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# The Religious Novel

Claudia Stokes

Trinity University, [cstokes@trinity.edu](mailto:cstokes@trinity.edu)

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## Chapter 11

### The Religious Novel

By Claudia Stokes

Conventional literary historical wisdom dictates that American religious fiction reached its peak of popularity and influence in the mid-nineteenth century, with the flowering of sentimental novels, such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), that depict the powers of Christian faith to abet female maturation and personal reform. The decline of this literary genre after the American Civil War, this story continues, coincided with the ascent of realism and naturalism as the late-century's premier aesthetic modes, a shift taken to signal the replacement of cloying literary piety with a tough-minded insistence on secular empiricism and documentary verisimilitude. However, to study the religious fiction of the late nineteenth century is to discern how faulty this enduring literary historical narrative really is. Sentimental novels remained popular well after the war, and, on the whole, religious novels actually rose in popularity in the late century, with novels such as Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) and Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (1897), which respectively sold copies numbered in the millions. Though nineteenth-century religious fiction is typically remembered as a genre composed largely by women for female readers, the most successful, respected writers working in the genre were in fact late-century men, such as Edward Eggleston and E.P. Roe as well as Sheldon and Wallace, whose fiction was oriented specifically to male readers. And though late-century religious fiction was predominantly Protestant in its leanings, it appeared within a variety of aesthetic modes, realism

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among them, and thus complicates the established narrative of late-century literary aesthetics. In all of these ways, religious fiction disrupts many of our received notions about the literary history of the late nineteenth century.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, perhaps the century's leading sentimental novelist, observed both the new pervasiveness of religious fiction after the Civil War and the particular appeal of this genre to male writers, quipping in her novel *My Wife and I* (1871) that "[s]oon it will be necessary that every leading clergyman should embody in his theology a serial story" (ch. 1). Here, she envisioned a future in which clergy from all denominations would regard the novel, and not the pulpit, as the premier medium for the salvation of souls. Stowe's prediction may have been sparked by the recent publication of *Norwood* (1868), the sole novel authored by her brother Henry Ward Beecher, the mid-century's preeminent minister, but her forecast proved prescient. By the century's end, the roster of bestselling American novelists included the names of such clergy as Edward Eggleston, George Hepworth, E. P. Roe, and Charles Sheldon, all of whom found considerable success writing novels narrating the rewards of a devout Christian life. But for every bestseller by Eggleston or Roe, there were countless lesser novels published by clergy eager to take advantage of this popular new medium, among them W. Boyd Carpenter's *Narcissus: A Tale of Early Christian Times* (1879), Henry Morgan's *Boston Inside Out! Sins of a Great City! A Story of Real Life* (1880), Thomas Bailey's *In the Pine Woods* (1893), and R. F. Bishop's *Camerton Slope* (1893). In addition to Beecher, some of the era's most prominent religious leaders tried their hands at novel writing, among them renowned Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale with his novel *If Jesus Came to Boston* (1895), and Washington Gladden, a Congregationalist minister and prominent Social Gospel theologian, with his *The Christian League of Connecticut* (1884).

That Christian piety became so fruitful a subject of late-century novels is all the more striking in light of the fact that, until the mid-nineteenth century, novels were presumed by conservative Christians to be, at best, trivial amusements that fostered habits of idleness and, at worst, a moral contagion that endangered readers' souls by tempting them to emulate the worldliness, vanity, and licentiousness portrayed therein. Timothy Dwight, Lyman Beecher's mentor and one of the premier theologians of the Second Great Awakening, summarized this orthodox view of novels in his observation that "[b]etween the Bible and novels there is a gulph [sic] fixed which few readers are willing to pass. The consciousness of virtue, the dignified pleasure of having performed our duty, the serene remembrance of a useful life, the hope of an interest in the Redeemer, and the promise of a glorious inheritance in the favour of God, are never found in novels" (qtd. in Blodgett 1997, 11). Although the American Tract Society (ATS) issued conversion narratives that provided a literary precedent for later religious novelists such as Susan Warner (who had distributed such tracts among the urban poor), it was a particularly vehement opponent to novels. Thunderously exhorting readers to "PUT DOWN THAT NOVEL!" the ATS contended that novel reading led directly to unwholesome appetites, damnation, and even suicide (qtd. in Nord 2004, 118). This belief in an incompatibility between novel-reading and Christian piety would begin to dissolve in the mid-century at the hands of sentimental novelists such as Cummins, Warner, and Stowe herself, who would famously use the novel form to spark readers' conversion—both religious and political—in such novels as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856). Though works such as Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* often capitulated to traditional attitudes by including explicit warnings about the moral perils of novel reading, sentimental novels used narrative to depict the transformative effects of Christian conversion and in so doing reconstituted the novel from an

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agent of sin to a potential instrument of evangelism. If Susan Warner's many letters from newly devout readers are to be believed, these mid-century chronicles of piety and forbearance were indeed effective in prompting conversion in untold numbers of readers. This fact did not go unnoticed by clergy, whose sermons with increasing frequency adopted narrative over theological exegesis in accord with these changes. By the late nineteenth century, preachers such as Dwight Moody, T. DeWitt Talmage, and Reuben Torrey were famous pulpit raconteurs who could incite listener conversion with heart-rending tales of suffering and piety.

As theologians and ministers caught on to the potential persuasiveness and emotional impact of novels depicting conversion and piety, the religious antipathy toward novels began to seem increasingly outdated as the century wore on. In 1870, Noah Porter, Congregationalist theologian and President of Yale, sought to elucidate the complex relationship between faith and literature, observing that these presumed rivals were in fact conjoined by a mutual reliance on imagination and sympathetic projection. He wrote, "It is because the imagination is so nearly allied to faith that her power to hinder or help is so unlimited, and that literature itself becomes to religion either the deadliest foe or the most potent ally" (qtd. in Jenkins 1997, 5-6). Arguing that one could justifiably harness the imaginative powers of narrative to provoke conversion and inspire virtue, Porter confirmed that an automatic condemnation of novels was now a thing of the past. In the preface to his bestselling novel *From Jest to Earnest* (1875), E. P. Roe took the matter further by suggesting that it was incumbent upon the church to craft religious novels for impressionable young people, saving them from sin by proffering salutary works of fiction in place of morally questionable ones. He wrote, "If millions in the impressible period of youth, in spite of all that any can do, will read fiction, then it would appear a sacred duty in those who love their kind, to make this food of the forming character healthful, bracing, and ennobling in its

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nature. Earnest men and women, who hold and would transmit the truth, must speak in a way that will secure a hearing” (qtd. in Thorp 1961, 220). By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, novels of a religious character were fully accepted as a legitimate accompaniment to a devout life. Denominational organizations such as the American Baptist Publication Society conceded that some morally upright novels were acceptable, and religious periodicals such as the *Christian Advocate* and *Christian Union* reviewed novels, thereby determining for readers which novels were compatible with the Christian life. Opinion changed so drastically that, by the end of the century, religious novels would depict this reflexive conservative opposition to novels as the subject of mockery, taking it to denote a closed mindedness and a Pharisaical commitment to forms out of keeping with a modern Christian sensibility. For example, in his novel *Esther* (1884), Henry Adams characterizes the Midwest as hopelessly backwards when Catherine Brooke, a visitor to New York from Colorado, remarks that she’d been raised to regard novels as sinful, an oversight in her education thereupon corrected by the minister Stephen Hazard, an intervention that, in and of itself, signals changing clerical attitudes toward fiction. Likewise, in Helen R. Martin’s novel *Tillie: A Mennonite Maid* (1904), the novel’s eponymous heroine is cruelly beaten by her insular, pious father after having been found reading *Ivanhoe*.

Once they achieved a measure of acceptance and respectability, religious novels flourished, achieving extraordinary heights of popularity. One successful novel could spawn numerous imitators; for example, Florence Morse Kingsley built a career on literary spin-offs of *Ben-Hur*, among them *Titus, a Comrade of the Cross* (1895) and *Stephen, a Soldier of the Cross* (1896). Even Henry Van Dyke, a renowned poet, critic, and minister, published one such imitation, *The Story of the Other Wise Man* (1895), which, like its predecessor, focuses on an unknown witness to the life of Christ and became a bestseller. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s

novelistic inquiry into the nature of the afterlife, *The Gates Ajar* (1869), struck such a chord with readers that it spawned three sequels as well as a host of imitations, such as Louis H. Pendleton's

*The Wedding Garment: A Tale of the Afterlife* (1894), which elaborated on her vision of heaven.

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Although William Dean Howells declined to review most of these works—thereby establishing the enduring critical indifference to popular American religious fiction—the predominance of this genre was such that it exerted visible influence even on Howells's own work, as with his novels *The Minister's Charge* (1887) and *Annie Kilburn* (1889), in which two separate ministers function as pivotal arbiters of literary taste, offering definitive literary opinions that provide much-needed moral clarity; both characters, Minister Sewell and Mr. Peck, speak to the ascent of ministers in this era to legitimate positions of literary authority, and the title of the former novel seems designed to appeal to current reader taste for novels about piety.

All of this is to say that religious novels occupied a central role in the literary late century, but have seldom received commensurate acknowledgment in the era's literary history, an omission that likely derives from a confluence of causes, foremost among them their marked divergence from the neat academic categories of periodization. The late century is typically demarcated as beginning in 1870, though the 1870s remain a gaping lacuna in literary scholarship, characterized, if at all, as merely the beginning stages of literary realism, which is typically anointed the foremost aesthetic of the 1880s, followed by naturalism of the 1890s. To review the offerings of religious novels in the late century is to see the insufficiency of this enduring assessment. In the first place, 1870 does not mark the emergence of late-century religious fiction, since a number of significant works were published in the late 1860s, on the border of the post-bellum divide, and thus are lost in a literary no-man's land, left out of all standard historical groupings. H.W. Beecher's *Norwood*, Augusta Evan's *St. Elmo* (1867),

Elizabeth Prentiss's *Stepping Heavenward* (1869), and Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* were all successful and important; Beecher's novel, for example, adapted the sentimental form by placing at its center male faith and religious experience, thereby paving the way for the many dozens of late-century novels about devout men, among them Margaret Deland's *John Ward, Preacher* (1888), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *A Singular Life* (1895), and Albion Tourgée's *Murvale Eastman, Christian Socialist* (1889). In this way, Beecher's novel—like its contemporaries by Evans, Phelps, and Prentiss—also illustrates that religious fiction proved a lasting home for sentimentalism through the nineteenth century, giving it a durability that outlasted the typical shelf life allotted to it in literary history. For example, literary histories have memorialized Susan Warner chiefly for *The Wide, Wide, World*, but she and her sister, Anna Warner, continued publishing for decades, each separately publishing a dozen sentimental religious novels in addition to two collaborative novels, *Wych Hazel* (1876) and *The Gold of Chickaree* (1876). Likewise, Harriet Beecher Stowe published such novels as *My Wife and I* and *Poganuc People* (1878), Martha Finley published several dozen novels in the Elsie Dinsmore series between 1867 and 1905, and E.D.E.N Southworth had extraordinary success with her blockbuster *Ishmael* as well as its sequel, *Self-Raised* (both 1876).

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The literary historical void that is the 1870s was also a veritable golden age of religious fiction. As Frank Luther Mott notes, a great many bestsellers in that decade were religious novels, among them Southworth's novels; E.P. Roe's *Barriers Burned Away*, *Opening a Chestnut Burr* (1873), and *From Jest to Earnest*; Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871) and *The Circuit Rider* (1874). Scholarly inattention to the 1870s has thus obscured an important period in the continuation and evolution of the American religious novel. In the 1870s, male and female authors of varying statures, from the sensational Southworth to the eminent

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Eggleston, could all acceptably pen religious novels. The genre, moreover, expanded considerably in this period, adapting to such forms as the melodrama, the historical novel, or the *roman à clef*, and took up broader contemporary interests such as frontier history or topical events like the catastrophic Chicago fire of 1871, which inspired Roe to write *Barriers Burned Away*. In all of these ways, the religious novel went fully mainstream in the 1870s.

Nor was realism the dominant aesthetic mode of religious fiction of the late century. While novels agitating for social reform did employ the signature documentary methods of realism, other religious novelists, such as Albion Tourgée, were openly contemptuous of realism. Furthermore, with the exception of Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), naturalism failed to leave much of an imprint on religious fiction; its pessimism and deterministic skepticism about human agency were unsuited to the innate optimism of religious fiction, which insisted on the everlasting power of faith to effect self-improvement and self-determination. However, religious novels were a particularly robust outpost for literary idealism, realism's chief antagonist and rival in late-century aesthetics. Although usually overlooked by literary historians, idealism was a significant force in late-century American letters, and its supporters included some prominent figures, among them Thomas Bailey Aldrich, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* during the 1880s. Idealist critics such as Edmund C. Stedman contended that literary texts ought to provide inspiration amid a coarse and cynical world, and they frowned on realist texts that, to their mind, merely documented the quotidian and base, arguing that such works degraded literature and reified the ugliness of modern life. Instead, idealists maintained that literature ought to inspire and refine readers by depicting an idyllic world of beauty and moral clarity, and this aesthetic mode naturally complemented the interests of late-century religious fiction, which aimed above all else to inspire and edify the reader.

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This aesthetic allegiance produced religious novels that often shunned formal innovation and hewed to simple characterization and predictable plots that modernized John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) by narrating the struggles of contemporary Christians among worldly temptations and the consequent rewards for their piety, whether in material riches or a joyful death. A reader of such works may reliably expect the infidel love interest to undergo a conversion experience and the poor but honest Christian man to achieve professional success. While these elements certainly signal the idealistic allegiances of religious fiction, these scripted narrative forms openly admit their ideological foundations, for they were a strategic part of the religious novels' efforts to promote Christianity and inspire conversion in the reader. These formulaic conventional narratives offered reassuring evidence that Christianity could be relied upon to yield predictable results, regardless of the circumstance: self-betterment, comfort, and salvation. Likewise, the idealism of such novels suggests that Christian faith may simplify a complex world, rendering it manageable and apprehensible.

In support of this implicit promise, religious novels often deliberately adopt an artless, homely affect with marked nostalgia for a simpler time. As with such novels as Rev. George Hepworth's popular *Hiram Golf's Religion; or, The Shoemaker by the Grace of God* (1893) and its sequel, *They Met in Heaven* (1894), these works juxtapose modern cynicism and sophisticated disbelief with unpretentious, simple characters, whose unadorned piety and folksy wisdom render religious faith wholesome and accessible even to the most unlearned. In those two works, a sophisticated modern businessman visits a rural hamlet and finds himself embroiled in lengthy fireside discussions about Christianity with several local men, chief among them Hiram Golf, a plain-speaking but wise shoemaker. Although Golf is humble and inarticulate, his plain piety and simple faith offer the narrator much-needed inspiration, and the novels thereby implicitly reject

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modern sophistication and cynicism in favor of a faith undergirded by simple trust in scripture and the Lord. This crafted artlessness is also evident in religious novels' general distaste for theology, which is typically dismissed as an unnecessary intellectual appurtenance to faith. As Hiram Golf remarks in *They Met in Heaven*, "we've got too much theology in the world, and too little religion" (ch. 6); one may be a devout Christian and still be wholly ignorant of the nuances of abstruse doctrine.

The modest formal ambitions and idealism of much religious fiction no doubt contributed to the general impression that religious fiction was of lesser literary value and undeserving of serious critical attention. The career trajectory of Edward Eggleston makes clear how aesthetic proclivity signaled literary import and prompted critical regard. In his preface to *The Circuit Rider*, which was based on his own experience as an itinerant Methodist preacher, Eggleston publicly differentiated his novel from the standard idealist fare of religious fiction and attempted to make a case for the compatibility of religious novels with realism. He wrote,

no man is worthy to be called a novelist who does not endeavor with his whole soul to produce the higher form of history, by writing truly of men as they are, and dispassionately of those forms of life that come within his scope. . . . [T]his is not a "religious novel," one in which all the bad people are as bad as they can be, and all the good people a little better than they can be. . . . The story of any true life is wholesome, if only the writer will tell it simply, keeping impertinent preachment of his own out of the way. (p. Preface)

Presaging Howells's later essays in which he would argue for the inherent wholesomeness of realist literature, Eggleston suggests both that religious literature need not be founded on idealist principles and that piety in no way necessitates that one shield one's eyes from the complexities of life (on Howells's wholesome realism, see [Chapter 7](#) of this volume). It is in large part

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because of Eggleston's embrace of realism, as with his depiction of mMidwestern local culture, that he is among the few religious novelists to achieve critical esteem and inclusion in literary history.

While the idealism of religious fiction may make it seem naive and outmoded, it often betrays an uneasy suspicion that the sophistication of the modern world was inimical to faith. For example, many religious novels were historical in nature, set in earlier eras portrayed as simpler and more hospitable to religious belief, among them James Lane Allen's *The Choir Invisible* (1897), Edward Eggleston's *The End of the World* (1872) and *The Circuit Rider*, Annie Trumbull Slosson's *The Heresy of Mehetable Clark* (1892), and Silas Weir Mitchell's *Hugh Wynne, Free Quaker* (1897). Their nostalgia implicitly bundles religious faith together with other long-vanished curiosities of the past, like the ill repute of Methodism or the eschatological terrors of the 1840s. Michael Kammen and T. Jackson Lears have examined the late-century climate of religiously-infused nostalgia, which animated the Arts and Crafts movement as well as revived enthusiasm for more antiquated forms of Christianity, to argue that religious faith seemed increasingly impracticable in the late-century, a concern that religious novels would at times openly engage. For example, Henry Adams's *Esther* candidly questions the effectiveness and sincerity of modern Christianity. The main character, Esther Dudley, deprecates the decor of a new church and the fashionable society people commissioned to adorn it, commenting, "It has a terribly grotesque air of theater even now," and the painter Mr. Wharton replies, "It is a theater. . . . That is what ails our religion. But it is not the fault of our art. . . . I would like now, even as it is, to go back to the age of beauty, and put a Madonna in the heart of their church. The place has no heart" (ch. 4). In thus yearning for an earlier time of beauty and simplicity, Wharton posits nostalgic idealism as more conducive to religious faith and intimates that modernity has

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hopelessly compromised religious belief. The anxiety that the modern world might not be hospitable to faith also animates Arlo Bates's *The Puritans* (1899), which recounts the difficulties of two Protestant seminarians in reconciling their faith with worldly ambitions; the novel concludes with the decision of one of these men to leave the church altogether, while the other elects to convert to a more antiquated form of Christianity in Catholicism and retreats to a cloister. Set against this backdrop of late-century religious disbelief and cynicism, the stylistic sincerity and ingenuousness of much idealist religious fiction take on a different quality. Instead of appearing merely as the distinguishing hallmark of literary amateurism or talentless inability, it emerges as a defensive, reactive counterclaim that optimistically refutes modern cynicism to depict faith as a steadfast bulwark against skeptical sophistication.

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One exception to this climate of religious nostalgia is the repeated enmity with which late-century novelists portray Calvinist orthodoxy. Rather than treat this once-pervasive form of Christianity with admiration or affection, late-century writers see in it both callous indifference toward suffering and a severity verging on sinfulness. In James Lane Allen's popular novel *The Choir Invisible*, for example, an Episcopalian priest compares Calvinism to "an uncorked inkbottle in a rolling snowball: the farther you go, the blacker you get!" (ch. 18). In this formulation, Calvinism's belief in the utter depravity of human beings merely deflates and depresses its adherents. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps famously began writing *The Gates Ajar* out of her sense that Calvinism could not offer solace to the many women left bereaved in the aftermath of the Civil War. The novel begins with the failures of Calvinist clergy to console Mary Cabot upon the death of her brother, Royal, as they insensitively dispute Royal's salvation and characterize Heaven as a sterile, joyless place. Mary thus sinks into a depression and renounces religion until the arrival of her aunt Winifred, who challenges prevailing ~~orthodox~~

[viewsorthodoxy](#) and offers an alternative view of heaven as a sacralized home populated by reunited loved ones. Peter Van Brunt, the protagonist of George Hepworth's novel *They Met in Heaven*, is similarly inconsolable upon the sudden death of his wife and son. Raised by a severe Calvinist father who had characterized God as wrathful and the afterlife as brutal, Van Brunt is a bitter apostate until the kindly interventions of shoemaker Hiram Golf, whose homely faith not only converts Van Brunt but also enables Van Brunt's postmortem reunion with his lost relatives. Calvinism likewise causes an irreconcilable rupture in the Ward family in Margaret Deland's *John Ward, Preacher*, as minister John Ward, under pressure from his stern orthodox congregation, refuses to reunite with his wife until she accepts the doctrine of hell. It was not lost on observers at the time that Deland's novel was published the same year as Mrs. Humphrey Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), a bestselling English novel that also depicted a growing modern disillusionment with Calvinism, and the two were often cited together to betoken the waning influence of Calvinism in a religious climate dominated by the Arminian belief that human beings may take a more active role in their own salvation. It was abundantly clear to late-century novelists that the stranglehold of Calvinism was long gone, and these retrospective treatments of Calvinism implicitly celebrate a modern, meritocratic religious worldview in which faith reliably results in salvation and remains available to all, even in the very last moments of life.

The late-century culture of religious nostalgia found its greatest success with Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur*, a historical novel about the adventures of a Jewish prince, Judah Ben-Hur, set against the backdrop of first-century Messianism. A sweeping epic, the novel follows Ben-Hur's adventures as he is falsely accused of attempting to assassinate the Roman governor, survives imprisonment on a Roman galley ship, and finds himself among a band of believers who eagerly await the fulfillment of Messianic prophesy. Along the way, he exacts revenge upon

his accuser, the Roman Messala, in the novel's most famous scene, in which the two men fiercely compete in a heated chariot race. Although Ben-Hur is an ardent supporter of the man reputed to be the Messiah, Jesus only appears at the end of the novel, when Ben-Hur witnesses the crucifixion. While this delay mirrors the Christian belief that the faithful are rewarded for their loyalty with direct contact with their lord at the very end of life itself, Wallace would later admit that he had omitted Jesus chiefly for reasons of public relations: as he remarked, "The Christian world would not tolerate a novel with Jesus Christ as its hero, and I knew it" ([qtd. in Carter 1991](#), 68). Wallace's own religious conversion became part of the book's legendary backstory. As a lawyer, Civil War veteran, and statesman (he served as governor of the New Mexico territory), Wallace claimed to have had no particular religious sentiments before writing the book: "I had no convictions about God or Christ," he remarked. "I neither believed nor disbelieved in them" ([qtd. in Carey 1971](#), 93). The book, he maintained, was born out of a chance conversation with Robert Ingersoll, a prominent late-century orator and known agnostic. Deeply affected by Ingersoll's skepticism, Wallace embarked on the novel as an inquiry into religion, and he publicly claimed to have been converted through the process of writing, an assertion that no doubt contributed to sales as well as to Wallace's own reputation. The novel initially sold only modestly, and mainstream reviews largely dismissed it as an old-fashioned romance, but favorable reviews in Christian publications contributed to word-of-mouth publicity that led to an escalation in sales. By the end of the decade, the book had sold 400,000 copies, with lifetime sales estimated ~~to at~~ between two and three million copies. In 1913, after Wallace's death, Sears Roebuck ordered a million copies of an inexpensive edition, and in 1936 it was added to [the](#) Modern Library. Because of its wide appeal and extravagant spectacles, the novel was adapted for numerous stage and film production, thereby sparking further sales with each

production. Billy Sunday, the foremost revivalist of the turn of the century, gave his approval to one such production, proclaiming, “I wish 100,000,000 people could see the play, now running in New York” (qtd. in McKee 1947, 185).

As mentioned earlier, *Ben-Hur* spawned many imitators, among them *The Gladiators* (1891) by G. J. Whyte-Melville; *Come Forth!* (1891) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and her husband, Herbert Ward; and *John: A Tale of the King Messiah* (1896) by Katherine Pearson Woods. While this late-century fascination with novels set in early Christian history was clearly a literary trend inspired by Wallace’s spectacular success, it also had a wider intellectual context that would have been readily recognized at the time. For most of the nineteenth century, Americans regarded the Bible as a factual, historical document that detailed the lives of real people and actual events. That belief came under considerable pressure when it was announced in 1870 that a transatlantic committee composed of scholars had begun work on a new translation of the Bible. In explanation for this mammoth undertaking, the editors published a series of essays in popular periodicals stating their rationale and methods, and in so doing they brought to American attention the significant advances in biblical historical scholarship. The “higher criticism,” as it was called, emerged in Germany in the early nineteenth century and presumed the Bible to be a human-authored text rooted in cultural history and thus subject to historical, archaeological, and literary analyses. Although American seminarians and theologians had kept abreast of these scholarly advances, this new translation brought these findings and methods to a wider American public, among them the belief that the first five books of the Hebrew Bible had recognizable stylistic evidence attesting to composite authorship, thereby unseating [the](#) long-standing conviction that they had been authored by Moses himself. In addition, the public became aware that the translators had consulted more than five thousand

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separate Hebrew and Greek texts, most of them fragmentary and with uncertain authenticity. The Bible was thus exposed as a mutable, constructed text, a development that caused great excitement in some quarters and great anxiety in others. Modern Christian fundamentalism emerged in part from the discomfort caused by biblical historicism, as with the resolution of the Niagara Bible Conference of 1876 to maintain a strict belief in biblical literalness.

Publication of the Revised Version of the New Testament, which was finally released in 1881, was so heavily anticipated that it was preceded by preorders of a million copies. It went through thirty reprints in its first year, and in some cities its publication caused traffic jams. In such a climate, popular studies in biblical historicism also sold well, foremost among them Washington Gladden's work *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1891). That same year, Joseph Henry Thayer, a Harvard professor and member of the American Bible Revision Committee, reminded Americans that in reading the Bible they should always "Interpret *historically*. Remember that Palestine in the first century is not America in the nineteenth," an assertion that undermines the belief in a continuous biblical truth (qtd. in Szasz 1982, 34). Biblical historicism also sparked widespread interest in the historical Jesus, and revisionist biographies of Christ became a full-fledged international trend. Beginning with David Strauss's revolutionary *Life of Jesus* (1835), the 1860s saw the publication of both Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863), and J. R. Seeley's *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Christ* (published in the United States in 1866). By the 1870s dozens of these works had been published. The biggest bestseller was Canon F. W. Farrar's *The Life of Christ* (1874), which derived from years of extensive historicist research that included a trip to Palestine in 1870. Even popular religious writers with no background in biblical scholarship found themselves inspired by this trend, including Henry Ward Beecher, whose *Life of Jesus Christ* appeared in 1872; Eggleston, whose studies *Christ in Art* and *Christ*

*in Literature* were both published in 1874; and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who published *The Story of Jesus Christ* in 1897.

Harold Frederic depicted the disorienting and even disillusioning effects of the “higher criticism” on one believer in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, in which naive Methodist minister Theron Ware undertakes to pen his own biblical biography. Motivated chiefly by his dire financial problems and utterly ignorant of historicist approaches, Ware embarks on a study of Abraham, only to learn from two sophisticated, learned men—the Catholic priest Father Forbes and the atheistic scientist Dr. Ledsmar—that Abraham had long ago been recognized by scholars to be merely a literary metaphor rather than an actual historical personage. Finding Ware’s sincerity refreshing, the men lend him works of biblical scholarship, but they serve to undermine his already tenuous commitment to the church. Ware furtively and greedily reads one such work by Ernst Renan as if it were pornography, and his new knowledge inflates his vanity, causing him to regard with contempt the uncritical piety of his parishioners and to imagine himself above the traditional moral injunctions against adultery, theft, and deceit. While the novel does not suggest that the “higher criticism” is directly responsible for Ware’s immorality or apostasy, it places this scholarship alongside the blatant showmanship of revivalism and the self-serving careerism of clergy as an equally significant contribution to modern religious cynicism.

Frederic’s work was an exception, however. More typically, historical research in many novels about early Christian history vested religious novels with credibility. For example, Lew Wallace filled *Ben-Hur* with evidence of his extensive research in the Library of Congress, including innumerable details about first-century Middle Eastern mores, diet, flora, and architecture. Instead of undermining the credibility of the Bible, these details work to reify

biblical narrative as historical truth: thus infused with researched data, Bible stories seem more realistic and lifelike, allowing readers to visualize more clearly the settings, contexts, and minutiae of biblical events. In the hands of novelists, that is, historicism largely revitalized biblical narrative and allowed writers such as Lew Wallace to restore the religious certitude that had been challenged by the “higher criticism.”

As novelists embellished the tales of innumerable minor biblical characters in the vein of *Ben-Hur*, the biblical figure of Lazarus caught the attention of a number of writers—among them William Holcombe with *In Both Worlds* (1869), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and her husband, Herbert Ward, with *Come Forth!* (1891), and Olla B. Tolph with *Lazarus* (1895)—who retold the New Testament tale of his resurrection from the dead. While these novels about Lazarus dramatize the belief in the transformative powers of Christian faith, they do so by narrating a story of a man’s conversion and its beneficial effects on his sisters, Mary and Martha. This narrative proved to be one of the cornerstones of late-century religious fiction, which is thoroughly overwhelmed by novels of male conversion, including Eggleston’s *End of the World*, Hepworth’s *They Met in Heaven*, E. P. Roe’s *Opening a Chestnut Burr* (1874), Phelps’s *Gates Between* (1887), and Louis Pendleton’s *The Wedding Garment*, among many others, all of which depict conversion as the culmination of male maturation. Countering the presumption that religious men were credulous, gullible saps, these novels show that Christianity helps men to be more fully manly, giving them the inner strength to realize their ambitions and the character to honor their obligations to those dependent upon them. To illustrate that Christianity enables men to become bold leaders, these novels often have clergy as their protagonists, depicting them as iconoclastic heroes patterned after Christ himself, men whose character and commitment to Christian principles cause them to take valiant public stands against a harsh, disbelieving public.

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As is evident in such works as Edward Eggleston's *The Circuit Rider*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *A Singular Life*, Tourgée's *Murvale Eastman, Christian Socialist*, Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, and George Farnell's *Rev. Josiah Hilton* (1898), these novels seek to remake the public image of the Christian minister into a pillar of strength and fortitude.

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This literary preoccupation with Christian masculinity was by no means an isolated development but derived from a larger late-century movement known as “Muscular Christianity,” a term originally coined to describe the mid-century novels of English writers Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857). In the post-bellum United States, Muscular Christianity came to denote a widespread campaign to invigorate Christianity by attracting male believers, an effort that informed the decision of the Young Men's Christian Association in 1869 to embrace athletics as a key part of its ministry in the hopes of luring more men. Muscular Christianity was permeated by an overt antipathy for the female-centered spirituality of sentimentalism and its attendant feminization of Christianity, and advocates protested that female influence contaminated every aspect of Christianity—from hymnals to images of Jesus to the ministry itself—and consequently made it inhospitable to men. In 1890 Methodist minister Howard Alan Bridgeman questioned whether men were welcome in the woman-dominated church, asking, “Have we a religion for men?” (qtd. in Kimmel 2006, 117). G. Stanley Hall, one of the era's foremost psychologists, denounced the “woman peril” that he believed afflicted American churches, while Billy Sunday, the leading revivalist of the late-century, directly aimed “to strike the death blow at the idea that being a Christian takes a man out of the busy whirl of the world's life and activity and makes him a spineless effeminate proposition.” To counter this image, Sunday depicted Jesus as the “greatest scrapper who ever lived.” In contrast with a “dainty, sissified, lily-livered religion” he deplored, Sunday

characterized Christianity as a “hard muscled, pick-axed religion, a religion from the gut, tough, and resilient” and proclaimed that “the manliest man is the man who will acknowledge Jesus Christ” (qtd. in Kimmel 2006, 119).

Male religious novelists contributed to this effort to masculinize Christianity and sought to defeminize the literary medium altogether, an effort also undertaken by William Dean Howells and Mark Twain in their own respective efforts to differentiate themselves from literary sentimentalism. James Lane Allen, author of the *The Choir Invisible*, complained that literature had for too long been dominated by womanly influence, “producing a literature of the overcivilized, the hyper-fastidious . . . the fragile, the trivial, the rarified, the bloodless” (qtd. in Putney 2001, 31–32), and E. P. Roe agreed that “the day of prolix, fine, flowering writing” had ended, to be succeeded by more manly writing of “simplicity, lucidity, strength” (qtd. in Thorp 1961, 216–71). As one of the era’s leading religious novelists, Eggleston actively supported the *Muscular Christianity* cause, publishing a series of articles in 1878–79 that lamented the sorry state of the ministry and urged ministers to assume greater manly strength: “Stand on your manhood and not on your office,” he wrote in the 1878 essay “Parsons and Parsons” (qtd. in Randel 1962, 154). Eggleston aggressively recruited men to join his Brooklyn congregation by renaming it the Church of Christian Endeavor, which consolidated its association with manly striving and vigorous activity, and by adding a social center for working men. His novel *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* also visibly registers this influence, as with the resolution of newly converted Bud Means, a school bully, to stop fighting and save “his best licks for Jesus Christ,” a statement that aligns Christian faith with manly strength and responsibility (ch. 15).

The novels of E. P. Roe are perhaps the fullest expression of the literary arm of *Muscular Christianity*. Although long forgotten, Roe was the nation’s bestselling writer in the

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1870s and '80s. Roe's novels typically portray the rise of a devout young man forced to begin his career at the bottom rung of the social ladder. For example, in the bestselling novel *Barriers Burned Away*, Dennis Fleet moves to Chicago to seek his fortune but experiences great difficulty landing a job suited to his education and talents. Although he'd planned to become a lawyer, he eventually accepts a humiliating job as a factotum in an art gallery, but his piety equips him with a strong work ethic that catches the notice of his employer and leads him on an upward path of promotion and achievement. Along the way, he succeeds in converting his disbelieving love interest, the haughty Miss Ludolph, helping to reform an alcoholic, and rescuing scores of people from the Chicago fire of 1871. Roe's novel *A Knight of the Nineteenth Century* (1877) similarly recounts the effects of conversion on a dissolute youth, Egbert Haldane, whose faith endows him with the fortitude to resist alcohol and a determination to serve ~~to~~ others. This selflessness leads him to become a commander in the Civil War and a beloved, renowned physician. The Christian man in such narratives is typically heroic and willing to endanger himself for the good of others; these texts appeal to male readers by contending that faith imparts men with trustworthiness and a work ethic, both of which create opportunities and earn material rewards.

This depiction of Christianity as an indispensable accouterment to male professional advancement was seconded in this era by scores of self-help books designed for male readers. As exemplified by such texts as Orison Swett Marden's *Pushing to the Front* (1894), *Success* (1897) and *The Secrets of Achievement* (1898), these success manuals, as they were called, claimed to help men achieve their fullest potential, and many of them actively propounded Christianity as an essential vehicle for professional success because it helped cultivate a sound reputation and character, as well as a useful opportunity for networking. Many of these manuals claimed biblical justification for their advice, claiming that wealth corroborates virtue and that God

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desires prosperity for the faithful. Religious publishers issued many such works, and clergy were among the most successful authors of success manuals, among them Rev. Wilbur F. Crafts, author of *Successful Men of Today* (1883), and Rev. John Thain Davidson, author of *Sure to Succeed* (1889). Rev. Russell Conwell delivered an oral version of his popular *Acres of Diamonds* (1890), a text that began as a sermon, over six thousand times. Insisting that Christians have a “duty to get rich,” he maintained that “[t]here is not a poor person in the United States who was not made so by his own shortcomings” (qtd. in Kimmel 2006, 59).

This unabashed materialism pervaded many late-century religious novels, especially ones that sought to appeal to male readers. For example, in Hepworth’s *They Met in Heaven*, a minister applauds the narrator’s business career, remarking, ““Let me congratulate you . . . on the divine necessity of work-. . . Commercial activity means manliness-. . . The world of commercial transactions, the competitions . . . are God’s university.”” He continues, ““I have a notion that business and religion were intended to complement each other-. . . If religion is divorced from business, mankind suffer”” (ch. 1). But while novelists such as E. P. Roe averred that piety will bear fruit in material prosperity and business success, other writers such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Albion Tourgée strongly questioned altogether the compatibility of capitalism with the Christian life. In so doing, they channeled into their novels the arguments and theology developed in the Social Gospel movement. Led by such theologians as Robert C. Ely, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch, the Social Gospel movement repudiated both laissez-faire capitalism and self-interested Christianity, and preached that Christianity should aim not for individual salvation but for the worldly betterment of all human beings through social reform, social justice, and activism. To be a true Christian, they maintained, one must imitate Christ fully and work on behalf of the poor and oppressed, rather than strive merely for personal

financial gain and professional success, as supporters of Muscular Christianity had suggested. In their critique of capitalist self-centeredness, some supporters propounded socialism as a more faithful expression of Christian fellowship, taking the collective ownership of the Apostles, described in Acts 2:44–45, as a scriptural precedent for Christian socialism. This political affiliation would result in the Society of Christian Socialists, founded by Rev. W. D. P. Bliss in 1889, and the prominence of Christian Socialist George D. Herron in nominating Eugene V. Debs for president at the 1904 Socialist convention.

To be sure, the Social Gospel movement was never more than a minority opinion amid the blatant materialism promulgated by Russell Conwell and Wilbur Crafts, but it generated considerable attention and informed a great many religious novels that documented late-century social ills and agitated for Christian activism. In attending thus to the gritty realities of contemporary life, Social Gospel novels tended to be more recognizably informed by literary realism than by idealism and in that way diverged from more mainstream religious novels. Many dozens of Social Gospel works were published in the late century, among them Washington Gladden's *The Christian League of Connecticut*, E. J. Haynes's *Dollars and Duty* (1887), Edward Everett Hale's *How They Lived in Hampton* (1888), R. E. Porter's *The Union League Club*, Archibald McCowan's *Christ, the Socialist* (1894), and Marion Couthouy Smith's *Dr. Marks, Socialist* (1897). Occasionally, religious novels criticized the Social Gospel movement, notably Katherine Pearson Woods's *Metzerott, Shoemaker* (1889), which characterizes socialism as fully incompatible with Christianity.

The most famous Social Gospel novel—and the bestselling religious novel of the era—was Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* Sheldon was a Kansan Congregationalist minister who, as Stowe had predicted, used narrative fiction as a substitute for

sermons. In an effort to lure his congregation to return to church for the second Sunday service, Sheldon read weekly installments of a lengthy narrative in lieu of a sermon, and it was thus that he wrote *In His Steps*, a novel that would be translated into dozens of languages and would sell millions of copies (Sheldon claimed that it sold 30 million copies, though later critics estimate that it likely sold closer to six million). The novel follows the transformation of a complacent, prosperous congregation after the minister, Henry Maxwell, invites them to spend a year attempting to imitate Jesus in every aspect of their lives. Inspired by this challenge, the town newspaper editor decides to cease publication on Sunday and to decline advertising from saloons, a railroad employee exposes company corruption, and an heiress resolves to use her wealth for social good. Through these examples, Sheldon depicts Christianity as a social practice that requires sacrifice and a commitment to the wider social good at the expense of individual profit or comfort.

Sheldon followed *In His Steps* with several sequels—*Jesus Is Here!* (1914), *In His Steps To-Day* (1921), and *In His Steps Today* (1928)—but none of them came close to the popularity of its progenitor. In fact, the unparalleled success of *In His Steps* was the climax of late-century religious fiction. The influence of the Social Gospel would continue into the first decades of the twentieth century, with the novels of Harold Bell Wright, author of *The Shepherd of the Hills* (1907) and *The Calling of Dan Matthews* (1909), and Canadian writer Charles W. Gordon, whose novel *Black Rock* (1908) was a bestseller. Otherwise, religious novels waned in number and popularity in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the critique of capitalism staged by Social Gospel novels would be utterly routed by Bruce Barton's blockbuster *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925), which remained a bestseller for two years. Like many of its late-century predecessors, *The Man Nobody Knows* offered a revisionist examination of the life of Christ, and

it likewise reconstituted Jesus in the spirit of Muscular Christianity, rendering him strong, hardworking, and tough-minded. And also like many of its antecedents, Barton's work characterized Christianity as the secret to business success, for it depicted Jesus as a kind of advertising executive whose entrepreneurial savvy enabled him to create, publicize, and organize an effective international corporation. Barton unabashedly upheld capitalism as a contemporary analogue to Jesus' ministry and, like E. P. Roe, envisioned business success as a worldly expression of Christian piety. According to Barton, Jesus is the "Founder of Modern Business," an assertion that thoroughly rejected the Social Gospel embrace of socialism while repackaging for a new century the capitalist sentiments of some late-century religious novels (ch. 6).

Religious fiction would remain a mainstay of popular publishing through the twentieth century, attaining particular prominence with such works as Lloyd Cassel Douglas's *The Robe* (1942), Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958), Janette Oke's *Love Comes Softly* (1979), Frank E. Peretti's *This Present Darkness* (1986), and Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind* series (1995–2007). For the most part, however, religious fiction has been narrowly classified as a niche industry and thus seldom receives national press or attention outside of sectarian settings. Set against later American literary history, the late nineteenth century comes into view as the high-water mark of American religious fiction, an era before religious novels were marginalized as a special-interest genre and one in which they enjoyed both popularity and national visibility.