

Unspeakable Truths, Unutterable Sincerity: Godwin's The Genius of Christianity Unveiled

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“There are good men everywhere, at all times. Most men are. Some are just unlucky, because most men are a little better than their circumstances give them a chance to be. And I’ve known some that even the circumstances couldn’t stop.” (Ike McCaslin; Faulkner, “Delta Autumn,” *Go Down, Moses*)

Like many of William Godwin’s works, *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled* is an odd text – hard to classify generically and hard to gauge with respect to its intended audience and anticipated effects. As is clear from the letter he wrote to Mary Shelley bequeathing to her the care of the manuscript, *Genius* was conceived by Godwin as the capstone of his intellectual career. It is, he says, “the concluding work of a long life, and written, as I believe, in the full maturity of my understanding....”¹ Its objective was, to his mind, straightforward if fairly expansive:

The object of the following pages is to counteract, and, as far as may be, put an end to, the reign of superstition and error, to fix the history and phenomena of the universe on their true foundation, and to deliver my species from false terrors and groundless alarms, and to impress upon them the great truth, that all that is, is subject to laws, fixed in their weight, measure and duration, capable of the most exact calculation, and which in no case admit of variation and exception.²

Serving as a companion piece to *Political Justice*, *Genius* would complete Godwin's labor of freeing the human mind from enslavement to prejudice, accomplishing the same task with respect to religion as *Political Justice* had done – or had sought to do – for politics.

It is more than forty years since I applied myself in the best manner I could to the discovery of the remedies for our political evils. And now, in this posthumous work, I have given my attention to the removing that oppressive weight of religious prejudice, which has exerted an influence scarcely less fatal to the energies and independence of the intellectual part of our nature.³

Still incomplete at the time of Godwin's death in 1836, *Genius* also serves as his epitaph, his final contribution to the intellectual debates of his era, written with all the definitiveness characteristic of Godwin's philosophical prose.

Despite its clarity of polemical purpose, *Genius* remains rhetorically and generically elusive. It offers itself as a treatise, an Enlightenment contribution to the impartial pursuit of truth. "The purpose of this book is argument,"⁴ Godwin asserts in an early version of its preface, describing its aim as the logical persuasion of its audience through irrefutable reasoning. Its method, as he states on one point, is simple and consistent throughout: "We will merely follow out the natural and unforced consequences which unavoidably result from the original proposition."⁵ At the tail end of his career, Godwin maintains the conviction about the power of truth he had first articulated in *Political Justice* – that truths are self-evident, and that truth is all of a single piece. Quoting from a text by Conyers Middleton on miracles, he frames his project metaphorically.

"I look upon the discovery of anything which is true as a valuable acquisition to society, which cannot possibly hurt or obstruct the good effect of any other truth whatsoever, for they all partake of one common essence, and necessarily coincide with each other, and, like the

drops of rain which fall separately into the river, mix themselves at once with the stream, and strengthen the general current."⁶

Mark Philp has argued in his brilliantly nuanced study of Godwin's political philosophy that for Godwin, as for the circle of Rational Dissent from which he came, there remains a theological foundation beneath this sort of rationalist epistemological claim: "we can understand these writers' assumption of a natural orientation to truth in terms of the search for justification in God's eyes." As Philp later concludes, Godwin "seems to have substituted truth for God, while retaining the framework of assumptions and arguments which accompanied theistic accounts of our moral duty."⁷ *Genius* marks the end of this intellectual odyssey, turning Godwin's account of truth onto Christianity itself. The text represents itself as a calm and dispassionate investigation into the plausibility and desirability of religion – first and foremost Christianity, but ultimately religion in general. Its overt intent is starkly clear: "that of putting an end to the ascendancy of the Christian religion."⁸

Yet this philosophical text is equal parts memoir or autobiography as well – not to say that it does not aspire to truth, but that it steadily acknowledges tremendous uncertainty about that Enlightenment project – its feasibility, its efficacy, its worth. The conclusion to Godwin's Preface emphasizes the inextinguishable influence of subjective experience and personal circumstances upon a project such as this one.

I know that it is human to err. And I am not so vain as to imagine myself exempt from the lot of humanity [...] the "heart of man is deceitful." The motives of our actions are complicated, beyond the power of human skill to unravel them.

This general point is succeeded by a more confessional application of the rule.

I would willingly know the truth. Almost all my life it has been my aim, avowed to my own heart, to "follow

truth whithersoever it appeared to lead me.” But who can tell what motives, in the midst of the most diligent search, may lead the enquiries [*sic*], unaware of himself, wide of the unbroken direction which he sought to pursue? Vanity, the love of novelty and paradox may insensibly mislead. So may ambition, the desire to be great and to be distinguished.

Godwin traces the source of his own possible errors directly back to his own religious upbringing. “The power of education is immeasurably great. I was bred a Calvinist. I was destined to the profession of a Christian preacher. And, though at the time that I exercised that profession my aspirations after truth were vehement and continuous, I was for years entangled in the fetters of my profession.” So he concludes, “Which of us shall discover how subtly our worldly interests or the desire of a fair fame may bias our conclusions?”⁹

So although he wishes to speak *the* truth and tries hard throughout *Genius* to reassure himself and his readers that he can indeed do so, Godwin recognizes at some level that he can speak only *his* truth, subjective and circumscribed as it may be. Sincerity – what he can attain with his words – intersects only obliquely with truth; indeed, the two purposes can be determinedly at odds. This is crucially true with respect to his audience. His impulse to speak sincerely, he senses, will impede the ability of much of his audience to hear what he construes as the truth. *Genius* thus gives us a window on to one of the persistent anxieties of Godwin’s life, the way in which truth and sincerity do not perfectly coincide, and on to his intermittent acknowledgment of an incongruence that he continues to resist.¹⁰ It testifies, too, to his ultimate commitment to sincerity, even at the expense of truth. Having parted ways in significant respects with the Enlightenment, *Genius* pauses at the threshold to Romanticism, caught between both, party to neither, prey still to a skepticism that unsettles both. It is not only a meditation upon, but itself a demonstration of, the mind’s capacity to resist truth.¹¹

II

The epistle that Godwin sends to Mary Shelley conveying to her the burden and obligation of his manuscript exhibits considerable anxiety for the fate of his manuscript. *Genius* is, he thinks, "a most valuable legacy to my species";¹² approaching the end of his life, he feels a need to speak truly and sincerely his opinions on and absolute rejection of the Christian religion. On the one hand, the text exhibits considerable confidence about its likely reception and about the power of its sincerity to elicit conviction in the minds of its potential readers. He assures Mary that,

The human mind is now in a considerable state of preparation to receive its sentiments, and to consider the evidence, which I have endeavoured to prepare. The political world is rapidly on the advance to shake off its shackles. And a great portion of mankind is disposed soberly to examine the evidence of things, which for a vast length of time have been suffered to pass unquestioned.¹³

Christianity, he asserts in the manuscript itself, has outlived its time; its internal contradictions and negative impacts have grown increasingly visible. For, "Christianity, like all the sallies of mortal enthusiasm, is a mass of contradictions."¹⁴ Moreover, in a preliminary essay entitled, "On the Exoteric and Esoteric in Philosophy and Theology," Godwin explicitly rejects the common notion that some truths are best kept for the few and not, at least not before their time, to be given wide public dissemination. "I am of the opinion that a great majority of profound and unprejudiced readers will subscribe to the doctrines pleaded for in this work," he begins confidently, and goes on to assert that,

No scheme can be imagined more ungenerous than that which proposes that we, the favoured few, shall enjoy the privilege of letting our thoughts loose to pursue fearlessly the inductions which our understandings suggest, while we are to take care that the vulgar of mankind are to be perpetually shut up within the

circumference of a straitened and a narrow creed [...].
This, of all kinds of aristocracies, is the most inexorable
and despotic.¹⁵

And yet, Godwin is deeply fearful the manuscript will vanish without a trace – ignored, forgotten, unpublished. He tells Mary, “I am most unwilling that this, the concluding work of a long life, and written, as I believe, in full maturity of my understanding, should be considered as oblivion.” He addresses not just her, but all of anonymous posterity, when he adds, “I adjure you therefore, or whomsoever else, into whose power these papers may fall, not to allow them to be consigned to oblivion.”¹⁶ He explicitly charges Mary with a filial duty to publish *Genius*, one that he knows to be problematic. “I am devolving on you an arduous duty, which I am afraid will cause you often to think of me with disapprobation and pain. But I have no alternative.”¹⁷ That fear leads Godwin to anticipate, as his novels demonstrate he can so vividly do, a volatile reception to the message that he wishes to convey. Here his confidence begins to ebb, as in a Preface dated 2 October 1835 (still fairly early in the writing process) he imagines the afterlife and aftereffects of his manuscript. It will encounter, he expects, misconstrual and recriminations: “this book will draw on me the misconstruction of multitudes. They will regard me with aversion and abhorrence. They will pursue me with execrations.”¹⁸ His vision of a project of pure philosophical truth and his philosophical optimism about the power of argument to foretell the shape of things as they ought to be, gives way to a deeper sincerity that is fatalistic about things as they are, as we feel them to be – a tension it was always Godwin’s special gift to be able to diagnose. The language of sincerity becomes increasingly overwrought as the Preface continues and Godwin’s anxiety increases:

Many of them [his prospective readers] would tear my
poor remains from the grave, and treat them with every
imaginable indignity. Many, if I were to return once
more to the earth, would willingly give their suffrage
that I should perish at the stake [...]. I know not that I

should not be pursued with hootings, with loud expressions of detestation and horror.¹⁹

Curiously Gothic in its emotional intensity, this passage envisages an outcome of continued torment after death, but one that still seems better than consignment to oblivion. A work whose primary objective is to refute the belief in an afterlife is, it turns out, deeply concerned about Godwin's own authorial afterlife and about how this final work may affect that fate.

Godwin was right to be anxious. The fate of *Genius* was in fact suppression followed by neglect. Consigned not to oblivion, but at least to the trunk, by Mary Shelley, it was eventually published (under a different, more innocuous title) in 1873 by Kegan Paul. When it did appear in a later era, reviewers were charitably dismissive. Its recent editors, Philp and Austin Gee, were scarcely less so – not much inclined to argue for its intellectual or historical significance.²⁰ Even after an era of political reaction ended, its effects persisted, and Godwin was never to be again taken as seriously as a political philosopher as he had been in the 1790s. Even *Political Justice* was to be consigned to the pile of texts whose interest is primarily historical. If we want to find value or relevance in *Genius*, then, we must look elsewhere than at its explicit philosophical content. Guided by Godwin's own hermeneutic, as laid out in the unpublished but now widely cited essay, "Of History and Romance," we might perceive in *Genius* a useful distinction between the moral and the tendency of Godwin's final work. While its "moral" purpose can be readily articulated as the dissemination of the truth about Christianity, its tendency is harder to pin down, so all the more worth probing to locate. In what follows, then, I employ an oscillating analytical method that tries to take account of both moral and tendency, and to begin to unravel the interplay between them.

Genius is, I would argue, ultimately of interest in the way of many of Godwin's works, as psychobiography, most especially in its tracing of Godwin's conflicted relationship with his own authorial purposes and expectations about the work's public reception. It lays out the tensions in

Godwin's own thought between sincerity and truth, between the primacy of private, inevitably subjective and partial, judgment on the one hand, and truth, with its aspiration to objectivity, on the other. Everything about Godwin's philosophical ambitions tells him the two must coincide; everything about his practice as a writer displays his recognition that – at least within the horizon of foreseeable historical time – they cannot.

III

First, on tendency. *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*, I argue, does have an enduring interest as an account of the psychopathology of Christian belief – as a first-person rendering of how Godwin lived and felt that experience in his own imagination. “Christianity,” he argues, “is the nightmare that has pressed down all its [the human mind's] exertions, and paralysed its articulations.” He apostrophizes, “Oh, when shall the mind of man again be free, shake off the chains that fasten it to its dungeon, and soar unrestrained in its native element? Who can tell, in the revolution of eighteen hundred years, what wonders it might not have effected?”²¹ As Godwin's sincerity breaks through his dispassionate philosophical tone, it becomes clear that *Genius* is more memoir than treatise, that its mode is confession and its subject a meditation upon the powerfully subterranean workings of human affect. The 1835 Preface illustrates well, as it nears its end, this slide into an uncontrollable emotional intensity: “I will conclude this prefatory, apologetical discourse with an acknowledgement that I am a frail and fallible creature. I am almost terrified with my own audacity.”²²

The generic precursors for *Genius*, then, are not so much d'Holbach's or Chateaubriand's earlier critique and defense of Christianity, but instead the confessional autobiographies of Augustine and Rousseau. The 1835 Preface begins in a distinctly Rousseauvian vein: “I have been stopped for three months by the consideration, What am I that I should have the confidence to endeavour to stem the current of my species? I ask my own heart, and that replies to me with entire assurance, that there is nothing I more earnestly desire than the welfare

of mankind." In words that echo Rousseau's ethics of sentiment, Godwin adds,

I am anxious to be loved, to be approved, to be applauded [...] to be known for the tender-hearted susceptible affectionate creature that I truly am, with a sense that feels along the line, that vibrates to every vibration, that shrinks and shrivels and is painfully contracted, when any thing occurs that seems hostile to the general interest.²³

Or, if not Augustine and Rousseau, then James Hogg might seem the most apt predecessor, since his *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* emerge from a Calvinist background so similar to Godwin's. Especially in this Preface, but persistently throughout, *Genius* testifies, like Caleb Williams' final speech (version two) to Godwin's integrity, even while evidencing the disintegrative power upon integral subjectivity of the Calvinist doctrine of sincerity.

Genius, however, is of more general interest as well, as a study of the rhetoric and ideology of Christianity, and of the historically efficacious intersection of these two elements. Godwin's primary topic is the *ingenuity* of the Christian religion, the secrets of its success, and especially the sources of its power of persistence, both across history and within the individual mind. So *Genius* is a study of affect, of Christianity's ability to play upon the register of human hopes and fears – not, for Godwin, our most essential nature, but our surfaces. Godwin speaks quite bluntly of what he sees as "the extraordinary ignorance of Jesus as to the nature of man,"²⁴ and yet Christianity has arguably been for some time the world's most successful religion due to its uncanny grasp of human psychology. Probing Godwin's own religious odyssey, *Genius* offers testimony to how Christianity's psychological duplicity plays out in the mind of a Calvinist (un)believer, how it feels to be an heir of the Calvinist heritage – which is, for Godwin, the truest, i.e., the most logically consistent, variant of Christianity. As Godwin's tone reveals, that heritage is inextractable, corroding the philosophical

optimism that he attempts to maintain; the narrative voice here is neither serene, nor at peace. So *Genius* is, in the end, a failed confession, for it mistakes its own generic impulse and value; it tries to be what it is not (such narratorial miscalculation being a recurrent theme of Godwin's novels).

Genius demonstrates as it proceeds and as Godwin frames and re-frames it how the power of sincerity, what the heart feels to be true, is greater than the power of truth itself. Sincerity is the source of the speaker's compulsion to speak. The text's stance is at moments weirdly Christ-like, its voice strangely Calvinist, denunciatory and abject at the same time. Hence *Genius* is, I would argue, as much a first-person narrative as the novel Godwin published at about the same time, *Mandeville*, his historical study of a character immersed in Calvinist ideology making his way at the time of the Puritan Revolution.²⁵ Neither text alone represents the "truth" of Calvinism, neither should be read alone. But combined, these two texts, would-be treatise and novel, fix the two extreme poles of Calvinism's ideological genealogy. Both are meditations upon personal failure and intellectual stasis.

That Calvinist upbringing makes it hard for Godwin, at any point in his career, to develop a convincing theory of historical or personal change. Such possibilities recede forever beyond an imagination bounded by a prescriptive determinism. Already at the time of *Political Justice*, his inherited Calvinist theory of predestination had given way, by a logical progression, to an equally necessitarian materialism that gets articulated repeatedly throughout *Genius*. This is, for Godwin, intimately connected to his critique of Christianity, with its alternative notion of an interventionist causality.

The object of the following pages is to counteract, and, as far as may be, put an end to, the reign of superstition and error, to fix the history and phenomena of the universe on their true foundation [...] and to impress upon [my species] the great truth, that all that is, is subject to laws, fixed in their weight, measure and

duration, capable of the most exact calculation, and which in no case admit of variation and exception.²⁶

This perspective, he later adds, extends to mental phenomena as well:

Whatever is not thus to be accounted for is of mind, and springs from the volition of some being, of which the material form is subjected to our senses, and the action of which is in like manner regulated by the laws of nature. Besides this, mind as well as matter is subject to fixed laws, and thus every phenomenon and occurrence around us is rendered a topic for the speculations of sagacity and foresight.²⁷

Hence Godwin's repeated insistence, here as in other writings, that men are the product of circumstances – his broad term for all that impinges upon our volition and behavior: "The mighty power of circumstance," he contends, determines our ethical status for good or for ill; the same person, in other circumstances, would turn out wholly differently. "No maxim can be more common, at the same time that no maxim can be more irrefragable; than that man is to a great degree the creature of the circumstances in which he is placed,"²⁸ an argument that Godwin uses to undercut the standard Christian justification for final judgment. Here arises the problem, however, of any determinist causality. If circumstances are so determinative, how can anyone stand outside of circumstances to change them? And do so, moreover, not just for oneself, but for others, especially given the deep affective imprinting of circumstances upon the mind, their pre-rational basis?²⁹ As if external circumstances were not enough, Godwin insists in *Genius* upon the equally heavy weight of personal temperament in inhibiting change, and the consequent necessity for an ethical constraint in judgment quite antithetical to Christian views. "It must surely be unjust to dispose of the fates of these men to all eternity for happiness or misery, in consequence of dispositions they inherited before they first drew vital air on the surface of the earth."³⁰ Free will and personal responsibility are myths ... if inevitable ones and perhaps even valuable or necessary ones. Here,

however, Godwin's text chooses to evade a key philosophical problem, turning aside from what he terms "abstruser speculations" about the existence of free will. He leaves the actual processes of choice and change mysterious and unpredictable, just as the impact of a book like *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled* remains imprevisible.³¹

Amid these epistemological and rhetorical uncertainties, *Genius* grounds itself upon the premise of human sincerity:

The first thing required of him [a man] is sincerity, that he should have an open front and an undaunted heart, and that benevolence and philanthropy should mould every lineament of his face, that he should carry his heart in his hand and upon his lips, that we should fearlessly speak the truth each man to his neighbor, and be vigilant in well-doing.³²

Sincerity depends in practice, as Mark Philp has so acutely and thoroughly analyzed, upon the preservation of a space for private judgment.³³ Sincerity is the only thing truly worth striving for ... and yet, as Godwin also concedes, so hard to attain, and even harder to maintain. Its condition is utter solitude, unintruded upon by outside pressures of any kind. Godwin's central objection to the Christian God is couched in terms of the need to sustain sincerity. The idea of a final judgment, not only unjust in itself and the source of terrible acts against other human beings, justified by our denigration of their worth, is in the end incompatible with the effort to be sincere with oneself; that sincerity is, in turn, the indispensable basis for an accurate self-assessment and a fitting self-reverence. Godwin develops an explicit political analogy to represent the deleterious effects of the divine omniscience that underlies Christian justifications of final judgment:

Under Mortal tyrants mankind have passed their days in a constant terror of spies and informers. They dared not utter their thoughts before a stranger, lest they should be reported, and so made subject to the most fatal consequences. Nay, to so great a height has the alarm

sometimes attained, that they dared not speak their sentiments to their most seemingly confidential friend, lest that friend might prove false, and betray them.³⁴

Godwin evokes the cavern of Dionysus to illustrate this condition, then imagines the projection of this sort of scrutiny into the inner recesses of the human mind: "according to Christian doctrine, we are subject to an inspection still more fearful than this [...]. As long as a man offends in thought only, he is safe from all the spies and *surveillance* that human ingenuity can invent. But it is not so with omniscience. 'God knoweth the secrets of the heart.'" Hence, "we dare not trust ourselves with our own thoughts."³⁵ In an unpublished essay of 1818, Godwin had already compared the Christian God to the jailer in Bentham's Panopticon: "We have a tyrant perpetually controlling us with his lash, with this additional horror, that he is acquainted with all our most secret motions, and sits like Jeremy Bentham, perched on the top of his Panopticon to spy into our weaknesses."³⁶ The implications of this perpetual porousness of mind can rightly seem appalling; Godwin spares no vehemence in castigating panoptic oversight: "'Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.' This is the most intolerable sentence in the whole cycle of religious morality."³⁷

As a consequence, Christianity inevitably cultivates duplicity and hypocrisy; human beings are simply incapable of dealing honestly with its mechanism of surveillance. Hence, in effect, even devout Christians ignore crucial portions of basic Christian doctrine.

The great body of professing Christians acknowledge with their mouths the creed which has been dinned into them; they repeat what has been taught them for truth; but it has scarcely any influence on their actions and lives. It is a thought laid by on all ordinary occasions, and only brought out at church on Sundays, and fasts and festivals. It is so carefully kept as to be in no danger of becoming familiar.³⁸

Fully sustained credence in the system of Christianity would destroy any truly cognizant believer. "It would so break our spirit, that it would be next to impossible that we should exist under it [...]." ³⁹ Steady adherence would lead, Godwin later argues, to insanity: "The first [kind of belief, that which thinks of the 'secrets of the world unknown'], in its natural and full operation, leads to madness." ⁴⁰ Fortunately, we are so constituted that we can ignore it, engaging throughout most of our lives in an ongoing and active repression of one or another part of Christianity's system of beliefs. We engage, quite successfully, in self-delusion. And life itself assists us:

fortunately, amidst the busy scenes and various excitements of this world, amidst the intoxication of luxury to the rich, and the perpetual calls for labour and industry to the bulk of mankind, the recollection of the rod of iron under whose sway we conceived ourselves to be placed, fades from our thoughts, and that, as was said before, we do not truly believe the creed which with our lips we profess. ⁴¹

As a result, the vast majority of Christians deal in duplicity even in their most intimate and private moments, such as prayer, a condition that they at some level consciously recognize:

All men have in reality in a confused sense lurking within them the sentiments of prayer which are here expressed. When we kneel as in the presence of an invisible being, and express to him our desires as if he heard us, and would, it may be, grant our requests, we are conscious of a secret absurdity [...] which renders our most sacred offices "as false as dicers" oaths [...]. ⁴²

Caught between two contradictory psychic stances, human integrity and sincerity become impossible: "The sort of belief and no belief which is nearly inseparable from the profession of the Christian faith, renders every man in some degree a hypocrite [...]. Each of us becomes, in some sort a double man, and is encumbered with limbs and articulations which

make no proper use of ourselves."⁴³ The personal tone here ("us" and "ourselves") is telling. Trained so perfectly in the Calvinist discipline of self-observation, Godwin cannot evade in the recesses of his mind his recollection of his own past duplicities [...] or his anxiety that they may not simply be past. Even if no God is watching, we watch ourselves.

Whence Godwin's vehemence, however, and what is his intended effect? What does he expect from his audience in thus denouncing the Christian God so absolutely, and in attacking so bitterly the figure of Jesus, to which he devotes an entire, lengthy chapter? Why does Godwin see the extirpation of Christianity as his task, and how can he imagine its attainment through the publication of a work like *Genius*, which he knows will offend most of his readers and thereby heighten their resistance to truth and its dispassionate concerns? If his moral purpose is, as he asserts, the furthering of a benevolence and tolerance that he finds too little present in Christianity, the tendency of *Genius* seems likelier to be perceived, rightly, as disputatious. Godwin's *Genius* is confessional most of all in leaving no space – as he cannot in his Calvinist imagination – for any alternative vision of Christianity. There is no place for compromise and no way to salvage anything from the ruins of Christian belief. Even worse, there is no way to move forward, even if one did know where one wished to go.

IV

I want to turn back now to the explicit moral of Godwin's text, his dissection of Christian psychopathology. Even a successfully maintained internal duplicity cannot wholly shield believers from its implications; even partial adherence to core Christian beliefs, he argues, can pervert our faculties. Hence much of *Genius* charts across history the corrosive psychological and ethical effects resulting from even the typically half-hearted allegiance to Christian doctrines. As Weston has rightly noted,

Godwin is primarily concerned with the *effects* of Christianity rather than its logical or historical veracity and is specifically intent on exposing as socially and

morally corruptive the “genius” or essence of Christianity, which Chateaubriand believed productive of the indisputable gains of Western civilization.⁴⁴

Godwin’s critique focuses upon the idea of hell, a preoccupation that one can easily trace to his own upbringing as a Sandemanian Calvinist.⁴⁵ Hard-core even among Calvinists, Sandemanians believed that the odds of salvation were markedly against the vast majority of human beings; their faith was a particularly unforgiving one, with almost all human beings doomed from the start to eternal torment. But Godwin’s claims are explicitly directed at *all* Christian religions and at the Bible itself. Although one can try to find in the Christian afterlife a glimpse of divine benevolence, Godwin argues that,

the Scriptures [the ultimate authority in matters of religion for Puritans, of course] teach us a different doctrine. They affirm that mankind shall ultimately be divided into two classes, figuratively called “the sheep and the goats,” and that in the day of judgment the wicked “shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.” And the distribution of the two classes is not less distinctly marked than their final destination. For we are told that “wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat,” while, on the other hand, “strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”⁴⁶

This doctrine, Godwin contends, is fundamentally incompatible with any notion of a truly just or benevolent God, a charge he documents meticulously throughout *Genius* with hundreds of quotes drawn from across the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments alike. As he puts it bluntly, within the frame of an explicit political analogy, “The God of the Christians is a tyrant,” whose ferocity of retributive zeal causes human beings to live “under a ‘reign of terror’”:⁴⁷

We are told of a God, irascible and vindictive, of fierce unmitigable passions and wrath, and who repents him of the good he has done to the children of men. We read that so vehement is his indignation that even the few that shall ultimately be saved cannot be received into his favour, without the substitute of a spotless and mysterious being, upon whom shall be laid the iniquities of us all, and in whose person God shall manifest his infinite displeasure against the delinquencies and enormities of mankind.⁴⁸

The state of the world around us, as an act of conscious design, offers further confirmation of the injustice of any divine being imagined to have created it:

It is impossible for us to remark to what a vast extent suffering and calamity reign in the world, without our being impressed with serious doubts as to the infinite power and benevolence which is said to rule the machine. Even as to the crimes and perversities which prevail among the sons of men, we can scarcely avoid thinking that perfect and almighty wisdom might have conducted things better than we behold them.⁴⁹

The figure of Christ fares no better, indeed, perhaps even worse, since Godwin lays at his door, personally, the characteristic ethical defects of the Christian religion. Looking at both Scripture and the historical impact of Christianity since its origins, Godwin concludes that this particular religion offers an irremediably negative view of human nature and character. Its genius, in the sense of its tutelary spirit, derives from the characteristic disposition of its founder, Jesus, whom Godwin sees as a figure not unlike many of the heroes of Godwin's novels, a figure of great intellect and potential, but ultimately of a saturnine and misanthropic temperament. Essay VII, "On the Character of Jesus," offers a psychobiography of the founder of Christianity conducted much like others of Godwin's middle and late historical essays.⁵⁰ He concludes with these words. "To sum up the

whole question as to the views of Jesus Christ respecting the final fates of mankind, nothing can be more certain than that they were of the gloomiest disposition.”⁵¹ Godwin finds it incomprehensible that any humane being might dwell with such “complacency” upon statements repeated as often as the Gospel accounts do, that the guilty “shall be cast into hell, where their worm, dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”⁵²

Jesus, therefore, was of the same mind as the royal monitor of the Jews, who says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” He was copious and exuberant in his threats of the divine anger. No one before him was ever so emphatical in asserting the doctrine of everlasting torments in a future world. He tells his hearers again and again, as we have seen, that there are few that shall be saved, and that the rest of mankind are doomed to everlasting burnings.⁵³

Nor is this ferocity limited to just some among many Christian denominations, an aberrant rendering of Jesus’ basic teachings. “I found however, unfortunately, as I proceeded [in my inquiries into Christianity], that the gloomy views of a future state were by no means confined to a sect of narrow-minded Christians, but that they received too much countenance from the original and authentic records of the founder of our religion.” To narrow his critique to only some Christian creeds would, in Godwin’s mind, be a misreading of the historical record that would constitute a “dastardly plan.”⁵⁴

Foremost among the effects of this Christian disposition is anxiety, a perpetual concern about possible sin leading to eventual damnation that, “poisoned to them [men] all that was naturally refreshing and agreeable in life ... Haven with them was heaven, and hell was hell [...]. Of consequence, the vision of these terrific menaces haunted their nightly slumbers, and poisoned all their enjoyments.”⁵⁵ This anxiety poisons as well the Christian’s relation with God.

He must therefore be a man of a peculiar constitution, that, however secure he may be of his own salvation,

does not feel a sacred horror and a nameless fear of that God who has thus miraculously rescued him. Even the fanatic himself, who in his own thoughts is elevated to the highest heavens, must sometimes recollect how unlike these heavens are to the pit from which he has so narrowly escaped.⁵⁶

Designed, it would seem, to alleviate human pain and suffering, Christianity has done the reverse, even for those who imagine themselves among the elect. Even in its revisionist post-Reformation forms, Christianity turns an appropriate religious sentiment of humility into humiliation.⁵⁷ This pattern is, to be sure, a result in significant measure of now-vanished historical circumstances; the origins of Christianity explain its present reality. "Man, as we have already said, fashions his God principally upon the model of his own manners and ideas. Hence it follows, where men were brutal and sanguinary in their proceedings, they represented God as acting in a similar manner, and saw nothing reprehensible in it."⁵⁸ But Christian doctrines have yet to catch up with changing historical circumstances – and seem, to Godwin, unlikely to be able to do so.

Moreover, despite its routine praise of brotherly love, the most common and deepest effect of the Christian perspective is a pervasive egoism. As "On Religion" had already asserted, under a Christian dispensation, "the principle of virtue as it exists in a well formed mind, is immediately converted into a refined and long-sighted selfishness."⁵⁹ The logic here is strictly mathematical. "Where the question is of millions of ages of bliss or of misery to myself, there can be no room for a thought of what may happen to others. All subtlety and refinement, all overflowing of a generous sentiment, must be at an end; and the mighty thought of what is at stake for myself must necessarily swallow up all incidental considerations"⁶⁰ – most emphatically, considerations related to other people. Naturally enough, this attitude poisons in turn our relations with other human beings. "The religion of the Jews and the Christians was essentially intolerant." Both led to intense doctrinal

disputation, and as a result, “Men, who were bitter and earnest in disputation, would not always content themselves with using the weapons of reason, but would sometimes employ those of a less ambiguous character.”⁶¹

Although not developed very far, Godwin’s critique extends beyond Christianity to encompass all anthropomorphic religions, especially monotheistic ones, which necessarily make their god the creator of both good and evil. By contrast, he praises the Zoroastrian conception of a creator as far superior to any monotheism. “How much superior to these crude and barbarous notions is the creed of the Orientals, who represented the system of the universe as under the conduct of two opposite and contending principles, the one the author of all good, the other of all evil!” In consequence of this dualism, “Oromades they represented as utterly removed from anger and vengeance, for ever happy and serene, always designing good for his creatures.”⁶² Although one cannot quite detect symptoms of an impending conversion by Godwin to Zoroastrianism, both the tone and the substance of *Genius* make it difficult to presume that Godwin’s attitude toward Christianity could be anything but uncompromisingly critical.⁶³ Sympathy for the dead, even reverence for them (as evidenced in Godwin’s 1809 “Essay on Sepulchres”) needed to be kept far apart from any effort to resurrect them.

V

So Godwin begins elsewhere, with a different account of human nature, one that sounds distinctively Romantic, but has its deepest roots in his own Protestant and anarchist sensibility. “We claim,” he says, “as our own peculiar province our innocence – innocence, in the strict and etymological sense of the word, that by which by no construction we can do any harm, when already every duty has been discharged, every debt paid to the utmost penny.”⁶⁴ and he quotes from his *Thoughts on Man* (1831) to underscore, “the inoffensiveness and innocence which ordinarily characterize him [...]. We cannot in equity do less than admire

the innocence of our species" under normal conditions. And he believes that we need criminal laws only "to prevent the ill-disposed few from interrupting the regular and inoffensive proceedings of the vast majority."⁶⁵ Ethics, therefore, are innate; they can be derived from within.⁶⁶ But innocence is not so much a matter of intuitive immediacy, as for Rousseau, as of logical necessity.

Given that premise, it is safe to give rein to the most fundamental human impulse, a desire and need for liberty:

we revel to shake off all restraint, save that of our innocence, and so to let our thoughts be free to roam wherever they please, and to say, "Now, within rational limits, I am accountable to no one; I may indulge my genius [...] we revel in the unbounded freedom of thought, conscious that we are under no restraint either of man, or (with reverence be it spoken) of God himself; that, within the limits of honour and innocence, we shall be called to no account, neither by any human tribunal, nor by a tribunal, which many of us look for, beyond the grave."⁶⁷

Liberty of thought is irreparably damaged by the postulate of a panoptic God; privacy of thought is essential to the full self-interrogation required by a Godwinian notion of sincerity. Yet Godwin is not reverting here to the strict rationalism and utopian anarchism of *Political Justice*. He is instead proposing an alternative foundation for ethics and justice that would be grounded not upon reason, but upon the imagination. He states this most directly in "On Religion," where he says,

I am myself deeply convinced that imagination is the basis of a sound morality. It is by dint of feeling, and of putting ourselves in fancy into the place of other men, that we can learn how we ought to treat them, and be moved to treat them as we ought [...] it is our impulses and our sentiments, that are the glory of our nature.⁶⁸

He goes on to pose his central question: “whether the empire of the imagination can be maintained in proper force without the aid of religion, or of what I call a false religion?” Religions, Godwin recognizes, do generally cultivate imagination and fellow feeling, but they do so, he believes, at too high a price, a price that in Christianity as it has developed historically amounts to psychological terrorism, both of ourselves and of others.

What gives these capacities of innocence wider appeal and validity for Godwin is the characteristic Romantic solution, nature. The social imagination requires supplementation by a visionary impulse. Now Godwin is not Wordsworth, attentive either to individual objects or to a more deeply interfused spirit in the world around him. Indeed, Godwin in the woods or among the lakes is rather hard to imagine. His relation to nature is instead an intellectual one, an appreciation for the workings of the whole that transcends the individualism toward which his Calvinist-Christian heritage tends. Looking at the world outside himself, he muses, “I find a plentiful harmony and adaptation of one thing to another throughout.” “There is further something wonderful,” he continues, “and to the organization of the human mind delicious, in the life, so to speak, of inanimate nature.” Rivers and tides and light and heat and wind and clouds, “go on for ever in their salutary and vivifying operations. In solitudes into which man nor beast ever penetrated, they still display their exuberant wealth, without needing the tribute of admiration, or expecting thankfulness in any of its forms.”⁶⁹ Nature, the source of the pain and suffering that, for Godwin, the premise of a God cannot explain, is still ultimately benevolent, salutary, restorative. His paeon to nature in “On Religion” is worthy of Wordsworth or Wollstonecraft at their most unrestrained. “How gloriously is the whole fabric built for admiration, and for advantage? To what transport, to what ravishment, is the soul of man raised, by contemplating the wonders of nature? [...] I am an infinitely small portion of this complicated machine, and am therefore thankful for the benefits I enjoy, gratefully disposed to make the most of my advantages, and not vain enough to think that I can break the

adamantine chain, by which every creature is held in his appointed place."⁷⁰

So nature becomes Godwin's alternative basis for religious humility and charity. Every human being is (or should be)

impressed with reverence and awe when he contemplates the universe of nature. He feels how little and how weak is man compared with the wonders that everywhere surround him. He is conscious that there is a mysterious power at work on all sides of him, in the contemplation of which he is penetrated with awe and, thereby, with a chastened humility.⁷¹

The relation here is a causal one. "That we should feel how frail and insignificant a part we constitute of the great whole; can alone inspire us with a proper sobriety and humility, and make us sensible of our real state and condition."⁷² Crucially, this is a decidedly non-anthropocentric world. The "great principle of all things," he asserts, is fundamentally alien to us, incomprehensible, not reducible to our conceptual or ethical terms. "The principle is not intellectual; its 'ways are not our ways.'"⁷³ Presuming that its ways are or might be our ways would be to lapse back into conventional religion. "To apply the term wisdom therefore to the formation of the earth and the things that are therein, I should regard as species of anthropomorphism, the shaping the incomprehensible cause of all things after the model of the human mind."⁷⁴ While admiring nature, Godwin insists that for "the good man,"

the "judgments" of this mysterious power are "unsearchable," and his ways "past finding out," and therefore he does not presume to penetrate into the secrets of what is sometimes called its Providence, or imagine that it will interest itself in his favour, or in any degree supersede the necessity of his vigilant and strenuous efforts.⁷⁵

But it is not simply humility that results from this experience; there is room, and doubtless a need, for a leap of faith (or of reason) to be

made. In passages that strikingly echo a rhetorical move by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species*, Godwin follows his acknowledgment of the alienness of the world around us by asserting that in *Nature* (his italics and capitalization), “we find a wonderful adaptation of means to ends similar to what, from the imperfect analogies we are acquainted with, we should be apt to denominate wisdom,” that is, a regularity and even benevolence not unlike that of a Divine Providence.⁷⁶

So, in the processes and changes which take place before our eyes, we in like manner remark a beneficent tendency, by which things are continued, are maintained in their state and condition, and even, as it often happens, restored and set right again after the unfortunate casualties that may occur.

And Godwin continues, “If we have not an omniscient friend, who perpetually beholds the things he has made, who ‘careth for us,’ and whose ‘tender mercies are over all his works,’ there is nevertheless a principle in nature which in a vast sum of instances works for good and operates beneficially for us.”⁷⁷

In Chapter IV of *The Origin*, Darwin’s version of natural providence goes thus: “It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinising, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life.” Thus, “natural selection can act only through *and for the good of* each being.”⁷⁸ For both Godwin and Darwin, this might seem panopticism writ large. Yet there is a significant difference with respect to the matter of apparent surveillance. What may matter most for Godwin is that we can be, in nature, unobserved by any particular being, that the perpetual scrutiny of any god and even, perhaps especially, of oneself, can be intermitted.

We love to be alone; to be surrounded with no objects but the fields and the trees, the mountains and the

waters, to hear nothing but the rustling of the foliage and the songs of the birds, and to feel the fresh breeze of heaven playing upon our cheeks. And, when we are thus alone, how do we revel in the unbounded freedom of thought, conscious that we are under not restraint either of man, or (with reverence be it spoken) of God himself; that, within the limits of honour and innocence, we shall be called to no account, neither by any human tribunal, nor by a tribunal, which many of us look for, beyond the grave.⁷⁹

Yet at the same time, Godwin's *Genius* testifies throughout, in its tone and its unremitting insistence upon what he knows his likely hearer will not have ears to hear, to the elusiveness of this aspiration. For the abolition of such a religion as Christianity would involve more than reasoned argument, even if that were to result in the alteration of determining circumstances. Against the impulses of reason lie the combined effects of trauma and disposition. Trauma: what lies too deep to be changed by a shift in circumstances. Disposition: what precedes and escapes circumstances. Godwin's disposition remains permeated to its core by the traumatic circumstances of his Calvinist training.

At some level, Godwin knows this paean to nature to be only an intermission, however consolatory it may be. His final words might therefore best be seen not as those of the manuscript itself, but as those of the letter to Mary Shelley and the dual prefaces that accompany the manuscript he addressed to Mary Shelley. Those final words look forward to a different fate and come full circle – to his own paradoxes and his own searing commitment to sincerity, which give to his text a subtext against which it begins to resonate. Seemingly confident in the benevolence of the universe and the world of nature, convinced of the ultimate innocence of his fellow human beings, he nonetheless anticipates that his effort to speak truth, even couched as his personal truth, will bring him vituperation. As stated previously, he imagines that

“This book will draw on me the misconstruction of multitudes. They will regard me with aversion and abhorrence. They will pursue me with execrations. Many of them would tear my poor remains from the grave, and treat them with every imaginable indignity.” To this he appends, with resignation, a last thought: “This I must endure” – presumably, even beyond the grave. May Godwin, once read, rest in peace.

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Notes

¹ William Godwin, *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, Vol. 7, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993), 80.

² Godwin, *Genius*, 82-83.

³ Godwin, *Genius*, 79.

⁴ Godwin, *Genius*, 96.

⁵ Godwin, *Genius*, 220.

⁶ Godwin, *Genius*, 102.

⁷ Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (Cornell UP, 1986), 30 & 33. Philp aptly terms Godwin's account of ethics a “perfectionist” one, distinct from both utilitarian and contractarian versions of justice. That is, “he values above all the development of human intellectual and moral capacities” (53). “For Godwin, history is the first part of a story about man's progressive liberation from the causal constraints of desires, passions and wants, unmediated and undirected by reflection” (94). As Philp notes, the key problem with a perfectionist account of ethics is its inattention to the issues of motivation, what it is that impels us to act consistently upon the basis of what we know, and persuasion, how we can bring others to share our sense of right behavior. As Godwin revises *Political Justice*, Philp sees him moving away from pure perfectionism and toward what he terms instead an “ideal utilitarianism,” which “no longer conflates wisdom and felicity” (154).

⁸ Godwin, *Genius*, 93.

⁹ Godwin, *Genius*, 96.

¹⁰ Philp sees this tension emerging explicitly in *Caleb Williams*, but strictly as a motivational or strategic issue, where truth and sincerity can still be made to coincide, although their joint success ultimately depends upon sentiment and sensibility, not just logical reasoning (116). This results in his account of Godwin's increasing openness (as he revised *Political Justice* and came to be influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft) to the need for sympathy to carry conviction, and thus a significant (indeed, *the* significant) shift in Godwin's intellectual framework. "The pleasures of sense are not nearly as alluring as the pleasures of reason, and the view that the pleasures of reason enter into our motive for action clearly involves a break with the Dissenting conception of reason as sufficient to motivate us to act justly" (147).

¹¹ Rowland Weston has provided the most thorough account of Godwin's shifting views toward religion across the course of his writing career, an analysis from which I have benefited greatly, even as I disagree with where he sees Godwin ending up. Thus, Weston has argued (408) that Godwin's shifting religious views are an example of a shift within British culture more broadly from a rationalist to a Romantic sensibility. Weston's view provides a very useful counterpoint to the view that Godwin's beliefs show any simple trajectory from conventional (or even unconventional) Calvinist doctrines toward a neatly consistent atheism. Rowland Weston, "William Godwin's Religious Sense" *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (2009): 407-23.

¹² Godwin, *Genius*, 79.

¹³ Godwin, *Genius*, 80.

¹⁴ Godwin, *Genius*, 159.

¹⁵ Godwin, *Genius*, 99 & 101.

¹⁶ Godwin, *Genius* 80.

¹⁷ Godwin, *Genius* 79. This charge is, to be sure, deeply ironic, given that Godwin had withheld Mary's second novel, *Mathilda*, from publication out of his own fear of the reception that a narrative concerned explicitly with paternal incest would receive. Mary's state of mind on receiving this letter and final manuscript from her father is well worth imagining.

¹⁸ Godwin, *Genius*, 81.

¹⁹ Godwin, *Genius*, 81. As pointed out to me by Jonathan Crimmins at NASSR 2013, this is very much a vision of hell on earth, a literalized version of the Christian afterlife of the damned that *Genius* sets out to eliminate from the human imagination.

²⁰ The introductory note to the Pickering edition of *Genius* summarizes the reception thus: "When the *Essays* [...] appeared they were treated rather more leniently than Godwin had anticipated. Indeed, reviewers found some aspects praiseworthy. But this does not mean Godwin was out of touch with contemporary opinion. As several of the reviewers mentioned, the doctrines which Godwin was attacking were no longer widely espoused. Having been written in one intellectual climate, the work appeared in a very different one." (77-78)

²¹ Godwin, *Genius*, 199.

²² Godwin, *Genius*, 96.

²³ Godwin, *Genius*, 81. Rousseau's Introductory Note to *The Confessions* even anticipates Godwin's concern for the fate of his manuscript: "Here is the only portrait of a man, painted exactly according to nature and in all of its truth, that exists and probably ever will exist. Whoever you may be whom my destiny or my confidence has made the arbitrator of the fate of this notebook, I conjure you by my misfortunes, by your entrails, and in the name of the entire human species not to annihilate this unique and useful work." Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, I (Gallimard, 1959), 3 [my translation].

²⁴ Godwin, *Genius*, 205.

²⁵ Weston has explored the parallels of these two texts in illuminating ways in "William Godwin and the Puritan Legacy," *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 39 (2012), 411-42. An especially astute essay on *Mandeville* is Tilottama Rajan's "The Disfiguration of the Enlightenment: War, Trauma, and the Historical Novel in Godwin's *Mandeville*," *Godwinian Moments*, ed. Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto UP: 2011), 172-93.

²⁶ Godwin, *Genius*, 82.

²⁷ Godwin, *Genius*, 154. Borrowing the geological terms of the era, one might refer to Godwin as having a "catastrophist" view of history.

²⁸ Godwin, *Genius*, 127.

²⁹ Weston notes the power that Mandeville sees circumstances having over his life, and the curious doubleness of being sane enough to recognize and admit their power, without being sane enough to escape them.

³⁰ Godwin, *Genius*, 127. Godwin, in this regard, foreshadows Nietzsche's critique of Christian ethics and of the whole apparatus of societal and theological punishments. See also 129.

³¹ *Thoughts on Man* did pursue this issue further in the essay, "Of the Liberty of Human Actions." There Godwin had argued that "every man, the necessarian as well as his opponent, acts on the assumption of human liberty, and can never for a moment, when he enters into the scenes of real life, divest himself of this persuasion" (164). This "delusive sense of liberty" (as Godwin terms it, referring back to Lord Kames' *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*), rooted in feeling, is essential for moral awareness. "Love and hatred, as they regard our fellow-creatures, in contradistinction to the complacency, or the feeling of an opposite nature, which is excited in us towards inanimate nature, are entirely the offspring of the delusive sense of liberty" (167). Indeed, "Our moral sentiments are all involved with, and take their rise in, the delusive sense of liberty. It is in this that is contained the peculiar force of the terms virtue, duty, guilt, and desert" (167-68). Not only can we *not* divest ourselves of this delusion, "it is not desirable that we should do so," for it is the basis of human ethics, a delusion "to which the world we live in is indebted for its crowning glory and greatest lustre" (170).

Yet Godwin, in his usual way, notes that the necessarian position also involves a "hallucination of the human intellect," suffering from the misconception that human lives can (or, crucially, *should*) be lived according to a strictly rational, causally determinist perspective. "They did not perceive what a wide devastation and destruction they were proposing of all the terms and phrases that are in use in the communications between man and man in actual life" (168-69).

³² Godwin, *Genius*, 136.

³³ See especially Philp's discussions in his Introduction (10-12), Chapter 1, "Godwin and Rational Dissent" (16-26, 33-37), and Chapter 7, "The Ethical Dimension of the Revisions" (156-59).

³⁴ Godwin, *Genius*, 130.

³⁵ Godwin, *Genius*, 131. Dionysus had a cavern constructed in the shape of an enormous ear, in which he imprisoned his political prisoners, and above which, by positioning himself correctly, he could hear even the whispers of their conversations.

³⁶ William Godwin, "Of Religion," *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, Vol. 7, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993), 65.

³⁷ Godwin, *Genius*, 204. These two sentences form the first paragraph, tellingly, of a fragmentary essay in *Genius* entitled "On Liberty."

³⁸ Godwin, *Genius*, 108.

³⁹ Godwin, *Genius*, 130.

⁴⁰ Godwin, *Genius*, 237.

⁴¹ Godwin, *Genius*, 130.

⁴² Godwin, *Genius*, 91.

⁴³ Godwin, *Genius*, 108.

⁴⁴ Weston, "Godwin's Religious Sense," 409.

⁴⁵ Peter Marshall quotes from the Abinger manuscripts Godwin's own assessment of Sandeman's doctrines: "After Calvin had damned ninety-nine in a hundred of mankind," Godwin joked bitterly, Sandeman "contrived a scheme for damning ninety-nine in a hundred of the followers of Calvin." *William Godwin* (Yale UP, 1984). On Godwin's religious education, see also William St. Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys* (Johns Hopkins UP: 1989), Chapter 1. Daniel E. White's *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge UP: 2006) offers a detailed study of the Dissenting genealogy of Romanticism in general, and sees Godwin aiming in his writings at "a cooperative form of discourse that will, in the absence of the emphatic sociability of

Dissenting public life, maintain the integrity of the individual private judgment and marry rational and affective strategies" (14-15). His chapter on Godwin usefully discusses Godwin's use of the memoir as a form of "collaborative and collective" writing that would be an alternative to the polemics of political pamphlets.

⁴⁶ Godwin, *Genius*, 111.

⁴⁷ Godwin, *Genius*, 132 & 105.

⁴⁸ Godwin, *Genius*, 85.

⁴⁹ Godwin, *Genius*, 155.

⁵⁰ Both Godwin's *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1803) and his *Lives of Edward and John Philips. Nephews and Pupils of Milton. Including Various Particulars of the Literary and Political History of their Times* (1815) are instances of what might term his bio-historiographical method.

⁵¹ Godwin, *Genius*, 177-78.

⁵² Godwin, *Genius*, 178.

⁵³ Godwin, *Genius*, 183.

⁵⁴ Godwin, *Genius*, 103.

⁵⁵ Godwin, *Genius*, 185-86.

⁵⁶ Godwin, *Genius*, 156.

⁵⁷ Godwin, *Genius*, 197.

⁵⁸ Godwin, *Genius*, 218.

⁵⁹ Godwin, "On Religion," 65.

⁶⁰ Godwin, *Genius*, 162. Plato, too, in the *Republic* (Book III, 386a-388d) was concerned about the effects of a civic religion based upon fear of punishments, and concerned, especially, about the role that literature played in heightening such fears.

⁶¹ Godwin, *Genius*, 192.

⁶² Godwin, *Genius*, 218.

⁶³I diverge here from Rowland Weston, whose thorough assessment of *Genius* leads him to the opposite conclusion, finding in the trajectory of Godwin's career an increasing sympathy for conservative Romantic and even Catholic perspectives on Christianity. Godwin would, I think, have dismissed such impulses as nostalgic and ineffectual, not necessarily ill-

intentioned, but untimely for a period of history that had moved far beyond them, and dangerous in any effort to recover them. See Weston, "William Godwin's Religious Sense," 416 and 420. "The Puritan Legacy" suggests that "the best solution [presumably, even for Godwin himself] to Godwin's central political dilemma [of grounding social sympathy and solidarity] appears to be the Anglo-Catholic ideal expressed in *Mandeville*, itself based upon a "Burkean commitment to Christianity" (431).

⁶⁴ Godwin, *Genius*, 204.

⁶⁵ Godwin, *Genius*, 116.

⁶⁶ Weston aptly terms Godwin's view of religious sentiment an "innatist" one ("William Godwin's Religious Sense," 410). As he puts it on 413, "Godwin insists that Christianity's beliefs are damaging and unlivable because they contradict our innate moral and *religious* sense."

⁶⁷ Godwin, *Genius* 205.

⁶⁸ Godwin, "On Religion," 67.

⁶⁹ Godwin, *Genius*, 224-25.

⁷⁰ Godwin, *Genius*, 70-71.

⁷¹ Godwin, *Genius*, 138.

⁷² Godwin, *Genius*, 103. See Weston's useful account of this process, "William Godwin's Religious Sense," 416-17.

⁷³ Godwin, *Genius*, 226. "Nature" is capitalized twice in this section by Godwin, the only time that this occurs in his text.

⁷⁴ Godwin, *Genius*, 224.

⁷⁵ Godwin, *Genius*, 138.

⁷⁶ Godwin, *Genius*, 226.

⁷⁷ Godwin, *Genius*, 227.

⁷⁸ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (Harvard UP, 1964), Chapter IV: "Natural Selection," 84.

⁷⁹ Godwin, *Genius*, 205. Isolation, albeit in a geographical rather than a psychological sense, is vital for Darwinian evolution as well, allowing advantageous adaptations to flourish and spread.

