

Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

Volume 1 *A Collection of Essays Presented at
the First Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on
C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 16

1997

George MacDonald's Answer to the Victorian Crises of Faith

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Recommended Citation

Jordan, Pamela (1997) "George MacDonald's Answer to the Victorian Crises of Faith," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol1/iss1/16

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A Collection of Essays Presented at

The First

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1997

Upland, Indiana

**A Doubting Thomas and His Challengers:
George MacDonald's Answer to the Victorian Crises of Faith**

Pamela Jordan
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George MacDonald's Answer to the Victorian Crisis of Faith
by Pamela Jordan**

In his essay "Faith and Doubt in Victorian Fiction" Reg Tye reminds us that "the retention of faith under a variety of onslaughts" was one of the most excruciating and consuming problems faced by the Victorians (139-40). Advances in science, the influence of German higher criticism, political reforms, and drastic changes in society and culture as a result of industrialization and newly articulated philosophies, all challenged traditional habits of mind and threatened to undermine belief. Victorians found no easy answers in their struggle to cope with change and especially to comprehend the implications of advances in science and biblical scholarship, but the writers of the day came to their aid. As the work of Margaret Maison, Robert Lee Wolff, and Elisabeth Jay has shown, Victorian religious novels addressed all the multifaceted issues of faith and doubt, and religious novelists provided a variety of answers to the Victorian crisis of faith.

Like other Victorian religious novelists, George MacDonald used his novels "to address the theological and social questions of his day" (Raeper 196). His popularity would suggest that his readers appreciated his answers. Apparently, MacDonald spoke to many Victorians who found in his message a shelter from the storm of doubt. Probably for this reason, Maison considers him, "one of the

most influential religious novelists of the nineteenth century" (217). Unquestionably, MacDonald used his fiction as a pulpit. In the words of his son Ronald, "[H]e was driven inwardly to make as clear as he could to as large an audience as possible his understanding of the relations of Christian truth to human experience" (qtd. In Hein, *Harmony* 113). His novel *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* is no exception.

In this novel about a clergyman who doesn't know what he believes or why, MacDonald outlines all the major tenets of his personal theology. In fact, he considered the story of Wingfold one of his most significant novels. According to Rolland Hein, MacDonald regarded *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* important for two reasons. First, in it "he had found a way to successfully convey the heart and substance of his Christian convictions in story form." In his preceding novels he had difficulty juxtaposing the message he wanted to convey and the story he attempted to frame it in. Second, "the novel represented his response to many of the issues confronting the contemporary church, beginning with the validity of belief itself" (*George MacDonald* 281). In recording Thomas Wingfold's quest for belief, MacDonald is able to explore the causes of doubt and confront the challenges to orthodox

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belief faced by many Victorians. Through Wingfold, MacDonald suggests that one might seriously entertain the questions of the Victorian era yet still be able to retain belief.

Initially, Wingfold is a professional clergyman only. He has no real convictions and accepts the teachings of the Church on authority. Although he is a sincere and dutiful curate, he is incapable of defending his faith. When his beliefs are challenged by George Bascombe, Wingfold realizes he has never really thought through what he believes. Wingfold is ill-equipped to find answers on his own, but help is provided by an unlikely source, a parishioner who confronts him for a plagiarized sermon. In a series of conversations with Joseph Polwarth, Wingfold is guided through a search for truth and develops a personal faith.

Wingfold's conversion represents MacDonald's answer to the Victorian crisis of faith. MacDonald felt the most valid response to doubt was to honestly seek God. He believed and sought to demonstrate in all of his fiction that human beings prosper and find fulfillment only when they are in right relationship to God (Dyer 221). His position is, essentially, an Evangelical one. As Jay points out, one of the key elements of Evangelical doctrine is "an insistence on the primacy of the individual's relationship with his Savior, maintained through prayer and the search for guidance from Scripture" (*Faith and Doubt* 1). Wingfold finds what he's looking for in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ which is made possible by his study of the New Testament. Wingfold comes to know Jesus as He is revealed in the New Testament and accepts that what Jesus says about Himself is true. While Wingfold may not expound a particular creed, he lives by the essentials of Evangelical doctrine. The

emphasis for MacDonald is always on personal relationship with the Heavenly Father through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Wingfold's story also illustrates what some Victorians turned to in the face of their own doubts according to Horton Davies. He maintains that a certain group within the Established Church thought through what they believed very carefully and reached conclusions very similar to what MacDonald advocates in *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*. Davies asserts: "Only the more careful and most committed learned anew that they must cling, with unyielding grasp, to a supernatural religion; to a Christ, truly Divine as well as human: to an Incarnate, Crucified, Risen and Reigning Lord of all the centuries, who would sustain and renew the flagging cohorts of His Church" (205). Wingfold represents the sector of the Victorian population whose faith was strengthened and deepened by the questioning that characterized the era.

Two other characters in the novel enable MacDonald to address this questioning. Both play a key role in Wingfold's conversion. George Bascombe pushes Wingfold to question his beliefs in the first place, and Joseph Polwarth helps him think through what he believes. These two characters are significant because MacDonald uses them to express his personal views regarding faith and doubt in Victorian England. One reflects MacDonald's argument for belief; the other represents his answer to those who argued that science had invalidated Christian belief.

Joseph Polwarth serves as a spokesperson for MacDonald and presents a cogent argument for retaining faith. Polwarth is a type found in most of MacDonald's novels, "true sages of great moral and spiritual insight who stand outside the conventional Christian ministry" (Hein, *Harmony* 124). Polwarth

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rarely attends the parish church, and it is never clear what his association with the Church is, yet he is the wisest man Wingfold has ever met and much more well-read in religion and knowledgeable of the Bible than Wingfold. Polwarth serves as a mentor who teaches Wingfold that knowledge of God comes through acquaintance with Jesus Christ.

Explaining his own quest to know if God was real, Polwarth tells Wingfold he also had begun by asking "How can I know there is a God?" and "How am I to know that such a man as Jesus ever lived" but soon discovered that those questions were void in the face of being drawn to Jesus as He was revealed in the New Testament. He says to Wingfold, "I had seen the man Jesus Christ, and in him had known the Father of him and of me" (88; ch. 18). Polwarth argues that it is not necessary to prove the existence of God. To those who can't believe in the unseen, to the scientists, to those who speak of the world being governed by natural laws, and to those who simply assert that common sense flies in the face of the miraculous, Polwarth puts forth the question: What if God is real? Polwarth argues "Either the whole frame of existence" is chaos or it is the "perfect creative idea" of the God of the universe who is everywhere and always involved with His creation.

It is clear from reading MacDonald's letters and sermons that the words Polwarth speaks and the beliefs he expresses replicate MacDonald's own. Throughout the novel, Polwarth gives expression to key elements in MacDonald's theology. He believes that man's role is to render service to God and that in serving, the divine nature is developed in man. Doing something for God means serving fellow creatures just as Christ's example demonstrates (292; ch. 60). Polwarth also believes human beings are fulfilled only when

the divine nature within them is cultivated and they move toward the perfection which God intends for them (295; ch. 60). Additionally, he sees God as very interested in the welfare of those He has created and able to turn everything to good. Polwarth is the one who convinces Leopold that God can forgive him. MacDonald's ever present conviction that God is a loving Father and that we are His beloved children is also expressed by Polwarth. Polwarth's staunch conviction that believing and trusting in God is humankind's only hope and deepest need is expressed to Mr. Drew in chapter 95:

[I]t is not a belief in immortality that will deliver a man from the woes of humanity, but faith in the God of life, the Father of lights, the God of all consolation and comfort. Believing in him, a man can leave friends, . . . with everything else . . . in his hands. Until we have the life in us, we shall never be at peace. The living God dwelling in the heart he has made, and glorifying it by inmost speech with himself—that is life, assurance and safety. Nothing less is or can be such. (487)

This is the sermon of *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* and every other MacDonald novel. Polwarth's convictions underscore the validity of the new belief that Wingfold has acquired and afford MacDonald the opportunity to reiterate that the choice to believe in God and Jesus as He is revealed in the New Testament is the only answer to the Victorian crisis of faith.

While Wingfold owes much to Joseph Polwarth for helping him find a genuine faith, he is also indebted to George Bascombe who first challenges his belief. When confronted

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with Bascombe's question, "Then I am to understand, Mr. Wingfold that you neither believe nor disbelieve the tenets of the church whose bread you eat?" Wingfold does not have an honest response (52; ch 11). Bascombe is an atheist who makes it his business to destroy the beliefs of others. The narrator suggests that Bascombe sees himself as "one of the prophets of the new order of things" (33; ch.7). Bascombe believes men will be happier from learning that there is no God and that by enlightening them he is doing them a service. He takes pride in "his doctrine of living for posterity without a hope of good result to self beyond the consciousness that future generations of perishing men and women would be a little more comfortable, and perhaps a little less faulty therefrom" (61; ch. 13). Bascombe believes the story of Christ is rubbish. He thinks the conceptions of the atonement and resurrection are absurd, and claims that even those who call themselves Christians don't act as if they really believe the biblical account is true. To him "the whole system is a lie" a consummate self-deception (26; ch. 5). He refers to the Bible as a "farrago of priestly absurdities" and asserts that those who believe it are idiots (240; ch.48).

MacDonald is clearly biased in his portrayal of Bascombe, but in giving expression to Bascombe's beliefs, he is able to call attention to the weaknesses in them. Bascombe flatly rejects what he cannot see and has no capacity for faith. MacDonald's personal response to thinkers like Bascombe is depicted in this description of him in chapter 7: "That region of man's nature which has to do with the unknown was in Bascombe shut off by a wall without chink or cranny; he was unaware of its existence" (32). MacDonald portrays Bascombe as one incapable of seeing

beyond the limits of his own thinking and also as one who denounces everyone who didn't believe as he did as "either a knave or a fool if not both in one" (32). More than once in the novel, the author suggests that Bascombe's major fault is prideful close-mindedness. With regard to Bascombe's dismissal of the teachings of the Church, the narrator is especially critical because Bascombe is not fully informed or is misinformed and has made judgments for which he has no validation; as the narrator observes, Bascombe "inveighed against the beliefs of other people without having ever seen more than a distorted shadow of those beliefs" (32).

In chapter 7 MacDonald suggests that Bascombe is caught up in the current of the times readily accepting the propositions of the scientists and writers of higher criticism and riding the coattails of those who rejected orthodoxy. Bascombe believes in science and facts that can be proven. He is ready to accept any scientific or intellectual evidence that supersedes traditionally held beliefs and to disdain any notion of the supernatural. The tone in which the author speaks of Bascombe's attitude toward Wingfold suggests that MacDonald felt that men like Bascombe had closed their minds to possible truth. Bascombe thinks the curate is "worrying his brain about things that had no existence" which he wouldn't even concede were possible. "The thought had never rippled the gray mass of his self-satisfied brain that perhaps there was more of himself than what he counted himself yet knew, and that possibly these matters had a consistent relation with parts unknown" (189; ch. 38).

Bascombe's is a rationalistic and materialistic approach to life that MacDonald presents as insufficient in *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*. Bascombe's belief that after death

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humans become "only an unpleasant mass of chemicals, which a whole ant-heap of little laws would presently be carrying outside the gates of the organic" leaves no hope for humankind. His position if taken to its logical conclusion leaves humanity in a desperate state of meaningless existence which MacDonald pictures in chapter 92:

Then either man is the constructive centre of the world, and its meanings are but his own face looking back upon him from the mirror of his own projected atmosphere, and comfort there is none; or he is not the centre of the world, which yet carries in its forms and colours the aspects of his mind; and then, horror of horrors! Is man the one conscious point and object of a vast derision—insentient nature grinning at sentient man! Rose or saffron his sky, but mocks and makes mows at him; while he himself is the worst mockery of all, being at once that which mocks and that which not only is mocked but writhes in agony under the mockery. (477)

MacDonald's picture suggests that if humans are confined to the limits of what can be proven experientially, they are, indeed, without hope.

MacDonald's goal was to help refocus the thinking of Victorians who were beset by attacks on orthodox belief. In *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* he contends that Victorians were preoccupied with irrelevant questions and replaces them with the only questions that, in his mind, really mattered. For example, when Wingfold asks Polwarth how he is to

regard the Bible, Polwarth implies that the issue of inspiration is a moot point and counters Wingfold's question with another, "For yourself, however, let me ask if you have not already found in the book the highest means of spiritual education and development you have yet met with" (172; ch. 35)? If the Bible serves this purpose, then why question its authorship or historicity? MacDonald contends that the Bible as a text is not nearly as significant as the Bible as a means of becoming acquainted with Jesus Christ and God through Him. He doesn't so much provide an argument against science or higher criticism as he seeks to help his readers find a personal faith that can stand in the face of the perplexities of the Victorian milieu.

It is important to note that MacDonald was not opposed to science; in fact, he had a strong interest in it. At one time he had even hoped to become a doctor and studied natural science at Kings College in Aberdeen. He also read Darwin with interest and was well acquainted with the debates within the Church. His response to the issues which caused so many Victorians to doubt was to accept the enlightenment that advances in science and criticism could bring without surrendering the essence of his faith. MacDonald is likened to Scottish theologians who, in the words of D. J. Vaughn, are perfectly prepared to surrender to modern critical and scientific thought all that they can be reasonably asked to surrender to it; but who at the same time hold fast by the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, being firmly persuaded that the final outcome of all modern speculation will only be to make our conception of that Gospel more pure and potent for good than ever. (472)

MacDonald didn't reject the advances in science or higher criticism, he simply contended that scientific investigations or new

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ways of studying the biblical texts could not reveal all truth. His argument turns on the premise that finite man cannot know that there is no God. As an intrusive narrator he states his case in chapter 13: Even if it were possible for one to search "all spaces of space, up and down, in greatness and smallness . . . and all regions of thought and feeling, all the unknown mental universe of possible discovery" one might find "that there is no God such as this or that in whom men imagine they believe, but you cannot be convinced that there is no God" (61-62). MacDonald furthers this argument in chapter 43 when Wingfold reasons that though he may not be able to prove that God exists, neither can Bascombe prove that God doesn't exist. Finally, using his speaker Polwarth, MacDonald expresses his own conviction that God does exist and further that He is a personal God involved with those whom He has created:

Either the whole frame of existence... is a wretched, miserable unfitness, a chaos with dreams of a world, a chaos in which the higher is for ever subject to the lower, or it is an embodied idea growing towards perfection in him who is the one perfect creative Idea, the Father of lights who suffers himself that he may bring his many sons into the glory which is his own glory. (88; ch. 18)

For MacDonald, Christianity was a viable option. Like his character, Thomas Wingfold, he chose to believe in the Father of Jesus Christ.

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