

Exploring the Holy Land: Harriet Martineau's Comparative Theology

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The result must be, when the study is real and earnest, either that the metaphysics must dwindle away into a mere fanciful adornment of the theology, or the theology must be in time stripped of its dogmatic character, exhausted thereby of its vitality, and reduced to a mere name and semblance. (Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography*, 558)

Harriet Martineau's journey from Unitarianism to atheism¹ has been well documented in scholarship, particularly in relation to the break in her relationship with her brother James, a Unitarian clergyman. Also relevant in this regard is Martineau's engagement with Auguste Comte's positivism and Religion of Humanity, as well as her explorations in mesmerism. Each of these factors contributed to marking her position as a prolific yet controversial public intellectual. Her impressive career as a journalist, economist, educator, and abolitionist has become increasingly appreciated in spite of her sometimes extreme metaphysical explorations. But one aspect of her writing that remains underrepresented is the foundational role of theology in shaping her intellectual development. This is also true of her approach to the fields in which she would become known as formational, such as political economy, travel writing, and sociology. In fact, Martineau's appreciation of, and rigorous critical engagement with, the theological underpinnings of the cultures in which she traveled

or explored—including her own middle-class British culture—reveals the ways in which, like Comte, she saw theology as the beginning of human understanding.

While she clearly moved away from theology in a truly positivist (scientific rationalism) direction, Martineau's engagement with comparative theologies in her earliest writing is carried throughout her career, providing a foundation from which she engages with ideas of ethics and social justice, as well as the hypocrisies that arise from the impulse to hold to dogma over scientific knowledge and human feeling. Through mapping the foundations of belief, one could arrive at the fundamental Unified Idea, which Martineau saw as the essence of the divine impulse. This essay focuses on Martineau's writings on the East as examples of her critical engagement with theology. From a Comtean perspective, she seeks to trace the primitive roots of human belief and belief structures, finding the resonances between them in their roots, while also setting them up as foils for each other to challenge their resiliency and authenticity to their stated missions. In particular, through her engagement not just with Islam, Judaism, and Christianity but with the mythologies of ancient Egypt, she seeks to establish a coherency between faiths as well as reveal the corruption of human religion in relation to theological thought.

Interdisciplinarity and Comparative Theology

In order to understand Martineau's relationship to theology in a culture that officially excluded women from conventional theological discourse, it is crucial to extend the scope of what is considered theological writing. This extension is particularly important in the nineteenth-century context for two main reasons: first, intellectual engagement was more organically interdisciplinary than twentieth- or early twenty-first-century scholarship. A second factor concerns the general theological trend to contemplate "the eternal life of God as a source for answers to social disorder" (Calhoun, "Proclaiming" 1). The connection between theology and society is important to Martineau's promotion of the idea of "God's 'strict unity,'" that the divine being is the "exclusive cause and source of

a singular, universal truth and a consistent, immutable moral government" (Calhoun, "Interpreting" 102). For Martineau, theology, like any discipline, needed to be connected to human civilization and society in order to have meaning. Thomas Scheff, who argues for interdisciplinarity in research, notes "the most physical science progress has been made when separate disciplines or subdisciplines have combined" (179). Martineau values the networking together of various genres and disciplines in order to create a stronger web of human meaning, perceiving the inter-relationships before strict disciplinary boundaries were outlined, enforced, and fiercely defended by subsequent intellectuals. Interdisciplinarity is, for Martineau, a form of simultaneous connection and critique, as she teases apart and re-categorizes ideas. While Lucy Bending has referred to the "profound instability of many of Martineau's own terms of description" (67), this very instability becomes the critical nexus of Martineau's theological understanding. Her atheist position is, to some degree, ironic, undergirded by her early foundation of Unitarianism that would remain instrumental in all of her intellectual pursuits. Regardless of the existence or otherwise of a personal God, Martineau held to the importance of "the essential truths, or principles" that were to inform moral forms (Calhoun, "Proclaiming" 67). While Martineau saw Unitarianism as superior to trinitarian Christianity and to monotheistic Judaism and Islam, and her own move to atheism as superior again, she also saw the importance of each religion's theological construct as a necessary part of the development of human civilization.

Given the importance Martineau lends to the connection between theological understanding and society, it is not surprising that there are strong links between Martineau's life-writing, travel writing, and comparative theology. Carolyn Barros suggests that in Victorian autobiography, there were four central types of transformation: the religious, the philosophical, the scientific, and the literary. These transformations were used to "manifest the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the culture in which they are inscribed and to which they are addressed" (viii). Jill Conway further suggests that autobiography provides space to

explore the dynamic nature of intellectual disciplines, reflecting the “chaotic ebb and flow of experience,” which can also relate to a practical understanding of the relationship between theology and social progress (3). To understand Martineau’s theological perspectives, then, it is crucial to understand her perspectives on intellectual life, as presented in her *Autobiography* (1877). It is evident that, for Martineau, theology was not immutable, as much as it is a foundation of intellectual life. Instead, this foundation becomes transformed and understood through the disciplines that rest upon it, from political and moral economy, through to her anthropological and sociological understandings of human societies. Sidonie Smith argues that “the pattern-making, or hermeneutical propensity that characterized [Martineau’s] early response to life” is crucial to understanding Martineau’s intellectual development: “[patterns] provided a means of control, making life more coherent and tractable, less chaotic and threatening” (129). I take this argument further to suggest that the hermeneutical propensity in Martineau’s writing comes both from her early exposure to theological study and from her early adoption of Comtean positivism. Martineau’s fusion of mapping, hierarchy, and evolution in her presentation of human intellectual development reveals a strongly positivist philosophical approach to understanding theology and its relationship to human nature and society.

Auguste Comte and Martineau’s Theological Methodology

Martineau began translating Auguste Comte’s *Cours de Philosophie Positive* in June 1852 and it was published by John Chapman in 1853. In her *Autobiography*, she claims that, while she had heard Comte’s name “for many years,” she had only a “vague notion of the relation of his philosophy to the intellectual and social needs of the time” before 1850 (586). However, Susan Hoecker-Drysdale points out that Martineau’s exposure to French positivism began much earlier, in 1830, when she was introduced to the work of Claude-Henri, Comte de Saint-Simon, by the French socialist Gustave D’Eichtal (176). Saint-Simon was one of Auguste Comte’s most influential professors; and, while Comte developed

his own structures of positivism, his work remained heavily influenced by his early master. It is not a great stretch to suggest that Martineau was reading Comte in the original series of texts, published between 1830 and 1842, and was therefore aware of his ideas well before she started translating and condensing the series. Comte's influence, and that of French positivism more generally, is strongly evident in her 1840s travel writing on the East, and also in her apologetic writing and religious fiction of the 1830s, particularly in relation to her understanding of theological, metaphysical, and scientific progress.

Martineau's epistemology is derived from Comte's philosophy of the three stages of scientific progress: the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific (or positive). Like Comte, she was a "systems thinker" and "assumed that ideas and belief were fundamental to social change" (Hoecker-Drysdale 171). As Smith argues, "Martineau found Comte's developmental categories the most powerful hermeneutic tool for understanding the world and herself" (131), and therefore believed that his system was essential to the further progress of human society. In the preface to her translation of Comte, she writes of her "deep conviction" of the need for Comte's intellectual structures and vision of social organization in British society:

We are living in a remarkable time, when the conflict of opinions renders a firm foundation of knowledge indispensable, not only to our intellectual, moral, and social progress, but to our holding such ground as we have gained from former ages [...]. The moral dangers of such a state of fluctuation as has thus arisen are fearful in the extreme, whether the transition stage from one order of convictions to another is long or short. The work of M. Comte is unquestionably the greatest single effort that has been made to obviate this kind of danger; and my deep persuasion is that it will be found to retrieve a vast amount of wandering, of unsound speculation, of listless or reckless doubt, and of moral uncertainty and depression. (Preface vii-viii)

The way that Martineau traces the history of theology resonates strongly with this desire to find a “firm foundation of knowledge.” She writes in her *Autobiography* that the purpose of writing about her Eastern travels was to “illustrate the genealogy [...] of the old faiths” in order to find the central (unified) Idea or Truth—or idea of truth (520). As a result, she “obtained clearness as to the historical nature and moral value of all theology,” which necessarily influenced a great deal of her future work (521). But by mentioning “holding such ground as we have gained from former ages” in the Preface, she hints at the aspects in which she departs from Comte’s positivism. While she sees Comte’s work as providing a methodology that would assist in bringing about cohesion in all human thinking, including theology, by putting it all within its proper hierarchical place, she crucially suggests—in opposition to Comte—that one does not have to depart from old ways in order to enter into the new. Thus, as she “travels intellectually from the theological, through the metaphysical, to the scientific or positivist perspective,” Martineau “does not actually leave behind the earlier stages in the way that Comte would suggest is necessary, but rather she positions them as permanent foundations for progress” (Scholl, “Mapping” 23-24). Unlike Comte, Martineau returns to theology repeatedly (25). This is made evident in her continued respect for theological pursuits, although she believed it was necessary that such pursuits be conducted through the lens of science—in other words, a positive approach to theology.

Martineau further departs from Comte in the way she navigates between the knowable and unknowable. Whereas Comte’s positivism dismissed the pursuit of knowledge that cannot be proved as elements of the earlier theological and metaphysical stages, Martineau continues to value such pursuits as an essential, continuing part of civilization’s development. In her *Autobiography*, she writes, it “would no doubt have been a fine thing” for her “if a teacher had been at hand to show [her] the boundary line between the knowable and the unknowable”; yet through understanding the connection between the two, which cannot be wholly separated, she has come to a more valuable understanding of “physical and

moral science"—the former being empirically knowable, the latter unknowable in an empirical sense (104). She extends the idea of science further than Comte by using, in her theological writings, history as a science to interpret and engage with theology in a way that lends it a seemingly empirical position. This looking backward rather than forward is her strongest departure from Comte. Yet, by emphasizing the importance of what can be known, it maintains the spirit of positivism by bringing theology into material history in order to uncover its central Idea, rather than its being reified into the spiritual and theoretical. In this way, Martineau's theology becomes both comparative and ecumenical, while being grounded in history and material culture.

Early Inter-Cultural Theological Engagement

While Martineau's three prize-winning essays, written in 1830 for the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, effectually established her writing career, they are rarely engaged with in modern scholarship. However, these essays, along with the even more rarely mentioned *Traditions of Palestine* (1830),² are foundational in positioning Martineau as a theological writer. Looking back on the essays in her *Autobiography*, Martineau recalls with uncharacteristic self-criticism: "The Catholic essay was ignorant and metaphysical, if my recollection of it is at all correct; and the other two mere fancy pieces: and I can only say that if either Mohammedans or Jews have ever been converted by them, such converts can hardly be rational enough to be worth having" (136). Although an unusual break from Martineau's general confidence and conviction in her own skill as a writer and intellectual, in this case her self-effacement is necessary for her in order to adamantly separate herself from the content of these early pieces. They were designed as apologies for Unitarianism, intended to convert Roman Catholics, Jews, and Muslims to the Unitarian faith; and, by the time she was writing her *Autobiography*, she had very much removed herself from Unitarianism and wanted to make that separation clear. However, as Calhoun observes, although Martineau came to deride these essays, "they remain significant not only as a catalyst to her

career but, even more notably, as a snapshot of the kind of Unitarian theology that was prized in Britain at this time” (“Proclaiming” 67).

Martineau’s rhetorical technique in each of the competition pieces was to appeal to the respective group’s sense of agreement, emphasizing the unifying truths or ideas they held with Unitarianism. In the treatise directed to Roman Catholics, *The Essential Faith of the Universal Church*, Martineau begins: “As Christians addressing Christians, we, whose faith is called Unitarianism, invite you, our Roman Catholic brethren, to join with us in investigating the origin and true nature of that Gospel which we agree in believing worthy of the deepest study, the most unremitting interest, and the highest regard” (5). In her address to Jews, Martineau appeals to spiritual cohesion by suggesting that a part of the gift of God to the Jewish nation was that they were able to experience the divine directly: “While the mysteries of paganism were concealed in the recesses of Egyptian temples, your fathers were assembled at the foot of Sinai, listening to the thunders and watching for the disclosures of the cloud in which the glory of God was shrouded” (1). She implores the Jewish reader to begin to listen directly to God again. However, it is the spiritual unity she claims between Unitarianism and Islam (Mohammedism) that is perhaps the most radical and also the most pertinent to her theological cause.

Unlike the first two competition pieces, which are written as conventional essays, *The Faith Unfolded by Many Prophets* is written as didactic fiction. In many ways, this piece, along with *Traditions of Palestine*, which is also didactic fiction, are forerunners of Martineau’s rhetorical style in her economic series, *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34), which would launch her as a literary celebrity and public intellectual. In fact, Martineau credited the prize money she received with giving her the time and space to plan out her economic series (*Autobiography* 137). The fictionalization of *Faith as Unfolded*, as in *Illustrations*, breaks down the wall between theory and practice—in this case, between theology and human relationship—in a provocative way that challenges assumptions more effectively than a purely didactic

rhetorical mode. In fleshing out and giving life to the Unitarian and Islamic characters—two men who have become intimate friends despite deeply ingrained prejudice—Martineau disallows her readers' ease of emotional and psychological separation that occurs from a purely intellectual activity, instead forcing them to acknowledge a human connection that supersedes religious, cultural, or intellectual presumption. She also steps back into the position of omniscient narrator, excluding speech marks so that the men's extended conversation intertwines with the narrative in a way that resonates with indirect speech; this further conflates the reader's voice with that of the narrative itself, neither inviting nor forcing them into the narrative, but causing them to find themselves immersed in it almost unconsciously. In this way, although the text is less conventionally a theological text than the first two essays, its capacity to convey potentially unsettling theological ideas becomes more powerfully visceral and disruptive.

Rather than theology, Martineau opens *Faith as Unfolded* with the primacy of human relationship:

There was a friendship like that of brothers between Havilah the son of Aram, and a man of another nation, to whom Havilah gave the name Eber. Yet Eber was a Christian, while Havilah was a follower of the Prophet. Havilah remembered how his father had early taught him to despise the Jews and Christians, and how he had hated them in his youth; yet he did not repent of his love for Eber. (5)

Martineau goes on to depict the development of this friendship through authentic spiritual belief and genuine human compassion: "When Havilah's child was sick Eber had, by the blessing of God, restored him. When Havilah's wife had died Eber wept with the mourner and comforted him. Havilah, in his turn, opened his house and his bosom to the Christian, and made him his brother" (6). It is from this position of genuine respect and love for each other that the men enter into a dialogue regarding their theological positions. Yet even in this, Martineau still uses the appeal to

agreement in order to evoke a sense of spiritual cohesion. Eber says: “Though we worship not side by side, nor in the name of the same Prophet, yet we worship together; for we pray to the same God, often at the same time,—and may it not be said in the same spirit?” to which Havilah replies, “So I even believe, my friend” (6). Martineau arguably makes her most “ecumenical claims based on her doctrine of divine unity” in *Faith as Unfolded*: “The order of the world speaks to the ‘one Preserver’ and, most importantly, to the one truth. Although truth is expressed in multiple forms and even multiple religions, its underlying consistency reveals the single divine source of all reality. Christians and Muslims may have different doctrines and distinct practices, but they both worship ‘the same Father’” (Calhoun, “Interpreting” 111). Martineau refines her theology further by suggesting a closer connection between Unitarians and Muslims than with trinitarian Christians. Eber claims a similar spirit and conviction similar to that of his Muslim friend: “When I have seen those who are called Christians praying to Jesus as a God, *I have also mourned*, because having known the truth, they have corrupted it” (*Faith as Unfolded* 13; emphasis added). Eber thus claims spiritual kinship with his Islamic friend through his emotional response for what he sees, as does Havilah, as a kind of worship that has been corrupted by polytheism.

Fictionalized Theology

Few Martineau scholars make mention of *Traditions of Palestine*, yet it is distinctive as one of the most developed early fictional pieces Martineau wrote—more so than some of the rapidly produced *Illustrations of Political Economy*—and also one of her earliest engagements with disruptive theological ideas. Published before her competition pieces and less explicitly Unitarian, *Traditions* is a series of historical fiction tales set in the East during the time of Christ’s ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and ends with the early ministry of the Apostles. The first tale was published by the *Monthly Repository* in 1829, with the rest being serialized in 1830. Through her imagined reconstruction of everyday Palestinian life, Martineau conveys the unsettling nature of Christ’s

ministry and theology in relation to Jewish law and custom, vivifying the traumas of conversion from the emotive and social through to the intellectual. Such trauma is both individual and corporate, and the conversion narratives of various characters are depicted as much through the implications of their conversion on their familial and social relationships as through their grappling with new theological ideas.

The public literary reception of *Traditions* was favorable. The advertising review in the 8 January 1831 edition of *The Spectator* was brief but decided: "Harriet (Mrs. or Miss?) Martineau's *Traditions of Palestine* is a very superior performance, and one we ought not to discuss in a few lines. It is the production of a mind thoroughly imbued in New Testament lore; and though apparently the work of no great effort, we are mistaken if it be not the production of a great deal of thought" (36). Importantly, these two sentences draw together key aspects of what would become Martineau's literary profile: her scope of knowledge and depth of thought, and the ease with which she conveys her narrative. More specifically, the review values her theological knowledge, in no way expressing discomfort with her as a woman writer engaging with theological ideas—perhaps because it was written as a fictional narrative rather than an explicitly theological treatise. This appreciation of *Traditions* is consistent with the general response to the work.

A more extensive review in the Unitarian *Monthly Repository* reveals the way in which Martineau's text intersects with the theological appetite of the early nineteenth century, both in its use of genre and narrative and in its ecumenical underpinnings. Although Christian in emphasis, *Traditions* is arguably the earliest example of Martineau's leanings toward the idea of divine unity. The reviewer recognizes this: "Would the different religious bodies but agree, for the sake of a great common good, to shelve their peculiar creeds for the very limited time and space which would be required for this purpose, and combine their resources for its accomplishment, how speedily might our dream be realized" (522). The way that Martineau's tales depict the disagreements of characters exposes the flaws in the differences and instead draws the reader to focus more on

the unities that matter—compassion and social responsibility over strict adherence to legal observance of customs. Early in the first tale, “The Hope of the Hebrew,” one of Christ’s disciples, Paltiel, who is later martyred, comments on Christ’s strange lack of adherence to Judaic law: “I inquire whether we might not also be more holy in our minds while less strait in our external observances” (8). Later, in “Life and Death,” Paltiel’s friend Sadoc argues with his father, Imri, regarding Jesus of Nazareth. Imri refuses to believe that he could be the Messiah given that “he eats with unwashed hands, and permits others to do so. Holier was he, the master in Israel, who chose to perish of thirst rather than not wash with the little water he had” (44). Imri’s views are first articulated by his son in the opening of the first tale. Sadoc tells Paltiel that Imri believes the Nazarene “can have no commission to deliver our nation, as he has neither wealth nor power; and his very works, of which the fame has spread so far, have brought him no followers but those who are as poor as himself” (5). Imri’s perspective is material and based in custom—the kind of custom of “peculiar creeds” that the *Monthly Repository* reviewer calls upon religious bodies to shelve for a time in order to find their common ground: that is, the Unifying Idea. While Sadoc tries to explain to his father that even the rabbis disagree on points of law and custom, Imri maintains his adherence to the traditions and laws of the Pharisees, along with the perspective that the true Messiah would deliver the nation through earthly power, wealth, and leadership.

Paltiel, however, recognizes a different type of deliverance, which involves an internal reformation within the Hebrew nation: “His words are ever in favour of peace and brotherly love; and I know of something of which you have not heard. He refuses not to discourse and to eat with Samaritans” (5). Michal, Sadoc’s sister, is horrified at this revelation: “It cannot be! [...] The Samaritans! Our foes, who opposed the building of our holy temple!” Sadoc adds, “Who corrupted the law! [...] The vengeance of Jehovah shall swallow them up.” Sadoc does not believe this new account of Christ, and claims that if he did, he would no longer follow him. In this emotive exchange, fueled by deeply embedded cultural indoctrination, the

natural splitting off into different ways of believing while following the same leader (Christ) is shown. Yet even for Paltiel, the most devout of the main characters, the strange ways of Christ are unsettling in their departure from conventional Judaism. When Sadoc asks him "what other changes may be wrought," Paltiel replies:

I can scarcely say that I believe or expect such changes [...] but this man is like no other, inasmuch as he regards some of our customs, and strangely violates others. By his teaching, he confirms the law and the prophets; and yet some of his thoughts are not those of a Hebrew. He worships in the temple, and goes up to the feast; yet he has said that the temple shall be destroyed. He enters, as ye know, into the synagogue, on the Sabbath, and yet he keeps not the day altogether holy. He condemns extortion, yet eats with publicans. He is pure, and he teaches righteousness, while he discourses with some sinners so polluted that all good men avoid them. No prophet hath done that of old. (7)

Within *Traditions*, these differences are accounted for subtly, whereas in *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848) they are discussed more explicitly. Martineau's comparative theology not only extends across different faiths but across different sects within faiths. In the case of Christ, she speaks in *Eastern Life* of his closer affinity to the Essene sect, as opposed to the Sadducees and Pharisees. In *Traditions*, Martineau emphasizes the Essenes' reserved life and attitudes toward social responsibility, primarily through the lepers who are healed by Christ's disciples in the tale "The Wilderness Gladdened."

Just as *Illustrations of Political Economy* sought to illustrate what economic theory would look like in practice, *Traditions of Palestine* illustrates the practical manifestation of theological ideas and conflicts, depicting theology through fictionalized human connections and experience rather than through didacticism, thereby appealing to the heart and emotions as much as to the mind. The conversation between the two

lepers, Philip and Jotham, anticipates Martineau's subsequent didactic tales, here emphasizing exclusion from society in theological, rather than economic, terms. Indeed, Jotham's questioning of fellow-feeling and community—"Am I thy brother?" (73)—could easily be transferred to social exclusion due to poverty. Philip is more open to adapting to the community of exile: "Alas! we are brethren, [...] our lot is cast in the same place, and the days of our years must we fulfil in like sorrow of spirit. But we will endure, even as Job laid his finger on his lips and bowed himself" (74). While Philip seeks to comfort himself psychically and spiritually, Jotham expresses what would satisfy him, despite being an outcast:

If our limbs were strong to toil [...] if our own hands could till the ground and gather food till we die, we might endure with greater patience. Then no man should approach, and none should scorn or fear us. [...] But our strength departeth in the day of youth. No leper diggeth the ground, or scattered seed. What other hands give us, we eat; if they withhold, we die. (75-76)

It is the loss of agency rather than the exclusion from society that embitters him, and he requires more than faith to sustain him.

One of the crucial interventions that Martineau makes in theology at this point is the revelation of how theological perspectives are inevitably tied to social position and privilege. While leprosy equalizes Jotham and Philip as outcasts, after the disciples heal them and they return to their homes, Philip has a wife and child to welcome him, whereas Jotham remains as solitary—perhaps more so—than when he had been an outcast. Yet Martineau's solution to this isolation is to have Jotham join a community of Essenes, where Philip finds him; the narrative expresses the motives of the Essenes and Jotham's personal motivations in joining them:

Philip found that though fruits abounded, and honey was spread over the fields, it was not for themselves that the Essenes labored to produce what was fair to the eye and pleasant to the taste. Their food was bread and herbs, and

they drank only of the fountain. Their toil was from the day-spring till sun-set, and their sleep was shortened lest sloth should overcome them. To minister to others they rose and toiled, and all that they sought for themselves was liberty to meditate and pray until they should become holy. (90)

The simplicity of the Essenes' way of life and their ministry of toil and service speaks to the pure form of all religion—in divine unity—that Martineau values: the common truth, although manifested differently. Philip questions Jotham as to why he left his home in Mamre for this community. From their positions of wellness, their faiths seem to reverse: now it is Jotham who expresses the deeper theological convictions, tied closely to his ability to connect with nature and purpose despite the social isolation that had excluded him from the kind of community Philip experienced. Because their social experiences are different, their worship and theology also varies. Jotham gives an account of his return after being healed:

"Thither I went to offer my gift of purification, and when I greeted the city from the Mount of Olives, my spirit was once more glad. But within, all was desolate—yes, amidst crowds. I was alone where all other men were as brethren, and the worship itself seemed changed, because none worshipped with me. Therefore I came hither, and here I shall be in peace, for I am even as others. If I am alone, at least I see no man lying in the bosom of another.—With thee all is well, for a light is in thine eye, and gladness in thy step. May Jehovah prosper thee, and maintain peace within thy dwelling!" (92)

Yet, while Jotham is willing to allow Philip to worship and believe as he sees fit, Philip questions Jotham about his observance of what he calls "the new law"—the following of Jesus of Nazareth, not believing that it would be possible in seclusion rather than going into the world to teach Christ's doctrine. Jotham responds: "Wherefore not? Doth he forbid to toil, to deny

ourselves, to do good, to minister to the sick, to meditate, to commune with Jehovah all the day long?" (92). He further refutes Philip's questioning his attitude of thankfulness, given that he must be lonely: "Yea; for my loneliness is not as the solitude of the desert. My limbs are strong, and my spirit at peace. The water sparkles beneath the rock, and the murmur of bees is heard in the still noon. There is fragrance in the air, and the voice of prayer is as music to mine ear. My soul is filled with good" (93).

The *Monthly Repository* begins its review by placing *Traditions of Palestine* alongside Lant Carpenter's *Introduction to the Geography of the New Testament*, which was published in several editions, a new one just preceding Martineau's text. As a prominent Unitarian preacher, Lant Carpenter had significant influence on Martineau's theological engagement. The review sees the value in expressing theology through the sciences, like geography or history (which is treated scientifically), as a way of improving theological understanding:

The better apprehended reality of the scene might perhaps impart a clearer and deeper sense of the reality of the religion by which it is consecrated. They may not have learned the important truth that the Gospel History is the gospel; but in every scheme of theology that history is so prominent a portion that a vivid perception of its localities may be expected to reflect some of its vividness upon faith itself, and aid in dissipating that mental mistiness which forms so unfavourable a medium for the power of faith to operate through. There would be pictures in the mind where now there are only words. (521)

The reviewer continues:

Sacred geography and its kindred studies are the best preparation for the just interpretation of Scripture. They form and cherish the habit of exercising the intellect upon the Bible. They present a sphere in which none can deny that reason may be safely and usefully employed [...].

The studies in question not only train the mind for the successful investigation of scriptural truth, they furnish in many cases the best materials and facilities for the discovery of truth and the exposure of error. Many an orthodox dogma, as well as many a skeptical objection, is but the perversion of an obscure phrase, the true meaning of which will be obvious to the proficient in these illustrative sciences. (522)

Thus, Martineau enters into a form of interdisciplinary theological discourse that lends itself to comparative theology. Furthermore, the reviewer recognizes how critical it is that Martineau incorporates the "natural, social, political, and education influences which operated upon the minds of the natives of Palestine" in order to "realize the effect of those influences [...] and give the writer that identification with the persons he describes, and the characters he develops" (523-24):

And this done, we have the best kind of commentary on the Bible, for we realize not only the physical and animal, but the mental and moral appendages of its scenes; our eyes not only follow the Savior's finger as he points to the lilies of the field, the house built on a rock, or the city set on a hill; but we enter into the hearts whose thoughts he knew, whose hardness he mourned, or whose love he won; their prejudices, their ignorance, their weaknesses, their wanderings, their conflicts, their predilections and aversion, their discoveries, their strength, all are bared to our inspection, and brought home to our sympathies, and made subservient to our more vivid and influential perception of the meaning, the truth, the beauty, and the power, of the Gospel record. (524)

The reviewer acknowledges that Martineau is creating "a new field [...] of literary exertion" that literally rewrites theology. What she achieves through writing fiction she develops further in her travel writing, most significantly her *Eastern Life*, which represents the culmination of

Martineau's theological research, seamlessly entwined with history, travel narratives, and biblical commentary. Valerie Sanders writes of childhood isolation in Martineau's *Autobiography* as "transforming dislocation into distinction" (70); similarly, Martineau uses the physical and cultural isolation of the East—a disruptive psychological space—to transform and refine her theological understanding. Discomfort is necessary for growth: "Egypt is not the country to go to for the recreation of travel. It is too suggestive and too confounding to be met but in the spirit of study" (Martineau, *Eastern Life* 58). Within this uncomfortable setting she thus sets up Egypt as the center for human intellectual and moral education, the foundation of the divine unity and the Unified Idea. The development of major theologies, both Eastern and Western, are traced back to their Egyptian heritage.

Mapping the Ancient Faiths

Carol Keller notes that Martineau's travels to the East "renegotiated the terms" upon which she understood herself and her public and "convinced her of the truth in all religions" (313). Martineau's *Autobiography* expresses the pleasure she felt in writing *Eastern Life, Present and Past*, as well as the personal influence the journey had on her: "but there were effects produced on my own character of mind which it would have been impertinent to offer there, even if the lapse of years had not been necessary to make them clear to myself. I never before had better opportunity for quiet meditation" (519). Her autobiographical reflections on the Eastern travels are written through the lens of Comtean positivism, and connected to her correspondence with Henry Atkinson, with whom she infamously wrote *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1851). She acknowledges the importance of her travels in bringing "a rich accession of material for thought," enriching her understanding of the Christian and Judaic faiths (520). She recalls, "It was evident to me, in a way which it could never have been if I had not wandered amidst the old monuments and scenes of the various faiths, that a passage through these latter faiths"—meaning Christianity and Islam, as

opposed to the earlier Egyptian and Hebrew faiths—"is as natural to men, and was as necessary in those former periods of human progress, as fetishism is to the infant nations and individuals, without the notion being more true in the one case than in the other" (521). The language here reflects her word choices in the Comte translation, and thus recalls Comte's theory of human transition through the theological and metaphysical stages, through to the scientific or positive. In the *Autobiography*, then, the latter religions are positioned as human progress—the progress of civilization. Such progress is depicted in the reduction of the number of deities, to the point of abstraction:

more advanced nations and individuals suppose a whole pantheon of Gods first,—and then a trinity,—and then a single deity;—all the divine beings being exaggerated men, regarding the universe from a human point of view, and under the influences of human notions and affections. In proportion as this stage is passed through, the conceptions of deity and divine government become abstract and indefinite, till the indistinguishable line is reached which is supposed, and not seen, to separate the highest order of Christian philosopher from the philosophical atheist.

However, despite this later account, the narrative of theological movement within *Eastern Life* seems degenerative, depicting an aversion to present-day religious practice and, conversely, a reverence for the ancient as if it were a more pure foundation—as though by tracing back through theological history and exposing the corruptions of theology, a more authentic theology can be arrived at.

The degeneration of contemporary religion is noted early in the text, when Martineau gives an account of the greed and violence of "a catholic lady of rank" who was a part of their travel group. This woman helped herself to an entire chicken, every bone of which she picked. While doing so, she was disturbed by the waiters passing behind her, between the two tables; and

she taught them, by vigorous punches, what it was to interfere with her elbows while they were wanted for cutting up her chicken. (*Eastern* 27)

This example of gratuitous violence is followed with

Immediately after this feat, she went to the cabin, and kneeled down to her prayers, in the face of as many as chose to see. Between this countess and the eunuch, there was more religious demonstration on board than we had been accustomed to see in such places. (27-28)

It is possible that Martineau elevates Islam above trinitarian Christianity in this case—a move that does not challenge the supremacy of her later Unitarian heritage. Indeed, the religious hypocrisy continues to be ascribed to Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox churches, with Orthodox monks being the first example of begging that she encounters (38-39); and, while she encounters Islamic beggars later, they are never depicted as offensively as the trinitarians. Conversely, there is some respect in Martineau's account for the adherence to the social laws of the Koran, for example in the community care of vulnerable people:

I am not sure that I saw an ill-fed person in all Egypt [...] this is partly owing to the law of the Kurán by which every man is bound to share what he has, to the last mouthful, with his brother in need. (20)

Such an account contrasts sharply with the Catholic woman's greed a few pages later. Given that it is also associated with the act of prayer, it is crucial to consider these episodes in relation to Martineau's theological convictions, which she expressed in a letter to Henry Atkinson on 21 November 1847 when she was preparing to write up *Eastern Life*:

As for Christ's example and need of prayer,—I felt that he did not mean what we mean by prayer: and I think so still. I think he would condemn our prayers as much as he did those of the Pharisees of his time: and that with him prayer was contemplation and aspiration chiefly. (qtd *Autobiography* 529)

In Martineau's reference to contemplation and aspiration, reflection is followed by a positive action—manifested in the act of sharing, and brought into distinction through the Catholic woman's violence.

Martineau claims that the reason *Eastern Life* does not disavow the theologies it details is that she did not see it as the appropriate place in which to express her personal views—what she refers to as "the total extent of [her] dissent from the world's theologies" (*Autobiography* 521). She writes that her

subject was the mutual relation of those theologies, and not their relation to science and philosophy. I had no desire to conceal, as my subsequent writings have shown, my total relinquishment of theology; but it did not seem to me that this book was the natural or proper ground for that kind of discussion. The birthplaces of the four faiths had been my study; and the four faiths were my specific subject; and it seemed to me that it would spoil the book to intrude any other. (522)

Yet, although she writes to Atkinson that she is "pretty confident that I am right in seeing the progression of ideas through thousands of years,—a progression advanced by every new form of faith (of the four great forms)"—Egyptian, Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic—and she acknowledges that "every one of these faiths is beset by the same corruptions"—the earlier forms do not carry the same level of critique as the latter (Letter to Atkinson, 7 November 1847, qtd. *Autobiography* 523). Potentially, this discrepancy comes from her disappointment in the development of the newer forms of faith—that they are failing when they should be thriving and, perhaps, because they are resisting the need to progress beyond theism to a more positive construction. This perspective, however, does not negate her appreciation for and admiration of the influence of the ancient Egyptian past.

Perhaps under the influence of Lant Carpenter's work, Martineau situates Egypt's theological primacy geographically. She observes that the mythical Egyptian king Cecrops was believed to have founded the city of

Athens, and notes the obligations—culturally, politically, and socially—that Rome and Greece had toward Egypt (*Eastern* 95). Importantly, Rome and Greece were not just other empires, but the geographical homes of trinitarian Christianity: the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox. Both imperial homes also had a polytheistic heritage, which Martineau attributes to Egypt's influence.

Egyptian religion is then positioned as the source of all philosophy: “Wherever we turn, in tracing the course of ancient philosophy, we meet the priests of Egypt” (*Eastern* 100-101). Martineau goes into some detail discussing the number of key Western philosophers who went to Egypt to study, from Pythagoras to Socrates and Plato, and includes Moses among their number. She argues that

more of the spiritual religion, the abstruse philosophy, and the lofty ethics and political views of the old Egyptians have found their way into the general mind of our race through Pythagoras than by any or all other channels, except perhaps the institutions of Moses, and the speculations of Plato. (99)

Within her understanding of the ubiquity of Egyptian philosophy in Western thought, it is also crucial to note that, when Martineau speaks of Egyptian philosophy, it is inherently entwined with Egyptian theology. She speaks explicitly of “the principles of Egyptian theology” (107), emphasizing that it was, after all, the priests who had sole possession, not just of religion, but of “politics, law, medicine, science and philosophy” (106). Within Martineau's account, theology encompasses these aspects of society, becoming at once material and practical, as well as lending spiritual authority to human social constructs.

In several places throughout *Eastern Life*, Martineau draws on the irony of Christian evangelism, which is associated with iconoclasm. Christians who destroy ancient Egyptian idols seem ignorant of the fact that their own faith can be traced back to those same elements (105, 108, 116). She uses this irony to promote her doctrine of divine unity and the Unifying Ideas that underpin all theologies: “how happy should I be if I

could arouse in others by this book, as I experienced it myself from the monuments, any sense of the depth and solemnity of the IDEAS which were the foundation of the old Egyptian faith! I did not wait till I went to Egypt to remember that the faculty of Reverence is inherent in all men, and that its natural exercise is always to be sympathized with, irrespective of its objects" (106-7). She also describes the early corruption of ancient Roman and Greek theology, with their "limitation of powers, and consequent struggles, rivalries and transgressions, their fondness and vindictiveness, their anger, fear and hope" (116). This contrasts with the

majestic passive possession of power, and the dispassionate and benignant frame of these ever-young old deities of Egypt. Vigilant, serene, benign, here they sit, teaching us to inquire reverently into the early powers and conditions of that Human Mind which was capable of such conceptions of abstract qualities as are represented in their forms.

From the connection between the ancient polytheistic theologies of Egypt, Rome, and Greece, Martineau takes a more controversial move to connect Judaism to Egypt. This move was not to show that Egypt had some aspects right, given that they also held to ideas divinely inspired to Moses (as was commonly recognized in nineteenth-century biblical commentary), but that Moses had taken his ideas from his Egyptian education. She suggests that the way in which Judaism formed was not the original plan of Moses, but a corrupt one that was a compromise with the Egyptian religious forms that the Hebrews were familiar with from their slavery. As she goes on to discuss Moses, Martineau's theological agenda becomes more explicit:

By his priestly rank and privileges, Moses knew the Mysteries of Egyptian worship. He was the only one of the multitude at Sinai who knew, what we all know, now,—that the two chief objects of all the heathen Mysteries were the preservation of the doctrine of the Divine Unity, and the detection or explanation of Idolatry. (*Eastern* 320)

In order to elevate Moses' mind, Martineau performs a kind of speculative double-think: he was inspired as a great philosopher (or divinely inspired as a theologian-administrator), yet while he sought to take the Hebrew people further in terms of civilization, they were not ready for such a transformation:

The multitude were in fact incapable of receiving a faith without forms, as children are incapable of receiving abstract ideas but by means of illustrations: and they would have gone back to Egypt on the first disappointment or pretence [sic], if Moses had not brought as much of Egypt as he could into the desert with them. (328)

Moses thus becomes a failed hero of abstraction, unable to move the Hebrews from the Egyptian model of theocracy (330) in the way that Martineau saw as necessary for the next stage of social progress. Yet most importantly, in all her discussion of the various faiths—the “old family of faiths” she refers to in her *Autobiography* (521)—all roads lead to Egypt.

An Atheistic Divine Knowledge

Martineau claims in *Eastern Life* that her goal in exploring the Egyptian heritage of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is not to claim “parity of value for their objects of faith and ours” (*Eastern* 138). For her, this has

nothing to do with comparative elevation, purity, and promise of any two faiths. It is merely a claim that the old Egyptians should be regarded as having a faith; a faith to which they might refer the loftiest ideas of a high order of intellect, and in which they might repose the affections of their common human heart.

The ambiguity of her statement can be unpacked through the way in which she does in fact claim that all four religions hold the same corruptions—as they would, coming from the same source. They are at once equal, while the latter religions are both superior and inferior through their simultaneous

progress and corruption. Where there is superiority in the Egyptian faith from Martineau's perspective, it is in the emphasis on the Divine Unity, which becomes corrupted in the later theological forms (excepting, although not expressed explicitly, in the even more recent Unitarian form of Christianity). The embedded ironies in Martineau's comparative theology may arise from her determination to merge the theoretical or philosophical with social and cultural practice.

Martineau accepts these ironies with much the same approach as theologians of other convictions. She recognizes her own capacity to be unsettled by contradictory evidence, but unlike Comte, who dismisses the unknowable, she is willing to hold unknowable experience, albeit lightly. Her comparative studies and historical exploration of theologies increases her respect for the unknowable, even if she determines that such knowledge needs to be moved to the abstract through an acknowledgment of its corruption by social and cultural privileges and structures:

All knowledge is sacred. All truth is divine. It is not for us to mix up passion and prejudice with our perception of new facts. We may not like to be perplexed by new knowledge which throws us out of some notions which we took for knowledge before. We are apt to feel our own spiritual privileges lessened by its appearing that they were held for many ages before the time we had supposed.
(*Eastern* 229)

Martineau asks much of her readers in regard to theology, encouraging them to follow in the journey from theology, through metaphysics, to the scientific or positive. Her theology becomes more unsettling because of the scientific way in which she presents the history of ideas; yet she maintains a reverential attitude toward those aspects of theology that can be empirically shown to benefit human society.

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Notes

¹ Although Harriet Martineau used the term atheism, she never relinquished the possibility of First Causes, and therefore her views are more akin to agnosticism. The texts this article refers to, however, were composed before Thomas Huxley coined the term “agnosticism” in 1867, a term that Carol Ann Keller describes as more fitting for those “secularists,” like Martineau, “who hovered on the boundary between atheism and theism” (311-12). While this essay refers to Martineau’s later atheism, it does so with the qualification that such atheism would best be defined later as agnosticism.

² *Traditions of Palestine* was published in the United States as *Times of the Savior* (1832).

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