

“Tennyson’s ‘Christian Year’: The Minimum of Faith & National Spiritual Community”
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This fall, I was offered a research leave by Baylor to work on my book, *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain’s Age of Print*, which is being seriously considered by Ohio State University Press. It is now 85% complete (336 pages of 401). This afternoon, I will describe my book’s basic contribution, and then share parts of the seventh chapter. When, in 1968, *The New York Times* asked American sociologist (now Baylor professor) Peter Berger about religion’s future, he said what many scholars then assumed: “By the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture” (“Bleak Outlook” 3). According to many versions of this “decline of religion” story, the secular nation had, over the course of the nineteenth century, become the primary form of community in which modern people imagined themselves, even as religious forms of belonging had dwindled to a matter of private life. Yet in the last two decades, scholars from across the humanities and social sciences have resisted or reworked this secularization narrative in recognition of the resilient public presence of religion throughout the nineteenth century and around the world today. I have supported this reconsideration in recently published articles and in my book, whose title, *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain’s Age of Print*, recalls the book *Imagined Communities* (1983, 1991) by the political scientist Benedict Anderson. I wish to extend Anderson’s influential account of the ways modern national imagination was enabled by the spread of mass print media, even as I resist Anderson’s implication that imagining national communities is a secular activity coordinated with the declining power of religious ways of imagining community (Anderson 11-12, 24-36). I study the ways nineteenth-century British authors, educators, and clergy represented the circulating printed page as a medium for envisioning and participating in competing versions of a British Christian community.

This phenomenon was prevalent in the period on which I focus—the 1820s through the 1880s. Several historical developments were then converging to accustom middle and upper-class Britons to imagining their religious belonging in terms of solidarity created with strangers through circulating texts. Rapid expansion of reading, combined with the rise of a voluntary religious settlement, which forced the Church of England to surrender much of its exclusive political and social influence, created an environment for religion in which competition through the print market was the rule. Worship services ceased to be the most widespread media for imagining religious unity on a national scale, envisioning the place of one's religious group within the nation, or seeking influence over new believers. These acts were for many in the middle and upper classes increasingly conceived as dependent on appeals to membership in a community of strangers established by texts circulating within a competitive print culture. This is *not* to say that church activity and membership noticeably declined or became unimportant to nineteenth-century religious life in Britain. In fact, several of my chapters concentrate on the strong public resonance of church buildings and forms of worship in nineteenth-century print culture. My claim, rather, is that in attempts to *imagine* and *publicize* British Christian identity, no religious institution, membership list, or form of public worship could claim universal assent, or even a decisive majority. Imagining oneself in spiritual community with others through reading, rather than through shared physical sites and acts, became increasingly important.

My study of the resulting attempts to imagine print-mediated national spiritual communities divides into nine chapters, themselves grouped in two sections. In the book's first half, I focus on middle-class authors, clergy, and educators who aligned themselves with the Anglican Church: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Frederick Denison Maurice, and Matthew Arnold. I analyze their differing attempts to promote reading strategies and educational programs to help

Britons transform millions of texts daily circulating through their nation into mediums for imagining themselves in a shared spiritual, and generally Protestant, community. In the second half of the book, I study the surprising influence of *The Christian Year* (1827), a blockbuster collection of devotional poems organized around the Book of Common Prayer and Church calendar, and written by the priest John Keble to bring reading back under the discipline of the Anglican Church. Unexpectedly, Keble's widely-circulating volume quickly became a means for many inside and outside the Church of England to imagine a national Christian, and basically Protestant, community that was sustained by private reading. A wide range of Victorian poets and commentators could therefore represent private reading of poetry as participation in a national Christian community by alluding to *The Christian Year*, and by adapting its model of a cycle of poems that coordinated private reflection with membership in a worshipping community. *In Memoriam*, an elegiac cycle of 133 poems that Tennyson wrote in memory of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam and published in 1850, recalled Keble's *Christian Year* for commentators from many religious camps in ways that convinced them they shared in a spiritual community with strangers across their society. James Thomson, by contrast, manipulated Keble's familiar pattern in his 1874 poetic sequence *The City of Dreadful Night* to invite British readers into an unbelieving counterpublic. Yet near the century's end, Christina Rossetti reclaimed the structure of Keble's *Christian Year* for Anglicans in her 1893 collection *Verses*, though now for a "devotional" audience that high-end journals marked off from a vaguely Christian "general" reading public.

Most of the questions faced by the authors I study, and raised by their efforts to imagine print-mediated spiritual communities, are still with us. What is the role of religion in the public life and debate of increasingly pluralistic, liberal, and mass-mediated nations? How could mass

media become a means of sympathetic imagination, formation of shared values, and reform of inequalities? What contribution could and should education and religious belief make to this effort? Translated from their printed age into our digital age, the questions confronted and indicated by these authors are alive, and I take them up explicitly at several points in the book.

In my remaining time, I will share portions of my seventh chapter. This chapter contributes to my book's second half, in which I examine the diverse inheritance of John Keble's *Christian Year*. In chapter 6, I survey a wide field of Victorian responses to Tennyson's *In Memoriam* to explain why this poem struck so many Victorians as a strong public testimony to a "minimum of faith," an inalienable belief in God and immortality resting at the foundations of each person's soul. This minimum of faith, *In Memoriam* insists, "dwell[s]" beyond the reach of public religious forms in the poet's "spirit" (123.9-10), a "dream of good" (129.11) preserved from sectarian conflict and material harm even "tho' faith and form / Be sunder'd in the night of fear" (127.1-2). Only from such inner springs can Tennyson rise to faith and close his series of poems calling upon readers to look into their hearts for the same "truths that never can be proved" (131.10). Tennyson's apology for a minimal faith of the human spirit appealed to a broad spectrum of middle and upper-class readers used to imagining their religious belonging in terms of spiritual intuitions of the heart. I argue that Victorians intuitively compared Tennyson's poetic cycle to Keble's *Christian Year*, and that for some Tennyson's "New Christian Year" rivaled and even replaced Keble's as the poetic cycle best suited to help British readers imagine themselves in a Christian community that transcended denominations.

Tennyson's appeal to an inward "minimum of faith" in *In Memoriam* would seem to confirm the story contested by my book: the idea that, in modern nations, religion inevitably retreats from public life into the inner realm of private feelings. I resist this conclusion in

chapter 7, on which I draw today, where I argue that *In Memoriam* trades on an open secret. The poem locates a minimal faith within the private soul only with the aid of recognized public religious and cultural forms. By relying on internalized public forms to validate intuitions of the private soul, I conclude, *In Memoriam* ironically facilitated a vague British piety that could sanction imperial expansion, repression of political protest, and sacrifice of one's body for war and the economy—all as signs of faith in a sacred British community.

I. Thoughts at Christmas

Victorians from a wide spectrum of religious allegiances sanctioned Tennyson's organization of *In Memoriam*'s 133 poems around the three Christmas seasons described in poems 28-30, 78, and 104-105. The 1850 *Eclectic Review*, a non-Anglican Protestant journal, was representative in identifying "Christmas-tide and its household rites" (335) as powerful means by which Tennyson's spiritual struggle in *In Memoriam* assumed a publicly legible trajectory and connected "itself with the deepest life of the reader" (332). Yet Christmas plays a tellingly different role in Tennyson's poem than in John Keble's *Christian Year*. Keble's "Christmas Day" poem in *The Christian Year* opens with a creative response to its scriptural epigraph, taken from the lesson assigned for that day by the Prayer Book, where Luke recounts the angels announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds. In his poem, Keble notes that the angel who begins the proclamation is joined by "a multitude of the heavenly host" (Luke 2:13) only *after* saying that Christ will be born in a lowly manger. Keble turns this detail into a foreshadowing of Christ's dwelling within the manger of every humble believer's—and reader's—heart (35-6). Readers are not left to think this means Christ dwells in them apart from participation in a church under priestly authority. The approach of the shepherds to Christ's

manger becomes, for Keble, a foreshadowing of priests—“pastoral spirits”—approaching “[Christ’s] lowly shrine” in an Anglican service (43, 46). Keble then turns fully to the present, when readers are ideally considering his poem in sync with the Church calendar, which is meant to inspire memory of Christ’s first Advent and longing for his second Advent: “Still, as the day comes round / For Thee [Christ] to be reveal’d, / By wakeful shepherds Thou art found” (49-51).

John Keble draws readers of “Christmas Day” into an imagined congregation governed by priestly authority, the Church lectionary and calendar, and the divine arrangement of history that underwrites connections such as those between Christ’s manger and believers’ hearts. Tennyson, by contrast, illustrates through his changing reaction to three Christmastides the evolution of his and family members’ grief and spiritual hope:

With trembling fingers did we weave
The holly round the Christmas hearth;
A rainy cloud possess’d the earth,
And sadly fell our Christmas-eve. (30.1-4)

Again at Christmas did we weave
The holly round the Christmas hearth;
The silent snow possess’d the earth,
And calmly fell our Christmas-eve. (78.1-4)

To-night ungather’d let us leave
This laurel, let this holly stand:
We live within the stranger’s land,
And strangely falls our Christmas eve. (105.1-4)

The return of Christmas Eve across these poems marks a movement, often mirrored by weather, from weeping and sorrow on the first Christmastide after Hallam's death (30), to calm resignation (78), to a growing break with the past after relocating to a new home (105). Alongside the Christmas cycle, Tennyson includes recurrences of the New Year (83, 106), anniversaries of Hallam's death (poems 72, 99) and birth (107), and the return of spring (38-39, 115-116). The coordinated impression of these cycles is a movement from resentful anger over Hallam's physical absence to acceptance of his spiritual rebirth in the next life, and therefore toward anticipation of "some strong bond which is to be" recovered (116.15) in that "one far-off divine event, / To which the whole creation moves" (Epilogue.143-4). The interweaving of ecclesiastical, seasonal, and personal calendars into a chord seemingly pulled through the central circle of the poet's feelings reinforces the total impression of moving from the poet's inward grief to his inward faith, all the while making this movement feel understood and collective. The private, internal faith of *In Memoriam* is, therefore, always given its meaning by shared forms and calendars, but in ways designed to elude the explicit notice of the kind Keble attracted when he imposed a rigid ecclesiastical scheme on his poem *The Christian Year*.

II. Repeat the Sounding Joy

Church bells resound throughout *In Memoriam*: twice on Christmas Eve (28, 104), again on New Year's Eve (106), and at the wedding of Tennyson's sister in the Epilogue (60-64). In all but the last case, Tennyson considers the bells from outside the church in what seems to be a solitary domestic setting. Such solitary bell-listening scenes mark a private separation from the communal worship to which the bells beckon; but they also situate Tennyson's meditations within an imagined national community hearing the same and similar church bells across the

UK. Allusions to the British technique of change-ringing—“Each [set of bells] voice four changes on the wind” [28.9]—link the bells to British Anglican piety (Blair “Church Going”); but by virtue of their existence as public sound waves marking acts of worship and points in the year observed by many Christian groups, the bell tones avoid exclusive Anglican associations in a way that descriptions of church services could not (Blair *Form and Faith* 179). The church bells, then, involve Tennyson’s inner development in a national religious cycle.

Franklin Lushington was the brother of Edmund Lushington, whose marriage to Cecilia, Tennyson’s sister, is announced by bells in the Epilogue to *In Memoriam*. Lushington reviewed *In Memoriam* in 1850 for *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*. He indicates both the sense of national religious community, and the familiarity with a wide body of related poetry, which Victorians could be expected to bring to the bell-listening scenes of *In Memoriam*:

That simple music, of which the associations stretch over the world—‘the merry, merry bells of Yule’ [28.20]—brings to the troubled spirit ‘sorrow touched with joy’ [28.19]. . . In spite of all the songs, good, bad, and indifferent, that have been written and sung on the subject of village bells, there is an invincible freshness in their merry peal. (80)

Sailors in the tropics and wanderers in the Syrian desert, Lushington continues, hear “distant notes of the church-bells of England booming through the thin air, and are changed by the magnetic influence of the illusion into unalloyed masses of poetical feeling” (80). As Lushington’s comment about “all the songs” on “village bells” suggests, the bell-ringing sections of *In Memoriam* contribute to a large body of Victorian religious poems, in which speakers, usually standing outside of village churches, interpret ringing church bells as signs of an idealized British Christian community (Blair “Church Going”).

The bells' role in keeping the British public timed to an inherited Christian Year, itself designed to recall Christ's first Advent and anticipate his return, is essential to the spiritual development charted by *In Memoriam*. In poem 104, the poet laments the loss of nostalgic joy in the bell's peal following his move to a new home, but his loss is framed within the traditional message of hope carried by the bells, summed up in the first line of poem 28, and repeated in the first line of 104: "The time draws near the birth of Christ" (28.1; 104.1). Repetition of the sounding joy empowers memory of the "holy morn" that "shone when Hope was born" (30.29, 32) to resurface in the poem following 104, poem 105, which the poet closes by wishing for the church bells' announcement of Christ's birth to echo without distraction in his mind: "[let there be] No dance, no motion, save alone / What lightens in the lucid east / Of rising worlds by yonder wood. / . . . Run out your measured arcs, and lead / The closing cycle rich in good" (105.23-25, 27-28). The "arcs" of the sun and other heavenly bodies seem "measured," timed by Providence to a "cycle" closing in a new Advent, because the poet's heart has been trained by the bells' traditional strain. Prepared by an inherited Advent hope that has yearly worked its way inward, in the next poem, 106, the poet can call with authority on the bells of New Year's Eve to usher in a new millennium of enlightened Christianity: "Ring out the darkness of the land, / Ring in the Christ that is to be" (106.31-2).

Bells next ring at the wedding of Tennyson's sister Cecilia to Edmund Lushington in the Epilogue. In commemorating this marriage, Tennyson also relinquishes his desire for an earthly connection to Hallam. Now surrendered to the world of spirit, Hallam can be recovered as a "noble type" (Epilogue.138) of an oddly spiritualized "crowning" future "race" (128) that is destined to enter the great consummation in "God," the "far-off divine event, / To which the whole creation moves" (143-144). This vision of a crowning race and unity with God itself

requires quietly turning Cecilia's wedding (and resulting impregnation) into a naturalized version of the Biblical use of marriage as a type of the union of Christ with the Church at creation's redemption. After Cecilia and Edward take their vows, Tennyson hears church bells, for the last time in *In Memoriam*, as a member of a congregation within a church service unobtrusively governed by the Book of Common Prayer. Lines 54-56 of the Epilogue allude to the Form of Solemnization of Matrimony: "The 'wilt thou' answer'd, and again / The 'wilt thou' ask'd, till out of twain / Her sweet 'I will' has made you one." No longer listening on the outside, Tennyson is now within a religious community from which the resounding joy—of the bells and his lines—reaches ears outside the walls and seems to shake dead forms of creation into spiritual life in token of the great consummation and marriage to come: "overhead / Begins the clash and clang that tells / The joy to every wandering breeze; / The blind wall rocks, and on the trees / The dead leaf trembles to the bells" (60-4).

III. The Sacred Heart(h) of National Worship

In Memoriam participates in a familiar Victorian habit of conceiving of national religious community in terms of family devotional life. Victorian Evangelicals were most vocal in tying family devotions and Sunday afternoon religious reading to national welfare, but their views were shared by many middle and upper-class Christians (Landow 21). These associations motivated the nearly universal praise Victorian reviewers lavished on poem 30 of *In Memoriam*. Poem 30 looks back on the Tennyson family's Christmas Eve rituals through the poet's isolated meditations at dawn on Christmas morning. The poet recounts how his family sat in a circle and spontaneously broke into a song resembling a hymn. The Tennyson family in poem 30 could offer a parallel, rather than a counter, to the worship service taking place in the churches whose

Christmas-eve bells have been ringing in the immediately preceding poems (Blair *Form and Faith* 179-180). The likelihood that many Victorian readers would have viewed poem 30 in this way is indicated by a call for British Christian unity from a Congregationalist minister printed in 1864 by *The Patriot*, a non-Anglican Protestant newspaper. The minister cites Keble's *Christian Year* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in support of his ecumenical message, and follows quotations of these poetic cycles known for their wide circulation among British families by asking the nation to imagine itself as a Christian family (75).

Formal features of *In Memoriam*'s poem 30 invite a response on these terms. Haunted by the sense of Hallam's "mute Shadow" (**stanza 2**), the family goes about their household rites with a "vain pretence / Of gladness" until they fall into silence. In stanza 4, their shared agony compels them to join hands and seek relief in singing "A merry song we sang with [Hallam] / Last year," perhaps a Christmas carol, before turning into a gentler shared confession in stanza 5: "They rest,' we said, 'their sleep is sweet." Laced with allusions to Scripture readings assigned for the Burial of the Dead by the Book of Common Prayer, the family's alternations between singing, silence, and collective confession begin to seem less a spontaneous invention than a private memorial service for Hallam quietly guided by known religious forms, in this case Anglican ones. The Prayer Book reading to which their words directly allude is the announcement of blessed rest for those who die in Christ (Rev. 14:13), and in the order for the burial service this verse is sandwiched between collects and Scripture readings emphasizing "hope in the Resurrection to eternal life" (*Prayer Book* 238). On this subtle absorption of public religious forms into a private and voluntary ritual the Tennyson family's return to song in the next stanzas depends (**second column**): "Our voices took a higher range; / Once more we sang: 'They do not die.'" Keble had based his poem for "Christmas Day" on the scripture reading

assigned for that day by the Prayer Book (Luke 2:1-15), and Tennyson less explicitly does so in this and immediately preceding poems. One verse from that reading, the angels' announcement to the shepherds in Luke 2:14, resounds in the Christmas bells in poem 28, which ring out "Peace and goodwill, goodwill and peace, / Peace and goodwill, to all mankind" (28.11-12).

Combined with the dual focus on Christ's first and second comings stressed by the traditional Advent season, this dense network of Prayer-Book and scriptural associations provides the background support for the poet's isolated, present-tense song on Christmas morning in the final stanza of poem 30. There, after having recounted his conflicted anticipation of Christmas in poem 28, and his family's Christmas rites and impromptu memorial service in poems 29-30, the poet turns to the awaited Christmas dawn with his own morning hymn: "Rise, happy morn, rise, holy morn, / . . . O Father, touch the east, and light / The light that shone when Hope was born" (30.29-32). Once again, Tennyson has timed his thoughts to the public religious forms his inward confession of faith requires, and yet, time after time, quietly downplays.

IV. Faith in the Beat

In Memoriam's famous stanza loosely resembles stanzas often used for hymns, and this contributed to its powerful public resonance. Although some Victorian commentators recognized that Tennyson had not actually invented the stanza, everyone continued associating it with *In Memoriam*. In 1867, *The Christian Witness*, a widely circulating Congregationalist and evangelical magazine, reviewed *The Inner Life* (1866), a poetic cycle by the Rev. William Tidd Matson. Written in what the reviewer calls "the 'In Memoriam' stanza," *The Inner Life* described stages in an evangelical spiritual awakening (236). *The Christian Witness* reviewer

notes that “sections of the poem would make exquisite hymns” (236). This advice was followed, and several poems from *Inner Life* soon entered Nonconformist hymnals (*The Puritan* 486).

As *The Christian Witness* reviewer indicates, the “‘In Memoriam’ stanza” invites comparative contrast with the hymn tradition. The alternating rhyme (A-B-A-B) and metrical pattern (4-3-4-3) of most hymn and ballad stanzas implies a forward movement of thought or narrative. But Tennyson’s stanza of full tetrameters (4-4-4-4) and embracing rhymes (ABBA) indicates a mirroring pattern less clearly related to change or progress, and it is therefore more easily turned to expressing what Tennyson described as *In Memoriam*’s “wandering” (Intro.41), “Short swallow-flights of song” (48.15). Poised between the popular tradition of the hymn and the meanderings of individual inner life, the connotations of Tennyson’s metrical frame are suited to the internalized use of public religious forms in passages such as the one discussed earlier, where Tennyson closes poem 30 with a private morning hymn. Evangelicals who wrote poems in the “‘In Memoriam’ stanza” and gave them titles such as *Inner Life* picked up on these possibilities. So did the *Christian Witness* critic who recommended *Inner Life* for congregational singing. From this perspective, the unplanned family memorial service in poem 30 of *In Memoriam* alludes not only to the Book of Common Prayer, but also to the interdenominational practice of hymn signing. Pauses enforced by stanza breaks in poem 30 support this view by aligning the reader’s negotiation of lines with pauses the family makes between their songs, statements of belief, and more impassioned singing. “We gambol’d,” the poet recounts,

. . . making vain pretence

Of gladness, with an awful sense

Of one mute Shadow [Hallam] watching all.

We paused: the winds were in the beech . . . (6-9)

The reader has also “paused” in the gap between lines 8 and 9, which are on either side of a full-stopped ending to the second stanza. The family, the poet recounts, then “Sat silent, looking each at each. / [**stanza break**] Then echo-like our voices rang” (12-13). Again, the reader momentarily sits silent with the family in the gap between stanzas—especially if this reader is sitting while reading the poem alone or aloud to family and friends—before proceeding to the account of how the family sang the “merry song we sang with him” the previous Christmas Eve (15). The pattern continues, exaggerated by enjambment, between this and the next stanza:

. . . A merry song we sang with him

Last year: impetuously we sang:

We ceased: a gentler feeling crept

Upon us: surely rest is meet:

‘They rest,’ we said, ‘their sleep is sweet,’

And silence follow’d, and we wept. (15-20)

As expected by this point, the reader again pauses with the family, while they weep, between their corporate confession and their passage into the rousing hymn in the next stanza: “Our voices took a higher range. . .” (21). Crossing, yet again, the stanzaic gap between the family’s hymn recounted in the next two stanzas and the poet’s present-tense, isolated morning hymn in the **final stanza**, the reader might understandably feel a shared significance in the private family ceremony and the poet’s concluding solo. We have been singing with them, as it were.

The recurrent rhyme scheme and steady beat of the *In Memoriam* stanza were as important to its religious and public meaning as its partial affinity to the hymn stanza. When reviewing *In Memoriam* in 1850 for *The North British Review*, a moderate journal associated

with the Free Church of Scotland, the (then) Anglo-Catholic Coventry Patmore claimed that Tennyson's poem signaled a reawakening in Britain to innate spiritual truths residing within the innermost depths of the soul: "A fact that is vividly suggested by the book is, that . . . the A B C of Christian philosophy," including tenets such as belief in immortal life, "are now in process of *recovery from the syn-co-pe* into which they have been cast by a long period of practical neglect" (553; emphasis mine). Patmore compares this awakening to recovery from a "syn-cop-e," a term describing both a dangerous pause in the heart's action and the subtraction of a syllable or letter from a word to make it fit a meter. This relies on an association between the heartbeat and poetic rhythm that runs through Victorian prosody and poetic practice. For Patmore, because of Deism and apathetic Anglicanism, in "the last century" the British heart ceased beating to shared convictions of a divine design in the cosmos and in human experience (553). Yet, Patmore asserts, we can now hear the beat of belief reviving through the spiritual stethoscope of Tennyson's disciplined verse in *In Memoriam*.

Patmore praises Tennyson for upholding the "faith" of readers that every "variation" from his regular metrical pattern is "suggested" by the authentic "emotion to be expressed" (534). For Patmore, the controlled beat of *In Memoriam* signifies more than craftsmanship: it represents Tennyson's ability to write with the laws of English meter in his heart, and to affirm thereby his readers' faith in the universal emotions that his lines communicate. The quickening pulse of faith in Tennyson's lines can thereby be experienced as the reaffirmation of the "A B C of Christian philosophy" at the level of undeniable human instinct. For Patmore, Tennyson's disciplined but heart-felt metrical beat acts as a confirmation that there is a common pulse in the human heart timed to intuitive belief in a divine law and Providence. Patmore connects *In Memoriam* to a tradition then strongest in High Anglicanism, but felt well beyond it, which saw

regular metrical and verse forms as a sign of secure faith in God's laws, a reassurance that "God's ordering presence" is "always already at work" (Blair *Faith and Form* 186).

Poem 96 was probably one of the passages Patmore had in mind when he later admitted "regret[ing]" some "careless" theological "expressions" in *In Memoriam* (503). Ironically, this poem subliminally rests its claim to credence on the regular metrical beat admired by Patmore.

. . . one [Hallam] indeed I knew
In many a subtle question versed,
Who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,
But ever strove to make it true:

Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,
At last he beat his music out.

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds. (5-12)

The poet, defending the virtue of Hallam's honest doubt, implicitly directs his demand to believe in him to the reader as well as to the woman addressed in the poem, who is probably Tennyson's wife Emily. Once the question of our trust in the poet is raised, a secondary meaning surfaces in the language describing Hallam's battle with doubt. If Hallam began airing his painful questions with "a jarring lyre" but learned to "beat his music out" through patient striving and "good deeds," so, too, has the poet of *In Memoriam*, who has earlier in this elegiac sequence written terrified poems about "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (56.15) before arriving at this confident request for his readers' belief. The "music" achieved by Tennyson is less metaphorical than Hallam's, and the "good deeds" by which he "beats" it "out" are displayed in the iambic regularity that keeps this very statement in good measure: "At last he *beat* his *music*

out” (10). In lines describing Hallam’s heroic victory over doubt, the regular meter provides continuity across breaks that correspond with uncertain moments in the trial of faith:

He faced the spectres of the mind
And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own;
And Power was with him in the night,
Which makes the darkness and the light,
And dwells not in the light alone. (15-20)

Between line 15 (“He faced the spectres of the mind”) and its completion in line 16 (“And laid them”) the enjambment momentarily keeps a reader hovering over the conclusion, even as the meter carries her confidently on. Across the gaping “length” of space between the spiritual warfare of this stanza and the “stronger faith” discovered in the next stanza, the reader must then venture, momentarily unsure of where she is heading; but the steady beat, affirmed by alliteration (“To find a stronger faith”), confirms the destination of renewed faith was in the greater scheme of things. This passage through doubt to higher faith could describe Tennyson as much as Hallam (Ryan 128), a connection suggested by allusions backward and forward to poems 54 and 124, in which Tennyson describes himself as a child crying in the night of doubt who eventually realizes a divine fatherly power has been stretching down to him through the dark. The poet has been carried by God, but perhaps also by the verse that carries readers with him over uncertain pauses between religious questioning and its resolution (5.7).

V. A National Scripture

By tacitly depending on public forms to communicate its inward testimony of faith, *In Memoriam* early encouraged some Victorian Christians to appropriate it as a quasi-sacred national scripture whose authority sat alongside the Bible's. In an 1855 essay on "Tennyson," the Cambridge librarian and essayist George Brimley praises Tennyson in terms that resemble a declaration of faith: "we, who . . . admire him, have a reason for our faith" (226-7). Brimley was operating in a literary culture in which comparing faith in Tennyson's poetry to faith in the Bible was becoming more common. Just over ten years later, Alfred Austin, a jealous minor poet who would succeed Tennyson as laureate before fading from memory, could open an article in *The Temple Bar* sneering at Tennyson's biblical status:

If one were to enter a modern drawing-room [and] declare that Mr. Tennyson has no sound pretensions to be called a great poet, . . . we suppose he would not create more astonishment, or be regarded more unanimously as a heretic, than would another . . . who, before a committee of orthodox divines, exposed his utter disbelief in the inspiration of the Scriptures. (179)

To defend his faith in Tennyson's poetry, George Brimley concentrates on *In Memoriam* and Tennyson's 1842 poem "The Epic [better known as Morte d'Arthur]." Brimley treats "Morte d'Arthur," Tennyson's first foray into Arthurian legend, as a mythical, national gospel whose full meaning is drawn out in coordination with the psalms and prophetic hymns of *In Memoriam*. He notices that Tennyson gives "Morte d'Arthur" a fictional setting, presenting it as a poetry reading given by a young poet, in a country house at Christmas, to a group of conservatives who are lamenting the decline of faith. Within this frame, Brimley observes, Tennyson's poem about Arthur's glorious passing becomes "the answer of a Christian poet to"

his day's "querulous lamentation . . . over the decay of faith," and an affirmation that Arthurian Christian heroism endures: Victorian "men" who "fight the good fight" will be aided with the gift of "heavenly weapons," just as Arthur was given his Excalibur (241-242). Brimley then fluidly connects Tennyson's mythical national gospel to the yearly reminder of the Christian Advent that is so important to *In Memoriam*:

The Arthur of the round-table is gone to fairy-land; but the desire and hope that gave birth to the legends of chivalry yet live,—the dim prophecy that he will one day return and rule over Britain is ever accomplishing itself. What mean those Christmas bells that tell us yearly Christ is born? Do they lie? No! they blend with all noble legends that speak of man's great deeds, of his vaster aspirations, of his yet unaccomplished hopes. They remind us of the prophecy to which fact is tending . . . To him whose heart is hopeful and brave, . . . 'Arthur is come again, and cannot die,' is the burden of the world's song; . . . 'Come with all good things, and war shall be no more,' [is] the strain that echoes in the clear distance, and most clear when the bells ring in the Christmas morn. (242)

Here Brimley quotes and paraphrases Tennyson's concluding lines to "Morte d'Arthur," where the narrator envisions Arthur's Second Coming, in the form of a good Victorian gentleman, and then awakens to hear church bells welcoming the Christmas morn.

Brimley completes his canonization of Tennyson's national scripture by claiming *In Memoriam* as a national book of psalms and hymns. "We know," Brimley asserts, that "thousands of men and women" find "in *In Memoriam* the sort of consolation and strength they find in the Psalms of David" (276). *In Memoriam*, Brimley continues, contains "groans of despair" alongside "triumphant songs of faith," and in the background is "the scroll on which one

reads from afar, ‘*I am the resurrection and the life.*’ ‘*Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord*’” (277). The verses quoted by Brimley, John 11:25 and Revelation 14:13, are assigned in the Prayer Book’s Order for the Burial of the Dead, which, as I noted earlier, subtly guides the family memorial service in poem 30 of *In Memoriam*. Indeed, Tennyson’s own allusions to these passages in poem 30 might have prompted Brimley’s. Brimley shows himself sensitive to the public forms of Tennyson’s private faith that I have discussed—Christmas bells, Christmastide, the Prayer Book, Scripture, the suggestion of hymnic form and hymn singing (he says *In Memoriam* contains “songs of faith”). The public coding of Tennyson’s wandering cries and inward declarations of faith empowers Brimley’s appropriation of *In Memoriam* as a more subjective version of David’s Psalms.

Brimley closes his defense of Tennyson’s national scripture by quoting the well-known poem 106 from *In Memoriam* (“Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky”). Both in Brimley’s essay and in Tennyson’s poem, the call to New-Year bells at the end of poem 106—“Ring in the Christ that is to be” (106.32)—absorbs reminders of Advent rung out by Christmas bells in earlier passages. Brimley introduces his closing quotation of poem 106 as if he were repeating a text long recognized as sacred to the nation, and essential to readers’ imagination of themselves within its spiritual community: “let us listen,” he says when introducing poem 106, “to the New-Year’s hymn which . . . the people of England has taken for its national song of hope and prophecy of all good things to come” (281).

Readings of *In Memoriam* as a quasi-sacred national scripture were not isolated to liberal Anglicans such as Brimley. *The Leisure Hour*, a widely-circulating evangelical family magazine, ran an article in 1874 on “‘In Memoriam’ and the Bible.” For the writer of this article, the national popularity of *In Memoriam* lies “in the fact that” Tennyson’s use of

“Scripture imagery” links the poem’s “immortality . . . to the higher immortality of that Book of books—the Bible” (73). To more firmly yoke the faith of (and in) Tennyson’s poem to the Bible, the author identifies Scriptural allusions throughout *In Memoriam*, often tacitly rewriting Tennyson’s departures from orthodoxy. The critic reworks what might be Tennyson’s most disturbing challenge to Christian tradition in poem 56, where Tennyson concludes all “hope of answer, or redress” is “Behind the veil, behind the veil” (56.58). Perhaps justified in detecting an “allusion to the veil of the tabernacle which concealed the presence of God,” the *Leisure Hour* critic goes on to assert with the New Testament that “the Saviour has now passed” beyond that veil (72). In his poem, however, Tennyson is unable to embrace this removal of the veil as certain, since God is known only through shadowy intuitions throughout *In Memoriam* (124.3-24, 131.10, Epilogue.141-2). Emphasizing Tennyson’s biblical allusions to the detriment of Tennyson’s own meaning, this critic reworks *In Memoriam* into a quasi-scriptural text that suits the needs of an imagined Evangelical community of readers.

The *Leisure Hour* critic, then, joins George Brimley in claiming *In Memoriam* for a quasi-sacred national literature. The article’s first page describes the village near Tennyson’s house as “a place of pilgrimage” (71), and, readers must negotiate an illustration of Tennyson’s home while following the discussion of *In Memoriam*’s biblical allusions (72). Home and Bible, core values of this magazine, sanction Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* as suitable family evangelical reading, perhaps even for sacrosanct Sunday afternoons. The initials of the contributor, “J.C.,” tempt a holy pun, as if Jesus Christ were himself extending Biblical immortality to Tennyson’s domesticated and national testimony of faith (73).

VI. Tennyson's Measured Ministry to Workers

Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, then, makes minimal faith public by dissolving public religious and cultural forms into the private soul. Yet by championing an inward faith in so publicly resonant a way, *In Memoriam* invited a diffusive sense of British piety that some called upon to validate control from above at home and military and imperial power abroad. As Victorian reviewers often noted, the inward Christian experience of Tennyson's poem could be class coded: many of these reviewers observed that *In Memoriam's* appeal was strongest among English upper and upper-middle-class readers, especially those with university educations. The social and political undertones of *In Memoriam* seem intimately connected to its poetic tones—to “the ‘In Memoriam’ stanza” widely praised by Victorians for its stately pace. That this measured metrical progress is implicitly tied to visions of controlled social and political evolution Tennyson hints in *In Memoriam*, especially in poem 113, where he expresses fear of revolution. This poem borrows lines from a poem called “Hail Briton!” that Tennyson wrote in the *In Memoriam* stanza in the early 1830s, itself about disappointment over agitations leading to the 1832 Reform Act (Ricks I.527).

In fact, Tennyson wrote a series of poems between 1831-1834 using the *In Memoriam* stanza, all of them expressing fear of sudden political and social change and extolling the virtues of a land where “Freedom **slowly** broadens down / From precedent to precedent” (“You ask me, why, though ill at ease” [c. 1833] 11-12). After 1834, Tennyson dedicated the stanza he had early used to contain fears of “banded unions” (“You ask me, why” 17) to containing doubt in the wake of Hallam's death in the poems that became *In Memoriam* (Ricks II 307, 311). Tennyson made these connections publicly available by publishing several of the political *In Memoriam* stanza poems in his 1842 volume, and using the same stanza to hymn imperial Britain

and the Queen in his first poem as Poet Laureate, “To the Queen” in 1851. By the 1860s, it would be hard not to make the association, as newspapers reprinted debates over the 1866 Reform Bill showing Gladstone and his opponents quoting one of Tennyson’s early political poems in the *In Memoriam* stanza, which Tennyson had just republished under the title “Britain.”

F.W. Robertson, a popular liberal Anglican minister in Bristol, early seized on the tacit analogy between *In Memoriam*’s stately progress and the firmly measured progress of Christian Britain. In his 1852 lectures on poetry to working men, Robertson reveals the social and class interests behind using *In Memoriam* to sanction Christian unity based on “fundamental” inward experiences. “The first maxim in religion and in art,” Robertson tells his 1852 working audience, “is— . . . cut your life adrift from all party,” political or religious (182). Tennyson’s poem can show these workers the wisdom of locating a uniting faith not in “particular forms . . . of words or ritual” (156), but in “intuitions of the Soul” (155).

Coming on the heels of Tennyson’s promotion to Poet Laureate because of *In Memoriam*, the publication of Tennyson’s “To the Queen” in the *In Memoriam* stanza, and the decisive suppression of the Chartist movement, Robertson’s ban on public form and organization has a political charge. Not in the world of divisive forms and “party” organization but in the inward realm of intuitions, working Britons will discover their faith and freedom. So long as working peoples’ skepticism, anguish, and longing for a better world find expression through the ministrations of poets such as Tennyson, Robertson claims, these working-class readers will help preserve “England’s freedom from revolution and conspiracies” (184). Revolution and conspiracies are the consequences of bottled-up frustration and doubt. But high poetry acts as a “safety-valve to the heart” (184), releasing negative emotions in noble expression. Robertson supports this “safety-valve” theory by quoting Tennyson’s poem “You ask me, why, though ill at

ease,” published in 1842, and one of the early political poems that Tennyson wrote in the *In Memoriam* stanza (184). Robertson claims that modern poetry, especially poems such as *In Memoriam* suffused with Christian feelings, expresses unsatisfiable longing for a world unseen, and so should be recognized as the special inheritance of the working classes: “Does not such poetry therefore more peculiarly belong to the Working Men, whose life is desire, not enjoyment; aspiration, not contentment?” (185). Robertson is quick to ensure his statement is not misunderstood: “when we say Poetry elevates” workers, he cautions, “let it not be understood of the improvement of physical comforts” (186).

Aided by poems such as *In Memoriam*, workers should channel aspirations for a better world into inward religious expectation, and away from outward forms (or reforms) and organized public demands. But they should not resist calls to action from the British state. Robertson notes that the 1848 revolution in France has brought Napoleon III to power, and that working men might soon be called to serve as heroic Christian brothers of British soldiers (205). This will require their inward sense of Christian unity, and Tennyson can minister to the need. Robertson also champions this national faith as the source of Britain’s imperial glory, citing British soldiers’ subjection of hill peoples in India as an example (204). If Robertson asks workers to embrace the **inward** force of modern Christian poems such as *In Memoriam*, he concludes praising the **outward** force of war and imperial conquest. For war, Robertson says, forces citizens to overcome self-interest and aspire to higher virtues (202). In battle Britons will discover brotherhood, even as Tennyson’s poetry helps them believe their fellowship will survive death—at which point their aspirations for a better world could be realized.

Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and Christian poetry of its caliber can divert workers’ from making demands in the streets by uniting them around inward spiritual fundamentals, leaving

their bodies to be secularized as the property of the state—and, Robertson suggests, the economy. He exclaims that “the Poetry of the coming age must come from the Working Classes” (168), for workers have learned the loyalty and devotion that exist in smoking factories, “the heroism of perseverance, and the poetry of invention, and the patience of *uncomplaining* resignation” (169; emphasis mine).

VII. An Inward and Imperial Faith

As Robertson indicates, turning to inward experience as the basis for a vaguely Christianized British reading public was also easily tied to imperialism, a Christian civilizing ideal for a superior British nation. This version of British imagined community, historians have shown, was increasingly acceptable after the 1870s (McLeod “Protestantism” 55-65), and it colors the poem Tennyson later said best expressed what he meant in poem 106 of *In Memoriam*, where he called on New-Year bells to “Ring in the Christ that is to be” (32). By this phrase, Tennyson said, he meant the world in which “Christianity without bigotry will triumph, when the controversies of creeds shall have vanished” (*Memoir* I 326). The poem Tennyson felt best captured this vision was “Akbar’s Dream” (1892), completed and published in his last year of life. In the poem, a sort of dramatic monologue, Tennyson has the sixteenth-century Moghul emperor Akbar describe his attempt to create a religiously tolerant empire in northern and central India. In footnotes, Tennyson praises “Akbar’s rapid conquests and the good government of his fifteen provinces” (Ricks III 237), and in the final lines, Akbar recounts a dream in which he foresees the failure of his attempt to combine imperial rule with tolerance of the best in all creeds, but glimpses its completion by Christian Britain:

From out the sunset [i.e., the West] there poured an alien race,

Who fitted stone to stone [of my ideal ecumenical temple] again, and Truth,
Peace, Love and Justice came and dwelt therein,
Nor in the field were seen or heard
Fires of Súttee, nor wail of baby-wife,
Or Indian widow; and in sleep I said
“All praise to Alla by whatever hands
My mission be accomplished!” (182-189)

Citing the practice of Súttee, or Sati, a widow’s throwing of herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, which the British would also ban in 1829, Akbar prophetically welcomes “whatever hands”—and, because of the intervening history, guns—will be required to uphold the rule of “Love and Justice” over the “furious formalisms” of Hindu and Muslim dogmatists (55). The coercive undertones of this spiritualized British imperialism are nicely caught in the description of more thoroughly secular forms of redemptive liberalism by anthropologist Talal Asad: “there is a readiness to cause pain to those who are to be saved by being humanized” (62). Tennyson’s standards for religious participation in this imperial and ecumenical British community resemble those Asad finds at work in secularist understandings of the modern nation state—“religion has the option of either confining itself to private belief and worship or of engaging in public talk that makes no demands on life” (199). Throughout “Akbar’s Dream,” Tennyson has Akbar portray as subhuman all those (other than himself) who make public and exclusive claims for their doctrines: Muslim “Ulama” are “like wild brutes new-caged—the narrower / The cage, the more their fury” (45-9), and “intolerant priests” are “cobras ever setting up their hoods” who must be “beat back” (156-8). Since Akbar’s regime stands in for Tennyson’s ideal imperial Britain, Tennyson is deriding those members of the empire, whether Evangelicals at home or

missionaries and Muslims abroad, who frustrate Britain's sacred mission of imperial inclusivity by publicly proclaiming special access to God. Tennyson's repeated imagery of beasts and clamoring sects suggests that mockery is the best policy for discouraging sectarian excess in Britain. His poem on Akbar is one dose of the harsh medicine. Yet in British India, as in Akbar's India, more forceful measures might sometimes be required to enforce tolerance in a "vast dominion" once "won" by "a sword, / That only conquers men to conquer peace" (14-15).

Tennyson's poetry, then, recommended, and sometimes enabled, the vaguely Christianized vision of imperial British community that became more widespread after the 1870s. Yet from this generalized sense of British Christendom, I argue in my book's final chapters, many late-Victorian poets, whether atheistic or more traditionally Christian, sought relief, invoking reading communities that either defined themselves against the vague idea of a Christian Britain or assumed a more dogmatic, and often more international, boundary. Appeals to religious belonging did not decline next to the rise of national imagination. Rather, my book shows, as the British nineteenth century progressed, the labor to imagine a *national* religious community through reading increasingly gave way to efforts to demarcate competing religious and irreligious reading audiences within a broadly "Christian" British public that itself floated loose from any single institution or religious group.