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The Victorian Crisis Of Faith In Mrs. Humphry Ward's Robert Elsmere

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Abstract: The diminishing of faith corresponds with a reduced sense of sin and its seriousness. This is closely tied to the rejection of the Church's moral doctrines, as faith is a unified whole. Consequently, the obligation of attending Sunday services loses significance and fails to compel attendance among those who do not believe in the seriousness of the sin of missing Mass. Several authors were shaped by this crisis, including Mrs. Humphry Ward, who authored Robert Elsmere. This paper explores the definitions of faith, the meaning of a crisis of faith, Darwin's Theory of Evolution and its role in the Victorian Crisis of Faith, as well as Victorian fiction, its notable authors, and novels. Additionally, it examines Mrs. Humphry Ward's life, provides an overview of Robert Elsmere, discussing its key characters and themes, and finally addresses the crisis of faith portrayed in the novel.

Keywords: The Victorian age, Humphry Ward, Robert Elsmere, Crisis of Faith.

INTRODUCTION: Faith is defined as the confidence in what we hope for and the assurance of things that are not visible. It is through faith that we remember notable figures from history. Faith helps us comprehend that the universe was created by God's command, so everything we see originates from what cannot be seen. Abel, for instance, offered a more acceptable sacrifice to God than Cain, and as a result, God acknowledged Abel's faith and regarded him as righteous. Even though Abel died, his faith continues to resonate. Similarly, Noah acted on faith when he followed God's warnings about events that were not yet evident. By building an ark to save his family, Noah condemned the world and was deemed righteous

through his faith. These individuals all passed away in faith, never receiving the promises in their lifetime but anticipating them from afar, taking joy in the knowledge that God had planned something better for the future, which included them (Nelson 11).

The Victorian Era was marked by significant change and development, which both benefited and challenged society. Progress was evident in the construction of railways, industrial growth, the reign of a female monarch, scientific advancements, and expanded educational opportunities for women. While these developments represented strides in various sectors, they also raised numerous concerns. Children as young as nine years old were working instead of attending school to support their families, regular churchgoers began to doubt their faith due to the influence of Darwinism, and women increasingly left their traditional caregiving roles to seek education. This period has been referred to as "the age of energy and invention; the age of doubt in faith and industry; the age of reform in politics and social class status, along with the reform of a woman's role; the age of empire; the age of reading; and the age of self-scrutiny" (Longman 1102-1117). Nevertheless, it was primarily an era of prosperity and economic growth, which led to widespread questioning and uncertainty regarding religion and the familiar aspects of life. This atmosphere of doubt inspired much of the poetry of the time, including Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and Gerard Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur," both of which explore the relationship between religion and science in that era.

Victorian England was deeply religious, and families during this era were generally large, diligent, and respectable, with religious instruction often beginning at home. They frequently attended church and read the Bible. Church attendance also contributed to a family's social status, but the lower middle and upper working classes felt excluded, as they were not welcomed in churches dominated by the upper class, particularly the Anglican Church or Church of England. Being a Roman Catholic in this period was often associated with being poor and low class, leading to exclusion from political positions and other societal penalties (xxx). As a result, many lower-class citizens established the Methodist and Nonconformist churches, which remain influential today. Although Anglicanism and Nonconformity were always available, many individuals, upon leaving home, joined the Methodists. These churches were led by Evangelicals and middle-class philanthropists and appealed to the working class by teaching them to read the Bible and offering social opportunities with the opposite sex—rare for that time. Despite fuller congregations, many middle- and working-class individuals still felt unwelcome due to their inability to contribute financially like the upper class. This sentiment persists today, with some churches perceived as exclusive to the wealthy, deterring attendance from those of poorer backgrounds. While religion was often seen as a middle-class privilege, most people were still married in a church, and their children were baptized there.

During this period, churches initiated programs to offer food, clothing, shelter, monetary support, and personal copies of the Bible to help the working class improve their conditions. These initiatives resemble the efforts of contemporary organizations like Agape, Good Samaritan, and the Jesus Community Center, which provide similar aid to the working poor in Logan County. However, a downside emerged when the working poor began to manipulate the system, feeling entitled to the assistance provided by the churches. After several years of experience as a church secretary, it became apparent that those within the working class or welfare system still believe they are owed certain rights from the church and often exploit the system to gain benefits. Meanwhile, scientists—geologists, physicists, and others—began scrutinizing religion, challenging the writings of the Bible, which was historically regarded as the oldest book known to humanity. This was difficult for people of that time, as science and religion had once complemented each other, creating a sense of harmony in the world. The tension escalated with Charles Darwin's publication The Origin of Species, which introduced the theory of Darwinism. Darwinism posits that "all species of organisms arise and develop through the natural selection of small, inherited variations that increase the individual's ability to compete, survive, and reproduce" (Webster Online), leading to the concept of "survival of the fittest."

The term "survival of the fittest," coined by British economist Herbert Spencer, was aligned with Charles Darwin's concept of natural selection. Spencer drew parallels between his economic theories and Darwin's ideas on evolution. The notion of survival of the fittest reinforced the belief that fate determines human endurance, suggesting that people might not be equipped to handle every challenge they face. As a result, individuals often hide their true selves by wearing figurative masks, observing boundaries, and adjusting their communication depending on the situation. This concept also echoed the Romantic Era belief that people should limit their families to what they could afford, considering their economic constraints. Darwinism, along with new scientific discoveries, posed significant challenges for both the church and society, leading to religious doubts and questioning. Despite being disproven, Darwinism's

influence has persisted from the nineteenth century into the twenty-first century. In contrast, poets such as Arnold and Hopkins sought religious truth in their work. Using vivid imagery and a distinct tone, they explored their perspectives on religion but reached different conclusions. Arnold's poetry conveys a sense of impending doom, while Hopkins' work offers a feeling of hope (Wynne-Davies 97-8).

Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" addresses religion and reflects on the diminishing spiritual values of the era. It suggests that the rise of existentialism, materialism, socialism, and Darwinism contributed to a decline in Christian faith. Arnold uses the imagery of the sea to symbolize eternity, continuity, and stability, which he associates with the church. However, the poem reveals a crisis when he describes the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, retreating…" (Arnold 1662). These lines convey a sense of lost hope, abandoned faith, and nostalgia for the past when faith was more certain. The phrase "…pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling…" (Arnold 1662) represents people, implying that although individuals may stray from the church or lose their faith due to the influence of science, they are eventually drawn back. Arnold references Sophocles, comparing the Greek tragedian's view of water as a symbol of human emotion, as seen in the line "…the turbid ebb and flow of human misery…" (Arnold 1662), a sentiment echoed in Antigone. The unpredictable nature of the sea parallels the uncertainty caused by Darwin's theory of evolution, exacerbating the crisis of religious faith. Ultimately, "Dover Beach" suggests that the world would be bleak if people abandoned belief in God in favor of science. Through the poem, Arnold advocates for philosophy and religion as sources of comfort in an uncertain world.

In his poem "God's Grandeur," Gerard Manley Hopkins addresses the spiritual decline of the Victorian era, but unlike Arnold, he offers hope for renewal. Hopkins begins by affirming that the world is "…charged with the grandeur of God…shining from shook foil…" (Hopkins 1792), a metaphor likening God's presence to flashes of light, possibly referencing electricity or lightning. This metaphor also has a Biblical connection, as seen in Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (NIV). Hopkins continues with another symbol of Biblical significance, "…the ooze of oil crushed…," which suggests richness and refers to the sacrament of olives used for various purposes, including food, medicine, light, and religious rituals, as reflected in Exodus 35:8: "…olive oil for the light…" (NIV). Hopkins' early lines emphasize the presence of God in the world. However, he then warns of humanity's failure to recognize God's authority: "…Why do men then now not reck his rod? Generations have trod, have trod, have trod…" (Hopkins 1792). Despite this, Hopkins reassures that "…nature is never spent…" (Hopkins 1793), reminding readers of nature's perpetual renewal, which symbolizes God's promise of grace and the rebirth that comes with each season. Hopkins criticizes humanity's exploitation of nature while simultaneously calling for change to restore God's blessings.

Theory

The Victorian era, especially following the publication of Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life in 1859, was marked by a profound religious crisis. Darwin's theory, which proposed that biological species, including humans, evolved over time through natural selection, directly challenged the prevailing religious doctrines of the period. The Victorian population, deeply influenced by Christian teachings, was unsettled by the idea that contradicted both their religious and scientific understandings, leading many to experience a deep sense of isolation. As one scholar noted, the Victorians "experienced a great age of [religious] doubt, the first that called into question institutional Christianity on such a large scale" (Online Source).

Interestingly, Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, had introduced early evolutionary ideas in his work Zoonomia or the Laws of Organic Life (1794), where he suggested that all animals shared a common origin and could improve over generations. Erasmus posited the existence of a "Great First Cause," which endowed the first creatures with the ability to evolve and pass on improvements to their offspring (Scotland 2). In addition to Charles Darwin, other prominent figures like geologist Charles Lyell contributed to this shifting scientific landscape. Lyell's work on rock strata and the extinction and creation of species eventually aligned with Darwin's theories, particularly after the publication of The Origin of Species in 1859 (Scotland 2-3).

Despite his groundbreaking work, Charles Darwin was not an infidel, and he rejected any association with overt attacks on Christianity, as evidenced by his polite refusal of Karl Marx's request to dedicate Das Kapital to him. Darwin even asserted that his work should not undermine the faith of sincere Christian believers (Scotland 2). Nevertheless, Victorian Christians struggled to reconcile Darwin's ideas with a literal interpretation of Genesis. They feared that questioning the Genesis account would lead to doubts about other key Christian doctrines, such as the resurrection. This tension was exacerbated by the literalist view, which

demanded adherence to a specific timeline of creation, denying any form of species modification or natural selection (Scotland 3).

Darwin's work, alongside other scientific advancements, posed a serious challenge to this literalism. Evidence accumulated that the earth had evolved over a vast period of time, and that marine life likely preceded land vegetation. Darwin's theory of natural selection also demonstrated a close relationship between species, showing that modification occurred and could be passed down through generations (Scotland 3).

Victorian fiction

Victorian fiction marked a significant transformation in English literature, with the novel emerging as the dominant literary form of the era. The novel became highly accessible and relatable to a wide audience, especially the middle class, due to its engaging plots and depiction of familiar social settings. Readers, many of whom came from the same middle class as the authors, identified with the protagonists and the urban landscapes in which these stories took place, fostering a deep connection between the narrative and its audience. Victorian novels often acted as a "mirror" of society, reflecting the values, opinions, and experiences of their readership (Wynne-Davies 97-8).

By the time of George Eliot's death in 1880, the genre had undergone significant changes in both content and readership, signaling the end of the major phase of Victorian fiction. However, many of the novels that followed still drew upon themes and concerns from the earlier Victorian period.

Interestingly, the term "Victorian" was not widely used by the first readers of Dickens and George Eliot, and it only gained popularity later, particularly among Edwardians, who often used it with a critical connotation. The major Victorian writers, including Dickens and Eliot, were heavily influenced by the preceding Romantic era, which elevated themes of common life, emotion, and individual experience. Romantic ideals and creative impulses continued to shape mid-Victorian literature, resulting in a tension between modern materialism and lingering Romanticism, as Victorian fiction grappled with both practical concerns and imaginative, Gothic, and melodramatic elements.

During this time, the novel as a literary form lacked the formal definition it would later acquire. It was understood primarily as a narrative focused on everyday life, as opposed to the more fantastical elements of romance. Even as late as 1884, Henry James could lament that the novel "had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it," reflecting the evolving nature of the genre (James, qtd. in Louis James).

In conclusion, Victorian fiction was a dynamic and evolving genre that mirrored the complexities of society, with authors like Charles Dickens leading the charge in blending social commentary, moral lessons, and relatable characters into captivating narratives. While rooted in the Romantic traditions of the previous generation, Victorian novels also reflected the era's materialism and fascination with the darker aspects of life, leading to a rich and multifaceted literary legacy.

Context:

Charles Dickens and Mary Augusta Ward (Mrs. Humphry Ward) both played prominent roles in Victorian fiction, contributing to its evolution in distinct ways. Dickens, as the prolific author of 15 novels and many other works, is renowned for his vivid characters, such as Uriah Heep, Fagin, and Scrooge, and for capturing London life in all its complexity. His writing, deeply concerned with social issues, is notable for addressing the plight of the poor and marginalized. Dickens drew on his personal experiences of poverty and labor—such as his time spent in a blacking factory after his father was imprisoned for debt. His novels, from Oliver Twist to Great Expectations, often explored the darker aspects of society while still infusing humor and satire. He critiqued social injustices while offering his readers complex, resonant narratives. Dickens' literary career also extended beyond his own novels, as he helped promote other writers and tackled important social issues through his weekly journals (Bidwell 222-4).

In contrast, Mary Augusta Ward's literary legacy is primarily associated with her novel Robert Elsmere (1888), which addressed religious crises within Victorian society. Drawing from the experiences of early Victorian clergymen, Ward explored the intellectual and spiritual struggles of the time, particularly the tension between traditional Anglican doctrines and emerging liberal theology influenced by German rationalism. Ward's work was unique in its sympathetic portrayal of characters experiencing religious doubt, and it generated widespread debate for its handling of faith and moral judgment. The novel, while radical in its religious themes, was also deeply rooted in the intellectual environment Ward inhabited—she was part of a prominent intellectual family and was well-versed in classical languages, philosophy, and theology.

Both Dickens and Ward exemplify the range of Victorian fiction, from Dickens' social commentary and moral allegories to Ward's exploration of intellectual and religious doubt. While Dickens entertained and

critiqued societal norms, Ward pushed the boundaries of Victorian morality, particularly concerning religion, influencing debates around faith and intellectual inquiry.

The novel was influenced by the religious struggles of early Victorian clergymen, including Ward's own father, Tom Arnold, as well as figures like Arthur Hugh Clough and James Anthony Froude. Froude's novel The Nemesis of Faith particularly served as inspiration. The story follows Robert Elsmere, an Oxford clergyman who begins to question Anglican Church doctrines after engaging with the works of German rationalists such as Schelling and David Strauss. Rather than abandoning religion entirely or converting to Roman Catholicism, Elsmere embraces a form of "constructive liberalism." This concept, which Ward drew from philosopher Thomas Hill Green, emphasizes social service among the underprivileged and uneducated. Ward was motivated to write Robert Elsmere after hearing a sermon by John Wordsworth, who argued that religious uncertainty leads to moral corruption. In response, she crafted a novel that sympathetically portrayed individuals grappling with faith, loosely basing her characters on contemporary intellectuals like Benjamin Jowett, Mark Pattison, and her uncle, Matthew Arnold.

The novel attracted widespread critical attention, including a well-known review by William Ewart Gladstone. He criticized its suggestion that moral judgment should be detached from traditional religious doctrines. Oscar Wilde, in a more humorous critique, remarked in his essay The Decay of Lying that Robert Elsmere was essentially "Arnold's Literature and Dogma with the literature removed," (Black 735–743).

Despite the controversy, Robert Elsmere remained a bestseller, largely due to Ward's sensitive handling of its themes. At the time, Victorian readers were highly sensitive to perceived blasphemy, and literary depictions of Jesus Christ outside of theological or devotional contexts were uncommon. A similar precedent had been set a decade earlier by Lew Wallace's Ben-Hur, which included Christ as a character but portrayed him as the divine Savior. Wallace originally intended to depict Jesus as merely human, but if he had done so, he might have faced the same fierce criticism that Ward encountered.

The novel resonated deeply with both intellectuals and agnostics, who saw it as a work of liberation, as well as with religious readers, many of whom viewed it as a dangerous step toward apostasy. Due to its popularity, unauthorized editions proliferated, often matching or even surpassing the sales of the official versions. After remaining out of print for twenty-five years, Robert Elsmere was republished in 2013 as a scholarly edition, which included excerpts from Gladstone's review (Burstein, 2013).

5. Analysis:

Robert Elsmere, a novel by Mrs. Humphry Ward, was first published in 1888 and quickly became a commercial success, selling over a million copies. It even won the admiration of renowned writer Henry James. The central themes of Robert Elsmere revolve around the protagonist's spiritual crisis and his marriage. Ward positions Elsmere as a figure who absorbs major intellectual developments of the Victorian era, including Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, German historical analysis, and higher biblical criticism (Harris 818–825).

Mrs. Ward's second novel, published in 1888, was a phenomenal success. It tells the story of a Church of England rector who, after losing faith in the miraculous elements of the Gospels, feels morally compelled to resign from his clerical position—a decision that deeply distresses his devout wife. Before taking this step, he seeks guidance from Henry Grey, a fellow at St. Anselm's (modeled on Balliol College). Grey had previously inspired Elsmere, although he had not followed him in his complete rejection of Christian orthodoxy. The character of Grey is based on the idealist Oxford philosopher Thomas Hill Green (1836–1882), whom Ward personally knew and whose lectures she had attended. Green's philosophical idealism aimed to preserve a spiritual understanding of life while dismissing supernatural elements in the Gospels as mere "beautiful fairy tales." Ward's own religious views seem to align closely with Green's philosophy.

After leaving his rural parish, Elsmere relocates to a poor district in London, where he meets Murray Edwardes, a Unitarian minister who has moved beyond traditional Unitarian beliefs and now delivers public lectures promoting a straightforward ethical philosophy. Though Elsmere does not consider becoming a Unitarian—believing that once one begins questioning doctrine, stopping at Unitarianism is irrational—he finds inspiration in Edwardes' efforts. He also perceives Unitarianism as lacking depth and being disconnected from the working class. Encouraged by Edwardes, he joins an educational club for laborers and soon emerges as a leading figure in the group. There, he begins delivering weekly Sunday lectures, offering a reinterpretation of Jesus' teachings that removes supernatural elements. His new religious vision presents theism with Jesus as a great moral teacher, particularly relevant to Western society. Eventually, he establishes an organization called "The Brotherhood of Christ," which embraces Jesus' ethical ideals and the

theistic philosophy inspired by Green. Its mission is to uplift working-class men and women by providing them with a moral and intellectual framework to improve their lives (Ashton 72).

The novel quickly became a cultural phenomenon. Celebrated as the defining book of the decade, it sparked widespread debate, generating a flood of reviews ranging from praise to outright condemnation. It was frequently denounced in sermons, and unauthorized editions sold in large numbers across America and Canada. One of its most distinguished critics was William Ewart Gladstone, who had an intense and conflicted reaction to the book. While he acknowledged Ward's sincerity and intellectual depth, admiring her for offering what she believed to be a solution to the world's suffering, he was ultimately alarmed by its implications. He described Robert Elsmere as "a devout attempt, made in good faith, to simplify the difficult mission of religion in the world by discarding all the supposed lumber of Christian theology." Yet, he also feared that its central argument—the portrayal of Gospel narratives as myths—posed a fundamental threat to Christianity. His concern led him to engage in two extensive and passionate discussions with Ward about the novel's themes.

The central conflict in Robert Elsmere revolves around faith and doubt. While Catherine remains steadfast and even defiant in her belief, Robert experiences an irreversible crisis of faith. Catherine challenges him with a series of rhetorical questions, her conviction building to a climax: "Did not—did not—Jesus still live, and die, and rise again?—can you doubt—do you doubt—that He rose—that He is God—that He is in heaven—that we shall see Him?" (Ward, p. 112). Her words rise in intensity, culminating in the emphatic "Him." In stark contrast, Robert's response is subdued and final—his faith is shattered. Influenced by his intellectual mentors and extensive reading, he concludes that the Gospels are riddled with errors and reflect the credulity of their time. He can no longer accept that God was in Jesus in any way different from how He exists in any human being. As Gladstone later noted in his review, Robert's stance fundamentally undermines the entire Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and Redemption (Gladstone, p. 112). Robert confesses to Catherine, "There is something dead in me—something gone and broken. It can never live again—except in forms which now it would only pain you more to think of" (Ward, p. 113). His tone is flat, devoid of emotion, and final.

Beyond their religious divide, their relationship is strained by Catherine's feelings of love and betrayal, and Robert's internal conflict between love and conscience. Catherine is deeply hurt that Robert confided in the Squire and Grey rather than in her. She views Wendover as not just a skeptic but a morally indifferent man who neglected his tenants' suffering for decades until Robert forced his hand. "Was it right for a clergyman to discuss sacred things—with such a man?" (Ward, p. 114), she asks. American social reformer Julia Ward Howe echoes this concern, though for different reasons, acknowledging Wendover's intellectual honesty but noting his lack of religious sentiment. She argues that Robert should never have sought guidance from him (Howe, p. 112). Catherine, on the other hand, embodies "religious affection" and expresses her faith with deep emotion. However, she laments, "I know so little of books" (Ward, p. 115). Her simple trust is not enough for Robert, whose intellectual thirst demands more than unquestioning faith.

Robert struggles between his conscience and his emotions. For a moment, he nearly gives in to Catherine's plea to retreat into solitude and seek divine guidance, but having already sacrificed love for truth, he refuses to now "murder the sense of truth, for love" (Ward, p. 116). His wording is strikingly violent, revealing the depth of his internal turmoil. He acknowledges that he has, in the past, yielded to the influence of others, aligning with Sutherland's critique that he appears "weak and somewhat epicine" in earlier parts of the novel (Sutherland, p. 121). There is an element of self-reflection here, as Robert recognizes how easily he was swayed by Wendover, though he believes that the Squire merely accelerated an inevitable process. The theory of evolution, for example, had already begun "to press, to encroach, to intermeddle with the mind's other furniture" (Ward, p. 498). Nevertheless, Robert has now made his decision. His conscience dictates that he must renounce his position and "cease to be a minister of the Church of England" (Ward, p. 117), which he does.

This pivotal confrontation solidifies Robert's resolve but also highlights the profound personal cost for both him and Catherine. More than any other scene in this intellectual novel, this exchange exposes the emotional weight of his decision. Some of this intensity may have been inspired by Ward's own family history, particularly the religious struggles of her father, Thomas Arnold, who vacillated between the established church and Catholicism. While his crisis was one of denomination rather than faith, it was nonetheless dramatic (Beauman, p. 138). The dialogue between Robert and Catherine in this scene is more natural and poignant than Robert's earlier debates with his mentors. However, Ward's portrayal of Catherine as purely emotional, rather than intellectually engaged, is

somewhat limiting. This is particularly evident considering the first volume's frontispiece by Albert Sterner, which depicts Catherine reaching thoughtfully for a book. Moreover, the novel states that her favorite work is Augustine's Confessions—hardly the choice of someone uninterested in intellectual pursuits (Ward, p. 475). By relegating Catherine to a purely emotional role, Ward may be reflecting the conservative views that would later lead her to oppose the suffrage movement. Despite this, the novel effectively captures the generational clash between traditional Christianity and modern skepticism, as Beauman describes it, "the clash of older and younger types of Christianity" (Beauman, p. 138).

Mary Augusta Ward, born Mary Arnold in 1851, was part of a prominent family that included her uncle, Matthew Arnold, and her sister, who married into the Huxley family, making her the mother of Aldous Huxley. Mary grew up amidst the intellectual shifts brought about by Biblical criticism, Darwin's Origin of Species, and new discoveries in geology and astronomy. It was a period of significant intellectual excitement, but one that posed serious challenges to traditional religious beliefs (patheos: Online).

Robert Elsmere portrays the journey of a man grappling with these intellectual upheavals, presenting a variety of ideas and contemporary thought. The protagonist, Robert, an Anglican clergyman, finds his faith undermined by the impact of Biblical criticism and German philosophy. Reluctantly, he adopts the skeptical view of Christianity as a "fairy-tale" and struggles with estrangement from his wife due to his crisis of faith. However, instead of turning to atheism or strict orthodoxy, he forges a new path through social gospel ministry (ibid).

In her memoirs, written shortly before her death, Ward reflects on her early married life, describing peaceful moments with her husband in their Oxford home, where they studied amid a larger world of intellectual tension. She recalls, "Darwinism was penetrating everywhere; Pusey was preaching against its effects on belief," and mentions the influence of figures like her uncle Matthew Arnold and the stir caused by works like Supernatural Religion (A Writer's Recollections, I: 220). The intellectual climate of the time profoundly affected those living in it. Ward herself was infuriated by a lecture from Reverend John Wordsworth, who condemned thinkers she admired. In response, she wrote and distributed a pamphlet in protest, though it damaged her husband's career at Oxford (Sutherland 80). She later channeled her views into Robert Elsmere.

Much of the novel was written after Ward left Oxford, while renting rooms at Borough Farm in Surrey. The protagonist, an Oxford-trained Rector, works among the poor in his parish and wrestles with his shaken faith, influenced by his tutor, Edward Langham, and other intellectuals. In her 1911 introduction to the novel, Ward acknowledges Langham's character was inspired by her study of Amiel's Journal Intime, though Sutherland argues that Langham is based on Walter Pater, a close friend of Ward's husband. Robert is also shaped by Professor Grey, modeled on Ward's mentor, Thomas Hill Green, to whom she dedicated the book (Robert Elsmere, I: xii; Sutherland 115).

Ward claims that Robert is "a figure of pure imagination" (I: xlii), but he appears to be inspired by Edward Denison, a founder of the Settlement movement, and historian John Richard Green, whose doubts led him in a similar direction. The character of Catherine, Robert's wife, is said to have roots in real-life figures like Laura Lyttelton, to whom Ward also dedicated the novel (Sutherland 110). Ultimately, the novel's characters are not solely modeled on individuals but embody the larger religious turmoil of the period. Ward described the book as "a study in Modernism" (A Writer's Recollections, II: 99), with Robert representing many late 19th-century young men who either maintained outward religious conformity or abandoned organized religion entirely.

Catherine's voice trembled as she spoke again, her words slow and deliberate, as though weighed down by her heartbreak. "Robert, I am lost without you. This—this thing you have become—it's not the man I married. I don't know how to follow you into this darkness. But I can't abandon you either."

Robert looked into her tear-filled eyes, his own burden of sorrow deepening. "I am still here, Catherine," he whispered, "but the way we once understood things has changed for me. I can't pretend any longer, not even for your sake. I must be true to what I've discovered, even if it means losing everything I thought I could hold onto." They stood in silence, the weight of his words filling the space between them like a vast, unbridgeable chasm. The life they had shared, the faith that had once united them, now seemed to crumble away, leaving only the frail bonds of love to hold them together.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion highlights the intense emotional struggle surrounding faith and doubt, a theme commonly explored in Victorian literature. Leslie Stephen, an outspoken critic of excessive emotionalism, experienced a personal crisis of faith, a reflection of the anguish many Victorians expressed in various literary forms, including novels, poetry, memoirs, and letters. J.A. Froude, for instance, vividly

illustrated this turmoil through his protagonist in The Nemesis of Faith, who mourned the loss of childhood faith, while A.H. Clough poetically questioned whether life's purpose was to endure repeated pain in understanding human existence. Similarly, Mrs. Humphry Ward's Robert Elsmere depicted a minister's agonizing journey of losing his faith, marked by intense emotional struggle.

The central conflict in such narratives revolves around the tension between unwavering faith and shattering doubt. In Robert Elsmere, Catherine remains steadfast in her Christian convictions, despite her husband Robert's intellectual and spiritual collapse. Robert, however, has been persuaded by intellectual mentors and his own critical reading to doubt the authenticity of the Gospels and, ultimately, to reject the notion of Christ as divine. This crisis, as Gladstone notes in his review, undermines the very foundation of Christian belief in the Incarnation and Redemption, symbolizing the broader Victorian struggle between religious tradition and modern intellectual skepticism.

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