

THE BRONTËS
AND
RELIGION

MARIANNE THORMÄHLEN



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Abbreviations and editions</i>	ix
Introduction	i
I DENOMINATIONS	
1 A Christian home in early nineteenth-century England: Evangelicalism, Dissent and the Brontë family	13
2 Charlotte Brontë and the Church of Rome	24
3 An undenominational temper	39
II DOCTRINES	
4 The Brontës in the theological landscape of their time	47
5 God and his creation	53
6 Faith and redemption	71
7 This life and the next	90
III ETHICS	
8 Forgiveness and revenge	119
9 The Christian life	144
IV CLERICS	
10 Clergymen in the Brontë novels	173

II	The enigma of St John Rivers	204
	<i>Notes</i>	221
	<i>Select bibliography</i>	271
	<i>Index</i>	278

CHAPTER I

A Christian home in early nineteenth-century England: Evangelicalism, Dissent and the Brontë family

The spiritual elements that were present in Haworth Parsonage can be viewed as microcosmic representations of religious currents in Britain from 1800 to 1850. These movements transformed the life of the Established Church; created a major new Nonconformist community as Methodism formally separated from the Church of England; and resensitised the historically painful area along the boundary between the Anglican Church and Roman Catholicism. The family at the Parsonage felt the impact of all these events, and each of the Brontë sisters attempted to steer her own course among them with characteristic fearlessness and determination.

This absence of stasis in the religious lives of the sisters is another reason to avoid simple categorisation where their beliefs are concerned, in addition to the seeming contradictions and paradoxes referred to above. The terms in which Hoxie Neal Fairchild describes the Brontës' religion are over-simplified by any standards:

Anne, never much tempted to smash through the wall which surrounded her, was a mildly faithful Evangelical. Charlotte, in whose mind Jane Austen and Mrs. Radcliffe contended for mastery, was a Broad Churchwoman. Emily, so pure a romantic that she reminded Matthew Arnold of Byron, cared nothing about Christianity, broad or narrow.¹

Two of the most important religious influences on Patrick Brontë were Wesleyan Methodism and Evangelicalism in the Church of England, as he came to know and absorb it at Cambridge. A recorded conversation between John Wesley and a leading exponent of the latter movement conveys a potent warning against relying too much on labels when describing the spiritual life of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries:

‘Sir’, said [the young Charles] Simeon, ‘I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have sometimes been called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission, I will ask you a few questions, not from impertinent curiosity, but for real instruction.’ Permission being very readily granted, the young minister proceeded to say, – ‘Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?’ ‘Yes’, says the veteran [i.e. Wesley], ‘I do indeed.’ ‘And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything that you can do; and do you look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ?’ ‘Yes, solely through Christ.’ ‘But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?’ ‘No; I must be saved from first to last by Christ.’ ‘Allowing then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?’ ‘No.’ ‘What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother’s arms?’ ‘Yes, altogether.’ ‘And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto his heavenly kingdom?’ ‘Yes, I have no hope but in him.’ ‘Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is all my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it: and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.’ These doctrines, so beautifully and graphically stated by these two illustrious champions, may justly be styled the doctrines of the Church of England.²

This exchange provides an excellent illustration of the dynamics that characterised religious developments in England throughout Patrick Brontë’s long life. His apparent readiness to allow his children to evolve their own beliefs will not only have been due to personal distaste for indoctrination and respect for the unadulterated perspicacity of the young; the spirit of unfettered enquiry in religious matters that gradually gained ground in the Britain of his youth is surely a factor, too.

Patrick Brontë himself, the son of an Irish small farmer, was brought up in a Protestant household. In due course, he was befriended by the Revd Thomas Tighe, Vicar of Drumballyrone and a member of the Church of Ireland.³ It was his spell as tutor to Tighe’s children which introduced him to that Evangelical brand of Protestantism which shaped his future career: first as a mature student (he was twenty-five on admission as a sizar at St John’s), subsequently as a clergyman in the Church of England.

As Evangelicalism was of such fundamental importance in Patrick Brontë’s home, a summary of its main features seems in order at this

point.⁴ The movement emerged in the eighteenth century as a reaction against the secularity and spiritual shallowness that were felt by many to prevail in the Established Church. Its power and influence grew steadily, though it was slow to obtain a secure footing among the higher echelons in the Church hierarchy. In the early nineteenth century, however, Evangelical bishops began to be appointed, and Evangelicalism became the predominant religious current in the Church of England. After 1830, a decline set in; but it was gradual, and the Brontë sisters grew up at a time when their father's spiritual orientation was generally felt to constitute a central force in the Church he served.

The focus of Evangelical Christianity is illustrated by the conversation of Wesley and Simeon quoted above: wholehearted love of and faith in the merciful God whose just wrath against wretched humanity was forever appeased by his Son's Atonement. To the Evangelical, Christ's sacrificial death to save mankind was an even more crucial event than the Incarnation itself. It is characteristic that the inscription on Charles Simeon's tomb echoes 1 Cor. 2:2: 'I determined not to know any thing . . . save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'⁵ A personal response to the Atonement was required of every Christian; even if Christ extended the possibility of salvation to all men, it had to be actively embraced. Consequently, the element of conversion was of great importance in Evangelicalism. Conversion did not necessarily take place in a moment: it was often preceded by months and years of spiritual agonising.⁶ Nor was it enough to have experienced it; faith in the Gospel must be evinced in a life of piety and effort. In these labours of body and spirit, the Christian's chief guide is the Bible, which he should study individually as well as in the company of other believers during Church and society meetings.

This brief recapitulation indicates several points of confluence between Wesleyan Methodism, Calvinism and Evangelicalism in the Established Church. Both the former have been mentioned as religious influences on the Brontës, and not without reason;⁷ but though all three possess distinct characteristics, they have much in common, too. For instance, the emphasis on Scriptural authority links Calvinism and Evangelicalism; and like the Methodists, Evangelicals were strongly aware of the sinfulness of man and of the sole hope of redemption through Christ. All three branches of Protestantism were united in their commitment to justification by faith accompanied by the pursuit of holiness, manifest in practical action as well as in the glorification of God.

A subsequent chapter shows how Anne and Charlotte Brontë expressly repudiated the Calvinist doctrines of election and predestination; it also looks at Emily Brontë's Joseph, as pungent a satire on sanctimonious Calvinist hypocrisy as Burns's 'Holy Willie's Prayer', with which it has occasionally been compared. Here, however, it is enough to say that while Calvinist tenets caused Anne, Charlotte and Branwell much spiritual anguish, there is no evidence that they had such notions specifically impressed on them by their elders. Nor is it fair to denounce Calvinism *in toto* as a monster responsible for cruel and unnecessary suffering in the lives of the Brontës. Apart from the fact that Calvinism comprises much more than the doctrine of predestination, an awareness of sin and a desperate yearning for salvation were feelings promoted by all the denominations represented in their immediate milieu. It should be borne in mind, too, that however forbidding all this may seem to a later age, these fears coexisted with hopes for everlasting bliss whose nature and intensity few of us can imagine today.

Many unsuccessful attempts have been made to blame Patrick Brontë and/or Aunt Branwell for the religious tribulations that occasionally beset Charlotte, Branwell and Anne. The meagre scraps of indirect evidence favouring the allegations are nullified by the astounding mental and spiritual liberty which the Brontës demonstrably enjoyed in their religious development, as well as in their reading and study. It would be tempting to call this freedom unique, at least in the home of a clergyman in the Church of England; but where parental non-interference with children's spiritual progress is concerned, Mr Brontë had at least one predecessor among the Evangelical clergymen he knew and admired. Henry Venn, the distinguished father of the Clapham Sect's pastor John Venn, and the friend of Charles Simeon and Isaac Milner,⁸ was very much against the religious indoctrination of children:

The great danger is, from surfeiting a child with religious doctrines, or over-much talk. Doctrines they are too young to understand; and too frequent talking to them is a wearisomeness to them. Too many parents greatly err, in expecting the religion of a child should be nearly the same as their own. Much have I thought on the subject; and much pains, indeed, have I taken with my children; and, God knoweth, desiring this one thing – that He would give them the knowledge and love of His ever blessed name. But I did not give them formal instructions till they were eight years old; and then, chiefly set before them the striking facts in the Old Testament, or the miracles in the New; and laboured much to set before them the *goodness* of our God, in things they could understand.⁹

A peculiarly satisfying way of attacking your *bêtes noires* is to make fun of them, and Joseph at *Wuthering Heights* is not the only instance of Brontë mockery directed against representatives of religious denominations or communities other than Evangelical Anglicanism. From their early youth, the children of Haworth Parsonage ridiculed Methodists and Baptists,¹⁰ and the portrayals of Dissenters in the Brontë novels are consistently uncomplimentary: for example, Caroline Helstone's dead aunt Mary's *Methodist Magazines* are 'mad', and the unholy alliance of Dissenters challenging the Church of England school-feast party in Royd-lane must suffer ignominious defeat.

Patrick Brontë's chief disputes were with the Baptists, against whom he would happily quote Independent and Wesleyan divines. In his 'Treatise on Baptism', a polemical piece directed against a Baptist adversary, he resorted to a phrase whose potential disingenuousness was less apparent to the early nineteenth century than it is today: 'I have been able to number some of my best friends amongst Dissenters'. The qualification he added, however, carried an unambiguous sting, 'yea, even amongst *Baptists*'.¹¹ His strong ties with Wesleyan Methodism will have been a factor in his more conciliatory attitude towards Wesley's successors; but his children, born after the formal secession of Methodism from the Church of England, lambasted representatives of that denomination with glee.¹²

Commentators on *Wuthering Heights* have seen an element of anti-Methodist satire in Emily Brontë's creation of Jabes Branderham (in Lockwood's first dream, ch. iii in the first volume). Three circumstances have been adduced in support of the belief that Branderham is based on the founder of independent Methodism, Jabez Bunting: the shared first name and surname initial; the fact that Bunting's predecessor referred to himself as 'a Brand plucked out of the burning' (Wesley had been rescued from a fire as a child); and Bunting's conduct in connexion with the opening of a chapel at the Wesleyan Academy of Woodhouse Grove, when he allegedly quelled an 'unseemly riot . . . by thumping vigorously on the pulpit book-board and demanding silence'.¹³ The last two arguments seem somewhat feeble: the 'rapping' in *Wuthering Heights* is associated with blows dealt in a brawl, and there seems no obvious reason why Emily Brontë should have recalled the Woodhouse Grove incident, which took place as far back as 1833, when writing these pages in her novel. Maybe Emily, whose 'organ of veneration' (to borrow Charlotte's phrenological idiom) cannot have been strikingly large, would not have scrupled to create the name of a grotesque fictional

character by means of taking a famous Methodist/Scriptural phrase in vain.¹⁴ In that case, though, she was not acting as a ‘loyal daughter’ (Harrison’s phrase); Patrick Brontë would not have relished any flippancy, however implicit, directed against Wesley. The link forged by the similarities of the names seems less tenuous; but on these grounds, a stronger claim can be made for another Dissenter. The Baptist and temperance pioneer Jabez Burns, named after Bunting by a Wesleyan mother, was an indefatigable compiler of ‘Sketches and Skeletons of Sermons’ (a popular genre in early nineteenth-century clerical publishing). In 1844, a few years before the appearance of *Wuthering Heights*, Burns published *The Pulpit Cyclopaedia; and Christian Minister’s Companion*. This book alone contains some 300 ‘skeletal sermons’, along with a number of essays on relevant subjects by well-known divines; another work by his hand, which also antedated *Wuthering Heights*, is entitled *Four Hundred Sketches and Skeletons of Sermons*. The name ‘Burns’ is semantically closer to ‘Branderham’ than ‘Bunting’, and the plethora of sermons associated with the Baptist minister makes it more natural to think of him in connexion with the 490 pulpit addresses endured by Lockwood than of the hard-fisted Methodist administrator.

A tangible cause of vexation with Nonconformists on the part of the family of a clergyman in the Established Church is, of course, simple rivalry, for the parishioners’ material support as well as for their souls. Again, ch. iii in *Wuthering Heights* reminds us of these grim realities: the ruin of the chapel of Gimmerton is directly due to the stinginess of the rural population, who ‘would rather let [the parson] starve than increase the living by one penny from their own pockets’, and starve he would with no more than 20 pounds per annum.¹⁵

When we take a closer look at what actually annoys the Brontës in representatives of Dissent, we encounter another interesting element: an unmistakable note of disgust originating in matters unrelated to religious dogmas and conceptions (or material considerations). Methodist and Baptist preachers are despised not because they are wrong in what they teach, but because they are vulgar, ranting, noisy people. The contempt they elicit is hence due to social and aesthetic considerations as well as – indeed, rather than – doctrinal disagreement. More than one notable representative of Nonconformity in *Shirley* is a notorious inebriate; socially, several of them are no better than scum. The shouts and groans of the common people who ‘find liberty’ during prayer-meetings offend against the more austere and sophisticated tastes of their church-going betters. In the eyes of a modern reader, these sneers

are unattractive, smacking of social and intellectual snobbery. The latter quality is expressed in Charlotte Brontë's letters, too.¹⁶

It must not be forgotten, however, that animosity between Church and Chapel *was* informed by social–political aspects and that this antipathy was articulated by combatants on both sides. The Dissenters felt discriminated against, and financially exploited, by an ecclesiastical establishment to which they did not belong and whose representatives were given to ridiculing their beliefs and practices (Mr Helstone's descriptions of the activities of Messrs Barraclough and Supplehough are typical; see *Shirley* I.i.13–14). The fact that they tended to belong to the lower strata of society did not help.¹⁷ Paradoxically enough, Church–Chapel friction grew when Church of England parsons lost some of the civil powers with which they had been invested, powers which had continually reminded them of their duties to Dissenters as well as to their own flock. As a result of these measures, which were intended to emancipate non-Anglicans, Dissenter preachers and Church of England clergymen became rivals in a way they had not been before.¹⁸ This partly explains the resentment felt by Anglicans: if the Dissenters loathed the Established Church, representatives of the Establishment were often bitterly hostile to them. A chilling example is found in William Gresley's *Portrait of an English Churchman* of 1838. Regretting that the Dissenters make it impossible for Anglicans to live peaceably with them, the otherwise comparatively conciliatory Herbert exclaims:

'Delenda est Ecclesia' is their motto; or, to use their own words, 'Down with the old hag.' . . . I cannot but express my sorrowful conviction that, amongst the large majority of Dissenters, there is a deep hatred of the Church – an hostility which cannot be appeased by concession, and therefore must be opposed by firmness and vigilance . . . In truth the question has already literally come to this, – not whether the Established Church will tolerate Dissenters, but whether Dissenters will tolerate an Established Church.¹⁹

Charlotte Brontë was hence reproducing real sentiments and *ressentiments* current in her time and her circles, not merely giving vent to arrogant notions of her own. Besides – and this is an important point which illustrates her essential broad-mindedness – she did not approve of wholesale condemnation of Dissenters. In a letter where she acknowledged the excellence of two curates' anti-Dissenter sermons, she still took pains to point out that she considered the preachers' actual opinions 'bigoted, intolerant and wholly unjustifiable on the grounds of common sense', adding that her 'conscience [would] not let [her] be

either a Puseyite or a Hookist'.²⁰ Five years later, her impatience with curates 'glorifying themselves and abusing dissenters' resulted in a sharply worded protest which even managed to '[horrify] Papa'.²¹ *Shirley* displays the same irritation with young men of the cloth who exalt their useless selves at the expense of the Nonconformists.²²

Consequently, it is no paradox to find the writer who cheerfully chronicles the discomfiture of socially obnoxious sectarians allowing for the legitimacy of religious searching beyond the pale of the Established Church. The following lines occur in a letter to a correspondent with whom Charlotte could be more outspoken in respect of religion than was possible with the theologically unadventurous Ellen Nussey:

I smile at you again for supposing that I could be annoyed by what you say respecting your religious and philosophical views; that I could blame you for not being able, when you look amongst sects and creeds, to discover any one which you can exclusively and implicitly adopt as yours. I perceive myself that some light falls on earth from Heaven – that some rays from the shrine of truth pierce the darkness of this life and world; but they are few, faint, and scattered, and who without presumption can assert that he has found the *only* true path upwards?²³

Thus speaks a mind that insists on freedom for spiritual questers. That is a point of direct relevance to Charlotte Brontë's quarrel with the Church of Rome, a topic which will be discussed below. Ultimately, too, this quality contributes to explaining why she could not be referred to as 'Evangelical'.²⁴

Before leaving the religious milieu formed by Haworth Parsonage as the Brontë children grew to adulthood, we should look briefly at what their domestic sphere meant to those who were reared there.²⁵ It was peculiarly representative of Evangelical Christianity as a family home. Evangelical families were particularly loyal and devoted, and bonds between parents and children were close and powerful. Emily Brontë was not the only child from an Evangelical home who suffered intense homesickness, even to the point of physical ill-health, when obliged to spend time away from it. Evangelically reared children loved their homes. To mention just one example, young Tom Macaulay was passionately devoted to his, barely surviving school terms and living for the holidays.²⁶ Pat Jalland has recently emphasised that Evangelical families were often, contrary to modern belief, cheerful families, comfortable and content in their religion.²⁷ It is no accident that so many sons of Evangelical men wrote affectionate biographies of their fathers.

They were raised by patriarchs who tempered paternal authority with unstinting devotion and frequent jocularity.²⁸ Though many scions of Evangelical families drifted away from their parents' religion, the characteristic family affection remained. Unsentimental and undemonstrative as the Brontës were, that emotion pervaded Haworth Parsonage from first to last.

Patrick Brontë's children were especially fortunate in enjoying this warm domesticity while being spared the dark shadow that haunted many of these otherwise so happy homes. Unlike a large number of Evangelical Christians, the father of the Brontës was not constantly watching his young ones for early signs of evil propensities. The harshness with which childish misbehaviour was often punished, even by parents whose devotion to their offspring could not be doubted, was largely due to the fear that such transgressions might constitute 'the germ of unspeakable miseries' and that they were especially hateful in God's sight.²⁹

It is in this context that Mr Brocklehurst's 'evangelical' school (he himself uses this word about Lowood in conversation with Mrs Reed) should be seen. The policy of mortifying the flesh to save the soul rested on a conviction, influenced by Calvinist thought and held by large numbers of Evangelicals, that the young trees could only grow straight if every sign of incipient crookedness was vigorously and instantly counteracted. It could and did coexist with a genuine love of children – a quality which the *Ehrenrettung* of William Carus Wilson, the original of Mr Brocklehurst, has frequently stressed.³⁰

Another privilege granted to the Haworth Parsonage children was the liberty to enjoy childish games and adventures unchecked by a disapproving parent. Many serious-minded Evangelicals deplored recreational activities, distrusted the liberal arts and frowned on even the most innocent worldly pleasures. By contrast, Patrick Brontë and his sister-in-law were apparently content to leave the children to such humble amusements as they could find. The horror stories of Mr Brontë's eccentricities first promulgated by Mrs Gaskell have repeatedly been challenged and can now safely be consigned to oblivion. One noteworthy detail in this context is that he was clearly happy for his children to take part in games of a theatrical character – and the theatre was one form of entertainment which even fairly liberal-minded Evangelicals outlawed.³¹

The Evangelicals insisted that a Christian's commitment to God was a matter of the heart. By and large, intellectual probing into doctrinal

issues did not much interest them; and however important it was to try to live according to Christ's example, such efforts must be informed by love. When Anne Brontë discussed the significance of the statement 'God is Love' in *Agnes Grey*, she thus raised an issue lodged at the very core of Evangelical Christianity.³² Evangelical divines kept exhorting their parishioners to remember that God required *all* their hearts.

This emphasis on Christian love seems to have agreed with the climate of religious instruction in Haworth Parsonage. Like the revered Henry Venn,³³ and like his own curate William Weightman, Patrick Brontë appears to have made 'the love of God, rather than the fear of hell, the ruling motive for obedience'³⁴ in teaching his 'little flock', as he often called his children. He unequivocally condemned Calvinist ideas of predestination, referring to them as 'the appalling doctrines of personal Election and Reprobation'.³⁵ Such a man would never have suffered his sister-in-law to burden his children with notions of this kind, even supposing she had any desire to do so, which is highly unlikely.³⁶

In view of this, there is no mystery attached to Anne Brontë's wish to see a Moravian minister when ill at school. The Anglican clergymen associated with Miss Wooler's establishment seem to have had Calvinist leanings; attendance at their services may have exacerbated, or even initiated, Anne's religious anxieties. The Moravians, by contrast, were characterised by simple piety and devotion to the person of Christ the Redeemer. Their faith was informed by warmth mingled with cheerfulness, a combination which did much to account for their success in the field of foreign mission. To the teenager Anne Brontë, lonely, homesick, suffering from the peculiar misery of gastric illness and gravely troubled in mind and soul, a representative of this sect must have seemed the best hope for local comfort. She had probably heard Miss Wooler speak of the Moravians with approbation and respect;³⁷ and a girl brought up in Haworth Parsonage must have known of the formative influence on John Wesley of Moravian Brethren.

Patrick Brontë's patron Wilberforce's *A Practical View* admitted that the language used by the Moravians might well appear offensively gross at first. However, Wilberforce went on to proclaim that this 'body of Christians'

have perhaps excelled all mankind in solid and unequivocal proofs of the love of Christ, and of the most ardent and active and patient zeal in his service. It is a zeal tempered with prudence, softened with meekness, soberly aiming at great ends by the gradual operation of well-adapted means, supported by a courage

which no danger can intimidate, and a quiet constancy which no hardships can exhaust.³⁸

Anne thus turned for comfort to a source congenial with the spiritual climate of her home. It is surely significant that both her and Charlotte's worst religious crises came upon them while they were away from Haworth.³⁹

For a century and a half, people have wondered what factors – genetic and environmental – were especially significant in the evolution of the Brontë genius. Part of the answer lies, I believe, in the physical, emotional, intellectual and religious freedom accorded to the exceptional talents that developed in Haworth Parsonage. It was a freedom allied to an ethos of labour and effort, informed by affection for fellow humans and by personal commitment to a religion which not only allowed for, but demanded, the engagement of the passions.⁴⁰ It would be hard to think of a more favourable climate for creative imagination and intelligence to mature in at the time, and it was very much a product of that time.