

## George Eliot & the “real drama of Evangelicalism”

Presented by Loretta Willems  
Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
July 8, 2018

The title of this sermon, given in your Order of Service is “George Eliot and the ‘real drama of Evangelicalism,’” which is a quote from one of her essays. Unless you studied English literature in college, you may have never heard of the writer known as George Eliot. But at one time she was as well-known as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. George Eliot was not her real name. It was the pseudonym she assumed when she began writing fiction. Before I say any more about her, though, I want to back up and tell you more about the remarkable woman who became the writer we know as George Eliot.

George Eliot’s real name was Mary Ann Evans. She was born on November 22, 1819 to a prosperous yeoman family. Even as a small child her father recognized her intelligence. He paid for her to attend a boarding school run by two sisters committed to quality education for women who gave her a good grounding in language, music and composition. When she returned home after her time at the school was complete, her father paid for further private instruction in music and language. He also paid for any books she wanted, which allowed her to pursue a serious study of theology, church history, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, geology, entomology. That self-disciplined study continued all her life. By the time she was a mature adult she was able to read German, French, Italian, Latin and Greek so fluently that she was chosen to translate for English publication two major works of German scholarship that are still in print today. To quote my Victorian Literature professor, Mary Ann Evans, the women history knows as George Eliot, was Victorian England’s closest approximation to a “Renaissance Man.”

George Eliot was also a woman who was deeply serious about religious faith and religious belief. In adolescence, the young Mary Ann whole-heartedly embraced the Evangelical faith and theology of the women who owned the boarding school she attended, women she loved and respected. She brought that fervent faith back to her Broadchurch Anglican home where it was accepted and respected if not completely understood. Then, in her early twenties she met a Unitarian family who took her under their wings. Charles and Caroline Hennell Bray, “*were pillars of the cultivated, intelligent Unitarian Congregation of the Gravel Pit Chapel*” (37). Caroline’s elder brother, Charles Christian Hennell, a London merchant, was the author of the book, *An Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity* (1838), a careful, critical examination of biblical literature. These new friends introduced Mary Ann to both the new biblical scholarship taking shape in Germany as well as the individuals in England who were talking and writing about current developments in science and social thought. It was a heady, exciting atmosphere and Mary Ann flourished in its embrace.

Mary Ann’s friendship with that Unitarian family provided her with the intellectual nourishment she could not find in local Evangelical circles or in her own home. She was stimulated by it, but also troubled. The theology she had previously accepted as simple truth was being challenged by powerful new ideas that called into question the beliefs on which her

religious and intellectual life had been built. After a period of intense mental and emotional struggle, she yielded to the intellectual force of the new ideas. She now became as passionately committed to the new vision as she had been committed to Evangelicalism.

The Hennells and Brays effectively became Mary Ann's new family. Recognizing her intelligence, they encouraged her participation in the life of liberal Victorian intellectual circles. Through them she met many of its leading thinkers, --including Ralph Waldo Emerson who stayed with the Brays on a trip to England in. Emerson was deeply impressed with Mary Ann who was twenty-eight years old when that encounter with Emerson took place. He had good reason to be impressed.

Two years earlier Mary Ann had completed and published the translation of a revolutionary work of German scholarship, David Friedrich Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu*, which was published in 1846, under the title, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. Mary Ann's translation is still in print. As her biographer, Gordon Haight, notes: "*Few books of the nineteenth century have had a profounder influence on religious thought in England*" (59). The challenge this book presented to traditional Christian belief was as great as Darwin's, *The Origin of Species*. Then, in 1854, Mary Ann's translated and published another book that deeply disturbed traditional Christians, Ludwig Feuerbach's, *The Essence of Christianity*. Mary Ann's translation of this book is also still in print, still the standard translation.

Mary Ann Evans was no longer just a private individual known only to her friends and family. She was publically visible not only as the translator of disturbing religious scholarship, but also as the author essays and book reviews highly critical of Evangelical authors. Then in 1854, the same year that the Feuerbach translation was published, she took a step that made her even more notorious. She began to live openly with a married writer, George Lewes, who was separated from his wife, but unable to get a divorce. Both Mary Ann and George Lewes considered their relationship a marriage, even if not one recognized as legal. Their liaison scandalized not only the general public but their friends as well.

It was George Lewes who suggested to Mary Ann that she try her hand at fiction. She was hesitant, but Lewes convinced her to give it a try, urging her to write something for one of the periodicals that published serialized fiction. There was a problem, however, one that both of them saw --her notoriety. Mary Ann wanted to write about Evangelical Christianity, and she wanted people to read it without the prejudice of the scandal associated with the name Mary Ann Evans. She decided to use a pseudonym. The name she chose was George Eliot, and that is how I shall now refer to her.

The title of Eliot's first book was *Scenes of Clerical Life*, which was published in 1858. The book was an instant success, and the presentation of the Evangelical world was so sympathetic, people assumed that the author was a clergyman. That idea was strengthened with the publication of Eliot's next book, a full length novel, *Adam Bede*. People began to speculate about the author's true identity, and opinion settled on a man who was perfectly willing to let people think he was the famous author. Eliot had had enough. She allowed her publisher to reveal her true identity. That revelation caused more than a bit of an uproar. As one critic noted:

*“Many readers felt they had been badly deceived: the clerical gentleman who stressed so impressively the demands of duty in his vivid picture of a Christian society turned out to be a female atheist living with another woman’s husband.”*

That perceived contradiction became the focus of Victorian criticism from that time forward. Impressively, Victorian literary critics reveal a genuine attempt to do justice to Eliot’s work in spite of what they knew about the author’s life. They recognized that here was a great talent, and they respected that. Readers, too, were won over. They saw in the novels a deeply intelligent, morally serious woman who also had a lively sense of humor. Many of her readers also found help in their own wrestling with religious faith. They saw genuine wisdom in what Eliot wrote. Women wrote long letters to her in which they poured out their hearts. Aspiring authors sought her out and sent her their manuscripts. Queen Victoria asked for her signature and recommended her books to her friends. English society even began to accept Eliot’s relationship with George Lewes. They lived together as man and wife until Lewes’ death in 1878, a total of twenty-four years. George Eliot’s courage, integrity and disciplined work were vindicated in own lifetime. She lived to see herself acclaimed as England’s the greatest living novelist.

I would like to give you a taste of Eliot’s own words. After the interlude I will read a passage from *Adam Bede* that addresses what she saw as the “real drama of Evangelicalism.”

## **Part II: Dinah’s Sermon**

George Eliot had a profound understanding of Evangelical theology, and I think, perhaps, she can help us understand an aspect of Evangelicalism that tends to make religious liberals like us uneasy—the intense focus on Jesus, Jesus language and Jesus devotion. To do that, I want to read a section from *Adam Bede*, Eliot’s second book of fiction. The setting is rural England in the year 1799. Methodist revivals are sweeping the country. In the scene that follows a crowd of people have gathered to hear a young, woman named Dinah, who is a Methodist lay-preacher. This is the sermon Eliot wrote for Dinah to preach:

### **Dinah’s Sermon**

*“Dear friends, ... you have all of you been to church, and I think you must have heard the clergyman read these words: ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath appointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.’ Jesus Christ spoke those words—he said he came to **preach the Gospel to the poor**. I don’t know whether you ever thought about those words much; but I will tell you when I remember first hearing them. It was on just such a sort of evening as this, when I was a little girl, and my aunt as brought me up, took me to hear a good man preach out of doors, just as we are here. I remember his face well: he was a very old man, and had very long white hair; his voice was very soft and beautiful, not like any voice I had ever heard before. I was a little girl, and scarcely knew anything, and this old man seemed to me such a different sort of a man from anybody I had ever seen before, that I thought he had perhaps come down from the sky to preach to us, and I said, ‘Aunt, will he go back to the sky tonight, like the picture in the Bible?’*

*'That man of God was Mr Wesley, who spent his life in doing what our blessed Lord did —preaching the Gospel to the poor—and he entered into his rest eight years ago. I came to know more about him years after, but I was a foolish thoughtless child then, and I remembered only one thing he told us in his sermon. He told us as 'Gospel' meant 'good news.' The Gospel, you know, is what the Bible tells us about God.*

*'Think of that now! Jesus Christ did really come down from heaven, as I, like a silly child, thought Mr Wesley did; and what he came down for, was to tell good news about God to the poor. Why, you and me, dear friends, are poor. We have been brought up in poor cottages, and have been reared on oat-cake, and lived coarse; and we haven't been to school much, nor read books, and we don't know much about anything but what happens just around us. We are just the sort of people that want to hear good news. For when anybody's well off, they don't much mind about hearing news from distant parts; but if a poor man or woman's in trouble and has hard work to make out a living, they like to have letters to tell 'em they've got a friend as will help 'em. To be sure, we can't help knowing something about God, even if we've never heard the Gospel, the good news that our Saviour brought us. For we know everything comes from God: don't you say almost every day, 'This and that will happen, please God;' and 'We shall begin to cut the grass soon, please God to send us a little more sunshine?' We know very well we are altogether in the hands of God: we didn't bring ourselves into the world; we can't keep ourselves alive while we're sleeping; the daylight, and the wind, and the corn, and the cows to give us milk—everything we have comes from God. And he gave us our souls, and put love between parents and children, and husband and wife. But is that as much as we want to know about God? We see he is great and might, and can do what he will: we are lost, as if we was struggling in great waters, when we try to think of him.*

*'But perhaps doubts come into your mind like this: Can God take much notice of us poor people? Perhaps he only made the world for the great and the wise and the rich. It doesn't cost him much to give us our little handful of victual and bit of clothing; but how do we know he cares for us any more than we care for the worms and things in the garden ...? Will God take care of us when we die? And has he any comfort for us when we are lame and sick and helpless? Perhaps, too, he is angry with us; else why does the blight come, and the bad harvests, and the fever, and all sorts of pain and trouble? For our life is full of trouble, and if God sends us good, he seems to send bad too. How is it? How is it?*

*'Ah! Dear friends, we are in sad want of good news about God; and what does other good news signify if we haven't that? For everything else comes to an end, and when we die we leave it all. But God lasts when everything else is gone. What shall we do if he is not our friend?'*

Then Dinah told how the good news had been brought, and how the mind of God towards the poor had been made manifest in the life of Jesus, dwelling on its lowliness and its act of mercy.

*'So you see, dear friends,' she went on, 'Jesus spent his time almost all in doing good to poor people; he preached out of doors to them, and he made friends of poor workmen, and taught them and took pains with them. Not but what he did good to the rich too, for he was full of love to all [people], only he saw as the poor were more in want of his help. So he cured the lame and the sick and the blind, and he worked miracles to feed the hungry, because, he said, he was sorry for them; and he was very kind to the little children, and comforted those who had lost their friends; and he spoke very tenderly to poor sinners that were sorry for their sins.*

*'Ah! Wouldn't you love such a man if you saw him—if he was here in this village? What a kind heart he must have! What a friend he would be to go to in trouble! How pleasant it must be to be taught by him.*

*'Well, dear friends, who was this man? Was he only a good man—a very good man, and no more—like our dear Mr Wesley, who has been taken from us? .... He was the Son of God—'in the image of the father,' the Bible says. That means, just like God, who is the beginning and end of all things—the God we want to know about. So then, all the love that Jesus showed to the poor is the same love that God has for us. We can understand what Jesus felt because he came in a body like ours, and spoke words such as we speak to each other. We were afraid to think what God was before—the God who made the world and the sky and the thunder and lightning. We could never see him; we could only see the things he had made; and some of these things was very terrible, so as we might well tremble when we thought of them. But our blessed Saviour has showed us what God is in a way us poor ignorant people can understand; he has showed us what God's heart is, what his feelings are towards us.'*

~ ~ ~

George Eliot knew that the word *Gospel* means “good news,” and she understood how the Gospel preached by Evangelicals could be heard as Good News. She no longer experienced Jesus as a personal friend and comforter—she no longer believed in a Jesus to whom she could pray, but she had no desire to “steal” other people’s Jesus from them. She knew that Jesus, could, indeed, be a “balm in Gilead” for people whose lives were hard, people for whom this earthly existence offered little in the way of goodness and hope.

George Eliot knew that the “real drama of Evangelicalism” was not all positive. None of the novels Eliot wrote after *Adam Bede* presents Evangelicalism in the same warm light as her first two books of fiction. In fact, not long after *Adam Bede* came out, she wrote a novel, *Silas Marner*, that is a dramatic critique of the dark side of Evangelicalism and presents the inadequacy of its beliefs and theology.

Eliot never returned to what she referred to as “dogmatic Christianity,” but she never lost her belief in the love she saw embodied in the figure of Jesus. That love remained for her the ultimate meaning of life.

This country today is caught up in a different Evangelical drama than the one George Eliot presented in her fiction. Ours is a political drama in which Evangelicalism has come to be identified with the Religious Right, a political label for White Conservative Christians. In this charged political atmosphere it is important to know that not all Evangelical Christians in this country are part of the Religious Right. Not only are African-American churches overwhelmingly Evangelical, almost all the immigrant Christian churches you see around this country are as well. There are also white Evangelicals who are sharply critical of the Religious Right and see the political platform of the Religious Right as the antithesis of Evangelical faith.

We as religious liberals have every right to be critical of Evangelicals. It is legitimate to criticize Evangelical theology as well as the politics and actions of people who call themselves

Evangelicals. However, if we are to be effective in our criticism it is necessary to not demonize them. We need to see what we can affirm, see where we can find common ground. That common ground is the affirmation of the reality of love. We also believe that love is real; we also see love as salvific. We share that fundamental faith. It is important to remember that as we engage in this country's present Evangelical drama.