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# Faith and God (Chapter 3 of "Reflections: Virginia Woolf and her Quaker Aunt, Caroline Stephen")

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envies and is repelled by the need and the intimacy between the Ramsays. Colonel Abel Pargiter, of *The Years*, is casually unfaithful to his dying wife, and is nearly the only character in the book who is not left to ponder the meaning of what it is to be "I," so secure is he in his position. Orlando is at once the victim and the perpetrator of patriarchy, subject to the laws of inheritance as well as the laws of desire; the nature of the ending to *Orlando* is what readers often dislike the most, as Orlando's marriage to Shelmerdine, despite their androgynous qualities, seems to represent the traditional socially happy ending; after all those centuries, they are unable to offer anything new.

Woolf's greatest attack on patriarchy, of course, comes in *Three Guineas*. While *A Room of One's Own* establishes her concerns for the education of women, *Three Guineas* directly blames patriarchy for all the ills of the world. Here again she lists the tyrannies in which her family has participated, the institutions that perpetuate the masculine ideals: the church, the academy, the law, the military, the political arena. The only solution is, according to Woolf, to organize a society of "Outsiders," those who refuse to participate in the institutions that teach the values which lead to war and oppression. Ironically adopting "facts" and citations to bolster her argument, Woolf discusses "facts which make it difficult, perhaps impossible, to go on" (109). Facts, she says, interrupt the flow of the argument, and can be used to bolster ANY argument, and therefore another standard must be used, a standard of truth. She refers to "the hypnotic power of dominance" (177) that allows a man to lecture women, for example on matters of the vanity of dress, without recognizing the vanity of the robes he himself is wearing. These topics will be discussed later in more depth, but suffice it to say for now that for both Caroline and Virginia, the heart of their struggles is the disruption of the system that tried to rob them of their voices. While they, again, did not agree on the details of their conclusions, and while Virginia went much further than did Caroline, the impulse to create a different reality for women is strong for both of them, and surely Caroline helped to pave the way for Virginia to try to reject the patrimony that was so firmly established for them as their expected fate.

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## FAITH AND GOD

Beyond the bulwark of family, for both Caroline Stephen and Virginia Woolf, the institution of the Church was central in fostering a patriarchal fortress that kept women in an inferior position. For Caroline, turning away from the church tradition of her forefathers led her to the Quaker tradition as a way to honor both her God and herself as a woman. For Virginia, that same impulse led her away from the church as well, and although she did not embrace the tenets of Quakerism, much of her work is certainly imbued with a Quaker sensitivity to mysticism and spirituality.

Many have assumed that Virginia was an atheist like her father, with critics such as Peter Alexander insisting that she "had little desire, then or later, to break from the values of her father" (28), although there is much evidence that she did, in fact, break from her father's values, in this as well as in other areas. Quentin Bell, her nephew, recalls Virginia teasing T. S. Eliot about his religious conversion to Catholicism, and says that she always remained consistent in her unbelief, that "after a momentary conversion in childhood she lost all faith in revealed religion and, while never committing herself to any positive declaration, she maintained an attitude sometimes of mild, sometimes of aggressive agnosticism" (136). He says that while she allowed that "the Universe is a mysterious place," she did not believe the logical conclusion was

to “suppose the existence of a moral deity or of a future life” (Bell 136). Many other critics take their cue from these assumptions, reading Woolf as being outright antagonistic to religion and to God, as if the two entities are inseparable. A careful reading here, however, suggests that losing faith in revealed religion is not quite the same as a disbelief in God.

Peter F. Alexander notes that Leslie Stephen did not baptize his children or instruct them in Christianity, and yet this does not mean, as Alexander implies, that Virginia lacked any knowledge of Christianity. There is considerable evidence that Woolf, and the Stephen family, were familiar with church going, if only drawn to the aesthetics of the experience. When the Stephen family had to attend church for the banns to be read for Stella Duckworth (Virginia’s half sister) and her fiancé Jack Hills, they “rummaged the house for prayer books and hymn books,” finally leaving the prayer book behind, to go to “the performance. At certain parts we stood, then sat, and finally knelt—this I refused to do—[...] Our prayers and psalms were rather guess work—but the hymns were splendid —” (*Early Journals* 61). Her sense that the service was a “performance” and the “guesswork” of the prayers indicate the distance she felt from the ceremony, and yet the Stephens did actually own the proper book for the service—despite leaving the prayer book behind. Her refusal to kneel, of course, is more emphatic, a clear alignment with her father’s faith, at least for the time.

Drawn to churches, she writes numerous accounts of visiting them, sometimes meeting the curates (in 1899; (*Early Journals* 141)), sometimes just driving around the close (in 1903); (194). She finds “no place can be more amply satisfactory to spend an hour in” (194), all being “loveliness & peace” and harmonizing “with the prevailing spirit of the Cathedral” (194). In 1906, pondering those who were on their way to and from church, she wonders how “piety thrives at all,” but wonders, “And yet look at the great solid chapels! [...] Don’t I feel the steady beat of the great Creator as I write; & doesn’t the Church there record its pulse this evening, & for six hundred years of evenings such as these?” (*Early Journals* 310–311). Two years later, she stays at the Vicar’s Close at Wells and Manorbier, and notes, “if Christianity is ever tolerable, it is tolerable in these old sanctuaries; partly because age has robbed it of its power, you can fondle a senile old creature, when you must strike with all your force at [a] young & lusty parson” (*Early Journals* 376). The tradition, the order, attracts her, but the sentiment does not. She senses the origins of what makes worship lovely, while rejecting that which makes it false to her. In 1936, she attended a full service in Canterbury, though she declined to write

her impressions of it (*Diary Five* 11). She goes to Poitiers, visiting churches; it is here that she heard “women baa-ing responses like sheep” (*Diary Four* 22). In Athens in 1932, she remembers staring “up at the white vindictive Christ, larger than a nightmare, in blue & white mosaic on the ceiling. We liked that Church very much” (*Diary Four* 91). Her description of the church in *Jacob’s Room* reveals an awareness of the power of the building itself, where even at night the church resonates with people, “the dead and the living, the ploughmen, the carpenters, the fox-hunting gentlemen and the farmers smelling of mud and brandy.... Plaint and belief and elegy, despair and triumph, but for the most part good sense and jolly indifference, go trampling out of the windows any time these five hundred years” (*Jacob’s Room* 103–104). The buildings resonate; it is, after all, the services Virginia finds empty.

When she does attend a service, especially weddings and funerals, her accounts are telling. She went to Jane Harrison’s funeral in 1927, where the clergyman “read some of the lovelier, more rational parts of the Bible; & said, by heart, Abide with me....But tho’ L[eonard] almost cried, I felt very little—only the beauty of the Come unto me all ye that are weary; but as usual the obstacle of not believing dulled & bothered me. Who is “God” & what the Grace of Christ? & what did they mean to Jane?” (*Diary Three* 181). The impersonality of ceremony especially irritated her, as she recounts the “inadequacy of the service” at the wedding of Desmond and Molly MacCarthy’s daughter, Rachel: “the sense of its being the entirely obsolete & primitive voice of a defunct tribal magnate, laying down laws for the government of the tribe: & then these civilised sceptical people letting themselves pretend that they obey” (*Diary Four* 127). This pretence, she felt, “clogged & diluted all the real feeling,” leaving them with nothing but “the perpetual compromise” (*Diary Four* 127). Ottoline Morrell’s burial service, in 1938, Virginia bemoaned for its “lack of intensity; the wailing & mumbling, the fumbling with bags; the shuffling; the vast brown mass of respectable old South Kensington ladies. And then the hymns; & the clergyman with a bar of medals across his surplice; & the orange and blue windows; & a toy Union Jack sticking from a cranny. What all this had to do with Ottoline, or our feelings?” (*Diary Five* 136). Only when she went to the funeral for Roger Fry (who was raised in the Quaker tradition) did she find a service to be adequate to its need: “I was glad we went to the service on Thursday. It was a very hot summers day. And all very simple & dignified. Music. Not a word spoken. We sat there, before the open doors that lead into the garden. Flowers & strollers which Roger would have liked... .Yes, I liked the wordlessness” (*Diary Four* 243). Here at

last, in the same silence that drew Caroline Stephen to the Society of Friends, Virginia could find an appropriate way to honor the moment and the Divine.

Other alternative styles of worship attracted Woolf as well, especially when she went to Turkey and visited St. Sophia. People walked around “reflectively;” others “rocked their bodies rhythmically to the tune of the Koran spread open upon their knees.” No one minded interruptions, and the feeling was “so little the precinct of an awful religion that this miscellaneous worship did not offend it” (*Early Journals* 350). She was attracted to the lack of distracting decorations, as are Quakers (350). She found in mosques a lack of pomposity, and a willingness to allow devotion to seem much like the rest of life. Worship seemed, she felt, “but little dis severed from real life,” with children playing, men using their normal voices, friends saluting each other, and devotions that seem natural. “And the devotion seemed none the less sincere that it could stand the light of the day & the brilliance of silk & mosaic; nor did it seem in any way strange that men should say their prayer to rare carpets & painted tiles, without the figure of a saint or the symbol of a cross to inspire them” (*Early Journals* 352–353). The sense that the worship itself remained part of the quotidian, not a separate and hushed experience, appealed to her; why should, after all, a true belief in God be compartmentalized, only appropriate for Sundays in special buildings? So attracted was she to this new style of worship, admittedly without understanding what she saw, she notes that while the Muslims “suffered” the tourists to watch them, they would not allow the strangers to pray with them: “So we watched, a scene which we shall never understand; & heard the true gospels expounded in an unknown tongue” (*Early Journals* 355–356). Her earnest words regarding these places, without a tinge of the irony she often uses when discussing Christianity, tell much about her connection to the Divine when it is not muddled by what she feels about Christian traditions.

Such interest in the Divine is hard to reconcile with absolute atheism, but Virginia’s ability to find the Divine in sources incompatible with traditional Christian teaching is consistent with Quakerism. Even the question of Biblical authority is contested: Jane DeGay investigates Virginia’s idea of religious authority, and insists, “Woolf does not accord biblical ideas any authority” (181). Looking at *The Waves*, where Bernard “points at a truth beyond expression in language,” DeGay notes that truth is demonstrated, for example, in the pages of the picture-book shown to him by his nurse. “Woolf implies that while one can hear echoes of voices which hint at the mysterious, no one has the power or authority to describe it directly” (DeGay 181). Yet allowing

for an authority beyond the Bible does not actually dismiss the Bible as an authority, as the Quakers preach; the authority of God’s truth is to be found everywhere. The Bible, on the contrary, is a text to which Woolf responds as reverently and problematically as she does to the texts of Wordsworth and Austen. An early memory, recalled in “A Sketch of the Past,” is of watching her mother, Julia, “reading—the Bible perhaps; and, struck by the gravity of her face, [I] told myself that her first husband had been a clergyman and that she was thinking, as she read what he had read, of him. This was a fable on my part; but it shows that she looked very sad when she was not talking” (*Moments of Being* 82). The fable, interestingly, is that Julia’s first husband, Herbert Duckworth, was a barrister, not a clergyman, but the ambiguity of “this” being a fable may have included Julia reading the Bible at all; we don’t know. The memory itself is loaded with such solemnity that we must wonder whether the Bible was indeed a part of the Stephen household. Certainly the language of the Bible was pervasive in the language of all educated people at the time, even in the language that her agnostic father uses to describe Julia, her agnostic mother, in *The Mausoleum Book*, where he refers to “the holy and tender love which breathes through those exquisite lips” (59). One of Virginia’s earliest writing projects was a book that is no longer extant, “a long picturesque essay upon the Christian religion, I think; called *Religio Laici*, I believe, proving that man has need of a God; but the God was described in process of change” (Lee 166). In 1906 she wrote to Violet Dickinson that if there was one book she wanted above any other—“no, it’s not the Bible,” she insists—it would be the poems of John Keats (*Letters I* 263), suggesting there was some kind of expectation of Bible reading. In 1905, we know that Virginia got a book about “early Xtianity!!” at the London Library, “because I want to read about that— but these books, I see, don’t give me in the least what I want” (*Early Journals* 233). One wonders what it was she sought, but we may have a clue in *The Years*, when Eleanor ponders Digby’s obituary:

She always wanted to know about Christianity—how it began; what it meant, originally. God is love, The kingdom of Heaven is within us, sayings like that she thought, turning over the pages, what did they mean? The actual words were very beautiful. But who said them—when? [...] It was what a man said under a fig tree, on a hill, she thought. And then another man wrote it down. But suppose that what that man says is just as false as what this man—she touched the press cutting with her spoon—says about Digby? And here am I, she thought, looking at the china in the Dutch cabinet, in this drawing-room, getting a little spark from what someone said all those years ago. (*The Years* 119)

Fully aware of the slippery nature of language, she is also fully aware of the impact the Bible has even on herself, despite not feeling a part of the tribe of those who are taught to revere it. Nigel Nicolson records that Virginia was reading the Bible while she wrote *The Years*, though he insists “for its language, not its doctrine” (119); he offers, however, no more evidence for this assumption than he does for many assertions. By 1933, Virginia records in her diary that she wants, “rather vainly, to read the Book of Job. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” (*Diary Four* 185); in 1933, “Shall I now read the New Testament?” (*Diary Four* 187); and in 1935, “read St Paul & the papers. I must buy the Old Testament. I am reading the Acts of the Apostles. At last I am illuminating that dark spot in my reading. What happened in Rome?” (*Diary Four* 271). It may be that she read the Bible for the language, or for the cultural capital that is necessary for educated persons, but such an astute reader could not remain untouched by what she read, whether she was converted or not.

Other critics may acknowledge Woolf’s mysticism or spirituality, though they distance her from Christian values. Julie Kane aligns her with the Theosophical Society, which she would have encountered through her friends and through others such as W. B. Yeats, whom Woolf found strange but interesting. Kane presents an intriguing argument, suggesting that Woolf’s later work especially incorporates elements of Indian mystical belief such as auras, astral projection, and reincarnation, concluding that Woolf’s mystical tendencies had to be disguised because of the disapproval of the strong masculine figures around her, including Leslie Stephen and Leonard Woolf. I would argue we don’t have to look that far to consider Woolf’s mysticism, and that her desire for wholeness, order and purpose in the world lead her to seek some kind of Divinity, whether or not one would consider that Divinity the Christian God. The difficulty with Kane’s definition of mysticism is that she seems to assume the term incorporates only the interaction with a spirit world, and discounts the term as a description of a personal interaction with God. Kane’s point about the strong and irresistible forces of the men around Woolf is a good one. The religious—or anti-religious—influences in her life were powerful. Both Caroline and Leslie had a kind of conversion experience, and for both of them, that experience led them away from the Church of England. For Leslie, his moment came when, as a member of the clergy, he found he could no longer preach stories such as that of Noah’s flood “as if it were a sacred truth” (*Mausoleum* 6). The debate, raging around the same time as the discovery of the tablets that purportedly established the truth—or at least the variety of

sources—of Noah’s flood, was all around him. In writing *An Agnostic’s Apology* in 1903—the title itself a concession to his audience, as he was much closer to being an atheist than to being an agnostic—Leslie defends his position, a position that struggles “with hard facts” instead of “ancient mummeries of forgotten dogma” (6). He refers to the teachings of the church as “imbecilities” and says that argument against those who waste their human intellect on “old theology” would itself be a “foolish waste of time” (7). His condescension, which Caroline faced through much of her life, continues when he announces, “The supported creed, which is popular with all the old women in the world, certainly a most estimated and venerable class, is also bound to support their prejudices. The great desire—natural to their age and sex—is to keep things as they are” (*Apology* 351). Beyond the condescending tone he adopts to those who profess belief—for Leslie, there is no more denigrated population than old women—Leslie cannot concede that religious faith is anything but a panacea for those who cannot face the truth of the world. As much as Leslie fixates on the concept of evil as proof of God’s absence, he associates religion with little more than conventional morality and the “dream,” “hallucination” (106), or “phantasm” (110) of an afterlife. Again his rhetoric attempts to establish his supercilious position, as he insists, “The ignorant and the childish are hopelessly unable to draw the line between dreamland and reality; but the imagery which takes its rise in the imagination, as distinguished from the perceptions, bears indelible traces of its origin in comparative unsubstantiality and vagueness of outline” (106–107). He did not shy away from stating his forceful opinion in the most scathing of tones; it would take a very strong woman to defy his assertions and his scoffing.

Caroline’s own conversion, to the Society of Friends, came “at a time when the pressure of liturgical forms and Church ordinances had become almost intolerable to my mind, then quite at sea upon the deepest subjects, and harassed by the difficulty not only of knowing the truth, but of finding any united worship in which I could join without risk of insincerity” (“Caroline Fox” 77). She found a welcome in the Quaker service she attended, and a peace among the people there that she had thought never to find. “Dwelling securely in the light of ever-present Love, their longing was not to argue but to bless. Their faith made no pretence to infallibility, and they feared no possible harm from reason or facts, come from what quarter, or in what form, they might” (78). The monolithic certainty she found so overwhelming in the Church of England—in fact the same elements which repelled Leslie—was here mitigated and she felt the essential nature of pure worship. She concedes

that “this unfettered spiritual life” may very well be found outside of Quakerism, that “there are those who can use forms and ordinances without coming under bondage to them, and who can dwell amongst doctrines without mistaking them for the life” (79), but she feels that “these outward things” such as dogma have “overgrown” Christianity (79). She acknowledges doubt as an element of faith, rejecting the certainty which Leslie feels must be part of faith, urging Christians to wrestle with the questions of their souls, “not necessarily to study how they are to be answered, but rather to consider whether it is our place to attempt any answer, and what should be our relations with those whose answer to doubts and difficulties is contrary to our own” (79). Christians must not ignore the questions “which perplex the wisest” but must judge for themselves how to “best preserve and transmit the light of life” (*Light Arising* 62), but in doing so, one must be just, especially to those “who have less light than we ourselves enjoy,” in order to be open and welcoming rather than closed and prohibitive (80). Her sense of openness and tolerance extends even to agnostics, suggesting that “doctrinal agreement” cannot be a requirement to unity in faith, and that agnosticism “is not a hostile camp, but a rich recruiting ground” (62). Doctrine remains a “stumbling-block” in the path of those who are seeking light: “Must we not remember how often the excess of definite teaching and its proved fallibility has been the very cause of their revolt? Do we not well to be ‘slow to speak’ in the presence of those who have been wounded by the strife of tongues? [...] People forget that confident assertion is much more likely to produce contradiction than conviction” (63). She is far more conciliatory than Leslie is, intriguing in light of Leslie’s assumptions that she is eager to go along with whatever he says or does; perhaps she is only eager to avoid the controversy that he seems to stir up with all the women in his life, and she finds shelter here for her own voice, a place where she will not be attacked as an “imbecile.”

Caroline propounds a mystical sense that “owes nothing to the darkness” or trances and visions, the “enthusiasms” that appalled her brother. Far from the supernatural, her mysticism is “emphatically a consciousness of the clear shining of spiritual light; of the light of truth as to whatever is deepest and most permanent and far reaching in its spiritual import and ethical character; [...] the light in which we see that he who will save his life shall lose it, and that there is nothing worth having in exchange for our souls” (*Light Arising* 21).

When we look at Virginia’s own spirituality or mysticism, it is easy to imagine her being more attracted to Caroline’s version of interaction with the

Divine than to Leslie’s, and there is ample evidence in her writing to suggest she found such a sense of universality and tolerance appealing. She was less concerned with arguments of doctrine—and in fact found them to be every bit as damaging as did Caroline—and claimed that her “great religion is to be happy” (*Letters I* 303). Alison M. Lewis suggests that what Caroline calls “rational mysticism” may have “resonated with Woolf’s own brand of spiritual agnosticism” (7), in that it does not require an abnegation of reason. Caroline defines what she means by “rational mysticism” as the belief that every human being has been given a measure of “light, life, spirit and grace” (*Light Arising* 2). This inward grace “would lead every one to salvation, with or without the outward knowledge of the Gospel of Christ” (2). An idea far more in keeping with Virginia’s own growing sense of democracy (despite her ambivalence about the servant class), the universalism inherent in this statement is radical, and is anything but a reiteration of the traditional Christian doctrine of exclusion. Caroline goes on to say that this “inward illumination” accommodates “the most contradictory creed,” because it does not worry about doctrine and the disputations of Reason, gazing instead “on the Being of Whom in virtue of this mysterious faculty” the true mystic “is so vividly aware” (*Quaker Strongholds* 13–14). Caroline refutes the idea that many (such as Leslie) have about mysticism, using it “as a mild term of reproach, to convey a general vague dreaminess,” asserting that the early Friends, such as George Fox, were “fery, dogmatic, pugnacious, and intensely practical and soberminded” (15); they were mystics in that they had a “vivid consciousness of the inwardness of the light of truth” (13–14).

Mystics, as I understand the matter, are those whose minds, to their own consciousness, are lighted from within; who feel themselves to be in immediate communication with the central Fountain of light and life. They have naturally a vivid sense both of the distinction and of the harmony between the inward and the outward—a sense so vivid that it is impossible for them to believe it to be unshared by others.... He finds there, first repose, then an awful guidance; light which burns and purifies; a voice which subdues; he finds himself in the presence of his God. (35–36)

Significantly, Virginia has marked this passage in her copy of *Quaker Strongholds*, suggesting her awareness of a more nuanced sense of mysticism. The idea of a “Fountain of Light and Life” is quite compatible with the way she felt about her own vocation of writing, as she attempts to glean what is inside, trying to understand what is “real”: whether the events of war, for example, are more real than the interior life. Caroline avers that no “true

mystic would hold himself bound by the thoughts of others," instead relying on the "inward guidance, whether called light, or voice, or inspiration" (17). What is "real," therefore, cannot be determined by those outside of us.

Before we can reach that stage of mysticism, Caroline asserts, "We must have settled it in our hearts that everything, from the least to the greatest, is to be taken as His language—language which it is our main business here to learn to interpret—and we must be willing to face all pain as His discipline" (26–27). The Bible is not the only source of our understanding of God; every experience in life must be made to adhere to this sense of our Divine interaction, an idea echoed in Woolf's text, "On Being Ill": "this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism" (*On Being Ill* 5–6). Alison M. Lewis refers to Woolf's "mystical unity to the greater whole," citing Woolf's comment that "behind the cotton-wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this" (Lewis 7). The vision of a greater whole, one made according to a plan and orchestrated by outside forces, one that encompasses all that is to be celebrated in the world, is consistent with Caroline's own sense of mysticism. When Woolf praises "inspired" street music, played by "disreputable" old men "in a trance of musical ecstasy," she says, "It is, indeed, impossible not to respect any one who has a god like this within them; for music that takes possession of the soul so that nakedness and hunger are forgotten must be divine in its nature" (*Essays* 1 28). She exults in a sunny white Christmas morning, writing to Violet Dickinson about the blue sky and white field, little birds and blue smoke: "I should have saluted the happy morn had I been a Christian [...] Then I am reading your Keats, with the pleasure of one handling great luminous stones. I rise and shout in ecstasy, and my eyes brim with such pleasure that I must drop the book and gaze from the window" (*Letters* I 271–272). Books often give her great pleasure, a pleasure she argues is good in itself, imagining that on Judgment Day, Saint Peter will see them coming, amidst "the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards," and will say, "not without a certain envy when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, 'Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading'" (*Second Common Reader* 270). She finds in reading the deepest "foundation of spiritual life," although "With us it is, of course, sunk very deep; hidden beneath the heaviest and dampest deposit of hymn books and ledgers" (*Captain's Death Bed* 170). Acknowledging that spirituality is extant, in a deep foundation, she laments its burial in traditional and proscribed forms, just as does Caroline. Virginia finds the mystical in Sir

Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, exulting in his "conviction of the mystery and miracle of things": "In the grossest superstition there is something of devotion; in tavern music something of divinity; in the little world of man something 'that was before the elements and owes no homage unto the sun'" (*Captain's Death Bed* 174). His celebration of everything causes her to ask what "is ever to stop the course of such a mind, unroofed and open to the sky?" (173), an echo of Caroline Stephen explaining the sensation of her conversion moment: "It is as if my painted roof had been smashed and, instead of the darkness I had dreaded, I had found the stars shining" (*Vision* lxii). The mystery of such openness appeals to Virginia as it appealed to her aunt.

Virginia's longing for a sense of order and wholeness in her life is reflected in her work, though often that order is demonstrated in a way less imperialistic, assertive and assured than the patriarchal traditions she so struggled against. Eleanor Pargiter, in *The Years*, begins to see that in life, everything comes around again, albeit perhaps a little differently. "If so, is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half remembered, half foreseen? ... a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible? The thought gave her extreme pleasure: that there was a pattern. But who makes it? Who thinks it? Her mind slipped. She could not finish her thought" (*The Years* 282). In reading "Her mind slipped," we don't know whether it slips because the concept is too huge to be compassed, or whether a slippery mind is the cause of such thinking to begin with. Elsewhere, Woolf tells us, "Movement and change are the essence of our being; rigidity is death; conformity is death: let us say what comes into our heads, repeat ourselves, contradict ourselves, fling out the wildest nonsense, and follow the most fantastic fancies without caring what the world does or thinks or says. For nothing matters except life; and, of course, order" (*The Common Reader* 64). In "The Sun and the Fish," she writes, "Nothing exists needlessly," and she compares the beauty of a fish to the sense of desolation during an eclipse of the sun. The fish

neither work nor weep. In their shape is their reason. For what other purpose except the sufficient one of perfect existence can they have been thus made, some so round, some so thin, some with radiating fins upon their backs, others lined with red electric light, others undulating like white pancakes on a frying pan, some armoured in blue mail, some given prodigious claws, some outrageously fringed with huge whiskers? More care has been spent upon half a dozen fish than upon all the races of men. Under our tweed and silk is nothing but a monotony of pink nakedness. Poets are not transparent to the backbone as these fish are. Bankers have no claws. Kings and Queens themselves have neither ruffs nor frills. In short, if we were to be turned naked into an aquarium—but enough. The eye shuts now. It has shown us a dead world and an immortal fish. (*Books and Portraits* 218)

Her description of the beauty of purpose, in its non-purpose, of the fish, is mystical, and ties to another mystical moment she has, when she reflects in her diary, two years earlier, on the mystical side of solitude, a sense that she finds both “frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is: One sees a fin passing far out” (*Diary Three* 113). The image, one she has never encountered before, leads her to the thought that “Life is, soberly & accurately, the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality” (113), and the image of the fin she associates with “a curious state of mind,” one which may be “the impulse behind another book” (113). This moment has a deep impact on her, as she later recalls “my vision of a fin rising on a wide blank sea,” and states, “No biographer could possibly guess this important fact about my life in the late summer of 1926: yet biographers pretend they know people” (*Diary Three* 153). This mystical understanding of the world around her is, in fact, completely in keeping with the vision of the world as “a vivid sense both of the distinction and of the harmony between the inward and the outward” of which Caroline speaks, and is central to her thinking about what is real in life.

Several of her short stories continue to pursue the mystical, including “Happiness,” where through the character of Stuart Elton, Woolf considers the fleeting quality of being happy, attributable to nothing external, nothing identifiable. In considering what makes him happy, Stuart sees two figures which “flashed into his mind simultaneously—a flag in a breeze, a trout in a stream—poised, balanced, in a current of clean fresh clear bright lucid tingling impinging sensation which like the air or the stream held him upright so that if he moved a hand, stooped or said anything he dislodged the pressure of the innumerable atoms of happiness which closed and held him up again” (*Complete Shorter Fiction* 179), again invoking the fin. Significance lies in the momentary image, unbidden, unattributable, unsought: a gift that leads to exaltation. Such exaltation is “a mystic state, a trance, an ecstasy which, for all that he was atheistical, sceptical, unbaptised and all the rest of it,” and is something like “the ecstasy that turned men priests, sent women in the prime of life trudging the streets with starched cyclamen-like frills about their faces, and set lips and stony eyes; but with this difference; them it prisoned; him it set free” (*Complete Shorter Fiction* 180). Virginia’s diary of 1919 suggests she feels the same way herself, when she rejoices in the progress of her life and work, despite being aware of the clouds of ill health impending, and she comments on “these queer spiritual states” (*Diary One* 298) that seem disconnected from the reality of one’s circumstances. She is interested in such

moments, remembering “the saying that at one’s lowest ebb one is nearest a true vision. I think perhaps 9 people out of ten never get a day in the year of such happiness as I have almost constantly; now I’m having a turn of their lot” (*Diary One* 298). She associates these moments of illness with her visions of wholeness and unity.

The fish are invoked again, in “The Fascination of the Pool,” as Woolf’s narrator sits at the edge of a pool, hearing the voices of those who sat there before, swirling around in the pool just as fish do, but one voice rises above others: “So sad a voice must come from the very bottom of the pool. It raised itself under the others as a spoon lifts all the things in a bowl of water. This was the voice we all wished to listen to. All the voices slipped gently away to the side of the pool to listen to the voice\* which so sad it seemed—it must surely know the reason of all this” (*Complete Shorter Fiction* 227). The asterisk here denotes deleted words: “of the great seer,” adding to the sense of the mystical nature of this moment. Unity and purpose, understanding and wholeness seem to arise with the voice, and the longing of all creation to hear that voice, to understand its message, is palpable.

The wholeness wrought from spirituality is evident in much of Woolf’s writing. From telling Lytton Strachey in 1908 that she spent most of her time in Cornwall “alone with my God, on the moors” (*Letters* 1 327), declining to define who “her God” might be, to her assertion that a musician is “the minister of the wildest of all the gods,” creating music which “incites within us something that is wild and inhuman like itself—a spirit that we would willingly stamp out and forget” (*Essays* 1 29), she adopts a vision of the Divine that is at one with the world and humanity, but is not necessarily at one with the Church as she knows it. In fact, her writing impels her to attempt to reconcile the mystic into a sense of wholeness, as she sees each life containing the kernel of the entire. She is “now and then haunted by some semi-mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident—say the fall of a flower—might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist—nor time either” (*A Writer’s Diary* 101). The fall of a flower, the sight of a fin, a moment of happiness are each indicative of that mystic whole which is entirely consonant with the Quaker faith propounded by Caroline Stephen. Writing became a way of engaging in the mysticism of the world. “It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me” (*Diary* 2 171). That need for wholeness was increased by her mental



and physical illnesses, and she recognized the connection: "In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality" (*On Being Ill* 21). Through illness, the poet could more easily "grasp what is beyond their surface meaning," using instinct that is otherwise buried, and the illness allows the poet to evoke "a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain" (21). Certainly she felt that her illnesses lent to her creativity, the illnesses themselves being "partly mystical. Something happens in my mind. It refuses to go on registering impressions. It shuts itself up. It becomes chrysalis. I lie quite torpid, often with acute physical pain—as last year; only discomfort this. Then suddenly something springs" (*Diary Three* 287). Such an awareness allows her to re-read *The Voyage Out* and call it an "assortment of patches—here simple & severe—here frivolous & shallow—here like God's truth—here strong & free flowing as I could wish. What to make of it, Heaven knows" (*Diary Two* 17). In her attempt at an autobiography, "A Sketch of the Past," she writes that there is a "rapture" in writing when a character comes together, and she again discusses what she "might call a philosophy" of pattern: "that the whole world is a work of art; that we are part of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock" (*Moments of Being* 72).

We are the thing itself, in much the same way God is asserted in "An Unwritten Novel." If there WAS in fact a Shakespeare and a Beethoven, is she suggesting that there was, equally, in the past, a God, and none of them exist any longer? Or is she suggesting that as we are all part of the pattern, all the thing itself, then we are Shakespeare and Beethoven and God?

Such a faith left plenty of room for doubt for Virginia, but then, it also did for Caroline, although for both of them, arguably, the doubt had more to do with the patriarchal institution of the church in which they were raised rather than with the Divine itself. Christianity, according to Virginia and Caroline both, had wrought grave damage in the world. The restrictions laid upon women, the language of sin and damnation, the exclusionary nature of the institution, its patriarchy, and its bickering about what both women perceived as petty doctrinal differences all served to repel rather than attract. Virginia blames the church for much, including destroying the life of Christina Rossetti, who would be "one of the first witnesses I should call" in "a case against God": "First she starved herself of love, which meant also life; then of poetry in deference to what she thought her religion demanded" (*Diary*

*One* 178). "O," she tells Violet Dickinson later, "you Christians have much to answer for! [Rossetti] died surrounded by all the horrors of the Church, poor woman" (*Letters* 1 272). Again, however, we must note that it is religion that made the perceived demands, not God.

Virginia appreciated the sense of order provided within religion, but not the sense of pomposity and piety. The character of Neville, in *The Waves*, hates "men who wear crucifixes on the left side of their waistcoats," "ceremonies and lamentations and the sad figure of Christ," and "the pomp and the indifference and the emphasis, always on the wrong place, of people holding forth under chandeliers in full evening dress, wearing stars and decorations" (*The Waves* 79). The constructed system of religion is juxtaposed with the symbols that try to encompass it: the crucifix, the ceremonies, the emphasis on Christ's sadness, as well as the indifference to the message of God because the pomp is more important. Woolf's precise focus here is not in deriding God, but in deriding those who have largely missed the point about Christ in favor of their own status. She does seem to feel that religion could be redeemed, as she suggests in *Three Guineas*. If religion were taken over by the Outsiders, this new anti-masculine group who understands that "I" is not the central focus of the universe, if those Outsiders could read the New Testament, could attend services and read divines and historians critically, all could be saved. The critique of religion made by these Outsiders would "free the religious spirit from its present servitude" and could "create a new religion based, it might well be, upon the New Testament, but, it might well be, very different from the religion now erected upon that basis" (*Three Guineas* 133–34). As it is, she argues, even the legal system is attributed to "God," "who is now very generally held to be a conception, of patriarchal origin, valid only for certain races, at certain stages and times" (*Three Guineas* 218). Having been subsumed into a patriarchal construct, Woolf argues, God has disappeared into "God," made into the image of man rather than the other way around.

Because of her dislike of formal religion, Woolf is particularly repelled by those who, certain in their condemnatory positions, attempt to convert her. In 1919, she writes of a woman who came to evangelize her, remembering "the peculiar repulsiveness of those who dabble their fingers self-approvingly in the stuff of others' souls" (*Diary One* 255–256). She wonders whether she is a snob because of her reaction against such people, with the "smug vigour of their self-satisfaction! Never a question as to the right of what they do—always a kind of insensate forging ahead until, naturally, their undertakings are all of colossal size & portentous prosperity" (255). She sees in such attempts a desire

for mastery over others, and “more & more I come to loathe any dominion of one over another; any leadership, any imposition of the will” (256). Evangelization seems to her a kind of paternalistic imperialism.

Written in 1919, the above passage recalls Caroline’s earlier writing, when she acknowledges, emphatically, “I wholly disbelieve in the professional competence of one human being to discipline the soul of another” (*Service* 249), insisting that the act of one human presuming to know another’s soul is one of the more reprehensible facets of Christianity. We sense yet another reverberation between Virginia and Caroline.

Virginia had any number of people trying to convert her (though, interestingly enough, it does not appear that Caroline attempted to do so). She records having to “confute the Christian religion” and asking a friend to “supply me with a God quick—not the Christian God” (*Letters* I 66). Dorothea Stephen, her cousin, continually tried to preach her into Christianity, to Virginia’s growing contempt. As Hermione Lee notes, both Virginia and Vanessa conceived an intense hatred for Dorothea especially, her pomposity, disapproval and Christian piety too much for them; the “pious, intrusive Doris Kilman” of Mrs. Dalloway may owe something to Dorothea (Lee 63). As Virginia writes to Violet Dickinson in 1903, she apologizes for a religious allusion in her letter that “drifted in, or was pounded in, by a fat religious cousin [Dorothea Stephen], very red in the face, who is arguing Christianity with Thoby” (*Letters* I 85). She writes to Vanessa about Janet Case, her friend and former tutor, that she is “full of tender humanities, and a kind of cultured Christianity, though she is too well educated to be a Christian” (*Letters* I 363), again directly responding to Janet’s religious status rather than the condition of her belief. Jean Thomas, the woman who ran the nursing home where Virginia went to recover from her breakdowns, spent years trying to convert Virginia; Virginia liked her, but felt that religion “seems to me to have ruined” her and her associates. “Miss T. is always culminating in silent prayer. Miss Somerville [patient], the absent minded one with the deaf dog, wears two crucifixes. Miss B. says Church Bells are the sweetest sound on earth. [...] They are always wondering what God is up to. The religious mind is quite amazing” (*Letters* I 431). Two years later, after Christmas (which she once referred to as “the Devils own feast not the other way round, as generally supposed” (*Letters* I 62)), she writes to Vanessa that Jean Thomas had sent her a long Christmas letter, “exhorting me to Christianity, which will save me from insanity. How we are persecuted! The self conceit of Christians is really unendurable” (*Letters* I 442). Virginia complains that atheists are “persecuted” by church bells,

by congregations singing “without understanding” (the same source of irritation for Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* (229)), by boys singing “senseless” psalms. However, she says, “I suppose it would be too rash to burn them all. They must have imaginations. I am more charitable about them than they are about me” (*Letters* I 448).

Part of the contempt Virginia has for the Church (and its adherents) is the focus on conventional morality as a proof of a person’s soul, and what she saw as hypocrisy in those who judge others. She understood that one could behave in a way that ignored traditional moral codes (living in a house with single men in it, for example) without damaging one’s worship for the Divine. In “An Unwritten Novel,” the connection between Christianity and guilt is laid out in terms of the limitations of the Christian consciousness: “Life’s what you see in people’s eyes; life’s what they learn, and, having learnt it, never, though they seek to hide it, cease to be aware of—what? That life’s like that, it seems” (8). What is real is often hidden by hypocrisy, or at least by the constant masks that one must wear in life. Seeking to get at the person behind such masks, the narrator speculates on a woman sitting across from her on a train, and makes up a story about her life, naming her Minnie Marsh, imagining her praying to God.

That’s all very well; and she may rub the pane too, as though to see God better, but what God does she see? Who’s the God of Minnie Marsh, the God of the back streets of Eastbourne, the God of three o’clock in the afternoon? I, too, see roofs, I see sky; but, oh dear—this seeing of Gods! More like President Kruger than Prince Albert—that’s the best I can do for him; and I see him on a chair, in a black frock-coat, not so very high up either; I can manage a cloud or two for him to sit on; and then his hand trailing in the cloud holds a rod, a truncheon is it?—black, thick, thorned—a brutal old bully—Minnie’s God! Did he send the itch and the patch and the twitch? Is that why she prays? What she rubs on the window is the stain of sin. Oh, she committed some crime! (*A Haunted House* 12)

The narrator imagines a miserly sin, though the details don’t matter, she says, something that haunts Minnie Marsh, a crime that was “cheap, only the retribution solemn,” because she goes to the church and kneels, “every day, winter, summer, dusk, dawn (here she’s at it) prays. All her sins fall, fall, for ever fall” (13–14). The supposed crime is out of all proportion to the punishment, as the narrator imagines, because of the conception of the vengeful God. Even though in fact the narrator’s story arc is entirely disrupted when the reality occurs—the strange woman disembarking and meeting her son, laughing arm in arm—the narrator does not mind; the story is what matters,

the characters drawn, true or not. The truth, according to the narrator, is that the real world is too glorious for such a God, so the writer of the story gets to play at being God, creating a world the way she wants it to be. Woolf gets to play God herself, imagining and creating what others must think and feel, including their own worship of God, who in this case becomes Virginia herself.

Far from setting herself up as God, however, Virginia uses the above passage to indicate her desire to see the reality of the patterns, to detect the order at work. God is a pervasive topic in her writing, sometimes, as Gough notes, ironically, but many times with a patent curiosity about piety and divinity.

*The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Melymbrosia* (1912), the earlier version of *The Voyage Out*, both have religion at the heart. From the beginning in both texts, Helen Ambrose is anxious that the nurse will make her children pray now that she and Ridley are gone, having taken great care to ensure that, so far, “they think of God as a kind of walrus,” preferring that her children told lies than that they learned the Lord’s Prayer (*The Voyage Out* 26–27). In *Melymbrosia*, Helen calls teaching the Lord’s Prayer to the children “stupidity,” and Ridley “growls” at her, “You attribute too much power to Christianity, my dear. I’ll sweep [our daughter’s] little head clear in half an hour. Besides, the child is sensible” (23). The emphatic and assured voices have softened in *The Voyage Out*, where Helen’s insistence that religion is harmful, and that telling lies and belief in God “come to the same thing” (23), is less certain. In both texts, Helen appears to be the voice most often associated with Virginia Woolf’s own adult views, but Leslie Stephen also echoes. Helen asks “the only questions that matter. For instance, are we Christians?” (VO 144), to which all reply in the negative except Rachel, who answers, “I believe—I believe [...] I believe there are things we don’t know about, and the world might change in a minute and anything appear” (144). Helen declares Rachel is not a Christian and has not, in fact, seriously considered what she might be, amused at the ignorance of youth in claiming an identity without thinking it through. Later, in the chapel, “The Lord’s Prayer was read over them....As if the prayer were a torch applied to fuel, a smoke seemed to rise automatically and fill the place with the ghosts of innumerable services on innumerable Sunday mornings at home” (VO 226). This section, in light of Helen’s fear of the same prayer being taught to her children, seems to recognize the power of the prayer. It is during this service that Rachel has her epiphany about the hollowness of those who fail to recognize the beauty in the words (discussed later, in the chapter on “Writing”), and so when Evelyn asks her later, “Do

you believe in anything?” Rachel can exclaim, “In everything! [...] I believe in the bed, in the photographs, in the pot, in the balcony, in the sun, in Mrs. Flushing [...] But I don’t believe in God, I don’t believe in Mr. Bax, I don’t believe in the hospital nurse” (250); when shown the photograph of Evelyn’s mother, Rachel announces that she doesn’t believe in her either. Her belief in everything that she cannot touch and feel has been shaken, and what is at stake is the concept of belief itself, what it means and what it conveys.

The narrative voice is more present in *Melymbrosia*, and less filtered through the voices of characters, with more asides, such as, “Since religion has gone out of fashion, and the soul is called the brain, these enormous spaces of silence in which our deeds and words are but as points of rock in an ocean, are discreetly ignored; the novelist respects but does not attempt to render them” (*Melymbrosia* 105). By the time Woolf has revised the text into *The Voyage Out*, she has developed enough faith in the reader (and in her own characterization) to remove many of these speeches, allowing the characters to make the points for her.

A greater shift between the two versions, however, is the depiction of the chapel service, which in *Melymbrosia* we see through Susan’s eyes rather than Rachel’s (as in *The Voyage Out*). Susan, newly engaged, is smug in her religiosity, and “could not help her joy at feeling that God had kept her so right up to the greatest event of her life. She was a virgin, in soul as well as body” (234). Her mood is broken, however, by the psalm, as Susan has never felt the application in her life of “man goeth about to devour me; he is daily fighting and troubling me” (234). This shift, taking the response to the service from Susan’s complacency and creating a moment of epiphany for Rachel, suggests that Woolf was, in fact, stepping away from the irony with which the passage might be read if it were coming from Susan. While we understand Rachel’s innocence, Susan is a less sympathetic character, easily discounted. In fact, Rachel’s voice and experience sound much more like Virginia than Helen does (or Susan). Her education, her inexperience, the absence of her mother, all point to identification with Virginia. At the corresponding point in Virginia’s life, she has not identified herself as “aggressively atheistic” as Quentin Bell calls her, but does not identify as Christian either. “Mystic” is perhaps the best term for her. In writing of a clergyman who loved art, Woolf discusses the dual sides of his nature, noting how uncommon such a nature is: “in the majority of cases one instinct triumphs and the other dies, or they both survive, imperfectly, in a state of chronic warfare. But it is extremely rare to find a mind open enough to widen year by year so that there is room for each

different plant to come to flower" (*Essays* 2 184); why would it be impossible to imagine that Woolf had such a mind?

While religion is little discussed in *Night and Day* (1919), there is a sense that faith has been subsumed into social work, particularly with the suffrage bill efforts, and Mary Datchet feels that "faith, faith in an illusion, perhaps, but at any rate, faith in something, was of all gifts the most to be envied" (*Night and Day* 269). But *Jacob's Room* centers a consideration of religion in the characters and their sense of a world facing war. Florinda is vapid and shallow, "her sentiments infantile" (72); "for some reason when she wrote she declared her belief in God" (72). Yet she is redeemed "by the fact that she cared," and is unable to "pretend a feeling" and so has, "(so Jacob thought) an inviolable fidelity" (72). The irony here is multi-layered; Florinda is anything but faithful and chaste, though she does care; placing a religious faith in her nods to both her naive nature and her experience: Jacob's surety is shattered when he sees her turn up Greek Street on someone else's arm. Is she in fact so shallow that she is a hypocrite? Or is her simplicity proof of her inability to pretend a belief? And if that is the case, are all believers shallow and stupid? Jacob's friend Fraser, after all, abhors "vagueness—the Christian religion, for example" (81), again an echo of Leslie Stephen. Fraser also hates Dean Parker, who "wrote books and Fraser utterly destroyed them by force of logic and left his children unbaptized—his wife did it secretly in the wash basin—but Fraser ignored her, and went on supporting blasphemers, distributing leaflets, getting up his facts in the British Museum, always in the same check suit and fiery tie, but pale, spotted, irritable. Indeed, what a work—to destroy religion!" (*Jacob's Room* 81–82). Again, it's the religion that is abhorred, in its vagueness, not God. Still, even when Christianity has become "the thin voice of duty, piping in a white thread from the top of a funnel, that collects the largest multitudes, and night is nothing but a long drawn-out sigh between hammer-strokes, a deep breath—you can hear it from an open window even in the heart of London" (*Jacob's Room* 126). The influence is palpable and inescapable.

*Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and the stories that followed the novel, represent much thinking about faith. "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street" gives us Clarissa Dalloway thinking about a belief in God, wanting to let her children choose for themselves. She wonders why one would go on "if one doesn't believe" and one's son is killed in the war. She decides it is "For the sake of others" (21), and goes on with her day, satisfied with the illusion of belief. But Clarissa is satisfied with many illusions: that of her marriage, that of the status she gleans from shopping for gloves, that of peace; and yet it is all shattered with a

violent explosion in the street. Her faith, if she has any, lacks deep roots, and appears to be a convention more than a belief.

In *Mrs. Dalloway* itself, the version of Clarissa is similar but not identical to that of "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street." In her marriage to Richard, as a mother to Elizabeth, as the former lover of Peter Walsh, as the friend and devotee of Sally Seton, Clarissa is also the antagonist to Miss Kilman, Elizabeth's friend and teacher, who was herself working for the Quakers, and "did not envy women like Clarissa Dalloway; she pitied them" (121). The association of Miss Kilman with the Quakers is intriguing here, coming as it does before Miss Kilman's conversion. Clarissa contemns Miss Kilman, repulsed by her green coat and the power she holds over Elizabeth, as well as the piety that assumes the moral high ground whenever she walks in the room. She can sense the antagonism from Miss Kilman, who is soothed by the righteousness she feels in her religious piety; her "hatred of Mrs. Dalloway, this grudge against the world" is eased when she thinks of God. "Rage was succeeded by calm. A sweet savour filled her veins, her lips parted, and, standing formidable upon the landing in her mackintosh, she looked with steady and sinister serenity at Mrs. Dalloway, who came out with her daughter" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 121–122). Clarissa is appalled, "really shocked. This a Christian—this woman! This woman had taken her daughter from her! She in touch with invisible presences! Heavy, ugly, commonplace, without kindness or grace, she know the meaning of life?" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 122). Clarissa's reaction is so strong that she reacts physically, shuddering.

Love and religion! thought Clarissa, going back into the drawing-room, tingling all over. How detestable, how detestable they are! For now that the body of Miss Kilman was not before her, it overwhelmed her—the idea. The cruelest things in the world, she thought, seeing them clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous, dressed in a mackintosh coat, on the landing; love and religion. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 123)

Miss Kilman is marginalized in her character, unsuccessful in life, reduced to shopping at the Army/Navy store for her undergarments. Feeling humiliated because she believes Elizabeth has rejected her after tea, she "lurches" out of the mall and immediately sees Westminster Cathedral, "the habitation of god" (130). She heads for it, "doggedly," seeing it as a sanctuary" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 130), the only place where she feels she belongs, without respect to her class or her green mackintosh. Because our sympathies naturally lie with Clarissa, the main perspective of the book, we naturally find ourselves repelled by Miss Kilman as well, and yet her situation should call for our sympathy;

Clarissa's lack of sympathy for her forms our suspicions, and those are based on Clarissa's envy and revulsion at allowing for Miss Kilman, an unattractive woman, to represent Christianity to Elizabeth.

In "A Simple Melody," one of the short stories connected to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Mr. Carslake is at Clarissa Dalloway's party, gazing at a landscape portrait, and has a Prufrock moment wherein he wonders if he dares to announce the connection all of the party attendees have to each other, knowing doing so would kill the party. But he imagines them all walking through the depicted scene as if it were real life:

There would be a shepherd very likely; a windmill; or if these failed, some bush against the sky, or cart track which had this power—again he trembled on the silly words,—“to reconcile differences—to make one believe in God”. It almost stung him that last! To believe in God indeed! When every rational power protested against the crazy and craven idiocy of such a saying! It seemed to him as if he had been trapped into the words. “To believe in God”. (*Complete Shorter Fiction* 203)

The imagery which he pictures here, especially the shepherd, propels him to the Biblical almost against his will. “Every phrase he used, alas, tinkled in his ears with a sham religious flavour. ‘Getting home’—the religious had appropriated that. It meant going to Heaven. His thoughts could not find any pure new words which had never been ruffled and creased and had the starch taken out of them by others’ use” (203).

The sense of being unwillingly propelled into the religious permeates Woolf's texts, reminding us of the ubiquity of Christian language if not ideas, despite overt attempts to reject them. From Mrs. Ramsay blurting out, “We are in the hands of the Lord” (*To the Lighthouse* 66) to Septimus Smith announcing, “Men must not cut down trees. There is a God” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 24), to Mr. Carslake trembling “on the silly words,” to Bernard in *The Waves*, pondering, “It is curious how, at every crisis, some phrase which does not fit insists upon coming to the rescue—the penalty of living in an old civilisation with a notebook” (*The Waves* 184), we see her characters seemingly overcome by religious sentiments to which they consciously object.

Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), gives us perhaps her most complicated statement on God. Lucy Swithin, a clear remnant of the old traditions at a time when war is disrupting all sense of tradition, is made to look somewhat ludicrous as she holds onto her crucifix, praying for the weather to hold. But we see Lucy most often through the eyes of others, those who assume they know what she is thinking as she looks at the sky:

Mrs. Swithin's eyes glazed as she looked at it. Isa thought her gaze was fixed because she saw God there, God on his throne. But as a shadow fell next moment on the garden Mrs. Swithin loosed and lowered her fixed look and said:

“It's very unsettled. It'll rain, I'm afraid. We can only pray,” she added, and fingered her crucifix.

“And provide umbrellas,” said her brother.

Lucy flushed. He had struck her faith. (*Between the Acts* 23)

We do not see, in fact, whether Lucy flushes because her brother has struck her faith, only that she flushes. We see what Isa thinks she is seeing. It could be just the matter of her brother's perpetual contradiction that makes her flush. It is her brother, later, who thinks of her, upon discussing the origin of the phrase “touch wood”:

But it was not in books the answer to his question—why, in Lucy's skull, shaped so much like his own, there existed a prayable being? She didn't, he supposed, invest it with hair, teeth or toenails. It was, he supposed, more of a force or a radiance, controlling the thrush and the worm; the tulip and the hound; and himself, too, an old man with swollen veins. It got her out of bed on a cold morning and sent her down the muddy path to worship it, whose mouthpiece was Streatfield. (25)

He concludes that touching wood is the same as her belief, both of them “superstition” (25); the repetition of “he supposed” reinforces the unreliability of such supposition.

William Dodge regards Lucy as well: “Pendant from her chain her cross swung as she leant out and the sun struck it. How could she weight herself down by that sleek symbol? How stamp herself, so volatile, so vagrant, with that image?” (*Between the Acts* 73). And Bart watches Lucy at the performance: “She was thinking, he supposed, God is peace. God is love. For she belonged to the unifiers; he to the separatists” (*Between the Acts* 118). The fact of the crucifix around her neck beckons all of these others to draw conclusions about the nature of her faith. Their conclusions are generally taken to demonstrate Lucy's absurd and antiquated piety, and yet so often Woolf comments on our inability to know each other, on the inaccuracy of our misplaced conclusions, that we must wonder what, in fact, she is trying to say about Lucy. What can we know about the heart of faith? Why would we take the word of those around her, especially Bart, who denigrates her at every turn? It is Bart who, at the end of the play within the play, after everyone has cheated everyone else, laughs “like a horse whinnying,” and cries out “God's truth! [...] There's a moral for you!” (149), demonstrating his own cynicism. His contempt for his

sister is made all the more clear after the play, when Lucy asks him whether they ought to thank Miss La Trobe, the woman who put on the play, and he thinks:

How imperceptive her religion made her! The fumes of that incense obscured the human heart. Skimming the surface, she ignored the battle in the mud. After La Trobe had been excruciated by the Rector's interpretation, by the maulings and manglings of the actors ... 'She don't want our thanks, Lucy,' he said gruffly. What she wanted, like that carp (something moved in the water) was darkness in the mud; a whisky and soda at the pub; and coarse words descending like maggots through the waters. (*Between the Acts* 203)

Somehow it is religion's fault that Lucy is gracious enough to think of thanking Miss La Trobe for her work, even if the play did not come off as planned. Woolf's irony here about Bart's apparent "perception" is clear, unless Lucy is read as ludicrous in her faith, in which case Bart appears to be a simple bully.

But Lucy, caressing her cross "perfunctorily" (204), gazes into the lily pool, looking for her fish, at last getting a glimpse of them only when Bart has returned to the house. "And retrieving some glint of faith from the grey waters, hopefully, without much help from reason, she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched fish; seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves" (*Between the Acts* 205). She takes strength from the fish, and again Woolf's fin arises from the waves, or the fish's voice is coming from the pond, or the glory of the fish is being praised in "The Sun and the Fish." It is Lucy's turn to surmise others's responses, but she is unequal to the task and returns to herself and the fish:

Fish had faith, [Lucy] reasoned. They trust us because we've never caught'em. But her brother would reply: "That's greed." "Their beauty!" she protested. "Sex," he would say. "Who makes sex susceptible to beauty?" she would argue. He shrugged who? Why? Silence, she returned to her private vision; of beauty which is goodness; the sea on which we float. Mostly impervious, but surely every boat sometimes leaks? (205)

She is silenced by the male reasoning, just as Caroline and Virginia felt the need to withdraw into silence in the face of patriarchal religious compulsions. Lucy ponders, "For herself, every morning, kneeling, she protected her vision. Every night she opened the window and looked at leaves against the sky. Then slept. Then the random ribbons of birds' voices woke her" (206).

The need to protect her vision from the scoffing of the powerful male figures around her is something with which both Caroline and Virginia must have been familiar. Lucy is not the caricature of faith as she is so often depicted.

In 1926, Woolf wonders why she had ever planned to "leave out" the soul from her diaries, acknowledging that "the truth is, one can't write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes: but look at the ceiling, at Grizzle [her dog], at the cheaper beasts in the Zoo which are exposed to walkers in Regents Park, & the soul slips in. It slipped in this afternoon. I will write that I said, staring at the bison" (*Diary Three* 62). She cannot keep the soul out of her work either. Lucy looks less and less ludicrous if we also consider Virginia's final diary entry before she drowned herself (with the fish): "A curious sea side feeling in the air today. It reminds me of lodgings on a parade at Easter. Everyone leaning against the wind, nipped & silenced. All pulp removed. This windy corner. And Nessa is at Brighton, & I am imagining how it wd be if we could infuse souls" (*Diary Five* 359).