

A People of One Book: the Bible and the Victorians

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Author:

Timothy Larsen

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Daniel Ritchie

Timothy Larsen's purpose in writing *A People of One Book* is to demonstrate the extent to which the Bible dominated Victorian thought and culture. He claims that this has yet to be fully grasped, and endeavours to prove his thesis by offering a detailed examination of how Scripture was central to the experience of divergent groupings in Victorian England. In order to achieve this objective, Professor Larsen has adopted a case studies approach to the subject, examining the lives and intellectual histories of representative figures from different religious and irreligious traditions. Throughout his book the author seeks to undermine the simplistic assumption that what the Victorians wrote about the Bible represented the most uninteresting aspects of their works. Hence the perceived failure of modern scholars to adequately evaluate the Victorian devotion to Scripture is a recurring theme in this volume. Even in an age as secularised as our own, the issue of Biblicism or ostensible veneration for Scripture should not be viewed as superfluous. After all, can one be expected to fully understand modern American politics if devotion to Biblicism is not taken into account? Moreover, some of the people analysed in this study still retain considerable influence today. In 2009 it was found that there were more writings in print by Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a Calvinistic Baptist pastor, than by any other living or dead English-speaking author (p. 274). Thus to assume that the thesis of this book is unimportant is, to say the least, naïve. It is important, however, to keep in mind that Victorian Biblicism was not limited to evangelicals or orthodox Protestants. On the contrary, one of Professor Larsen's central concerns is to demonstrate that Biblicism was germane to other forms of belief that were prevalent in Victorian England. Indeed, it is even argued that comprehending such Biblicism is requisite to understanding religious scepticism. For instance, despite being an agnostic, T. H. Huxley regarded the Bible as an admirable book and insisted that Scripture reading be required in state schools. Even in the case of those Victorians who were openly antagonistic to the Bible, Scripture was still important to their lives. Secularists and atheists often regarded Scripture as being of chief importance in terms of their own loss of faith. Thus it

appears logical for the author to conclude that ‘even a desire to write a hostile or iconoclastic work on the Bible is itself a tribute to the centrality of “the book” for the Victorians’ (p. 297).

Although the author admits that selecting a particular individual as being representative of a wider group is both problematic and contestable, he nevertheless does attempt to provide adequate justification for focusing on the person selected in each case. Furthermore, it is also significant that Professor Larsen undertakes to avoid an over-reliance upon men, arguing that traditional religious history has been at fault here for having an inordinate preoccupation with one gender. In an attempt to substantiate his thesis, Professor Larsen considers the usage of the Bible among Anglo-Catholics, Roman Catholics, atheists, Methodist and Holiness groups, Liberal Anglicans, Unitarians, Quakers, agnostics, evangelical Anglicans, and orthodox Dissenters. However, it is perhaps to be regretted that other groups, such as Jews and the Plymouth Brethren, have been left out. This has been justified on the basis that Professor Larsen’s desire to write a two-volume work on the subject was rejected by the publisher as ‘a commercial non-starter’ (p. 277). However, it should be kept in mind that these groupings are briefly discussed in the conclusion.

In the case of the Anglo-Catholics or Tractarians who comprised the Oxford Movement, it makes perfect sense that E. B. Pusey be chosen as the figure to represent that group. After all, this group was often referred to as the Puseyites, and other figures, such as John Keble, were happy to apply that epithet to themselves. Due to various misconceptions that have arisen concerning the Oxford Movement in general, and Pusey in particular, this chapter is especially valuable for its attempt ‘to recover a picture of the Tractarian leader as a Bible man who lived an exegetical life’ (p. 41). Of course, this should not really be surprising as Pusey was Regius professor of Hebrew at Oxford.⁽¹⁾ Nevertheless, the author is at pains to point out that Pusey did not, as he was sometimes misrepresented as doing by his detractors, reject the authority of the Bible. Instead, Pusey differed from evangelicals in believing that the authoritative interpretation of Scripture should be guided by the collective consensus of the patristic fathers. This did not, however, imply that he regarded contemporary Bible study as unimportant. Quite the opposite is true, as the author highlights Pusey’s remarkable commitment to Biblical scholarship and devotional Scripture reading. Indeed, few realise that his Biblical commentaries were actually Pusey’s life’s work. Professor Larsen also helpfully corrects the straw-man assumption that Tractarians were so preoccupied with the sacraments that they were not interested in Biblical preaching.⁽²⁾ An appreciation of Pusey’s exegetical labours, which included regularly preaching expository sermons for an hour-and-a-half on a Sunday morning, fundamentally undermines such ill-informed suppositions. Indeed, Pusey is a figure which even conservative evangelicals should be interested in understanding due to his opposition to the attacks on Scripture emanating from 19th-century German Liberalism. For this illuminating discussion of a much maligned and misunderstood figure, Professor Larsen deserves the highest praise.

The chapter on Roman Catholics is similar to the preceding one on Pusey in that the author attempts to portray the chosen figure Nicholas Wiseman, the first Archbishop of Westminster, as ‘a Bible man through and through’ (p. 65). No doubt this will appear strange to some readers, as Wiseman is remembered primarily for his role in the infamous Papal Aggression of 1850 when Pope Pius IX restored a regular ecclesiastical hierarchy in England.⁽³⁾ Protestants feared that the result of such aggression would be the denigration of the place of the Bible in English life, yet Wiseman was both a Biblical scholar and exegetical preacher. He was so keen to convince English Protestants that Roman Catholics had a sound view of Scripture that he deployed arguments that unsettled some of his co-religionists. For example, in relation to Wiseman’s defence of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Professor Larsen highlights the fact that he adopted the historio-grammatical approach to Biblical hermeneutics, something that is normally associated with Protestant exegesis. He also called for a new Roman Catholic translation of the English Bible, not from the Latin Vulgate, but from the original Hebrew and Greek. It could even be argued that Wiseman’s doctrine of Scripture outstrips that of some late 19th-century and many modern evangelicals, as he affirmed a belief in Biblical inerrancy. Such was the extent of Wiseman’s conservatism on the doctrine of Scripture that he even defended the originality of 1 John 5:7 as found in the Authorised Version, a position which is adopted by very few conservative Protestants today. Indeed, far from seeking to undermine Biblical authority, Professor Larsen claims that Wiseman believed the perceived subjectivism of Protestant

approaches to Scripture, relying on the interpretation of the individual rather than that of the infallible church, had actually led to German Liberalism and contempt for the Bible among British secularists. In the opinion of the present reviewer, these sections on Pusey and Wiseman are so important, in terms of correcting popular misconceptions, that they are easily the most significant chapters in the book.

The chapter on atheists, which focuses on Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, is important for demonstrating how those in the Victorian era who embraced an explicitly anti-Biblical worldview still tended to reveal a Biblicist influence in their life and writings. Professor Larsen suggests that Bradlaugh (implicitly) had a high view of the importance of Scripture, since he believed that the exposure of the slightest discrepancy in the Bible was enough to demolish the Christian religion. Such an assumption seems to demonstrate how important the Bible was to both the Christian churches and broader culture in Victorian England. However, Professor Larsen points out a glaring inconsistency in Bradlaugh's 1870 work, *The Bible: What It Is*, when he flags up Bradlaugh's dismissal of the historicity of Scripture. On the one hand, Bradlaugh argued that the Bible is not historically reliable; yet, on the other hand, he assumed that Scripture was historically accurate when it contained accounts of certain actions that he regarded as morally suspect. Bradlaugh also held a remarkably conservative opinion in thinking that the epistle to the Hebrews was written by the apostle Paul, a view which many evangelicals strenuously reject.⁽⁴⁾ However, both Besant and Bradlaugh probably had more in common with their evangelical contemporaries than they imagined when they recoiled from its sexual frankness. Although no evangelical would have concurred with Besant's opinion that the Bible was 'a dangerous and despicable book' (p. 79), nevertheless, Professor Larsen uncovers a number of cases where evangelicals shared concerns about the public reading of certain Biblical narratives. For instance, the Quaker Elizabeth Fry recommended that the account of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 should not be read aloud. This and the observation that 'Spurgeon had the sense not to defy Victorian propriety by expounding on the more unseemly scriptural narratives' (p. 260) raises interesting questions concerning the extent to which Victorian culture was governed by the Bible, or to what degree Victorian culture shaped the way Christians viewed Scripture. Despite the reasonableness of viewing them as a people of one book, this nervousness demonstrates that religious thought in Victorian England was shaped by factors other than Biblical morality or devotion to Scripture as literature.

In terms of the remaining chapters, a number of significant themes emerge. The first is an exposure of the erroneous notion that Biblicism should be equated with theological orthodoxy. By carefully distinguishing between radical and conservative Unitarians, Professor Larsen's research reveals that English Unitarians were largely Biblicist prior to the 1880s, despite their theological heterodoxy. Notwithstanding Mary Carpenter's outbursts against evangelicals, the Bible was central to her life and was considered the standard by which all doctrinal opinions should be judged. In similar vein, the author rejects the idea that Broad Church or Liberal Anglicans were not interested in Scripture. Evidence of this can be seen in Florence Nightingale's slavish devotion to Bible reading and distribution – even though she rejected the idea that Scripture was supernatural revelation. Another interesting point is the relationship between Biblicism and creeds. For Unitarians such as Lant Carpenter the Bible was to be read without the influence of the church's creeds, and dogmas such as the Trinity were to be rejected as unbiblical. Although there were vast theological differences between Carpenter and Spurgeon, the latter gave expression to similar hyper-biblicist sentiments. For example, his assertion that he could respect and have fellowship with anyone who agreed with him on Biblical authority, even if they differed over the doctrines taught in it, is very similar to the views of some heterodox non-subscribers in the 19th century.⁽⁵⁾ However, it must be remembered that non-subscription was a position advocated by many orthodox Dissenters since the 18th century, so Spurgeon's views were not overly peculiar.⁽⁶⁾ Another important point which the author emphasises is that a defence of the practice of female preaching was not inextricably linked to a rejection of Biblical authority.⁽⁷⁾ Both Catherine Booth and Elizabeth Fry defended the practice on Biblicist grounds. Moreover, the Anglican Josephine Butler, another proponent of women's preaching, was a zealous opponent of theological modernism, and is quoted as accusing German higher critics of tearing the Bible 'to pieces like dogs' (p. 245). Thus it is a mistake to assume that defenders of female preaching always adopted Liberal views of Biblical authority. Even a rejection of the doctrine of eternal punishment was not necessarily a sign of anti-Biblicism, as Butler also rejected this dogma while remaining staunchly Biblicist to the end of her life.

Although it is currently a hotly debated topic among evangelicals (8), it should be recognised that in the 19th century at least some evangelicals questioned the doctrine.(9)

The critiques of the works of other scholars in this book are generally necessary and constructive in nature. Jo Manton's apparent failure to analyse Mary Carpenter's *Morning and Evening Meditations* is highlighted as a telling example of how the religious thought of such individuals has been widely ignored. Professor Larsen also helpfully debunks the myth that John Henry Newman referred to Josephine Butler as one who 'reads Scripture like a child and interprets it like an angel' (p. 240). This comment was not made by Cardinal Newman, but by his brother Francis. However, the most important corrective which Professor Larsen offers is to the notion that Spurgeon was an obscurantist 'young fogey' due to his rejection of higher criticism (p. 271). P. S. Kruppa's claim that Spurgeon was almost entirely negative towards contemporary Biblical commentaries is refuted by the author's having consulted his *Commenting and Commentaries*, where Spurgeon commends exegetical works by figures who did not share his own theological outlook. These included divines such as Pusey, B. F. Westcott, J. B. Lightfoot, and even the German higher critic Heinrich Ewald.(10) There are, however, a few places where the author's criticisms of others border on being ultra-critical. For example, on page 241 he criticises another scholar simply for misspelling the word Shunem.

Despite recognising the need for this study, the reviewer has a number of concerns regarding the book. The decision to adopt a case studies approach leads to the volume, at times, having a less than holistic feel about it. Though this is not an entirely bad thing, perhaps adopting a thematic approach would have been better. A greater problem, however, is that of whether or not the individuals chosen are really representative of their respective religious communities. In the case of Pusey and Tractarianism and Spurgeon and orthodox Dissent, the author's selection appears to be cogent.(11) Nonetheless, it must be asked whether or not Florence Nightingale is really representative of Liberal Anglican opinion, especially as her rejection of traditional Christian doctrines was apparently extreme in comparison with other Broad Church Anglicans. The decision to use Josephine Butler as the figure to represent evangelical Anglicanism appears strange, especially as she neither identified herself as an Anglican or an evangelical (though she belonged to the Church of England and embraced vital religion). Also, Elizabeth Fry is deemed to be an evangelical even though she likewise avoided employing the term as a self-descriptor. Such examples serve to partially substantiate D. G. Hart's contention that 'the evangelical movement ... is so oppressive that it can claim even those who do not want to belong to it'.(12) The author also appears to be unduly surprised by some of his findings. There is nothing particularly astonishing about Mary Carpenter having a friendship with the American abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison. Although it is true that Garrison was not regarded by many as theologically sound, nevertheless, he was held in high esteem by some theological conservatives. An American Covenanter minister, the Revd J. R. W. Sloane, argued that Garrison was 'moral, upright [...] and possessed of a character without reproach' and who read the Scriptures at his antislavery meetings 'from the depths of his soul, with a power I have yet to hear equalled'.(13) Moreover, the Revd Isaac Nelson, an orthodox Belfast Presbyterian abolitionist, said that 'I believe Garrison to be one of the most heroic, self-denying men whom I have ever read; a lover of Jesus Christ, of prayer, and of all good men'.(14) If these figures could respect Garrison for his antislavery sentiments, it is not at all surprising that a Unitarian refused to disown him. The references to Pusey's reliance upon Bernard of Clairvaux are not overly remarkable, as even John Calvin was a great admirer of the medieval divine.(15) Nonetheless, Pusey's omission of Calvin and Martin Luther from among those whom he considered to be the 'more thoughtful writers of all times' (p. 13) tells us a lot about the Oxford Movement. Despite these minor reservations, Timothy Larsen's work significantly illuminates the subject of Victorian interaction with Scripture and is a very good resource. Having been based on a large amount of primary research, from both manuscript and printed sources, it should be useful to all scholars interested in pursuing further enquiries into the individuals analysed.

Notes

1. P. G. Cobb, 'Pusey, Edward Bouverie (1800–1882)', From the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* website <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22910>> [2] [accessed 5 December 2011]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The Puseyites' belief in baptismal regeneration, Eucharistic presence, sacramental priesthood, and devotion to the medieval church probably did leave him vulnerable to such misconceptions, however. Cf. S. J. Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland 1801–1846* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 282–3. Gerald Parsons, 'Emotion and piety: revivalism and ritualism in Victorian Christianity' in *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume I Traditions* ed. Gerald Parsons (Manchester and New York, 1988), p. 229. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Cf. John Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain 1829–1860* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 1–2, 243. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. D. A. Carson and D. J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edn, Leicester, 2005), p. 602. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Cf. R. G. Crawford, 'The second subscription controversy and the personalities of the non-subscribers' in *Challenge and Conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian History and Doctrine*, ed. J. L. M. Haire *et al.* (Antrim, 1981), p. 98. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. R. E. Richey, 'From Puritanism to Unitarianism in England: a study in candour' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 41, 3 (Sep. 1973), 375. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. This was not unique to the Victorians, as John Wesley had defended the practice in the previous century. Cf. Wesley to Mrs Crosby, London, 2 Dec. 1777 in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M. Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford*, ed. John Telford (8 vols, London, 1931), vi, pp. 290–1. Wesley to Sarah Mallet, Canterbury, 15 Dec. 1789 in *Letters*, pp. viii, 190. R. P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, 1995), p. 193. David Hempton, however, argues that female preaching among Methodists was exceptional. See David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2005), pp. 140–1. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. D. L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London, 1988), pp. 321–2. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Cf. *The Life and Correspondence of John Foster: with notices of Mr Foster as a Preacher and Companion by John Sheppard, Author of 'Thoughts on devotion', etc., etc.*, ed. J. E. Ryland (2 vols, New York, 1846), ii, p. 266. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. In relation to Pusey's commentary on the prophecy of Daniel, Spurgeon says, 'To Dr. Pusey's work on Daniel all subsequent writers must be deeply indebted'. C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries: Two Lectures Addressed to the Students of the Pastor's College, Metropolitan Tabernacle, together with a Catalogue of Biblical Commentaries and Expositions* (London, 1876), p. 129. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Although an argument could be made that Spurgeon was not fully representative of Baptists, the author provides reasonable justification for his choice. [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2004), p. 10. [Back to \(12\)](#)
13. J. R. W. Sloane, *Life and Work of J. R. W. Sloane, D.D. Professor of Theology in the Reformed Presbyterian Seminary at Allegheny City, Penn, 1868–1886 and Pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church New York, 1856–1868*, ed. W. M. Sloane (New York, 1888), p. 84. [Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Isaac Nelson, *Evangelical Alliance. Letter from the Rev. Isaac Nelson, of Belfast, Member of the Alliance, to the 'Belfast Newsletter' in Reply to a Correspondent* ([Manchester], 1846), p. 3. [Back to \(14\)](#)
15. David Barbee, 'Covenantal spirituality: Bernadine themes in Calvin's covenant theology', *Westminster Theological Journal*, 73 (2011), 133–55. [Back to \(15\)](#)

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