). Likewise, looking forward would be easier and pain in this world could be shunted off as a necessary portion of evolutionary growing pain. Theosophy will be discussed in greater detail below.

Another obvious feature of sage writing, very much like the Victorian novel, is that it concerns public matters. With regard to Victorian women, who were not supposed to have voices (the entrance of a woman into the public forum indicated that she had abandoned domestic responsibilities, amongst other proprieties), Landow cites the vast amount of publishing and speaking out that was done by women in various forms such as poetry, devotional works, children's literature, and even intellectual periodicals and at what great cost in anonymity.

Surely the breakthrough of women Evangelist preachers during the earlier part of the century had something to do with promoting this enterprise, but it was still unorthodox behaviour, and those writers who appropriated this tradition, like Elizabeth Gaskell or George Eliot, have also been found at fault for their own reactionary tendencies.²⁰ As Christine L. Krueger explains, the ethos of prophecy and the ethos of simplicity were the two main strategies employed by women preachers in the first half of the nineteenth century, two extremes difficult to modulate: 'She had to sound sincere, but not enthusiastic; simple, but not inspired....Prophecy generally implies an authoritarian, exclusionary discourse, the prophet's unequivocal condemnation of the sins of the age and demand for reform. Paradoxically, women assumed prophetic authority to call for the liberation of silenced voices.'²¹ Annie Besant's first Freethought and Atheist publications were signed by the 'wife of a beneficed clergyman', and her first contributions to the *National Reformer* were made under the pseudonym 'Ajax'. After Besant found her voice and her mission, a distressed Beatrice Webb (1858-1943), in fact, commented on one of Besant's that 'It is only on great occasions when religious feeling or morality demand it that a woman has a right to lift up her voice and call aloud to her fellow mortals.'²² Indeed, great

²⁰ Christine L. Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) *passim.*, 16-19.

²¹ Krueger 61.

²² Taylor 223; Beatrice Webb, *Diary* (N. and J. Mackenzie, ed., London: Virago/LSE, 1980-85) i. 223: 'I heard her speak, the only woman I have ever known who is a real orator, who has the gift of public persuasion. But to see her speak made me shudder. It is not womanly to thrust yourself

occasions were Besant's life, and her sense of morality made extraordinary demands on her. But for a woman, actually speaking out was subversive, and perhaps most extremely so from a pulpit, in spite of the partial freedoms won by Evangelical women preachers.

Nevertheless, with her determination Besant became perhaps the most famous female voice of her age in Britain and other parts of the world. Gilman would record in her diary, in characteristic hopping phrases, her attendance at one of Besant's lectures in Oakland, California in 1893 as a positive and inspiring experience, probably the only moment they were ever nearly face to face: 'very interesting...Joy in life—Get up! It is time to begin! Plenty of time ahead—glorious world—let's start.'²³ The subject of Besant's lecture that day is unknown, but very likely something Theosophical, for this was the year she would go to India.²⁴

Aside from her comparison chart of the Gospels, which demonstrate their inconsistencies and caused grave doubt (doubt which incidentally coincided with the meeting of her future husband during Easter 1866), Besant's first 'serious' attempts at writing, take place in 1868 during her marriage, when doubt weighs more heavily upon her. First she tried

before the world. A woman in all relations of life should be sought.' It was also said that Besant seemed to 'unsex herself' when she spoke in this way.

²³ Mary Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist 1860-1896* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980) 199-200. Gilman's diaries have now been published under editorship of Denise Knight, *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 2 Vols. (Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia, 1994).

²⁴ It appears that not much was published that year, aside from Besant's final autobiography and a third and revised edition of Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), the bible of Theosophy. Besant was still editing the Theosophical monthly *Lucifer* (1887-1909) at the time, but neither Besterman nor her other biographers offer information.

some short stories, then a catalogue of the unheralded 'Black Letter' saints, saints for whom no special services were provided by the church and whose days were printed in black as opposed to red on the Calendar of the Church of England. She had the most luck with the short stories, earning her first check, but a novel was unsuccessful for being 'too political.'²⁵ Instead, she turned her attention (with both angst and mocking amusement?) to theology: 'I contributed further to the literature of my country a theological pamphlet, of which I forget the exact title, but it dealt with the duty of fasting incumbent on all faithful Christians, and was very patristic in its tone.'²⁶ While it is often difficult to engage with the high-strung grandiosity of Besant's prose, her occasional sarcasm can be entertaining, and she here suggests a keen awareness of what she is doing.

Her more resistant voice would be challenged by Pusey, who advised a form of 'rest cure,' telling her to stop reading, to pray only, and ordering never to speak of her doubt. Yet she had already met the soothing Theism of well-known Arian heretic Rev. Charles Voysey (1857-1941). While exploring other possibilities, she discovered the Eastern idea of the avatar, which challenged the uniqueness of the incarnate Christ, the business of comparative mythology adding fuel to her fire. Writing an essay, 'On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth' (1873)

²⁵ The short stories submitted to the *Family Herald* and this novel are not mentioned whatsoever in Besterman's bibliography, though they are probably to be found, if the periodical can be found, in the *Family Herald* for 1868-1869, located at Colindale.

²⁶ Besant, *An Autobiography*, 86. Besterman acknowledges that he has not seen this item and has no reference for it.

for new publisher friend, Thomas Scott, Besant again played the motherly saint while trying to save children from typhoid fever in Sibsey. During a quiet moment alone in the Sibsey Church (she had pretended she was going to practice on the organ) she would begin to speak with confidence on the 'Inspiration of the Bible': 'I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight—but especially of power—that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles...as the sentences flowed unbidden from my lips and my own tones echoed back to me from the pillars of the ancient church, I knew of a verity that the gift of speech was mine...' (AA 116).

Though Besant was lucky enough to have a chance to preach, even without an audience, in the realm of actual sage writing, according to Landow, the task was even more difficult. For the sage traditionally presents himself as an authority on biblical interpretation and uses the techniques of typology, allegory, and apocalypics, to which women were not supposed to have access. Moreover, autobiography is a particularly difficult form because it often borrows its structuring patterns from scripture, the models are derived from men's writing, with the lives of Jesus and Paul being obvious templates, and 'the application of these biblical figures to one's own life required interpretation of the Bible.' Of course preaching itself would be another hurdle not to be crossed by women.²⁷ Thus sage writing possesses overlapping qualities, which may be found in the novel and autobiography, and is associated

²⁷ Landow, 'Nightingale,' 40.

with a religion historically oppressive of women. Original sources of the genre are found in the 'patristic' tradition of the prophet, and it emphasises the speaker's original acts of interpretation as well as eccentricity and the irrational.

Besant and Gilman, however, were particularly keen to appear rational and objective throughout their respective pilgrimages and Gilman certainly makes short shrift of many potentially emotional or ambiguous moments in her own often unhelpful autobiography (what may be regarded as the antidote to Besant's). The ideologies of millenarianism and utopia, which both writers would ascribe to and practice in one degree or another generally have similar problems, though, which will be addressed more specifically during discussion of Gilman's utopias. Theosophy is Besant's way to utopia. But what of Theosophy? And what kind of sage is Besant if she is an eccentric, ex-Christian woman?

Until her near attempt at suicide, during her marriage and period of religious doubt, she portrays herself as a pure specimen of girlhood and womanhood. The first third of her account deals with her innocent and dreamy childhood and education, as well as some of her frustrations with the effects of that education. Painting herself as a 'darling' and a 'dot,' devoted to her mother, but intensely religious and mystical in nature, with some extra-physical ability, Besant alludes to finding her future 'Home' as a Theosophist in 1889 (AA 40-41, 338). She was always able to read, it seems. And she became a gifted young woman

who was always studying and prided herself on being a member of the Church, the Church Fathers being constant study companions. Her adorable-ness seems to deter any thought that this child was in any way odd. Her one hope is that she may be of service, like Joan of Arc:

Looking back to-day over my life, I see that its keynote—through all the blunders, and the blind mistakes, and clumsy follies—has been this longing for sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self. It has been so strong and so persistent that I recognise it now as a tendency brought over from a previous life and dominating the present one; and this is shown by the fact that to follow it is not the act of a deliberate and conscious will, forcing self into submission and giving up with pain something the heart desires, but the following it is a joyous springing forward along the easiest path, the ‘sacrifice’ being the supremely attractive thing, not to make which would be to deny the deepest longings of the soul, and to feel oneself polluted and dishonoured. (AA 57-58)

She now tells that she is obeying voices heard from the ‘everywhere’, that influences from ‘a previous life’ render her will incontestable, yet she maintains her connection to the cult of Victorian womanhood and the ideal of sacrifice. She is unable to achieve such sacrifice, however,

if she ever does, until the right conditions arise. During mental anguish on the road to Atheism, she considers taking chloroform:

I heard: 'O coward, coward, who used to dream of martyrdom, and cannot bear a few short years of pain!' A rush of shame swept over me, and I flung the bottle far away among the shrubs in the garden at my feet, and for a moment I felt strong as for a struggle, and then fell fainting on the floor. Only once again [we are not told when] in all the strifes of my career did the thought of suicide recur, and then it was but for a moment, to be put aside as unworthy a strong soul. (AA 94)

The strain of all her deliberating finally produces physical illness, but her doctor saves the 'helpless, bewildered child-woman, beaten down by the cyclone of doubt and misery' by bringing her back to reasonable life with books on science and anatomy (AA 97). Patient appeals only to Besant's emotion on the part of a kindly clergyman were not able to convince the mind of the impending Atheist of the possibility of God's justice amidst the human suffering she observed, first in her child's illness and then around her, breaking 'her heart over misery here and hell hereafter' (AA 98). Catering to her intellect (and in effect distracting her attention from her emotional confusion) in order to cure her body, this doctor corrects a situation which Gilman, Edith Wharton, and Virginia Woolf also suffered.

Besant's account of this particular illness (there would be others) both confirms the purity and passivity of the 'child-woman' and acknowledges her weakness and suffering as punishment for doubt while supporting her dire intellectual needs. This personal crisis also illustrates the essential conflict between the domesticated sphere of woman and the world beyond. In an age when illness was not yet commodified and hospitalisation far less common, particularly for the kind of unobservable pain Besant experienced in her head, which caused her to lie prostrate (apparently a migraine-like condition lasting many weeks), confinement to bed at home was the only answer. This intensified the claustrophobia and grief created by questionings which threatened the already precarious marriage bed. That formal medicine and the elements of 'reasonable life' (the doctor took time to explain 'knotty points on physiology', a Besant-like version of the talking cure, it seems) should be welcomed into this environment (the opium administered on one attempt to heal drove her mad, she says) is therefore not surprising, while it also validates her perception of her material impermanence and the application of scientific principles to the management of human life. The opium and other administrations, indeed the chloroform Besant might have used to commit suicide, are only effective on the body, however, for her soul was too strong for suicide and her intellect too strong for illness. In a similar fashion, Theosophy rationalises the sacrifice Besant's temperament and initial commitment to Christianity demands by incorporating science in a

redefined union of opposites which makes that sacrifice the means to moral and intellectual as well as physical evolution and improvement.

Autobiographical Sketches carries a very different, more brief account of this illness, which suggests that the retreat of her condition was the direct result of the doctor's 'mental diversion'. In the midst of several pages of correspondence with the kindly clergyman noted above, she exclaims here more specifically that: 'The thought of Hell was torturing me...my whole brain and heart revolted from the unutterable cruelty of a creating and destroying God' (AA 52). The unidentified clergyman (probably Edward Walker, rector of Sibsey parish church, according to Taylor)²⁸ recommends reading Rev. F. D. Maurice (founder of Christian Socialism with Charles Kingsley) and encourages a willingness not to judge Christ by religions but to judge religions by Christ. Besant's subsequent illness assumes a far more mundane dimension in *Autobiographical Sketches*: 'On these lines weary strife went on for months, until at last brain and health gave way completely, and for weeks I lay prostrate and helpless, in terrible ceaseless head-pain, unable to find relief in sleep' (AS 52). But *An Autobiography* elaborates: 'at last I broke down completely, and lay for weeks helpless and prostrate, in raging and unceasing head-pain, unable to sleep, unable to bear the light, lying like a log on the bed, not unconscious, but indifferent to everything, consciousness centred, as it were, in the ceaseless pain' (AA 97). In *Autobiographical Sketches*, it is the doctor's

²⁸ Taylor 37-38.

giving up every other method and trying to divert her that actually works: 'At last he gave up the attempt to cure physically, and tried mental diversion' (AS 53). In *An Autobiography*, the implication is quite different: 'Finally the pain wore itself out, and the moment he dared to do so, he tried mental diversion' (AA 97). The pain is remembered in the former account to have subsided as a result of the doctor's admittedly unorthodox approach, the more recent memory is coloured more intensely by the pain itself and her experience of its effects on her consciousness, a pain which leaves of its own will, and is then merely prevented from returning by the doctor's interventions. Metaphorically, science literally answers to religious doubt in the first instance, ministering to the intellect and saving the subject. In the second, science aids the treatment of a pain that 'wore itself out,' a pain that is both psychological and physical. Traditional medicine does not work in either recollection, though there is the assumption in the first that 'mental diversion' was an effective cure. As with her diagnosis of her mother's mental condition at the death of her father, Besant reassesses her own need for medical analysis.

She then decides (in both versions) on a lengthy reading list and a systematic examination of Christian dogma: the eternity of punishment after death, the problem of evil, the nature of the atonement, the meaning of 'inspiration'. But in the latter account, her memory of the illness is understood as part of an intellectual and spiritual progression, an inevitable experience for one unenlightened by any sort of valid theodicy, including that provided by the clergyman:

It will be seen that the deeper problems of religion—the deity of Christ, the existence of God, the immortality of the soul—were not yet brought into question, and, looking back, I cannot but see how orderly was the progression of thought, how steady the growth, after that first terrible earthquake, and the first wild swirl of agony. The points that I set myself to study were those which would naturally be first faced by any one whose first rebellion against the dogmas of the Churches was a rebellion of the moral nature rather than of the intellectual. (AA 99-100)

That such a crisis should converge on physical territory is not unique in the history of women's autobiography (Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) provides one famous example). Besant associates such physical deterioration with enlightenment, such as the 'feeling of deadly sickness' which nearly overcomes her as she leaves the Sibsey church for the first time before communion. Confronting the fact of her physical weakness with her intellectual strength metaphorically illustrates the problem of writing her autobiography, but in this way she also sacrifices the self which could not speak in order to enable her voice as a convert both to Atheism and to Theosophy (for better or worse) and to rescue her destiny from the proscriptions of material life:

What Religion has to face in the controversies of to-day is not the unbelief of the sty, but the

unbelief of the educated conscience and of the soaring intellect; and unless it can arm itself with a loftier ethic and a grander philosophy than its opponent, it will lose its hold over the purest and the strongest of the younger generation. (AA 100)

In other words, the system of morality which religious authority attempts to impose cannot stand if it merely punishes those who question it for desiring to commit vice and evil, just as Besant had been punished during the Knowlton Trial (over publication of *The Fruits of Philosophy* (1832), a birth control pamphlet by the American doctor Charles Knowlton) and during her custody battle for her daughter, Mabel. Of course, this also implies that unbelievers of the 'sty' will have little effect one way or the other on religious institutions in favour of those educated upper class unbeliever who are necessarily more powerful. Religious authority must answer to questions of justice or 'Materialism' will succeed it (AA 100).²⁹

Nevertheless, passage through Materialism was necessary for Besant.

The principles of Atheism Besant understood are critical, as the

²⁹ See also Taylor, 130-132: Besant had been accused of denying Mabel access to the Bible and intending to pollute the minds of children through sex education (the publication of *Fruits of Philosophy*), and the Custody of Infants Act of 1873 put Frank Besant in sole custody of the children and their education, whether or not the Deed of Separation between the Besants were enforced, which it was not (they could not prove that Annie was in fear of her husband, in spite of evidence to the contrary). The Master of the Rolls, George Jessel (Besant would later attack his Jewish heritage), explained Besant's publication of her lack of belief in religion and an obscene book made her morally repugnant, cutting her off from the rest of her sex such that modest women could not be expected to associate with her. Edward Royle's account of the trial is the standard version: *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans. Popular Freethought in Britain 1866-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

comments above suggest, if one is to understand her move toward Theosophy or her need to reunite doctrine and ethics. The first of these principles is monism (later augmented by certain dualisms of Theosophy and then the trinity of neo-Theosophy), which here asserts, in a framework of scientific materialism, that all things are made of matter, including thoughts. Therefore, those thoughts we may have of God are simply the effect of arrangements of matter; as they cannot be differentiated from anything else there can be no belief in the God others describe, for God cannot be verified (AA 141-142). Other precepts include the refusal to believe without evidence and that anything behind phenomena is simply unknowable (AA 143-144). Additionally, the Atheist ascribes to the belief that life is a property and not an entity, therefore there is no soul, 'a matter of cold, calm reasoning' Besant admits, though she now has proof for the existence of the soul (AA 147-150). This is pure positivism, but it is important to observe that a value system does inhere. Besant did not approve of the hierarchical system of stringent controls Comte delineated for the Positivist ideal state; it would be, she felt, the death of individualism and therefore of liberty and life.³⁰ The main motivation for Besant's move toward Atheism is the need to fill the space left by uncertainty about God and religion with a moral imperative. Besant does not distinguish between morals and ethics the way Gilman does but she does struggle with the issue of separating doctrine from ethics. As an Atheist and 'woman of my

³⁰ Taylor 91.

temperament', she explains, 'a lofty system of ethics was of even more importance than a logical, intellectual conception of the universe' (AA 153). Besant dutifully attempted to remove morality from a religious basis, determining that 'the true basis of morality' was utility: 'the adaptation of our actions to the promotion of the general welfare and happiness; the endeavour so to rule our lives that we may serve and bless mankind.'³¹ Utility is equated with happiness and with virtue: 'Virtue is an indispensable part of all true and solid happiness.'³² The cause of evil is simply ignorance. But this separation would not hold for long.

⊕ Muscular Atheism and Socialist propaganda

Besant does not alter her faith in Atheism. But the utility of 'virtue as its own reward' was not quite adequate for the task of real reform. Besant needed a motivating concept, an ideal. This ideal, in addition to that of the pursuit of Truth through material evidence, is the perfectibility of man, and here Besant, as Atheist, touts the Greek ideal of Hercules as the example to emulate, to 'stir the emotions and impel to action, and a clear understanding of the sources of evil and of the methods by which they might be drained' (AA 156-157). For the Atheist, the contemplation of the Ideal *is* prayer, she decided. Several

³¹ Besant, *The True Basis of Morality* (London: Freethought, 1874) 9.

times, Besant refers to the great *Orphan Humanity*, which she turns into a collective *Christ-figure* and over which she frets. But Christ's humanity is no longer adequate: 'Beautiful with a certain pathetic beauty, telling of the long travail of earth, eloquent of the sufferings of humanity, but not the model type to which men should conform their lives, if they would make humanity glorious' (AA 157). Christ's horoscope has not yet been consulted.

The sources of evil to be exposed and 'drained' convey tension between external and internal causes of evil, however, but for which religion is blamed:

It may be frankly acknowledged that man inherits from his brute progenitors various bestial tendencies which are in the course of elimination. The wild beast desire to fight is one of these, and this has been encouraged, not checked, by religion...Another bestial tendency is the lust of the male for the female apart from love, duty, and loyalty; this again has been encouraged by religion, as witness the polygamy and concubinage [sic] of the Hebrews...not to mention the precepts of the Mosaic laws—the bands of male and female prostitutes in connection with Pagan temples, and the curious

³² Besant, *The True Basis of Morality*, 11.

outbursts of sexual passion in connection with religious revivals and missions. Another bestial tendency is greed....All these bestial tendencies will be eradicated only by the recognition of human duty, of the social bond. (AA 164-165)

This sounds like a page out of Gilman. Moreover: 'Evil comes from ignorance, we say; ignorance of physical and of moral facts. Primarily from ignorance of physical order' (AA 166-167). Vanquishing the beast within through simple recognition of the social bond sounds fancifully quixotic. While such 'bestial' tendencies (lust and sex appear most pernicious) are already in the course of elimination we might assist evolution by incorporating the ideals of Hercules and of virtue (even 'virile virtue'). But even such virtue, conventional enough, could not expunge evil from the world if men (and women) would not act. The physical order holds the key to morality.

Besant continues, in apocalyptic tones, to attack the social structure through grotesque accounts of the poor, articulating for those who cannot speak, and metaphorically describing social disease. The slums of Edinburgh reveal the corpse of a mother surrounded by her children, and another woman 'shrunk and yellow, crouched over a glimmer of fire; "I am dying of cancer of the womb," she said, with that pathetic resignation to the inevitable so common among the poor' (AA 308).

Besant's article expands this metaphorically:

And so, year after year, the misery grows, and every great city has on its womb a cancer,

sapping its vitality, poisoning its life-blood.

Every great city is breeding in its slums a race

which is reverting through the savage to the

brute-- a brute more dangerous in that degraded

humanity has possibilities of evil in it beyond the

reach of the mere wild beast. (AA 309-310) (my

emphasis)

Besant clearly saw a division of evolutionary potential between the 'sty' and its physical effects on the inner constitution and the 'educated conscience' and 'soaring intellect' of those in power. The notion of degeneration runs counter to her optimistic theory of inevitable progress. But the economic forces which should have corrected environmental situations (as in the dire but successful case of the Bryant and May match-girls strike in 1888) within the Socialist program did not seem to be working to regenerate society.³³ That she was unable to see positive results in Socialism troubles Besant, driving her to find the source of the disease, particularly after the carnage during what was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration in Trafalgar Square: 'Our efforts to really

³³ The concept of degeneration, proposed by French royalist Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) in opposition to what he felt were absurd ideas of inevitable progress, became a more prominent theme in nineteenth-century social science. Besant notes that the criminologist Professor Lombroso attended at least one of her lectures in Italy and she recasts his conclusions in a Theosophical light in her Australian lectures, explaining that degeneracy could be avoided: 'It is only fair to admit that at the present time the genius, the artist of the highest kind, the great religious leader, the seer, the prophet, the revealer, has often a brain too delicate to bear the rough vibrations of the outer world.' *Australian Lectures* (Sydney: George Robertson & Coy, 1908) 156-158; Roe, 146-147. Gilman advocated that all mothers take courses in eugenics: 'We require, to do our organized fighting, a picked lot of vigorous young males, the fittest we can find. The too old or too young; the sick, crippled, defective; are all left behind, to marry and be fathers; while the pick of the country, physically, is sent off to oppose the pick of another country...this steady elimination of the fit leaves an ever lowering standard of parentage at home.' *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture* (New York: Charlton, 1910) 208-226.

organise bands of unselfish workers had failed....there was not a real movement of self-sacrificing devotion, in which men worked for Love's sake only, and asked but to give, not to take. Where was the material for the nobler Social Order, where the hewn stones for the building of the Temple of Man? A great despair would oppress me as I sought for such a movement and found it not' (AA 338-339).

As if in answer to the question 'what kind of sage is she', during the last chapter of her autobiography, in 1888, Besant starts looking for a new church and talking to Rev. S. D. Headlam and journalist W. T. Stead (1849-1912). She finally shows her command of the vocabulary and ideas of what Peter Washington has called the 'Western guru', who provides the answer to the problem of evil (in the guise of a neo-Platonist): 'Eastern Science uses as its scientific instrument the penetrating faculties of mind alone, and regarding the material plane as *Maya*—illusion—seeks in the mental and spiritual planes of being the causes of the material effects; there the true existence of which the visible universe is but the shadow' (AA 347).

Speaking as this Western guru of sorts, Besant confirms that the causes and effects of conditions on the material plane are to be found elsewhere. When humans begin to understand how to communicate in the higher realms of matter they can begin to repair the damage to society. 'Spirit', moreover, is a 'misleading word' which 'connotes immateriality and a supernatural kind of existence. The Theosophist believes neither in the one nor the other. For the Theosophist, all living

things act in and through a material basis, and “matter” and “spirit” are not found dissociated, hence there is continuity with Atheistic philosophy. But the Theosophist also ‘alleges that matter exists in states other than those at present known to science’ (AA 357). In fact science has the power to bestow such knowledge, having recently (according to Besant) caught some glimpses of Occult Doctrines. However, as Besant explains in her review of *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) such knowledge is only suitable in the minds of the wise few, for it is this knowledge that will continue to cause division if used improperly: ‘hence the wisdom of those ‘Masters,’ in whose name Madame Blavatsky speaks, has ever denied the knowledge which is power until Love’s lesson has been learned, and has given only into the hands of the selfless the control of those natural forces which, misused, would wreck society’ (AA 350).

‘Love’s lesson’; is it the rationalisation of sacrifice? This is not clear. ‘Life’s lesson’ is first that man is not the only living form in the universe and that all the universe is charged with life. Most importantly, man is a sevenfold being, three parts of which form his Ego, the intangible (if not immaterial) self which works out its own redemption, though she hints that Karma and Reincarnation are the doctrines which must be understood and that there are many incarnations of man during which he may attempt to atone for his wrongs (it is significant that she does not use these terms within the context of the more traditional genre of the autobiography): ‘within the limits of an inexorable law, sowing seeds of which it ever reaps the harvest, building its own fate with tireless fingers, and finding nowhere in the measureless time and space

around it that can lift for it one weight it has created, one burden it has gathered, unravel for it one tangle it has twisted, close for it one gulf it has dugged' (AA 349). Thus matter and spirit are no longer in opposition, as they have been throughout the history of religion and philosophy, but incarnation is simply the engendering of another body which will eventually be discarded and the mental plane is the permanent and primary level of existence.

Not only does Theosophy preserve Besant's childhood dreams, it saves her from her body. The asceticism and self-discipline required of the Theosophical adept aside for a moment, the wisdom Theosophy teaches promises the ability to improve one's own future in another body through the development of transcendental powers in this one (although such knowledge is not given except to those ready to receive it). Through the transformation of her consciousness, Besant is able to escape from the cycle of disappointment. Towards the end of the autobiography, the freedom Besant finds in Theosophy becomes more apparent: 'I know, by personal experiment that the Soul exists, and that my Soul, not my body, is myself; that it can leave the body at will; that it can, disembodied, reach and learn from living human teachers, and bring back and impress on the physical brain that which it has learned; that this process of transferring consciousness from one range of being, as it were, to another, is a very slow process, during which the body and the brain are gradually correlated with the subtler form which is essentially that of the Soul' (AA 345-346).

With such freedom, history is lengthened and Besant's biography becomes ever more elaborate as she and her colleagues cultivate the ability to see past lives and discover previously unknown identities in different bodies and different ages of the earth. Besterman charts more than fifty incarnations of 'Mrs. Besant' or 'The Lives of Herakles' spanning from 70,000 B.C. to 1847 A.D.³⁴ While Besant is identified generally as Herakles, she also appears as the 'White Lady' in Norway, Hypatia in Alexandria, and Giordano Bruno in Italy. Many of these incarnations also involved relationships with well-known personalities of Western European or Aryan civilisation. She was sometimes male, sometimes female, was usually married (the names of parents and spouse are given) held many powerful positions in whichever ancient society she inhabited (e.g. Gobi Sea, New Zealand, Mississippi, Central Asia, Mysore, Egypt) and had various familial or conjugal relationships with other members of the Theosophical Society in *their* past lives. Many whose past lives were identified were considered to be *ideal* types, those who would be responsible for bringing in the 'nobler Social Order' and governing it. The ideal type, later to be discussed in Theosophical works lauding 'The Aryan Type' (1895), *Superhuman Men in History and in Religion* (1913), and 'The Coming Race' (1917), includes Christ, who comes to figure prominently in this regard after the death of Col. Olcott, the ascendance of Leadbeater, and the grooming of Krishnamurti for his eventual role as World Teacher. It is to be

³⁴ Besterman 219-221.

wondered if, by de-centring her identity this way, Besant was not able to retain some aura of earthly divinity. Clad always in white saris with long sleeves and Victorian ruffled collar and cuffs (they look like togas) she stands in contrast to the grimy, 'badly wrapped and glittering parcel' that was Blavatsky, whose earthly presence seems to have been of little concern to her.³⁵ Later, Besant's ribbons, medals and other symbols of esoteric knowledge further decorate her as a properly unconventional article.

³⁵ Washington 41.

⊕ Re-veiling the body

Before becoming a Theosophical sage, Besant was quite absorbed with pressing concerns regarding population and poverty. Her conversion to the celibacy of Theosophy prompts her (in *An Autobiography*) to admit what she seems to feel is her only major mistake, which is that she had encouraged the practice of birth control as secretary of the Malthusian League in 1877. Her eminent colleague, the attorney and eventual member of Parliament, Charles Bradlaugh, had been president of the league in the 1860s and continued to support its goals in removing hindrances to public discussion of the population question, which was legally considered a misdemeanour. Inevitably, Bradlaugh and Besant fell afoul of the law when they published American doctor Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* (1832) (originally issued in England in the 1850s) but decided to incite prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act (1857) and thereby attempt to protect the freedom to publish.

While Malthusianism advocated the right to speak about matters of population in public, neo-Malthusianism was more directly sensitive to the social aspects of the issue and prescribed specific remedies. Knowlton's manner (in the pamphlet) has been described as perfunctory and unsympathetic,³⁶ and suggests the more condescending purpose of

³⁶ Taylor 109.

discussing the 'population' question as opposed to the social question of sexual freedom, which was definitely scandalous and perhaps not the main issue for those who would promote the consumption of such literature by the poor and working classes. While Charles Darwin objected to neo-Malthusianism on the grounds that the most gifted should be allowed to reproduce themselves at will, Besant believed (with others) that it would be the least capable who would propagate because they were unaware or inconsiderate of the consequences.³⁷ Speaking of Malthus' prescription of late marriage (in order that children are certain to be supported) which would lead to the poor marrying and reproducing far less than the more wealthy, Besant writes: 'the best of the people, the more careful, the most provident, the most intelligent, would remain celibate and barren while the careless, thoughtless, thriftless ones would marry and produce large families. This evil is found to prevail to some extent even now'.³⁸

Bradlaugh and Besant were convicted of depraving public morals during the infamous trial, in which Darwin declined to participate due to poor health, but they were released on their own recognisance at the very last minute with a fine of one hundred pounds. Lord Justice Cockburn also ignored the fact that Besant, as a married woman, could not enter into her own recognisance, while Bradlaugh paid the fine for both of them.

³⁷ Taylor 116.

³⁸ Besant, *The Law of Population* (London: Freethought, 1889) 29-30.

This experience did not stop Besant from publishing her own Malthusian tract, *The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and its Bearing on Human Conduct and Morals* (1877), first as installments in *The National Reformer* and then as a pamphlet. This would precipitate action for the removal of her daughter Mabel from her custody in 1878.

Using the example of current famine in India (Bradlaugh and Besant had frequently turned to India to castigate the Tory establishment for the consequences of imperialism and Christian missionary work), which neatly coincided with Queen Victoria's assumption of the title of Empress of India (1876), Besant challenges the 'positive checks' (disease, war, famine, death) posed by Malthus' law of population with the equally scientific response of preventive checks: 'Is it possible to sit down with folded hands and calmly contemplate the recurrence at regular intervals [Lord Derby noted the predictable periods of distress for such a country] of such a famine as lately slew its tens of thousands?'³⁹ She recommends a fine sponge dipped in a solution of alum, Dr. Palfrey's powder, quinine, or a primitive rhythm method and even justifies abortion in certain life-threatening cases. Celibacy is denounced as unnatural and in one blow Besant reduces Victorian morality to a mask:

The asceticism which despises the body is a contempt of nature, and a revolt against her; the morality which upholds virginity as the type of

³⁹ Besant, *The Law of Population*, 24-25.

womanly perfection is unnatural; to be in harmony with nature, men and women should be husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and until nature evolves a neuter sex celibacy will ever be a mark of imperfection.⁴⁰

Here we should recall that for the Victorian woman, birth control did not generally mean freedom *for* sex, rather freedom *from* sex and its consequences. Besant's position, which encouraged health and sexual freedom for women, is reversed due to new Theosophical insight which characterises the 'bestial' sex motive as a disease or primitive vestige. In light of her awful experience with Frank Besant, it is particularly ironic that Besant would so wholeheartedly defend heterosexual practice in the first place; her later retraction in *An Autobiography* is therefore the more startling:

I brought a material cure to a disease which appeared to me to be of material origin...we see in sexual love not only a passion which man has in common with the brute, and which forms, at the present stage of evolution, a necessary part of human nature, but an animal passion that may be trained and purified into a human emotion, which may be used as one of the levers in human progress...instead of this...the abnormal

⁴⁰ Besant, *The Law of Population*, 28.

development of the sexual instinct in man...is
 due to the mingling with it of the intellectual
 element...giving rise to continual demand....

(AA 241-242)

Paradoxically, it later emerges that Besant's Socialist and Atheist statement on earthly celibacy being unnatural and the sarcastic jibe about nature evolving a neuter sex were not so far off the mark, in a more esoteric sense. A clear reference to her thinking on this theme occurs during lectures on *The War and its Lessons* in 1919 in which she describes the ultimate stages of human evolution as a union of masculine and feminine love:

More and more in the highest types of humankind, you find blending the qualities called masculine and feminine into one nobler type of human being, approaching human perfection. But in the intermediate stage the difference was wanted...when these qualities are developed, then the blending process begins...and you find the qualities of the saint, with the qualities of the hero, blended into one special specimen of humanity.⁴¹

Theosophy apparently proposes to deal with the current evil through a careful blend of scientific language and esoteric insight. The

⁴¹ Besant, *The War and its Lessons on Equality* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1920) 9.

development of the sexual instinct has become 'abnormal' in the physical world and the disease it causes must be remedied by dealing directly with the 'subtler' source whence it comes.

III. SOME PROGRESS TOWARD UTOPIA: A THEOSOPHICAL THE(ODYSSEY)

⊕ *Logos spermatikos*: the generative word

Besant came under the direct influence of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), also affectionately known as HPB, in 1889, after being given *The Secret Doctrine: the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (1888) to read for review (it is in dispute over who actually gave her the book, W.T. Stead or George Bernard Shaw), but she had also recently become interested in spiritualism, having read A.P. Sinnett's *The Occult World* (1881). Her immediate conversion to Theosophy, after meeting HPB and reading the discrediting reports of the Society for Psychical Research (which studied the phenomena supposedly produced by HPB in her capacity as medium), prompted concern on the part of her colleagues and friends. Just before HPB died unexpectedly of influenza in 1891, she gave orders for Besant to succeed her as leader of the Inner Group of the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society.

HPB's fellow founder, American William Quan Judge, in a scandal now generally validated (except, perhaps, by Theosophists), forged letters from the Masters (introduced in a moment) indicating that he and Besant would share leadership of the exclusive and politically powerful Esoteric Section, while the amiable Olcott would be a figurehead President. Besant accepted and presented these 'Mahatma Letters' as

evidence (all were horrified) in front of her usual crowd of workmen at the Hall of Science in which she gave the lecture '1847-1891: A Fragment of Autobiography,' her last lecture in memory of Charles Bradlaugh whose death the same year (he had been in very poor health) devastated her. The letters, written on rice paper in coloured crayon (in Judge's hand) would be the source of long and complicated controversy, entailing the very essence of validity of the society, which is belief in the aforementioned Masters, 'Great Ones' who 'voluntarily incarnate in human bodies in order to form the connecting link between human and superhuman beings'.¹ The affair ultimately ended with Besant's founding of a new section in Australia and the expulsion of Judge from the society. At that point, an ideological split had been established and Judge's supporter in America seceded, forming a separate organisation headquartered at Point Loma, California and headed by 'the Purple Mother' (and Besant's permanent rival) Katherine Tingley.

For two years Besant travelled and lectured in Europe and America. In 1893, the year she published her *An Autobiography*, Besant also attended the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago (a conference adjunct to the World's Fair) at which allegations of the influence of fifty year-old Brahmin mystic and mathematician Gyanandra Chakaravarti were advanced by newspapers eager to reveal a new side to Besant's exploits. Indeed, allegations of the influence of her male colleagues and idols (Jesus Christ, Frank Besant, Bradlaugh, Chakravarti, Leadbeater)

¹ Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom* (1897; Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1997) 325.

are prominent in accounts of her biographers. Nevertheless, 'comparative religion came before the public for the first time on this grand scale. Years of literary and biblical scholarship, of tales by travellers of the calibre of Richard Burton and Laurence Oliphant, of popular poetry like Arnold's 'Light of Asia,' of romances like Rider Haggard's *She*, were beginning to transform Western attitudes to non-Christian religion; ignorance and suspicion were giving way to sympathetic interest...Hinduism took this Parliament of Religions by storm.'² Presumably such years of scholarship and literary creativity had also fomented many myths, but it all served to further the cause of Theosophy. Besant believed Hinduism (religion of the first Aryans, delivered by the Grand Lodge of Central Asia from which all religions emanated) was supreme among the religions of the world and that India had suffered under the agnostic influence of Western materialism and the patronising treatment of imperial rule (which deprived it of its traditional and excellent village-based system of education). But it was necessary for India to be under England's rule temporarily in order for the English language to become the language of Hindu evangelism.

Briefly, Hinduism strongly emphasises unity (as opposed to individualism) and oneness with an immanent God, tolerance and patience. The ideas most relevant to the current needs of society included reincarnation and karma (the law of action and reaction or that what is sown is reaped), dharma (duty), and self-sacrifice. Believing

² Taylor 264.

that Hinduism most truly expressed the insights of the universal religion, the Divine Wisdom or Theosophy, Besant wanted to revive it for the world and would directly connect such efforts to her own political agenda for an Indian National Congress and an independent India (allied with Britain), based on the principle of the family and a millennial 'aristocratic socialism' characterised by 'mutual co-operation' and the government of the wise for the benefit of all.³ Together, India and Britain would begin to bring the rest of the countries of the world into a world government.⁴

Just after the Chicago conference, in October of 1893, Besant travelled to India where Col. Olcott would meet her and take her to Adyar, the headquarters of the Theosophical Society then (after HPB and Olcott had settled there in the 1870s) and now. Besant would later travel to Australia from India to deal with the Judge scandal. There, in India, she would truly claim the mantle of Blavatsky as head of the inner Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, the group in which practical occultism was most likely taught. In opposition to Olcott, who had determined that Buddhism was the most appropriate and closest faith for a true Theosophist to study, Besant would begin her exhaustive work for the recovery of ancient Hindu faith and traditions. She adopted Indian dress, her famous white sari and robes with gold embroidery and beads. She washed in the Ganges (Ganga). Olcott called her 'Annabai'.

³ Wessinger, 242-243.

⁴ Besant, *The New Civilisation* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1927) 88-89: 'Why should we not have a United States of Europe as well as a United States of America? Why should not war be outlawed between European nations?'

As explained above, her appeal to Hindu tradition would ultimately serve (some believe as a cloak) a political agenda to establish Indian Home Rule on the Irish example, for as her sphere of influence increased, so did her political activity. But what is Theosophy or Divine Wisdom, exactly, that it should have become a breeding ground for Indian Nationalism and that so many women should have taken part in its development and activities? The issues from which Theosophy draws its strength have hopefully been illustrated, but it may be useful to demonstrate.

Regarding sex, all religions attempt to conceptualise reproduction and provide a strategy to counteract what are perceived as the evil social effects of sexual behaviour when the link between sex and reproduction is broken. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, the strategy of selection and the biological construction of the family, the fundamental unit of society which religion strives to protect, is jeopardised when reproduction and sex become separate issues. This view assumes, on the basis of the religions about which it is trying to generalise, that the process of selection and reproduction is inevitable and operative at any level. Reproduction enables the society to continue, and the unruliness and inconvenience of sexual desire can lead to an unregulated reproduction which threatens order and stability. This is why religions have been so important: 'they are the earliest cultural

creations of which we have evidence which supply contexts of security and controls over human behaviours and evaluations of them. They have extended the unit of selection beyond the family and the kinship group...Sexual variance may thus be harnessed or prohibited.’⁵ While a tremendous diversity of approaches have been formulated by religions with regard to moral codes, designation of mating choices, techniques, education, and also the protection of women and children, the ‘consequence has been strong male control of women, in which have been combined reverence for women and subordination of them.’⁶

Textually and historically, the position of woman in Judeo-Christian, Islamic and Hindu religion is directly determined by her very difference. However often women are revered or respected, this attention is given separately from the fact that in doctrinal terms they are generally considered unfit for like forms of participation in these particular religions or societies with men. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, woman’s apparent transgression in having caused original sin is the source of all strife and suffering. Her apparent bodily density or uncleanness is a contaminant inhibiting pursuit of higher spiritual knowledge. She is revered as domestic labourer and despised or dismissed as religious aspirant. In Islamic law women are considered spiritually equal and allowed to have access to education and property, but this is belied by actual practice in many countries where the hiding

⁵ *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. John Bowker (Oxford: OUP, 1997), entry for ‘Sex and religion,’ 879.

⁶ ‘Sex and religion,’ *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 879.

of the woman's body, for example, is considered so essential to the maintenance of society that, in some extreme cases, the woman may be killed for violating this injunction. In Hinduism, women are considered inherently incapable of achieving absolute devotion to God and must wait until they are reincarnated as men.⁷ It is therefore doubly surprising that Besant eventually subscribes most fully to the theological influence of Hinduism in her interpretation of Theosophy, though she was concerned to raise the status and expand the role of Indian women in society within the context of Indian culture.⁸ These are obviously broad generalisations pulled from a reference book, and they do not reflect dissenting belief or reformed interpretation, but are based on historical and doctrinal precedent.

As explained in the Introduction, sociologist Bryan S. Turner has contended that the intention of religion is to legislate for the body. Turner applies a 'materialist' critique to the concept of body as property within the Western patriarchal economic and social system. Christianity is problematic in particular, Turner argues, because 'Christianity elaborated a strong theory of evil as a consequence of Man's fall from

⁷ 'Women,' *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 1041-1044.

⁸ Nancy Fix Anderson, 'Bridging Cross-cultural Feminisms: Annie Besant and women's rights in England and India, 1874-1933' *Women's History Review* Vol. 3, 4 (1994) 563-580. Of Besant's initial refusal to criticise Hindu culture, which in fact created an obstacle for indigenous reformers who wanted to improve women's education, employment training for widows, and an end to child marriage, Anderson notes 'The secularist Kaliprasanna Kavyabisharad, for example, pointed out in 1894 the irony of Besant's praise of the Vedas, for under Hindu law as a woman she would not be permitted to read them.' (569) Besant does advocate for the return of women to their proper positions of reverence in society (but only in fulfilment of the domestic ideal) and does express meagre concern for the education of girls, but overall, her attitude as a Western feminist in India is at the least ambiguous and usually quite conservative until 1913 when she decides that India cannot succeed politically on the world stage or be free until it is reformed because 'the laws of

grace. Since this fall from grace was deeply associated with the problematic nature of human sexuality, Christianity institutionalised a strongly ascetic response to the problem of the body....the world, that is, the profane regions of life, was defined essentially by the nature of the human body' and the negative impact of human sexuality had to be resolved through a system of regulation which would lead directly to salvation.⁹ The relationship between regulation of the body and salvation in Christian tradition seems almost too mundane to mention, yet in spite of increasing numbers of ordained women in non-Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches, and alternative approaches to traditional religion, one need only recall more recent issues such as controversy over the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) to realise just how tedious and complicated the notion of an incarnate deity has been to deal with, particularly with regard to the possibility that Jesus (historical or otherwise) may have desired an earthly life and the apparently polluting influence of women.¹⁰ The thought that Jesus could possess sexual desire is anathema to notions of his purity. This is to say nothing of the problem posed by the anthropologists who brought an understanding of totemism to Western society, which led to comparisons with Christian tradition. It is striking that asceticism seems to prevail when divinity is invoked in Christianity. Though the union of man and woman (and

Nature...to me are more sacred than any writing, however ancient.' *Wake Up, India: a plan for social reform* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1913) 57.

⁹ Turner xiv-xv.

¹⁰ Nikos Kazantzakis suffered excommunication from the Orthodox church after publication of his novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1955).

some would argue for same-sex relationships in this regard) is often considered the closest we can come to union with God in some religions (such as Hinduism), the view of the official Church, particularly in the West, has preached asceticism as a means to unqualified love for God, that earthly marriage may symbolise a higher union, but is impermanent and base: 'That means it became the voice of men, since only men have control and authority in the Church....Thus the subordination of sex, and the attempt to make it in effect synonymous either with sin or with reproduction, became, within Christianity, a particular strategy through which men kept control and gave to control a new meaning.'¹¹

Centuries of debate within Christianity have tried to determine the meaning of Christ's apparent embodiment, which at the very least unites human and divine on some level. The example of an ascetic and (therefore) moral life is the apparent answer if one wishes to imitate Christ from desire or duty.

The concept of the messiah is integral to both Jewish and Christian faith, and the incarnation of Jesus is the foundation of Christian belief. Whether or not a Christian accepts the notion of the 'Word made flesh' and the deity of Christ, contending with the example of Jesus' life and with his teachings in particular is inevitable, for it is often believed that the intrinsic purpose of the Gospels contained in the New Testament is to ground apostolic interpretation of those teachings in law. As the apostles re-interpret Jesus, who never speaks directly but through the

¹¹ 'Sex and religion,' *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 880.

writings of the apostles, Christians are faced with the difficulty of interpreting the meaning of such writings for themselves, either through the edict of a particular church or, in a more evangelical fashion, individually.

Christians therefore address the notion of what it means to be human with their own brand of ethics, although the source of Christian ethics and morality is, as suggested above, notoriously slippery. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, 'What bishops and journalists suppose to exist somewhere—if not on tables of stone, at least in materials of undoubted durability—turns out to be almost as elusive as the snark.'¹² However, MacIntyre believes certain themes persist. Primary to the Christian ethical equation is the idea that original sin against the father (for which woman is responsible) requires *reconciliation*. This is particularly associated with the previously mentioned idea of Gnosis, union with the divine, and knowledge of God. That God's *goodness* stems from His *omnipotence*, therefore from His *moral authority*, and that obedience to God in appreciation of His goodness will create happiness on earth, is central to the point of belief. As Alasdair MacIntyre explains: 'It would be absurd to deny that the world religions, and more especially Christianity, have been the bearers of new values. But these new values have to commend themselves by reason of the role that they can have in human life.'¹³

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1967) 111.

¹³ MacIntyre 114.

Another element of Christian ethical belief is *equality before God*, the sanctifying of which idea MacIntyre describes as the means of maintaining the vision of equality in the face of an apparent inability to resolve inequalities except within small, separate communities (hence the drive to create utopian communities, one supposes): ‘The paradox of Christian ethics is precisely that it has always tried to devise a code for society as a whole from pronouncements which were addressed to individuals or small communities to separate themselves off from the rest of society.’¹⁴ The point, however, is that Paul and Jesus both preached an *interim* variety of ethics which appealed to inherent human selfishness and self-love (‘Love thy brother as thyself’) and relied on the imminent Second Coming, the kingdom of God on earth, and the end of history. Of course, the ‘Messianic kingdom did not come, and...the Christian church ever since has been preaching an ethics which could not find application in a world where history had not come to an end.’¹⁵ And it is here that the borrowings from other systems begins, according to MacIntyre: ‘It is therefore not surprising that insofar as Christianity has propounded moral beliefs and elaborated moral concepts for ordinary human life, it has been content to accept conceptual frameworks from elsewhere.’¹⁶

These frameworks historically depend on the model of feudal social life as well as medieval understandings of Plato (c.427-347 BCE), and

¹⁴ MacIntyre 115.

¹⁵ MacIntyre 116.

¹⁶ MacIntyre 116.

Aristotle (c.384-322 BCE). It is very important to realise that these borrowings are made possible through the works of the 'fathers of the Church' such as Irenaeus (c.120/140-c.203), St. Augustine (350-430), St. Anselm (c.1033-1109), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), etc. Through these interpreters of the apostles, themselves interpreters of Jesus, and eventually the earlier theologians themselves, we obtain formal social direction and law. Of course, the Reformation and Evangelical Christianity made it possible for the common believer to read and interpret for himself (please be mindful that the literacy and education of women was practically non-existent on any significant scale until the eighteenth century).

But more than this, the Protestant Reformation helped create the problem or idea of ethics in the first place, and the relatively new notion that doctrine and ethics might be separate, as Stanley Hauerwas demonstrates. Faith, not works were to determine the Christian's relationship to god, and works became associated with ethics, or a means of forestalling complete dependence on God's grace. Therefore there has ever since been a tension between law and grace: 'The law is needed, but we can never attain salvation through the law and the works of the law'; hence the removal of penance, for example, entailed the loss of casuistry (i.e. close attention to particular cases) on the part of moral theologians and left the question of what it meant to be Christian open to wider and wider interpretation and denominational separation.

As a result, 'there have increasingly been attempts to "do" ethics.'¹⁷

The problem of moral relativism has caused ethics to become an autonomous discipline taught in universities. As mentioned, Besant studied the church fathers thoroughly in her youth, which was a rather unusual thing for a young girl to be doing when only professional theologians and scholars would normally be engaged in such work. The tone and occupation of such apologetic and exegetical writings is surely a great influence on her early beliefs, but it is also apparent that such writings have influenced her Theosophical views as well. Her need to reconcile doctrine and ethics or prescriptions for social behaviour is apparent at every step of her theological journey.

To put Besant's work in perspective, we should remember that the feminist approach to religion and the reinterpretation of teaching of the church fathers is not so recent. Women preachers of the Evangelical movement have already been noted. 'Britain's lady novelists are our great Evangelists of Reconciliation,' quotes a reviewer of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853).¹⁸ Matilda Joslyn Gage would publish, also in 1893, her diatribe against Christianity and organised religion, *Woman, Church and State*. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a large group of women activists and scholars published *The Woman's Bible* in 1895. Also a political rather than scholarly work, it is a compendium of extracts of contentious material from each book of the Bible along with variously

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, 'On Doctrine and Ethics,' *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997) 28.

¹⁸ Krueger, 3.

contributed commentary and interpretation. In 1913, Theosophist Charlotte Despard published *Theosophy and the Women's Movement*, a work finally linking Theosophy with the subject that seemed to come so naturally to it, a feminist approach to ethics and religion. Despard makes practical what HPB and Besant preach.¹⁹

Curiously, the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* has no entry for 'Theosophy,' rather a brief entry for the 'Theosophical Society' as founded by Mrs. H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel H. S. Olcott in New York City in 1875. It explains that their purpose was 'to derive from ancient wisdom and from the insights of evolution a world ethical code.'²⁰ This is an extrapolation, and quite correct. But it does not discuss the provenance of the idea of theosophy or its development (or mention the third founder, Irish-American attorney W. Q. Judge). What the founders originally listed as their objectives changed order. Originally focused on the discovery of unobservable powers latent in man, the forming of *the* nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood, and the study of Aryan religious traditions (Blavatsky was vehemently anti-Christian), the Theosophists came to concern themselves with the survival of their organisation and with its impact on society as a whole. Thus the objectives were changed a few more times, notably in 1886 to remove rules about initiation and secrecy and to reject distinctions of race, creed, class or sex:

¹⁹ Charlotte Despard, *Theosophy and the Woman's Movement* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1913) 1-2: 'How has it all come about and why is the movement so strong? Because it is in the direct line of spiritual evolution....The present relations between man and woman, with the effect of those relations upon society...we may find that, before any real progress can be made, these will have to be radically changed.'

²⁰ 'Theosophical Society,' *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 970.

1. To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, colour, or creed.
2. To promote the study of Aryan and other Scriptures, of the world's religions and sciences, and to vindicate the importance of old Asiatic literature, namely, of the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian philosophies.
3. To investigate the hidden mysteries of Nature under every aspect possible, and the psychic and spiritual powers latent in man especially.

By the 1930s the objectives had been reworded again to read:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.
2. To encourage the study of comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science
3. To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.²¹

What Blavatsky intended to accomplish, besides the institutionalisation of herself and her beliefs (she had been struggling to recover her lost reputation as medium after being investigated by the SPR and found fraudulent in 1887), cannot simply be equated with the use to which Besant put Theosophy. The albeit unconscious feminism of the work of HPB has received almost no attention. She was Besant's

²¹ The first list is found in Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (1889) (Pasadena, California: Theosophical UP, 1972) 39. The second list is cited in Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1938) 81.

revered teacher and held sway until her death in 1891, two years after Besant joined the organisation.

The current Theosophical Society's theological foundation consists of the tomes written by Blavatsky from her researches, experiences, revelations and imaginings (as well as Besant's less hermetic reform-oriented work). First, there is *Isis Unveiled: A Master-key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (1877), a two-volume work ('Science' and 'Theology' respectively) establishing the antiquity of Theosophy and its Eastern beginnings, starting with the ancient Indian *Vedas* (18th-4th centuries BCE.), the body of sacred knowledge through which the knower 'contacts the divinities, or discovers the universal foundation of things, thereby attaining to his desires and overcoming all that is undesirable,' and which had been discovered by Europeans in the early nineteenth century, notably the scholar Max Müller.²² The Western figures Ammonius Saccas (d. after 242) and Plotinus (205-170) carry on in the Platonic tradition. There is also the influence of the little-known Pythagoras (c. 582-507 BCE), who was driven to synthesising religion and reason, relating the forms of the natural world in mathematics, music, and cosmology to a higher order leading to spiritual illumination.²³

Blavatsky's second successful publication, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), also in two volumes, 'Cosmogogenesis' and 'Anthropogenesis', is her grandest and most thorough, some would say dense, explication.

²² 'Vedas,' *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 1018.

The Secret Doctrine ought to take its place alongside Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) and Marx's *Das Kapital* (Vol. 1, 1867) as a seminal nineteenth-century work of history and synthesis, though it never does, probably because it has been so largely discredited by historians and others for its inaccuracies, while the political objectives of Marx and the motives for Frazer's agenda go without much comment. However inaccurate may be some of the information (and it is not simply a cataloguing project like Frazer's), there is a grand mythological and theological system being teased out of the torrent of facts. It is pointedly anti-Darwinist. Considering the ape a lower creature, as probably all nineteenth and most twentieth-century minds have done, Blavatsky is incensed by the denigrating idea that man is a descendant (or is it ascendant?) of baboons (whether this is true or not) and retorts that, in fact, evolution occurs but not in the way that Darwin thinks it does, as implied in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and more directly in *The Descent of Man* (1871).

Rather, evolution works not from the ground upward, but from the empyrean downward. Through an hierarchical system of manifestation from the Logos, the many bodies of man emanate. The source of Oneness provides the essence of each individual that travels into successively more advanced material forms (through the 'lower' animals) until it is a human, and as a human certain things can be understood. The laws of Karma, Dharma, and Reincarnation are critical

²³ Tarnas 22-23.

to the cosmology, for the purpose of life on earth is to strive to attain an even higher life of union with the divine. The incarnation itself of divinity in matter, in order that other souls may be improved, is therefore the great sacrifice, not the crucifixion or sacrifice of matter. The goal is to escape from the 'cycle of generation' which traps the unenlightened in a series of karmic lessons and dharmic duties.

The critical concept linking the Eastern and Western worlds of thought is the Logos. The notion of the 'Word' and the search for Adam's original tongue, the words given him by God, preoccupies many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philologists and corresponds most intimately with the project of finding the Master-key. These parallel searches for the Truth, the origin, the genesis of what has become Western history, religion, and science are corroborated by the labours of Theosophy. St. Justin Martyr (c.100-165), one of the first pagan converts to Christianity to record his experience, argues against the Romans in his *First Apology* (c.155) that traces of the truth can be found in pagan thinkers, since all, including Christianity, shared in the 'generative word' (*logos spermatikos*):

When, indeed, we assert that the Word, our Teacher Jesus Christ, who is the first-begotten of God the Father, was not born as the result of sexual relations, and that He was crucified, died, arose from the dead, and ascended into Heaven, we propose nothing new or different from that

which you say about the so-called son[s] of
Jupiter. (Chp. 21, p56)

The sons of Jupiter do not possess the goodness of Christ, however. Moreover, Justin Martyr asserts that Plato borrowed from Moses and other Prophets. Suggesting that Plato borrowed the 'X,' symbolising spirit embodied in matter, from the brass cross Moses fashioned at God's instigation to protect his people from the poisonous beasts of the desert, he tries to discredit the originality of pagan thought.²⁴ In any case the 'seminal' word indicates human reason, which is implanted in all men. The wise employment of this reason may enable one to attain some knowledge of the Perfect Logos. But the Perfect Word or Word of God (*ho pas logos*) can only be attained by Christians through Revelation.²⁵

Christianity, Justin Martyr believed, is solely credible *because* of the incarnation, in spite of similar comparisons to Jupiter's sons: 'Jesus Christ alone is properly the son of God, since He is His Word, First-begotten, and Power, and that, having become man by His will, He taught us these doctrines for the conversion and restoration of mankind'.²⁶ Nevertheless, Justin Martyr asserts that the kingdom of which Christians speak is not a kingdom on earth, but a kingdom in heaven, and that the Romans are mistaken to think that the Christians

²⁴ Thomas B. Falls, Trans., 'The First Apology', *The Writings of Saint Justin Martyr* (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948) Chap. 59-60

²⁵ Chap. 5, 38n.

²⁶ St. Justin Martyr, 'The First Apology', Chap 21-23, 56-59.

entertain the notion of creating an earthly kingdom, or that they hold allegiance to another kingdom, thereby inviting accusations of treason, though it has been suggested that this was done for political reasons only.²⁷

Justin Martyr's reference to the Logos as a common thread in a sense justifies Theosophy's project of recovering the past and a pantheon of similar ancient truths in order to restore the one true religion. Moreover his apologetics are drawn on by Besant in *Esoteric Christianity* to demonstrate the validity of Christianity.²⁸ However, while Blavatsky uses Justin Martyr to draw attention to his understanding of the common teachings of world religions as evidence for the project of recovery, she blasts the Christian apology as yet another source of the contamination of Gnostic teachings: 'And thus, one by one, perished the Gnostics, the only heirs to whose share had fallen a few stray crumbs of the unadulterated truth of primitive Christianity.'²⁹ Indeed, Blavatsky *claims*, Philo depicts the Logos, now identified with Christ, as male and female, the word *petra* (which Philo first used for the Logos) meaning *rock*, but also 'interpreter' in Chaldaic and Phoenician.³⁰ It is true that Besant believes that 'true' Christianity has been neglected, but as a result of contemporary teachings and not apologists like Justin Martyr or

²⁷ St. Justin Martyr, 'The First Apology', Chap. 11, 43.

²⁸ Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, 103-105.

²⁹ H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877; Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1998) 249.

³⁰ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 246; *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy, Vol. II: Anthropogenesis* (1888; Adyar, Madras; Wheaton, IL; London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993) 489.

the church fathers, who understood the privileged esoteric discourse hidden behind the veil.

With regard to Christianity more generally, the relationship between Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy is helpfully fleshed out by MacIntyre and Richard Tarnas. Essentially, the division of worlds between that of Forms and that of sense perception is reinterpreted by Neoplatonist St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) to imply division between the world of desires of the body for earthly things, and the desire of the soul for the world of heaven: cupiditas v. caritas. The 'Platonic anticipation, the Form of the Good' becomes God, the reward for the expulsion of earthly desire and rational enquiry leading to illumination. This dichotomy creates the tension between earthly and heavenly cities in Augustine's *City of God* (412-427), which helps to form the genre of utopian writing. Stanley Hauerwas comments, 'How properly to understand the relation between the two cities becomes the central issue for the development of what comes to be called Christian social ethics. Of course Augustine would have found the modern distinction between personal and social ethics at the very least questionable and more likely theologically a mistake.'³¹

This sort of dualism within a greater unity (as well as the Neoplatonic system of intermediaries between God and the material) is critical for Theosophy as Besant understands it. Origen (c.185-254) should also be added to the list of church fathers Besant follows. Origen, whom she

³¹ Hauerwas 25.

often cites, believed that everything has a dual nature with both bodily and spiritual aspects. Moreover, he determined there were two classes of Christian as well, the simple and the perfect, and that a spiritual hierarchy was determined by the development of spirits through free will. He also believed that the Son was God, that the godhead was a unified trinity, and that creation was eternal. Views attributed to Origen (Origenism) include the pre-existence of souls and distinction between the mortal and resurrection bodies, and metempsychosis, all essential to an understanding of Theosophy.

Aristotle provides, through St. Thomas (1225-1274) Aquinas, two laws, natural and supernatural, a vision of God as the goal of human desire, and a list of virtues (but this list is problematic). Self-preservation is the first principle of natural law (one Gilman recognises as operative in society and one she would wish to change to ‘race-preservation’), ‘but the self which has to be preserved is the self of an immortal soul whose nature is violated by irrational slavery to impulse.’³² Aquinas’ belief in original sin prevents him from accepting human nature as it is and simply describing the virtues of the polis, as Aristotle does, but he does accept the equation of virtue and happiness. Importantly, ‘Aquinas’ theological ethics is such as to preserve that nontheological meaning of the word *good* and man’s ability to determine goodness. “Good is that to which desire tends.” To call God

³² MacIntyre 118.

good is to name him as the goal of desire.’³³ This suggests the degree to which secularisation of the idea of the good life is possible, and even begins to substantiate the nineteenth-century equation between evolution and correct development constituting goodness. Hauerwas also makes the argument that Aquinas, who focuses on the idea of God as creator, would find doctrine and ethics indistinguishable. Through Christ and the sacraments, creation would return to God, however, somehow the second part of *Summa Theologiae* (1266-73), which part deals with matters of morality more specifically, was separated from the first and anthologised, thus allowing for the later interpretation that natural law is at the heart of Aquinas’ account rather than the virtues.³⁴ Perhaps this is why, in the Middle Ages, MacIntyre asserts, the distance between finite man and God was increased dramatically and this meant seeking individual salvation outside the human community in an afterlife through mystical experience and divine revelation. God’s power, rather than his goodness, becomes the focus. Whereas Aquinas allows a certain rationalist emphasis, later theology determines that our desires have no effect on determining goodness, ‘the opposition between rules and desires becomes paramount. Asceticism and overasceticism...become prominent in religion.’³⁵ Therefore, Christian ethics becomes a nebulous region where classical, Hebraic, and Christian theologies merge.

³³ MacIntyre 118.

³⁴ Hauerwas 27-28.

³⁵ MacIntyre 119.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), desiring to place morality on a rational basis, affirms the test of universality in the categorical imperative.³⁶

Kant's focus on personal experience, the postulation that man could view himself both objectively (as phenomenon) and subjectively (as noumenon) and that he must believe in God in order to act morally helps Besant to place Theosophy in a more contemporary context. For Besant, the rule of external law is the measure of man's imperfection:

We need the categorical imperative, not the conditional...Is it not true that Nature sounds the categorical imperative? Humans, ignorant and foolish, not knowing the laws that surround them, desire to follow the promptings of their own untrained will...Nature mandates sternly, "Thou shalt." The human will, able to choose, answers "I will not." Then the two words fall upon the silence: "Then suffer."...If to you law seems cruel and death soulless, you do not understand the universe. Law is but the Will of the Divine, and the Divine desires your happiness.³⁷

³⁶ Murray MacBeath, 'Kant,' *Philosophers of the Enlightenment*, ed. Peter Gilmour (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989) 96-97.

³⁷ Besant, 'Theosophy and Ethics,' *The Spiritual Life* (1893; Wheaton, Ill: Quest, 1991) 87-88.

⊕ **The Vale of Soul-making: Besant's utopia**

For Theosophy to the Christian world is a re-presentation of fundamental truths clothed in that scientific garment which makes them more acceptable to the mind of the modern man, and is also an explanation of the doctrines drawn from mystic truth too much forgotten in popular presentation, unveiling unknown depths of thought, unveiling unknown heights of mystic interpretation.

Annie Besant, 'Is Theosophy Anti-Christian? An Explanation addressed to the Bishop of London,' 1 July 1904

Theosophy asserts that the ancient wisdom and original religions were revealed in their most exalted teachings to a few select initiates, and that the rest was given, in selectively contrived doses, to the masses and those who were becoming sufficiently advanced in their intellectual and spiritual progress to withstand and use wisely such knowledge. This implies, of course, that certain groups have been denied such access due to their evolutionary inferiority. The goal of Theosophy is to recover those ancient teachings which would be common to all religions, the ancient stem of religious revelation which provided the foundation for all subsequent religious development, and to distribute these teachings in the appropriate doses to people at all stages of spiritual evolution, thus hastening development.

Theosophy as interpreted by Besant considers many current religious practices as degenerate forms of the original teachings. Thus it is Besant's duty as sage to recall the world to the truth of religion. This truth takes the forms of several eastern teachings, but they only become relevant as they are interpreted in a Western context through the lens of Christianity.

First of all, Theosophy functions as a theodicy. That the difficulties of material life on earth should have a provenance in a subtler sphere, whether by decree of God or gods, or via the cycle of reincarnation and karma, is the contention of most religions. The aforementioned concepts of dharma, karma, and reincarnation are critical to Theosophy as a means of explaining evil and the needed human response to it. Dharma is, in Besant's terms (though she does not indicate the source of quotation, Blavatsky or otherwise): 'the "inner nature of a thing at any given stage of evolution, and the law of the next stage of its unfolding"''.³⁸

Dharma is inseparable from morality and from individual character: 'morality is not, as the simple-minded think, one and the same for all; because it varies with the Dharma of the individual. What is right for one is wrong for another.'³⁹ Yet, this does not imply any sort of free will, for Dharma is predetermined by Karma and vice-versa. Moreover,

³⁸ Besant, *Dharma: Three Lectures delivered at the eighth annual convention of the Indian Section held at Benares on October 25th, 26th, and 27th, 1898* (Benares and London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1910) 19. Please note that Besant is lecturing in India here; her explanations to a London audience may be differently phrased or explicated.

³⁹ Besant, *Dharma*, 7

‘There is one life in all, but the stage of enfoldment of a particular life depends upon the time through which it has been separately evolving.’⁴⁰

This necessitates leaving each individual in his or her place, to grapple with Dharma as they are intended to in order to evolve. The ends are necessarily the survival of the karmic fittest. Lecturing to an audience in India, Besant delicately broaches the subject of child-marriage, albeit without disturbing in the slightest the traditional role of the female, in this example of the fruit of her philosophy:

Take a child. There is no doubt that if you take a woman-child, she has before her a future nobler, higher, and more beautiful than the present when she is playing with her dolls; she will be a mother with a baby in her arms instead of a doll; for that is the ideal of perfect womanhood—the mother with the child. But to grasp at that ideal before the time is ripe will do harm and not good....that motherhood should be grasped before its time, and a child be born from a child, the babe suffers, the mother suffers, the nation suffers...All sorts of suffering arise from grasping the fruit, ere the fruit is ripe.⁴¹

A rare instance of Besant advocating in favour of education for women, as well as family planning, this conveys the meaning of Dharma

⁴⁰ Besant, *Dharma*, 19.

in practical life, as well as the implicit morality of the teaching, which seems to have little to do with outwardly observable facts. Karma is similarly used. Literally meaning 'action' in Sanskrit, Besant explains, 'karma, is therefore used for causation, or for the unbroken linked series of causes and effects that make up all human activity....No one life is isolated ; it is the child of all the lives before it, the parent of all the lives that follow it, in the total aggregate of lives that make up the continuing existence of the individual.'⁴² Karma is therefore made by each individual (particularly by *thought*, thought control and purification being major planks in Besant's platform) who is in turn controlled by the karma made in a previous life. Certain *yogas* or mental and physical forms of meditation may be used to foster self-knowledge and promote spiritual evolution. It is here that a sort of free will may be perceived, though individual development is nevertheless predetermined by Dharma.

Reincarnation, through the Monadic descent, verifies the eternal cycle of the previous two ideas, although Theosophy also posits bodies beyond the physical in which these processes also occur. The Monad, a difficult concept, is essentially a storehouse, on a different plane, for all the energies created on lower planes. These energies in turn redistribute those qualities to souls which have been developed in other lives, thus flouting the claims of science that mental and moral qualities (acquired characteristics) are not transmitted from parents to offspring:

⁴¹ Besant, *Dharma*, 21.

Modern science is proving more and more clearly that heredity plays an ever-decreasing part in the evolution of the higher creatures, that mental and moral qualities are not transmitted from parents to offspring, and that the higher the qualities the more patent is this fact;... A continuing substratum there must be, in which mental and moral qualities inhere, else would Nature...show erratic uncaused production instead of orderly continuity. On this science is dumb, but the Ancient Wisdom teaches that this continuing substratum is the Monad, which is the receptacle of all results.⁴³

Evil is therefore justified on the grounds that it is created by humans and that it inheres in one's character, development, and actions, all of which are predetermined.

Besant's utopia depends, therefore, on predetermined conditions which are beyond the apparent physical causes observable by conventional science. Science at the Theosophical level attributes individual qualities, positive and negative, to sources unseen and uncontrollable *only to the untrained*. There are many opportunities to understand and improve this world and others beyond through occult practice, but good works, altruism and self-sacrifice, while valuable, are

⁴² Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 267.

not the way to escape the cycle of generation. Escape is to be found only through Mysticism and penetrating the veil, attaining gnosis, and following the path of the initiate.⁴⁴ In the meantime, the world requires a means of beginning to achieve some higher level of social and spiritual awareness. Besant discovers her teaching not only in Christian ethics, but in the Christian narrative as a whole.

In June 1916, Besant proclaims the need for a natural law that will compel social reconstruction and conduct by forcing religious belief to develop character.⁴⁵ This law, 'working around us, below, above us, a law from which we cannot escape, and to which we must conform ourselves – or suffer' is the law of love: 'the forces born of love are those which join together, and only a Society which is built on love, and cemented by love, can endure through the ages of the future.'⁴⁶ In August 1912, Besant told her 'fairy-tale' of *The Future Socialism*, an 'aristocratic socialism' administered by the wise few in which anti-social individualism had passed away, spiritual intelligence or the 'real nature' of man was recognised, and all contributed and received according to their capabilities and needs, but this story of the 'Fairy-State' offers no specific means to its end.⁴⁷ Doctrines common to all

⁴³ Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 202.

⁴⁴ Besant, *How a World Teacher Comes* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1926) 75-76.

⁴⁵ Besant, *The Bearing of Religious Ideals on Social Reconstruction* (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1916) 3, 12.

⁴⁶ Besant, *Religious Ideals*, 12-13.

⁴⁷ Besant, *The Future Socialism* (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1912) 4, 10, 22.

religions, in the interest of forming a 'World Religion' were discussed in February 1913 to include: 1) the Unity of God, 2) The Trinity of Divine Manifestation (a tradition in all religions), 3) the super-physical Hierarchies and their worlds, 4) The Nature of Man (a divine spirit), 5) Man's evolution (the perfectibility of man), and 6) the great Laws (Karma and Sacrifice).⁴⁸

Elements of the natural law, according to the demands made in 1916, must be discovered by reason, which naturally sees what is good for Society and that what is evil is anti-social.⁴⁹ The unchangeable religious Ideals 'rooted in natural law' which will regenerate Society include: 1) One Life or the immanence of God or universal Consciousness, 2) 'the law of Brotherhood' or the 'sense of true Solidarity', and 3) 'Self-Sacrifice' or 'the joy and glory of Sacrifice' as demonstrated not by the mistaken teaching of individuality in Christianity, but by the Christian ideal of the family.⁵⁰ But what is to be the path to the fulfilment of these laws of nature or religious ideals? By December 1916, Besant is discussing history and the need to recognise patterns and the working out of a grand plan in the apparently Indian fashion of seeing 'events on earth as the projections thrown down on to the earth of spiritual realities in higher and mightier worlds.'⁵¹ Still the question of how to see such

⁴⁸ Besant, *The Brotherhood of Religions* (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1913) 14-24.

⁴⁹ Besant, *Religious Ideals*, 13.

⁵⁰ Besant, *Religious Ideals*, 7, 11, 13-18.

⁵¹ Besant, *A World Religion* (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1916) 2.

patterns as spiritual realities is not resolved except by reference to the gradual enlightenment and learning of history, the recognition of ideals and the ability to 'develop the spiritual faculties' which may lead man to the truth of such providence.⁵² But the development of faculties for the perception of truths in worlds beyond this has been addressed before; the question of applying such abilities in the service of some conception of the ideal world or life soon becomes clearer.

In 1917, Besant begins discussing *The Coming Race*, and how this race, currently being discovered in sub-race form in the colonial regions of America (Western America in particular), Australia, and New Zealand are possessed of a notably Greek-style physiognomy (as drawn from the principles of creating composite photos of criminals, for example, to identify 'types') and the special attribute, as Henri Bergson's insight had demonstrated, of intuition.⁵³ The current or 'fifth' race, in an historical hierarchy of seven races and sub-races based on physical and mental characteristics, is meant to consolidate, beginning with England and India, an empire of peace. The coming 'sixth' race, after a series of apocalyptic events including earthquakes (in the Pacific Rim), floods and the rising of the continent of Lemuria in the Pacific Ocean, will then prevail in the realisation of Universal Brotherhood.⁵⁴ These people are in fact to be reincarnations of those dying in World

⁵² Besant, *A World Religion*, 18.

⁵³ Besant, *The Coming Race* (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1917) 14-16.

⁵⁴ Besant, *The Coming Race*, 8.

War I.⁵⁵ This will happen because 'the science of the soul' will be learned by all who dare to muster it, thus *earning* the more ready guidance of the Masters. As mentioned before, the entire validity of Theosophical teaching depends on the existence of the Masters. But unlike Blavatsky, Besant makes the coming of the World-Teacher (a manifestation of a Master) synonymous with the founding of a new religion for the new race based on Theosophy.⁵⁶ The concept of the avatar, superhuman man, or messiah justifies her vision even as it controls it.

The practice of Occultism, it is said, will develop the higher powers of perception: 'man, if he will, may leave the prison of the body, may unlock this prison-house whilst still the flesh is about him, may learn the secrets of the other worlds, may meet the Master and bow at his blessed feet.'⁵⁷ Such practice, that can verify the reflections of earthly realities in the higher spheres, is needed to expand consciousness (in four stages) and learn the ancient Mysteries, already known to fathers of the Church and other great teachers of all religions, to the point where 'liberation or salvation...the escape from the power of death' is achieved.⁵⁸ After this, the higher Mysteries of the 'Inner Government of the world...which is ever watching over the world and taking advantage of every opportunity in which man may be helped and evolution may not

⁵⁵ Besant, *The Coming Race*, 18.

⁵⁶ Wessinger 278-279.

⁵⁷ Besant, *How a World Teacher Comes*, 85.

⁵⁸ Besant, *How a World Teacher Comes*, 85.

be retarded in its course' may be discovered.⁵⁹ To this end Jeddu Krishnamurti was chosen, or so it was believed, as the new vehicle for the World-Teacher.

In 1929, Krishnamurti would renounce the Order of the Star, a section of his own followers within the Theosophical Society, because these members were too dependent on his authority. Such authority could only engender another organisation and more religious bureaucracy and therefore, believing that spiritual evolution could not be dependent on authority, he 'absolutely refused to have anything to do with Besant's dream of founding a new world religion.'⁶⁰ His subsequent career and fame cannot be addressed here, but his reasons for departure illustrate the mix of tensions between free will and determinism and faith and doctrine with which Besant's religion attempted to grapple.

⁵⁹ Besant, *How a World Teacher Comes*, 85.

⁶⁰ Wessinger 289.

IV. 'WHOSO DOETH THE WILL SHALL KNOW OF THE DOCTRINE': GOD'S IMMANENCE AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

There are those who write as artists, real ones; they often find it difficult to consider what the editor wants. There are those who write to earn a living, they, if they succeed, must please the editor. The editor, having his living to earn, must please his purchasers, the public, so we have this great trade of literary catering. But if one writes to express important truths, needed yet unpopular, the market is necessarily limited. The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (304)

That men have essentially ruled the world for thousands of years through their language and their institutions is an assumption which has frequently been made throughout the history of feminism. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a vocal antecedent of critics such as Dale Spender, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter who have often echoed her parody of accepted wisdom in *The Man Made World* (1911): 'Men are people! Women, being "the sex," have their limited feminine interests...Men however, are not restricted -- to them belongs the world's literature!' She later affirms this: 'Yes, it has belonged to them -- ever since there was any.'¹ While it is difficult to thoroughly assess the progress of literacy in women in the Western world, it is quite clear that widespread literacy among women not of the upper classes was not

¹Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man Made World* (London and Leipsic: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911) 91-92; subsequently abbreviated as MMW..

achieved until relatively recently, to say nothing of their right to read (and write) whatever they would like.² Gilman is still largely responsible for the view that we live in a man-made world, even if it generally fails to consider the intricacies of language acquisition, linguistic development and models of feminist linguistic approaches. To be fair, these disciplines did not exist to any significant degree in Gilman's day and it has taken quite some time for such research to come of age and build credibility. Nonetheless, linguistic research, post-Freudian theory, and the large field of current theory used to account for issues of gender now help to characterise views which are more complicated and less rigidly defensive.³ Boundaries are far more permeable as well, and the kind of interdisciplinary approach that Gilman used in her work is now often applied to literary studies, challenging previous methods and reinventing the discipline. Using a

² The quality of what can be determined literacy also weighs heavily on the assessment of how many women were capable of reading, writing, and disseminating independent thought through written media. In describing the extent and quality of literacy in women, *A History of Women in the West*, Volume IV, ed. Genveieve Fraisse and Michelle Perrot (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), asserts that most gains were made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (pages 117, 145-52, 164, 220-22, 233-6). Also helpful is Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: CUP, 1975).

³ See Deborah Cameron, 'Rethinking language and gender studies: some issues for the 1990s' in Sara Mills, ed., *Language and Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London and New York: Longman, 1995) 31-44. Cameron compares the reception of Spender's *Man Made Language* (1980) and Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1990). She determines that the popularity of these two very different approaches to gender and language issues is due to ideological changes in feminist linguistics which have left it in an impasse regarding how to move away from the extremes (the *deficit* and *dominance* model of Spender or the *cultural difference* emphasis of Cameron) exemplified by the two aforementioned authors.

Gilman's solutions or lack thereof aside, Cameron describes recent theory which stresses that gender is being continuously constructed relative to time and place and cannot be generalised or accepted in a particular case as a norm. As we will see, it is just this question of what is normal that is Gilman's concern.

See also Camille Roman, Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, eds., *The Women and Language Debate: A Sourcebook* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994).

scientific as well as moral basis, Gilman founded a “‘sociology” of women’⁴ which drew from the rhetoric and ideology of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order to convert the minds of her readers to a new way of thinking about the role of sex and sexuality in their lives.

The social construction of gender, in which literature (religious or otherwise) plays a key role, is, in Gilman’s theory, the basis of economic and social inequality between the sexes, though the term ‘gender’ probably never appeared in her vocabulary. Other differences are genetic and providential and, unlike Besant’s Theosophical position, they are set in stone, for Gilman’s utopia is far less dependent on a grand cosmology. It is, however, similarly dependent on the existence of two sexes for the attainment of the ideal utopian condition. Current theorists will see problems with her method, as well as paradoxes, even hypocrisy in her conclusions: her assignment of male and female designations, for example, to various qualities and occupations risks undermining her program for a society based on ‘human’ (rather than exclusively male) qualities, particularly without the help of Besant’s grand synthesis. But though her methods sometimes seem questionable and she speaks primarily to an audience of her own particular social class and race, she reaches toward a philosophy which aims to encompass the essential belief systems which permeate society, and, in doing this, to change them. Like Besant during most of her life, Gilman

⁴ Bland, Lucy, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995) 48-49.

is above all an activist concerned with producing tangible results for the daily lives of women, men, and children.

In spite of her many comments and explorations of the effects of religion, and her belief that '[r]eligion is the strongest modifying influence in our conscious behavior'⁵, Gilman's focus on religion, the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular, is not generally recognised as being a driving force behind most of her work, even though this impulse is often associated with the tradition of utopian writing and thinking, of millenarian and other proportions, in which Gilman is increasingly found. An understanding of the development of Gilman's religious views is essential to the study of all of her work, utopian or otherwise, for these beliefs undergird her constant but variegated attempts to communicate a relatively consistent philosophy in which social and religious concerns merge.

Has so much really changed since Gilman proposed that we do away with private kitchens, with indulgence in non-procreative sex and with fashion and create a new, more egalitarian world? We now have daycare funded by public and private companies, household conveniences that supposedly reduce labour, and, in the United States, an Equal Opportunity Commission which dubiously guarantees hiring practices blind to race, sex, sexual orientation, or age. But these material measures belie the question. Does practice indicate the absorption of the theory behind it? We have already seen that with regard to Besant, the

adoption of external regulation is no substitute or effective measure for the re-orientation of intention, that is, for conversion. Gilman's pragmatic vision was not concerned merely with material improvement of society, although this is clearly the aim of her proposed economic enfranchisement of women. She believed that the minds of people could be fundamentally changed. With the right sort of education and training their ideologies could be completely transformed through conversion to new insights and concepts of thinking and, ultimately, behaviour.

'We live, humanly, only through our power of communication,' she further explains in *The Man Made World*, in a tone which must be described as passionately objective and typically didactic. If women were to obtain the same opportunities as men, people had to agree, universally, about why they should have them; they could not be grudgingly handed over in an atmosphere of suspicion and guilt to women by whom men secretly felt threatened or towards whom they felt inclined to patronise. Rather, to guarantee the genuine value of those social and legal opportunities, a consensus admitting complete and open reception of basic values regarding the equality of the sexes and the re-interpretation of social and political codes in non-gendered, that is, *human*, terms, was required, or so Gilman believed. To create a society based on general human values rather than those constructed by gender and power relationships sounds almost impossible in some ways to this generation, accustomed as it is to the understanding of the profound

⁵ *His Religion and Hers: A Study of the Faith of Our Fathers and the Work of Our Mothers* (New York, London: The Century Co., 1923; Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, Inc., 1976) v, subsequently

influence of such relationships, but Gilman, perceiving that this was both necessary and possible, decided to start at the beginning. Religion and its corresponding system of belief, organising our souls and consequently our lives, is in great need of change, Gilman writes, but this must occur through nothing less than the total 'conversion' of society, as described in *His Religion and Hers* (1923). Here, she echoes Besant in terms more pertinent to her practical approach:

Our thronging troubles, when studied in such new light, are seen to be due to mere false attitudes in our minds, false ideas, theories, beliefs. These things do not require centuries for removal. Nothing is more sweepingly sudden than a religious "conversion," or more miraculously productive of changed conduct. (HH 257)

While conversion reflected emotional and spiritual crisis for Besant, Gilman attempts to simplify the process. Gilman's objective is a conversion of thought of religious import with the moral power of women in the vanguard. A specifically woman-authored morality is the means by which conduct in daily life, which is the critical factor, may be altered for the better. Communication, therefore, is the main functionary of change. Describing the importance of literature in *The Man Made World*, Gilman explains how we can live 'humanly':

Speech gives us this power laterally, as it were, in immediate personal contact. For permanent use speech

becomes oral tradition -- a poor dependence. Literature not only gives an infinite multiplication to the lateral spread of communion but adds the vertical reach. Through it we know the past, govern the present, and influence the future. In its serviceable common forms it is the indispensable daily servant of our lives; in its nobler flights as a great art no means of human interchange goes so far. (MMW 93)

Preaching about literature, Gilman moves from a scientific modular evaluation of how speech functions within the social organism to suspicion of the oral tradition to grand rhetoric over its preferred evolutionary stage, its inspirational propensities as communication in written literary form. Unlike Besant, Gilman intends her literary efforts themselves to perform the task. She does not need an organisation to lead, but her ambitions are nonetheless extensive. She does not explain what she means by 'vertical reach', but in light of her beliefs in the power of literature to effect change and in progress generally, it seems logical to expect this verticality to refer not only to the improvement of communication generally, but also to progress in the future, constant movement forward, and the ability to control history. Having control over language is essential, therefore, especially for women who will need to account for half of the world's history while structuring its future. When language is controlled, morality and behaviour can be controlled as well.

The 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind' is examined in a serial entitled 'Our Brains and What Ails Them' (1912), from Gilman's

magazine *The Forerunner*. Carol Farley Kessler sees similar purposes in Gilman's article and the discussion by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar of a 'mother tongue' theory of language and of the mother as first language teacher.⁶ Here Gilman aims to account for the relation 'between the brain and preserved speech'. She relies on Otis Mason's chapter on 'The Linguist' in his book *Woman's Share in Primitive Culture* (1899) to explain how men invented words for the acts and emotions of hunting and warfare, though they generally had to remain silent most of the time while stalking prey.⁷ The words for all other human industries were, according to this theory, invented by women. Much later, *His Religion and Hers* (1923) would describe language anthropologically, as a means of communication emerging through woman's own activities, though Gilman is vague at best in accounting for her sources, perhaps another strategy in itself. Men were the first tellers of tales, she asserts, in an oral tradition.⁸ As for literature, this was not properly established until the 'pastoral time, and is found well-rooted in the later period of agriculture':

No priesthood was secure enough to develop a religious literature till after a steady supply of the firstlings of the flock was assured them; and such literature did not grow

⁶ Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia* (Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse UP, 1995) 111-112. Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Vol. I, The War of the Words* (New Haven, London: Yale UP, 1988) 262-271.

⁷ Otis Tufton Mason, *Woman's Share in Primitive Culture* (New York: Appleton, 1899).

⁸ *Our Brains and What Ails Them*, 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' *The Forerunner* Vol. 3, #5 (May 1912) 133.

great until agriculture gave settled homes at last, and the temple was established with the village. All human productivity is conditioned on surplus time and surplus energy. ('Effect of Literature Upon the Mind', 133)

Telling her narrative as though it were fact, she grows dimly aware that she may be hypothesising and quickly inserts her Veblen-style point.

Why Gilman ascribes the creation of stories to men may be answered by her theory of the inherent tendency of men toward self-expression; her attribution to men of the facility for telling 'tales' thus enables her to lay the responsibility for the negative effects of stories, indeed of religious superstitions, on the shoulders of those who created them. As for the establishment of literature and art, this required leisure and economic stability, which most women did not enjoy even in Gilman's day.

In this early article, Gilman describes literature as 'an external brain', a 'vast secondary storage battery', and also 'the brain of society' by which all individual brains are in turn modified, because it contains more power, memory, and ability to transmit than any individual brain.⁹ Presumably literature is thus modified as well, causing continuous change as understanding proliferates, within a highly organic scene of literary osmosis: 'Our social evolution...began, from the first sporadic groups, to transmit pulsing waves of thought and feeling from brain to brain, developing common action and common sensation; and its amazing speed of growth...is due...to the formation of this permanent

⁹ 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' 133-139.

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⁹ 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' 133-139.

and illimitable complex of cells'.¹⁰ As with Besant, intellectual evolution is depended upon. Priest included, the writer is a 'book filler'. What concerns Gilman, aside from the fact that man has been in control of language, is the actual moral effect of literature and whether the art form we take for granted has been good for us or bad for us.¹¹ Besant never seemed to question the possible perniciousness of this in spite of her controversial publishing activities (though she was concerned that Hindu children learn the works of their own tradition). Language, in Gilman's view, is a socialising force of which we are all products; the priesthood first developed and guarded this 'paper brain', the influence of which they well understood. The priest kept the common people in ignorance, a tradition which continues amongst those following the 'cult of literature', Gilman urges.¹² But the claims to ownership of the social organ of literature are in dispute. After describing the effect male control (priestly and otherwise) of language has had on history and fiction in *The Man Made World*, Gilman explains:

The thought of the world is made and handed out to us in
the main. The makers of books are the makers of thoughts

¹⁰ 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' 133-134.

¹¹ 'We have to-day the un-literary moralists, who want no books written but pious ones; and the un-moral literary craftsmen, who hold that literature is an Art—and exists for its own sake, knowing no laws of use or ethics. Waving aside both the moralist and the artist, let us look at the real relation of literature to the brain...The contents of the race mind is very largely composed of "that which is written."' ('Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' 133)

¹² 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' 135. It is worth explaining here that Gilman had problems with artistic modernism, though she does not refer to it as such, and she later writes in 1913 regarding the ghastly 'elephantiasis of the soul' she diagnoses in some current art. In 1916 she again proclaims that egoism is the disease of modern art. See 'On Some Recent Art,' *The Forerunner* 4 (April 1913) 112. Also 'Painting via Literature,' *The Forerunner* 7 (July 1916) 186.

and feelings for the people in general. Fiction is the most popular form in which this world-food is taken. If it were true, it would teach us life easily, swiftly, truly; teach not by preaching but by truly representing; and we should grow up becoming acquainted with a far wider range of life in books than could even be ours in person. Then meeting life in reality we should be wise -- and not be disappointed.

(MMW 103)

The trouble has been twofold, due to the object of preserving a past authority established by 'custom' and habit; first, we have stored all of our memories in books, second, we have sought to carry all of our books in our memories, thus denying the possibility of improvement and growth, however often religion and philosophy have tried to aid us. For Gilman, difficulty of the relationship of doctrine to ethics is, as with Besant, that there is such a relationship. She suggests, like Besant, that the original version was the best. The 'Arthurian Legends' were once 'healthy and new-born' and 'voiced the ideals of a rude age. They were mystic, sensuous, vital, full of the beauty of their time -- jewelled velvet over an unwashed nakedness.'¹³ Yet Tennyson has ruined them with the 'power of his fancy', appealing to adolescents going through 'the period of individual growth comparable to the race-period when such tales were born.' Thus, the repetition of a primitive tale preserves a primitive state of mind, individual growth is correlated with historic evolutionary

¹³ 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' 138-139.

process, producing a poetaster obsessed, for instance, with a 'fling at a pulse-stirring Guinevere!'

Fiction and the novel, however, are of a more fluid medium, which has been more responsive and helpful to the needs of its age. Writing which re-visualises and reinterprets actual parts of life in order to convey experience and information to others is what ought to be read, she explains. *Nicholas Nickleby* is a far-reaching example of what literature ought to do. England saw in fiction what it could not see in fact, and therefore made improvements in the schooling of boys. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), written by Gilman's aunt, Harriet Beecher Stowe, provides another example of the social effect of writing.¹⁴

Teaching society is the essential project of literature, according to Gilman. Having a noble and powerful enterprise, the artist acts to 'enlarge our world of feeling' and hears, sees, and speaks where others cannot. But the artist must respond to what Gilman calls the science of *Ethics*, the artist cannot simply be an artist because that person likes to do something (like telling objectionable stories in 'a supremely objectionable manner' for instance): 'If Art of any sort is part of Human Conduct it is in the range of Ethics. Ethics is not morality-- Morality rests on custom; Ethics is a science. There may be no morals in literature, save in the accumulating habits of writers, quite as likely to be wrong as right; but Ethics there is.'¹⁵ These statements will be rephrased

¹⁴ 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' 138.

¹⁵ 'Effect of Literature Upon the Mind,' 138.

from time to time, but their import will not vary. Morality is that version of what we will call the business of determining right human behaviour that is based on tradition, written or oral, and which needs to be changed in favour of a business of determining right human behaviour which is based on Gilman's world view, starting with internalised conversion to particular principles which might be based in literature.

How can ethical writing be restored to the canon of literature?

Gilman provides an example. The short story 'Bee Wise' (1913) attempts to teach the value of an alternative to male-centred society by offering to the reader the mythical woman and child-centred California communities of Beewise, a town in a coastal valley, and Herways, a nearby port. The title is taken from Proverbs 6.6: 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise.' A gift of ten million dollars from a long-lost gold-mining uncle allows a group of college women to begin an experiment in female-controlled capitalism which relies on textiles and agricultural products. This brief venture prefigures the woman-centred society of *Herland* (1915). The craft-oriented form of self-sustenance (albeit through a hearty and unusually efficient capitalism) employed by Beewise also recalls William Morris' ideal society of *News from Nowhere* (1890) in its sanctification of the creative impulse. Illustrating the idea of a 'true fiction' in this earlier and more concrete vein than either that of Morris' novel or that which would later emerge in her own writing, while alluding also to the biologically-based social theory she developed and expanded through her prose works, Gilman instructs readers to 'be wise', like the industrious society of the

honeycomb, and take heed from the truths nature provides (which they should understand if they've read their Proverbs).

Beewise and Herways would not have been possible without the gift of a long lost uncle's money. The extraordinary sum necessary to begin the experiment rather undercuts the purpose of the narrative, which is to make the reader appreciate the possibilities inherent in productive (female) labour. Each of the founders of the community also has a title corresponding to a particular talent and task-- the 'Manager', the 'Teacher', the 'Nurse', the 'Doctor', the 'Minister', the 'Statesman' [sic], the 'Artist', the 'Engineer'. These titles, too, suggest those natural qualities Gilman will later attribute to women in general, qualities which are ostensibly human, but which have been perfected primarily by men (except perhaps in the case of 'Nurse') and are later to be taken up again by women. The ethical nature of a story like 'Beewise' thus inheres in its didactic description of female initiative and industry, though it assumes some problematic preconditions which will haunt Gilman's later fiction and theory generally, preconditions that foretell Gilman's return to an existing model of society which the revisionist work of her writing would attempt to transform.

'Beewise' also metaphorically illustrates the paradigm for human development that Gilman employs. The particular truth nature provides for Gilman, in the form of Lester Frank Ward's 'gynaecocentric' theory of inherent female dominance becomes fused with a belief in the *morality* of her application of scientific knowledge: a belief in progress, in determinism (an ordered world), gradualism (there will be continuous

evolutionary growth), and adaptationism (everything fits and works). These are basic invalid biases many people hold today, according to scientist Stephen Jay Gould, who insists that neither science nor nature can provide moral messages.¹⁶ Gilman knows that we invent our own morality, but needs to validate the ethical system she is striving to develop. Unlike Besant, who sees morality as inseparable from the tradition which made it, Gilman distinguishes morality (a matter of tradition, which will include Biblical tradition) and ethics ('the science of social relation' and more generally of human conduct); so she turns to the language of science and the eminence of the Queen Bee, and to literature, new formal principles, new morals, new ethics. That Gilman can separate tradition from 'scientifically' derived morality makes it possible for her to take more imaginative steps toward reform. Like Besant, she tries to disassociate emotion from the process as well, which Besant's mysticism ultimately could not tolerate; yet both finally proclaim that love is the answer.

As explained in *The Man Made World*, the effect of having literature in the hands of men for so long, unfortunately, has been to skew its real purpose. Men have written history as the story of heroes and their accomplishments, repeated war and conquest; Gilman is vituperatively direct in her attribution of this kind of writing to the quality of combativeness she sees in men. Fiction and poetry, too, she says, are outlandish examples of the lengths to which men carry their inherent

¹⁶ Ann J. Lane, *To Herland and Beyond: The life and work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Pantheon, 1990) 294-295. Lane applies Gould's insights from *Ever Since Darwin*:

propensities for *desire, combat, and self-expression*, writing of love, adventure, fighting, and death endlessly.¹⁷ The Bible, and the male Jews who wrote it, will also be attacked in *With Her in Ourland* (1916).

However, 'the artist, if great enough, has transcended sex' and the 'real masters' (such as Balzac and Dickens) deal with 'life, life in general, in all its complex relationships'.¹⁸

Perhaps transcendence of sex enables the great writer to focus on the fundamental relationships of 'life in general,' but what does this mean for the love story? This curious amalgamation of scientific analysis and passionate moralising, so typical of Gilman's prose, leads to (or perhaps requires) her increasingly deployed proclamation of a boundary between what is normative and right and what is not. The nineteenth-century novel in general, she believes, is a very poor thing which encapsulates and promotes forms of relation that are detrimental to society, but occasionally the socially conscious mind of a great writer shines through a purposeful narrative.

In keeping with her ideals, Gilman therefore advocates changes in the way fiction is written, describing, in *The Man Made World*, a series of new plots and a new emphasis on the psychological relations of characters to each other and to society. These include the position of a young woman who must give up her career for marriage, the socially starved middle-aged woman who wants 'more business in life', the inter-

Reflections in Natural History (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979).

¹⁷ MMW 33-34 for exposition of male qualities later to be discussed.

¹⁸ MMW 98-103.

relation of women with women (as in 'Bee Wise'), the interaction between mothers and children, and the 'new attitude of the full-grown woman, who faces the demands of love with the high standards of conscious motherhood.'¹⁹ She would make another list of 'Coming Changes in Literature' during the publication of her utopian novel *Herland* (1915) in *The Forerunner*. These included the shift of focus to the depiction of motherhood and 'the mother-love story', 'the story of the common child', the effect of woman's new position upon war and industry, women and men as co-workers, and the story of the new man as 'mothered, sistered and wived by adequate normal women'.²⁰ These changes shift the focus to women and away from life in general.

Attempting to balance the scales, Gilman suggests these other subjects for literature, as though they regarded 'life in general', but they are almost exclusively concerned with women's roles, including the 'new man' who is defined by his relationship to women. These subjects will largely be the concern of later stories and novels, to varying degrees of intensity as Gilman tries to find the formula that will make her fictitious world seem possible in the mind of the reader.

The irony, of course, is that Gilman did not attempt to be her own Balzac or Dickens or a local hero like William Dean Howells. Like Besant, Gilman has many detractors. Her writing does not lend itself to the kind of close reading which peels away layers of allusions and

¹⁹ MMW 107.

²⁰ Gilman, *The Forerunner* 6.9 (1915) 230-236 as quoted in previous Kessler, 113.

literary word-play in order to discover the key to the (in)coherence of a particular piece. In his biography of Gilman, Gary Scharnhorst explains that Gilman's literary theory was 'an unapologetic defense of didacticism'.²¹ Or, as Lillian S. Robinson puts it in her discussion of Gilman's last piece of fiction, the murder mystery *Unpunished* (c. 1929): 'in order to reach a wide audience with the ideas that she deemed most essential, she was prepared to compromise almost everything else.'²² As disparaging as these comments may seem, Gilman's work is intended to teach, to show a better way of "doing" (doing is superior to being, presumably being idle) and is opposed to Walter Pater's version of "being", for example.²³ One of Gilman's poems, 'The Purpose' (1904), may helpfully be compared to Yeats' excerpted and versified 'Mona Lisa' from Pater's essay 'Leonardo da Vinci' (1869).²⁴ Gilman's madonna-figure is 'full grown in human power,/Established in the service of the world/...Wise with the womanhood of centuries' and has beauty 'which the study of a life /Would fail to measure-- beauty as of hills/or the heart-stilling wonder of the sea.' Similes about her beauty aside, however, she fulfils her purpose in ensuring that 'The Child' will be glorified by actively choosing the one who will be her mate: 'For this was she made woman-- not for him.' While possessing some of the

²¹ Gary Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Boston: Twayne, 1985) 11.

²² Lillian S. Robinson, "Killing Patriarchy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Murder Mystery and Post-Feminist Propaganda," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* Vol. 10, pt. 2 (1991): 277.

²³ *His Religion and Hers* 98, hereafter referred to as HH..

²⁴ 'The Purpose,' *Woman's Journal* 9 (April 1904): 114, as printed in *The Later Poetry of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Denise D. Knight (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996). 'Mona Lisa', *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, ed. W. B. Yeats (New York: OUP, 1937).

timeless qualities of Pater's figure, the deep eyes of Gilman's madonna are clearly burning with the 'fire of inextinguishable love' and she is anything but enigmatic, insisting on participating fully and carefully in her life's mission as a virgin who must choose best in order to build the race. Men are dismissed as lovers bearing the single gift of 'manhood', and in selecting she might very well be choosing her prey. Yet it is clear that in making an extremely practical commitment, this mother's conception will be impeccable; she is not an object of allusive ambiguity, but a living, breathing goddess with her own social vision versus Pater's object.

But Gilman did not believe her fiction or copious poetry (she wrote over 1,200 poems), however purposeful, were nearly as important as her non-fiction prose, which, aside from *Women and Economics*, has rarely been considered until recently. Gilman's apparent "compromise" in literary terms has nonetheless earned her a late entry into the canon of women's literature. Since Carl Degler re-published *Women and Economics* (1898) in 1966 (including an introduction which contains its own gentle denunciations of the quality of Gilman's writing) in quiet rediscovery of Gilman, 'The Yellow Wall-paper' (1892) had been her best known work (it is also her earliest and most personal) possibly because of views like the following: 'To her credit, however, she crafted the tale with care.'²⁵ . More recent interest in Gilman at conferences, a new book of essays with the subtitle 'Optimist Reformer,' and a very

²⁵ Scharnhorst 17.

interesting critical edition and history of the publication of 'The Yellow Wall-paper' may alter this sort of reception for better (and more accurate) understanding.²⁶ Fortunately, there is now widespread critical interest in Gilman

Though she called herself a humanist, preferring this to 'feminist' as a label, Gilman is gendered and grouped with 'women's studies' or feminist theory by default, probably owing to the fact that her books were out of print until the late 1970s. In spite of the literary fame of 'The Yellow Wall-paper', a chilling gothic story of the psychological illness and transformation of an infantilized wife (a woman playing the reality as opposed to the ideal of the madonna in 'The Purpose'), Gilman did not even consider her talent to be literary. Of her reaction to William Dean Howells' request that she allow the story to be anthologised, she explains in her autobiography, 'I was more than willing, but assured him that it was no more "literature" than my other stuff, being definitely written "with a purpose." In my judgement it is a pretty poor thing to write, to talk, without a purpose', the purpose here being to prevent the notorious Dr. S. Weir Mitchell from inflicting his rest cure treatment on women suffering from depression or other nervous

²⁶ Jill Rudd, Val Gough, ed., *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999). Julie Bates Dock, compiler and ed., *'The Yellow Wall-paper' and the History of Its Publication and Reception: A Critical Edition and Documentary Casebook* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1998).

ailments in the future, a 'cure' undertaken by Gilman after the birth of her daughter.²⁷

In spite of some successes, Gilman's dissatisfaction with women's lives and social relations was never assuaged. She acknowledged some concrete progress: suffrage was not a particularly great victory, but increasing numbers of working women pleased her, as did improvements such as those of Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) in childhood education (which are also mentioned in 'Bee Wise'). But, believing ideas were stronger than facts in influencing behaviour, she would continue to be troubled by the problem of 'an idea, a concept, a theory'.²⁸ It was not enough to simply illustrate possible ways of living; there had to be a reason deeper than the scientific one to motivate people to act on her social vision. Gilman finally realised that there was a more effective motivating force than scientific truth in determining the rightness and efficacy of conduct. She would struggle to present her vision, her own version of the application of religious truth, again and again, emphasising some qualities more than others from time to time, trying to get the right balance, in poetry, narrative, and non-fiction.

²⁷ *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 121, hereafter as *Living*. Howells, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1871 and established novelist (*A Modern Instance* (1882), *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894)) supported Gilman and her work throughout her life even though he often believed her frankness would imperil her success (Lane 144-146). Of Dr. Mitchell, Gilman explains (*Living* 121) that she heard through friends of his years later that he had changed his treatment of 'nervous prostration' since reading 'The Yellow Wallpaper': 'If that is a fact, I have not lived in vain.'

²⁸ HH 4.

While Gilman is not usually recognised as a philosopher, much less proto-feminist theologian, some recent research also attempts to recover her history and importance in this area. As she was not classically trained in philosophy, Gilman was not included in the canon of American Pragmatism to which at least two authors, Charlene Haddock Siegfried and Maureen L. Egan, believe she belongs.²⁹ Thomas Peyser, however, believes these critics are mistaken and that Gilman has more in common with German historian Oswald Spengler (1880-1936).³⁰ In fact, the precocious Charlotte Anna Perkins had very little schooling herself (four years was the average in the 1870s, even after the Civil War) and only one unproductive year at the Rhode Island School of Design.³¹ This shortfall came to be compensated for by the large network of educated and influential friends she developed throughout her extraordinary career, and by her own unique energies. Biographer Mary Hill asserts: 'She would always stay on the fringes of academia. But she was well-read enough, intellectual and political enough, and also close enough to academic renegades -- [Edward] Ross, [David Starr]

²⁹ On women in the American classical tradition of philosophy, or Pragmatism see Charlene Haddock Siegfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and Maureen L. Egan, 'Evolutionary Theory in the Social Philosophy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,' *Hypatia* Vol. 4, 1 (Spring 1989): 102-119. Frank Kirkpatrick emphasises Gilman's Unitarian background in 'Begin Again! The Cutting Social Edge of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Gentle Religious Optimism', *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Joanne B. Karpinski (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992).

³⁰ Thomas Peyser, *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Realism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998) 68.

³¹ Hill 51.

Jordan, and later John Dewey as well -- to formulate some astute, sometimes fiery educational proclamations of her own.'³²

We have seen that Gilman also intended her vision to be practicable. Primarily concerned with the *function* of her writing, she experimented widely. Today, her affinity with the thought and practice of utopian writing is generally what identifies her work. Her utopias are often seen as encapsulations of her views. Keeping in mind the consistency of her work, this is possibly a fair estimation. But what is to be the purpose of the printed account of the unrealisable yet imaginable perfection of humanity in Gilman's hands? Regarding Gilman as a writer and activist, as a sociologist and, indeed, as a humanist, it needs to be asked why she turned to utopia and utopian thought in order to achieve her purpose.

The influence of her famous and famously eccentric family and her eclectic education certainly created an atmosphere fostering intellectual experimentation. Beginning with her philosophy of religion, which quickly dispenses with the problem of evil, Gilman's thought culminates in a belief in religion as a fundamental source of power and inspiration. Her God is a more Unitarian one, a 'Force' or immanent 'Power' or even 'Life' itself, a view which attempts to reconcile theology and science while redressing the social ills caused by the continued uncertainties of a 'book-derived God'.³³ Convinced of the positive effect of women's

³² Hill 41, 51. Ross was a Populist-Progressive Stanford economist (trade unions, free silver), Jordan was Stanford president (also a Populist). Hill is certain Gilman read Dewey but gives no evidence for this, though deems it probable that she met and talked with Dewey at Hull House in Chicago, where he spent much time (245-247).

³³ HH 12.

views of religion, which would emphasise life rather than life after death, and confidently demanding the use of human reason to establish the right evolutionary path for the species within a framework of inevitable progress, Gilman's apparent optimism and simplistic solutions are tempered by a shrewd pragmatism and desire to confront reality with viable programs for reform.

While her adoption of sociology by method and profession, through the avenues of Darwinian biology and eugenic theory, is both a natural outcome of Gilman's pragmatism and a testament to her commitment to a way of perceiving (or enforcing?) order in the natural world, she is not a secularist. Belief in an immanent God is joined with faith in the inevitable, positive evolution of humanity, apparently contradicting her developmental theory of evil as mere perception and suggesting a more permanent belief in natural law. A self-consciously non-Marxian National Socialism also encourages her ambition for an all-encompassing theory and vision of the future. Concern that the over-development of the sex instinct has led to moral decay as well as economic and social disparity between the sexes leads to a solution that will enforce morality through religious channels.

Ultimately, like Besant, Gilman faces a dilemma over the sort of government she would choose. Although she speaks out against prejudice, her rigid adherence to some views which are racist, anti-Semitic, or simply arrogant often results in disappointing reflections of dominant patriarchal ideology and narratives that are often amusing but don't always provide solutions to the problems they present. The

founding of abolitionist and anti-defamation movements long before much writing of the high modern period, a period during which Gilman was also writing, testifies to the social recognition of these problems. Regardless of whether racist and anti-Semitic views were 'common', they often serve to undermine the very logic of Gilman's work, in particular, for she seems to have failed or at least equivocated in her understanding of the relationship between the oppression of women and that of other races and creeds. This leads to an authoritarian slant even when democratic freedom is desirable.

Gilman's defence of Christianity, which for many feminists today constitutes a paradigm of patriarchy, is somewhat confusing in light of her criticism of male-authored religions. Her use of the widely popular utopian novel also indicates similar formal concerns. What exactly are utopia and utopians and in what way does Gilman appropriate this field? Focusing on the concept of utopia, the problematic terms of its definition and its place in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social history and millenarian movements will provide the proper context for discussion of Gilman's own utopias as attempts to demonstrate the possibilities of her religious vision of society. She developed a world view and a plan to change the world that encompassed nearly every aspect of life. The essence of this plan is active change or conversion, the primary change taking place in the mind. Coming to terms with Gilman's recognition that the concept of religion and its social prescription are the axis upon which society has been organised and upon which it might efficiently re-align itself can

hopefully provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the motivating forces behind the reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the relative value of intellectual and cultural obstacles reformers like Besant and Gilman had to contend with.

⊕ The family model

Gilman's concern with the problem of evil was rooted in her upbringing. Membership in the well-established, outspoken, highly religious, emphatically Protestant Beecher family of New England certainly provided role models of strong and unorthodox women and men, all of whom 'were driven to question, to examine, to analyze, and then to communicate publicly the results of their investigations.'³⁴ John Beecher came to Boston, presumably from England, in 1637. Her famous great-grandfather, Lyman Beecher (1775-1863), was still alive when she was born. Gilman begins her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, with a haphazard survey of her distant connection to English royalty through most of European culture and of course she is annoyed: '131,072 ancestors -- and only one king!'³⁵ Written as her popularity seriously waned, the autobiography is notoriously vague about the personal struggles the author suffered to make her living, making short shrift of her trials and tribulations.

³⁴ *Living* 2.

Gilman is quite critical of herself nonetheless, but emphasises ambition and over-achievement in an effort to inspire her readers. The ethnic heritage of which she was so proud would ground her thinking in the North-eastern establishment tradition, but also add unwholesomeness to her attitudes toward blacks, Jews, and immigrants and her so-called solutions, which are at best ignorant and at worst outrageous, including leper colonies for blacks and abstention from Judaism in the interest of eliminating it.³⁶

Henry Ward Beecher of the Brooklyn Plymouth Church is notable for having freed himself from the yoke of Lyman's Puritanism by making a distinction between 'the science of theology and the art of religion', whereby 'theology would be corrected, enlarged, and liberated by evolution' but religion, as an ineradicable element of character, would not be altered; he considered himself a 'cordial Christian evolutionist'.³⁷ His contribution to the incorporation of the Darwinian theory of evolution into Protestant theology asserted the necessarily religious nature of man (hopefully in the generic sense). Beecher was an instrumental participant, as Richard Hofstadter explains, in a great change in American thought: '...evolution had been translated into divine

³⁵ *Living* 2-3.

³⁶ See, for example, 'A Suggestion on the Negro Problem' [originally published in *The American Journal of Sociology* 14 (July 1908) 78-85] ed. Larry Ceplair, 176-183. Publication in this major journal illustrates Gilman's desire to formally speak the language of the social scientist but also illustrates the extent to which such racism was common in academic circles as well as society.

³⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944) 29. See Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion* (New York, 1885). Also see Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) 156-157. Roberts asserts that for 'most American Protestant intellectuals, the question of biblical authority was subsumed in the larger problem of religious knowledge.'

purpose, and in the hands of skillful preachers religion was livened and refreshed by the infusion of an authoritative idea from the field of science.³⁸ Writing to Herbert Spencer in 1866, Beecher would explain that the 'peculiar condition of American society' related to the 'cause of emancipation and enlightenment of the human mind' made Spencer's writings more successful in America than in Europe.³⁹

The Unitarianism of Gilman's friends William F. Channing (son of founder of Unitarian theology, William Ellery Channing) and his daughter Grace was also a strong influence. Originating as an Arminian challenge to Calvinism, Unitarianism was founded in America by English immigrant Joseph Priestly in Boston in 1785 and became official, after much controversy (in which Lyman Beecher played his part), in 1830.⁴⁰ Unitarians rejected the doctrine of the trinity, seeing Jesus Christ as an ethical leader and teacher, rather than a Lord and Saviour, though Christ was still considered divine and the source of religious belief.⁴¹ According to Kirkpatrick, Gilman's emphasis on right conduct (rather than doctrinal purity) and a religion of action reflects Unitarian ideals and 'late nineteenth century romantic, liberal theology'

³⁸ Hofstadter 30.

³⁹ Robert Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979) 63.

⁴⁰ Leo Rosten, *Religions of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975) 274. James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, *The Shaping of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1961) 243-260.

⁴¹ Rosten 264; Smith 253.

which emphasised the better aspects of human nature.⁴² Indeed, when discussing the effect a mother would have over religion in *His Religion and Hers*, Gilman would cite woman's 'reformatory tendency' and ability to improve the effects of proper religious teaching (as correctly implemented by herself) on children because children are not inherently bad and their misbehaviours do not therefore pose a problem of evil.⁴³ Moreover, she shared with Henry Ward Beecher and the Social Gospelists (evangelical revivalist theologians) such as Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) a belief in evolutionary progress, the power of human intellectual intervention, and the existence of sin as an 'historical variable' which could be lessened or removed.⁴⁴ It is not known whether Gilman read Rauschenbusch though it seems likely that Beecher would have.⁴⁵ The form and rhetoric of Rauschenbusch's idea approximates Gilman's own teaching:

The Kingdom of God is humanity organized according to the will of God...the organic union between religion and morality, between theology and ethics...It contains the teleology of the Christian religion. It translates theology from the static to the dynamic...By laboring for it we enter

⁴² Kirkpatrick 129.

⁴³ HH 52-53.

⁴⁴ Kirkpatrick 137. For information on the Social Gospel see James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1961) 294-298, 455-456 and throughout. Sydney E. Ahlstrom's essay contained in this volume makes reference to parallel movements in Germany and England, 321.

⁴⁵ See Hill 139.

into the joy and peace of the Kingdom as our divine fatherland and habitation.⁴⁶

But while Beecher, the Social Gospelists and Gilman all agreed that inevitable and positive evolution, occurring through the labours of believers, would bring humanity to a more perfectly Christian state, they did not necessarily agree on what this state would consist of, or indeed what category of labour was involved. Beecher firmly believed in the underpinnings of a social Darwinist philosophy; those who were morally superior would achieve supremacy (these generally being white males) and would therefore be justified in retaining power. He also believed that poverty was the result of sin and he feared labour protest and the foreigners who often composed the labour interest.⁴⁷

Gilman appears not to have remarked on Beecher's views though her beliefs would come to reflect similar values. As regards poverty, editor Larry Ceplair explains that, after 1896, Gilman 'left behind her working-class activity'.⁴⁸ She had plunged into depression while working in Chicago settlement projects with Jane Addams and Helen Campbell beginning in 1894 and left in poor health in 1896. She did not return, perhaps because of political defeats on the radical front (disintegration of Nationalist Clubs, the Pullman railroad strike, the presidential election) and perhaps, according to Ceplair, she believed that her message of

⁴⁶ Smith and Jamison 296 from Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, 1917) 140-142.

⁴⁷ Kirkpatrick 138-140.

⁴⁸ Ceplair 43.

social consciousness could only be comprehended and put into practice by the educated middle-class, doubting the strength of the working-class to rise above their immediate conditions and adopt her long-term goals. While it is certain that Gilman intended her message to reach all echelons of society and her disgust with the sexual-economic relationship is clearly derived from the middle-class experience, she nevertheless came to support principles of social evolution which were necessarily exclusionary.⁴⁹ She wrote less than six articles after 1896 dealing with labour and its conditions, of which most regarded working women of the middle-class.⁵⁰ Her later expressions of xenophobia and ethnocentrism are potent. Most certainly, however, Gilman would have taken issue with Beecher's complete disregard for women's economic oppression and simultaneous commitment to unbridled laissez-faire capitalism, the effects of which she was far more prescient. She would come to see women as harbingers of change through their own unique forms of labour.

As in Besant's case, a sense of injustice may have been aroused by family circumstances. Frederick Beecher Perkins, Gilman's father, became an assistant director of the Boston Public Library and chief librarian of the San Francisco Library after an eccentric education and

⁴⁹ For corroboration of this view, see Lisa Ganobsik-Williams, 'The Intellectualism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Evolutionary Perspectives on Race, Ethnicity, and Class,' ed. Val Gough, Jill Rudd, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999) 30. Peyser agrees that sociology is responsible, but is more adamant that Gilman's authoritarianism stems from the influence of Bellamy and a complicated mix of imperialism and fear of globalization, as well as her dependence on traditional narrative forms. I am suggesting that her commitment to what is primarily a Protestant world-view and a religion of immanence using Judeo-Christian models for social ethics is responsible for both.

⁵⁰ Ceplair 42-43.

uncertain careers as writer and lawyer.⁵¹ Perkins left his family for good after repeated absences in 1869, when Charlotte Anna Perkins was nine years old and her brother, Thomas, was ten. Gilman had neither a familiar father and daughter relationship nor a rewarding one with the physically and often emotionally distant Frederick and, according to biographer Anne J. Lane, she was barely able to pity him when he died in 1899, though she still desired his approval and guidance. They did write to each other and he often influenced her reading. Frederick has also been seen as a more sympathetic figure than Mary Westcott Perkins, whose well-documented coldness undercut her positive qualities and instilled insecurity in her daughter.⁵² Lane takes the authority of Charlotte's later view, that her father was distant, selfish, and unforgivable.⁵³ Gilman's autobiography (albeit written in her later years, contrasting with her more youthful enthusiasm for her father which Hill depicts through diaries and letters) states unequivocally that 'The word Father, in the sense of love, care, one to go to in trouble, means nothing to me, save indeed in advice about books and the care of them...By heredity I owe him much...but his learning he could not bequeath, and far more than financial care I have missed the education it would have been to have grown up in his society.'⁵⁴

⁵¹ Lane 25-29.

⁵² Hill 28, 31-32.

⁵³ Lane 34.

⁵⁴ *Living* 5-6.

Frederick's suggestions for his daughter's reading, as she passed through adolescence, included the works of Reform Darwinists such as George Rawlinson, Sir John Lubbock, and Edward Tylor and he sent her copies of science magazines and Andrew White's *Warfare of Religion and Science* and James Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions*.⁵⁵

Reform Darwinism responded to the brutality of Social Darwinism by arguing for man's moral, ethical and religious responsibility to improve society 'in accordance with God's design'.⁵⁶ Dissenters with the doctrines of Social Darwinism (as it came to be known), as it was originally established by Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner (among others), would include Lester Frank Ward and Edward Bellamy, both of whom would later have a tremendous influence on Gilman, along with Henry George, John Fiske, and Henry Drummond.⁵⁷

Through her reading, Charlotte became preoccupied with the problem of evil. At the approximate age of seventeen, she was eager to formulate her own theodicy.

The itinerant lifestyle Mary Westcott Perkins led with her children certainly did not encourage a sense of security either, but it may have fostered a dogged determination. Chapter Four of Gilman's

⁵⁵ *Living* 36-37.

⁵⁶ Hill 139. Hofstadter, *passim*.

⁵⁷ Maureen Egan, 'Evolutionary Theory in the Social Philosophy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman' *Hypatia* Vol. 4, 1 (Spring 1989): 100-119. I am aware of Gilman's reference to Drummond in *Women and Economics* (p. 34) though it is not clear from where Egan draws her information on Fiske and George.

autobiography, entitled 'Building a Religion', begins after an incident ending her childhood, in which she refused to apologise for something she had not done while living in a Swedenborgian community with her mother Mary (a woman of 'profound religious tendency' who became a spiritualist, but was rather less colourful than aunt Isabella Beecher Hooker, the spiritualist). She had been watching a certain Mrs. S. eating some grapes from a vine in the backyard and supposedly *thinking* 'harsh things of her-- that as one of a co-operative group she had no right to eat those grapes. I denied having thought anything about it, which was true'.⁵⁸ This liberating sense of power and responsibility, lightly tinted with martyrdom, encouraged her to take the matter of her own character in hand and to develop her own belief system. This early experience in the Swedenborgian community produced an intense dislike in Gilman for communitarian living and irritation with the Swedenborgians' mystic doctrine of 'Correspondence'. Gilman's antipathy toward such movements is illustrated also in jibes at spiritualism in *His Religion and Hers* which (like visions of utopia created by men, which will be discussed later) pretends to know of the world beyond but can come to no consistent or conclusive proof though it may convince the imaginations of believers.⁵⁹ Scientific 'proof' was not a malleable concept for Gilman as it was for Besant, however impulsively she played with her own sociology.

⁵⁸ *Living* 33-34.

⁵⁹ HH 14-15, 22-25, 27.

Through her reading, she explains, she realised the importance of religion 'as a cultural factor' and saw the 'universal need of it, the functional demand of the brain for a basic theory of life, for a conscious and repeated connection with the Central Power, and for "sailing orders" and 'a recognized scale of duties' especially when 'immediate conditions did not tend to produce right conduct.'⁶⁰ Already she was thinking in terms of the whole sphere of social relationships.

A religion based on knowledge, she tells us, was her early goal. Faith did not mesh with the hard understanding Gilman regarded as necessary, and had only led to paralysis brought on by 'the concept of a fixed revelation' and 'book-derived God'.⁶¹ Intellect was unquestionably the supreme arbiter of belief and founder of facts, in her view. Representing the first fact, action, God is 'Power' or 'Force'.⁶² The second element is a conviction not only that there is an unmitigated hierarchy in the natural world, but that this apparent fact demonstrates the existence of a single dominant force, which moves ever forward; again, the teleological argument from design for the existence of God, as it were is combined with a doctrine of immanence. God is persistently active within all things rather than maintaining an exclusive relation to those things.

Good and Bad are the next concern. Examining the formation of crystals, as though she were observing the development of the world from the beginning, the young Charlotte decided that the inadequate

⁶⁰ *Living* 38-39.

⁶¹ *Living* 38, HH 12.

⁶² *Living* 39.

development is the wrong one: if a square or pentagon or hexagon is broken or twisted, the state produced in the matter is therefore wrong. Extrapolating from this a principle for organic life, she concluded that so far as 'a given' organism develops in the way best for it, this is right.⁶³ Obviously, an anthropomorphic insistence on the verifiability of human perception did not trouble Gilman. She was unwilling to question the validity of human reason or the tendency of reason to apprehend goodness and strive toward it. This principle would never change; in *His Religion and Hers* she would later argue:

Ethics is...*the* social science...being a consciously apprehended system of modifying our behavior in the interests of our common happiness and progress...covers all our inter-relationship, in economics, in politics, in ordinary intercourse. Its basis is an understanding of the nature of society...That conduct is right which tends to the best development of humanity; that is wrong which injures it. The relative importance, the degree of rightness or wrongness in a given act, is according to the amount of good or evil in its effect upon society. (HH 149)

Discovering rightness in social relations is as simple as subjecting the natural world to (an arbitrary) judgement of what best development consists of, a proclamation of good or evil being the result. Sociological insights and language enable Gilman to neatly encapsulate and validate

⁶³ *Living* 40.

her moral agenda. Her early views on death are equally compact. Nature is undeniably reasonable. Death, in fact, is not a thing to be feared, for it is not evil but an essential condition of life:

It is told that Buddha, going out to look on life, was greatly daunted by death. 'They all eat one another!' he cried, and called it evil. This process I examined, changed the verb, said, 'They all feed one another,' and called it good. (*Living* 40)

Did Gilman really believe that morality can be so simple? Does changing Buddha's verbs do anything to change actual conditions? This statement implies that it is only a change of perspective on the status quo that is necessary. Good and evil are relative. But this is not how Gilman's theory is intended to look. Science is supposed to provide real grounds for moral decision-making. Pain, moreover, is only a situation where something in the chain of evolution goes wrong:

the most important continuous functions of living are unconsciously carried on within us; that the most external ones, involving a changing activity on our part, as in obtaining food, and mating, are made desirable by pleasure; that just being alive is a pleasure; that pain does not come in unless something goes wrong...As to the enormous suffering of our humankind, that we make, ourselves, by erroneous action -- and can stop it when we choose. (*Living* 40-41)

As for what God wants humans to do, that is clear; to do their jobs in assuming 'right functional relation' to society. Finding the right way of doing is most important:

Life, duty, purpose, these were clear to me. God was Real, under and in and around everything, lifting, lifting. We, conscious of that limitless power, were to find our places, our special work in the world, and when found, do it, do it at all costs.

There was one text on which I built strongly: 'Whoso doeth the will shall know of the doctrine.' 'Good,' said I. 'That's provable; I'll try it.' And I set to work, with my reliable system of development, to 'do the will' as far as I could see it. (*Living* 42-43)

Just as Lyman Beecher questioned the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and began to nourish an heretical belief in free will, Gilman decided that God's will was necessarily to be performed in her own special work (though she had yet to define her occupation) and in the works of others, preferring to demonstrate religious truth by conduct and experience rather than dogma. Her own will to attain her goals was limitless, and she somehow expected that her profound energies and personal capacity to think and act (often dictated by a severely pragmatic self-discipline) might easily be found in others of all classes if they would only recognise their ability to similarly change their minds about their previous understanding of the relationship between God's will and

human responsibility. Her subsequent life experience would lead one to wonder how she was able to muster such optimism.

After much deliberation and with great ambivalence, Charlotte married Charles Walter Stetson in 1884, nearly forty years before writing *His Religion and Hers*. She had been concerned that her public interests would come to take precedence over whatever small amount of private life she allowed herself, which was truly a premonition of times to be, for her husband felt it was quite wrong that she could conceive of putting any other work above that of being a good wife and mother.⁶⁴

After she gave birth to her only daughter, Katharine, in 1885, she plunged into a deep depression, which affected her ability to mother, notwithstanding the adverse example of her own unaffectionate mother and the emotional scars Mary had left behind.

Gilman's periodic depression, given that she lived in a very socially restrictive and emotionally repressive era, should not necessarily be surprising. What drove Gilman to the aforementioned breakdown, which she has documented in her autobiography, was her treatment by S. Weir Mitchell. Mitchell's 'rest cure', a vicious punishment purposely intended by the prejudiced doctor to put in their (domestic) places the women of whom he disapproved.⁶⁵

In 1887, she and Walter finally agreed to separate. A divorce was granted in California in 1894. At this time, Katharine (who had stayed with Charlotte) was sent to live with her father and his new wife (he

⁶⁴ Lane 169-170.

immediately remarried), Grace Ellery Channing, the grand-daughter of William Ellery Channing. Channing was a dear friend to Charlotte and, Charlotte apparently believed, far more nurturing and motherly than she.⁶⁶ Not being able to live in the kind of world that enabled her to be an effective professional woman and a mother (in spite of her emotional state, of which the causes were both internal and external) was probably one of the most frustrating aspects of Charlotte's life (as well as Besant's), and one that encouraged her crusade for reform. She suffered great public censure for her decision to send her daughter away and often regretted the decision, but also rejoiced in her new freedom.

Her later marriage to cousin George Houghton Gilman, in 1900 (marriages between cousins were not considered scandalous at the time), would be different. They had known each other since childhood and Houghton, now a lawyer, was gentle, thoughtful, and extremely supportive. Their courtship actually carried on for at least three years through letters and occasional visits. Charlotte destroyed all of her husband's letters, but Houghton saved hers. These have recently been published.⁶⁷

After staying with Jane Addams for three months in 1895 she was asked to manage a settlement in 'Little Hell', on the North Side of Chicago. Her unreliable health and the other doubts that may have

⁶⁵ Hill 149.

⁶⁶ Living 162-164.

⁶⁷ Mary A. Hill, *Journey From Within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman 1897-1900* (London: Associated University Press, 1995).

occupied her mind, as Ceplair indicates above, prevented her from taking the assignment.

Gilman then launched a lecture tour that lasted several years, even during her second marriage to Houghton. She appears to have met Elizabeth Cady Stanton during this time. At the Woman's Suffrage Convention in Washington, D. C. in 1896, Gilman 'spoke, read verses [she had published her first book of poems, *In This Our World*, in 1893], preached, and addressed the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives -- while having the mumps!' She had often expressed her desire to preach, writing to one of her editors, 'I am not a poet...I'm only a preacher, whether on the platform or in print.'⁶⁸ Her use of preaching is established in her autobiography, though she does not appear to have addressed the matter directly as a subversive activity, perhaps preferring not to draw the matter into question. But as with Besant, Gilman's first experience of the power of her own voice occurred in the pulpit.

In 1891 in Oakland, Gilman records in her autobiography, following various diary entries, that she was quite excited to be asked by a Nationalist couple to come and preach on Sunday evenings. The political context is significant, for the Nationalist Socialism of Edward Bellamy would have a strong influence on Gilman's belief that gradual change would be possible, rather than the armed rebellion, 'economic determinism', 'class consciousness', and 'class struggle' of Marx. Her

sermons to this group are not described in detail, but she is later asked to preach by a Dr. McLean, a Congregationalist clergyman, at which occasion she would 'Read and pray earnestly', presumably relying on Biblical text.⁶⁹

Gilman was greatly impressed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* (1895) and its offer of religious/Biblical support for belief in women's equality with men. More specifically, according to Hill, she approved of Stanton's 'God the Mother' imagery. Stanton addresses Genesis in the first chapter:

The first step in the elevation of woman to her true position, as an equal factor in human progress, is the cultivation of the religious sentiment in regard to her dignity and equality, the recognition by the rising generation of an ideal Heavenly Mother, to whom their prayers should be addressed, as well as to a Father.

If language has any meaning, we have in these texts a plain declaration for the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine. The heavenly Mother and Father! '*God created man in his own image, male and female.*' Thus Scripture, as well as science and philosophy, declares the eternity and equality of sex... (14-15)

⁶⁸ To Caroline Hill (1866-1951), editor of *The World's Great Religious Poetry* (1923) from Ceplair (p. 8) from Gilman papers, file 143, December 4, 1921. The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection is housed at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

⁶⁹ *Living* 136.

Two years later, a letter to Houghton of October 1898 describes 'translating' the Lord's Prayer 'to my own language...so that I am praying it again with real truth when I go to bed.' Reflecting on her admiration of Christ, she interprets the prayer to emphasise the 'divine business' of living. The 'us' and 'our' are enlarged to include God, forming a statement of immanentist belief. She would later explain in her autobiography that "'He" is merely a survival in terminology. This God I was so sure of, was not him or her, not limited by personality, but an inescapable, ever-acting force *to be used*.' Hence 'Our Father who art in Heaven' is completely re-read and re-written as the 'Inner creative force of all of us...exists in happiness...intense happiness proves God.' Immediate conditions of happiness are supposed to verify the existence of God, who is actually a force within all of us. This is confusing, for it is not clear where Heaven is. To read in parallel, 'Our Father' is the creative force in all of us and happiness is Heaven, heaven on earth, which therefore proves God, in Gilman's version.

Gilman's other writings verify her belief in the immanence of God. The religious practice of *Herland* is notably immanentist:

...they had a clear established connection between everything they did -- and God. Their cleanliness, their health, their exquisite order, the rich peaceful beauty of the whole land, the happiness of the children, and above all the constant progress they made -- all this was their religion.

They applied their minds to the thought of God, and worked out the theory that such an inner power demanded outward expression. They lived as if God was real and at work within them. (114-115)

Of course, 'as if' and 'real' in the last sentence betray the naiveté of the incredulous and infatuated male narrator from 'Ourland' who echoes Gilman's youthful description from her late teenage years, that 'God was Real, under and in and around everything, lifting, lifting,' a pervasive force for inevitable progress. Later, in *His Religion and Hers*, she similarly describes the God whom woman would have apprehended as 'a power promoting endless growth' and 'a successfully acting power engaged in improving the world, with ourselves as conscious helpers in the process' rather than a 'book-derived God' of men who foments superstitious beliefs.⁷⁰ The 'faith which is aroused through conscious motherhood' is a 'faith resting firmly on the laws of nature, seeing God work through them.'⁷¹ Seeing is believing, on the one hand, but the reverse is also true. Already believing God to be active in the functions of living enables the faithful to move forward in a process of 'endless growth' which correlates theory with practice. Religion would hinge on an arbitrary faith otherwise, with the potential believer always waiting for a miracle. Gilman's view of an immanent God thus presupposes faith; a total change of perspective is necessary which makes Gilman's version of the prayer active, rather than passive.

⁷⁰ HH 12, 247.

The masculinity of the name of God in the Lord's Prayer is not directly questioned in this interpretation; she says only 'may we all recognise and revere this fact.' Presumably, the very notion of a 'power' is sexless, as the very highest and most holy inhabitant of heaven in Olive Schreiner's Dantesque short story, 'The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed' (a favourite of Gilman's), is thoroughly androgynous.⁷² Gilman carried two small books with her on speaking tours of the 1890s: Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and Schreiner's *Dreams* (1910). In Schreiner's story, God shows the narrator first through part of Hell, then through three levels of Heaven. The cloaked figure occupying a precipice of the highest realm sees all of Heaven and Hell and the paths upward and downward and sings an unearthly song that the narrator recognises, upon waking, as the song of the barrel-organ and footsteps on the pavement outside her window, thus verifying her persistent desire not to be working toward enlightenment in Heaven, as she imagines herself begging God for the privilege in her dream, but to seek out love, truth, and the beautiful on earth. In her dream, God explains: 'In the least heaven sex reigns supreme; in the higher it is not noticed; but in the highest it does not exist' (*Dreams* 175). Curiously, though, both God and the narrator start calling this figure 'he'. Gilman's projected reigning in of the sexual impulse, which she so clearly conveys in her article 'Birth Control,' in her non-fiction, and in *Herland* and *With Her*

⁷¹ HH 247.

⁷² Olive Schreiner, *Dreams* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1910).

in Ourland, becomes the essence of her program of reform. The relationship of sexual and religious issues is therefore quite important.

'Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done' are revised as 'May the evolution of happiness go on and be worked out in our lives.' There is no concern with an unearthly heaven, it is the *thought* of Heaven in 'God's coming out in life' which illuminates the next line 'On earth as it is in Heaven'. Thus happiness and God are to be realised in our actual lives, not in an eternity after death.

With the issue of forgiveness for 'our trespasses', there is some consternation, but Gilman resolves the difficulty of hoping to be forgiven in the future by leaning toward a philosophy of love, which allows us to forgive ourselves. So it is not 'our forgiveness to be measured by our forgivingness', rather

the conquering absorbing power of love which we feel as fast as we use it, may it flow into us more and more, removing our sense of discouragement and shame over failure-- showing all of us always that there is nothing to be discouraged over-- that love is able to heal and overcome everything-- as is proved by our own exercise of power and knowledge toward children and other weaker ones who offend us and are discovered. (*Letters* 189)

This version of the Golden Rule also eliminates concern about the need to prepare for the afterlife. Gilman never says there *is* no afterlife, but totally discounts the notion of one as a patriarchal superstition (also found in traditions other than the Judeo-Christian) which exonerates

men (and women) from their responsibilities to this life, a backward and irrelevant concept to her mind.

In fact, as before mentioned, she will eventually blame the (male) utopian tradition from Plato to Bellamy to Wells for failing to agree regarding the *details* of our coming life on earth. Ironically, she blames them for assuming that people are going to behave differently and that is why we have never found them convincing (!), a change in behaviour also assumed by visions of the afterlife.⁷³ But these statements are made long after Gilman incorporates changes of behaviour in her own literary attempts at such visions of human life on earth. In the meantime, she develops her views on the utility of love.

Warning against too much love, that it may 'intoxicate us with the glory of it till we lose touch with common life and forget that seeing is one thing, doing, another', she admonishes against the possibility of neglecting the necessities of this world for the emotion of another. We must have love in order to justify and redeem ourselves from failure, but this is something that may be powerful enough to separate us from the exigencies of the Real world. Moving to images of light and power, however, Gilman explains that this love-force, if *controlled*, will show us only the way: 'may this measureless current of love so steadily pouring in all the time not press us too far...may we realize in its light and power *that there is no evil--* it is all one long upward way.' The light and power of love are necessary but they must not take us into

⁷³ HH 27-28.

another realm where the necessities of daily life are despaired of or dismissed. As with Besant, love is the defining force which guarantees the absence of evil, but it has been misinterpreted. Whether evil results from wrong development or the results of karma and dharma, it is the responsibility of the individual to conform to the laws of nature (as understood by Gilman and Besant) and not to allow the deadly failing of desire to do more damage.

The final line of the prayer ('For thine is the Kingdom') is simple: 'all life consists of this same spirit of eternal good-- living is simply *experiencing God*-- He is the whole thing. Amen.' Emphasis in these lines is Gilman's. She first shows her fiancé how much translating the prayer into her 'own language' means to her, and then proceeds to answer his letter, which apparently addressed his fears that she might leave him for her work. She reassures Houghton, but makes it clear that his ever helpful support of her must include acceptance of her wandering life, 'my best safeguard'.

Gilman came to see that women could and should have an independent influence on our systems of belief. Re-writing scripture to ground the integrity of her own belief was one way of finding a path to a more appropriate system of ethics. Her solution to the problem of evil, in the case of her letter to Houghton Gilman, is to eliminate it as a concept by reinterpreting its literal meaning. Her earlier solution depended on the assumption that pain and suffering only exist when things go wrong, that is, when an organism (social or individual) was not performing correctly or fulfilling its best possibility for development.

This newer optimism also seems extremely naïve and simplistic, but Gilman is experimenting with the new social science, the discipline of studying 'all the complicated processes which form and maintain a society.'⁷⁴ She is beginning to address the issue of religious belief in these terms, although her most profound insights regarding the role of gender in religion were yet to be developed. It is also very useful to see how important it was that Houghton accept this kind of activity from his wife-to-be, for her struggle with love relationships and the purpose of marriage explicitly informs her theory. She writes avidly to him after his positive reply:

I'm *ever* so pleased at your interest in my sudden impression of the Lord's Prayer. It is such a pleasure to talk with you when you care about it. You see I am immensely interested in finding sound sociology as I see it in the teachings of Christ; because I have long felt that our next advance must come through [the] development of existing religious feeling and not in contradiction to it....(*Letters* 191)

These letters were written two years after the Woman's Suffrage Convention of 1896, at which Stanton's book was ultimately disowned and at which Gilman also met Lester Ward. She makes it clear in the second letter to Houghton that her agenda is not to change religion completely, rather to reinterpret it and to somehow convey what she perceives as the genuine message of Christ as palpable in the current

⁷⁴ 'Socialist Psychology', unpublished article or lecture, March 5, 1933, typescript, Gilman papers, folder 178, also printed in Ceplair 302-312.

social fabric. Despite all of her radical theorising, Gilman wished to change the world views of men and women, but she could not depart from the tradition she found herself in. Was this because of her practicality or in spite of it? She later came to conclude that Jesus would continue to provide the answer, the philosophy of love, the Christian ethics: 'It is no wonder that Christianity was so eagerly adopted by woman. Here was a religion which made no degrading discrimination against her, and the fulfilment of which called for the essentially motherly attributes of love and service.'⁷⁵ Aside from the fact that Christianity had not been interpreted or followed correctly (or so she believed), Gilman had to create her own language to describe this problem, moreover, she had to make people listen and learn. Making this happen required validation, which she discovered in the words of Spencer, Darwin, and Ward. Religion, and particularly woman's potential influence on it, would provide the missing link, as it were, which joined the world Charlotte Perkins Gilman lived in with the world she wanted to believe was possible, to the point of enabling that vision, a religion that combined the power of God with earthly human purpose and reconciled theology with ethics.

⁷⁵ HH 51.

⊕ **Sociology, Birth Control, Eugenics: tools for reconstruction**

True scientific knowledge cannot exist merely in an answer to the question, What? It must also discover the whence and tie it up with the whither. Knowledge becomes understanding only if it can encompass origin, progression, and end.

J. J. Bachofen, *Mother Right*⁷⁶

The female, even when greatly surpassed in size and strength by the male, still asserts her supremacy and exercises her prerogative of discrimination as sternly and pitilessly as when she far surpassed the male in these qualities. This is why I reject the usual expression 'male superiority' for those relatively few cases in which the male has acquired superior size...It is the mother and she alone that cares for the young, feeds them, defends them, and if necessary fights for them. It is she that has the real courage-- courage to attack the enemies of the species.

Lester F. Ward, *Pure Sociology*⁷⁷

⁷⁶ J. J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right/Mutterrecht und Urreligion: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen, 1859-1870*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1967).

⁷⁷ Ward 330-331.

The social Darwinism that Lester Ward and others were responding to presented itself most succinctly in the theory of Herbert Spencer as an offshoot of his (and Darwin's) reading of Reverend Thomas Malthus, who believed in the equation of progress with conditions of unrestricted competition and selection.⁷⁸ Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), written in the early years of industrialisation, claims that since population expands geometrically while food supply only increases arithmetically, there is an inevitable result in overpopulation and poverty (poverty which might be prevented by providing 'preventive checks' to the overbreeding of the poor).⁷⁹ Having expounded on his belief that life is a never-ending struggle for existence, Malthus influenced Darwin's development of the theory of *natural selection*, which explains that, under the right circumstances, certain variations in a species would be preserved and others destroyed.⁸⁰ Correspondingly, natural selection of characteristics could only be justified by the simple, brutal, physical struggle for survival. The question of morality is moot.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who began publishing his theories before Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) (see *Social Statics, or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified and the First of Them Developed* (1851)), wished to create a unified theory of nature, including human society, based on science. As Hofstadter explains, it

⁷⁸ Hofstadter 35, 38-39. Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality: 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995) 190-191.

⁷⁹ Bland 198-199.

⁸⁰ Bannister 24.

was an amalgamation of the most popular science of his day: 'Spencer's thinking took shape in the bright light of English science and positive thought' and included

...the nonconformism of his family [he was born in 1820 to a lower-middle-class English family], Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, Lamarck's theory of development [that acquired characteristics could be inherited], Von Baer's law in embryology, Coleridge's conception of a universal pattern of evolution, the anarchism of Hodgskin, the laissez-faire principles of the Anti-Corn Law League, the gloomy prognoses of Malthus, and the conservation of energy....⁸¹

Hofstadter also explains that the appeal of Spencer's social theories in America probably had lain in this synthetic integration of knowledge. The theory of the conservation of energy (most clearly described by Helmholtz in *Die Erhaltung der Kraft* (1847)) also gave a high degree of sanction to science, and it provided Spencer with the unifying principle he needed, the force, or more accurately, 'the persistence of force', which operates everywhere in the universe and in every process:

Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent

⁸¹ Hofstadter 85.

*heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.*⁸²

Progress from homogeneity to heterogeneity, the second of Spencer's principles, continues until it reaches a state of equilibrium, a limit of *individuality*, represented in an organism by death. In society the limit is, in fact, perfection, 'a stable, harmonious, completely adapted state', though it is difficult to determine just what the limit of individuality entails in human terms.⁸³ Hofstadter explains that this positivism would have been unacceptable in America were it not for Spencer's religious concession, the 'Unknowable': 'If Religion and Science are to be reconciled, the basis of reconciliation must be this deepest, widest, and most certain of all facts-- that the Power which the Universe manifests to us is inscrutable.'⁸⁴ The Unknowable actually surrounds science, a sphere of religious space for that which cannot be discovered by science. This cushion of space also provides grounds for the sanctification of what science does discover, 'the survival of the fittest' being one proposition which justified Spencer's commitments to evolution and the power of the individual. The totally unified or monistic aspect of Spencer's theory included mental evolution and physical evolution in the same equation, therefore, 'the survival of the fittest' meant unbridled

⁸² Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, 6th ed. (New York: A. D. Fowle, 1900) 367. Hofstadter's interpretation is clearer: 'Evolution is the progressive integration of matter, accompanied by dissipation of motion; dissolution is the disorganisation of matter accompanied by the absorption of motion. The life process is essentially evolutionary, embodying a continuous change from incoherent homogeneity, illustrated by the lowly protozoa, to coherent heterogeneity, manifested in man and the higher animals' (36-37).

⁸³ Hofstadter 37.

⁸⁴ Spencer 39.

competition and an ethical standard allowing every man to do as he chose, progress being defined as the 'adaptation of human character to the conditions of life'.⁸⁵ Through Lamarckian channels of acquired inheritance, continuous adaptation to conditions would lead inevitably to the perfection of man, but would this include woman?

Of course if positive development were inevitable, reform was necessarily out of the question. 'Natural law' had to be left to operate undisturbed. A review of the first American edition of *Social Statics* in the *Atlantic Monthly* asserts that the work answered to certain needs in the population for the support of traditional ideals: 'The calm deductions of reason are brought to enforce the distinctive American doctrines in which the loyal citizen has sentimental belief.'⁸⁶ William Graham Sumner (1840-1910), an extremely popular exponent of social Darwinism, would argue that poverty was part of 'the struggle for existence', that there should never be government intervention, and offered only moralising (and useless) words on the solution: 'Let every man be sober, industrious, prudent, and wise, and bring up his children to be so likewise, and poverty will be abolished in a few generations.'⁸⁷

Challenging Spencer's monism and Sumner's arrogance, Lester Ward (1841-1913) proposed a helpful dualism for Gilman which separated *mental* evolution from *physical* evolution. Ward saw a basis for

⁸⁵ Hofstadter 40.

⁸⁶ Bannister 63 from *Atlantic Monthly* 16 (1865): 383.

⁸⁷ William Graham Sumner, *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, Albert G. Keller and Maurice R. Davie, eds. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1934) 109, as quoted in Hofstadter 61.

distinguishing between the economies of the body and the economies of the mind. The physical or active, animal aspect of evolution is without purpose. However, Ward believed that humans can control their environments with purposeful action. Natural law and 'human advantage' are not related, for laissez-faire trade laws result in tremendously inequitable distribution of wealth, 'founded in accidents of birth or strokes of low cunning rather than superior intelligence or industry.'⁸⁸ Nor did so-called natural law provide natural correctives to the situation in the way of regulation or barriers against monopolies. Man must apply himself to the direction of natural processes and prevent the wastes of competition. Ward argued that there could be no competition anyway, without the regulation necessary to prevent monopolies.⁸⁹ The control of this process, as well as other social processes required the intervention of the mind, the conscious director of evolution.⁹⁰

Ward, born of a poor family, educated himself while working as a labourer and eventually qualified as a secondary school teacher. After serving (presumably for the Union) in the Civil War he became a clerk in the Treasury Department and took evening classes, earning diplomas in arts, law, and medicine. Because he was able to improve himself (Gilman felt similarly about herself) he believed in the power of

⁸⁸ Hofstadter 72-73.

⁸⁹ Hofstadter 75.

⁹⁰ Bannister 127.

education and also, to a large degree, in the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Spencer and Lamarck were responsible for this. When he was confronted with the findings of neo-Darwinian August Weismann, which demonstrated that Lamarck was wrong, he countered with the assertion that 'the capacity to acquire knowledge is another matter', that '[c]ertain arts and talents which apparently run in family lines cannot be accounted for by the theory of natural selection because these talents have no value in the struggle for survival.'⁹¹ Education would have no value if acquired characteristics were not inherited and Ward could not accept this. Lamarckianism explained that the 'intense exercise' of the higher faculties impressed them 'profoundly upon the plastic brain substance and reacting upon the germs of posterity,...transmitted [them] to descendants through centuries of developing civilization.'⁹²

Like Spencer who also was not a scientist (though he was accepted by the scientific community), Gilman saw herself as a social philosopher. From Spencer she claims she learned 'Wisdom and how to apply it'.⁹³ Spencer also introduced her to Malthusian ideas about overpopulation, which probably fuelled her later eugenicism, and the unfortunate Lamarckian foible. She later corrected herself with regard to Lamarck in *Herland*, discussed below. While describing the enormous and

⁹¹ Hofstadter 77 regarding Lester Ward, 'The Transmission of Culture,' *Forum* (1891).

⁹² Bannister 128 from Ward, 'Neo-Darwinism and Neo-Lamarckism,' *Glimpses of the Cosmos*, 4 (New York, 1913-1918) 290-295.

⁹³ *Living* 154.

continuous growth and improvement of the people there, Zava, a teacher, explains their theory of conscious improvement. Terry, one of the men visiting her country points out that Weissman [sic] proved that acquired characteristics are not transmissible, which argument Zava then rationalises by implicating the expression of latent traits of the original mother of the race of Herland. But Jeff, another of the three visitors, immediately argues that it must be their 'soul culture' and their psychic growth that has made such a difference.⁹⁴ The notion of 'psychic growth', which will be returned to later, of course reflects Ward's response to what he perceived as the 'animal' degradation of social Darwinism. In *His Religion and Hers*, Gilman would argue of unsavoury characteristics that, regardless of the means of inheritance, 'appear they do and transmitted they are.'⁹⁵ Education, in her view, was essential to any improvement in the socio-economic and biological conditions of women, and therefore to improvement in the species.

The most significant implication for education as regards Gilman's interest in Ward is Ward's Gynaecocentric Theory, 'the greatest single contribution to the world's thought since Evolution', as Gilman happily puts it.⁹⁶ Her effusive dedication of *The Man Made World* to Ward describes him as 'one of the world's great men...to whom all women are especially bound in honour and gratitude for his gynaecocentric theory of

⁹⁴ *Herland* 78-79.

⁹⁵ HH 10-11.

⁹⁶ *Living* 187.

life'.⁹⁷ As expressed in *Pure Sociology* (1903) and as Gilman understands it, Ward's theory asserts 'that the female is the race type, and the male, originally but a sex type, reached a later equality with the female, and, in the human race, became her master for a considerable historic period.'⁹⁸ Ward's version is longer, and less interesting (but it is intriguing to see what kind of material Gilman sifted through for her own purposes):

...that originally and normally all things center, as it were, about the female, and that the male, though not necessary in carrying out the scheme, was developed under the operation of the principle of advantage to secure organic progress through the crossing of strains. The theory further claims that the apparent male superiority in the human race and in certain of the higher animals and birds is the result of specialization in extra-normal directions due to adventitious causes which have nothing to do with the general scheme, but which can be explained on biological and psychological principles...It accounts for the prevalence of the androcentric theory by the superficial character of human knowledge of such subjects, chiefly influenced by the illusion of the near, but largely in the case of man at least by tradition, convention, and prejudice.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Spelling in UK edition of MMW.

⁹⁸ MMW 7, 163.

⁹⁹ Lester Ward, *Pure Sociology* (New York, London: Macmillan, 1903) 296-297.

Tradition, convention, and prejudice, of course, are the cultural products which Gilman continuously aims to subvert. Ward helpfully sanctions the cultural application of biological principles. The key word is 'normal'. The Androcentric Theory attributes the origins of biological and social problems to the nearly exclusive influence of the male, whose inherent characteristics of desire, combativeness, and need for self-expression have upset the natural balance and usurped the power of the original 'race type', the female. Is the male, as 'extra-normal' therefore abnormal or more normal?

Gilman spends much time accounting for male superiority and its effects. Like Besant, Gilman is attracted to the story physiognomy might tell. Woman is physically more human: 'the face of the woman approximates the human more closely than that of the man...the child, representing race more than sex, is naturally more akin to her than to him...The male preserves more primitive qualities, the hairiness, the more pugnacious jaws'.¹⁰⁰ Her physical power is clearly intended to be morally superior to his, manifesting itself in a less differentiated fashion closer to the 'race' type captured most clearly by the physical nature of the pre-pubescent child. The more male, the less moral, it would seem. Woman is also the first teacher, administrator, co-ordinator, legislator, executive, and mother of industry.¹⁰¹ As mentioned before in the article

¹⁰⁰ MMW 163.

¹⁰¹ MMW 189.

‘Effect of Literature Upon the Mind’, she is also the inventor of language:

The economic activities of the mother, beginning in simple maternal instinct, soon assumed group forms and developed group forces. Language itself, the early requisite of further growth came through woman's activities, rather than in the solitary efforts of the huntsman. Even where hunting was done in groups, the hunters must be silent lest the prey escape. (HH 253-254)

The point at which the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal stages occurred is uncertain, but Gilman explains that while Woman was initially superior, the repository of *human* qualities and *race* qualities, she being the ideal sort of human type; she is completely opposite to man in that her mental as well as physical qualities are characterised by a gathering, nurturing, centripetal force. Man's centrifugal force, his scattering, projecting impulse (‘perfectly right and admirable in its place’) includes ‘those dominant characteristics, desire, combat, self-expression’ all of which enabled man to assert himself and push woman into subjugation.¹⁰² But this subjugation was actually *necessary*, for man had to become *human* as well; he had to learn how to love and care for children and the race as a whole, while woman stood in the

¹⁰² MMW 82. *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, 1898, Carl N. Degler, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 74-75, 127, 129.

background, exercising her natural capacity in serving him until this task was accomplished.¹⁰³

Curiously, though, the qualities that were considered to be masculine, such as rationality, skill in public affairs and business, and the ability to develop productivity through social institutions such as government, these are considered *human* qualities actually developed originally through the female. These human qualities have been monopolised by the male sex, according to Gilman.¹⁰⁴ But now the economic aspect of human life is in jeopardy, due to inherent qualities of the *male* which have caused an exaggerated emphasis on sex-distinction to govern relations between the sexes, generating inefficiency and inequality. It is time for women to resume their places, to resume human activities in government and industry, and to be the equals of men (even though this material change does not complete the matter).

Identifying the status quo as both a development of the skills women originally taught to men and the outcome of what men have done with those skills independently of women describes a rather contaminated mixture. Arguing that the outcome, the man-made world, is actually a more human world with men in it who are more human than women, and which women should now be free to join is an equivocation. Moreover, after joining this world, women are to continue their activity of constructing the race, a 'human process', to which women are peculiarly suited: of developing 'fitness' by selecting the fit.

¹⁰³ WE 74-75.

Destruction, the social Darwinist process of eliminating the *unfit*, is not a human process, but 'merely a male process'.¹⁰⁵ Educating and reintroducing women to the world, which, under the domination of men has kept them in the home and stunted their personal and intellectual growth, will enable women to make wiser choices in their exclusive task of sexual selection. Men have exaggerated sex-distinction in both sexes because of their own invalid sexual demands. Therefore, women must respond to the call of social responsibility.

On the one hand, the notion of trying to have women make improvements from within the existing structure makes Gilman's demands more plausible, but at the same time it thoroughly undermines her purpose by asserting that the injurious man-made capitalist industries and vastly inequitable economic systems are, in origin, the positive products of female labour and ingenuity which have been harmfully overused. It also avoids her program of socialism, even though woman is apparently the first socialist as well ('As a matter of fact the woman, the mother...is the first to consider group interests and correlate them').¹⁰⁶ Several of her short stories fully advocate capitalism, as practised in 'Beewise', for example. Gilman tries to show how well women can perform in a man's world in order to demonstrate reasons why they should be given opportunities to do so (such as the middle-aged woman who wants 'more business in life' in 'Aunt Mary's

¹⁰⁴ WE 43, 51.

¹⁰⁵ MMW 190.

¹⁰⁶ MMW 189

Pie Plant'), yet this belies deeper changes which are necessary. The process of *mental* evolution that would make the practical changes Gilman demands and remove women completely from the drudgery of household labour would require the wholehearted co-operation of men, financial and otherwise and the conversion of the whole society. Here the concept of inevitable and positive evolution meets the need for control of the outcome, an evolution which apparently needs some coaxing if it is not to bring us full circle to the world we thought we had left behind.

Ideally, there is to be a balance of centripetal and centrifugal forces, social (female) and individual (male) impulses, like that more generally proposed by Edward Bellamy in 'The Religion of Solidarity' (1874):

The instinct of universal solidarity, of the identity of our life with all lives, is the centripetal force which binds together in certain orbits all orders of beings...The fact of individuality with its tendency to particularizations is the centrifugal force which hinders the universal fusion, and preserves the variety in unity which seems the destined condition of being. Thus these mutually balancing forces play each its necessary part.¹⁰⁷

An extremely influential philosopher and writer (we have already noted Besant's interest and the influence of Theosophy on Nationalism), Bellamy wrote this excerpt long before his most famous utopian novel

Looking Backward (1888), which Hill claims sold 10,000 copies a week in 1890. He also conceptualises his idea of 'nemesis' in this unpublished essay, according to biographer A. E. Morgan, and discusses the way Christianity provides some relief from the sense of guilt spawned by more ancient religions, an idea Gilman does not attribute to Bellamy specifically, but a theme she will develop in her own terms, as in the poem 'The Real Religion' (1914), later discussed. There is much of Spencer's theory of equilibrium in this, but in a politicised form more useful for Gilman. But while it describes the undignified and wasteful condition of woman's economic dependence on men, Bellamy's solution in a separation of the sexes is not quite the answer Gilman is looking for. Gilman often asserted that she did not intend to denigrate men but to establish a basis for an equitable relationship between the sexes. To do this required focus on the outmoded and overgrown tradition giving social and economic ascendancy to men in order to bring about a balance of influence on societal institutions between (heterosexual, it should be duly noted) men and women.

Unfortunately, religion has sanctified and law has established the horrifying relation of woman's economic profit to the power of sex attraction. She is to become nothing but an egg-sac in her activity of *race-preservation* unless the power of *self-preservation* is restored to her (economic activity).¹⁰⁸ *Improvement*, the third task of humanity, can

¹⁰⁷ Arthur E. Morgan, *Edward Bellamy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944) 201 from unpublished fragment.

¹⁰⁸ WE 52-59.

only occur when both sexes work together (that is, when women have the exclusive power of sexual selection, just as men have had) to decide what kind of people they wish to make and to educate those people in turn to perpetuate the species and continue improvement. Obviously, the exclusivity of woman's power in the arena of reproduction begs the question of equality, but if nature can be controlled, why not human nature? The humorous poem 'Similar Cases' (1890) became quite popular for its parody of social Darwinian perception. After similar examples provided by the Eohippus and the Anthropoidal Ape, who are chastised about having to change their natures, it is Neolithic Man's turn:

.....

There was once a Neolithic Man,

An enterprising wight,

Who made his chopping implements

Unusually bright.

Unusually clever he,

Unusually brave,

And he drew delightful Mammoths

On the borders of his cave.

To his Neolithic neighbors,

Who were startled and surprised,

Said he, 'My friends, in course of time,

We shall be civilized!

We are going to live in cities!

We are going to fight in wars!

We are going to eat three times a day

Without the natural cause!

We are going to turn life upside down

About a thing called gold!

We are going to want the earth, and take

As much as we can hold!

We are going to wear great piles of stuff

Outside our proper skins!

We are going to have Diseases!

And accomplishments!! And Sins!!

Then they all rose up in fury

Against their boastful friend,

For prehistoric patience

Cometh quickly to an end.

Said one, 'This is chimerical!

Utopian! Absurd!'

Said another, 'What a stupid life!

Too dull, upon my word!'

Cried all, 'Before such things can come,

You idiotic child,

You must alter Human Nature!'

And they all sat back and smiled.

Thought they, 'An answer to that last
 It will be hard to find!'
 It was a clinching argument
 To the Neolithic Mind!

Altering nature, challenging social Darwinism and previously existing theories of 'human nature' are natural responses for Gilman. In her article paralleling the thought of Gilman and Spencer and substantiating feminist appropriation of Darwinian theory, Lois Magner claims that after Darwin, 'science became as powerful as religion in providing a rationale for theories of human nature and the proper arrangement of society.'¹⁰⁹ Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825-1921), the first woman minister in the United States (Congregationalist) admonished that women must confront the "alleged biological 'proofs' of female inferiority by developing for themselves the scientific basis of their pursuit of equality."¹¹⁰ Magner asserts that Gilman took up Blackwell's challenge with the greatest alacrity. Indeed, science enabled Gilman to confront religious issues from a gendered perspective.

The most metaphorically plain example of the intersection of science, evolution and morality, the birth control movement, would not have been possible without the study of the female body which blossomed, for

¹⁰⁹ Lois N. Magner, 'Darwinism and the Woman Question: The Evolving Views of Charlotte Perkins Gilman', *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, J. B. Karpinski, ed. (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992) 115-127. Blackwell is quoted in this article from *The Sexes Throughout Nature* (1875; rep. Westport: Hyperion Press, 1985) 235.

¹¹⁰ Magner 115.

better or worse, into research on sexual behaviour and medical treatment, including the development of gynaecology as a legitimate speciality. Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes, the Malthusian League and neo-Malthusians in England, and the National Birth Control League in America might not have been possible at any other time in history were it not for the fact that science sanctioned the application of reason to the question of family limitation and, in spite of the indignation of various quarters, thereby legitimised discussion. The neo-Malthusians also made self-satisfied associations between a falling British birth rate and the very existence, height and breadth of the women's movement.¹¹¹ As mentioned before, the social purity movement encompassed religious desires for control of both private and public worlds. The repression that might ensue from such vigilant activity was not often foreseen.¹¹² Gilman was attracted to this sub-movement and helped to organise a Social Purity group in California.¹¹³

Those who resented such discussion and were appalled by activism for the cause of birth control led Marie Stopes to a telling last resort. Stopes eventually believed herself to be a priestess or prophetess and confronted the Catholic Church in 1920 with what she claimed was a message from God: *A New Gospel to All Peoples: A revelation of God uniting physiology and the religions of man*. She refuted the teachings of Paul on the married state, described the necessity of sexual activity

¹¹¹ Bland 202.

¹¹² Bland 97, 95-122.

¹¹³ Hill 182.

for its own sake, in order that men and women (and children) be whole individuals, proclaimed that sexual union was not designed for the sole purpose of creating children, and commanded (through God) that couples use the best means of birth control 'placed at man's service by Science'.¹¹⁴ Here, confronting actual behaviour, the practical met the theoretical in a way which not only challenged previously accepted social laws regarding, for example, a woman's duty to submit to her husband and procreate if necessary, but also the religious foundations of those laws.

Far from advocating sexual freedom as made possible by science in the service of a reasonable God, Gilman, like her contemporary Frances Swiney, takes the opposite side of this debate, arguing that the pressure of population is the result of 'our own irresponsible indulgence' in her article 'Birth Control' (1915).¹¹⁵ Rather than refuting the religious arguments of those opposed to the dissemination of information regarding birth control methods, Gilman offers a rationale for their claims. Those who advocate birth control do so for three reasons: 1) economic pressure 2) the physical health of the mother 3) 'a desire for a "safe" and free indulgence of the sex instinct without this natural consequence.' The first two reasons are our own fault; we must correct the economic conditions which cause such pressures and we must create

¹¹⁴ June Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1992) 136.

¹¹⁵ 'Birth Control,' *The Forerunner* 6 (July 1915) 177-180.

the optimal conditions of healthful living necessary for women to have natural and healthy periods of maternity. She adds:

Wiser people, more far-seeing, with a higher standard of living to keep up, have accepted their restrictions as final, and sought to limit their numbers as to maintain that standard for the few. If we would apply our reasoning power and united force to secure a fair standard of living for all of us, we could go on enjoying our families for many centuries. ('Birth Control' 177)

The final reason, enjoyment, is objected to partly on the grounds of religious conviction and partly on the grounds of an antipathy toward the notion of free indulgence. Religion provides very serious reasons which Gilman, in her optimism, does not actually question, much less refute:

We are beginning at last to have a higher opinion of God that we used to entertain. The modern mind will not credit an Infinite Wisdom, an Infinite Love, with motives and commands unworthy of the love and wisdom of a mere earthly father. ('Birth Control' 178)

Likewise, science provides an even more serious objection that gives weight to the religious concern, and that is the objection to birth control on the grounds of what sex union is to be used for. Feelings are relative and reactionary from this perspective, which claims that sex is 'a biological process for the perpetuation of the species, and that its continuous indulgence with no regard to reproduction or in direct exclusion of reproduction indicates an abnormal development peculiar

to our species.' Moreover, to call a thing natural does not make it right. This is an unpopular view, Gilman says, but 'it remains true that every advance in all human history has been begun by the ideas of a few, even of one perhaps, and opposed with cheerful unanimity by all the rest of the world.'¹¹⁶

The change to a different way of thinking about the use of sex and to a change in an entire standard means that neither one sex nor the other will be higher in status:

the resultant status is not of an emasculate or e-feminate [sic] race; or of one violently repressing its desires; but rather that of a race whose entire standard has changed; in physical inclination, in emotion, and in idea; so that the impulse to that form of sex-expression comes only in a yearly season, as with other species of the same gestative period [these species are unnamed]. ('Birth Control' 180)

Eugenics, "the science of improving stock" according to founder Francis Galton, would focus the issue of reproduction on moral grounds. As Lucy Bland explains, genetic purity and moral purity became synonymous and even philanthropic concepts, each bolstering the other while giving the power of reconstructing society directly to women, leading to a relatively small amount of feminist criticism.¹¹⁷ Gilman is wholeheartedly absorbed with promoting improvement of the 'race',

¹¹⁶ 'Birth Control,' 180.

¹¹⁷ Bland 229-231, 235.

even citing the eugenic benefits of warfare.¹¹⁸ Her utopian novels will most fully explore applied eugenics. Religion's claim, and Gilman's God who (at least) possesses the sensitivity of an earthly father, are validated by science. But the author recognises that this is an unpopular 'truth'. *Herland* (1915) will present the case for the control of sexual expression in a far more entertaining if equally problematic manner.

Reviews of Gilman's work, though admittedly difficult to obtain, are generally quite positive. There does not appear to have been a strong backlash against her writing except among a few offended male reviewers and except in so far as women did not live up to her expectations of them. The flapper, for example, was a tremendous disappointment, perhaps prompting more output from Gilman in an attempt to correct a story gone all wrong. But after a time, her popularity flagged. Kessler comments on the waning interest in Gilman after the Great War and the passage of the women's suffrage amendment in 1920, that the 'proliferating Freudian pleasure principle' caused the 'constriction of a nearly ubiquitous Protestant work ethic' and led to a distaste for didactic literature.¹¹⁹ (43)

Kessler also suggests that Gilman's style may be to blame.¹²⁰

Gilman's mixture of science, philosophy, and didacticism failed to keep

¹¹⁸ MMW 208-226.

¹¹⁹ Kessler, *Progress*, 43.

¹²⁰ Kessler, *Progress*, 44.

her audience at the end, even in a murder mystery in which the evil patriarch has been murdered in several different ways to make the point brutally clear. And she also virulently attacked Freud as the cause of modern problems, particularly the continuation of the view that a woman's sexuality was a commodity. She hopefully dismisses Freud's 'perverted sex philosophy' which 'seems to embody the last effort on the part of man to maintain his misuse of the female.'¹²¹ Gilman could wage a counter-attack on what she saw as Freud's apparent motivation of *desire* for preserving a man's so-called 'rights' by using her (Ward's) scientific theory. Moreover, she could maintain her religious views on birth control because they were justified by science, and vice-versa. Curiously, like Freud, she would indeed find Judaism to be the essentially masculine and patriarchal form of Western religion, but unlike Freud, she would celebrate her perception of the feminine appeal (or 'humanness') of Christianity (in *His Religion and Hers*) and its potential offer of redemption from a life concerned with death and the fate of the soul. What Freud most obviously did offer Gilman however, as is well-demonstrated by the conscious 'conversion' of the male narrator of *Herland*, is psychology itself and the possibility of applying scientific principles toward the understanding, education, and *control* of the psyche through techniques of diversion and displacement.

However, the language of science was man's language, just as arbitrary as any other, Dale Spender argues in *Man Made Language*, but

¹²¹ HH 164.

one that appeared to be universal in its supposedly objective description of reality such as that Gilman perceived in Spencer, Darwin, and Ward. Writing in 1980, Spender reacts to language in a way that disclaims or ignores many current insights about the formation and acquisition of language. But Gilman would probably have agreed with her in principle if not on the question of scientific language. As Spender helpfully explains, there 'is a new interest in such areas as the philosophy or sociology of science in which the question of "objectivity" is being taken up, and where old answers are being viewed as inadequate and false'.¹²² The recent work of Theodore Roszak and Evelyn Fox Keller have been mentioned (and there are others), and of course there are the anti-positivists of the Frankfurt School. Spender herself uses linguistic science, or at least the trappings of its theories, as she herself is not a linguist, to make her own point clear, and it is difficult to see, if her argument is to be taken literally, where her objectivity may lie. The introduction of new words and changes of words and usage are an important aspect of Spender's solution. Writing itself is the critical activity, which ensures that women do not feel trapped in someone else's language-world and remain silent. That the words *patriarchy* and *sexism* exist provides significant evidence that women have begun to create a reality for themselves.

Spender attests to the area of common purpose shared by religion and science which Gilman blended together, joining the biological,

theological and sociological history of women with Darwin's evolutionary narrative. Gilman's arguments for changes in literary content and plot structure and her own experiments in that area, her reinterpretation of the Lord's Prayer, and even her attempt to reformulate common proverbs demonstrate a similar purpose in reconstructing not only language, but, inevitably, thought.¹²³ But Gilman does this publicly within forms of discourse that may actually support dominant hierarchies and modes of belief against which feminists, Gilman included, traditionally array themselves.

Left in a 'natural' state, according to Gilman, humanity ought to have progressed through reason and experience in an evolutionary manner. But the consistent economic subordination of woman has thwarted this progress, a subordination based only on ideology. Making the relationship between ideology and action dynamic, reorienting the *use* of Judeo-Christian religion to serve the ends of life, rather than a possible life after death, could reorganise society. All that was needed was a 'change of mind', and, as Gilman would put it in her early utopia *Moving the Mountain* (1911), a new religion called 'Living and Life'.

The following sections will discuss the concept of utopia, why Gilman chooses the genre, and how it applies to her thought. Three of Gilman's serialised novels, will be discussed, including *Moving the Mountain*, *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916).

¹²² Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London, Boston, Melbourne, Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 140-141.

¹²³ HH 170-171.

Moving the Mountain addresses the main issue of a religion concerned with life rather than death and the afterlife, but becomes overwhelmed by frankly terrifying answers to the 'problem' of disease, immigration, overpopulation, race, and sex as solved by the intensive and wholehearted use of eugenics that would not be out of place in Aldous Huxley's anti-utopian *Brave New World*. But what it most suffers from, perhaps, is its immediacy to the present day and its lack of a convincing ideological foundation. John Robertson is lost in Tibet in 1910 and returns in 1940 to find everything completely changed. Because of the relative brevity of the time lapse, people like himself are still around and all but a few have been converted. These people *show* for all those eminently practical purposes how it was done and explain why, which discourages convictions that it is possible to move 'Beyond Socialism', as John's sister Nellie puts it. Moreover, the sweeping change in religion is comprehensive in a social sense, but not compelling in a psychological sense, for the society produced (without revolution) is not justified strongly enough. The religion of socialism does not work under circumstances of such gradual change, and the political component is skipped over in order to concentrate on material fundamentals which begs the question of which comes first, theory or practice.

Herland is able to redeem the idea of utopia, but only at the expense of sacrificing men entirely from the social experiment to show what religion should truly mean. Ironically, *Herland's* religion is quite different from that of *Moving the Mountain* in the aesthetic sense, and

very similar to Christianity. It restores the emotional purpose lacking in the previous novel's religious experiment, emphasising the psychological life of the society much more than in the previous novel. Moreover, the unnamed country is much prettier, more remote and less jarring for not being the hands-on re-creation of cities we already know. Man, in this context, is the last thing to be changed, the finishing touch. *Herland* is able to concentrate much more intently on the differences between women and men and therefore on the way the foreign religion, which is so similar to that of the women in theoretical terms, can be common to both, finally uniting them in purpose. Is it this similarity which actually demands the reintroduction of men to an all-female society, in order to fulfil the demands of an implicit Christian narrative? Or was *Herland* doomed to stasis to begin with? It may be Gilman's pragmatic concern with application and the function of her utopia that leads her to Christianity. The attempt at the barest of differences between sexes and within sex relationships appears as a compromise. Ironically, the practice of Christian teaching which is realised in a one-sex world meets only with difficulty when the structure that makes the ideology fit, the heterosexual family, becomes a societal goal.

With Her in Ourland, the sequel to *Herland*, is not really a utopian novel, rather, a *dystopia* or anti-utopia which takes Gilman's present day world as the horror to be avoided. The heroine of *Herland* accompanies her new husband back to his world to study and analyse it, hopefully to save it, though she cannot do this all by herself and eventually takes her findings back to her country for evaluation. Swiftly demonstrating her

ability to master the various languages they encounter and taking copious notes, Ellador unfortunately concludes that Judaism is very much at fault, due to the peculiar talent of Jews in 'literary expression', through which they have been able to perpetuate a 'race egotism' (which Christianity has actually enabled). Ellador believes there is much truth and good will in our religions, if they would only be used, much as the devotion we used to hold for kings, she argues, should be transferred to democracy.¹²⁴ There is much inconsistency in this serialised novel, as though Gilman were rushing through and changing her mind rather often about what she really wanted Ellador to tell us. It was much easier in Herland, where there was only the risk of offending a few fictional men. This novel attempts to apply the ethics of Herland to Ourland in order to save it.

¹²⁴ *With Her in Ourland*, IX-X.

V. WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: REDISCOVERING UTOPIA

Spender's conclusions in *Man Made Language* regarding the language of science and the possibility of women creating their own language leave aside the question of transcendence discussed by H. Lee Gershuny in her article 'The Linguistic Transformation of Womanhood' (1984), which confronts the activity of rewriting language with its final product; what is it? That is, what kind of world is to be created by this new language, and are the language and the world view common to women? Fantasy literature, for Gershuny, provides the answer by making female experience visible. Gershuny also believes, with critic Carol Pearson, that 'in feminist utopian fiction in general, women seem to agree about the kind of society they want.'¹

Whether that is true or not, it is true that many women have been attracted to the utopian tradition at least since the nineteenth century, as Carol Farley Kessler shows in her anthology of what she identifies as the feminist examples of American women writing utopian stories and novels between 1836-1919.² Also writing in the 1980s, Kessler makes the curious distinction between what she regards as feminist utopian works and those utopian works written by women which are *not*

¹ H. Lee Gershuny, 'The Linguistic Transformation of Womanhood', *Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers*, ed. Ruby Rohrlick, Elaine Hoffman Baruch (New York: Schocken, 1984) 189-199; 193.

² Carol Farley Kessler, *Daring to Dream: Utopian Stories by United States Women, 1836-1919* (Boston, London, Melbourne, Henley: Pandora Press, 1984).

feminist. 'Feminist' here means that they deal with 'feminist values', which Kessler gleans from Olive Banks' *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (1980) and which include: a) social reform and moral guardianship b) Enlightenment philosophy, concern with reason, natural rights, autonomy c) communitarian socialism.

Kessler's array of criteria which designate utopia in the case of feminists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is helpful in so far as we accept these definitions of feminist values, but Kessler says little about the genre or tradition of utopia because she believes enough has been said regarding the history of the utopias of men; rather, she prefers to separate the utopias of women (the feminist ones, that is) from those of men because they are essentially different somehow, or perhaps she would like them to be, even though some of them obviously are not, for they have been excluded. What her book depends on is a working definition of utopia, and Kessler concentrates on function as the determining factor. The didactic purpose of certain literature, including Aesop's *Fables* and *Everyman*, the medieval morality play, is highlighted as well as much late nineteenth century literature 'lately decried by twentieth-century critics as moralistic'.³ Yet Kessler urges some reconsideration of the term didactic as used pejoratively, for much recent fiction by women, she explains, including utopian novels of which a great many were written during the 1970s, has received approval of critics like Rachel Blau DuPlessis. DuPlessis lauds the

³ Kessler, *Daring to Dream* 4.

speculative nature of such narratives which contain elements from 'assertive discourse' (e.g. sermons, manifestos, fables, tracts, speeches) and analyse the past while projecting into the future, provide collective protagonists which embody Socratic questions, and also *unreal* elements which encourage the reader to dislodge himself or herself from the acceptance of the known world. This loosening encourages the reader's mind to be more receptive to change, and Kessler quotes: 'An ethical art moves the reader beyond acceptance of existing values and institutions'.

⁴ Thus transcendence is achieved through application. Gilman would agree.

It would be well to consider, in spite of the historically specific feminist ruminations of Spender, Kessler, and DuPlessis, however, just what utopia, or the utopian tradition, has been. This is a difficult question to answer because utopia is notoriously difficult to define in the first place, according to scholars of utopia. Perhaps the most elegantly simple description I have discovered is that of Ruth Levitas in *The Concept of Utopia* (1990): 'Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of world we would live in if we could do just that.'⁵ Afterward, Levitas asks the grittier questions: 'Are all images of the good life utopian, or only those set in the future and intended to be implemented? Should the pursuit of spiritual perfection be included, or paradises beyond death, or does utopia refer only to transformed versions of the

⁴ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'The Feminist Apologues of Lessing, Piercy, and Russ', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 4 (1) (Spring 1979) 1-2.

⁵ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (New York, London: Philip Allan, 1990) 1.

social world in which we live our lives before death? Are lines to be drawn between utopia and religion, or utopia and “real” politics? And what is utopia for? Does it help to change the world or to stabilize existing societies?’⁶

Levitas comes to no clear conclusions regarding these questions, after surveying the history of what others have thought utopia to mean and to be. To varying degrees, content, form, and function, she explains, tend to govern the descriptions others use to define utopia, and such definitions may or may not be consistent within themselves. Levitas prefers an ‘analytic’ definition of utopia which asserts that the fundamental element in utopia is *desire*, desire for a better way of being and moves beyond definitions of utopia as an alternative world, whether possible or not:

It involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the “collective problem” solved.⁷

‘[S]carcity gap’ refers to the difference Herbert Marcuse observes, after Freud and Marx, between the historical condition of the scarcity of resources and the repression of the *desire* for those resources (originally understood as Freud’s concept of Eros) which in turn produces society. To put it crudely, then, if all resources and desires were balanced, the

⁶ Levitas 2.

scarcity gap would be closed. Much more ought to be said about Marcuse (and Ernst Bloch), but what is important here is to understand that Marcuse, according to Levitas, does not propose a solution of Cockayne-like proportions, but rather the 'qualitative change in the character of needs and wants, such that material consumption by the currently affluent will decrease, while "real" needs, wants, and satisfactions increase for all.'⁸ The Marxist 'collective problem' is also important for discussion, but these are examples which Levitas uses to illustrate her point that an analytical definition applies to various conceptions of social and economic problems that prevent utopia from being a reality in the social or private sphere. Moreover, the pursuit of 'spiritual or psychological states' may be included in this definition as well as other forms of behaviour. Function is not limited. And this definition 'allows us to explore the ways in which form, content, and function interact and are conditioned by the social context of utopia.'⁹ Levitas' definition lends itself nicely to an interdisciplinary approach which can helpfully be used to study Gilman and her utopias. But Gilman's *use* of literature in particular is what causes her writing to fit into a more general scheme of literary study.

Krishan Kumar's view that utopia itself is an essentially literary form which is purely Western and begins with Thomas More offers more general insights regarding the history of writing utopia. In addition to

⁷ Levitas 191.

⁸ Levitas 139.

⁹ Levitas 192.

the classical notion of the ideal city, he emphasises the impact of Christian millenarianism (its antecedents being found in Jewish messianism and the book of Daniel) on the tradition as fundamental to its development for the belief that there would be, after the Apocalypse, a heaven on earth. And this would be a foretaste 'the more delightful for being fleeting, of that eternal bliss which the faithful would enjoy in the everlasting life at the right hand of God.'¹⁰ Even though the Council of Ephesus pronounced millenarianism a heresy in AD 431, the movement continued to ferment, though quietly during the Middle Ages, which produced no utopias under the weight of Augustinian *contemptus mundi* which expresses so strongly, even in Augustine's *City of God*, the conviction that 'My kingdom is not of this world.' Kumar believes the almost 'willful' obscurity of life as described by the millennium myth corresponds to the same obscurity of life presented by socialist utopias.¹¹ But this uncertainty appears to fuel actual attempts at the development of this vision and leads to transformed behaviour 'often on a revolutionary scale,' which includes the activities of a myriad of sects and experimental communities, particularly those in eighteenth century America such as the Shakers, Rappites, and Oneida Perfectionists.¹² Kumar points out that those actual communities which lasted the longest, like these millenarian groups, were religious in nature (like the

¹⁰ Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991) 9.

¹¹ Kumar 9.

¹² Kumar 9-10.

Shakers who lasted 180 years, the Rappites lasted 100, and the Amana community continued for 90 years). Tellingly, those communities which were entirely secular, such as New Harmony, Brook Farm, the Fourierist Phalanxes, and the Icarian Settlements lasted less than six years on average and some only a few months.¹³ It should be remembered that these sects were famously egalitarian regarding the position of women and liberal, even promiscuous about sexual matters, perhaps drawing into question the truly liberating quality of the experiment for women. After close study of the sexual practices of such communities, overtly religious or otherwise, Louis J. Kern believes that their intentions in regulating sexual practice (only at Oneida was widespread sexual activity encouraged, but within a controlled environment) were in fact to restore a threatened patriarchy.¹⁴ It would be interesting to know, though it seems quite unlikely, if homosexuality was ever on the agenda.

Kumar is at pains to argue that utopia is also a secular form of thought, which necessitates human agency in the achievement of the perfectibility of man and life on earth. Thus, while all of the utopias written through the end of the seventeenth century were religious in purpose, and were often written by priests and monks, science became subordinate to these ends and established a literary tradition of achieving the perfected vision, with science finally serving some ethical and social ideal. This model easily adapted itself to the more worldly views of the

¹³ Kumar 76.

¹⁴ Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias; the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981) 286-287.

Enlightenment.¹⁵ Examples of Renaissance utopias include Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1623), Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1619) (which literally demonstrates the melding of Christian and classical influences on the genre), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) and Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621-1638).

More's utopia, Kumar argues, is best seen as a kind of novel and most definitely contributes to the development of the conventional novel in the eighteenth century. The effect of movements toward democratic reform on the novel may also be pertinent. In any case, literary realism offered 'a vast repertoire of techniques for at least "domesticating the improbable" (Wells had written that it benefited the utopian (or science fiction) writer "to domesticate the impossible hypothesis").¹⁶ Quoting David Lodge, Kumar describes the elements of realism that enable the genres of utopian and science fiction to succeed at creating "pseudo-historical verisimilitude" as in Orwell's *London of 1984*, which seems just as real as the *London of Dickens* or the *Paris of Zola*.¹⁷ Kumar's views of literary realism and the development of the utopian novel are helpful, but his insistence on viewing the utopian genre as a non-religious product after the Enlightenment and apparent secularisation of such writing is somewhat problematic. It is as though he would have us

¹⁵ Kumar 54-55.

¹⁶ Kumar 25.

¹⁷ Kumar 25-26.

see the Utopian imagination as a secularised imagination after a certain point in time. Kumar does not consider the effect of process (whether it be transformation or displacement, as discussed by Green in Chapter I) in the business of religious change or the ethical implications of utopia generally.

Before her courtship with Houghton, in 1896, the same year she met Ward at the Woman's Suffrage Convention, Gilman attended the International Socialist and Labor Congress in London and met and visited a galaxy of famous thinkers and writers. She went not as a Socialist, but as a representative from the Alameda County, California, Federation of Trades. She rejected Marx, but not Socialism:

My Socialism was of the early humanitarian kind, based on the first exponents, French and English, with the American Enthusiasm of Bellamy. The narrow and rigid 'economic determinism' of Marx with its 'class consciousness' and 'class and struggle' I never accepted, nor the political methods pursued by Marxians. (*Living* 131)

It seems that Gilman may have liked the qualities of Bellamy that William Morris overlooked in his criticism of 'machine life' in Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). Countering with *News from Nowhere* (1890), Morris desired to emphasise a truth in art that seemed to be missing from Bellamy's utopia. Gilman admired Bellamy, saying that he had no style and had not invented much, but did put in popular

form the “truth of ages” just when the world needed it.¹⁸ She liked his optimism, logic, “largeness of thought” and “immense human love”.¹⁹ Gilman admired Morris also, but not to the same extent.²⁰ Bellamy advocated evolutionary change as exemplified by his portrayal of Boston through protagonist Julian West, who was put to sleep in a trance in 1887 and awakens to find himself in the home of Dr. Leete and his daughter Edith in the year 2000. A gradual shift of capitalist ownership to the entire people of the nation, bloodless and simple, is described. A very complex hierarchy of labour replaces the corporate world, however, and women and men are separated into their own ‘industrial armies’. Unhindered sexual selection has also vastly improved the race. Religious practice is unhindered and even made convenient, though it is obviously Christian. West and his hosts listen to a lengthy sermon broadcast over an intercom system. In the sermon the priest, Mr. Barton, emphasises the realisation of the spirit of Christianity in the new age: ‘It is very easy to believe in the Fatherhood of God in the twentieth century.’²¹

Gilman became a lecturer and writer for this evolutionary socialism called Nationalism, especially between 1890 and 1895. Government ownership of transportation and utilities, educational reform, co-

¹⁸ Lane 169-173.

¹⁹ Lane 169-173.

²⁰ *Living* 209, 212. Gilman met Morris at the Congress and at his home in Hammersmith and described his death on October 3 of that year as ‘a great loss to the progress of England, of the world.’

²¹ Bellamy 200-201.

operation and community were advocated. But these Nationalists were middle-class intellectuals, not activists. Kessler argues that it was the idealism of the Nationalists that excited Gilman, 'who did not question the paternalistic and racist tone of some of its thinking.'²² While it is true that Gilman often seems unaware of such a 'tone' of thinking, there still appears to be an emerging difference between Gilman's concept of utopia and that of her male counterparts, though she is not entirely certain how to convey this. These differences beg the question of whether utopia is indeed the right vehicle for her to use.

Levitas' identification of the admittedly complex element of desire in the utopian tradition is taken to the level of cultural psychology by another critic, David Bleich, in *Utopia: The Psychology of a Cultural Fantasy* (1970). This dissertation, actually published in 1984, describes the authors of utopian novels, to use the author's own later description of his work, as 'paralyzed in masculine adolescence, appropriating the utopian genre in order to conceal their individual frustration as artists and social reformers, and to express their own wishes for traditional political power.'²³ Utopia is seen as a 'peculiarly masculine genre,' like sage writing, and Bleich believes it is the product of the Oedipal conflict as schematised in early childhood by object relations psychoanalysis.

²² Kessler, *Progress*, 23.

²³ 'David Bleich, *Utopia: The Psychology of a Cultural Fantasy* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984). Self-description from 'Sexism and the Discourse of Perfection' *American Transcendental Quarterly* 3 (1989) 11.

The business of object relations psychoanalysis is not necessarily helpful or necessary to Bleich's argument, but the outcome identifies utopia as 'the name of a feeling rather than a plan of action.' That is, an infantile wish for nutritional merging, that the father will be gone and the mother will always be at the child's disposal, is mobilised by adolescent masculine energy and, socially, becomes transferred to the relationship between the individual and the rest of society.

Bleich explains that fantasy *names* the feeling of childhood by expressing for the adult what the child lacks the language to express, there being several phases of adult fantasy corresponding to earlier childhood phases. Erik Erikson's demonstration of the mutual interaction of individual development with social values establishes a paradigm for examining public fantasies as 'instrumental in creating the psychological groundwork that is to form the personality of the child in his or her subsequent adult world.'²⁴ Key public fantasies of this world, in turn, form a generalisation of the childhood fantasies of its leading figures and the mythologies of the general population. Studying what he calls the 'Transition Period' (1870-1914), Bleich takes two authors, H. G. Wells and Henry James, as examples of 'utopian personalities', but Plato, Thomas More, and Hitler also fall into this category. Identifying the most easily recognisable element of the utopian emotion to be the Christian fantasy, 'a fundamental of culture,' which subsequent millenarian activity translated into social action, Bleich explains:

²⁴ Bleich, *Utopia* 5-6.

the implicit 'now' in the fantasy's quest for salvation was made explicit. By the time More invented the word 'utopia' the 'new world' across the sea and the new printed word at home rendered 'salvation now' worth working for. Through More, the Christian fantasy joined with the notion of its possible realization to produce the utopian fantasy, and hence the utopian emotion as we commonly know it today.

(128)

Thomas More, of course, wrote what is largely considered to be the first true utopia in *Utopia* (1516), which Bleich sees as one of the tests of the 'efficacy' required of the Christian fantasy in the age of the Reformation. Believing Christian rebellion to have been in the air long before Martin Luther, Bleich tells his version of events in Christian history through the Middle Ages, highlighting millenarian activity. What is most interesting about this version of events is the way Bleich finally compares More to Thomas Muntzer, who, as an extremist exponent of Luther, first broke away from Catholic orthodoxy and died a martyr, like More, defending his own (millenarian) orthodoxy (League of the Elect) and actively attempting to 'do the job in reality'. This was Muntzer's adolescent mistake. More kept to the literary sphere and the rules of social decorum:

Both men, in short, were motivated by the *same fantasy* and were troubled by analogous crises of identity. But More, owing to features common to his personality and his society,

expressed it in terms of traditional adult behaviors and thereby gained sainthood; Muntzer remains in the gallery of historical demons. (21)

There is an echo here of the different approaches of Besant and Gilman, though the point won't be pressed. While it is probably not quite accurate under most circumstances to consider H. G. Wells a literary or historical demon, it is true that Bleich compares Wells and his work, *A Modern Utopia* (1905) to Henry James and *The Golden Bowl* (1905) and reaches a similar conclusion. James moved on to adulthood, making the transition from literary realism to concentration on more subjective experience while Wells stayed paralysed by adolescence. But Bleich ultimately finds this whole analysis of neurosis inadequate (and so do I) to describe the tremendous enthusiasm for the utopian vision in England and America at the turn-of-the-century and takes his concerns with utopia a step further in 1989, in his article 'Sexism and the Discourse of Perfection.'

In a fresher vein, then, Plato and More still cannot disavow themselves of this negative view of utopia, a 'genre invented and sustained by men who wanted power, didn't get it, and wrote books about the best of all possible worlds to create a vicarious kingship for themselves.'²⁵ Utopia is about power. Bleich explains that masculine utopists such as Plato and More, but including Bellamy, Morris, and Wells, were either less privileged members of a privileged class or

²⁵ Bleich, *Sexism* 12.

secondary figures among novelists and social reformers who
 'nevertheless bore an unconscious sense of privilege that came from
 being men' and consequently (women writers pursuing utopia included)
 the utopian novels and schemes written are addressed to 'other men in
 the hierarchy of social privilege.'²⁶ Moreover:

The revolutionaries, the utopists, the evangelicals and other
 clerics, and the traditional masculine academy all participate
 in a discourse of perfection which either justifies war in the
 name of a higher morality, or articulates the hope for social
 justice with the vocabulary of religious salvation, or both.

(13)

Asking whether feminist utopianism can challenge this view or even
 change the academy itself, Bleich examines Gilman's *Herland* and finds
 it lacking. While certain contemporary feminist critics and theologians
 like Rosemary Ruether identify 'the lie',²⁷ Gilman is included in the

²⁶ Bleich, *Sexism* 14.

²⁷ Bleich quotes from Ruether's 'The Big Lie' in *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) 264-265:

'Those who rule pay their professors to proliferate lies, to generate a mental universe that turns everything upside down. The Big Lie makes those who toil appear to be idle, while those who speak into dictaphones appear to be the hard workers. It makes women appear the offspring of males, and males the primary creators of babies. It makes matter the final devolution of the mind, and mind the original source of all being. It regards the body as an alien tomb of the soul, and the soul as growing strong the more it weakens the body. It abstracts the human from the earth and God from the cosmos, and says that that which is abstracted is the original, and the first, and can exist alone and independent.

The Big Lie tells us that we are strangers and sojourners on this planet, that our flesh, our blood, our instincts for survival are our enemies. Originally we lived as disincarnate orbs of light in the heavenly heights. We have fallen to this earth and into this clay through accident or sin. We must spend our lives suppressing our hungers and thirsts and shunning our fellow beings, so that we can dematerialize and fly away again to our stars.'

It is said that mothers particularly are the enemy, responsible for our mortal flesh. To become eternal and everlasting we must flee the body, the woman, and the world....

wave of nineteenth-century utopianism in which 'no novel challenged the idea of divine rule as manifested in chosen rulers.'²⁸ Like Ruether, who assembles a scale of events leading to patriarchal domination (control of the womb, exploited labour, rape of the earth and its peoples, 'the big lie', and the disclosure of divine wisdom), Bleich attacks the underlying hierarchies present in these utopias and their notions of perfectibility, which assume that those lower on the scale will have to rise with the majority of people being 'deceived into collaboration with sexism by religious ideology, which itself establishes the discourse of perfection.'²⁹

Bleich, finally, does not believe that Gilman transformed the genre into 'something more authentic than it was in the hands of men.'³⁰ Rather, he argues that it is unfortunate that 'insofar as the discourse of perfection is a received cultural habit, it tries to inhibit initiatives, such as Gilman's, to change it.'³¹ It is true that Gilman both recognises and participates in the game when she argues that the thought of the world is made and 'handed out' to us by the makers of books. But it is equally obvious that she intends men to read her work and be horrified and provoked, then proselytised, in spite of whatever concessions we may see her making to their world views.

²⁸ Bleich, *Sexism* 15.

²⁹ Bleich, *Sexism* 15. Ruether 259-266.

³⁰ Bleich *Sexism* 17.

³¹ Bleich, *Sexism* 17.

Bleich's view is corroborated by Thomas Galt Peyser in

'Reproducing Utopia: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *Herland*' (1992).³²

Peyser takes issue with critical readings such as those of Susan Gubar (and Ann Lane, biographer and editor) which stress Gilman's use of humour and 'rely too heavily on the assumption that a refusal to portray the existent amounts to a rejection of social order, overlooking the possibility that even a vociferously adversarial ideal can underwrite dominant ideology.'³³ He explains: 'This in fact was particularly likely in Gilman's America, where the espousal of radical causes had become a therapeutic diversion for many members of the middle class.'³⁴

Most insightful is Peyser's critique of Gubar's assertion that it is an 'abusive' or 'probable' reality which 'prompts women to imagine a revolutionary possible.'³⁵ The utopian vision is supposed to inhabit an imaginary space, a place outside the prescribed space of culture, but this necessarily depends on the pre-existence of 'a utopian imagination, a realm of interior freedom sequestered from the necessitarian dictates of the patriarchs.'³⁶ Utopia requires its opposite in order to exist. Though he seems to be demanding an impossibly pure form of utopia, Peyser identifies the problem of 'dominant ideology,' if not outright masculinity

³² Thomas Galt Peyser, 'Reproducing Utopia: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *Herland*,' *Studies in American Fiction*, 20 (1992) 1-16. This essay has been substantially reworked to emphasise Gilman's participation in imperialist dialogue in *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Realism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

³³ Peyser 1.

³⁴ Peyser 1.

³⁵ Peyser 1.

³⁶ Peyser 2.

inherent in the genre as well as the question of how Gilman can be considered a *radical* and an outsider and bearer of truth for feminists if such literature is truly autonomous from history.³⁷

Gilman's reworking of the Lord's Prayer and her remarks to her fiancé, George Houghton Gilman, that she wants to find sound sociology as she *sees* it in the teachings of Christ, her vaunting of middle-class values and ways of life and her privileging of racial purity and the hegemony of the white race bear witness to a conscious adherence to convictions which do not contradict the 'discourse of perfection'. Nevertheless she is still perceived as a radical, a fact which stresses her historical contingency and the value of her own undoubted attempts to subvert convention and tradition. 'The Yellow Wall-paper' is most popular today, perhaps, as many argue, because it succeeds in the metaphorical and linguistic vein where other stories appear to fail. But what marks Gilman's utopias for continually rewarding study is their concern with the entire sphere of social relation, the religious foundations of social behaviour, and the problems presented by sexual difference, difficulties which have not been resolved by the evolution of an androgynous ideal or neuter sex, or universal transcendence through gnosis, or otherwise.

³⁷ Peyser 2.

⊕ **Tramps in Paradise: the short distance utopia**

One of the most distinctive features of the human mind is to forecast better things...This natural tendency to hope, desire, foresee and then, if possible, obtain, has been largely diverted from human usefulness since our goal was placed after death, in Heaven. With all our hope in 'Another World,' we have largely lost hope of this one. Some minds, still keen in the perception of better human possibilities, have tried to write out their vision and give it to the world. From Plato's ideal Republic to Wells' Day of the Comet we have had many Utopias set before us, best known of which are that of Sir Thomas More and the great modern instance, 'Looking Backward.'

All of these have one or two distinctive features—an element of extreme remoteness, or the introduction of some mysterious outside force. 'Moving the Mountain' is a short distance Utopia, a baby Utopia, a little one that can grow. It involves no other change than a change of mind, the mere awakening of people, especially the women, to existing possibilities. It indicates what people might do, real people, now living, in thirty years—if they would.

One man, truly aroused and redirecting his energies, can change his whole life in thirty years.

So can the World.

Gilman, Preface to *Moving the
Mountain*

It is significant that while there are references throughout Gilman's other fiction and short stories to religion in the form of ministers and sermons and concepts of God's will, it is only in the more expansive novels, where space allows more experimentation and explication, that religion becomes central.

The self-consciously titled 'A Woman's Utopia,' a fragment of a serial which Gilman started publishing in 1907 in a failed magazine (called *The Times Magazine*), conveys the author's intention of re-writing utopia for women. Christian Socialism, in the form of a local minister and member of humanitarian debating society, inspires a group of women to 'spiritual and practical' revival, which in turn sparks revision and reform in social development. The heroine, Hope Cartwright, is given twenty million dollars by her boyfriend to employ as she sees fit for twenty years while he, Morgan G. Street, travels about (for they have had some serious arguments preventing their marriage). In 1927, Street returns to New York to learn that the revival organised the women. The money funded a political party for reform as well as projects in child-culture, apartment hotels, socialised industries, and municipal utilities.³⁸ Street observes the improved status of women in

³⁸ Gary Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985) 81-82. The fragment is located with Gilman's papers at Radcliffe College. Scharnhorst does not give exact references.

the new society, is in the process of being converted, and had the story continued probably would have married Hope.³⁹

Scharnhorst's summary, explaining that the central ethical issue in this story is the removal of economic dependency from the condition of women, is augmented by Kessler. Some of the details of the new society include the religious tenet of 'Love in Action' (religion having become the study of ethics, the science of human conduct) the Upgrade Publication Company and a science of child culture which encourages the development of humanity 'from egoism to socioism.'⁴⁰ 'Love in Action' teaches that it is one's duty to serve beyond the immediate family and that those social services constitute worship, much the way they do in Besant's Theosophy and as they will in *Herland*. This piece prefigures the pattern of all subsequent utopian experiments and foregrounds the religious aspect at the outset as the galvanising force of the new society.

In 1912, Gilman published in *The Forerunner* a parable of 'an entirely new form of Government—a Democracy' -- a very short story (two pages) called 'A Strange Land'. Aesthetically, it resembles both William Morris' London in *News From Nowhere* and *Herland*, where all wealth, beauty, growth and progress are 'made' by the people. The 'ridiculous amount of satisfaction' which the people are said to derive from such beauty reaches its peak in the schools, the most beautiful buildings they can make: 'This is where we worship God...improving

³⁹ Scharnhorst 82.

the image as fast as we can.’⁴¹ The narrator comments parenthetically: ‘Now we were told long since that man was made in the image of God, and some of us believed it, but it did not occur to us to consider if the images were a credit to the original’.

The making of better people as the object of social activity informs both this fragmentary story and *Moving the Mountain*, where the New Religion called ‘Living and Life’ is the most important development in society, and that which makes all the rest of the material changes possible. In this serial, Gilman uses what Scharnhorst calls her ‘reform naturalism’ (similar to Kessler’s ‘reform realism,’ though it takes Reform Darwinism into account) which made it possible to transcend the contradiction of design and purpose inherent in conventional naturalism: ‘Gilman was no less scientific than Dreiser [in *The Financier* (1910)], just as Ward was no less scientific than Spencer.’⁴² As the novel seeks to present things as they *could* be *very soon* and in a very realistic way, it employs both the techniques of utopian novelists and realist novelists like Dreiser, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair. Because it seeks to distance itself from the ‘proper’ male version of utopia, however, it loses its utopian quality and becomes less effective as a realist novel. Gilman’s way of explaining how a tramp becomes a Professor of Ethics when ‘Living and Life’ is taken to heart becomes too

⁴⁰ Kessler, *Progress* 49; cites page numbers 372-375, chap. 3 of story.

⁴¹ ‘A Strange Land,’ *The Forerunner*, Vol. 3, 8 (August 1912): 207-208; Kessler, *Progress* 182-185.

⁴² Scharnhorst 89.

immediate for a comfortable escapist fictional experience, but is this not the aim of the reformer?

The preface is a quite accurate description of what this novel tries to do, in removing what Gilman sees as the 'remoteness' and unreality from previous men's utopias. Setting the novel in the year 1940, only thirty years in the future (she adds ten years to the span of 'A Woman's Utopia') becomes a risky proposition, however, for with a dose of realism an unwillingness to suspend disbelief on the part of the reader is more likely. Changes which are intended to seem so immediate and possible, the didacticism of the novel personified in the figure of Nellie, are less likely to inspire. Indeed, the social changes depicted in the novel which include women keeping their maternal names, commuting couples, and independent and single career-women, are the norm rather than the exception now, though it took longer than Gilman hoped for this to occur.

What is shocking for the modern western reader, in the midst of this almost comforting normality, is the highly organised system of 'humaniculture' which weeds out degenerates, maintains a regulated population, demands 'Compulsory Socialization' for immigrants, makes the transmission of syphilis and other diseases a crime, and forbids those with such diseases or other undesirable characteristics to mate. While this is quite exciting in the science fiction genre, it is horrifying in an age when we seem to have decided that anything, including human cloning, is possible; the notion of accepting this as a reform tract rather than revolutionary apocalypticism is out of the question. But 1912, when the

novel was issued as a single volume, as Scharnhorst helpfully points out, was the 'height of the eugenics craze.'⁴³ The Eugenics Education Society was founded in 1907 and Francis Galton became Honorary President in 1909 (he was knighted for his contribution to science). The society began publishing its journal, the *Eugenics Review*, also in 1909, and organised an International Eugenics Congress in 1912.⁴⁴ Besant's prescriptions for progress and the pervasive concept of degeneracy have already been addressed. It therefore seems likely that Gilman's proposals were not entirely shocking to her audience. They seem to undermine the pertinence of her narrative to the late twentieth century cultural values of inclusiveness, multiculturalism, and political correctness. But what makes the story important, though less compelling than *Herland*, is the way religion is used to justify these new social values.

John Robertson, the protagonist and narrator, is the son of a Methodist minister and a 'Yankee' mother. Having developed a talent for languages and become a philologist, Robertson goes off on an expedition to India and Tibet, eager for 'a sight of those venerable races, those hoary scriptures, those time-honored customs.'⁴⁵ Of course, he falls off a precipice and is rescued by native Tibetans, good Buddhist people, he says, who would teach him 'what they knew' and accept him

⁴³ Scharnhorst 89.

⁴⁴ Bland 226-227.

⁴⁵ *Moving the Mountain* (New York: The Co-Operative Press, 1912) 12 (hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text or as MTM in notes).

into their community for thirty years, until his sister Ellen (now Nellie) sets out to find him and finally identifies his belt and his white face under the hood of his peasant coat. Immediately upon recognising Nellie, Robertson falls again, conveniently hitting his head and forgetting all about his experience with the peasants. In this way, and through the treatment of his Tibetan clothing (below), Robertson is rescued from any identity with an unacceptable culture. Since bringing him back to the United States, Nellie has encouraged him to write about his new life in order to relieve the 'pressure' and Robertson agrees it is a useful process in his re-education while relieving 'mental tension' (MTM 11).

The only thing Robertson recalls of his experience before becoming lost in the Himalayas is having read a six month-old newspaper explaining that 'Mrs. Eddy' (Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), founder of the Christian Science movement)⁴⁶ had been dead quite some time and that a new religion had 'burst forth and was sweeping the country, madly taken up by the women' (MTM 12). Since losing his rather selective memory again, he is glad of his new life and has 'no longer any interest in those venerable races and time-honored customs.' He remembers not one day of the thirty years he has lost, and picks up where he was mentally at the age of twenty-five, though he is now fifty-five: 'I have

⁴⁶ Gilman's reference to Christian Science in this novel is obviously worth knowing about, though I can't find any precedent for it. Her letters and diaries may hold some clues, but as she never makes a formal issue of it to my knowledge, I can surmise that Eddy at least provides an example of the kind of woman-inspired religious reform that Gilman advocated. Religion was not supposed to be static, rather, she would argue in *His Religion and Hers*, that the old worn-out ideas must be replaced, just like scientific knowledge.

those filthy Tibetan clothes, sterilized and packed away, but I never want to look at them' (MTM 14). While Gilman's male narrators are never omniscient nor even wise, they do have a tendency to reflect conventional values rather clearly, values which Gilman would challenge generally. But Robertson's antipathy towards his experience in Tibet is rather extreme and unexpectedly hostile, an attitude which is intended to contrast sharply to that of his supposed love for his new-found home, the home on which he is genetically, and therefore racially (for it is important to remember that race could not be separated from biological conditions at the time) dependent.⁴⁷

In the meantime, Nellie has inherited the family farm since the death of their parents, a farm which turned out to be a very rich mine (what kind is not specified) and enabled Nellie to study as much as she liked, including medicine; now she is president of a co-educational college (exceptional now, extraordinary in 1940). As a New Woman, Nellie seems 'queer' to John, for she is not old-looking and while a brisk and sturdy figure she is 'not in the least mannish, nor in the least self-assertive,' rather, she 'takes things so easily—as if she owned them' (MTM 20). Nellie is no longer a weak and overworked late Victorian housewife, but a physically capable working mother; she expresses no hint of the androgyny or manliness, still wears skirts, and has a heterosexual marriage. She sounds a lot like the kind of woman Gilman partly became, and like other activists of a late-Victorian creed who

⁴⁷ For some of the most recent information on the still-current debate, see Natalie Angier, 'Genome Work Proves Race Only Skin Deep,' *New York Times* 22 Aug.2000, reprinted in *The*

maintained an emotionally unthreatening aspect. Nellie delivers her brother John from the Tibetan wilderness and shows him a new way; so dramatically changed, however, she was the little sister who, John says, 'believed everything I told her; minded me like a little dog' and John will have some difficulty splicing the two Nellies together (MTM 15).

During their sea voyage back to New York from India, Nellie uses various devices to prepare her brother psychologically for their return, which techniques the narrator does not directly observe (as the reader is being instructed). Nellie talks to him fondly about old times and gives John magazines, asking him to read a story and some articles. The magazine is edited and published by women, he later observes. The story is about the business adventures of a partnership of two women who are not young nor 'handsome' and he finds it enjoyable. One of the articles deals with information about municipal services and the other, more provocative, concerns a suggestion on 'educational psychology' with recent progress detailed. Significantly, there are no advertisements; women are to be seen as producers and not consumers. He initially feels threatened, but his sister reassures him that men are still active in all businesses (even though there used to be one and a half million 'extra').

John is both horrified and intrigued by some of the new women on the ship, but is informed that 'Uncle Jake' and 'Aunt Dorcas' and 'Cousin Drusilla' still live on the same old farm with their private road and that people go to visit them 'as if they were the Pyramids' (MTM

18). At the end of the novel, when Robertson finds himself pining for the old ways, he visits his kinfolk and eventually marries the pale and overworked Drusilla with the intention of rescuing her from her life of farm labour and turning her into a New Woman.

In the meantime John interviews his sister on board ship about the changes that have taken place. He asks for novels that will tell him what has happened: 'Tell me all, I can bear it—as the extinct novels used to say. But I cannot bear this terrible suspense! Don't you have novels anymore?' (MTM 37). Nellie reassuringly tells him that they have better novels than ever written. But he begs her for details anyhow, demanding to know if they have adopted Socialism and found it a failure and 'impracticable folly' but Nellie casually informs him that Socialism was adopted twenty years ago and now they have 'got beyond it' (MTM 40). What has occurred, she explains, parallels the development of Democracy from the talk of the 'heavenly results of Democracy' in the eighteenth century, to the more active efforts to make it work in the nineteenth century. So socialism has been improved on, but even this is not the main thing, for the main step was a New Religion (MTM 42).

'We didn't used to think much of religion, did we?' Nellie says with 'an expression of amused retrospection' (MTM 42). John's assertions that much time and money were spent on religion are scoffed at. He asks if there was another 'Incarnation of any body' and his sister allows that there was certainly somebody with an unmistakable Power (Lester Ward, most likely, though the identity of this person is left ambiguous), but as a 'minister's son, rigidly reared' with the horrors of Calvinism,

John is uninterested in this talk and generally sceptical about religions, of which he had studied all with little reverence for any. Perhaps because of his antipathies toward most religions, however, John is in a preferable state for receiving the wisdom of the New Religion; in fact Nellie asserts that he is 'equal to a considerable mental effort' (MTM 43). But John is not impressed, at first, when he learns that the new religion is mainly about behaving better. There isn't any real name to it besides 'Living' and 'Life' as Nellie explains; they have changed their minds and the 'world has come alive' (MTM 46). In place of Revelation and Belief they now have, via the incarnation of a great teacher, Facts and Knowledge. What John thinks of only as the invocation of good behaviour, however, comes from his past habit of perceiving of such things in individual terms, Nellie tells him. In fact, they no longer have 'religious people' for it is not a separate thing any longer: 'it is what all of us have at the bottom of everything else, the underlying basic fact of life' (MTM 200). The New Religion has brought with it the conviction that religion is a matter of community and of practical universal application:

You'll see results. That will make it clearer to you than anything I can say. But if I may remark that we have no longer the fear of death—much less of damnation, and no such thing as 'sin'; that the only kind of prison left is called a quarantine—that punishment is unknown but preventive means are of a drastic and sweeping nature such as we never dared think of before—that there is no such thing in the

civilized world as poverty—no labor problem—no color problem—no sex problem—almost no disease—very little accident—practically no fires—that the world is rapidly being reforested—the soil improved; the output growing in quantity and quality; that no one needs to work over two hours a day and most people work four—that we have no graft—no adulteration of goods—no malpractice—no crime. (47-48)

The notion of a powerful founder is hinted at but there is little of Jesus here or formal religious worship, for worship is conducted through the activity of daily life. The trappings of a traditional church are not needed, perhaps, if it is no longer necessary to preach. But John has missed the synthesis. On arriving in New York, Robertson is confronted with happy and healthy faces, familiar but strange, including a brother-in-law who confirms for him that Lester Ward was indeed right and that *woman is the race-type*. There is also a nephew, Jerrold, and a niece, Hallie, an official in charge of food production and distribution. Robertson discovers 'New' New York and is introduced to several experts, who explain the peaceful economic transition that has taken place.

Much time is spent in observing the way children are raised and educated; there are some schools, because they 'haven't wholly outgrown the academic habit,' but books are little used except for reference, and '[e]ducation no longer impairs our machinery,' teachers explain (MTM 204, 222). In fact, a great deal of the instruction, by

teachers who are mostly women and nearly all mothers, is oral: the children were 'trained to think...to question, discuss, decide; they could reason' (MTM 218, 223). There appears to be a strain of anti-intellectualism in this, but as *Herland* will show, this education is lifelong and pervasive and the capacities of children who are unaware that they are being taught are (naturally) almost superhuman. The use of oral method is appropriate if it is remembered that women, according to Gilman (and many contemporary linguists) are the first inventors and teachers of language. It is when she deals with this issue that Gilman is most compelling, for in moving away from books, language again becomes the province of mothers. Unfortunately, the reader is not to hear how this is done, though the child literature is made by the greatest artists, as described by Nellie:

Literature is the most useful of the arts—the most perfect medium for transfer of ideas. We wish to have the first impressions in our children's minds, above all things true. All the witchery and loveliness possible in presentation—but the things presented are not senseless and unpleasant....But the major difference is in our stories of the future, our future here on earth....the very best writers make them; good verses and pictures, too. And a diet like that, while it is just as varied and entertaining as the "once upon a time" kind, leaves the child with a sense that things are going to happen—and he, or she, can help. (MTM 208)

After observing such happiness, Robertson begins to enjoy himself in his new environment, though he has occasional queasy patches. He is much helped when he talks to people who experienced the change firsthand. An old friend, Frank Borderson, embodies the change himself. A former cocaine addict and alcoholic who dropped out of college, broke many laws, became diseased, and is now a Professor of Ethics, Borderson was redeemed by the new faith; he was assisted out of his malaise not by a priest but by a physician, a 'real soul-doctor' (MTM 248). He is best able to show John what happened to him by literally breaking out of his new personality to enjoin with his old aspect, in order to put things in plainer language. His first explanation, though, is blunt and confusing for Robertson. It explains the physics of the new religion rather than the emotion of it:

The business of the universe about us consists in the Transmission of Energy. Some of it is temporarily and partially arrested in material compositions; some is more actively expressed in vegetable and animal form; this stage of expression we call Life. We...the human animals, were specially adapted for high efficiency in storing and transmitting this energy; and so were able to enter into a combination still more efficient; that is, into social relations...This Energy is what the human mind has been conscious of ever since it was conscious at all; and calls God....Because of its special faculty of consciousness, this

human engine can feel, see, think, about the power within it;
and can use it more fully and wisely. (MTM 243)

This does not sit well with Robertson, who says it may be fine for the new minds but not for his. Borderson then assumes 'the old attitude' and Robertson watches 'an expression of pain slowly grow and deepen on his face,' and then tells him to stop. But Borderson goes on to describe in Robertson's layman terms, just what happened:

What was called God was still largely patterned after the old tribal deity of the Hebrews. Our ideas of 'Sin' were still mostly of the nature of disobedience...We were beginning to see something of Social values, too, but not clearly. Our progress was in what we called 'The natural sciences'; and we did not think with the part of our minds wherein we stored religion. Yet there was very great activity and progress in religious thought; the whole field was in motion; the new churches widening and growing in every direction; the older ones holding on like grim death...Ethics being taught indeed, but with no satisfying basis. Now here was I, an ill-assorted team of impulses and characteristics, prejudiced against religion, ignorant of real ethics, and generally going to the devil...the Dark Ages were still in, in spite of all we had to boast of. However, this new perception came. (MTM 244-246)

These two explanations illustrate the problem of translating new scientific insights into understandable, dare we say conventional, moral

terms. Robertson complains again about not getting enough information, but Borderson sees him as an example of 'the kind of mental jumble I spoke of.' He explains that knowledge of evolution did not come by revelation or by any one or two men: 'We have had many writers, preachers, lecturers who discoursed and explained (and Gilman would presumably include herself among these); this new precept as to the relation between man and God came with such a general sweep that no one even tries to give personal credit for it' (MTM 246). But this still does not satisfy Robertson, particularly since Borderson does not call it 'religion' either: 'Ethics is The Science of Human Relation. It is called Applied Sociology—that's all' (MTM 247). 'How does a thing like that touch one, personally?' Robertson asks, 'You leave out entirely the emotional side of religion' (MTM 247). Borderson responds with the argument that old religions were to believe or deny, but this is to act on, with a general recognition of 'right behavior'; however he rephrases to clarify that the love of God and man that used to be preached is now practised. The Energy itself is called Love: 'Love, the real thing we had in mind when we said "God is Love," is beneficent energy' (MTM 248).

What made them do it, John Robertson asks. 'Just nature, John. It is human nature. We used to believe otherwise.' And then Borderson goes quiet while he explains his rehabilitation process in a 'moral sanitarium' where he learned that Ethics cannot be predicated on nor religion practised by individuals. Put a tramp in paradise, he says, and there is some hope of him, though many of the more hopeless degenerates, perverts, and idiots were killed (!). Gilman quietly makes short shrift of

this nasty but necessary solution. Now Borderson is married to a woman, a 'broken lily', who had been in a similar condition. They are not allowed to have children, but they are quite happy together.

Ironically, while individualism is the thing which had discouraged the development of society, it is the very thing that is now encouraged of women. Nellie explains that 'individuation is in inverse proportion to reproduction' and that when they individualise the women, 'develop their personal power, their human characteristics', they don't have as many children (58). This message was not just petrified in fictional idealism. Zona Gale includes in her forward to Gilman's autobiography a letter written in 1899 by an otherwise unknown woman named Marie Hoffendahl Jenny. Jenny, a Unitarian minister in Des Moines, Iowa who desires to preach *Women and Economics*, praises Gilman for her early attempt (in *Women and Economics*) to balance the scale of ethics and asserts: 'During the present period of transition I believe it is wise to preach individualism to women, and Christianity to men. Surely Jesus himself gives us the completed ideal wherein no virtues are masculine and none are feminine.'⁴⁸

The levelling action of collectivising the men and individualising the women is subtle, but clearly essential. Controlling outward expression of sexuality is an obvious method. The men all wear knickerbockers, but the women display varying modes of dress and wear whatever they like (MTM 66). Florentine gowns and 'Greekish' draperies are

⁴⁸ *Living* xxi-xxii.

included. This does not necessarily clash with collective conceptions of religion or ethics for the women, too, aspire to a certain standard of beauty, but the question of why they have these apparent privileges is simply not addressed. The rehabilitation process that Borderson endures is invented to correct an extreme of personality, but it is quite clear that Compulsory Socialization of immigrants and the weeding out of other qualities is intended to match an ideal. Physically for women, in fact, this is the 'big, vigorous' Greek ideal, as Owen explains to John (MTM 117). Owen and John both find these women attractive; they are not confused by female appearances, only pleased by them. This will change completely with *Herland*. What should be clear is that these women have much more control over the new society and its modes of expression, with half of all artists being mothers who have created a new literature for children and women in places of power, literally legislating morality.⁴⁹

The New Religion of *Moving the Mountain* does not seem to be quite enough, somehow, to bring a change to an entire society, without revolution or revelation, and it suggests that "The natural sciences" alone are not adequate. Occasionally, Gilman throws barbs at her mentor, Edward Bellamy and at the sexism and horror of Wells. Bellamy is implicitly accused of creating a world where individuals, such as Gilman's Harvard-educated ship's hand, are made to do menial work without choice. Gilman's character is in between jobs and simply

⁴⁹ MTM 205.

getting some experience (playing in the gutter, as it were). And Gilman's women, as Nellie points out, do whatever work they like (Owen clarifies that men do most of the heavy lifting) whereas women in Bellamy's utopia do the work they are 'adapted' to.⁵⁰

Moving the Mountain is not quite a realist novel and not quite a utopia. The vagueness of the ideological foundation for the new world leads to such unintelligibility. This lack of commitment to a specific genre is not necessarily a bad thing, but by creating angst in the character of John Robertson, the author undermines the positive effects of conversion. A certain language is missing, which would make the new world intelligible and comfortable for Robertson, who must write to find his own idiom. He is forced to admit, grudgingly, that the world is a better place aesthetically and materially, but as he explains:

It was a beautiful world, but it was not my world. It was like a beautiful dream, but seemed a dream nevertheless. I could no longer dispute that it was possible for people to be 'healthy, happy and wise'...But they were not the people I used to know; those, too, were like Frank Borderson and Morris Banks-- changed so that they seemed more unreal than the others. (274)

His eventual marriage to Drusilla, also an outsider, in a brief Cinderella story within the story, returns him to the place from whence he came. It will take time to absorb all the new changes, so perhaps it is best for him

⁵⁰Bellamy, 185.

to start at the beginning, but the reader is left with the burden of imagining Drusilla's, indeed Robertson's, conversion and transformation. Moreover, Nellie, who never goes to visit her backward relatives, seems rather a condescending and unhelpful figure in the end. Perhaps it is all a subtle suggestion that Robertson should never have gone to Tibet in the first place.

This attempt at utopia was possibly initiated before the author had a clear idea of what man's religion meant. In 1923, she would begin *His Religion and Hers* with a poem of four stanzas, titled 'Two' in the book, but originally titled 'The Real Religion'. This poem had been published nine years before in *The Forerunner* of May 1914, the magazine Gilman wrote and published almost entirely by herself for seven years (1909-1916) under the auspices of the Charlton Publishing Company, which she had formed with Houghton Gilman.

The poem illustrates two ways of belief, creating a primary text which incorporates ideas of worldly knowledge with immanence, piety, faith, and love. The first two stanzas describe the horrors of the religion of 'Man the hunter, Man the warrior' whose 'mind, searching inward,/Saw in all one red reflection' and created 'dark religions' which are 'Built on Death.' The Soul, here made as flesh, is severed from the body in man's religion. It experiences all the horrors of the body as flesh, and proceeds, in man's system, 'In fear, black fear of the dark,/Red fear of terrible gods' to face 'eternity, fearful, unknown' in Death. The accentuation of 'red' and 'black' fear obviously draws from more classical ideas about hell, but also serves to highlight man's relationship

to more supposedly primitive races. I do not know if Gilman ever read Stendhal's (Henri Marie Beyle, 1783-1842) *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830); more political references might be drawn as well.

'Death, and the Fate of the Soul' as underscored in the religion made by man contrast plainly with the theme of 'Birth, and the growth of the Soul' of the following two stanzas dealing with the 'real religion' of woman. 'Woman, bearer; Woman, teacher;' is 'Filling all the earth' with her service as mother. It is social service on which woman bases her religion, her actions functioning in contrast to the good works that might be done selfishly by her male counterpart in order to earn his way into heaven, if in fact he is not already marked for damnation.

Antipathies to Calvinism aside, man's fate has been determined. Her 'awakening, searching' mind presently sees 'a fair world young and growing' and the Soul 'in the body established'. The new Soul, though surrounded by flesh, operates independently of bodily limitations and exists in 'the ever-new beauty of childhood' and 'the wonder of opening power'; its tasks are 'learning, improving, achieving,/In hope, new knowledge, and light,/Sure faith in the world's fresh Spring'.

Obviously, images of the Soul's power abound in the woman's religion, suggesting intellectual and emotional strength as well as the rationality implied by 'new knowledge' and 'light'. Gilman cleverly associates light (a light of purity, knowledge, and hope) with woman and darkness (a darkness of evil, ignorance, and despair) with man, though she probably would have seen innumerable examples of 'dark' women in her day: Salomé and other versions of fatal women, for example, or

even Pater's 'La Gioconda.' It is yet unknown whether she was familiar with J. J. Bachofen's theory (*Mutterrecht und Urreligion/Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, 1859-1870), but there is no incompatibility between earth and light in her view; indeed knowledge of God on earth is through an understanding of his will as expressed in nature. Bachofen's theory, albeit affirming the existence of a matriarchal past, is founded in the conviction that patriarchy is the superior, triumphant phase of the evolution of a collective spiritual consciousness, the ultimate consequences being quite immaterial. The power of the mother is temporary and earthbound:

The transience of material life goes hand in hand with mother right. Father right is bound up with the immortality of a supramaterial life belonging to the regions of light. As long as religion recognizes the seat of the generative principle in tellurian matter, the law of matter prevails: man is equated with unlamented lower creation and mother right governs the reproduction of man and beast. But once the creative principle is dissociated from earthly matter and joined with the sun, a higher state sets in...mortality is restricted to matter, which returns to the womb from whence it came, while the spirit, purified by fire from the slag of matter, rises up to the luminous heights of immortality and immateriality. (129)

This extraordinary passage sums up the views of centuries of (male) scientists, priests, and poets on women, but it was Bachofen's theory of

'mother-right', recovering from mythology the cultural truths of the ancient world, which was revolutionary in its time.⁵¹ Gilman champions the cause of the material life as the only life we can truly know anything about living, whether it generates evil or not, and is not bothered by its transience. She will explore matriarchal religion, to a certain extent, as an ideal state of being and of politics in *Herland*, but she ultimately tries to convert the insights she develops regarding women and religion to a foundation for a general system of ethics based on Christian principles. Moreover, if we are to concentrate our highest powers on the improvement of human life, then we must have the most accurate information pertaining to the exigencies of the material life. Thus Gilman turned to science for the most accurate view of reality.⁵² But the difficulty she has in adapting the principle of rational thought to a woman's religion is illustrated here.

The fifth line of the third stanza of this poem conveys a change of direction. Woman is described as tirelessly performing her educative and other mothering services to the earth, and there is a great pause: 'Service of the tireless mother/Filling all the earth;-- /Now her mind awakening, searching,/Sees a fair world young and growing' in the 'hope, new knowledge, and light' of the enlightened Soul (my emphasis). Woman herself experiences a vision of the 'real religion', based on birth and implemented with traditionally female nurturing qualities; she expands her activity to include the world. She also claims

⁵¹ See also Erich Neumann, *Der Grosse Mutter/The Great Mother* (1955).

Enlightenment values that man so prizes: learning, knowledge, achievement, the light of rationality, the growth of the Soul. There is no reason why these things should not be attributed to women, something Gilman does, as a self-described humanist, in *The Man Made World*, but they form a certain set of intellectual values from which women had been traditionally excluded. Simply taking them is bold. This is not the first of Gilman's reversals, but it is an important one, which steps back from her first utopian novel and re-formulates perspective. The separation of gender allows the author to explore the possibilities of a woman's religion. The two sexes are needed in order to foreground a woman-centred agenda, even in a purely female society, as illustrated by *Herland*.

⁵² Kirkpatrick 136.

VI. HIS RELIGION AND *HERLAND*: THE RE-EDUCATION OF DESIRE

Myth is nothing other than a picture of the national experience in the light of religious faith. J. J. Bachofen, *The Myth of Tanaquil*¹

In all sub-human life the physical body serves as a vehicle and expression of the spirit, but the human spirit, as it rises, expresses itself in and works through material forms we make. Gilman, *His Religion and Hers*²

For Bachofen, myth describes the most reliable source of social history in the ultimate expression of collective thought. Relationships between mythologies of different cultures demonstrate the continuity of Western religious tradition through a dialectical process of recreation. Regardless of the accuracy of history or legend, he argues, 'What cannot have happened was nonetheless thought. External truth is replaced by inner thought.'³ Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, he developed a 'scientific' approach to the study of religion, collecting documentary evidence, observing phenomena, and discovering laws which he

¹ Bachofen 213.

² HH 71.

² Bachofen 213.

³ Bachofen 214.

believed governed relationships between religious mythologies and their continuous development. Great myths are described and linked in a chain of spiritual history which leads to the theory of 'mother right' or the positing of an early form of matriarchal religion before that of the patriarchal, which explains the vestiges of such worship of women and mothers in various Western religions from pagan to Christian. As previously explained, Bachofen's version of this progression, beginning with the matriarchate, is to be fulfilled in the patriarchal form as the most advanced development; so Bachofen presupposes the linear, positive evolution of religion as a natural phenomenon, an intellectual habit of his times, but one that reinforces the final validation of the status quo in the patriarchal system. The sensitivity of the Swiss scholar's narrative and depth of his probing into the recesses of religious history met the admiration of contemporary American anthropologist, jurist, and ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan who praised Bachofen's contribution to science in Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877). Subsequent correspondence between the two men culminated in the gift to Bachofen of various publications concerning native Americans from the U. S. Government.⁴ Moreover, American women activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage were strong supporters of the obscure European intellectual and his thesis, which would be used to inform their own arguments. In her 1891 essay 'The Matriarchate,' Stanton pursues Bachofen's point through to the sixteenth century, when 'Luther

⁴ Bachofen lii.

eliminated the feminine element wholly from the Protestant religion and brought the full power of the Church to enforce woman's complete subjection.'⁵ A chapter of Gage's book, *Woman, Church, and State* (1893), is also dedicated to the validation of the matriarchate. These women went on to discover for themselves historical evidence of matriarchy in Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Teutonic cultures, as well as in early Christianity, though they derided Christianity for enforcing and perpetuating the subjection of women.

Gilman never indicates having read Bachofen, but if she had, or if she had read Frazer or Jane Harrison, her relationship with the idea of matriarchy might still be one of ambivalence. She is clearly familiar with the concept and addresses it several times, strongly desiring to valorise matriarchy on the one hand, but also doubtful of the usefulness of the deification of motherhood at times, for it is just such motherhood that has bound women to hearth and home. There is also the question of history, which, as Gilman has argued, has been written by men. Religion, too, has been given to us by men as a result of the economic subjugation of women and consequent social hegemony of men, there being no question in Gilman's mind of the inevitability of religion, for it is part and parcel of the 'normal social evolution' that should have taken place: 'A normal development of religion...seeing the broad road of progress as the line to be followed in right doing, would have strengthened our joy in good workmanship, exhorted us to mutual

⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 'The Matriarchate,' *Transactions of the National Council of Women*, ed. Rachel Foster Avery (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1891) 141; Behnke, 164-165, 179.

appreciation and inter-service, kept before us the splendid hope of race improvement.'⁶ But with man's influence religion has become a hindrance, having instituted divine sanction to justify women's miseries, nurtured the concept that human nature is evil, and fostered the separation of religion from the concerns of this life as a 'revealed' truth, consequently succumbing to preoccupation with life after death. Most notorious for Gilman is that man's influence has divorced religion from conduct.⁷ There is an unquestionable general need for religion, however, emotional as well as pragmatic. As to the choice of matriarchy, Gilman explains in *Women and Economics*:

...matriolatry is a sentiment so deep-seated, wide spread, and long-established as to be dominant in every class of minds. It is associated with our religious instincts, on the one hand, and our sex instincts, on the other, both of which we have long been forbidden to discuss, --the one being too holy and the other being too unholy, -- that it is well-nigh impossible to think clearly and dispassionately on the subject. (WE 175)

Moreover:

Our tenderest love, our deepest reverence, our fiercest resentment of insult, all centre about the mother to-day rather than about the father; and this is a strong proof that

⁶ HH 214-215.

⁷ HH 218-223.

the recognition of woman's real power and place grow upon
us just as our minds grow able to perceive it. (WE 177)

Later, in *The Man Made World*, she asserts that “‘the mother-right’—or as we call it, the matriarchate—the father being her assistant in the great work’ was the original and legitimate base of family life, which pronouncement would quite agree, denotatively, with Bachofen (MMW 36). Gilman obviously has a deep empathy as well as sympathy with the emotional aspect of maternal power. Her writing conveys a passionate tone and the desire to connect the power of women not only to fact but to feeling; but her desire to think clearly and dispassionately is also reflected in assertions that innate female superiority and primacy are scientific facts, her position on birth control and her belief in the duty of women to select sexual experience on the basis of their primary duty of race ‘improvement’ bearing heavily on this attitude. Many pages later she becomes uncertain of the use of matriarchy:

We know nothing of ethical values during the matriarchate; whatever they were, they must have depended for sanction on a cult of promiscuous but efficient maternity. Our recorded history begins in the patriarchal period, and it is its ethics alone which we know. (MMW 135)

The notion of ‘promiscuous but efficient maternity’ is rather condescending. Would the author prefer not to deal with the implications of a pre-existing matriarchal society? The question of reviving a pre-patriarchal past in order to validate utopian convictions is quite new. Clearly the question of ‘patriarchal ethics’ is the essential

one for Gilman, a concern which can be dealt with in the present reality; speculation about original female ethics would in this case be speculation and myth-making and the sociological treatise should avoid this (though Gilman has certainly done her share of speculating!).

Returning to sense what is needed in terms of motivation, Gilman later explains that religion is a theory of life, an emotion ('an attitude of mind'), and action. In *Herland*, the author creates an agricultural, matrilineal, matriarchal society where the male narrator discovers how religion is inseparable from behaviour. If man caused the goddesses—'types of motherhood, mother-love, mother-care and service'—to dwindle to forms of 'alluring Aphrodite' and has decided the gods are really like him,⁸ then the whole construction must be supplanted and his ideas, and consequently *hers*, changed. If women are to look to goddesses for guidance, they must do so intelligently, with the support of the facts; with an absence of recoverable spiritual history that can be *trusted*, this is a difficult task. Theoretically, we should be dealing with the exigencies of reality and the gods of men, but this is not practically possible, until, ironically, the world of *Herland* is realised in fiction.

Moving the Mountain begins to address the practical problem of woman's relationship to religion and how it is to be resolved by absorbing the economic and social concerns of women into the New Religion. The result is authoritarian, simplistic, and less than compelling in both practical and theoretical senses. In literary terms it

⁸ MMW 141.

falls somewhere between utopia and fictional realism, but being neither, it succeeds at neither. Literary utopias must be fully realised and self-contained. Intending to instruct the reader through Robertson's experience, the author creates a stock male character who certainly has some interesting features, including an interest in Buddhism, which is immediately squashed, and a background as a professional philologist, which is not used or explored at all after Robertson leaves Tibet behind. But for all the psychological manipulation he experiences, Robertson's inner life is not explored either, aside from the obvious difficulty he has in adjusting to his new world. He is to learn a new social language, which he often anticipates, actually, and there is little reflection involved. His troubles adjusting are apparently easily solved by comparing old and new, new being better of course. Though the narrator has growing pains, it is taken for granted that his marriage to Drusilla presumes a happy ending, enabling both to enter society as complete New Man and Woman. Reading *Herland* highlights the weaknesses of the previous novel and demonstrates that Gilman's utopia has yet to develop fully.

But onto what kind of ideological framework is Gilman to drape her second try at utopia? Krishan Kumar explains that in America in the nineteenth century (indeed, from the beginning), utopia is everywhere, to the point that this 'ideological or "pragmatic" utopianism, a unique and almost contradictory blend, had the paradoxical effect of driving out

almost entirely the formal literary utopia.⁹ Actual experiments were made on a vast scale, within an environment of reform and the exploration of the politico-social forms of socialism and communism, more often (successfully) than not with the plan of “realizing the state of civilization that Christ foreshadowed.”¹⁰ The Oneida colony, already mentioned, made experiments in ‘complex marriage’, eugenics, and ‘male continence’ as well, but was classed by their president John Humphrey Noyes as one of the “religious socialisms.”¹¹ Yet the success of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* prompted a slew of literary answers and similar attempts to present the American utopia in national form.¹² Gilman’s rather late entry obviously has its own unique concerns and desire for reform of sexual relations between men and women. Gilman, who disliked the Swedenborgian community she inhabited with her mother during childhood, was deeply affected by Bellamy, Socialism, Fabianism, and her own religious tradition. How, in light of the resurgence of the study of matriarchy and social experimentation, is Gilman to convey her utopia as social theory through her utopia as narrative?

⁹Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 81.

¹⁰ Kumar, *Modern Times*, 87. Kumar quotes a disciple of Oneidan president John Humphrey Noyes whose *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1870) he still considers the best source on the subject.

¹¹ Kumar, *Modern Times*, 88. See also Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998):

¹² Kumar, *Modern Times*, 81.

Serialised in *The Forerunner* in 1915, *Herland* was not published in novel form (as *Moving the Mountain* was) until 1979. Coming as it did within the field of feminist criticism developing in the 1970s and 1980s, certain aspects of the novel have been highlighted as particularly successful. First of all there is the general project of turning the tables on men by putting them in the woman's place, a subversion of convention lauded by feminists of the 1980s. Gilman's humour has also been lauded as a primary feature lacking in the feminist agenda (which is supposed to partly save her from charges of racism). Gilman's purpose of trying to realise an egalitarian sort of relation, economic and social, between the sexes is not in question. But in order to create a fuller understanding of her contribution to the feminism and the literature of her time, all of her ideas must be explored for what they were.

The religion of Herland, *Motherhood*, plays a central role in the plot's formation; 'more Christian' than any people the narrator has ever seen, the Herlanders have been waiting for the New Hope (a paraphrase of 'the Good News'?) of Fatherhood. The mysterious project of reintroducing men, that is, reality, to a perfectly self-sufficient race of androgynous and wholly parthenogenetic women throws their original religion back into question. Herland is both utopia and the move away from utopia, a paradise which is paradoxically lost as soon as sexual difference is introduced.

Originating in the historic incident of a parthenogenetic or virgin birth, the female society of *Herland* is indebted to a miracle of evolutionary proportions. Subsequent generations, in spite of firmly inbred principles of growth and change, have held this past in sacred esteem, relying on its promise to guarantee the future. The importance of the religion of Motherhood, the religion which *is* simultaneously the social miracle, is illustrated in the clash of cultural identities occurring when three American men, who have decided to investigate the isolated South American country, end up facing an unfamiliar (or are they?) breed of women in a situation they are obviously unprepared for. Gilman uses the format of an adventure novel, like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or Haggard's *She* (1887), written from memory (for all of the narrator's notes are lost) which parodies the process of exploitation and colonisation these novels describe.¹³ As soon as Herland is reached, the men will find themselves on the receiving end of such activities, benignly though they may be treated.

Primitive 'poison-arrow' (H 144) native South Americans, living far below the protected plateau of Herland, tell the explorers the legend of 'a strange and terrible Woman Land' and how no men ever come back from trying to find it. Gilman takes joy in teasing the whole race of men represented by her protagonists, including the primitives who live beneath and around Herland but never invade or contaminate it. Each character represents a particular form of stereotyped heterosexual

¹³ See Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* Vol. II (New Haven, London: Yale UP, 1989) 5-25.

masculinity: Jeff Margrave is a sensitive and romantic physician and poet, Vandyke Jennings ('Van') is a sociology major and therefore, we are to assume, a balanced intellectual, and Terry O. Nicholson is a wealthy, chauvinistic, adventurous 'man's man'. After making their attempt by plane and surveying the well-cultivated hills and fields and cities which resemble a garden-like 'civilization', Terry, Jeff, and Van land Terry's aircraft on an isolated rock and make their move toward the interior, to discover more forests, glades and gardens, where Terry observes that they do not kill birds but that they *do* kill cats and that there obviously must be men here because of this fact. Is the cat and dog thing really necessary? Well, it does raise the question of gender identification rather immediately, atrocious though the example is. Reading into this symbolically suggests that the women are in fact destroying an ancient token of femaleness and malevolence; and the independence of the cat is clearly a problem as well. The use of cats for agricultural purposes is ancient, so any suggestion that they are controlling pests must be wrong. Or perhaps this is foreshadowing of the role-reversals to come: the men soon meet a trio of bird-like girls twittering in a tree, Ellador, Celis, and Alima, the women whom they will eventually marry.

As the most open-minded, thoughtful and unbiased personality, Van becomes the narrator. Van's objective but naïve descriptions and unassuming demeanour, his 'middle ground', make him the perfect candidate for conversion to the perspective of his future mate, Ellador,

in the marriage game being played behind the men's backs; the inhabitants of the country intend to observe the new male specimens and decide which is most suitable to become Father of a new race.

Opening the second paragraph with 'Nobody will ever believe how they looked,' Van also observes the colourful freshness of the healthy girls in the first meeting, using the anthropological but also (innocently) chauvinistic simile of 'parrots'. It is to be wondered how the women regard the strange men. Like John Robertson, Van writes of the experiences of himself and his friends and ideas which he is still trying to make sense of, but which have converted him to a new way of thinking. He and the other men are immediately struck by the way the women look, and the way the women look at them, giggling and girlish, but completely unimpressed by Terry's antics at trying to attract them with the baubles he has brought with him. The socio-economically stratifying power of exaggerated sex distinction in the human species, as explained in *Women and Economics*, will clearly not operate here, for Gilman's utopians (are they humans?) display none of the perverse frippery of the women of Ourworld. Herlanders (the country is not actually named, though Ellador does refer to it as 'Herland' at the end of the sequel, *With Her in Ourland*) wear breeches and tunics with many useful pockets, have short hair and non-glamorous features; they are not, therefore, conventionally beautiful. To have the men recognise the beauty of such unconventional women, void of the contrivances of a male-dominated culture, is surely a goal, but one which asserts androgyny rather than sex distinction as an ideal. Later, Van remarks at

how, in their own new sexless attire, there are only beards to distinguish the men from the women.¹⁴ Hairiness, if we remember, is associated with the primitive male version of the race type. Indeed, Van will meet with the most approval for being the most like them, like 'People,' as Ellador will explain, in spite of her automatic assumption that 'in a bisexual race the distinctive feature of each sex must be intensified' (H 89). When the men dress themselves for their first public appearance, Van is 'comfortable' though unable to describe what he looks like, while Terry, a true peacock of self-expression, displays a 'Henry V' air and Jeff contrives himself as a 'Huguenot Lover' (H 84). Terry is too masculine, Jeff too feminine, apparently, though it is Jeff who will remain as a potential father for the new race. His romanticism of the paradise they've discovered is designed to amuse, for he accepts without understanding, and puts the new world on a pedestal, a fundamental error (but what is his alternative?). Van is somewhere in between; yet there must be intensified distinction. But how much is the question, for the line between too much and too little is vague at best. The purpose of the (hetero-)sexual act, as sanctified by religion (therefore unquestionable), will answer.

After the initial meeting and playing a game of cat and mouse, in which the women are too quick, the men eventually find themselves surrounded by an army of older women; when they begin to act defensively they are taken and anaesthetised. Waking up for Van is

¹⁴ *Herland*, 45, 84., hereafter to be referred to parenthetically in the text.

itself a mesmerising experience, like swimming through 'a deep warm ocean, nearer and nearer to full light and stirring air. Or like the return to consciousness after a concussion of the brain' (H 24). Their surroundings are perfectly comfortable and it is apparent that the men are not to be tortured or enslaved, rather treated as guests.

In order to communicate, the men must learn a new language first, as well as teach their own. This prerequisite establishes the principle of psychological immersion in a totally new society which 'works' on all three of the men, and is successful on two. After learning the language, the men are given three personal tutors, Zava, Somel, and Moadine. These are older, less exuberant, women who teach them the ways of Herland. The men are to start from scratch, like children. This does not sit well with Terry in particular, who is disappointed that he did not find the race of primitive man-hungry Amazons he was after, and he convinces the other two to try to escape their plush prison. Failing spectacularly to do this, they are returned to their schoolroom.

Van first learns of the parthenogenetic capabilities of the women, the reason why there are no men. This, of course, prompts a history lesson. Approximately two thousand years ago, 'at about the time of the Christian era', according to Van's ingenuous retelling, they were a polygamous, slave-holding, bi-sexual people (i.e. populated by both sexes) occupying a great amount of land with free passage to the sea. He adds: 'there is no doubt in my mind that these people were of pure Aryan stock, and were once in contact with the best civilisation of the old world. They were "white," but somewhat darker than our northern

races because of their constant exposure to sun and air' (H54). Van
 gleans from the information given that there was, in fact, a high degree
 of social development, like Ancient Egypt or Greece (H 67). In fact,
 most of the male population was decimated in what sounds like
 something akin to the Peloponnysian Wars. Finally, earthquakes and a
 volcanic eruption filled in their passage to the sea and only a few men
 and slaves (and many of the women and girls) were left alive. The
 slaves killed the men who were left as well as the boys and the old
 women and tried to take power; but the remaining women revolted,
 killing the men instead.

And so '[t]here was literally no one left on this beautiful high garden
 land but a bunch of hysterical girls and some older slave women,'
 according to Van (H 55). Without the stabilising effect of the men, the
 girls are 'hysterical,' though it is not clear whether he is told this or
 thinks this. A revolution did, therefore, occur to make this place
 possible, but it happened two thousand years ago. But the utopia is
 credible as a utopia because it simultaneously refers to a recognisable
 form of human history while contrasting an ideal future in some good
 place that is also no place, a totally controlled environment. Most fully
 realised in terms of temporal and spatial arrangements, this utopia is out
 of time; though it takes place at the present day. As it is removed to an
 isolated and uncharted geographic area, it is also out of place. Someone
 has said that for Americans, the past is another country. Occasionally,
 utopia describes an idealised past, like Morris' medieval England.
 These men are discovering a perfectly realised matriarchal agricultural

ideal like that which Bachofen recovered for history and which Gilman has expressed qualms about but nevertheless finds useful. Wishing to experiment with the prospect of what effect women would have had on religion, and therefore on society, if they were given the chance, Gilman finally chooses an exclusive world of women, but also appropriates the nineteenth-century project of recovering the seminal civilisation of white westerners.

The 'miracle' of parthenogenesis occurred five or ten years after the revolt, when one of the 'harem-bred' women began giving birth to female children. She was placed in the Temple of Maaia, Goddess of Motherhood, to be observed. This temple was apparently available for keeping the woman after the strange incident. In the sixth century BCE, a 'Queen Maya' gave birth to the Buddha. Besant points out several times, in totally different contexts of course, that maya means 'illusion,' but whether Gilman knew this is doubtful; the irony is too keen. 'Maia' was also one of the daughters of Atlas and Pleione, a Pleiad. She was, according to Thomas Bulfinch's *Mythology*, the eldest and most beautiful of the Pleiads and mother of Mercury by Jupiter. The Pleiads, seven nymphs of Diana who were turned to pigeons and then stars, were pitied by Jupiter because the obsessed Orion pursued them, perhaps an allusion to Terry's later misbehaviour in the novel. The ruin of Troy so upset the Pleiads that they became quite pale; the very disturbed Electra left her place (her son Dardanus had founded Troy), and only six stars are now visible. Troy and its associations with goddess-worshipping religion may also be relevant.

But perhaps Gilman did not research the name of the goddess too intently and is confusing it with Gaea, Mother of the Earth, or attempting to make a reference to Mary, Mother of Jesus, and recipient of the more ancient tradition of Cybele, Isis, Demeter, and Diana. At any rate, Maaia may function as an hieroglyph in the way H. D. uses many names ('mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary/Star of the Sea,/Mother.') in *Tribute to the Angels* (1945).¹⁵ Yet, the culture sounds as though it was quite masculine to begin with, which makes the immediacy of a temple to the Goddess of Motherhood odd, either a swift invention made to accommodate the miracle (the text simply acknowledges that they put the first mother in the temple) or an ancient relic finally put to use again, casually inserting the idea of matriarchy through symbol to validate the far more obvious though problematic idea of an all-female community. Gilman's lack of thorough explication of the idea of matriarchy both underscores her ostensible concern with 'humanisation' rather than the achievement of an exclusively feminine world and her drive to truly realise utopia in the future, rather than to muse on the past and some sort of 'blood and soil' revival that cannot be substantiated, especially in Gilman's day.¹⁶ Even Morris well understood that his idealisation of the medieval was based on art and not historical fact.¹⁷

¹⁵ H. D. , *Tribute to the Angels* (London: OUP, 1945) Section 8.

¹⁶ Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*, trans. Jan Van Heurck (London: Virago, 1984) 260.

¹⁷ William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. James Redmond (1890; London and New York: Routledge, 1970) xxxi.

Nonetheless, the opportunities an all-female society poses, aesthetic and otherwise, are various, freeing Gilman's pen to explore the more fantastic and bring fiction to martial her science in a way that potential fact failed to do. Her rewriting, rather than rejection, of ancient history leads not to the world we live in today or in thirty years, but to a completely different and otherwise unimaginable future. Van will later explain, in the context of his new relationship with Ellador, that he gets a queer feeling from the 'loving "up"' he learns to do, which awakens in him some 'ancient dim prehistoric consciousness'; it is like 'coming home to mother' (H 142). The feeling generated by the new world is one of an awakened consciousness and the revelation of old feelings. The men are like children in this new context, and are treated like children. John Robertson, too, has his consciousness raised; he actively puts his past in permanent storage in order to cope with the present, but he has many questions about how and why his world has changed which are not easily answered. There is no arguing with Herland, though Terry tries, because it is 'finished'. The disruptions and violence which created the conditions for the development of the utopia are long over. Referring to *Titus Andronicus*, Van says of the women's uprising against the slave men: 'I suppose they were about crazy—can you blame them?' (H 55).

Regarding the conception of her own novel, *Cassandra* (1984), Christa Wolf explains how the Troy she thinks of, one based very much on her doubt of the facts Homer supposedly presents, is really a model

for a kind of utopia, because the reality of the women of Troy does not exist for us.¹⁸ With no history and few examples of women's writing to take direction from, she argues, woman's writing becomes problematic, existing so far as women experience a different reality from men and express it and to the extent that they aim at autonomy.¹⁹

But what Gilman thinks of Ancient Troy or Greece is quite different from what Wolf envisions. Wolf would prefer to leave Homer aside and create her own mythology. Gilman idealises the stories she has learned of the ancient past, assuming the 'Greek ideal' in many places to be a thoughtful and noble aspiration, as well as one her readers would be familiar with. She accepts the recognisable, standard story of the great ancient civilisations leading to the 'Christian era', at which point Herland begins its life. But Gilman does not wish to make the same mistakes as her counterparts Plato, Bellamy, or Wells, much as she may respect them. *His Religion and Hers* sheds further light on Gilman's view of utopia: while books are the only source of information about our coming life on earth, she explains, and none of them agree with each other in detail, religion has been unhelpful as well:

If religion had concerned itself with our earthly future, it would have had a strong influence. Such pictures as it has given us of a vague millennium have been, if anything, less convincing than the Utopias. We can more easily believe in people's behaving well toward one another—as, indeed,

¹⁸ Wolf 224.

many of them do now—than in contiguous naps of lions and lambs. (HH 28)

But religion must take up the aims of society and promote them, Gilman argues, and the one religion which ‘urges most of real race improvement is that of Jesus. He taught unmistakably of God in man, of heaven here, of worship expressed in the love and service of humanity. But our strange death-complex was too strong even for his teaching’ (HH 35-36). Later she is succinct:

There was never a religion that would have gone so far toward building the kingdom of God on earth as the teaching of Jesus; and never one more blackened by hideous theories of hell and damnation, by persecutions, tortures, and devastating wars. (HH 42-43)

Herland strives to replace the ‘death-complex’ with a religion based wholly on life and the reality of women’s lives: but this is not necessarily matriarchy.

In fact, *Herland* lives so much in the present that it has no laws older than twenty years and holds no institutionalised form of veneration for the elderly mothers. There is no tradition of daughters taking care of their mothers or even carrying on with their old ideas. Ellador explains: ‘We do things *from* our mothers—not *for* them. We don’t have to do things *for* them—they don’t need it, you know. But we have to live on—splendidly—because of them; and that’s the way we feel about

¹⁹ Wolf 259.

God' (H 112). This constant erasure of any debt to the past is responsible for the consistent renewal of the society; or is it the other way around? Does the theory come before the practice? Gilman has not decided. Though founded in an act of tremendous violence in the murder of the last remaining men, the society is redeemed by the miraculous virgin birth and subsequent purification through a single-sex institution. The lifelong learning process for the making of better people, which discards old ideas as soon as newer and better ones are discovered, is intended to ensure constant progress. The monastic parallel in ideological history and lifestyle reinforces the purity of the Herlanders.

Theirs is a collective mind, and all inhabitants of Herland, individual talents aside, absorb the same bases of knowledge, ironically of their own ancient history and its traditions. What is critical, first of all, is their duty to their race, which is maternity and all of its occupations. The 'hysterical girls' were replaced by women, 'New Women', even: 'Mothers in their own right, and the whole spirit of the country changed from mourning and mere courageous resignation to proud joy' (H 56). After the first miracle, other women became pregnant as well, developing the culture of mothering and extensive educational project the men observe all around them. But eventually they had to control their population due to limitations of geography and resources. Van's assigned teacher, Somel, explains:

You see, before a child comes to one of us there is a period of utter exaltation—the whole being is uplifted and filled

with a concentrated desire for that child. We learned to look forward to that period with the greatest caution. Often our young women, those to whom motherhood had not yet come, would voluntarily defer it. When that deep inner demand for a child began to be felt she would deliberately engage in the most active work, physical and mental; and even more important, would solace her longing by the direct care and service of the babies we already had. (H 70)

A woman's purpose in Herland is to learn and educate, to produce her one child and help provide for the welfare of all through 'united action' (H 60). This requires a sense of duty and psychological control of the most personal nature. Orgasm, it would appear, is something even a non-sexual (?) Herlander must be wary of, for reasons of population control of course, as Ellador explains, but the intensity of this potential ecstasy will become even more significant in the long run. Van constantly praises their grasp of psychology, so fine that in spite of the fact that the children are 'cultivated', they do not *seem* cultivated: 'When it came to psychology—there was no one thing which left us so dumbfounded, so really awed, as the everyday working knowledge—and practice—they had in this line' (H 72). Having become genetically engineered, nearly agricultural (so the metaphor seems to go) products of their own scientific advancement (of both botanical and mammalian varieties), the women unite their science with a penetrating knowledge of psychology, making their science a uniquely social one. In fact,

Lester Ward declares in his preface to *Dynamic Sociology* (1893) that psychology is the body of truth upon which sociology 'directly reposes.'

In *The Sexual Fix* (1982), Stephen Heath discusses the concept of a commodified sexuality as a Victorian invention, which is transformed from the theatrical exhibitionism of Charcot (who took photographs of women subjects in the midst of apparent hysterical attacks and seizures) and many other doctors of his day to the twentieth century world of the individual. In bringing subjects to speak in a private room, Freud invokes the story, more accurately 'history', of an individual life emanating from sexual origins, according to his variously interpreted theories, and making sex inseparable from the history of the individual.²⁰ But Herland is not about individuals or individualisation, the kind of individualisation that makes New Women in *Moving the Mountain* but destroys the society when generated in men. Somel tells Van that they learn their own 'history, with its accumulating psychology' and this psychology is not assigned a 'personal' status: 'It is ours; it is among and between us, and it changes with the succeeding and improving generations. We are at work, slowly and carefully, developing our whole people along these lines. It is glorious work—splendid!' (H 105). The personal sex impulse we are familiar with becomes diffused, simultaneously liberating and constraining. Van explains: 'Two thousand years' disuse had left very little of the instinct; also we must remember that those who had at times manifested it as

²⁰ Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982) 43, 47-48.

atavistic exceptions were often, by that very fact, denied motherhood' (H 92). This will lead to Terry's complaint that the women have 'neither the vices of men, nor the virtues of women—they're neuters!' (H 98). (It is to be wondered what Besant would think of this.) But the point of improvement and growth is to overcome the limitations of Terry's sort of human psychology, relying on history to provide a blueprint for future advance.

The result of all this masterful cultivation of mind, body and spirit is a thoroughly interrelated system of immanentist religious practice. It takes a few tries to describe the religion of Herland, but Ellador's history leaves Van certain that they have a concept of God, who is not male, but of indeterminate location, not a 'Big Woman' somewhere, but a 'Pervading Power, and Indwelling spirit' who is not personified the way the Hebrew God is, as an old man with *whiskers*, etc. (H 112). Though it is called a Mother Spirit and is perceived as a spiritual magnification of actual motherhood, Ellador explains that their central concept of a Loving Power was assumed to have a motherly relation to their people. This is the extent of the evidence offered on the question of whether the religion or the society came first. They appear to have been simultaneous, with the virgin birth providing the initial impetus and subsequent thought ascribing maternal feeling to the force behind the miracle. 'What I cannot understand...is your preservation of such a very ancient state of mind. This patriarchal idea you tell me is thousands of years old?' Ellador asks. She continues to quiz Van on who the great Hebrew teacher was. The Christian tradition was initiated

by 'some great teacher who is dead' he explains, but Judaism is linked to pagan religions, though it is considered inspired and "the Word of God"—all quite confused, as Gilman is determined to separate the two religions (H 113-115). She cannot understand why we have kept these concepts for so long, having changed others. Ellador is also puzzled by the Sacrifice and the ideas of the Devil and Damnation as well as Immortality:

'But it means Heaven!' I insisted. 'Peace and Beauty and Comfort and Love—with God.' I had never been so eloquent on the subject of religion. She could be horrified at Damnation, and question the justice of Salvation, but Immortality—that was surely a noble faith.

'Why, Van,' she said, holding out her hands to me. 'Why Van—darling! How splendid of you to feel it so keenly. That's what we all want, of course—Peace and Beauty, and Comfort and Love—with God! And Progress too, remember; Growth, always and always. That is what our religion teaches us to want and to work for, and we do!'

'But that is *here*,' I said, 'only for this life on earth.'

'Well? And do not you in your country, with your beautiful religion of love and service have it here, too—for this life—on earth?' (H 117)

As a sociologist, Van is not necessarily sensitive to archaeological facts which might offer clues to the change in religion from the patriarchal period of the country's ancient history to the present, though he asks Ellador, who feels unable to explain it all very clearly (H 111). The only ruins to observe are the remnants of the ancient fortresses, which are still used, and the ambiguous scattered temples, which are employed for spiritual guidance, as needed. When Van horrifies Ellador with the idea of infant damnation, she runs to one of these temples, where a wise woman tells her she does not have to think there 'ever was such a God—for there wasn't. Or such a happening—for there wasn't. Nor even that this hideous false idea was believed by anybody' (H 110). The 'red pepper' in Ellador's eyes is taken out 'so quickly—so easily!' Whether it is true or not, this is not something for a Herlander to be thinking about. *With Her in Ourland* will explain that Ellador's own mother is one of these wise ladies and there is actually quite an intense bond between the mother and daughter, though such personal attachments are not usual, according to the country's social philosophy of communal motherhood. Gilman wants the psychology of the country to be uniform and this inner history is critical to the continuation of the religious system, but it is prescribed: there can be no behaviour that would create a unique, or individual experience. The women are New Women, but they must not deviate from what Gilman is striving to define as *normal* in physical and psychological terms.

Repression figures prominently in the society. The various mind-cleansing temples are quite obvious. The sublimation of sexual feelings

prior to maternity required of those who have already given birth once or of those who have been asked not to is also quite glaringly apparent. The teaching of psychology as a collective element is also needed to maintain the unity and coherence of the whole. Atavistic feelings and more differentiated sex distinctions, like those Alima seems to possess and which Van supposes make her a more possible choice as Terry's mate, are generally weeded out (H 130). Alima is also less adept at psychology than her other companions. Extreme 'femaleness' has consistently been counteracted with androgyny in the interest of the creation of a more human society, albeit still one of women, as the 'race type', and of heterosexual women at that. But the feelings preceding conception would doubtless be heterosexual if men were involved for Van sees in Ellador's eyes, at times, a 'look' she does 'not at all realize' (H 98).

Ellador does not allow herself to be swept away by this feeling, which comes surprisingly easily to her, and Alima's reaction to Terry's sacrilegious act in attempting to consummate their marriage and/or rape her is to wish Terry to be put to death. The awareness of the changes which extreme sexual differentiation may bring is embedded in the memory of the whole race. Their religion has long since been applied to their conduct and these new/old behaviours are taboo.

Van, nevertheless, is enchanted by their commitment to their religion and becomes converted. But does he need to be? The ideas contained are not unfamiliar:

Here was a religion which gave to the searching mind a rational basis in life, the concept of an immense Loving Power working out steadily through them, toward good. It gave to the 'soul' that sense of contact with the inmost force, of perception of the uttermost purpose, which we always crave. It gave to the 'heart' the blessed feeling of being loved, loved and understood. It gave clear, simple, rational directions as to how we should live—and why. And for ritual it gave first those triumphant group demonstrations, when with a union of all the arts, the revivifying combination of great multitudes moved rhythmically with march and dance, song and music, among their own noblest products and the open beauty of their groves and hills. Second, it gave these numerous little centers of wisdom where the least wise could go to the most wise and be helped. (H 115)

Van exclaims: 'You are more Christian than any people I ever saw' (H 115). He is quite ready to join. But the arts hold another important key to the difficulty of reintegrating the men. All of the arts and their religion are in a position of stasis in Herland: 'They had begun at a period when the drama, the dance, music, religion, and education were all very close together; and instead of developing them in detached lines, they had kept the connection' (H 100). There is no space for divergence. Child literature *does* work and is something Van could actually spend years studying, probably because it develops freely from

the conflicts of sex-role socialisation and within the context of a concept of one life cycle rather than two, though the literature is not actually described (H 44, 101). Their drama is 'flat' (or simply an extension of the tradition of children's literature?) because there is no tension between good and evil, it lacks the sex motive, there is no jealousy, aristocratic ambition, or opposition of wealth and poverty (H 99). As all conflicts have been resolved, the arts, as important as they are for children, remain exuberant but largely ceremonial. Bleich points out that Roman Catholic Christianity 'has similarly exulted in the public 'union of all the arts' and also remarks on the association of such celebrations with maternal love, which iconography has 'served actually to devalue motherhood by dissociating it from sexual lovemaking, exactly as Gilman tries to enhance its value by the same dissociation.'²¹ But there is no question of the Herlanders feeling any lack of something in their arts.

⊕ Love conquers all

*'Anybody'd think we were High Priests of -of
Philoprogenitiveness!'... 'These women think of nothing but children,
seems to me! We'll teach 'em!'* Terry O. Nicholson²²

²¹ Bleich, 'Sexism and the Discourse of Perfection,' 20.

Why, then, should the men be returned? Why should Herland even desire the New Hope of Fatherhood? Genetic diversity is one basic answer. To make 'new' men is the response Ellador will offer, for she hopes to have a son with Van eventually, and they do, at the very end of *With Her in Ourland*, clearly conforming to the Christian narrative. Or do the men themselves fulfil the demands of a millennial vision with their own 'Second Coming'? When difference is introduced, however, and readers are left to real and familiar heterosexual experience, utopia recedes. Jeff stays behind, to be the first father of the new race, an experience left undescribed. The focus is on Van, who will take Ellador on to Ourworld. As *With Her in Ourland* will demonstrate, the new race, as represented by the son of Ellador and Van, is only possible in Herland, partly because Ellador would not risk having a child in Ourworld, but also because Gilman cannot change Ourland with Van and Ellador. Nor can she complete utopia with Jeff's progeny, if, in fact, sexual intercourse is involved in the creation of it. And so the story will close, as the author wishes, in Herland with Van and Ellador and their son, but with no details as to how their particular story truly ends. Nor does any of this answer how all of this is to be reconciled with the religion of Herland, a religion which is supposed to be different, but ends up endorsing the same traditional heterosexual relationships under the aegis of a religion of love, relationships which it would be challenging. Having described Gilman's use of the metaphor of race to

²² *Herland* 119.

describe gender relation, 'not an error in the usual sense because it is created by ideological values from which there is no thought to escape,' Bleich puts it much more succinctly, that passion must be pure in the religious sense and 'if not transcendental in the narcissistic masculine mode, then nevertheless an ideal for all people. Love remains the 'answer' for Gilman to the enduring conditions of social difference. It remains the term that lives through social change, as if it were immune to the radical rethinking sought by feminism. This immunity is a feature of religious dogma endlessly emphasized by preachers of all persuasions and embodied in the idle faith that 'love conquers all.'²³

Bleich is still in the process of determining Gilman's worth, and does not allow for the fact that 'the radical rethinking sought by feminism' may refer more to contemporary feminism and does not necessarily have to include all aspects of Gilman's work. Incidentally, on the last page of *With Her in Ourland*, printed in December of 1916, is the poem 'Santa Claus', exhorting parents to tell true stories to their children, and the truth about Jesus, who loved everyone. The purpose of *Herland* is quite obviously to highlight the problems truly existing in the relationships of women to men and in what Gilman regards as a man-made world. The perfection of heterosexual relations, however, requires the perfection of the spirit, of the mind, of the body. This is all that *Herland* can aspire to; having merely maintained their level of development. Though they are supposed to be improving all the time, they can only evolve into a

²³ Bleich 19-21.

different species altogether, or rejoin the outside world and Gilman's imperative of heterosexuality limits their options. Herland can therefore be seen as a female model of a monastic community, vitalised by the real prospects of perfectibility within their private sphere, but unable to maintain such an ethic when the uncommon element of sexual difference is introduced. When the control a single parthenogenetic being has over her orgasm is relinquished, to a large degree, as Gilman's narrative is suggesting, it is in the service of a higher social ideal.

Thomas Laqueur's final discussion of Freud in *Making Sex* (1990) suggests that the differentiation of sex is critical to Gilman's program of devaluating passion or eroticism, which also makes empiricism triumphant. While Freud may think believing in God and paternity in the absence of truth or proof is a step forward for the intellect, Gilman's understanding of the intellect values the plane of nature, facts over fiction, body over spirit. But she senses a need to put the spirit back into the body and to tell the story of this (or what's a heaven for?). The devaluation of passion cannot hold after the notion of heterosexuality, unquestioningly associated with the introduction of sex difference, is introduced. Behaviour must be altered in order for sex difference to be accommodated, the foundation for which alteration is religion. The male seed is needed; orgasm is fundamental. Why? The possibility of a lesbian society, suggests Herland, is not acceptable. Gilman brings men to a world of women for essentially the same reason Laqueur believes Freud moves the centre of orgasm in woman from the clitoris to the

vagina; society is necessary and the sexual pleasure of women must be redirected toward social ends.²⁴

Of course, Gilman did not seriously expect Herland to provide a real alternative, but her novel suggests an answer to the 'Woman Question' she may not have intended, that while it would be best for all to be new (and practising) Christians and have a new form of heterosexual relation, the *historical* concept of Christianity, imbued with its own particular imagery and language, prevents this. Love prevents this. The language, the art, the science of Herland is inevitably influenced by its patriarchal past, and that of the author as well as the reader.

²⁴ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard UP, 1990) 240-243.

CONCLUSION: PARADOXES OF PARADISE

As many searched for the master key to salvation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a proliferation of categories and ideologies emerged. Such lists of labels apply to Besant and Gilman themselves as reformers, scientists, sociologists, theologians, proto-feminist activists, socialists, nationalists, and writers. Sharing the goal of creating a pure ethical system which will promote the conversion of human character and, consequently, social reconstruction in an atmosphere of perceived religious and moral crisis, Besant and Gilman adopt evolutionary perspectives which either assume or promote this transformation. Their systems are imbued with religious purpose, which is to enable comprehension and actualisation of a divine plan against perceived evils, to discover the ways of God among men and women, and to make manifest a predetermined destiny. Judeo-Christian rhetoric and ideals, utopian, millenarian, and socialist principles mesh with scientifically and sociologically informed perspectives to constitute the political and economic means of an ethical end. This largely involves 'purifying' society and redefining gender roles to reflect some 'higher' ideal. Narrowed ultimately to a positive view of history, indicated by post-millennial visions of overcoming evil to achieve Paradise on earth, this solution may lead to isolation or empire-building, but either is necessarily in the service of an intuitively felt Providence. Besant and Gilman, who held great authority and wide followings, therefore present a challenge to what historians refer to as

'secularisation theory,' which holds that as the end of the nineteenth century neared, society became less religious. There are many ways of defining the religious and the secular, definitions which become quite fluid in the face of the increasing proliferation of non-orthodox sectarianism throughout the nineteenth century. To be 'without God' (as Besant describes the Atheist in her autobiography) is not necessarily to be without religion or the need for an ethical system whereby social harmony may be realised. We might also consider earlier women writers influenced directly by the Evangelical movement or later activists who also take issue with the Bible directly, including Matilda Joscelyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Religion as rewritten and revised becomes an important catalyst for more pragmatic as well as spiritual reform. However, these rewritings often reflect the models against which they have been constructed.

The challenging of paradigms of gender, race and class plays a great part in the reformers' objective, but their programs are problematic, particularly as they continue to alter their own ideas. As a Secularist, Besant is active in confronting the issues of birth control and the rights of married women, lecturing to the masses and contributing to Freethinking publications. Her turn to Socialism is an attempt to put the ethical concerns of Atheism and Secularism into practice. But Besant later becomes a Theosophist and adopts the platform of a reinvented Buddhism and Hinduism. Her themes tend to trace along the traditional Judeo-Christian pattern both during her conversion crises and in her autobiographical writing and particularly during her period as

Theosophist. Her desire to be a martyr for her cause is duly observed by herself as well as her biographers. Her Theosophical vision, coloured as it is by a complicated esoteric science of the soul, conforms to the utopian dream shared by many reformers and charismatics of her time and is consistent in spirit with her Socialist ideals, or so she believes. It is a dream largely driven by Christian ideas of heaven on earth, the Judeo-Christian narrative of the Incarnation and its symbolic union of heaven and earth, male and female, as well as a linear sense of historical development, albeit within a karmic cycle. Moreover, her Western audiences often require forms of explication and analogy which will make her unorthodox ideas intelligible. In whatever guise her ideology finds itself, as nonconformist, Atheist, Socialist, or Theosophist, Besant's goal is to obtain the democratic Christian ideal in both political and spiritual terms, a Brotherhood of Man (Sisterhood is not mentioned) working in union with a divine directive in the spirit of self-sacrifice, the ultimate goal being gnosis, 'to know God directly' or 'meet the Master and bow at His blessed feet.'¹

In spite of her Theosophical ecumenism and democratic goals, Besant is found retreating more and more to an unseen (and therefore still possible) world of spirit within an increasingly complicated hierarchy of levels of spiritual achievement and ever more elaborate ritual which alienates both theosophical supporters and political protégés. Instead of lecturing and publishing pamphlets on the mission of Theosophy and

¹ Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage, 1989) 60. Also Besant, *Is Theosophy Anti-Christian?* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904) 26.

general social principles, she concentrates more on an ultimate vision of universal fraternity and racial purity and how Theosophy can correct (or correct the perceptions) of current social and political crises, with the addition of a messiah, J. Krishnamurti, to lead the way. As radical as Besant is in thought and deed throughout her early years, her life as a Theosophist is striking for its apparently antithetical qualities, her celibacy, her complete reversal on the issue of family planning, and her paradoxically hegemonic geo-political thinking. Yet the roots of her Theosophy may be found in her 'too religious' nature, which also powered her atheism and her Socialism. Her constant search for Truth may have been rewarded, yet her desire for real change in earthly life was compromised, perhaps because truth is intrinsically exclusive, or is this simply an assumption we feel compelled to make?

Gilman's utopian vision has been more widely studied than Besant's but similarly conforms largely to the Judeo-Christian narrative and to the literary model of utopia. Gilman's ideal world is a utopia of constant progress and innovation, harmonising the *feeling* of heaven on earth with practical earthly reform. For Gilman, however, the goal is to make her texts perform the action of actual reform and it is the use of fictional narrative in particular which characterises the intersection of Gilman's ethics with her fundamental world view. Yet, for all of her imagination, she must also tailor her language to encourage the response of her audiences. Her demand for the legitimisation of woman's social and economic contribution generates a dichotomy of sexual values and

racial attributes which are resolved by the demands of a didactic narrative based on social needs.

Both writers perceive the need for external government, in spite of beliefs in basic human freedoms, because humans are inherently imperfect, even sinful. Evil is pain caused by improper development and ignorance. To control and purify the body, the demands of which lead to dissolution, is therefore the first step in a process of rehabilitation and regeneration.

Both writers speak against the Judeo-Christian tradition explicitly as a failed or corrupted dream, an invention of patriarchal authority used to establish power and control over any and all aspects of life through the legislation of knowledge and morality or ethics. Yet, the performative nature of their enterprise eludes them as they disseminate examples of the ethically sublime and thereby attempt to alter human nature. Both authors either directly or inadvertently adopt traditional utopian schemes and those hierarchical or authoritarian positions which, as they are used, ultimately question the possibility of gender and racial equality and reinforce the dominant ideology and status quo through adherence to traditional ethical standards such as chastity or marriage as the appropriate means to the good and spiritually honest life, and, rather paradoxically, the idea of social responsibility.

In a revisionist process, different forms of writing are employed, including non-fiction, fiction, autobiography, and also poetry in the case of Gilman, the Roman-style oration (the immensely popular entertainment of the public lecture or more often, sermon). Certain

rhetorical techniques become common. The tradition of the Victorian sage calling back his/her listeners and readers to the path of righteousness, for example, is often apparent. The language of materialism and objectivity as applied to analyses of social and indeed, spiritual, problems reflects the discourse formulated by previous scientists and social-Darwinists. With regard to one element of Besant's intellectual inheritance in Theosophy, for example, spiritualists, in many ways the heirs of the tradition of scientific rationalism, readily adopted the language of evolution as a verification of their own understandings of the invisible world, ignoring Darwin's challenge to their anthropomorphic assumptions and, in fact, providing a type of scientific evidence for the survival of the spirit after death by using such language.² Washington pointedly states that 'Madame' Helena Petrovna Blavatsky would 'subsume' the facts presented by evolutionary theory and apply them to everything from 'atoms to angels', thereby forming 'a grand synthesis that makes religious wisdom not the enemy of scientific knowledge but its final goal.'³ Besant turns to chemistry, to history and the social sciences, and to Blavatsky. Gilman turns to the new field of sociology and its pioneer Lester Frank Ward as well as Thorstein Veblen, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and other social-Darwinist writers. To varying degrees, Gilman and Besant similarly adopt an

² Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) v-vi. These views point the way to the reversal of what may be considered empowering positions of female influence from spiritual leadership into authoritarian dogma.

³ Washington 52.

ethos which reflects the modes of discourse used by their predominantly male counterparts in the sciences.

The use of such perspectives and ideological furniture imparts credibility, on the one hand, but also transforms characteristics of the genres of sage writing or utopian writing, for example, as well as their use. As applied by feminists, these genres become refreshed and infused with a new purpose. Besant and Gilman use their rhetorical skills to rally their audiences to action with familiar themes and paradigms while promoting more radical programs. But this use of science, as understood and applied, tends to undercut the reformist agenda by informing the discourse with prevailing racial and social valuations. But this begs the question of intention. If we blame the language and the narrative for controlling the writing, what is professed is not necessarily what is meant, but are we to assume that Besant and Gilman, as feminists or proto-feminists, were therefore free from the prejudices which plague other writers and public figures?

A difficulty which plagues interpretation and analysis of any form of expression is historical context itself. Separating the art from the politics of a given writer is both difficult and disingenuous. Obviously, assumptions have to be made about what art is for (as well as what history is for). In this case, the art of writing and speaking is intended to be used in the most material way for the reform of society. Therefore, it is absurd to suggest discussing the work of Gilman and Besant without acknowledging their very own spoken intentions in writing and without examining their politics.

Moreover, discussing the religious teachings of these writers is not only to examine proto-feminist religious views or to analyse literary and rhetorical techniques as they apply to religious matters, nor to analyse such techniques as they apply to religious matters amongst feminists or women writers generally, but to discuss contributions to the history of religion, of literature, and of religiously inspired literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This discussion is also intended to present writings that are generally considered obscure in a new light which may expose their essential contradictions and accomplishments, thereby enriching our understanding of all of the above topics and helping to create a more complete literary and historical context. Without such challenges to reigning literary paradigms, how are we to determine the value of those paradigms? Gilman would argue that literature must be of *use*, as Besant would argue that nothing is so heavy as the responsibility of the 'public teacher' and nothing more powerful than the written and spoken word. Striving for truth in function as well as form, this writing still believes that beauty is a test, but also that it is the incidental, much anticipated product of a perfected world.

⊕ The indeterminacy of the body

Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Swedenborgianism, Christian Science, Socialism, Gilman's own faith and sociology of women, etc. all attempt to appropriate scientific method and language as a means of acquiring

legitimacy and validation. This creates an impasse between orthodox science and the apparent applications of it. Such attempts at synthesis claim to offer *proof*, unlike any other religion, but such proofs are notorious for inspiring faith in some and catcalls from others; it is a test of faith as to who may be able to hear over the spiritual telegraph, for example. And this business of communications technology (who has it, is it effective) is centred in the bodies and minds of mediums and their hearers, in the faithful. Yet it is the very indeterminacy of these enterprises and gods, perhaps like the indeterminacy of orthodox religion itself, which gives such philosophers and theologians their strengths. The limit of metaphor or allegory, like any other analogy, is that it breaks down at some point. Following Kant again, we cannot know the thing in itself, but we might try to claim a space in which we can know the thing as we think it is; if we can test the verity of such belief, we *might* claim truth and universality.

Away from the pins and pliers of science the idealists wrest control of subjectivity; objectivity is nevertheless an illusion, they seem to suggest. It is this independence which gives control of the body back to the subjective hearer/viewer/medium, which in turn creates an atmosphere ripe for the participation of women. Creation of that indeterminate and subjective space provides shelter to the grasping spirit and intellect. It also creates a no-man's land between women's bodies and science.

But the two-sex model is needed. The employment of the marriage metaphor, of unity in diversity, is intended to create perfection and finally know truth. Imagining the hermaphroditic or androgynous past

or future is to imply current degeneracy, but this, too, is needed to symbolise reasons for reform. Utopia requires its antonym. Writing is a plaything in the hands of the reformer, and such toys may be cast aside in the interest of actualised ideal evolution. In the absence of this circumstance, for these proto-feminists, utopia is a toy needed by a humanity still struggling with its own childhood.

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