CHRISTIAN DICKENS

by ANDREW SANDERS

In September 1844 Charles Dickens had a vivid dream while he was staying at the Villa Peschiere in Genoa. He dreamed that he was 'in an indistinct place, which was quite sublime in its indistinctness' and he was visited by a spirit which wore blue drapery, 'as the Madonna might in a picture by Raphael', but which bore no resemblance to anyone he had known. He recognized a voice, however, and concluded that this was the spirit of his much loved sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth. The seventeen-year-old Mary had died in his arms on 7 May 1837, six years before she conjured herself up in Dickens's dream. At the time he had been distraught. For months after her death he had dreamed of her 'sometimes as a spirit, sometimes as a living creature, never with any of the bitterness of my real sorrow, but always with a kind of quiet happiness'. Those dreams had long ceased, but the new manifestation of Mary in Genoa was evidently of a different kind. He beheld this visionary Mary 'in a great delight, so that I wept very much, and stretching out my arms to it called it "Dear."' He then entered into a dialogue with the spirit. 'Oh! give me some token that you have really visited me!', he pleaded. 'Form a wish', the spirit replied. Dickens then asked that Mary's mother might be released from 'great distresses' and he was told that this would be so. He then posed a new question: 'What is the True religion?' The spirit seems to have hesitated, and Dickens blurted out: 'Good God ... You think, as I do that the Form of religion does not so greatly matter, if we try to do good? – or' (the ghost still hesitated) 'perhaps the Roman Catholic is the best? Perhaps it makes one think of God oftener, and believe in him more steadily?' '"For you," said the spirit, full of such heavenly tenderness for me, that I felt as if my heart would break; "For you, it is the best!"' Dickens then woke up, with tears running down his cheeks.[1]

We could offer rational enough explanations for this dream, as Dickens himself did in the letter that described his vision. Dickens,

[1] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 4: *1844–1846*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson, Pilgrim edn (Oxford, 1977), 196: Dickens to John Forster, 30 September 1844.

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newly arrived in Genoa, was tense after the near-drowning of his brother in the bay. The city was beset with thunderstorms and Dickens had already experienced a series of vivid dreams. There was an altar in the grand bedroom at the Villa Peschiere 'at which some family who had once inhabited this palace had mass performed in old time'. Above the altar was the mark where a picture had once hung and Dickens tells us that he speculated as to what the picture might have been and, if it had shown a face, 'what the face was like'. Moreover, the bells of neighbouring convents had been ringing for the night offices. The Catholic atmosphere of Genoa had doubtless permeated Dickens's otherwise resolutely no-nonsense Protestant soul, and had disturbed it. But the dream ended; the vision dissipated and the no-nonsense Protestant side of Dickens returned him to equanimity. There was to be no conversion, though it may be an ironic comment on the dream that, thanks to the marriage of Dickens's youngest son, Henry, to a French Catholic woman after the author's death, many of his descendents have been born Catholic.

None of us needs to be told that Charles Dickens had a vivid imagination, and even the most ill-read does not need to be reminded that it was Dickens who, a year before this extraordinary Genoan dream, had published his 'Ghost Story of Christmas', *A Christmas Carol*. Unlike Dickens in Genoa, Ebenezer Scrooge responds immediately and positively to the monitory nature of the spirits in his dream. What essentially links *A Christmas Carol* with Dickens's Genoan dream is not necessarily the issue of conversion, but the insistent riposte that the novelist records in his letter: 'You think, as I do that the Form of religion does not so greatly matter, if we try to do good.' Many commentators have argued that *A Christmas Carol* is a singularly secular work with only a minimal degree of religious or doctrinal reference. Of course, the essential message of Dickens's Christmas story is one about 'trying to do good'. Scrooge's conversion is to good works and not to any defined faith. Nevertheless, to see *A Christmas Carol* in exclusively secular or social terms seems to miss the true essence of the story. It is, for example, a celebration of a distinctively Christian feast which rejoices both in human community and in acts of feasting and giving. It offers, moreover, a strong warning against closed minds and closed hearts. Very early on in the narrative, the

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ghost of Jacob Marley tells Scrooge of the ever-present need for a responsive openness to conversion:

> ... this earth must pass into eternity before the good of which it is susceptible is all developed ... any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its moral life too short for its vast means of usefulness ... no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunity misused![2]

Marley is insisting both on faith and works, and he is placing a particular stress on a change of life. This might not represent a statement of specifically Roman Catholic doctrine, but it is unequivocally Christian. Equally, in Stave Three of the story, when the Ghost of Christmas Present opens to doors of the Cratchit household, Bob Cratchit describes Tiny Tim's behaviour in church:

> Somehow he gets thoughtful sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.

Sentimental? Yes, of course, but this is also a strikingly Christian reminder of the earthly mission of Jesus, in the midst of the animated and detailed account of the Cratchits' Christmas feasting.

The themes of repentance, rebirth and the consequent importance of living out a new life return powerfully when Scrooge is faced with a vision of his own unvisited grave. The terrified Scrooge in the deserted and rank graveyard is suddenly desperately aware of the damnable nature of his unreformed life. He is not able to articulate to the guiding spirit his need for penitence:

> 'Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,' said Scrooge. 'But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!'
>
> The Spirit was as immovable as ever ...
>
> 'Spirit!' he cried, tight clutching at its robe, 'hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but

[2] Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Stave One.

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> for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?'
> ...
>
> 'Good Spirit,' he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: 'Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I may yet change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!'
>
> The kind hand trembled.
>
> 'I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!'[3]

Dickens, of course, knows that Scrooge cannot undo the fact of his future death, but he emphatically can change the nature of his life. He can, therefore, lay claim to a fuller life and to the life of the Resurrection. Scrooge insists that he will free himself of time itself – turning away from his past by learning lessons for the present which will in turn dictate the nature of the opening future. This declaration of a turning away from sin and depravity does not strike me as peculiarly 'secular'.

Some twenty-three years after the publication of *A Christmas Carol*, on the very morning of his own untimely death – 8 June 1870 – Dickens addressed a letter to one John Makeham concerning what Makeham had supposed was an over-casual, and therefore slighting, reference to Scripture in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. In the novel Dickens had referred to 'the highly popular lamb who has so long and unresistingly been led to the slaughter'. His reply makes it quite clear not only that there was no hint of blasphemy in his turn of phrase, but that he held the Christian Scriptures in the highest regard:

> I have always striven in my writings to express veneration for the life and lessons of Our Saviour; because I feel it; and because I re-wrote that history for my children – every one of whom knew it from having it repeated to them, long before they could read, and almost as soon as they could speak.

3 Ibid., Stave Four.

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> But I have never made proclamation of this from the house-tops.[4]

Dickens is referring here to his children's text of 1846 which was published in 1934 as *The Life of Our Lord*. He is also being emphatic that, as a writer, the Christian religion had always been implicit in his work but that he had consistently been unwilling to pose as a proselytizer. Not for him, therefore, novels that expounded any explicit doctrinal lessons. Everything was to be implied, to be shadowed out, to be suggested. It is extraordinary therefore to find him on the same 8 June 1870 writing the following paragraph in the last completed chapter of the *Edwin Drood* that he would never finish. We are offered a ravishing description of Dickens's fictional cathedral city – Cloisterham – on an early summer morning. It was doubtless a reflection of the view that Dickens himself had from the windows of his Kentish chalet, some three miles from Rochester, where he wrote these memorable words:

> A brilliant morning shines on the old city. Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful, with the lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air. Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and fields – or, rather, from the one garden of the whole cultivated island in its yielding time – penetrate into the Cathedral, subdue its earthly odour, and preach the Resurrection and the Life. The cold stone tombs of centuries grow warm; and flecks of brightness dart into the sternest marble of the building, fluttering there like wings.[5]

Dickens does not normally 'do' natural description, but here he is 'doing' religion as well.

Dickens had consistently found himself the object of unhappy conjecture on the part of many of his more narrowly devout readers. In May 1843 one David Dickson (whom the editors of the Pilgrim edition of the novelist's letters conjecture was the minister of St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh) wrote complaining about a supposedly flippant reference to Scripture in the *Pickwick Papers*.

[4] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12: *1868–1870*, ed. Graham Storey, Pilgrim edn (Oxford, 2002), 548: Dickens to John Makeham, 8 June 1870.

[5] Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ch. 23.

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Dickson was offended by what he assumed was Mr Weller's over-casual references to the Revd Mr. Stiggins as 'the Shepherd' and to his doctrine of 'the new birth'.[6] In reply Dickens insisted that he was attempting to show 'how sacred things are degraded, vulgarised, and rendered absurd when persons who are utterly incompetent to teach the commonest things take upon themselves to expound such mysteries, and how, in making mere cant phrases of divine words, these persons miss the spirit in which they had their origin'. There was clearly a sting in what Dickens was implying to Dickson. This was no mere self-justification, let alone an apology: it was an expression of polite vexation with a humourless bigot. Dickens went on:

> Whether the great Creator of the world and the creature of his hands, moulded in his own image, be quite so opposite in character as you believe, is a question which it would profit us little to discuss. I like the frankness and candour of your letter, and thank you for it. That every man who seeks heaven must be born again, in good thoughts of his Maker, I sincerely believe. That it is expedient for every hound to say so in a certain snuffling form of words, to which he attaches no good meaning, I do not believe. I take it there is no difference between us.[7]

There was, of course, a good deal of difference between the two men. That Dickens remained vexed by complaints like David Dickson's is evident from a section of the Preface he added to the cheap edition of *Pickwick Papers* in 1847, a preface which was reprinted in the collected editions of Dickens's novels that appeared in 1858 and 1867. In this Preface he insisted to his readers that he felt that there was a real distinction between 'religion' and 'the cant of religion' and between 'piety' and 'the pretence of piety'. This was exemplified by what he saw as a clear distinction between a 'humble reverence for the great truths of scripture' and 'an audacious and offensive obtrusion of its letter and not its spirit'. Furthermore, an 'extraordinary confusion of ignorant minds' existed, which he

6 Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, ch. 22.

7 *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 3: *1842–1843*, ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, Pilgrim edn (Oxford, 1974), 484–5: Dickens to David Dickson, 10 May 1843.

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saw as fostering 'one of the most evil and mischievous falsehoods existent in society', and this 'extraordinary confusion' was evident in the pronouncements of Exeter Hall (for many Evangelicals the most important London venue for public meetings) and an Ebenezer Chapel alike:

> It may appear unnecessary to offer a word of observation on so plain a head. But it is never out of season to protest against that coarse familiarity with sacred things which is busy on the lip, and idle in the heart: or against the confounding of Christianity with any class of persons who, in the words of SWIFT, have just enough religion to make them hate, and not enough to make them love, one another.[8]

Despite the fact that it seems to have been Dickens's earlier writings which attracted the adverse criticism of the evangelically minded, which in turn provoked this kind of response from Dickens, some religious commentators did grudgingly admit that the novelist had his merits as a *moral* rather than a *doctrinal* teacher. Take, for example, the unnamed reviewer of *The Haunted Man* in *Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal* in January 1849:

> Mr Dickens commenced his career as a novelist, by aiming chiefly, if not entirely, at the *amusement* of the public ... and for some time back, he has sought to be the solemn teacher, as well as the light-hearted jester, of the age ... the creator of *Pickwick* sets himself up as the regenerator of the human race! His Christmas books are grand moral lessons. The pretty and innocent tales are precious allegories, containing, in his opinion, individual and social ethics of transcendent value. We cannot say that we have a profound respect for his teaching. Though he surrounds himself with *ghosts* to make himself look very earnest ...[9]

This is indeed damnation by means of the very faintest praise. For a certain class of religious reader in the 1840s, therefore, Dickens offended by sins of omission and commission. His reverence for

[8] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. James Kinsley, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1986), Appendix B, 887.

[9] *Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal*, January 1849, 23–31; repr. in Philip Collins, ed., *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1971), 179–80.

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Scripture was self-evidently deficient, while his attempts at moral allegory were more likely to be propped up by sentimentality than they were to be supported by sound ethical argument.

But what can one say about the true nature of Dickens's religion? He was born into the Church of England and for the most part of his life appears to have been content with its doctrine and worship. He quotes the Authorized Version of the Bible regularly and accurately, with a decided preference for the New Testament. He is also clearly well versed in the phraseology and rhythms of the Book of Common Prayer. He strikingly uses one of the 'bidding sentences' from the order for Evening Prayer ('When the wicked man ...') in the opening chapter of *Edwin Drood* as Jasper rushes into Cloisterham Cathedral in his dirty surplice, and, yet more weightily, quotes the verse from St John's Gospel ('I am the Resurrection and the Life') from the Burial Service in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The gloomier aspects of the Burial Service are also echoed and re-echoed throughout Chapter 11 of *Bleak House*. David Copperfield confesses to inserting the name of his beloved Miss Shepherd into the 'Prayer for the Royal Family'. Significantly too, citations of the Psalms are generally from the Prayer Book version.

On Christmas Eve 1856, Dickens wrote to the Revd R. H. Davies, a Dublin graduate and incumbent of Chelsea Old Church. Davies had written to him complaining of the novelist's lack of proper reverence and evangelical urgency:

> There cannot be many men, I believe, who have a more humble veneration for the New Testament or a more profound conviction of its all-sufficiency than I have. If I am ever (as you tell me I am) mistaken on this subject, it is because I discountenance all obtrusive professions of, and tradings in, Religion, as one of the main causes of real Christianity's having been retarded in this world; and, because my observation of life induces me to hold in unspeakable dread and horror, those unseemly squabbles about the Letter, which drive the Spirit out of hundreds of thousands.[10]

[10] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 8: *1856–1858*, ed. Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, Pilgrim edn (Oxford, 1995), 244–5: Dickens to R. H. Davies, 24 December 1856.

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This letter gives emphasis to something most readers of Dickens would readily recognize as figuring vividly in his novels: he disliked scriptural literalism, firmly holding that 'the letter killeth', and possessing a strong distaste for inter-religious quibbling. In the 1850s, for example, he was particularly exercised about the rise of the Oxford Movement and its seemingly divisive insistence on tradition. Tractarians, as he rudely caricatured them in *Bleak House*, were little more than 'religious' dandies intent on 'turning the clock back'.

Retrospects, fond or wilful, were never likely to appeal to Dickens's innate progressiveness and the Tractarian mission to rewrite aspects of English church history left him at best antipathetic and at worst angry. The debates about theology, tradition and worship within the Church of England in the 1830s and 1840s seem to have turned Dickens against the Established Church *tout court*. His visit to the United States in 1842 marked a turning point, for, in the republic, which constitutionally barred any established church, Dickens found common religious currency with American Unitarians. He seems to have admired their doctrinal openness and their concomitant lack of 'obtrusive professions' and 'tradings in' religion. He also warmed to their active libertarianism and to their resolute opposition to slavery. For a year or two (or possibly five) after his return to Britain, Dickens worshipped as a Unitarian, taking a pew at the Little Portland Street Chapel in London and maintaining a close friendship with its minister, the Revd Edward Tagart. Dickens's intimate friend and biographer, John Forster, himself a Unitarian, was insistent, however, that this was a mere temporary flirtation on Dickens's part:

> That he did cease [to be a member of Tagart's congregation], after two or three years, I can distinctly state: and of the frequent agitation of his mind and thoughts in connection with this all-important theme, there will be other occasions to speak. But upon essential points he had never any sympathy so strong as with the leading doctrines of the Church of England; to these, as time went on, he found himself able to accommodate all minor differences; and the unswerving faith in Christianity itself, apart from sects and schisms, which had never

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> failed him at any period of his life, found expression at its close in the language of his will ...[11]

Forster went on to quote the lines from that will:

> I commit my soul to the mercy of God, through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; and I exhort my dear children humbly to try to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here or there.

Traces of Dickens's sympathy for Unitarian beliefs may well be evident in *The Life of Our Lord*, written for domestic consumption and not made public until 1934 when a family member sold the manuscript to the proprietor of the *Daily Mail*. Certainly the Jesus who emerges from this text is cast more as a universal teacher than as a redeemer, but it should be remembered that the work was written by a storyteller for impressionable children and intended to be a first instructor rather than a definer of doctrinal niceties. Dickens ends this text with another insistence on living the good life:

> REMEMBER! – It is Christianity TO DO GOOD always – even to those who do evil to us. It is Christianity to love our neighbour as ourself, and to do to all men as we would have them Do to us. It is Christianity to be gentle, merciful, and, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts, and never make a boast of them, or of our prayers or of our love of God, but always to shew that we love Him by humbly trying to do right in everything. If we do this, and remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in Peace.[12]

This is certainly more like Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander than John Henry Newman, but we have to recall that *The Life of Our Lord* reveals a devout father offering his own children religious and moral instruction at a level that they might appreciate. He is not pleading a special doctrinal case. His stress here, as in the roughly

[11] John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. J. W. T. Ley (London, 1928), 298–9.
[12] Charles Dickens, *The Life of Our Lord* (London, 1934), 128.

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contemporary *A Christmas Carol,* is on the propriety of living the Christ-filled life and on being able to approach death with a clear and faithful mind. The Christian is bidden to receive Christ as a little child, and to believe in a Saviour who had taken little children into his arms. It is interesting, however, to note that Dickens adds to the notion of God forgiving sin the idea that he is also a ready pardoner of 'mistakes'.

A parallel to *The Life of Our Lord,* the religious instruction given to his children, is the clearly deeply felt letter Dickens sent to his son, Edward Bulwer Lytton Dickens ('Plorn') when the latter was about to leave for a career in Australia in September 1868:

> I write this note to-day because your going away is much upon my mind, and because I want you to have a few parting words from me, to think of now and then at quiet times ...
>
> Try to do to others, as you would have them do to you, and do not be discouraged if they fail sometimes. It is much better for you that they should fail in obeying the greatest rule laid down by our Saviour than that you should.
>
> I put a New Testament among your books for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes, that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a little child; because it is the best book that ever was or will be known to the world, and because it teaches you the best lessons by which any human creature who tries be truthful and faithful to duty can possibly be guided. As your brothers have gone away, one by one, I have written such words as I am now writing to you, and have entreated them all to guide themselves by this book, putting aside the interpretations and inventions of man.
>
> You will remember that you have never at home been wearied about religious observances, mere formalities. I have always been anxious not to weary my children with such things, before they are old enough to form opinions respecting them. You will therefore understand the better that I now most solemnly impress upon you the truth and beauty of the Christian Religion, as it came from Christ Himself, and the impossibility of your going far wrong if you humbly but heartily respect it ... Never abandon the wholesome practice

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> of saying your own private prayers, night and morning. I have never abandoned it myself, and know the comfort of it.[13]

Dickens often seems to have found it difficult to be truly intimate with his children. Perhaps he seemed aloof because he was so busy, so very public, so much in demand. He was so often called away by his writing, his readings and the demands of his public. Like many Victorian men he left household concerns and domestic necessities to his wife and, in his case, to his ever competent sister-in-law, Georgina, who acted as housekeeper. The slow decline in his marriage also undoubtedly damaged his relations with his children. Yet he was, from their own testimony, a loving, responsive, inventive and hugely amusing father, when he gave himself the opportunity to be one. All of the children had affectionate nicknames and when he was in a party mood the children's father made the family the envy of all their friends. Both *The Life of Our Lord* and *A Child's History of England* (a volume which he *was* prepared to publish in his lifetime) suggest that he was particularly attentive to his children's education. Nevertheless, the boys in particular seem to have been more than a little in awe of Dickens's energy and his drive, and to have been the victims of his essential selfishness as an artist. What his letter reveals, however, is how in his attempts to be intimate he also becomes intensely pious. Love seems to dictate moral lessons, and morality and fatherliness, as in his novels (think particularly of *Dombey and Son*), are equated with divine lessons and with Bible teaching.

More accurately speaking, this is New Testament teaching. Both his present of the New Testament to Plorn, and the insistence in his will that the children guide themselves by the same book, indicate a profound and unquestioning response to the figure of Jesus and to central Christian teaching. Despite an active enough interest in modern science and an informed interest in pre-Darwinian geology and biology, Dickens appears to have been untroubled by the post-*Origin of Species* controversies which seem to have left other Christians disturbed and even bereft of faith. What Dickens seems to have most disliked was sectarian readings of Scripture. He seems to have been equally repelled by the expression of narrow Evangeli-

[13] *Letters*, 12: *1868–1870*, ed. Storey, 187–8: Dickens to Edward Bulwer Lytton Dickens, 26 September 1868.

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calism in the Church of England and by Nonconformity in general. His Evangelicals, such as the Murdstones or Miss Barbary in *Bleak House*, seem to be defined by a lack of charity and by a drastic misreading of what Dickens regarded as essential New Testament teaching. Miss Barbary, with her firm belief in sin and in the child Esther's inherited and unpardonable taint of bastardy, emerges as particularly unpleasant and unbending. Though the forgiving Esther recounts the story without any noticeable smugness or bitterness, it is wonderfully ironic that Miss Barbary should have a seizure as she reads aloud the story of the woman taken in adultery. She who has so condemned Esther's errant mother seems to be struck down by a divine stone. Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit* is equally attached to the kind of Old Testament texts which speak of divine vengeance, the smiting of foes and an awesome and unforgiving God.

Dickens's Dissenters are far less middle class, but equally narrow in their reading of Scripture. He was particularly offended by their ardent Sabbatarianism, being greatly attached to the principle of opening of museums and art galleries on Sundays in order to offer the working classes some relief from the dreariness of their workaday lives. Most Dickensian Dissenters are, however, more comic than they are sinister. Mr Stiggins is habitually drunk; the ranting Revd Melchisedek Howler in *Dombey and Son* is so attached to a precise, but pragmatic, millenarianism that he announces 'the destruction of the world for that day two years hence, at ten in morning, and opened a front-parlour for the reception of ladies and gentlemen of the Ranting persuasion'.[14] Howler's imminent millennium, we realize, proves to be a conveniently movable feast. Less immediately comic is Mr Chadband in *Bleak House*, a preacher so unctuous in his manner that he is described as 'a large yellow man, with a fat smile, and a general appearance of having a good deal of train oil in his system'. The nature of Chadband's religion is revealed to us not so much by his extraordinary, and always inappropriate, use of biblical language and imagery as by his inability to pronounce the word 'truth' (it distortedly emerges as 'Terewth'). It is he who patronizes poor Jo rather than offering either practical religion or practical support, and it is he who is condemned for his failure to embody the gospel. No Anglican clergyman (and there are relatively few in Dickens's novels) is ever so tainted by the same kind of hypocrisy.

[14] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ch. 60.

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So where does this leave us with Dickens's Christianity? Is the faith he professes in his letters, and insists on to his children, evident in his fiction? One great Christian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, was insistent that Dickens was decidedly a great religious teacher and, moreover, that Mr Pickwick was a prime example of an exemplary Christian.[15] Tolstoy too seems to have found deep spiritual nourishment in Dickens. When asked to list the literary works that had most influenced him, Tolstoy defined them as an extraordinary trinity: Rousseau's *Confessions*, St Matthew's Gospel and Dickens's *David Copperfield*.[16] As we have seen, this acceptance of Dickens as an implicitly Christian moralist is precisely what the novelist himself aspired to. What Dostoevsky and Tolstoy seem to have sensed, even through the medium of the sometimes clumsy translations in which they read his work, was that Dickens was at one with their own variety of spirituality.

Dickens's work, it seems to me, completely transcends any narrow emphasis we might want to put on 'good works' and on merely secular conversions to charity and decency. Central to much of his very best writing is the idea of something far more profound than Scroogian conversion. Dickens believes in a resurrection which is both here and now, and to come. This is something I wrote about at length in my study *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist* in 1982.[17] Let me here merely summarize what I see as a reiterated exploration of the theme of spiritual regeneration in Dickens's fiction. Most obviously, we have the play on coming back to life in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The play is both verbal and factual. Dr Manette, released from sixteen years in the Bastille, is described as having been 'recalled to life'; Jerry Cruncher parodies the idea by pursuing a nefarious career, his night job, as a 'Resurrection man' providing freshly buried corpses for the medical trade. Most significant, however, is the career of Sydney Carton, the alcoholic barrister, stirred into new life by human love (albeit an unrequited love for Lucie Manette), who finally lays down

[15] For Dickens and Dostoevsky, see Angus Wilson, 'Dickens and Dostoevsky', in idem, *Diversity and Depth in Fiction: Selected Critical Writings of Angus Wilson*, ed. Kerry McSweeney (London, 1983), 64–87. Wilson is cited in the entry on Dostoevsky in Paul Schlicke, ed., *The Oxford Readers' Companion to Dickens* (Oxford, 1999), 191.

[16] For Tolstoy and Dickens, see Henry Gifford, 'Dickens in Russia: The Initial Stage', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, January 1968, 42–52; repr. in Stephen Wall, ed., *Charles Dickens: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 509–17.

[17] Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist* (London, 1982).

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his life for his friend (and rival in love). At the end of the novel he stands on the scaffold, and inwardly expresses his faith:

> 'I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.'
>
> The murmuring of many voices, the upturning of many faces, the pressing on of many footsteps in the outskirts of the crowd, so that it swells forward in a mass, like one great heave of water, all flashes away. Twenty-Three.
>
> ...
>
> They said of him, about the city that night, that it was the peacefullest man's face ever beheld there. Many added that he looked sublime and prophetic.

This prophetic sublimity is not the consequence of a ghostly visitation, but of something essentially religious. It comes from something deeply internalized, not from an external prompting. *A Tale of Two Cities* has long been regarded by those critics who decline to admire it as grossly sentimental, contrived, or simply un-Dickensian. It seems to me that this sublimity is part and parcel of a theme that runs through all of Dickens's late works. Major characters in all of these late novels need to find themselves, and they are obliged to do so by exploring complex disguises, alter egos, tricks, tests, sacrifices and discoveries. Dickens's last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, is, for example, quite as dependent on the mystery of spiritual and physical resurrection as is *A Tale of Two Cities*, but the idea is more veiled, more complex, more essentially mysterious. It does not seem to me idle that Dickens chose the name 'Nicodemus' for Mr Boffin (though Boffin is generally known as 'Noddy'). I am happy with the argument that the whole novel can be seen as a meditation on Jesus's words to Nicodemus in John 3, and that the strange series of disguises, confusions, adoptions of false personalities, and slow unveilings of truth, are akin to the ideas that Nicodemus is obliged to puzzle over in his night-time encounter with Jesus. I would also suggest that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* might also have turned out to be a story hinged on the idea of coming back to life – but as Dickens never got round to presenting us with the fullness of the mystery, we shall never properly know what he finally intended.

I hope that this essay has adequately suggested a Christian reading both of Dickens the man and of Dickens the novelist. It is necessary

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to end, however, with a return to Dickens's Genoan dream of 1844: would the Roman Catholic Church have been Dickens's 'true' spiritual home? Probably not, given the way that the Roman Church sought to define itself and those outside its pale in the nineteenth century. Dickens's general antipathy to Catholicism was based on its political pretensions as much as on its unequivocal insistence on its own 'truth' and the schismatic or heretical nature of all those who dissented from it. Dickens generally distrusted all establishments and institutions and those that pretended to infallibility particularly stuck in his gorge. As *A Child's History of England* reveals, he had no love for popes or for the pre-Reformation Church, and no pronounced admiration for post-Reformation adherents to the old religion. But, equally, he had no love for the founders of the English Reformation, famously dismissing Henry VIII as 'a most intolerable ruffian, a disgrace to human nature, and a blot of blood and grease upon the History of England' and Elizabeth as having 'a great deal too much of her father in her, to please me'.[18] Dickens, like Macaulay, seems to have taken it for granted that the Reformation marked a break with the superstitious faith of the Middle Ages and with the tyranny of an overweening Church. Progress and Protestantism were integrally linked. What Dickens seems to have responded to in Italy was the theatricality of Catholicism, but this was not enough to tempt him to abandon his deep-seated liberal Protestantism. For him, Catholics were little more than picturesque and the modern Catholic Church little more than a buttress to tyrannical princes and narrow patterns of thought. Dickens was no Newman, and his spiritual search was never to be concerned with niceties of doctrine or with a restless demand for definition. He was equally no Pugin, and, for him, the Middle Ages were best left both unsentimentalized and unrevived. For Dickens it was always the Spirit that gave life and always the letter that killed. The spirit that spoke to him in Genoa was too much of a phantom in a dream to persuade him to start a series of redefinitions of his faith, but Dickens's own account of his dream certainly suggests that he was briefly open to the awkward and inconvenient promptings of something deep inside him.

Durham University

[18] Charles Dickens, *A Child's History of England* (London, 1914; first publ. 1851), 210, 246.

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