DISRAELI'S NOVELS: RELIGION AND IDENTITY

by DAVID BROOKS

'Dizzy's attachment to moderate Oxfordism is something like Bonaparte's to moderate Mahomedanism', observed George Smythe in 1842. 'Could I only satisfy myself', wrote his fellow Young Englander, Lord John Manners, a year later, 'that d'Israeli believed all that he said, I should be more happy: his historical views are quite mine, but does he believe them?'[1] As a politician, Disraeli was and remains a man of mystery, an identity which he took some care to cultivate. His protean career in public life found a counterpart in his literary works, in which likewise over the years he appeared to assume a range of different positions. His religious allegiance is similarly elusive. He had attended a Unitarian school, and his theological position, with little sense of the divinity of Jesus, reflected that branch of Christianity most akin to Judaism. On the other hand, he was fascinated by the rituals of Roman Catholicism and the cult of the Virgin Mary, and it was perhaps natural that he should find his spiritual home in the Church of England, that house of many mansions which to his mind reflected the rich diversity of national life. How far there was an underlying principle in Disraeli's life and art is a question that has intrigued numerous historians, and it will be the chief concern also of this essay in respect of two key issues: religion and national identity.

Disraeli of course does not lack distinguished biographers, beginning with the monumental work by Monypenny and Buckle, published nearly a century ago.[2] More recent studies, for instance those by John Vincent, Stanley Weintraub, Paul Smith and Jane Ridley,[3] have focused more particularly upon his literary works

[1] Sarah Bradford, *Disraeli* (London, 1982), 131 and 17 respectively.

[2] William Monypenny and George Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli Earl of Beaconsfield*, 6 vols (London, 1910–20).

[3] John Vincent, *Disraeli* (Oxford, 1990); Stanley Weintraub, *Disraeli* (London, 1993); Paul Smith, *Disraeli: A Brief Life* (Cambridge, 1996); Jane Ridley, *The Young Disraeli, 1804–46* (London, 1995). Other recent biographical works include Richard Aldous, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs. Disraeli* (London, 2007); Ian Machin, *Profiles in Power: Disraeli* (London, 1995); Charles Richmond and Paul Smith, eds, *The Self-Fashioning of Disraeli, 1818–51* (Cambridge, 1998); John Walton, *Disraeli* (London, 1990). Disraeli's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S042420840000142X Published online by Cambridge University Press

and ethnic background. Naturally, a key point of reference remains Robert Blake's classic biography published in 1966, which considers Disraeli's novels especially in terms of their literary qualities and the way in which they rate alongside those of other Victorian writers.[4] Blake's eminently sympathetic study of Disraeli portrays him as at heart an opportunist. Lately this view has been amended somewhat in an article by Jonathan Parry which emphasizes the coherence and consistency in Disraeli's thinking, and not least his concern with English identity.[5] What follows here will endeavour to carry the examination a stage further.

Why indeed did Disraeli eventually choose to make politics rather than literature his career? In one sense, of course, he never did. Each essential aspect of his life infused the other. The success of the parliamentary onslaught on Peel can be attributed in considerable part to Disraeli's theatricality, to his ability to personalize opponents almost as if they were characters in a play or novel. Conversely, it is the political element in his works of literature which brings them most to life. Disraeli's novels have drawn criticism in terms of characterization and plot, but debate gives them dynamism. In *Sybil* the reader's attention becomes thoroughly engaged in the scene set amidst the imposing ruins of Marney Abbey, today's Fountains, where Lord Egremont and Walter Gerard debate the dissolution of the monasteries. Key arguments are deployed, not least concerning welfare, community and the growing division between rich and poor, the 'two nations' which provide the novel's subtitle. Only one thing can interrupt their eager verbal contest, as 'from the Lady's chapel there rose the evening hymn to the Virgin: a single voice, but tones of almost supernatural sweetness'. Walter Gerard's daughter, Sybil, makes her first appearance. Disraeli is deeply susceptible to the mood and symbolism of the old religion.

Ultimately Disraeli's choice of career was a matter of circumstance and opportunity. Like his great rival, Gladstone, Disraeli

literary works are considered in Thom Braun, *Disraeli the Novelist* (London, 1981); Daniel Schwarz, *Disraeli's Fiction* (London, 1979); Robert Stewart, *Disraeli's Novels Reviewed, 1826–1968* (Metuchen, NJ, 1975). Also relevant here are Richard Faber, *Young England* (London, 1987); Alan Warren, 'Disraeli, The Conservatives and the National Church', *Parliamentary History* 19 (2000), 96–117.

4 Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (London, 1966).

5 Jonathan Parry, 'Disraeli and England', *HistJ* 43 (2000), 699–728.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S042420840000142X Published online by Cambridge University Press

effectively came of age at a time of almost unprecedented political upheaval, associated with the bitter constitutional conflicts of the late 1820s and early 1830s. Both men sensed serious danger in the air, perhaps even revolution of the kind that returned to France in 1830, although Disraeli, as a sort of latter-day Mirabeau, also saw his chance as an outsider to break into the traditional elite. Gladstone, having warned the Oxford Union against the perils of reform, graduated in late 1831 and became a Conservative Member of Parliament a year later. Disraeli also finished his (less formal) education in 1831, when he returned from an extended tour of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Undertaken partly to recover from a protracted nervous illness, this left him with a lifelong affection for the Ottoman Empire, which he admired for its essential conservatism and for its ability to rule over a diversity of peoples and religions without experiencing the revolutionary upheavals increasingly to be found in western Europe. Disraeli would return to this theme in his novel, *Tancred*, published in 1847. Back in England, Disraeli's political ambitions were not immediately realized. He failed twice in seeking election to Parliament in 1832, and for the next five years pursued intermittently a literary career. His writings from this period are not much remembered nowadays, but in 1837 he was at last successful in becoming a Member of Parliament, for Maidstone. For the time being he put down his pen, only to take it up again with the publication of *Coningsby*, the first of the Young England trilogy, in 1844.[6]

The three Young England novels, especially *Sybil* (1845)[7] and *Tancred* (1847), provide the main focus of this essay. Why did Disraeli take up writing again in 1843–4 after such a long intermission? For one thing, he now had matters which he very much wanted to impart. Disraeli's marriage in 1839 had given him financial as well as emotional stability. He no longer felt under pressure to write in haste for money. Also, his wife insisted that he throw over his former debauched acquaintances, such as D'Orsay and Bulwer Lytton. Disraeli's new circle of friends consisted of youthful aristocrats, in particular George Smythe and Lord John Manners, who formed the nucleus of what became known as the Young England

6 Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby or The New Generation* (London, 1927).

7 Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil or The Two Nations* (Oxford, 1981); idem, *Tancred or The New Crusade* (London, 1927).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S042420840000142X Published online by Cambridge University Press

group inside the Conservative party. Despite its name, its values were very much those of an older, pre-industrial society, still dominated by traditional influences such as the monarchy, the aristocracy and the Church of England. All of this appealed to Disraeli, whose instincts, although he had flirted briefly with radicalism in the early 1830s, were essentially conservative. In any case, he now had another axe to grind, in the shape of frustrated political ambition. Disraeli's party leader, Sir Robert Peel, had refused to give him office when the Conservatives returned to power in 1841, and Disraeli saw this as proof of Peel's apostasy, his abandonment of true Toryism in favour of the accursed principles of Whiggery.

Disraeli's politics, it is suggested, cannot be considered independently of his works of literature, nor vice versa. A good instance of this is provided by a speech made by Disraeli in the House of Commons in April 1845, a month before the publication of his most famous novel, *Sybil*. The occasion was the debate on the Maynooth grant, the most important trial of strength on ecclesiastical and religious policy during the decade. Peel's proposal to increase the state's grant to a Catholic seminary near Dublin sent shock waves through the ranks of the Conservative party, which saw it as evidence of collusion with English Whiggery and Irish separatism. Disraeli, with no liking for Peel, yet had a difficult path to tread. He wanted Toryism to be inclusive and national, and not exclusively identified with ultra-Protestantism. His solution was to argue against the subservience of religion to the state, in a way which would have found favour with the Oxford Movement. 'I deny', he declared, 'that the Church of England is the creature of the state. The alliance between them has been one formed and maintained upon equal terms.' Peel was guilty of perpetuating the state intervention, utilitarianism and centralization practised by the Whig governments of the 1830s.

> Will you [Disraeli asked pointedly] apply the principle of endowment to sectarians and schismatics of every class? Will you adopt a pantheistic principle [whereby] any body of sectarians that can prove a certain population to Downing Street will be considered to have a claim to an emolument? For my own part, I confess that I have no great confidence in the cure

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> of souls in that quarter ... From that quarter has proceeded the assault on the parochial constitution of the kingdom.[8]

This last was, of course, a hit against the New Poor Law of 1834, established by a Whig government but maintained by Peel's, which had replaced welfare provision at the parish level by a new administrative superstructure involving union workhouses and a centralized commission. The idea that religion could serve the material as well as the spiritual needs of society better than the state is at the heart of *Sybil*. But which religion, the reader will be moved to ask. Disraeli felt his way carefully, and sought inspiration in England's past, in an apparent golden age before the political upheavals attending in particular the Stuart kings. Actually, as we have seen, in *Sybil* the rot really started with the dissolution of the monasteries. 'Never', declared Sybil's father, Walter Gerard, 'was such a plunder ... it was worse than the Norman conquest; nor has England ever lost this character of ravage.'[9] Disraeli was careful not to call for an outright return to pre-Reformation days. The preservation of the monasteries arguably would have been consistent with the new order in Church and state. 'You might', continued Gerard, 'have changed the religion of the abbots as you changed the religion of the bishops: but you had no right to deprive men of their property, and property moreover which, under their administration, so mainly contributed to the welfare of the community.'[10] In discussing the fate of Charles I a century later, Disraeli also addressed the themes of social cohesion and national unity, in what some may consider a somewhat fanciful reading of English history.

> Thanks to parliamentary patriotism [he rather tendentiously observed] the people of England were saved from ship-money, which money the wealthy paid, and only got in its stead the customs and excise, which the poor mainly supply. Rightly was King Charles surnamed the Martyr; for he was the holocaust of direct taxation. Never yet did man lay down his heroic life for so great a cause: the cause of the Church and the cause of the Poor.[11]

[8] *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (ser. 3), vol. 79, cols 555–69 (11 April 1845).
[9] Disraeli, *Sybil*, 63.
[10] Ibid. 64.
[11] Ibid. 230.

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Throughout his life Disraeli professed a nostalgia for the lost world of the Stuarts. With that dynasty's effective demise in 1714 had been forfeited the chance of a historic compromise between Anglicanism and Catholicism, and not least of a reconciliation between Ireland and Great Britain. As always, he guarded himself against accusations of Ultramontanism, describing 'the English nation' as 'at all times a religious and Catholic people, but who even in the days of the Plantagenets were anti-papal'. Their loyalty was to 'the Catholic and Apostolic Church, independent of any foreign dictation'.[12] The opportunity for a great national rapprochement of religions might yet recur, but not, he felt certain, under Peel's direction. Like the rest of Young England, Disraeli looked to a revival of traditional Toryism, of 'the party that ruled Ireland by a scheme which reconciled both churches ... a party that has prevented the Church from being the salaried agent of the state, and has supported through many struggles the parochial polity of the country which secured to every labourer a home'.[13] To Disraeli, traditional Toryism took on a strongly religious dimension.

> It sympathises with the lowly, it looks up to the Most High; it can count its heroes and its martyrs. [Indeed] ... toryism will yet rise from the tomb over which Bolingbroke shed his last tear, to bring back strength to the Crown, liberty to the Subject, and to announce that power has only one duty: to secure the social welfare of the PEOPLE ...[14]

The search for national religious reconciliation had wider implications still for Disraeli. It was addressed in a key scene in *Sybil*, in which Egremont, in the kind of debate which Disraeli so much enjoys, confronted the Tractarian vicar, St Lys, over ritualistic tendencies within the Church of England. 'The people of this country', asserted Egremont, 'associate them with an enthralling superstition and a foreign dominion.' But, countered St Lys:

> ... forms and ceremonies existed before Rome ... Rome did not invent them: upon their practice we cannot consent to her

[12] Ibid. 21.
[13] Ibid. 272–3.
[14] Ibid. 273.

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> founding a claim to supremacy. For would you maintain then that the church did not exist in the time of the prophets? Was Moses then not a churchman? And Aaron, was he not a high priest? Ay! Greater than any pope or prelate, whether he be at Rome or at Lambeth.[15]

This takes us into an area of religious discourse that Disraeli was to make particularly his own, his insistence on Christianity's profound indebtedness to Judaism. This, he felt, put the long-standing rivalries between the various Christian churches into due perspective.

> In all these church discussions [observes Disraeli's effective *alter ego*, St Lys], we are apt to forget that the second Testament is only a supplement. Christianity is completed Judaism, or it is nothing. What has Rome to do with its completion? ... I do not bow to the necessity of a visible head in a defined locality. When Omnipotence deigned to be incarnate, the Ineffable Word did not select a Roman frame. The prophets were not Romans; the apostles were not Romans; she who was blessed above all women, I never heard she was a Roman maiden. No, I should look to a land more distant than Italy, to a city more sacred even than Rome.[16]

Disraeli had been captivated by his visit to Jerusalem in 1831. The experience had quickened his sense of ethnic identity, whereas his religious identity (formally at least) remained Anglican following his baptism at the age of twelve. Disraeli always retained an ambiguity about his Jewishness, but in the 1840s he came to view it in a more positive light, perhaps in compensation for his rejection by Peel in 1841. His reinvention of Jewish identity found expression in *Coningsby*, in the character of Sidonia, one of 'the aristocracy of Nature',[17] proud of his race, omniscient, a powerful if usually unseen influence in European affairs, probably modelled on a member of the Rothschild dynasty. In 1847, Disraeli took the brave decision to speak out in favour of Jewish emancipation in the House of Commons,[18] but his argument that Christianity

[15] Ibid. 111–12.
[16] Ibid. 112.
[17] Disraeli, *Coningsby*, 232.
[18] *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (ser. 3), vol. 95, cols 1321–30 (16 December 1847).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S042420840000142X Published online by Cambridge University Press

owed everything to Judaism found little favour among Tory backbenchers. The whole theme was explored much more fully in his novel *Tancred*, published in the same year. This is an intriguing and strange tale about a young English aristocrat, a quintessentially Disraelian creation, who journeys to Palestine in search of truth, as 'the Creator of the world speaks with men only in this land'.[19] Like *Sybil*, *Tancred* was concerned with national decline. England in the 1840s was portrayed as given over to materialism and railway mania, comfort instead of civilization, while beneath the surface lurked dark social forces such as Chartism or even revolution on the European model. 'The people of this country have ceased to be a nation, they are a crowd', lamented Tancred.[20] They had been let down by time-serving political and religious leaders. 'The English are really neither Jews nor Christians, but follow a sort of religion of their own, which is made every year by the bishops, in what they call a parliament, a college of muftis.'[21] What a contrast with the lands of the East, the cradle of so many religions, where spiritual values still prevailed over that graven image, progress. As in *Sybil*, a key scene in *Tancred* consisted of a debate in a significant location, in this case between the two principal characters in a garden at Bethany near Jerusalem. 'Are you', asked Eva, the nobly born Jewish lady, of Tancred, 'of those Franks who worship a Jewess; or of those who revile her, break her images, and blaspheme her pictures?'[22] The intolerance and divisions within Christendom were contrasted with the tolerance and inclusiveness of the East. And here Eva moved on to an argument of particular significance for Disraeli.

> Now tell me [she asked], suppose the Jews had not prevailed upon the Romans to crucify Jesus, what would have become of the Atonement? The holy race supplied the victims and the immolators. What other race could have been entrusted with such a consummation? ... We have saved the human race, and you persecute us for it.[23]

[19] Disraeli, *Tancred*, 268.
[20] Ibid. 52.
[21] Ibid. 215.
[22] Disraeli, *Tancred*, 194; again, note the Virgin Mary's significance for Disraeli. The term 'Franks' harks back to European crusaders in medieval times.
[23] Ibid. 199.

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One historian, Jane Ridley, has noted another element possibly at work here. *Tancred* was mostly written in the aftermath of Peel's removal from office in mid 1846, and, as she observes:

> Disraeli was too keenly attuned to the political mood not to realize the symbolic religious dimension to Peel's fall ... Disraeli's Judaeo-Christian interpretation of the atonement mirrored, or rather justified, his role in crucifying Peel, the mediator, redeeming the sins of politics through his crucifixion. Without the agency of Disraeli, what would have become of Peel's atonement?[24]

'I observe', remarked Eva, 'that Jesus was as fond of asking questions as of performing miracles.'[25] As we have seen, Disraeli was also keen on posing questions on religious matters in his novels, but he offered very few answers. In *Tancred* the hero had a vision on Mount Sinai, where an angel instructed him to 'announce the sublime and solacing doctrine of theocratic equality'.[26] The reader is not enlightened further, and one is reminded that Disraeli was always more adept in discovering political rather than spiritual solutions. The Ottoman Empire impressed him not least as it seemed to have found an answer to the problem of religious diversity. 'I aspire', declared the emir Fakredeen in *Tancred*, 'to a dominion where I have to govern the Maronites who are Christian, the Metoulis who are Mahomedans, the Anzareys who are Pagan, and the Druses who are nothing'.[27] Perhaps the inspiration of the East could have provided an answer to what Disraeli perceived as the problem of Britain's national decline.

> It is finished with England [asserted Fakredeen]; Louis-Philippe can take Windsor Castle when he pleases. [But] ... let the Queen of England ... transfer the seat of her empire from London to Delhi ... We will acknowledge the Empress of India as our suzerain, and secure for her the Levantine coast. If she likes, she shall have Alexandria as she now has Malta.[28]

[24] Ridley, *Young Disraeli*, 331.
[25] Disraeli, *Tancred*, 196.
[26] Ibid. 300.
[27] Ibid. 208.
[28] Ibid. 270–1.

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Whatever else this be, it is certainly prophetic, and it does have subtle religious implications. The word 'imperialism' would not enter the English language until the 1870s, yet in *Tancred* Disraeli sketched forth much of what would be accomplished by his own and other British governments in the course of the half-century before the end of World War I. Queen Victoria would indeed become Empress of India, and later the capital of the Raj would indeed be moved to Delhi. Similarly Alexandria would be seized, though by Gladstone, not Disraeli; and, far from capturing Windsor, Louis-Philippe's successors would be manoeuvred out of large areas of the Middle East by British soldiers and politicians. During this period there developed a distinct sense of what might be termed manifest destiny, a still stronger perception of the British as a chosen people. It is not too much to say that by the start of the twentieth century the defence of Britain's imperial mission had replaced defence of the Church of England at the heart of Conservative party ideology.

In one other quasi-religious sense *Tancred* was also prescient. 'All the great things', it stated boldly at one point, 'have been done by the little nations.'[29] This must rate as one of Disraeli's less sincere utterances, and later as Prime Minister he would become notorious for his lack of sympathy with small nationalities. But in *Tancred* he lent expression to what had only recently become a subject of popular interest, the return of English Jews of the diaspora to the Promised Land. Here at least was a little nation worthy of Disraeli's solicitude. During the 1840s, the main advocate in Britain of what would later become known as Zionism was the MP Lord Ashley, later to become the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury. A prominent Evangelical, he considered that the conversion and restoration of the Jews to their ancient homeland would be a fulfilment of biblical prophecy and bring about the second coming and the millennium.[30] This was not quite Disraeli's agenda, but already in the 1840s the fate of Palestine was becoming an issue in European diplomacy, in a way that would portend developments in the early twentieth century. Palmerston, for whom Disraeli professed admiration in *Tancred*, was anxious to check French ambitions

[29] Ibid. 236.

[30] Victoria Clark, *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism* (New Haven, CT, 2007), 66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S042420840000142X Published online by Cambridge University Press

in Syria by securing British interests in the Holy Land; and in 1841, he cooperated with Lord Ashley in establishing an Anglican-Lutheran bishopric of Jerusalem. As mentioned in *Tancred*, the first incumbent was a convert from Judaism.[31] This use of religion for avowedly secular purposes caused further crisis within the Oxford Movement, and helped to speed Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism. But Palmerston's priority, just like Balfour's in 1917, was to turn the Jews into an unofficial British garrison in Palestine, as the French were already doing with the Maronites in Syria.

Disraeli's attitude to proto-Zionism, it must be said, remained ambiguous. Only once does he seem to have expressed fervent support for a Jewish recolonization of Palestine. This was in 1851, in a conversation with Lord Stanley, son and heir to Disraeli's political boss, the fourteenth Earl of Derby. Stanley was impressed. Like Smythe and Manners, he had at times found himself wondering how far Disraeli believed in anything at all.[32] In 1851 Disraeli and his party were out of office, but when later he became Prime Minister he did nothing for the Jews in Palestine, and instead chose to establish a British protectorate in Cyprus, a possibility also hinted at in *Tancred*.[33] There are several possible reasons for this. He considered that exile made a race more virile, and where Judaism (and indeed most things) was concerned, Disraeli's emphasis was invariably on race rather than on religion. In *Tancred* he even bracketed the Jews with their traditional enemies, the Armenians, declaring that 'if you want to make a race endure, rely upon it you should expatriate them'.[34] Also, like those well-assimilated Jews who later opposed the Balfour Declaration, Disraeli may have feared that the establishment of a Jewish homeland might call into question the loyalty of British Jews to throne and empire. Finally, he probably considered that the Jewish community would flourish better not as an independent nation but as a powerful influence behind the scenes (whether in Britain or abroad), as personified by the all-pervading character Sidonia in *Coningsby*. Disraeli was always fascinated by intrigue, but his hint at what would later in

[31] Disraeli, *Tancred*, 194.
[32] Bradford, *Disraeli*, 186.
[33] Disraeli, *Tancred*, 244.
[34] Ibid. 198.

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some quarters be termed a Jewish world conspiracy would leave a sinister echo in the twentieth century.

This essay has focused mainly on the 1840s. The decade's middle years were Disraeli's most productive as a novelist, and the three volumes of the Young England trilogy have all stood the test of time. They reveal the author's intense engagement with questions of religion and identity, and in particular his sense that the Church of England, working in parallel with government, could provide a potent force for national renewal and reconciliation, as well as a vital barrier against the twin perils of revolution and bureaucratic despotism. Disraeli was confident that the instincts of the English people were basically Anglican as well as Tory, and that a reinvigorated, more inclusive, national Church could override even such inveterate divisions as those between Stuart and Hanoverian, Britain and Ireland, and indeed Gentile and Jew.

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