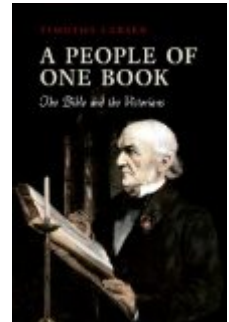


Timothy Larsen. *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 326 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-957009-6.



Reviewed by Walter Arnstein

Published on H-Albion (June, 2012)

Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski (Misericordia University)

The dustcover of this book portrays William Ewart Gladstone as he read the lessons at his local church. As not only four times prime minister but also, as David Bebbington contends in *The Mind of Gladstone* (2004), his nation's prime Christian apologist, he would appear an appropriate symbol of the central role that the Bible played in his society during his lifetime. Yet Gladstone is ignored almost altogether in Timothy Larsen's ten case studies that—together with a brief introduction and a brief conclusion—illuminate individual strands of the nineteenth-century religious tapestry. Few readers will be surprised to learn that the Christian Bible played a highly significant role in Victorian education, literature, and social reform, but the author takes special satisfaction in the discovery that even the most noted Christian skeptics or doubters were steeped in biblical imagery and in scriptural allusions. Larsen all but ignores the nineteenth-century rivalries between Protestant and Roman Catholics and between Anglicans and Dissenters; in chapter after chapter, he emphasizes instead that they shared a common culture,

a fascination in and a devotion to a common Bible—as a way of life, as a guide to conduct, and as a source of spiritual comfort. Thus the “people of one book” served as the unifying key to Victorian culture.

Each chapter focuses on one or two representatives of each sect or religious subdivision, and when he can find a plausible candidate, Larsen chooses a woman—because “accounts of religious history traditionally have so often focused overwhelmingly on men” (p. 7). The sentiment may be admirable, but Larsen neglects the degree to which mid-Victorian women were “forbidden to write in the traditional genres of theology, the treatise and the sermon,” as noted by Julie Melnyk.[1]. Yet he chooses Josephine Butler (1828-1906) to represent Evangelical Anglicanism, even though she “did not self-identify as an evangelical” (p. 220). She is best remembered indeed as the successful crusader against the double standard implicit in the Contagious Diseases Act, the temporary Victorian experiment that regulated legalized prostitution. Larsen then reminds us,

however, that not only was Butler married to a clergymen but her biographers have also neglected the manner in which she used scriptural language to promote social reform and ignored her own biblical writings. They included *The Lady of Shunem* (1894), “a deeply evangelical book, offering faith-filled encouraging devotional readings” and “*The Morning Cometh: A Letter to My Children* (1903) (p. 241). As she wrote shortly before her death, “I think our God remembers that we are the ‘Land of the Bible,’ and have for a century past sent the divine Word into every land where there is a language into which it can be translated” (p. 245).

Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), the British founder of modern nursing and hospital administration, is presented as the representative example of Liberal (or “Broad Church”) Anglicanism. Although she denied biblical miracles and the doctrines of the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, and bodily resurrection, she did believe in religious truths and never left the Church of England. Nightingale may have taken the Bible out of her system, Larsen contends, but she could never extricate it from her mental world. She saw her work in the Crimea through biblical lenses, and she regularly wrote sermons. Even as she readily accepted the import of the German “higher criticism” of the Bible, she happily compiled a Bowdlerized Bible for children. Larsen concludes therefore that, however unorthodox and unconventional Nightingale’s theology, it was in no fashion “nonbiblical.”

In a comparable fashion, Larsen has chosen women to represent two, at once influential but statistically tiny, Victorian denominations. Mary Carpenter (1807-77) is better remembered as the founder of reformatories for juvenile delinquents than as a Unitarian, a member of the Protestant tradition that rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and the claim that Jesus Christ was God. What she did not reject, the author insists, was an acceptance of the Bible or a belief in the factual truth of

most portions of the New Testament. Like her father, Dr. Lant Carpenter, she insisted that the Bible itself contradicted the formal proclamations of creeds and articles provided by church councils. Instead, Unitarianism alone “seemed the only faith supported by Scripture, unencumbered with tradition” (p. 151). The second edition of Lant Carpenter’s *Apostolic Harmony of the Gospels* (1838) was, by the permission of the young monarch, dedicated to Queen Victoria. His daughter followed suit with *Morning and Evening Devotions* (1845), and she emphasized teachings of the Bibles in her reformatory schools. Even as she steadfastly opposed all confessions and creeds in Unitarian churches, the Bible remained “absolutely central to her life, thought, piety, [and] spiritual practice” (p. 166). A close analogy may be found in the life, writings, and preaching of Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845), the Quaker best remembered as a prison reformer. Her pioneering Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners in Newgate proposed to “provide for the clothing, the instruction, and the employment of the women; to introduce them to a knowledge of the Holy Scriptures,” and she remained a staunch supporter of the British and Foreign Bible Society (p.179). Thus her *Texts for Every Day in the Year* (1830) and her kindred writings reinforced the theme of “a people of one book.” Fry took for granted “that Bible reading, or even pointing people to particular texts of Scripture, stood above any sectarian strife or ecclesiastical disputes” (p 186).

Catherine Booth (1829-90) is a somewhat surprising choice as a representative Methodist inasmuch as in 1878 her Salvation Army began as a distinct religious organization, but no doubt as a Wesleyan Methodist well versed in the scriptures, she “routinely thought, spoke, and wrote in biblical language and patterns of thought” (p. 90). In her pamphlet, *Female Teaching* (1861), she drew on the original Greek to argue that most scripture passages *did* encourage women to speak in church; the passages that supposedly prohibited them from doing so asked only that they do so in a

nonconfrontational manner. She was herself to begin a preaching ministry, and during her years as Mother of the Salvation Army, the Bible remained central to her public life.

The representative figures that Larsen chooses for the High Church Anglicans, the Roman Catholics, and the Dissenters (Baptists, Congregationalists, and English Presbyterians) are less surprising. Both Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-82), the leader of those High Church Tractarians who remained within the Church of England, and Nicholas Wiseman (1802-65), the leader in 1850, as archbishop of Westminster, of the newly restored Roman Catholic hierarchy in England, are generally seen as far more concerned with church creeds and traditions than with lay familiarity with the Bible. Larsen reminds us, however, that Pusey believed that “all truth does indeed lie in Holy Scripture” and insisted that “the most Tractarian book I ever open is the Bible” (pp. 19, 20). As Oxford University’s longtime Regius Professor of Hebrew, he soldiered on for many years writing Bible commentaries—as in his six-part work, *The Minor Prophets* (1860). Protestant critics of the “Papal Aggression” of 1850 accused Wiseman of doing everything in his power “to seduce Protestants from their scriptural faith” (p. 4). But Wiseman had begun his church career as a biblical scholar with a monograph on the Syriac version of the Old Testament. Later in England in the 1830s, in a series of lectures, he sought to persuade doubting Protestants that Roman Catholics believed that “there is no ground-work whatever for faith, except the written word of God” (p. 50). In his later years, as both Roman Catholic archbishop and cardinal, Wiseman found numerous occasions to cite ways in which Catholics took scripture more seriously than Protestants. At the same time, Wiseman insisted that amid an array of clamoring individual Protestant voices, the true love of scripture could be found only “in the true church” (p. 65).

The choice of Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92) as *the* representative of Protestant Dissenters appears altogether appropriate. In his heyday, in London’s gigantic Metropolitan Tabernacle, he was the most popular and successful preacher in all of England and beyond. His sermons were published in the tens of millions and translated into forty languages. Throughout his career, he insisted that the entire canon of the Bible was the Word of God. His “own holy earnestness” and his “passionate clarity and intensity could awaken conviction in others” (p. 259). Early in his life he prepared *The Interpreter*, a family Bible for household devotion with selected passages. The 1873 version added “a running comment and suitable hymns,” made respectably “attentive to Victorian morality” (pp. 263, 264). Although he never attended college, he fostered Bible studies by founding a pastors’ college to train ministers; it came to be known as “The Royal College of Spurgeons.” Throughout his life, he remained an unwavering opponent of criticism of the Bible, which for him remained an inerrant and infallible source of comfort, consolation, and encouragement.

Initially the most surprising inclusion in the work is a chapter on the most notorious atheist of the Victorian era, Charles Bradlaugh (1833-91). Bradlaugh was also a republican who sought to abolish the British monarchy; an advocate of birth control; the leader of the National Secular Society (a social organization that resembled a Nonconformist chapel); the editor of the weekly *National Reformer*; and, in his last years, a conscientious member of Parliament. Larsen understandably focuses on the manner in which the youthful Sunday School teacher first staunchly rebelled against Christianity and yet remained fixated on the Bible and all the contradictions and immoralities that he unearthed in its pages. In his public lectures, in his numerous debates with clergymen, and in *The Bible: What Is It* (1870), he time and again demonstrated not only his easy familiarity with chapter and verse of the Penta-

teach but also his ability to read and understand Hebrew. The author finds it fascinating that the “the great literary work of Bradlaugh’s mature life ... was a biblical commentary” (p. 84). Bradlaugh’s faithful associate during the later 1870s and early 1880s, Annie Besant (1847-1933), concurred that the Bible was a dangerous and indeed despicable book, appropriate for neither children nor adolescents. Yet Larsen demonstrates that in her memoirs and letters, Besant appeared “almost unable or unwilling to express a single thought without recourse to Scripture” (p. 78). A similar comment could be made about Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-95), the educational reformer and scientist best remembered as “Darwin’s Bull-Dog.” It was Huxley who proudly coined the word “agnostic” to denote a respectable form of religious unbelief. He began his famous debate on Charles Darwin’s theory with Bishop Samuel Wilberforce with the words: “The Lord hath delivered him into mine hands” (p. 202). Larsen reminds us that Huxley “habitually used biblical language and imagery in order to express his ideas” (p. 202). He referred to a collection of his lectures as “Lay Sermons,” and he devoted his final years not to scientific study but to biblical criticism. Whatever the scientific and historical errors and shortcomings of the Bible, Huxley insisted that it be kept in the school curriculum. After all, there still remained “in this old literature a vast residuum of moral beauty and grandeur.... For three centuries, this book has been woven into the life of all that is best and noblest in English history” (p. 210).

Larsen confirms thrice over that the Bible did indeed play a central role in the life of the Victorians and that believers and unbelievers alike were enveloped in its words, images, and allusions. The author is at his best in summarizing, in pamphlet, sermon, book, and manuscript, the manner in which significant nineteenth-century figures--nowadays identified primarily with secular causes--were often preoccupied with the scriptures. He is less successful in placing their distinct stories in a broader general context. Thus he pays no

attention to the Religious Census of 1851; in effect, he gives equal weight to 6,000 atheists, 19,000 Quakers, 37,000 Unitarians, 1,500,000 Dissenters, 1,500,000 Methodists, and 4,000,000 or more adherents of the Church of England. Nor does he pay heed to the versions of the Bible that were used or to how many books were published and distributed. The role of the Bible in Victorian music and art is also largely left out. Disregarded as well in this overview is the fact that, even as the Bible provided Victorians with a common culture, denominational rivalries could inspire sharp political divisions and occasional violence in the streets. Back in 1936, Sir Robert Ensor reminded us in his *England, 1870-1914* that no one would “ever understand Victorian England who does not appreciate that among highly civilized ... countries it was one of the most religious that the world has known” (p. 137). In the course of subsequent decades, numerous scholars were to neglect that aspect of the nineteenth-century British world, but Larsen is a member of a younger generation that in recent years has rediscovered that theme and provided well-documented reminders.

Note

[1]. Julie Melnyk, ed., *Women’s Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers* (New York: Garland, 1998), xii.

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Citation: Walter Arnstein. Review of Larsen, Timothy. *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2012.

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