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Book Review: Crisis Of Doubt: Honest Faith In Nineteenth-Century England

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Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England, by Timothy Larsen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 317. \$125 (cloth).

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In her novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888), Mrs. Humphrey Ward depicts the crisis of faith of an earnest young clergyman as he encounters the overpowering weight of skeptical German scholarship. The novel was an instant sensation, as popular as it was controversial, and the avalanche of responses in the press spanned the full range from fulsome praise to angry denunciation. Today her book is largely forgotten, but its theme is still with us: for over half a century, scholars have accepted the Victorian “crisis of faith” as a commonplace, characterizing the era as an age of religious disillusionment.

Timothy Larsen’s brilliant historical study does not challenge the claim that many Victorians lost their faith; indeed, it presupposes it. What Larsen does challenge is the idea that the traffic was all one way. In *Crisis of Doubt*, he tells the story of seven reconverts—men who lost their faith and became active in the Victorian freethinking and secularist movement but then reconsidered their doubts, returned to Christianity, and devoted a substantial number of years to preaching, lecturing, or writing on behalf of their recovered faith. There was, Larsen argues persuasively, a deep crisis in the Victorian freethinking movement. Again and again its acknowledged leaders defected and became able and informed partisans on behalf of the Christian faith.

Each of Larsen’s reconverts started out within a broadly evangelical milieu. William Hone was raised among evangelical Calvinists who denounced John Wesley as a “child of the devil”; Frederick Rowland Young seems to have been raised a Quaker; Thomas Cooper was a lay preacher among the Wesleyans before he lost his faith; John Henry Gordon was raised in a Congregationalist church and became a Sunday-school teacher for them; Joseph Barker was a rising minister in the Methodist New Connexion; John Bagnall Bebbington taught Sunday-school for the Primitive Methodists at the very time he was beginning to dabble in the freethinking literature of his time; and George Sexton seems to have officiated sporadically at his church in London and wrote a popular anti-Mormon tract in his youth. Each of them was precocious, Hone and Cooper markedly so. Most of them were political radicals in one way or another—Gordon was a lecturer for the Liberation Society and a lifelong gadfly to the Anglican clergy, Sexton was openly communist, and Cooper spent two years in the Stafford jail for having given a speech that roused a mob of Chartists into a frenzy that resulted in the destruction of property.

It is most interesting to trace the path each man took both into and, ultimately, out of the freethinking movement. Bebbington was swayed for a time by the works of Paine, Volney, and above all the Baron D’Holbach, and during his time as a secularist lecturer he accepted as decisive two of

Hume's *dicta*: that the argument from design demonstrated at best the existence of a being who might be limited in power, and that miracle reports are incredible. His reconversion came about as a result of the collapse of his case against theism in general. Though he still accepted Hume's criticism of the design argument, he gave it a different interpretation—the design argument, though its conclusion falls short of a robust demonstration of the existence of an omnipotent being, could be seen as a stepping stone that he had irrationally refused to use. As for Hume's strictures on miracles, Bebbington was eventually persuaded that Hume had himself been mistaken, both because he overrated the antecedent improbability of miracles and because his argument was question begging.

Gordon's loss of faith was also caused by the reading of skeptical books. His reconversion was prepared by a growing dissatisfaction with the moral laxity of the freethinkers in London—a factor that also weighed heavily with Joseph Barker. But the actual crisis of doubt was catalyzed by a sermon he heard preached by George William Conder. Conder presented such a fair and recognizable portrait of the unbeliever's mind that Gordon was severely shaken:

I could not help asking myself the suggestive question:—How is it that this man, evidently sincere and earnest, of greater age and experience than myself, and of wider culture, too,—how is it that this man, knowing the full force of my case, does not join issue with me in the conclusion to which I come? (p. 121)

The sermon triggered a radical reconsideration of the arguments for and against Christianity, and upon reflection Gordon decided that the weight of the evidence lay on the Christian side.

Perhaps the most colorful of all of Larsen's reconverts is Thomas Cooper, the self-educated cobbler. As a young man he was overwhelmed by the skeptical arguments in David Friedrich Strauss's *Leben Jesu*. In the height of his days as an infidel lecturer around 1850, Cooper popularized Strauss's arguments in *Cooper's Journal*, causing considerable alarm on the part of the established clergy. The story of his conversion is in no small part the story of his protracted wrestling with Strauss. Later in life, when he took to publishing some of his apologetics lectures, Cooper returned repeatedly to Strauss, blazing the trees to mark for others the path by which he had emerged from the dark wood of doubt. The character of Christ loomed large in Cooper's thoughts during the years in which he began to doubt his doubts, a fact revealed in his correspondence with Charles Kingsley when he was struggling toward reconversion in the summer of 1856:

Can you tell me what to do—anything that will help me to Christ? *Him* I want. If the Four Gospels be half legends I still want him But how is it, then, that I am still so full of doubts? (p. 88)

Cooper was not a man to do things by halves. When he finally resolved his doubts, he set out on a thirty year career in which he gave more than 6,800 public lectures and sermons in defense of Christianity, ranging over

the whole of natural theology and the Christian evidences and incorporating information from his staggeringly wide reading. He made a point of never charging a fee, living on whatever people would give in a collection at the end of their own free will. In the closing pages of his most popular work, *The Bridge of History Over the Gulf of Time*, and again in the closing pages of his autobiography, Cooper pleads with the next generation to take up the work of "maintaining and defending the evidences for the truth of Christianity." Larsen does not tell us whether the plea was answered.

Several of Larsen's reconverts moved across the porous boundary between Unitarianism and atheism—in both directions. Unitarians in the Victorian era were a diverse lot, all theologically heterodox but by no means all equally ready to throw out the historicity of the gospels and the resurrection. Barker describes his own descent "from the more moderate to the more extravagant forms of Unitarianism" (p. 144). Young, headed in the other direction, moved without interruption from secularist lecturer to Unitarian minister; eventually, he left the Unitarians, and the crowning work of his life was his *Indirect Evidences in the New Testament for the Personal Divinity of Christ* (p. 1884). George Sexton, a friend of Young, followed the same path out of infidelity, gradually moving to what he described as "the more orthodox form of Unitarianism," and in the end frankly confessed that "the great central truth of Christianity" is "the supreme divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ." In his obituary, Sexton was described simply as a "Presbyterian divine."

Larsen treats his subjects with sympathy, but he is not sycophantic. He describes the theodicy Thomas Cooper employs in one of his debates as "no more or less convincing than those generally offered" (p. 95). Occasionally Larsen is a bit harsh on the established church; one may reasonably doubt his claim that Henry Rogers (whose name is misspelled both on page 78 and in the index—almost the only typographical errors in the work) had not read Strauss's *Leben Jesu* before publishing his article in the October 1849 issue of *The Edinburgh Review*.

An unexpected effect of Larsen's book is that it raises a host of new questions that cry out for further historical investigation. Though it gives by far the best picture of Thomas Cooper's conversion ever to have appeared in print, it raises tantalizing questions about the critical two years of his conversion, of which there seem to be few documentary traces. Larsen mentions D. L. Moody and Ira Sankey only once, quoting a passing remark by Sexton. But Sexton himself delivered a discourse on May 16, 1875, that left no doubt of his general approval of the controversial revival movement that was sweeping across England, and this gives a context to Sexton's remark. The descriptions of the visits of Gordon, Barker, and Sexton to America are relatively circumscribed, and there is no description of the contemporaneous American apologetic scene with such diverse and colorful figures as Edward Everett, William Ellery Channing, Andrews Norton, Thomas Baldwin Thayer, Archibald Alexander, Alexander Campbell, Simon Greenleaf, John Gorham Palfrey, and Mark Hopkins. Even in

Britain, there are numerous connections waiting to be traced out, intersections of Larsen's reconverts with the work of Thomas Chalmers, Richard Whately, John Henry Newman, Henry Rogers, John Rely Beard, Joseph Barber Lightfoot, and Henry Wace. We know that some of these writers made an impact on Cooper and Barker, as they name them. Inevitably, we want to know more. There are faint echoes of the great Victorian controversies over Bishop Colenso and over the infamous *Essays and Reviews*. We know very well what the Anglican church made of them. But what did Larsen's reconverts think?

The fact that *Crisis of Doubt* raises such questions is hardly a criticism; for without his book, we would not have known enough even to ask them. By giving us these seven portraits, Larsen has broadened the horizon for future historical investigation not only of these reconverts but of the history of apologetics in the Victorian era. With a few laudable exceptions—Richard J. Cheroк's recent work on Alexander Campbell comes to mind—the history of apologetics in the 19th century has been curiously neglected by serious historians. Larsen's masterful work has opened a welcome window on that world.

And beyond this, he has given us an unexpectedly timely work. In the early 21st century, a particularly strident strain of atheism is on the rise. It is hard to imagine a thoughtful Christian who would not want to know why a man might lose his faith and why he might return to it. *Crisis of Doubt* answers both questions in polyphonic detail. The stories of these seven men should be of more than a passing interest to us all.