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The Deconversion of Harriet Martineau: An Emotional History of Unbelief

Conceptualising the ‘Victorian crisis of faith’ as a phenomenon fuelled by wider intellectual forces can only take us so far in our understanding of it. The loss of faith of many contemporaries did not merely entail an intellectual volte-face, but also an affective impact. Scholarly accounts have been primarily written by privileging the role of ideas, and without delving deeper into the historical record to reveal the emotional contours of these individuals’ loss of faith. This article follows a different approach. Using the lens of the history of emotions, and taking as its case study Harriet Martineau, it illuminates the hitherto underappreciated emotional dimensions of her deconversion from Unitarianism to agnosticism. It demonstrates that her deconversion followed an emotional trajectory, albeit one which was not only defined by positive feelings about her new secular creed. The article simultaneously contextualises Martineau’s emotions by examining the emotional responses of her friends, family and others. The final product is an inner and more intimate history. It is also one which offers new insights into the Victorian age of doubt and allows for a more meaningful examination of the relationship between individual experience, identity, human agency and wider intellectual forces.

Harriet Martineau, ‘one of the most extraordinary women’ of nineteenth-century Britain, lost her faith.¹ The story of her deconversion from Unitarianism to agnosticism is a familiar one.² It is also one which seemingly fits into extant interpretations of the so-called

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1. [Anon.], ‘Harriet Martineau’, *Westminster Review*, 52/1 (July 1877), 65.
2. See O. Boucher-Rivalain, ‘Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), from Unitarianism to Agnosticism’, *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens*, 76 (Automne, 2012), [27]–43; R.K. Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (London: Heinemann, 1960), *passim*; E.S. Arbuttle, *A Nineteenth-Century Woman’s Engaging with her Times: Harriet Martineau* (Martineau Society, 2019), *passim*, <https://martineausociety.co.uk/publications/harriet-martineau-a-new-biography/>; V.K. Pichanick, *Harriet Martineau: The Woman and Her Work, 1802–76* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 169–99; L.H. Peterson, ‘Introduction’, in Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography*, ed. L.H. Peterson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2007), 10–14; L.H. Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 135–55; A. Stone, *Women Philosophers in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 167–71, 199–205; S. Hobday and G. Weiner, *Reintroducing Harriet Martineau: Pioneering Sociologist and Activist* (London: Routledge, 2023), [89]–98; C. Roberts, *The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), [107]–92; S. Claggett, ‘Harriet Martineau’s Material Rebirth’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38/1 (2010), 53–73; B. Torgerson, ‘Harriet Martineau, Victorian Sciences of the Mind and the Birth of Psychology’, in *Harriet Martineau and the Birth of Disciplines: Nineteenth-Century Intellectual Powerhouse*, ed. V. Sanders and G. Weiner (Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), [135]–51; D.A. Logan, *The Hour and the Woman: Harriet Martineau’s “Somewhat Remarkable” Life* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 249–53; S. Hunter, *Harriet Martineau: The Poetics of Moralism* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 81–147.

‘Victorian crisis of faith’.³ This article does not seek to retell this story, but rather to illuminate its hitherto underappreciated emotional contours and dimensions. A *précis* of how Martineau came to abandon her religious beliefs is, nevertheless, necessary before giving her deconversion story the emotional texture it has so far lacked.

Born in 1802 in Norwich into a family of descendants of French Huguenot *émigrés*, Martineau was raised as a devout Unitarian who found religion in her youth to be a source of ‘great comfort and pleasure’, though her inquisitive mind led her from early on to grapple with complex problems such as the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will.⁴ In 1822, she began her long and illustrious career in writing by publishing in the Unitarian *Monthly Repository*, soon followed by her intensely pious *Devotional Exercises* for young people.⁵ It was around this time that she discovered necessarianism, the doctrine according to which the universe was governed by universal laws and remained unaffected by human will, and that ‘all action is determined by antecedent causes’ whilst ‘one’s own actions contribute to those causes’.⁶ This doctrine was reconciled with her ‘cherished faith’.⁷ By 1831, Martineau had become more free thinking, ceasing ‘to be an Unitarian in the technical sense’, but without renouncing her Christian beliefs.⁸ In 1844, around a decade following her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–4) which led to her ‘literary lionisation’ in London’s drawing rooms and across the country, she published *Life in the Sick-room* recounting her long-term illness and domestic confinement at Tynemouth as a result of uterine prolapse.⁹ Even though her mind at this point was in a ‘metaphysical stage’, the *Life* reflected her sustained religiosity in the face of suffering and invalidism.¹⁰ In search of a cure she began experimenting with mesmerism, Franz Anton Mesmer’s pseudo-scientific therapeutic method of which Martineau became an enthusiastic exponent after her apparent recovery. Between the late 1840s and early 1850s, she developed a materialist and naturalist understanding of the universe. Ultimately, she drifted into agnosticism but some-

3. See, for example, B. Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956); A.O.J. Cockshut, *The Unbelievers: English Agnostic Thought, 1840–1890* (London: Collins, 1964); E. Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791–1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974); R.M. Young et al., *The Victorian Crisis of Faith: Six Lectures*, ed. A. Symondson (London: S.P.C.K., 1974); S. Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850–1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977); E. Jay, *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); T. Larsen, *Contested Christianity: The Political and Social Contexts of Victorian Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 43–58; B. Hilton, ‘Moral Disciplines’, in P. Mander, ed., *Liberty and Authority in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 224–46; D. Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); G. St Aubyn, *Souls in Torment: The Conflict between Science and Religion in Victorian England* (London: New European Publications, 2010); C. Lane, *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of our Religious Uncertainty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Cf. R.J. Helmstadter and B. Lightman (eds.), *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); and T. Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

4. Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography*, ed. L.H. Peterson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2007), 56, 63, 104.

5. Discipulus [Harriet Martineau], ‘Female Writers on Practical Divinity. No. I.’, *Monthly Repository*, XVII/CCII (Oct. 1822), 593–6; ‘Female Writers on Practical Divinity. No. II.’, *Monthly Repository*, XVII/CCIV (Dec. 1822), 746–50; [Harriet Martineau], *Devotional Exercises, Consisting of Reflections and Prayers, for the Use of Young Persons; to which is Added a Treatise on the Lord’s Supper* (London: Rowland Hunter, 1823).

6. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 105, n. 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 105–07.

8. *Ibid.*, 136.

9. [Harriet Martineau], *Life in the Sick-room. Essays. By an Invalid* (2nd edn, London: Edward Moxon, 1844).

10. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 450–01.

times described herself as a ‘secularist’ or an ‘atheist’—the latter only in the ‘vulgar sense’ of denying ‘popular theology’, not a ‘First Cause’.¹¹

The hallmarks of Martineau’s deconversion would appear on three major works exhibiting ‘infidel’ and secularising tendencies. Her ‘unholy’ trinity of publications comprised, first, *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848), completed following her travels to Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria. This “conspiracy against Moses”, as a disconcerted potential publisher described it, posited a historical and developmental account of religion in the form of a genealogy of the Egyptian faith, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.¹² The second work was the *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development* (1851), co-authored with the phreno-mesmerist Henry George Atkinson, which scandalised readers with its ostensibly ‘atheistic’ tenor. Finally, there was her abridged translation in 1853 of Auguste Comte’s *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1830–42), which led her to subscribe to the French philosopher’s tripartite model of the progress of civilisation and the “phases of the mind of man”; to proclaim the imminent supersession of Christianity; and to assert the moral and epistemological superiority of science. Martineau’s deconversion to agnosticism, as this article demonstrates, followed an emotional trajectory, albeit one which was not only defined by positive feelings about her new secular creed. Before we begin the process of reconstructing this trajectory, there are some preliminary questions that need to be answered. Why should we care about her emotions? In a more general sense, why should historians and other scholars examining belief and unbelief in the nineteenth century pay attention to the emotional lives of doubters and unbelievers?

Conceptualising the ‘Victorian crisis of faith’ as a phenomenon fuelled by wider intellectual forces can only take us so far in our understanding of it. The loss of faith of many contemporaries, including Martineau, did not merely entail an intellectual volte-face as a result of anti-clerical and anti-dogmatic impulses, secularising tendencies, freethinking and rationalist attitudes, liberal, historical, developmental and ‘scientific’ modes of thinking, geological and biological evolutionary paradigms, and German ‘Higher Criticism’; it also entailed an affective impact. Emotions were at the vortex of the whirlpool of Victorian doubt and unbelief. These emotions were sometimes mixed, as individuals oscillated between old creeds and new-found theories of life. Doubters and unbelievers, the most vocal and famous of whom belonged to the Victorian world of letters, routinely spoke in emotionally charged language, referencing ‘pain’, ‘agony’, ‘grief’, ‘anxiety’, ‘horror’, ‘fear’, ‘repugnance’, ‘sadness’, ‘shock’, but also ‘exultation’, ‘happiness’ and ‘joy’. The collateral damage of their apostacy—friends, family, acquaintances—also experienced intense emotions which were almost invariably negative. Looking back at this period, Leslie Stephen noted how ‘[m]any admirable people ha[d] spoken of the agony caused by the abandonment of their old creed’ and that ‘[t]he shock ha[d] caused them exquisite pain’.¹³ Stephen was adamant that the emotional arc of his own journey to agnosticism differed from that of others, but one of his Cambridge friends gave an alternative account;

11. Harriet Martineau, *The Collected Letters of Harriet Martineau*, Vol. 3, ed. D.A. Logan (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 236. The terms ‘agnostic’ and ‘agnosticism’ would be coined in 1869 by T.H. Huxley: ‘Agnosticism’ (1889), in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 5: *Science and the Christian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894), 239–40. As Huxley stated in 1884: ‘I invented the word “Agnostic” to denote people who, like myself, confess themselves to be hopelessly ignorant concerning a variety of matters, about which metaphysicians and theologians, both orthodox and heterodox, dogmatise with the utmost confidence’: ‘Agnosticism: A Symposium’, *Agnostic Annual* (1884), 5. The term ‘secularism’ was coined in 1851 by George J. Holyoake in response to the Atkinson-Martineau *Letters*, who also used the word ‘secularist’ to describe “[f]o[r]ne who has no theory concerning a future world, but has a code of ethics concerning the present one”: G.J. Holyoake, Editorial comment in ‘On the Word Atheist’, *The Reasoner*, XI/6 (265) (1851), 88; ‘Mr. Holyoake’s Lecture on the Martineau and Atkinson Letters’, *The Reasoner*, X/32 (259) (1851), 478.

12. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 534.

13. Leslie Stephen, *Some Early Impressions* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), 69–70.

one which disclosed Stephen's misery, pain and trepidation about the grief he would cause to his loved ones.¹⁴ So great was his 'anguish' that, according to his daughter Virginia Woolf, he even contemplated suicide.¹⁵ In common with Stephen, Frederic Harrison claimed that he felt no 'serious pain or dread' in the course of his deconversion from 'Ritualism' to the Positivist Religion of Humanity, emphasising instead his inner peace and joy for the future.¹⁶ Herbert Spencer seemed equally unmoved, though his aunt 'became concerned about [his] state and anxious for [his] conversion.'¹⁷ Some like F.W. Newman, the theist brother of Cardinal Newman, displayed a consistent emotional state of almost pure moral repugnance at Christianity and indignation towards 'frightened friends'.¹⁸

Yet others did not hide their internal torment. In J.A. Froude's partly autobiographical *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849) for which he "cut a hole in [his] heart and wrote with the blood",¹⁹ the *cri de cœur* of his hero, Markham Sutherland, is replete with emotions, especially his anguish about the Old Testament depiction of God, and his horror at the idea of eternal punishment.²⁰ Mrs Humphrey Ward revealed to W.E. Gladstone that the idealist philosopher T.H. Green confided in her that he had renounced his faith 'with grief and difficulty', adding that "[t]he parting with the Christian mythology is the rending asunder of bone and marrow".²¹ In 1846 Caroline Bray evoked in private the pathos of George Eliot's spiritual struggle in translating David Friedrich Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (1835). Eliot confessed that she was 'Strauss-sick' and that 'it made her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion, and only the sight of her Christ-image and picture made her endure it.'²² Some hearts, as W.H. Mallock remarked, were still 'aching for the God that they no longer [could] believe in'.²³ As Eliot's work advanced towards publication, she became 'dreadfully nervous', with Bray expressing her 'pity' of this '[p]oor thing [...] with her pale sickly face and dreadful headaches, and anxiety too about her father.' But Bray also revealed that Eliot at times looked quite happy and satisfied with her work.²⁴ Deconversion was not always a straightforward process in terms of its emotional dynamics. Even those who retained their faith following brief encounters with the spirit of doubt registered powerful emotions. Frances Power Cobbe remembered how she had once recoiled in terror for momentarily disbelieving the miracle of the loaves and fishes.²⁵

Cobbe provides a useful starting point for our exploration of Martineau, for she was especially interested in emotions and the emotions of unbelievers in particular.²⁶ When Cobbe reviewed in 1877 Martineau's autobiography for the *Theological Review*, she did not concern herself with the latter's agnostic views, but rather with her emotions: 'with the

14. F.W. Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (London: Duckworth & Co, 1906), 146.

15. Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. J. Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), 117.

16. Frederic Harrison, *The Creed of a Layman: Apologia Pro Fide Mea* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1907), 3–4.

17. Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography, Vol. I* (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), 502.

18. Francis William Newman, *Letters of Francis William Newman, Chiefly on Religion*, ed. T.E. Jones (Philosophy Documentation Centre, 2009); Francis William Newman, *Phases of Faith: or, Passages from the History of my Creed* (6th edn, London: George Manwaring, 1860), 70.

19. Quoted in O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church. Part I* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1966), 535.

20. James Anthony Froude, *The Nemesis of Faith* (2nd edn, London: John Chapman, 1849), 9–19.

21. J.P. Trevelyan, *The Life of Mrs. Humphrey Ward* (London: Constable & Co, 1923), 63.

22. George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters, Vol. I: 1836–1851*, ed. G.S. Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 272.

23. W.H. Mallock, 'Faith and Verification', *Nineteenth Century*, 4/20 (Oct. 1878), 674.

24. *George Eliot Letters*, ed. Haight, 272.

25. Frances Power Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe. By Herself, Vol. I* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1894), 86–87.

26. Frances Power Cobbe, 'Agnostic Morality', *Contemporary Review*, 43 (June 1883), [783], 794. See also, Frances Power Cobbe, 'The Education of the Emotions', *Fortnightly Review*, 43/254 (Feb. 1888), 223–36; and C. Burdett, 'Emotions', in J. John (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 590–91.

tone of exultation with which [these views] are announced' and the manner whereby she 'proclaim[ed] herself enraptured at the joy of finding out that there is neither a God to protect the weak, nor, finally, any holiness or happiness beyond the grave'.²⁷ Agnostics such as Martineau, argued Cobbe, saw themselves as morally bound to make their views known to the world, but 'instead of rejoicing over the discovery of "a Spring in the Desert", it behoves them to weep tears, bitter as ever fell from human eyes, over the grave wherein they bury the Divine Love and the Immortal Hope of our miserable race'.²⁸ This should have been the 'fitting' emotional response of agnostics for the devastation they were wreaking, Cobbe sternly resolved.

For Cobbe the emotions of doubt and unbelief mattered, and they should therefore matter to historians. Recently, the lens of the history of emotions has been employed to provide new understandings of unbelief.²⁹ Regarding the nineteenth century, scholars have proved particularly adept in applying the emotional approach,³⁰ but more work remains to be done on the domains of belief and unbelief. Those interested in these topics have often fallen into the "'intellectualist" fallacy' which, according to Dominic Erdozain, is 'a tendency to privilege the clean logic of ideas above the raw fuel of human experience among the forces of historical change'.³¹ In examining the emotional dimensions of Martineau's deconversion, this article follows Erdozain's methodological approach of providing an 'inner history of alienation, rather than an outer history of cooling conditions'.³² It also responds to the call of a major intellectual historian who has urged those studying the Victorian faith in crisis to 'look at the social and psychological as well as the intellectual being of those Victorians who transformed their religious faith'.³³ But how can these emotions be studied? The 'raw fuel of human experience' is, after all, only incidentally encountered through traces of the past in the form of words, expressions and actions. According to Thomas Dixon, the job of historians of emotions may be notoriously difficult, but is certainly not impossible, and the only way to capture emotions in the past is to provide a '[c]areful, historically informed reading of the visible outward signs of inward and invisible feelings'.³⁴ These 'visible outward signs' can be found in diaries, autobiographies and private correspondence which 'have a marked relation to the self'.³⁵ Yet the historian should be mindful that these 'recorded' emotions might have been carefully curated, as well as consciously or unconsciously filtered or modified. But as Susan J. Matt has rightly argued, although 'there is a gap between what people felt and what historians can know about those feelings [...] there is nevertheless a value to be found in recovering these faint traces of past generations' sensibilities.³⁶

27. Frances Power Cobbe, 'Magnanimous Atheism', *Theological Review: A Journal of Religious Thought and Life*, 14/59 (Oct. 1877), 470–72.

28. *Ibid.*, 488–89.

29. A. Ryrie, *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019).

30. See, for example, T. Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 125–214; and T. Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 98–230. I have also found the following studies especially useful when thinking about emotions in this period: M. Ledger-Lomas, *Queen Victoria: This Thorny Crown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); and J. Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, LA, and London: University of California Press, 2002).

31. D. Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

32. *Ibid.*

33. F.M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 100.

34. T. Dixon, *The History of Emotions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3.

35. J. Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33.

36. S.J. Matt, 'Recovering the Invisible: Methods for the Historical Study of the Emotions', in S.J. Matt and P.N. Stearns, eds., *Doing Emotions History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 44.

In using emotions as an analytical device, this article shines a new light on Martineau's deconversion. Regarded as 'the quintessential Victorian woman of letters',³⁷ Martineau has often been associated with the 'march of the intellect' and the secularist and freethinking impulses of the age. Yet her habits of thought and intellectual inclinations also closely related to her emotions, something which has yet to be adequately recognised. Existing accounts—whether biographies or other scholarly studies discussing Martineau's views on religion in particular—have been written without fully considering the emotional dimensions of her loss of faith. This neglect has led to misleading conclusions. For Odile Boucher-Rivalain, unlike many of her contemporaries Martineau 'did not experience a painful crisis of faith, but rather a boundless enthusiasm over her new condition as an agnostic.'³⁸ A more recent scholar agrees.³⁹ Yet, as this article contends through its examination of Martineau's autobiography, letters and other writings, the emotional dynamics of her deconversion were more complex. Beginning with her sadness and fears at the early stages of her loss of faith, we then move into her grief, sorrow, pain, anxieties and even indignation over the reactions of her closest friends, and finally into her happiness and joy for her new positivist philosophy—though, as it will become evident, her emotional journey was not as clear-cut. The article also reveals that Martineau reflected on her emotions, and on some occasions she even sought to rationalise and defend these emotions in the face of insolent compassion and pity from Christian correspondents and acquaintances. On a broader level, this article argues that Martineau's structures of thought were imbricated with her structures of feeling: failing to account for both 'structures' yields an insufficient understanding of her intellectual development. In approaching Martineau through the history of emotions, this article offers fresh perspectives into her development, whilst also adding a layer of complexity to our understanding of the 'Victorian crisis of faith' by unveiling its emotional facets.

The emotions of an individual are, of course, often entangled with and conditioned by those of other people and society at large. Following the premise of Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead that emotions are not only personal but also social, this article illuminates the social and 'relational' dimensions of Martineau's emotions *vis-à-vis* the emotional responses to her unbelief from friends, family, admirers and detractors.⁴⁰ Since emotions are also 'embodied judgements' the history of emotions 'takes bodies seriously', as Dixon has noted.⁴¹ Accordingly, this article considers Martineau's bodily sensations and feelings which reveal interesting aspects about her deconversion. The emotional history this article constructs allows for a more imaginative and original examination of the relationship between individual experience, identity, human agency and wider intellectual forces.

'Shocked and Disgusted': Osiris at Home and Abroad

On 28 June 1838 Martineau found herself in the transept-gallery of Westminster Abbey to witness the coronation of Queen Victoria. By this time Martineau had already distanced herself from Unitarianism, though she did not renounce entirely her Christian beliefs and was in a 'metaphysical' state of mind. Nonetheless, the ceremony produced in her feelings of horror, pain and shame. She was shocked at 'the blasphemous religious services of the day'. The whole 'festival' seemed to be 'a highly barbaric one' whose 'theological part

37. L.H. Peterson, 'Harriet Martineau, Woman of Letters', in E. Dzelzainis and C. Kaplan (eds), *Harriet Martineau: Authorship, Society and Empire* (Manchester and New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2010), 15.

38. Boucher-Rivalain, 'Harriet Martineau', 42.

39. Stone, *Women Philosophers*, 167.

40. O. Riis and L. Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5–6.

41. Dixon, *History of Emotions*, 14.

especially was worthy only of the old Pharaonic times in Egypt, and those of the Kings of Palestine.⁴² The celebration was ‘the most coarse and irreverent’ she ever witnessed. But what filled her with sadness, pain and a feeling of shame was the performance of Handel’s ‘Messiah’. In a move that would have scandalised Christian readers of her autobiography, she paralleled Jesus Christ with Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead: ‘As an apotheosis of Osiris, under his ancient name, or his more modern image of Christ, the Messiah of Handel is the finest treat in the whole range of art: but it is too low for religion.’ Martineau would arrive at this conclusion about the apparent Egyptian mythological elements in Christianity during her travels to the East in 1846, so her comments about Handel’s Messiah during the coronation might have been a retrospective addition to her autobiography. Nonetheless, she remembered telling her mother how shocking she found ‘the impiety of the service’ the evening before the coronation when she received a copy of the service.⁴³ From this point forward, as this first section of the article shows, Martineau would begin to experience conflicting emotions as she gradually moved towards agnosticism, with her Eastern travels marking an important turning point in her views on religion—even though the process of her deconversion was already underway.⁴⁴

It is important to note that Martineau’s emotional response to the coronation ceremony was not merely informed by freethinking impulses. Her earlier political beliefs, structures of thought and intellectual inclinations played an equally significant role in her reaction. After all, she had been raised as a Unitarian, so the spirit of religious dissent continued to provide a strong guiding force in her critiques of the established church and its traditions, which were on full display in Westminster Abbey. Moreover, by this time she had already developed radical, democratic and republican opinions, as well as anti-clerical views. These had been ventilated in her *Society in America* (1837) which was based on her travels to the United States during which she became committed to abolitionism. This was a book not only defined by its ‘boldness of speech’, but also by a ‘broad republican character’.⁴⁵ In the same book, she charged American clergy for being ‘the most guilty class of the community in regard to the slavery question’, because they avoided ‘the subject of Human Rights in the pulpit’ and failed to offer ‘those [C]hristian principles of faith and liberty with which slavery cannot co-exist.’⁴⁶ Therefore, all of these ideas and patterns of thought overlapped with her developing freethought and contoured her emotional response to the coronation. The new queen was an enthusiastic reader of Martineau’s books,⁴⁷ but this did not seem to have sparked in the latter any royalist sentiments. Indeed, she ‘had not the slightest desire to go’, but because ‘it was the only coronation likely to happen in [her] lifetime’ she deemed it ‘a clear duty to witness it.’⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the point remains that her account of her response to the coronation is a fascinating early example of Martineau’s disclosure to readers of her autobiography of her feelings as the ‘offensive’ ceremony blending divinity and monarchy unfolded before her eyes.⁴⁹

In 1845, following her experiments with mesmerism in search of a cure for her disease, Martineau met the phreno-mesmerist Henry George Atkinson. She later described the

42. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 416–17.

43. *Ibid.*, 417.

44. Her ‘severance’ from Unitarianism, as she confessed in her autobiography, ‘was complete and necessarily final when [she] wrote “Eastern Life”’: Martineau, *Autobiography*, 137.

45. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 395, 401. Martineau would continue to engage with republican themes, publishing a few years later a novel about the Haitian black revolutionary leader Toussaint L’Ouverture: Harriet Martineau, *The Hour and the Man: A Historical Romance* (3 vols, London: Edward Moxon, 1841).

46. Harriet Martineau, *Society in America, Vol. III* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837), 282–83.

47. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 410–11.

48. *Ibid.*, 412.

49. *Ibid.*, 417.

friendship with him as “the greatest privilege of the concluding period of my life”.⁵⁰ In recounting the first meeting between them, Martineau revealed her thoughts and feelings as she transitioned into a materialist and scientific understanding of the universe. Contrary to what scholars have assumed, Martineau experienced various negative emotions as her mind began to reject metaphysical and theological suppositions. Atkinson, for example, ‘astonished and somewhat confounded’ her when he pointed out the mistake of people being so obsessed with death and the afterlife. Martineau was still unable to see the ‘selfishness’ involved in Christian notions about a future life and the ‘anxiety’ she ‘felt about the matter’. But Atkinson provided an uneasy grounding, helping her to realise that ‘our duties lie before our eyes and close to our hands; and that our business is with what we know [...] and not at all with a future which is, of its own nature, impenetrable.’⁵¹ It was ‘[w]ith grave interest and uneasy concern’ that Martineau later talked these ideas over with her hostess who became ‘exceedingly shocked’. Martineau struggled at first to accept these ideas; indeed, she did not hide the fact that she experienced ‘many alternations of feeling’. But she ‘soon began to enjoy breathings of the blessed air of freedom from superstition’; this also meant ‘freedom from personal anxiety and selfishness’.⁵²

The following year Martineau was invited by the Liverpool Unitarian philanthropist and iron manufacturer Richard Vaughan Yates and his wife to accompany them to Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria. Martineau’s travels to the East would forever change her life. Her convictions and all action of the rest of her life ‘would be shaped and determined by what [she] saw and thought during those all-important months’ in the East.⁵³ Her experiences gave her an idea: that of writing a book. This would not merely be a travelogue, but something that would ventilate all those embryonic ‘infidel’ views which gave her pain because they remained unarticulated: ‘The book itself had been determined on from the time when I found the influx of impressions growing painful, for want of expression’.⁵⁴ Before embarking on this project she consulted Atkinson. The letters which she sent him in November of 1847 and which were later reprinted in her autobiography, demonstrate the agony and fear she felt during this early phase of her deconversion. Martineau warned readers of her autobiography that these old letters ‘exhibit a very early stage of conviction, —before [she] had attained firmness and clearness, and while a large leaven of the old anxiety and obscurity remained.’ In her first letter she told Atkinson that she was overcome with a ‘depressing feeling’ due to the conflicting opinions of the authorities she read in the process of writing this new book on her Eastern travels. Perhaps more revealingly, she also told him of her growing despondency and loneliness for not being able to speak to anyone about her new-found theories: ‘I do feel sadly lonely, for this reason, —that I could not, if I tried, communicate to any one the *feeling* that I have that the theological belief of almost every body in the civilised world is baseless.’⁵⁵ Atkinson assured her that such emotions were completely normal and would go away. His words provided her with a sense of comfort. But in common with many other Victorian doubters and unbelievers, Martineau was concerned not to cause any pain to her friends. ‘What does give me a qualm sometimes’, she confessed,

50. C.E. Plumtre, ‘On the Neglected Centenary of Harriet Martineau’, *Westminster Review*, 158/6 (Dec. 1902), 673.

51. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 480.

52. *Ibid.*, 480–81.

53. *Ibid.*, 519.

54. *Ibid.*, 520.

55. *Ibid.*, 522–4.

is thinking that such friends [...] will suffer, whenever they come to know that I think their 'Christian hope' baseless. [These two friends] are widows, and they live by their expectation of a future life. I seriously believe that [one of them] would go mad or die, if this hope was shaken in her.⁵⁶

Notwithstanding her fears and anxiety about her friends' reactions, she was clear that 'there [was] no going back to discarded beliefs'.⁵⁷

Eastern Life, Present and Past (hereafter '*Eastern Life*') appeared a few months later. Written in compelling narrative style, the three-volume book presented a historical and developmental account of religion as Martineau 'wandered amidst the old monuments and scenes of the various faiths' in the East.⁵⁸ Her overarching argument as she travels through the cradles of the Egyptian faith, Judaism, Christianity and Islam—with her journey's geographical progression from Egypt to Sinai to Palestine and then Syria reflecting the 'births' of these faiths in chronological order—was that humanity's passage through them was a 'natural' course of development.⁵⁹ Martineau's account pointed to the inevitable supersession of religion.⁶⁰ The book contained several passages about religion that horrified readers. Perhaps the most shocking was her view on the Egyptian god Osiris, 'the only one of the sons of the Supreme, who came upon the earth to make him known'. The implications of her analysis were explosive: 'It is impossible not to perceive that Osiris was to the Old Egyptians what the Messiah is to be to the Jews; and what Another has been to the Christians.'⁶¹ But her attempt to identify the Egyptian mythological elements in later monotheistic religions did not stop here. In exploring the tomb of Osirei she was struck by its iconography which alluded to the Book of Genesis:

And it is impossible to look upon these representations of the serpent; of the tree of life, of which those who ate were made as gods; of the moving spirit of the Creator, and of the universally prevalent ideas of the original spread of water; the separation of the land from the water; the springing of vegetation, and the sudden appearance of animals on the new surface; and the separation of the upper air into regions of abode, without seeing whence was derived the first of the two accounts of the creation given in the Book of Genesis.⁶²

The idea of monotheism, she further argued, was also a product of Egypt: although its priests adhered to a form of monotheism, they cultivated polytheistic notions among the masses. It was from Egypt that Moses had thus gained his belief in monotheism, which he then conveyed to the Jews. Visiting the Church of the Annunciation in the Holy Land led Martineau to a similarly unsettling conclusion:

Having stood before the sculpture of the Annunciation at Thebes, and standing now between the pillars of the Annunciation at Nazareth, I could not but feel how much less irreverence attached to the Egyptian doctrines, in their early age: and I think no one can doubt what indignation would be expressed against the blasphemous indecency of Egyptian superstition, if we knew that they had presented to the people, as literal truth, such a story about the birth of the most distinguished of Egyptian men as our poor and ignorant fellowmen are told in our Christian churches, through the mistake of an ancient allegory for modern history.⁶³

At the Mount of Olives she rejected biblical literalism and, like those who applied the critical lens of German 'Higher Criticism' to the Bible, argued for the separation of myth from the historical Jesus and his 'actual voice'.⁶⁴

56. Ibid, 531.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid, 521.

59. Ibid; Stone, *Women Philosophers*, 200.

60. Stone, *Women Philosophers*, 200–01.

61. Harriet Martineau, *Eastern Life, Present and Past, Vol. I* (London: Edward Moxon, 1848), 247.

62. Ibid, 331.

63. Martineau, *Eastern Life, Vol. III*, 223–24.

Martineau's initial publication plans fell through after John Murray refused to publish her book because "of infidel tendency" and for supposedly overthrowing "the veracity (!) of the bible."⁶⁵ But Martineau's heretical opinions really should not have come as a surprise to Murray. Her earlier intellectual inclinations and patterns of thought had led her, almost two decades prior to the publication of *Eastern Life*, to question the Bible and biblical literalism—the rationalist impulses of Unitarianism and its rejection of 'bibliolatry', as well as her lifelong necessarianism, certainly played a role—and to develop a more liberal and sometimes critical attitude towards religion and religious institutions.⁶⁶ Moreover, following her cure in 1844 she published her 'Letters on Mesmerism' in the *Athenaeum*, with the response of her friends and enemies being one of shock and indignation.⁶⁷ Mesmerism and science more broadly, in combination with her other intellectual inclinations, had already paved the path to her move away from religion as the ultimate source of truth.⁶⁸ She was also no stranger to publication-related controversy, as demonstrated by responses to her 'Letters on Mesmerism'.⁶⁹ She therefore knew that Murray's refusal to publish *Eastern Life* would make for a good story if it got out, helping to boost sales among a reading public already aware of her freethinking disposition. After Edward Moxon agreed to publish it, Martineau wrote to him to tell him that Murray's conduct should be made known 'as widely as possible'.⁷⁰ Not that she did not expect any more backlash: as she also told Moxon, '[n]ow it *will* be called a book "of infidel tendency," [...] by many, & abundantly abused by the untravelled clergy.' Following the book's publication, she bemusedly reported of an individual from Leeds who had cut his copy into small pieces and burned them. 'He w[ould] have burned *me* [as a witch], three centuries since', she added. Martineau did receive some sympathetic responses, but she was not oblivious as to how 'much horror & concern must exist.'⁷¹ A woman from Cheltenham named Charlotte, for example, wrote to Martineau to demand that she destroy all her writings "because they g[a]ve pain to the pious."⁷²

As Martineau expected, the book roused feelings of shock, revulsion and anger in many readers and reviewers. Some gave a mixed response, with the editor of *Sharpe's London Magazine* confessing that the perusal of the book produced 'feelings of pleasure and pain': pleasure at the 'candour and honest enthusiasm of [Martineau's] mind' and its powers of exposition and imagination; pain at some of her deplorable opinions.⁷³ The *Prospective Review*, on the other hand, reported that liberal journals warned young readers to stay away from the book's pages 'as a tainted region that would strike an insidious poison into their hearts'; in other quarters there were 'suspicions whispered of evil tendency' and 'grave-looks of disapproval'.⁷⁴ *Fraser's Magazine* published a scurrilous fictional dialogue among members of a book club—written from the point of view of a personified copy of *Eastern Life*—during which the publisher John Murray exclaims: 'I should have liked it better if

65. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 95.

66. Webb, *Martineau*, 285–6; Boucher-Rivalain, 'Harriet Martineau', 34. As L.H. Peterson notes, in Martineau's *Autobiography* 'necessarian philosophy replaces the Bible as the principal guide to action', even though it initially harmonised with her Christian beliefs: Peterson, 'Introduction', 13.

67. T. Ketabgian, 'Martineau, Mesmerism, and the "Night Side of Nature"', *Women's Writing*, 9/3 (2002), 351. Her letters later appeared in a volume published by Edward Moxon: Harriet Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism* (London: Edward Moxon, 1845).

68. Boucher-Rivalain, 'Harriet Martineau', 35–36.

69. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 465–70.

70. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 88.

71. *Ibid.*, 88, 123.

72. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 636.

73. 'Editor's Postscript', *Sharpe's London Magazine*, 6 (Mar. 1848), 272.

74. [Anon.], 'Miss Martineau's Eastern Life', *Prospective Review*, 16 (Oct. 1848), 526–27.

all that Socinian trash had been extracted, to form a tit-bit for such as delight in the monstrous crudities of the dim-sighted infidel.’⁷⁵

The religious press was profoundly offended. The Congregationalist *British Quarterly Review* called the book ‘a great mistake’, whilst the evangelical Anglican *Christian Observer* described it as ‘a fearless and mendacious assault upon Revelation’.⁷⁶ No review was as damning as that of the newly established Catholic *Rambler*. It expected that ‘the religiously disposed, and indeed all in whom the principle of faith is not already extinct, will be shocked and disgusted’. Shock and disgust were the two things the *Rambler*’s reviewer felt about the book, in addition to being indignant ‘at the unblushing, and almost boastful and triumphant, manner in which [Martineau] gives expression to her unbelief.’⁷⁷ Yet in a second notice the *Rambler* noted that despite ‘her hardness of mind and inordinate confidence’, Martineau sometimes surprised the reader with tender expressions. This suggested that her religious faith was not entirely gone, and that in the depths of her soul ‘a struggle between faith and unbelief is still being carried on, of which even she herself is not explicitly or fully conscious.’⁷⁸ But at this point in her life Martineau experienced no such struggle. A historical and developmental understanding of religion had irrevocably disenchanting her worldview. ‘To have explored thoughtfully the records of Egypt, Arabia & Palestine’, she confessed, ‘in the monuments & localities, is to have risen into a wholly new & higher world of knowledge, after which there can be no resumption of the works & ideas of a former stage of the mind.’⁷⁹ *Eastern Life* was a decisive—but by no means the first—step into an unbelieving life.

“Vinegar Mingled with Gall”: Mesmeric Atheism

On 1 January 1851, *The Critic* teased the publication ‘of a work which will make a noise in the world’.⁸⁰ This was the *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development* (hereafter ‘*Letters*’) by Atkinson and Martineau. Decades after its publication, Victorians still remembered the shockwaves it had sent across society. The *Letters*, wrote Margaret Oliphant in 1877, ‘revealed Miss Martineau’s final conversion to the creed [...] known as “Agnosticism”—the religion of unknowableness.’ Crucial to the purpose of this article, Oliphant vividly recalled the range of emotions this work engendered in readers. Most people, she wrote, laughed at it and seemed ‘glad to see a “superior” woman [...] prove herself as silly as any poor evangelical sister worshipping a doubtful “shepherd” [i.e., Atkinson]’; still, there were many others ‘to whom the laughter was not pleasant, and whose feelings were those of distress and shame.’⁸¹ The *Letters*, as this second section of the article reveals, elicited intense emotional responses, especially in the religious-minded. In the face of relentless abuse from reviewers, Martineau tried to maintain her resolve as she defiantly continued to march down the path of agnosticism.

The *Letters* was written in epistolary form, where Martineau posed questions and Atkinson acted as an expositor. The book engages with a range of themes, including phrenology and mesmerism, the relationship between the brain and the mind, the nervous system, matter and causation, dreams, the association of ideas, superstition and science and

75. [Anon.], ‘Fuss in a Book-Club’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 38/228 (Dec. 1848), 629.

76. [Anon.], ‘Travel and Theology’, *British Quarterly Review*, 16 (Nov. 1848), 433; [Anon.], ‘Review of Miss Martineau’s “Eastern Life”’, *Christian Observer* (Dec. 1848), 819.

77. [Anon.], ‘*Eastern Life, Present and Past*. By Harriet Martineau. London, Moxon.’, *The Rambler*, 22 (27 May 1848), 78–79.

78. [Anon.], ‘*Eastern Life, Past and Present*’, *The Rambler*, 2/23 (3 June 1848), 108–09.

79. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 126.

80. ‘Gossip of the Literary World’, *The Critic*, 10/234 (Jan. 1851), 20.

81. [Margaret Oliphant], ‘Harriet Martineau’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 121/738 (Apr. 1877), 494–5.

theology. Throughout the book Atkinson unequivocally declares his faith in the empirical method of observation and experimentation championed by his ‘great master’, Francis Bacon, as the only appropriate method for the establishment of ‘a true science of human nature’.⁸² He vehemently rejects metaphysics and ‘theological notions’; asserts the limits of knowledge in a philosophical manner bordering on Hume’s sceptical empiricism; arraigns theologians for failing to reform and moralise the world; and declares the impossibility of finding God in nature. To the horror of many readers, Atkinson even went so far as to suggest that Jesus Christ was a mesmerist.⁸³ But Atkinson also carefully presented himself as an agnostic, *avant la lettre*, not an atheist.⁸⁴ Not that this avowal did anything to placate readers; quite the contrary.

This mode ‘of thinking about man and the rest of nature’, as John Morley observed in his review of Martineau’s autobiography in 1877, ‘led to repudiation by [her] of the whole structure of dogmatic theology.’⁸⁵ Though Martineau’s voice is, for the most part, drowned in Atkinson’s longueurs, we get several glimpses into her emotions as she reads the letters of her friend and writes back to him. Standing firmly on the new epistemological vantage point of naturalism, Martineau looked back with ‘horror’ and ‘pity’ at herself for subscribing to mainstream theological views:

There is no theory of a God, of an author of Nature, of an origin of the universe, which is not utterly repugnant to my faculties; which is not (to my feelings) so irreverent as to make me blush; so misleading as to make me mourn [...] I look back with a kind of horror, as well as deep pity, on myself, in the days when I thought it my duty to cultivate (against nature) an anxious solicitude about my own “salvation,”—my own future spiritual welfare.⁸⁶

Her ‘blushing’ might be a rhetorical device added for dramatic effect, but is nonetheless an interesting bodily sensation that Martineau chose to convey her discomfort caused by, and the anger she felt towards, baseless *a priori* theories about a divine creator of the universe. In showcasing her newly achieved freedom—couched in Platonic terms—from the dark cave of superstition, she juxtaposed these negative emotions to the joy, happiness and exhilaration she now experienced as she entered the revitalising and truthful light of nature. The admission of not knowing, and not being able to know, about the being and nature of a ‘First Cause’ was not a troubling but rather a liberating thing: ‘How far happier it is to see—how much wiser to admit—that we know nothing whatever about the matter!’ ‘You know what it is to have no longer cause to blush for the moral character of your faith’, she added in one of her responses to Atkinson, ‘and to tremble when a passing breeze finds its way into the old cavern, and shakes the painted vapours, and threatens to dissolve them.’⁸⁷ Deconversion did not only mean spiritual and intellectual emancipation, but also emotional catharsis. There were ‘no more ruptures and agonies of selfish hope and fear’, she wrote in a subsequent response, but a new sort of feeling: ‘And what a *feeling* it is,—that which grows up and pervades us when we have fairly returned to our obedience to Nature! What a healthful glow animates the faculties! what a serenity settles down upon the temper!’⁸⁸ Positive emotions saturated her final letters to Atkinson: ‘enjoyment’, cheerfulness, ‘contentment’ and ‘a new exhilaration’ felt for future generations who would experience a time ‘when all discipline will consist in a sweet and joyful surrender

82. Henry George Atkinson and Harriet Martineau, *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development* (London: John Chapman, 1851), 9–10, 139.

83. *Ibid.*, 214.

84. *Ibid.*, 240.

85. J[ohn] M[orley], ‘Harriet Martineau’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 36/211 (May 1877), 55.

86. Atkinson and Martineau, *Letters*, 217, 222.

87. *Ibid.*, 218–20.

88. *Ibid.*, 283 (Martineau’s emphasis).

to Nature, and all the forces of the universe will combine to lift Man above his sorrows'.⁸⁹ In her autobiography Martineau related a number of episodes of people ceasing to pay her visits; others speaking 'coldly' at her, or passing by her without speaking at all; while many others sent 'scolding letters'.⁹⁰ But this did not upset her, given how happy she felt about her new understanding of the universe:

[W]hat did it matter whether people who were nothing to me had smiled or frowned as I passed them in the village in the morning? When I experienced the still new joy of feeling myself to be a portion of the universe, resting on the security of its everlasting laws, certain that its Cause was wholly out of the sphere of human attributes, and that the special destination of my race is infinitely nobler than the highest proposed under a scheme of "divine moral government", how could it matter to me that the adherents of a decaying mythology [i.e., Christianity] [...] were fiercely clinging to their Man-God, their scheme of salvation, their reward and punishment, their arrogance, their selfishness, their essential pay-system, as ordered by their mythology?⁹¹

But the fact was that the *Letters*, this 'daring book' as Martineau described it, caused visceral reactions in its readership.⁹² Some like Gladstone and Charles Darwin read the book, but made no further comment.⁹³ Yet most readers found it hard to hide their shock, horror, anger and pain. Hearing of the 'excitement' the *Letters* was stirring, the poet Mary Howitt made several attempts to borrow it from the London Library, but it was 'always out'. When she eventually managed to get hold of a copy, she discovered that it was 'the most awful book that was ever written by a woman'. In private Howitt gave a fuller account of her emotional response:

[Martineau and Atkinson] dethrone God, abuse Christ, and prefer Mahometanism to Christianity. It made me sick and ill to hear them talk of Jesus as a mere clever mesmerist. To me it is blasphemy. To show you how evil the book is, I must tell you that Alfred [her son] wanted the Inquisition for its authors, and I sympathised with him. It will make good people devilish in their indignation and anger, and it will set all the poor infidels crowing like cocks on a dunghill.⁹⁴

Adding insult to injury, Howitt was astounded to see one of her articles reproduced in the *Letters*' Appendix.⁹⁵ The article was added deliberately, she remonstrated, 'to make me out an infidel'. This affront provoked her husband 'more than anything else', with both undoubtedly agreeing with Douglas Jerrold's pithy statement—which Mary reported—that "[f]here is no God, and Harriet Martineau is his Prophet."⁹⁶ Fanny Allen, aunt of Charles Darwin's wife Emma, was similarly left aghast at the *Letters*. 'Miss Martineau's publication in partnership with Mr Atkinson has shocked all her friends', she wrote to Elizabeth Wedgwood. 'I cannot understand the motive that guided these two criminals in the publishing their miserable theory', she wrote whilst revealing that she found some consolation in reading August Neander's work on the life of Christ.⁹⁷ '[I]t is a painful business', Edward Quillian, poet and son-in-law of William Wordsworth, wrote to Henry Crabb Robinson, confessing that he could not now 'cordially enjoy [Martineau's] society' and that he would not have his daughters associated with her—though he was also much

89. *Ibid.*, 284–5.

90. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 573–76.

91. *Ibid.*, 575.

92. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 174.

93. Gladstone read the *Letters* almost four decades after its publication: W.E. Gladstone, *The Gladstone Diaries: with Cabinet Minutes and Prime-Ministerial Correspondence*, Vol. 12: 1887–1891 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 313; Charles Darwin, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, Vol. 4, ed. by F. Burkhardt, S. Smith, and J.A. Secord (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 488, 504.

94. Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, Vol. II, ed. Margaret Howitt (London: WM. Isbister, 1889), 69–70.

95. Howitt's article, 'The Preaching Epidemic of Sweden', appeared in Appendix AA.

96. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

97. *Emma Darwin: A Century of Family Letters 1792–1896*, Vol. II, ed. Henrietta Litchfield (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1915) 129.

'troubled' about Martineau for she was 'a person towards whom [he was] very far from having unkindly feelings[.]'⁹⁸ On his own part Robinson noted that after reading the *Letters* he would 'make no sacrifice if [he broke] with [Martineau] entirely.' He had earlier reported that when he met George Eliot at John Chapman's house in London, she described the book as 'studiously offensive.'⁹⁹ However, Eliot's response was more mixed. In private she called the book 'the boldest' in the English language, but also spoke of Eliza Follen's 'extreme horror' at it.¹⁰⁰ These ambivalent feelings were apparent in the responses of many reviewers. Though the radical *Leader* '[expressed] sorrow at the Atheism of this book', it nonetheless 'applauded the courage shown' by the two authors in publishing it and freely expressing their opinions.¹⁰¹ Another radical publication, the *Westminster Review*, voiced its dismay at the book's 'unphilosophical' views, but also expressed its 'appreciation of the honesty and boldness with which unpopular thoughts ha[d] been frankly outspoken.'¹⁰² Others were of a more decided mind. In *Fraser's Magazine* J.A. Froude saw it as a foreboding sign of the times. 'We may turn away from it, affect a horror of it, slight it, laugh at it', he wrote as he took stock of the various emotional responses it had produced; 'but it is a symptom of a state of things, it is the first flame of a smouldering feeling now first gaining air, and neither its writers, nor we, nor any one, well know how large material of combustion there may be lying about ready to kindle. Practical atheism is abundant among us.'¹⁰³

Out of all reviews the last two stung Martineau the most.¹⁰⁴ But they were mild compared to the one in the *Prospective Review*, penned by her own brother, the Revd James Martineau. This review was published anonymously, though she eventually learned who its author was. The resultant sibling rivalry became a topic of gossip and one of the most dramatic 'family feud' episodes of the 'Victorian crisis of faith'. In private Matthew Arnold spoke of the 'hatreds' of James and Harriet.¹⁰⁵ The secularist George J. Holyoake was especially critical of the 'brutal' terms and 'spiritual malignity' of the review.¹⁰⁶ Scholars of Harriet Martineau have followed suit, highlighting the savageness of the review and the breach between the siblings.¹⁰⁷ But this was not the whole story, as some

98. *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle (1808–1866)*, Vol. II, ed. E.J. Morley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 777–78.

99. Henry Crabb Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, Vol. II, ed. E.J. Morley (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), 707–08.

100. *George Eliot Letters*, Vol. I, ed. Haight, 407, 425.

101. [Anon.], 'Martineau's Letters on Man. (Second Notice)', *The Leader*, 2/50 (8 Mar. 1851), 227. The first part of the review appeared a few days earlier: [Anon.], 'Letters on Man's Nature and Development', *The Leader*, 2/49 (1 Mar. 1851), 201–3. Some scholars have assumed that the two-part *Leader* review was written by Eliot: Webb, *Martineau*, 299; Weiner and Hobday, eds., *Reintroducing*, 93; Arbuckle, *A Nineteenth-Century Woman's*, Ch. 33, n. 60 on p. 20. However, it is more likely that the author was Eliot's future partner and founding member of the *Leader*, G.H. Lewes: see George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. II, ed. G.S. Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), n. 389 on p. 123. Eliot wrote a summary of the *Letters* for John Chapman's analytical catalogue: *An Analytical Catalogue of Mr. Chapman's Publications* (London: John Chapman, 1852), 57–60; G.S. Haight, *George Eliot & John Chapman. With Chapman's Diaries* (2nd edn, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1969), 155.

102. [Anon.], 'Martineau and Atkinson on Man's Nature and Development', *Westminster Review*, 55/1 (Apr. 1851), 83, 92.

103. [J.A. Froude], 'Materialism.—Miss Martineau and Mr. Atkinson', *Fraser's Magazine*, 43/256 (Apr. 1851), 433.

104. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 579.

105. *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, Vol. I, ed. C.Y. Lang (Charlottesville, VA, and London: The University of Virginia Press), 295.

106. G.J. Holyoake, *Bygones Worth Remembering*, Vol. I (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1905), 181.

107. E.g., S. Hoecker-Drysdale, *Harriet Martineau: First Woman Sociologist* (Oxford and New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1992), 89.

contemporaries and early biographers of the Revd Martineau recognised.¹⁰⁸ At first glance the review reads as a scathing rebuke guided by an acerbic wit. The book was nothing more than ‘a set of loose and shapeless assertions, serving perhaps to mark but not to protect the territory they open as an asylum for all the black sheep of unbelief’, the Revd Martineau expostulated.¹⁰⁹ The Revd Martineau’s *ad hominem* attacks against Atkinson and his character, qualifications (or lack thereof) as a philosopher, and poor grammar, syntax and use of punctuation, added to the review’s contemptuous tone. The philosophical questions his sister and Atkinson grappled with were left ‘in the most hopeless confusion’, the Revd Martineau declared. The fact that ‘they consider the doctrines of Atheism and annihilation legitimate conclusions’ from the ‘data’ of phrenology and mesmerism showed that what they had merely done was to ‘reproduce a phenomenon as old as human error and incompetence.’ Not mincing his words, he added that ‘[i]n their rapid and erratic course [they] habitually shoot the barriers between the common and the enchanted world, and show no passports’.¹¹⁰ It is little wonder, then, that many readers found the review unforgiving and a methodical exercise in intellectual and reputational demolition. Yet others, including some freethinkers such as F.W. Newman, acknowledged the review’s moral necessity. ‘You have performed a painful but wholesome duty’, Newman wrote to the Revd Martineau shortly after its publication.¹¹¹ Newman’s comment provides a point of entry into his correspondent’s emotional state since, as Newman recognised, the Revd Martineau’s ‘duty’ of writing this review must have involved a lot of ‘pain’. This emotion is easy to overlook amidst the review’s barrage of critical declamations and sustained onslaught against the book. The review’s prime target was Atkinson, whom the Revd Martineau considered responsible for deluding his sister with his phreno-mesmerist ideas. Yet at one point in the review, he takes leave of ‘this hierophant of the new Atheism’, and briefly casts a mournful gaze at his sister:

With grief we must say that we remember nothing in literary history more melancholy than that Harriet Martineau should be prostrated at the feet of such a master; should lay down at his bidding her early faith in moral obligation, in the living God, in the immortal sanctities [...].¹¹²

The Revd Martineau never overcame this feeling of grief. But what made a deeper incision into his heart was the permanent rupture in their relationship after she decided ‘to disown him’.¹¹³ Years later he tried to defend himself by setting the record straight in his Biographical Memoranda. Here he wistfully reminisced over the ‘close affection which had united [them] as sister and brother for so many years’, and how ‘sympathy in religious sentiment had always borne a large part’ in it.¹¹⁴ He also recalled that after Harriet had transformed herself into a public intellectual and Lord Brougham entreated her to help him with his reconstruction of natural theology, she asked James to take up the cause of fighting atheism (as Brougham wanted her to do) whilst she fought the Poor Laws, thus laying ‘side by side’ in their noble crusades ‘as [they] [had] ever been.’¹¹⁵ But this never

108. [Anon.], ‘Harriet Martineau’, *Church Quarterly Review*, IV, (1877), 458–59; J. Drummond and C.B. Upton, *The Life and Letters of James Martineau*, Vol. I (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1902), 222–29; J.E. Carpenter, *James Martineau, Theologian and Teacher: A Study of his Life and Thought* (London: Philip Green, 1905), 347, n. 1; A.W. Jackson, *James Martineau, a Biography and Study* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1900), 86–87.

109. [James Martineau], ‘Mesmeric Atheism’, *Prospective Review*, 26 (Apr. 1851), 226.

110. *Ibid.*, 225–35.

111. Oxford, Harris Manchester College Library Archives, MS J. Martineau 4: Newman to Martineau (May 1851), fo 73^r.

112. [Martineau], ‘Mesmeric Atheism’, 234.

113. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 203.

114. Oxford, Harris Manchester College Library Archives, MS J. Martineau 13: Biographical Memoranda, 38.

115. *Ibid.*, 38–39.

came to be, as circumstances brought James ‘not side by side with her, but face to face with a book that [bore] her name’. The *Letters* was ‘not atheistic’, he conceded, pondering whether this belated clarification would ‘mend the case’, though deep down he knew this to be mere wishful thinking. Interestingly, he also reflected on the emotional impact the book had on him: ‘How then did this book really affect me?’ The answer was that ‘[i]t simply mingled an element of sorrow with [his] affection’ for his sister, though he also expressed his feeling of mortification at her for submitting her superior intellect to ‘the most incompetent arguments’ of an intellectually ‘inferior mind’.¹¹⁶ For 3 years, James remained oblivious as to the impact of the review on his sister and ‘the breach it had occasioned’, only becoming aware of it when his wife wrote to Harriet proposing a visit at the Knoll, her house in Ambleside. It was at this point that James ‘found that [his] sister’s house and heart were closed against [him].’¹¹⁷ He was adamant that the ‘estrangement produced’ was all on Harriet’s side: ‘My affection for my sister Harriet survived all reproaches and mistakes; and, if she had permitted, would at any moment have taken me to her side for unconditional return to the old relation.’¹¹⁸ The hatchet was never buried, at least until Harriet’s death in 1876 and her funeral which James attended as ‘chief mourner’.¹¹⁹ Less than a decade later, he penned a letter to the editor of the *Daily News* seeking again to defend himself against charges of having acted callously towards his sister. He could not understand why ‘the old relation of affectionate appreciation’ between him and her ‘should be less maintainable than between the two brothers Newman [Francis William and John Henry]’, after the former became a theist and the latter converted to Roman Catholicism.¹²⁰ But he also revealed that the sorrow he felt as a result of his sister’s estrangement continued to darken his soul: ‘I never reciprocated the alienation from which I suffered, and should have escaped a real sorrow, had the efforts to remove it been successful.’¹²¹

Perhaps a more distressing episode for Harriet Martineau was when she learned the real views of her dear friend Charlotte Brontë about the *Letters*. The two women first met in 1849 in London, where Martineau discovered the true identity of ‘Curren Bell’ when Brontë decided to ‘lift’ the veil of her pseudonymity in front of her.¹²² Thereafter they developed a close friendship, with Brontë staying at Martineau’s house in Ambleside in 1850 and becoming deeply impressed by ‘the unceasing activity of her colossal intellect’.¹²³ It was during that visit that Martineau read to her parts of the *Letters* from its proof sheets, with Brontë voicing her concern that the book would lead to “a popular outcry” and cause trouble to Martineau—though she later recanted these opinions upon reading the book in its entirety.¹²⁴ Martineau appreciated Brontë’s ‘justice and candour’, even if she knew that the views presented in the *Letters* were to Brontë—the daughter of an Anglican minister—“vinegar mingled with gall”.¹²⁵ Martineau reassured Brontë that she was ‘not an atheist according to the settled meaning of the term’, unable as she was to ‘conceive the absence of a First Cause’.¹²⁶ In reality, Brontë was horrified by the book. As

116. Ibid, 39.

117. Ibid, 40.

118. Ibid, 41–43.

119. ‘Funeral of Harriet Martineau’, *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, L1L/6129 (3 July 1876), 8.

120. James Martineau, ‘The Early Days of Harriet Martineau. To the Editor of the Daily News’, *Daily News*, 12080 (30 Dec. 1884), 3.

121. Ibid.

122. See Martineau, *Autobiography*, 553–55.

123. Charlotte Brontë, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*, vol. II, ed. M. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 538.

124. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 572.

125. Ibid.

her biographer Elizabeth Gaskell noted in 1857, Brontë was ‘disturbed and distressed’ by the publication of the *Letters*,¹²⁷ and in a letter to James Taylor not long after her stay at the Knoll she divulged her true feelings:

[The book] is the first exposition of avowed Atheism and Materialism I have ever read; the first unequivocal declaration of disbelief in the existence of a God or a Future Life—I have ever seen. In judging of such exposition and declaration—one would wish entirely to put aside the sort of instinctive horror they awaken and to consider them in an impartial spirit and collected mood. This I find it difficult to do. The strangest thing is that we are called on to rejoice over this hopeless blank—to receive this bitter bereavement as great gain—to welcome this unutterable desolation as a state of pleasant freedom. Who *could* do this if he would? Who *would* do it if he could?¹²⁸

Yet Brontë did not break with Martineau over the *Letters*. Two years later, she would become embittered at Martineau’s review of her novel *Villette* in the *Daily News*.¹²⁹ On 31 March 1855 Brontë suddenly died, and Martineau sang the encomium of her dear friend in a biographical sketch in the same newspaper.¹³⁰ When Gaskell’s biography appeared in 1857, things took a dramatic turn. Charlotte’s father, the Revd Patrick Brontë, charged Martineau ‘with an atheistic profession’; this angered her and led her to describe him to a correspondent as ‘shockingly heartless’.¹³¹ But what filled her with ‘sorrow’ was discovering Charlotte’s ‘double-dealing’ and untruthfulness.¹³² She later wrote to Gaskell to add a clarification in her biography of Brontë against the latter’s claim that ‘hundreds have forsaken [Martineau]’: ‘There is the unaccountable delusion’, Martineau retorted, ‘that I was ‘deserted’ on account of the Atkinson Letters ... Facts are best; so I will only say that I am not aware of having lost any friends whatever by that book, while I have gained a new world of sympathy.’¹³³

Martineau was overstating the case. Nonetheless, she was resolute that she could not ‘sympathize much in the pain of some “friends”, (not *very* near, —& not [her] own family)’ as a result of her ‘heresy’.¹³⁴ But she was very much concerned about the emotional state of some of her most intimate friends. Besides Brontë there was Elizabeth Jesser Reid, to whom Martineau wrote in the spring of 1851 to express her ‘tender concern for the pain, —the needless pain, —[she was] nourishing in [her]self.’¹³⁵ Martineau had earlier ‘dreaded’ the effects of *Eastern Life* on Reid and another friend, but they both received it ‘better than [she] expected’.¹³⁶ Things were different now. For a moment Martineau relaxed her semblance of solid defiance, and in a compassionate manner confessed to Reid: ‘you don’t know how it grieves me to see you suffer so much from a vague terror which I think you might as well be spared.’ Martineau pleaded with Reid to ‘change this affectionate agony of [her] friendship into a good cheer’, and to consider the pain Martineau herself would have suffered if she decided instead to suppress her conscience, and upon discovering ‘a spring in the desert’ to ‘hide it from the suffering multitude’.¹³⁷

127. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1860), 360. See also, L. Penner, ‘Not yet settled’: Charlotte Brontë’s Anti-Materialism’, *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 4/1 (2008), <https://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue41/penner.html#:~:text=She%20concludes%20that%20%20Plain%5Bly,her%20delusive%20imagination%20to%20wander.>

128. Brontë, *Letters*, 574 (Brontë’s emphasis).

129. [Harriet Martineau], ‘Literature’, *Daily News*, 2092 (3 Feb. 1853), 2.

130. [Harriet Martineau], ‘Death of Currer Bell’, *Daily News*, 2771 (6 Apr. 1855), 5.

131. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 4, 48–52.

132. *Ibid.*, 56.

133. Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 412.

134. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 189.

135. *Ibid.*, 192.

136. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 573.

137. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 193–94.

However grief-stricken some of her closest friends became due to her loss of faith, and however much distress this caused in Martineau, she felt she had a responsibility to make her ‘discoveries’ widely known in order to help her fellow human beings whose lives, as she thought, were being dictated by ‘mythologies’. This was not only an intellectual, but also a moral duty.

Positivist Tears: The Comtean Moment

Whilst dealing with the fallout from the publication of the *Letters*, Martineau embarked on a new project: that of translating Auguste Comte’s *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1830–42). The final product was a two-volume abridged English translation published in 1853 by John Chapman under the title *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (hereafter ‘*Positive Philosophy*’). Comte found it so impressive that he expressed a preference for it over his own version, eventually retranslating it into French before adding it to the Positivist Library.¹³⁸ In the face of some unfavourable reviews, Martineau wrote to Comte to reassure him that his ‘true disciples’ were not insolent *litterateurs*, but ordinary people.¹³⁹ The process of rendering Comte’s work into English was an intellectually demanding task. It was also one which, as this section reveals, involved a heightened emotional intensity. Her positivist creed would complete her deconversion.¹⁴⁰ It would also provide her with a sense of inner calmness and relief in the expectation of death.

The preface to the *Positive Philosophy* and the sections in Martineau’s autobiography describing the process of translation are infused with a sort of ‘religious enthusiasm’, as Lesa Scholl has recognised, with Martineau simultaneously declaring her apostleship of Comte and asserting her intellectual achievement in making this new ‘holy scripture’ available in English.¹⁴¹ Her ‘strongest inducement’ for undertaking this task was her conviction of the need of Comte’s book in her own country in an accessible form. Related to this was the fact that in an age of doubt people were becoming ‘adrift for want of an anchorage for their convictions’. Comte’s work offered exactly that: a new moral and intellectual paradigm; a firm ground of conviction.¹⁴² The Comtean tripartite model of human progress (from the ‘Theological, or fictitious’ stage; to the ‘Metaphysical, or abstract’ stage; to the ‘Scientific, or positive’ stage) provided a clear case: that ‘[t]he law of progress is conspicuously at work throughout human history’ and that ‘[t]he only field of progress is now that of Positive Philosophy’.¹⁴³ Martineau anticipated that since Comte treated theology and metaphysics as transient stages, ‘theologians and metaphysicians must necessarily abhor, dread, and despise his work.’¹⁴⁴ But their grumblings mattered little in the face of the vastness of knowledge and intellectual stimulus offered by the book, in which a new and better understanding of man’s place in the universe was made possible: ‘[w]e find ourselves’, Martineau announced to readers, ‘suddenly living and moving in the midst of the universe, —as a part of it, and not as its aim and object.’¹⁴⁵ In her autobiography Martineau sought

138. T.R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66.

139. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 317.

140. On Martineau’s positivism, see S. Hoecker-Drysdale, ‘Harriet Martineau and the Positivism of Auguste Comte’, in M.R. Hill and S. Hoecker-Drysdale, *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives* (New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 2001), 169–89.

141. L. Scholl, ‘Provocative Agendas: Martineau’s Translation of Comte’, in E. Dzelzainis and C. Kaplan (eds), *Harriet Martineau: Authorship, Society and Empire* (Manchester and New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2010), 91.

142. Harriet Martineau, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, Vol. I (London: John Chapman, 1853), vii–viii.

143. *Ibid.*, xv, [1]–2.

144. *Ibid.*, xiii.

145. *Ibid.*, xiv.

to convey to readers the raw emotions she had felt as she translated Comte. For this reason, she looked into her diary where she found ‘some very strong expressions of rapture about [her] task’.¹⁴⁶ Her descriptions thus given are highly emotive:

I became ‘strengthened, stablished, settled’ on many a great point; I learned much that I should never otherwise have known, and revived a great deal of early knowledge which I might never otherwise have recalled: and the subdued enthusiasm of my author, his philosophical sensibility, and honest earnestness, and evident enjoyment of his own wide range of views and deep human sympathy, kept the mind of his pupil in a perpetual and delightful glow.¹⁴⁷

Martineau’s account of the joint processes of translation and subscription to Comtean positivism reflects evangelical autobiographies, the centrepiece of which is the transformative experience of individuals as they go through personal ‘conversionism’.¹⁴⁸ The phrase that Martineau uses—‘strengthened, stablished, settled’—paraphrases 1 Peter 5:10.¹⁴⁹ Her selective appropriation of this biblical text might, at first seem, peculiar. But many Victorian freethinking women continued to operate within the sphere and culture of Christianity long after embracing secular forms of belief.¹⁵⁰ Martineau was no exception. Her employment of this phrase in describing her conversion to positivism whilst translating her master’s work added a ‘religious’ element to the whole episode.¹⁵¹ Besides experiencing a ‘glowing’ of the mind, she was also moved to tears:

Many a passage of my version did I write with tears falling into my lap; and many a time did I feel almost stifled for want of a presence of some genial disciple of my instructor, to whom I might speak of his achievement, with some chance of being understood.¹⁵²

In this highly sentimentalised moment, Martineau weeps tears of joy not only at her new-found creed which seemed to confirm her earlier scientific naturalism, but also at her own remarkable intellectual ‘achievement’ of translating the work of a prophet of the new age.¹⁵³ As Dixon has noted, weeping is a ‘bodily reflex, an excretion—even a sort of waste disposal’, but tears also carry a more ‘exalted’ meaning: they ‘are alone among bodily fluids in being objects of admiration, considered not only immaculate but deeply meaningful, even as vehicles of the divine’.¹⁵⁴ A lachrymose Martineau thus acquires an aura of ‘religious’ zeal as she becomes confirmed in her apostleship of Comtean positivism.

Years after the publication of *Positive Philosophy*, Martineau would continue to receive letters from friends about her views. She accordingly decided to write a long letter as a reply to all of them. Here, Martineau made an impassioned case concerning the emotional state of positivists which Christians habitually misinterpreted through their incessant pity and compassion. Martineau began by historicising the emotional responses of ‘outsiders’ towards reformers and progressives: ‘Like the apostles, and the Lutheran reformers, and many more, the positive philosophers are called atheists, and for the same reason,—because they are disbelievers in

146. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 600.

147. *Ibid.*

148. On ‘conversionism’ being one of the four ‘special marks’ of evangelicalism, see D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–3.

149. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 600, n. 1.

150. L. Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women’s Emancipation, England 1830–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 15.

151. As J.D. Barbour has noted, ‘[i]n their use of scriptural language, depiction of a central crisis scene, account of emotional upheaval, and overall narrative structure, many stories of the loss of faith mimic the classical Christian testimony of conversion’: *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville, VA, and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 4.

152. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 600.

153. A few years later Martineau would express her disappointment at Comte for introducing his secular ‘Religion of Humanity’, and would refuse to adopt the Comtean language of ‘altruism’: T. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59–60.

154. Dixon, *Weeping Britannia*, 8.

popular theology. For the same reason they are insolently compassionated and insultingly grieved over.¹⁵⁵ Speaking on behalf of all positivists, Martineau averred that Christians now ‘insolently pity us for what *they* consider loss, without asking themselves whether they are qualified to estimate our gain.’¹⁵⁶ It was unbecoming for Christians to feel pity towards positivists since the latter ‘are healthier in mind, higher in views and conduct, and happier in life and the prospect of death’. ‘We know our own *feelings*’, Martineau protested, ‘and the wonder to us is that inexperienced persons should pronounce upon them.’¹⁵⁷ Her message was clear: let positivists feel the joy afforded to them by their new revitalising secular creed, and stop distorting their emotional states through the lens of pity and compassion.

Positive philosophy also gave Martineau a sense of inner calmness and relief as she faced death. ‘Agnostics could feel especially alone when confronting death’, according to Pat Jalland, ‘since the Victorian ritual of the deathbed and the funeral, as well as the language of consolation, were heavily dependent on Christian beliefs. Agnostics lacked the church and community support which sustained Victorian Christians, and the system of beliefs and rituals which helped to deal with the process of grieving.’¹⁵⁸ Unlike other agnostics in the mid-nineteenth century who struggled to find ‘alternative strategies for dealing with grief’, Martineau leaned on positive philosophy which allowed her ‘to face death easily and naturally’.¹⁵⁹ Though her actual death would not come until 1876, between 1854 and 1855 Martineau expected to die due to a diagnosis of a disease of her heart. Because she felt death could come at any moment, she began setting her affairs in order by writing her autobiography and identifying an appropriate burial place. A visitor at her house in 1855 was perhaps not exaggerating when reporting in private that ‘all England and France are agitated by what I will call the death-bed question.—Her death-bed seems to have set them all on the *qui vive*.’¹⁶⁰ Not unlike James Boswell who in 1776 had expressed a ‘strong curiosity’ to see if Hume ‘persisted in disbelieving a future state even when he had death before his eyes’, people now seemed to be on the lookout to see if the famed authoress would renounce her ‘infidel’ views as she departed life.¹⁶¹ Around this time Martineau reported that she was inundated with religious books and tracts from friends and anonymous correspondents, but deeming all of these publications to be of poor quality, she threw them into the fire.¹⁶² She would not allow anyone to make a ‘death-bed’ convert out of her. On the contrary, she welcomed death with peace, free from agitation and pain. She had no time for ‘the dismal anxiety, (now considered so holy) “what is to become of *me*?”’¹⁶³ The feelings she records in her autobiography as she stands on the brink of the grave are illuminating:

I find death in prospect the simplest thing in the world, —a thing not to be feared or regretted, or to get excited about in any way [...] to me there is no sacrifice, no sense of loss, nothing to fear, nothing to regret. Under the eternal laws of the universe, I came into being, and, under them, I have lived a life so full that its fulness is equivalent to length.¹⁶⁴

This attitude to death differed considerably from that of Christians who were plagued by ‘selfish and perturbing emotions connected with an expectation of rewards and punishments in

155. Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography. With Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman, Vol. III* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1877), 325–26.

156. *Ibid.*, 326.

157. *Ibid.*, 328 (emphasis added).

158. P. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 340.

159. *Ibid.*, 339, 341.

160. Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography. With Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman*, 277.

161. James Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes 1776–1778*, ed. C. McC. Wies and F.A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 11.

162. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 636.

163. Martineau, *Collected Letters, Vol. 3*, 349.

164. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 631–32.

the next world.’ There was no ‘evidence of a renewed life for human beings’; Martineau was certain of this.¹⁶⁵ Here was an unbeliever confronting mortality, who resolutely stepped out of the culturally conditioned domain of emotional attitudes to death and immortality primarily informed by Christian imperatives and beliefs. But Martineau did have one ‘feeling of concern’ which stemmed ‘from seeing how much moral injury and suffering is created by the superstitions of the Christian mythology’. Yet this mythology was bound to be extinguished, as Comte taught her and as she made sure to let Victorian society know.¹⁶⁶ ‘About this matter, of the extinction of theology by a true science of human nature, I cannot but say that my expectation amounts to absolute assurance’.¹⁶⁷ This assurance was what gave her strength in surrendering herself with profound serenity and reverential submission to the forces of the laws of the universe. The world might have been ‘growing somewhat dim before my eyes’, she wrote in the concluding lines of her autobiography, but the future world ‘looks brighter every day.’¹⁶⁸

Conclusion

Scholarly accounts on the ‘Victorian crisis of faith’ have been written by privileging the role of ideas and without delving deeper into the historical record to reveal the emotional contours of contemporaries’ loss of faith. This article has followed a different approach. Using the lens of the history of emotions and taking as its case study Harriet Martineau, it has retold her story of deconversion from Unitarianism to agnosticism by illuminating its overlooked emotional dimensions. It has demonstrated that her deconversion followed an emotional trajectory, albeit one which was not only defined by positive feelings about her new secular and scientific philosophy. Contrary to what scholars have assumed, Martineau’s emotions were more complex, and included her sadness and fears at the early stages of her deconversion; her grief, sorrow, pain, anxieties and even indignation over the reactions of her closest friends; and her happiness and joy for finally emerging from the dark Platonic cave of superstition into the revitalising air of a disenchanted nature. The article has simultaneously contextualised Martineau’s emotions by examining emotional responses of her friends, family and others who encountered, one way or another, her unbelief. The final product is an inner and more intimate history, one of pulsations, feelings and passions.¹⁶⁹ It is also one in which human agency and identity take centre stage. This is a story which has opened a new window into the past, allowing us to gain fresh perspectives into the Victorian age of doubt, as well as a more meaningful understanding of how individuals themselves experienced their loss of faith and how their experiences and actions affected those around them. Martineau’s unbelief would continue to grow in the years after the publication of her ‘infidel’ and secularising works. In early 1859, she wrote to George J. Holyoake to share her views on Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. ‘What a work it is!’, she exclaimed, ‘overthrowing (if true) revealed religion on the one hand, & Natural (as far as Final Causes & Design are concerned) on the other. The range & mass of knowledge take away one’s breath.’¹⁷⁰ A new phase in the Victorian age of doubt was about to begin.¹⁷¹ Martineau welcomed it with triumphant exultations.

165. Ibid, 631, 633.

166. Ibid, 636. The results of the Religious Census of 1851 seemed to Martineau to prove that ‘the power and authority of religion [...] must decline, necessarily, speedily, and irrevocably’: [Harriet Martineau], ‘Results of the Census of 1851’, *Westminster Review*, 61/120 (Apr. 1854), 354–6. In a subsequent article, she would again assert ‘that church influence has declined’: [Harriet Martineau], ‘The Crystal Palace’, *Westminster Review*, 62/122 (Oct. 1854), 535.

167. Martineau, *Autobiography*, 647.

168. Ibid.

169. ‘The beat of history is kept by the pulse of the human heart’: Dixon, *History of Emotions*, 1.

170. Martineau, *Collected Letters*, Vol. IV, 208–09.

171. The best recent book on the reception of Darwinian evolutionary thought is M. Hewitt, *Darwinism’s Generations: The Reception of Darwinian Evolution in Britain, 1859–1909* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

Conflict of Interest Statement

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.