Introduction

The Brontë sisters belong to those writers on whom so much has been written that a new full-length work calls for an explicit excuse, if not an apology. Such an excuse must incorporate the element of novelty, the *raison d'être* of any additional publication in an already well-researched field. Beyond that, the writer can only hope that the novelty will be perceived as part of a useful endeavour.

As no previous scholar has devoted a whole book to an attempt to situate the Brontë novels in the context of early and mid nineteenth-century religion – at least not a book readily available to students and researchers – this one may lay claim to being new in the sense that it attempts to do something that has not been done before on the same scale.[1] So far, so good; but a writer who proposes to add a 'first' to a mass of scholarship and criticism that includes hundreds of books must pause to wonder whether the reason for the lack of predecessors might be that the undertaking has seemed unnecessary in the past. A natural, and somewhat disturbing, corollary is the worry that such an attitude was – and remains – justified.

That worry may be articulated in two separate queries: has enough work been done on the Brontës and religion in the existing chapters, essays and articles by various authors, so that an entire book exclusively devoted to this line of enquiry is superfluous? Is that line itself of marginal interest and hence not sufficiently important to sustain a full-length effort?

While prepared to accommodate doubts in other respects, I am confident that the answer is 'no' in both cases. Although some excellent scholarship has been devoted to religious issues with a bearing on the Brontës and their work, previous efforts have either concentrated on isolated matters or presented general overviews. Taken together, they do not yield a full and balanced picture of the theme as a whole (nor, indeed, was there any reason to expect that they would). The second query has been answered for me over the last few years by a number of

Brontëans, who have repeatedly emphasised the desirability of closing what one of them referred to as 'a tremendous gap'.

The Brontës and Religion cannot claim to have achieved that, however. Work in this area soon convinced me that full coverage of the subject was too ambitious an aim for a single book; the first study must be followed by others written by people with different kinds of expertise. Another thing became clear as the magnitude of the task manifested itself: the scholar who sets out to remedy his/her profession's comparative neglect of religion in the Brontë fiction faces a peculiar aggregation of difficulties. Not only is he/she working in, and inevitably affected by, an intellectual climate which affords little scope for religious enquiry, as well as little readiness to allow for the potential power of religious feeling and experience in the context of artistic creation; the historical context itself is problematic, too: religious life in early nineteenth-century Britain was characterised by enormous complexity and variety which often threaten an investigator's foothold. Even the most attentive examiner runs into inconsistency and contradiction, and remembered morsels of religious instruction may be impediments rather than aids to reflection and analysis.

Thus, for instance, a modern academic with a reasonably well-rounded education will think of Methodism as a branch of Protestant Dissent – but the Church of England has had few more devoted sons than John Wesley. He or she will also know that the Evangelical revival which began in the eighteenth century drew much of its inspiration from dissatisfaction with the worldliness of the Church of England and her clergy; but some leading Evangelicals – such as the members of the so-called Clapham Sect, the spiritual base of men who supported the young Patrick Brontë – enjoyed the good things of this life with gusto. The Brontë student encounters seeming paradoxes when contemplating the words and actions of family members in the expectation that they will yield a religiously consistent pattern: the daughters and son of a Church of England clergyman firmly rooted in Evangelicalism freely associated and corresponded with Nonconformists, and Patrick Brontë himself asked a Unitarian to write Charlotte's *Life*.

Similar pitfalls make the mapping of religious associations in the novels a precarious business. Not even the distinction between the Protestant and Roman Catholic spheres is invariably clear. For instance, the piety of Helen Burns is traditionally regarded as being of a Low Church, even Methodist, character; but Helen's views on the impregnability of a clear conscience, her submissive resignation and her

warnings against attaching too much importance to human affections are too powerfully reminiscent of passages from Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* for coincidence to seem likely.[2] Charlotte Brontë had special reasons for being familiar with this Catholic classic (read and translated for centuries in Protestant countries): she inherited a copy of John Wesley's abridged translation of it from her mother. Charlotte also owned a copy of Pascal's *Pensées*, given to her by her beloved M. Heger; and Pascal's theology sometimes seems at least as close to contexts in her novels as that of nineteenth-century clerical writers belonging to the Church of England.[3]

It is hard enough to acquire the factual knowledge required in anyone who would claim to guide others across such an arduous terrain, and the concepts and values of later ages exacerbate the problems. For a present-day student, for instance, F. D. Maurice's readiness to perceive part of the highest truth in several religions might look like a precursor of the benignly *laissez-faire* attitude so often advocated in our own 'multi-cultural' times. Maurice, however, loved the Church of England above any other denomination, and 'the very thing he could least endure was the spirit "which was ready to tolerate all opinions in theology" '.[4] The quotation-within-the-quotation points to an additional complication: taken from a passage where Maurice condemns the Liberal party in the Church, it serves as a reminder that much interdenominational hostility was coloured by social and political alienation and/or dislike rather than by doctrinal disagreement. This element is present in the Brontë novels, too, as well as in Charlotte Brontë's letters.

No wonder Brontë scholars have been wary of this minefield. The third and fourth chapters in Tom Winnifrith's *The Brontës and Their Background* remain the most thorough investigation of it, and even this ambitious survey (of forty-seven pages in all) supplies indirect testimony to the difficulties involved.[5] Having stated that one 'cannot overestimate the influence of religion' in the lives and works of the Brontës, Felicia Gordon rightly remarks: 'The difficulty lies in identifying exactly what their own complex, and even shifting, religious positions were.'[6]

Fortunately, the identification of the authors' shifting positions is not the chief aim of this study. While it gives a fair amount of scope to biographical considerations, its fundamental purpose is to open up new and richer channels of perception to Brontë readers unfamiliar with the religious dimensions in the novels. Consequently, discussions of and

references to factors, incidents and circumstances in the lives of the Brontës are always ultimately aimed at elucidating their writing.

This sounds like an over-simplified rationale, and so, of course, it is. The story of the sisters' lives has fascinated people as long as their works, and the Brontës' works and lives are so powerfully intertwined in the minds of generations of readers that a truly rigorous attempt to keep them separate throughout an examination of their fiction would probably irritate as well as confuse many Brontëans.[7] But it is essential to distinguish between creative work on the one hand and personal experiences and opinions on the other. The time-honoured equation of characters in the Brontë novels with 'real-life' people known to the authors not only is irrelevant (why should it interest a modern reader which particular Yorkshire clergyman Charlotte Brontë may have had in mind when creating Matthewson Helstone?), it also detracts from our awareness of the authors as imaginative writers who worked with the serious artist's control both of self and of materials, and who researched their topics carefully.

The most abundant source of pertinent information on the lives of the Brontës is Charlotte's letters,[8] and they are often quoted in the following chapters; but like any correspondence they should be used with discrimination. While it is hard to imagine Charlotte Brontë telling a coldly deliberate lie, especially for selfish purposes, the charm of her letters (as of the letters of any pleasing private correspondent) to some extent resides in her consideration for the feelings and expectations of their recipients. To mention a single instance, she adopts a different tone when writing to her publishers about Roman Catholicism from that used when she addresses her father on the same subject.[9] Consequently, I use her letters, wherever pertinent, as records of relevant family activities and preoccupations as well as for the purpose of confirming concerns I have found in the novels. I hope that the presence of any detail which suggests the reverse order of priority might be tolerated as testimony to the irresistible lure of 'the Brontë story'.

This book examines the treatment of religion in the Brontë novels from four fundamental perspectives: the denominational angle; the doctrinal dimensions; the ethical issues; and the roles and duties of clergymen. The first perspective is relevant to Evangelicalism, Dissent and Roman Catholicism as related to the Brontës and their writings; this discussion is headed by a review of the forces and conceptions which shaped the spiritual climate of the home they were born into. The second section of the book addresses the theological issues raised by the

novels, above all that of salvation versus damnation and the underlying question of Divine love and the Atonement of Christ. The third section looks at the ways in which the novels deal with the moral obligations of Christians, to one another and, crucially, to their selves as God-created beings. Next, in the first chapter of section IV, the pastoral functions of vicars and curates are scrutinised, including their week-day obligations to their parishioners as well as their demeanour in their churches. Finally, points raised in the previous sections are brought to bear on the most intriguing clergyman in the Brontë fiction: the man whose confident anticipation of a heavenly crown forms the conclusion of one of the best-loved novels in the English language.

With a structure of this kind, a reader interested in a single novel may be frustrated by a sense of fragmentation; but I hope that the obligation to approach the same book from different angles might have the occasional advantage, too. A more serious fundamental objection to thematic analysis of the Brontë fiction as a body would be that it could harm the integrity of the individual work, not to mention the integrity of the individual writer. I have tried to bear this danger in mind throughout, resisting any temptation to exaggerate similarities and downplay differences while encouraged by Phyllis Bentley's classic summary of the 'family likeness' in the Brontë genius.[10]

The readings of the novels within the different sections will disappoint readers intent on 'challenging' texts, 'reading against the grain'. As I learnt more about religious life in early nineteenth-century Britain and began to perceive its relevance to the Brontë novels, I found so much *in* the 'grain' of the books that the wish to introduce new perspectives by reading *against* it never arose. That is not to say that it could not be done, and done with rewarding results, only that what I discovered while reading in an unchallenging frame of mind was quite enough for me. Similarly, the intense preoccupation with secular power relationships that dominates much contemporary literary criticism did not seem germane to my undertaking, which in part accounts for the absence of current critical terminology. Again, this does not mean that such perspectives could not be fruitfully applied to religion in the fiction of the Brontës, only that they are better entrusted to those whose interest and skill in, and ideological commitment to, this kind of work make them better qualified for the job.

Two examples of the way in which the richness of the Brontë 'grain' allows for dissimilar readings without disqualifying any might be mentioned as illustrations of the hermeneutic latitude these books provide,

like so many major works of art. The negligent clergyman who is too lazy to go and comfort the new orphans at Wuthering Heights on a rainy evening in 1777, and the ruin of Gimmerton chapel about a quarter of a century later, have been regarded as evidence of 'the disappearance of God' in *Wuthering Heights*.[11] They could also, however, be viewed as emblematic of that period of spiritual and material decay in the Established Church – distressingly evident in many rural parishes – which gave rise to the Evangelical revival in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[12] Neither perspective excludes the other. When Shirley is told by Mr Helstone to repeat the Apostles' Creed and says it 'like a child', the little scene may well be read as implying that the senior clergyman assumes himself entitled to belittle her.[13] However, a reader interested in theological issues is likely to pay more attention to the deliberate way in which the girl steers clear of the Athanasian Creed which Charlotte Brontë loathed, and he/she will be aware that childlike piety is a quality held in high esteem by Charlotte, as by many of her contemporaries.[14] There is no profound contradiction here either; what these examples illustrate more than anything else is the sheer range of interpretive possibilities that the novels offer.

In reminding readers of the presence of religious dimensions in the fiction of the Brontës, I am thus not attempting to prescribe altered responses. Quite apart from the fact that developments in literary criticism in the 1970s and 1980s finally disposed of the tyranny of the 'best' reading, it would be foolish to attempt to wave a didactic banner in the middle of the surge of enthusiasm and affection that flushes countless copies of these books from booksellers' shelves and carries them into the homes of people who regard any notion of a deity as at best a curiosity. The fiction of the Brontës will keep conquering new generations who appropriate it for their own purposes, as readers have always done and are entitled to do, and it seems unlikely that a preoccupation with spiritual concerns will feature in that process for the foreseeable future.

Even so, I do think that scholarly analyses of the Brontë novels which fail to take the religious context into account are incomplete. Worse, the vacuum they leave is easily usurped by anachronistic irrelevancies, and dual distortion ensues. There is no escaping the fact that the plot lines in all the books, including *Wuthering Heights*, confirm fundamental Christian tenets. From a different point of view, unfamiliarity with this context prevents the scholar/critic from appreciating the breathtaking

freedom from prejudice and dogmatic restraint with which all three writers examined Christian doctrine and ethics.

Both in their own time and in ours, the Brontës have been labelled 'anti-Christian' – then censoriously, now approvingly. These opposite attitudes are actually rooted in the same basic critical perspective: 'Christianity' has been regarded as inseparable from its earthly organisation and the views and practices of its members. Any criticism against the conduct of clergymen, and against opinions and values commonly held by Anglican Christians, expressed in the Brontë novels has always been interpreted as a more or less covert repudiation of the Christian faith. This is one of the two fallacies that have long bedevilled appraisals of religion in the fiction of the Brontës.

The other is the failure to realise that while faith and everyday practice are separable, faith and doubt are not. The more knowledgeable a person is where religious matters are concerned, the more self-evident that fact appears to him or her; it is significant that some of the finest scholarly investigations of nineteenth-century literature in the context of religion bear titles where both concepts occur together.[15] Phrases like *Credo quia absurdum* and 'Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief' have accompanied Christians for centuries. To a present-day unbeliever, manifestations of the ineradicable shadow of doubt naturally seem to detract from the validity of the faith and are thus regarded as implying hostility to Christianity. In the nineteenth century, when religion was literally a matter of life and death in a way few people in our time can comprehend, many Christians feared doubt as an ever-present danger. Unable to deny it, they saw it as a thing to be instinctively and decisively rejected wherever it emerged. In view of these circumstances, it is understandable that suggestions of doubt in the fiction of the Brontës have been regarded as anti-Christian.

I have called these two views fallacious because they imply that spiritual searching beyond the notions prevalent in one's religious community is at odds with the foundations of faith. I cannot think of a single leading Christian theologian, at any time, who would support that opinion, and the Brontës most certainly did not. The most striking quality in their exploration of religious subject-matter is its essential liberty: lives and works alike bespeak a consistent and insistent refusal to allow man-made obstacles to halt the peregrine spirit.

Acceptance of a wide latitude for spiritual enquiry was clearly a family characteristic. Seriously ill at school, seventeen-year-old Anne Brontë summoned a Moravian minister, not one of those Anglican

clergymen who were in plentiful supply in the immediate vicinity,[16] and apparently nobody tried to prevent James La Trobe's attending on her. Eleven years later, Charlotte commended the purity and elevation of F. W. Newman's *The Soul: Her Sorrows and Aspirations*, a highly unorthodox and controversial book by John Henry Newman's brother. She even admitted to finding 'sprinklings of truth' in J. A. Froude's *The Nemesis of Faith*, another work associated with anti-Established-Church currents in mid nineteenth-century Britain.[17] As for Emily, she consistently kept her thoughts on religion to herself,[18] and her family seems to have respected her reticence in this as in other respects.[19]

Such an attitude presupposes confidence in one's own power to search for and recognise the truth, as well as trust in the truth to be good when one finds it. Where the Brontës are concerned, these feelings are obviously rooted in Christian faith. For centuries, Christian thinkers have placed the heart of truth in God, maintaining that the unfettered and sincere pursuit of the former will lead to the latter.[20] In Charlotte Brontë's novels especially, truth and freedom are as intimately associated as in John 8:32: 'And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' The quester assured of this connexion has nothing to fear.

One of the most profoundly moving characteristics in the fiction of the Brontës and in their writings generally – including poems, letters and prefaces to editions of the novels – is their intrepidity. It meets us everywhere: in the opposition to social convention which has been the object of so much Brontë criticism; in the refusal to surrender personal integrity and submit to bullying from whatever quarter; in the flat, sometimes even contemptuous, rejection of what is felt to be unmerited censure. That fearlessness characterises the Brontës' handling of religious issues, too: though entirely typical of and in tune with their time in their concern with religion, and in the issues they raise, they are unusual in the courage and independence of their explorations. Others who have responded to these qualities, with disgust (in the Brontës' own time) or admiration (in ours), have regarded them as signs of revolt, even heresy, directed against both God and society. To me, they express the heroism of the pilgrim rather than the wrath of the rebel.

This book wants to alert Brontë students to a perspective on the fiction of the Brontës which has not received due attention in the past. I hope it will be useful in drawing attention to the significance of passages that readers tend to pass by quickly, or to read in an unnecessarily one-

dimensional manner. The Christian life is a foreign country to most people today, and I believe it serves some purpose to be reminded that to the Brontës it was home, with the occasional irritations as well as the manifold blessings of the domestic sphere. But I do not offer complete readings of the novels from religious perspectives, merely possibilities for readers to assimilate or reject as they see fit. It has been said that the Brontës' contemporary Charlotte M. Yonge needs to be taken on her own terms in order to be understood.[21] The works of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë make no such claim on their readers. That is part of their greatness.

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Denominations