



“You Ain’t No Christian, Not ’Cordin’ to Gospel Truth”: The Literary Theology of Rose Terry Cooke

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Now, if religion is good for anything, it is as good for everyday use as for prayer-meeting, Sunday, sickness, and death-beds. . . . If the Bible insists on anything, it is that its teachings shall so regenerate the life of man, so enter and recreate his whole living that he shall become a “living epistle, known and read of all men.”

—Rose Terry Cooke, “A Higher Life” (1874)

LATE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY American writers unfairly censured New England’s church hierarchy. At least so claimed a reader who, in 1889, lamented the depiction of religious officials in the work of America’s “story-writers.” They “have been too hard on the church deacon,” in particular, the reader complained, “making him too often a type of hard-heartedness, hypocrisy, or avarice.” Among the alleged literary offenders was New Englander Rose Terry Cooke (1827–92), an author who had for years made the church deacon, along with other church leaders, the subject of her acerbic local color fiction. In the *Christian Union*, Cooke responded to her critic in the strongest of terms:

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I am surprised to learn that I have been a stumbling-block in the way of the diaconate of the Congregational Church. Certainly I had no such intention. Why have I not *equally hindered the profession of Christianity* because I have depicted some professing Christians as sinners? If I have portrayed unpleasant deacons, let me assure your correspondent that I have spared the public portraits of some men in that office whom I know to be a shame and a disgrace, even today, *to their position*.¹

However secular and pluralistic American audiences might be today, they may yet experience a certain satisfaction in Cooke's spirited justification for her attack on the New England churches. No one likes a hypocrite, after all, especially a religious one. But because her statement underscores a dimension of her work—her firm commitment to evangelical Protestantism—that has largely been ignored by present-day readers and critics, Cooke's sermonistic outburst serves a purpose more fundamental than evoking in her readers a measure of smug disdain.² That Cooke was a practicing Christian has not been overlooked. Elizabeth Ammons notes that Cooke was "an orthodox and serious Christian" who wrote about New England religious beliefs from the "the Christian fold," and Eileen Elrod points out that she was "a self-consciously Christian author" with a deep knowledge of "the religious history of her New England region."³ Scholars also observe that Cooke's harsh fictional critique of Calvinism was informed by the liberal, domesticated brand of evangelical Protestantism that emerged in the nineteenth century. Still, commentary on Cooke has suffered from what Tracy Fessenden describes as a general trend in American "literary studies" to pay "little attention" to religion

¹Rose Terry Cooke, "The Deacon," *Christian Union*, 7 March 1889, p. 318.

²Mark Noll defines evangelicalism as that "form of modern Protestantism characterized by a stress on conversion, the Bible as supreme religious authority, activism manifest especially in efforts to spread the Christian message, and a focus on Christ's death on the cross as the reality of Christian faith" (*America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 564–65.

³Elizabeth Ammons, intro. to "*How Celia Changed Her Mind*" and *Selected Stories*, ed. Ammons (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. xvii, and Eileen Razzari Elrod, "Truth Is Stranger than Non-Fiction: Gender, Religion, and Contradiction in Rose Terry Cooke," *Legacy* 13, no. 2 (1996): 113.

“except when it figures as crucial to a progressive, emancipatory politics[.]. . . and often not even then.”⁴

To be sure, critics have done an excellent job of illuminating the relationship between gender and religion in Cooke’s fictional communities. But a comprehensive study of the evangelical thought that informs that fiction and the narrative strategies Cooke employed to address her religious interests has yet to be undertaken.⁵ I intend to launch that project by examining Cooke’s literary theology over a significant portion of her career: from the mid-1850s, when she first began to publish short fiction, to the 1870s and early 1880s, when she did her best work in the regional short story, to the last years of her life when Cooke found herself writing almost exclusively for the religious press. Although I focus on Cooke, it is important to note that her concerns were shared not only by the Protestant periodicals in which her writing appeared but also, albeit less directly, by the mainstream literary magazines that published her religiously inflected short fiction. “[D]iffused through various ‘culture industries’” like print media, the Protestant ideology that Cooke espoused was, like so many other forms of discourse in nineteenth-century America, associated with the moral health and civic welfare of the nation.⁶ We have only to tune into the daily news to recognize that, although in altered form, many of Cooke’s hopes and anxieties are still shared by Americans today.

⁴Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 2.

⁵For discussions of Cooke’s fiction, see Ammons, intro. to *How Celia Changed Her Mind*, pp. ix–xxxv; Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Women’s Tradition* (New York: Ungar, 1983); Elrod, “Truth Is Stranger than Non-Fiction”; Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); my “The Cruelty of Husbands, the Complicity of Wives, and the Cooperation of Community in Rose Terry Cooke’s ‘Mrs. Flint’s Married Experience,’” *American Literary Realism* 33 (Fall 2000): 65–80, and “How Freedom Becomes Free: Religious Conversion in Rose Terry Cooke’s ‘Freedom Wheeler’s Controversy with Providence,’” *American Literary Realism* 40 (Spring 2008): 248–61; Evelyn Newlyn, “Rose Terry Cooke and the Children of the Sphinx,” *Regionalism and the Female Imagination* 4 (1979): 49–57; and Augusta Rohrbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Race, Realism, and the U.S. Literary Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 51–72.

⁶Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, p. 93.



[Religion was] as vital to her as the atmosphere she breathed.

—Harriet Prescott Spofford,
Little Book of Friends (1916)

The little evidence we have concerning Cooke's religious education and affiliations must be pieced together from a handful of sources.⁷ She was born near Hartford, Connecticut, in 1827 to an established New England family. From approximately 1840 to 1843, she attended Catharine Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary. She joined the Congregational Church the year she graduated, possibly following a conversion experience, and she remained within the Congregational fold throughout most of her life until, in her later years, she joined the Episcopal Church.⁸ We also know that Cooke was professionally or personally acquainted with some of the leading Protestant figures of nineteenth-century America, including the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, her famous brother Henry Ward Beecher, and the well-known pastor, editor, and Social Gospel leader Washington Gladden. Contributing in the 1870s and 1880s to a variety of religious periodicals—the *Independent*, the *Christian Union*, the *Congregationalist*, and *Sunday Afternoon*—she

⁷In addition to entries in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, biographical information on Cooke can be found in the following published sources: Ammons, intro. to *How Celia Changed Her Mind*; Harriet Prescott Spofford, "Rose Terry Cooke," in *Little Book of Friends*, ed. Spofford (Boston: Little, Brown, 1916), pp. 143–56; and "Rose Terry Cooke," in *Our Famous Women*, ed. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward (1883; rpt. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1975), pp. 174–206; Cheryl Walker, "Legacy Profile: Rose Terry Cooke," *Legacy* 9 (1992): 143–50; and Perry Westbrook, *A Literary History of New England* (Bethlehem, Penna.: Lehigh University Press, 1988). The only full-length Cooke biography is Jean Downey's "A Biographical and Critical Study of Rose Terry Cooke" (Ph.D. diss., University of Ottawa, 1956).

⁸On her Congregational church affiliation, see Westbrook, *Literary History*, p. 252. As she wrote in July 1887, "Mr. Cooke and I were . . . confirmed on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, in the [Episcopal] Church here at Winsted, by Bishop Williams" (quoted in Rodney Smith, "These Poor Weak Souls"—Rose Terry Cooke's Presentation of Men and Women Who Were Converts to the Social Gospel in the Gilded Age" [Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 1978], p. 61). Rose Terry married Rollin H. Cooke in 1873.

spoke with authority about a range of theological and socially relevant religious issues. According to Harriet Prescott Spofford, Cooke's religious faith was "as vital to her as the atmosphere she breathed."⁹

Cooke's "vital" Christianity was shaped by the massive transformations Protestantism experienced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the most striking feature of which involved the adherent's image of and relationship to God. By the nineteenth century, God was being "perceived less often as transcendent and self-contained, more often as immanent and relational," and among New England writers and theologians, the stern, sovereign God of Calvinist orthodoxy was being replaced by a parental, often maternal, God who was both affectionate and caring.¹⁰ Cooke undoubtedly encountered this image of a softened, feminized deity in the work of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, if not of Hartford minister Horace Bushnell, but John Pierce Brace, principal of the Hartford Female Seminary and probably one of Cooke's teachers, may have first introduced her to this benevolent version of the divine being. Delivering a series of lectures on a recent revival, Brace told his pupils in 1841 that they would experience in their enlightened hearts a "*change of views*" toward God. Prior to conversion, he argued, the unenlightened heart regarded God as "remote," "unreasonable," "tyrannical" [*sic*]; but after conversion, "God is then near, not only as our creator and sovereign, but as our constant preserver, father and friend."¹¹ Brace's line of reasoning is distinctive for the agency it accords his converted students in conceptualizing and relating to God as well as for his belief that God is perceived as tyrannical only by those who have failed to achieve conversion. One of Cooke's most powerful stories, "Freedom Wheeler's Controversy with Providence," will embody this insight.

⁹Spofford, "Rose Terry Cooke," in *Our Famous Women*, p. 187.

¹⁰Noll, *America's God*, p. 4.

¹¹John Pierce Brace, *Lectures to Young Converts; Delivered to the Pupils of the Hartford Female Seminary, During the Revival of the Winter Term of 1841* (Hartford, 1846), pp. 24, 25.

Portraying God as more hospitable was only one element in what George Marsden has referred to as “the virtual obsession of much of the Protestant intellectual community . . . to reconcile the Calvinist heritage with the realities of nineteenth-century American religious and intellectual life.”¹² Central to this program was an attempt to reconceive the nature of sin and salvation. While conversion remained crucial to American Protestants’ sense of their spiritual identity, their understanding of the individual’s ability to inspire and shape that conversion experience altered radically. Rather than assuming that regeneration could be initiated solely by the Holy Spirit—that the sinner remained “passive until he was enabled to respond in the converting experience”—Yale’s Nathaniel Taylor argued not only that “sinful acts” are “acts of free choice” but also that the individual is free to repudiate sin and choose God’s path. That is, an individual’s act of free will—in Taylor’s words, the “act of the will or heart which consists in a preference of God to every other object”—could initiate the process of regeneration, with the Holy Spirit merely facilitating it.¹³

Associated with this liberalized theology was a new faith in the individual Christian’s “theistic common sense”—a development, influenced by Scottish common sense philosophy, that granted the adherent greater latitude for a direct apprehension of the Bible, which previously had been “embedded in a self-conscious ecclesiastical tradition.”¹⁴ As more and more Protestants gained self-assurance in interpreting scripture, they grew increasingly convinced about their capacity to discern and act upon their own intuitive sense of moral principle and religious truth.¹⁵ While Cooke was starting out as a writer, for

¹²George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 6.

¹³Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, pp. 50, 49; Taylor quotation, p. 50.

¹⁴Noll, *America’s God*, pp. 233, 4.

¹⁵The belief in commonsense theology was so pervasive in the nineteenth century that the young Rose Terry would undoubtedly have encountered it in a variety of sources. But Mary Kelley’s research on the curricula of early nineteenth-century female seminaries suggests that, as a student at the Hartford Female Seminary, Rose Terry would have been formally exposed to common sense philosophy in the work of “the

example, Catharine Beecher was “call[ing] upon her readers,” in two closely argued, theological treatises, “to supplant church authority and dogma with their own common sense beliefs” and interpretive powers.¹⁶ In *The Minister’s Wooing* (1859), Catharine’s sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, would locate the power of theistic common sense in the character of the black slave Candace, the better to subvert the teachings of the clergy and to suggest that spiritual insight is available even to the theologically marginalized and untutored. The theistic common sense and preaching capabilities of ordinary people likewise informed what Dawn Coleman calls the “democratic ubiquity of sermoniac rhetoric” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.¹⁷

Throughout the 1800s, in other words, many Protestants embraced a faith that was less doctrinal and more beneficent than that which they had inherited from their Puritan ancestors; it was also more affirming of the spiritual capacities of individual believers, more focused on “moral human behavior,” and more in keeping with the individualistic ethos of nineteenth-century America.¹⁸ This theological transformation went hand in hand with the assumption that evangelical Protestantism would continue to shape the destiny of the nation. A journalist in Philadelphia wrote in 1844 that “when we remember that our Pilgrim fathers landed on Plymouth rock to establish the Protestant religion, free from persecution, we must contend that this was and

most widely taught moral philosopher in post-Revolutionary America,” William Paley. See Kelley on the role of Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) in seminary curricula in her *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 89–91; quotation p. 90.

¹⁶Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 246. The theological treatises to which Sklar refers are Beecher’s *Common Sense Applied to Religion; or, the Bible and the People* (New York: Harper, 1857) and *An Appeal to the People on Behalf of Their Rights as Authorized Interpreters of the Bible* (New York: Harper, 1860).

¹⁷Dawn Coleman, “The Unsentimental Woman Preacher of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *American Literature* 80 (January 2008): 267.

¹⁸Leo Hirrell, *Children of Wrath: New School Calvinism and Antebellum Reform* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p. 26.

always will be a Protestant country.”¹⁹ In 1847 Congregational minister Horace Bushnell proclaimed that “this great field” of the expanding nation must be filled with “Christian churches and a Christian people,” by which he meant Protestantism, to him the purest, most authentic form of Christianity.²⁰ Arguing in 1858 for the importance of a “national Religion,” the editors of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* singled out Protestant Christianity as the “sentiment” in and “influence . . . over the national conscience and heart” that will continue to inspire and guide the progress of America.²¹ As evangelical Protestantism grew more liberal, more democratic, and more applicable to the everyday lives of individual Americans throughout the century, it also became more firmly “entrenched” in the American mind, more closely associated with national expansion and development, and more closely identified with normative civic values. Both “resourceful” and “vexed,” Tracy Fessenden says, “were efforts to maintain the Protestant ‘consensus’ as the invisible, organizing center of American democratic culture.”²²



Oh! had I but one hour more of life to hold a pen; one hour of reason to guide my thoughts to its tip and send them flying over the land,—I should think that hour well spent if I consumed it in preaching. . . .

—The narrator in Cooke’s
“Aceldama Sparks: Old and New” (1859)

Rose Terry Cooke came of age as the new theology was taking hold in many New England churches and communities. In time, she would come to incorporate key features of this

¹⁹Quoted in Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, p. 8.

²⁰Quoted in Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial, 1970), p. 49.

²¹“Providence in American History,” *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, October 1858, p. 697.

²²Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, pp. 5, 84.

liberalized Protestantism into her fiction, thus giving literary form to its normative ideology. But of the many stories she published in the early years of her career (1855–65), most are romantic tales of heterosexual love and loss, while others are allegorical fables or dream-visions and local color sketches of New England life. Only a handful of stories from the 1850s treat the religious concerns that, in the 1870s, would come to preoccupy her. “The Mormon’s Wife” (1855) recounts the fate of a woman whose husband succumbs to the “Mormon delusion” and, after moving the family to Salt Lake City, embraces the practice of polygamy.²³ “Parson Field’s Experience” (1856) and “Uncle Josh” (1857) touch on the protagonists’ conversion experiences: Parson Fields at the hands of a Methodist preacher in Ohio; Uncle Josh at a New England revival. Focusing on the ascendancy of what Cooke calls “New School” beliefs, a fourth story, “Aceldama Sparks; or, Old and New” (1859), dramatizes nothing less than the effect on a New England family—and, by extension, on their community—of the transformation of evangelical Protestantism in nineteenth-century New England.

The tale takes place amidst the protracted controversy that raged between Old and New School Protestants throughout much of the nineteenth century. Also labeled “New Divinity,” “New Light Calvinism,” and “New Haven Theology,” New School Protestantism “favored modifications of traditional Calvinist belief and practice” and, in many cases, cooperation among denominations so that they might serve as “more effective agents of evangelism and civilization in the American setting.”²⁴ Involving both Presbyterians and Congregationalists, the Old School/New School debates were carried on with particular vigor at Yale University where, as we have seen, Nathaniel Taylor promoted the idea that, because humans are free agents, they are responsible not only for their sins but for their salvation as well. In “Aceldama Sparks,” Cooke does

²³Rose Terry Cooke, “The Mormon’s Wife,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, June 1855, p. 644.

²⁴Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 114; Noll, *America’s God*, p. 566.

not specify her characters' sectarian affiliations, but she plays out the consequences of their commitment to either Old or New School beliefs. In effect, she suggests, adherence to one school or the other frames the difference between two modes of Christian living: one cramped, deficient, and heartless; the other spacious, bountiful, and loving. Although the story lacks the theological detail of her later fiction, Cooke's treatment of New School theology enables her both to acknowledge and to affirm the transformation of evangelical Protestantism in the decades before the Civil War.

In the story, the patriarch of the Sparks family, Deacon Ebenezer Sparks, emerges as a crusty New England farmer who is sure of his convictions and set in his ways. His theological beliefs are Old School, his conduct in life similarly entrenched and old fashioned. Although warning the reader not to plunge "headlong into the sea of metaphysics and terminology these hard-headed Yankees call theology," the narrator nonetheless explains that, as a faithful Calvinist, the Deacon embraces the doctrines of predestination, original sin, and total depravity. Because it was "the old way of his fathers, he believed in the Law, and only tolerated the Gospel." Father and son have been at odds before the story opens, but when a "New School man in theology" is installed as the village academy's teacher, Aceldama's intellectual and spiritual development accelerates and his disagreements with his father intensify. In due course, the schoolmaster is fired, and Aceldama leases a farm of his own.²⁵ There he institutes a series of cutting-edge farming methods, and his crops flourish. The home he establishes with his young wife likewise privileges a set of values different from those cultivated by his cold-hearted father. Motivated by his commonsensical approach to Christianity and supported by his mother and wife, Aceldama decides to care for his maternal grandparents, whom the Deacon had refused to bring into his home.

²⁵Rose Terry Cooke, "Aceldama Sparks; or, Old and New," in *The Sphinx's Children and Other People's* (1886; rpt. New York: Garrett, 1969), pp. 344, 349, 351.

At the end of the story, the Deacon suffers a life-threatening, and ultimately life-changing, illness. He is reunited with his son and converted to the “new dispensation,” that is, New School theology. Subordinating God’s vengeful Old Testament law to the charitable message of the Gospels, New School theology is presented as the choice Christian people will naturally make out of the goodness of their hearts when their hearts have not been hardened by years of indoctrination in Old School theology. Liberal theology is, in turn, associated with such civil values as good manners, gentlemanly conduct, common sense, and progressive thinking. Thus, its power to transform extends beyond the individual Christian to his family and community as well.

Although the anti-Calvinist tradition was well established in American letters by the mid-nineteenth century,²⁶ “Acelanda Sparks” was Cooke’s first attempt to place religious issues squarely at the center of a story, to draw specifically on the religious history of New England, and to attack patriarchal Calvinism and its withering effects. The story also marks her first use of a narrative voice that in the 1870s and 1880s would become a standard feature of her local color fiction. In most of her early stories, first-person narrators—some of them regional, others more urbane—recount stories, often tragic, of romantic love. (Anne Boyd claims that publishing love stories helped literary journals like the *Atlantic* attract female readers and generate subscription revenue in the 1850s.)²⁷ Departing from the convention of the love story in “Acelanda Sparks,” Cooke employs a third-person narrator who not only possesses knowledge, both sociological and theological, about her characters but also assumes the freedom to speak with conviction about the actions in which they are engaged.²⁸ Toward the beginning

²⁶See David Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 96–122.

²⁷See Anne Boyd, “‘What! Has She Got into the *Atlantic*?’ Women Writers, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the Forming of the American Canon,” *American Studies* 39 (Fall 1998): 5–36.

²⁸The narrator in “Acelanda Sparks” is an early example of Cooke’s energetic, outspoken narrators whom Fetterley and Pryse discuss in their examination of dialect,

of the narrative, for example, the narrator issues the kind of anti-feminist pronouncement that will distinguish Cooke's official position on women's rights activists throughout her career: "Heaven bless Auntie Sparks! If there were a hundred like her where there is one slightly resembling that type of woman, the world would be saved from half its evils and all its Women's Rights Conventions." The narrator also feels free to comment on the role religion plays in the lives of her characters. At one point, after reflecting on Deacon Sparks's stinginess and greed—a sin she raises to the level of Judas's avaricious betrayal of Jesus—she imagines the sermon she might deliver to *her* congregation, her readers: "Oh! had I but one hour more of life to hold a pen; one hour of reason to guide my thoughts to its tip and send them flying over the land,—I should think that hour well spent if I consumed it in preaching on the one text that no man dare expound in its awful power and significance to a 'respectable' congregation: 'And he cast down the thirty pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself!'"²⁹

With "Aceldama Sparks," Cooke joined the ranks of American women writers whom Mary Kelley has referred to as the "preachers of the fictional page."³⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, Maria Cummins, Susan Warner, and others had already used their best-selling novels to challenge the abstract, doctrinal, and often timid preaching of the mainline Protestant Church and to offer their readers a more relevant, authentic, female-centered form of Christianity. They had become what Elaine Showalter calls "the essential instrument of female participation in the male monopoly on theological debate."³¹ In this, her first contribution to the controversy, Cooke creates a narrator who possesses the zeal to propound religious truth, the

dialogue, and narrative voice in Cooke's regional fiction. See their *Writing Out of Place*, pp. 184–86.

²⁹Cooke, "Aceldama Sparks," pp. 350, 364.

³⁰Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 285.

³¹Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 144.

conviction to send it “flying over the land,” and the common-sense authority to interpret scripture for her readers. What is more, the narrator proclaims that she is ready and willing to expound on a text that no man in the pulpit of a “respectable” church has seen fit to discuss. With the forceful insistence of her narrator’s message, Cooke also announces what her later fictions will present as a cardinal belief of her literary theology: that scripture in general, and New Testament scripture in particular, must serve “as a daily guide in all our affairs.”³²

In promoting her emerging literary theology, Cooke also helped advance the social agenda of the periodical in which “Alcedama Sparks” appeared, *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*. “[P]ledged to no religious sect or political party, connected with no favorite movement of the day,” the editors of *Harper’s* were nonetheless committed to “the diffusion of intelligence, virtue, and patriotism” and the enforcement of “the most important lessons of morality and of practical life.”³³ As such, the journal became “a force that shaped the everyday cultural experiences of a national readership,” Thomas Lilly argues, and thus helped rally the new nation around core beliefs concerning the public good.³⁴ In upholding Protestantism as the country’s “national Religion,” *Harper’s* editors denigrated the higher criticism’s treatment of the Bible as a literary text, affirmed the centrality of divine revelation in scripture, and declared scripture to be the guiding force for the developing nation.³⁵ In its critique of a New England patriarch’s uncompromising Calvinism, its portrait of a family renewed by the new dispensation,

³²Rose Terry Cooke, “A Letter to Mary Ann,” *Sunday Afternoon*, January 1879, p. 82.

³³“Advertisement,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, January 1851, p. ii, and June 1850, p. ii.

³⁴Thomas Lilly, “The National Archive: *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* and the Civic Responsibilities of a Commercial Literary Periodical, 1850–53,” *American Periodicals* 15 (2005): 9.

³⁵These observations appeared in the Editor’s Table review of the 1853 Hartford Biblical Convention, “Error Must Develop Itself,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, August 1853, pp. 415–18. “There was much to arouse indignation” at this convention, the editor claims, given that “the malignity was so evident, the blasphemy so undisguised, the ferocious abuse of all things which the best minds esteem holy so unrestrained” (p. 416). See also, “Providence in American History,” pp. 694–700.

and the forthrightness of its narrator, "Aceldama Sparks" offered a progressive, biblically centered literary theology well in keeping with *Harper's* editors' understanding of their moral responsibility and their advocacy of evangelical Protestantism as the nation's foundational ideology.



The religion of Christ is a practical religion; and the only test which you can apply to it is the test of use.

—Washington Gladden, *Being a Christian* (1876)

Following a flurry of literary activity in the 1850s and early 1860s, Cooke entered a period of relative silence. Only four of her stories were published between 1862 and 1865, and for the next four years her publications were limited to *Our Young Folks*, a children's magazine.³⁶ In 1870 Cooke's work appeared in two new literary magazines, the *Galaxy* and *Lippincott's*, and by 1875 she was again contributing to *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*. But in the early 1870s, Cooke was most frequently writing for the Protestant publications the *Christian Union* and the *Independent*. Once a "specialized religious journal," the *Christian Union* had become by 1870 "a general family periodical" with a religious bent, with Cooke's contributions tending to be morally edifying rather than overtly religious. By contrast, in the late 1860s the Congregationalist publication the *Independent* aspired to become "a champion of evangelical religion."³⁷ In the early 1870s, the overtly religious stories and essays Cooke wrote for the *Independent*

³⁶Downey maintains that Cooke's "reduced literary output" in the 1860s was the result of frequent bouts of illness and, quite possibly, the care of her elderly parents. In 1862 she wrote to the *Atlantic's* editors that "my health has been so uncommonly miserable in the last year that I could not write," and in 1864 she informed James T. Fields that "I have been hoping all summer to send you something, but my home cares have been so incessant and imperative, and I have been so continuously tired that I could not write—not even letters" (Downey, "Biographical and Critical Study," p. 51; quotations, pp. 55, 56).

³⁷Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines: 1865–1885*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 3:423, 2:374.

established her as a religious authority within the community of evangelicals affiliated with this highly successful publication—Washington Gladden and Henry Ward Beecher among them—all of whom were concerned about the state of Christian faith in postbellum America. In an essay published in 1874, Cooke shared her aspirations for a meaningful, authentic form of Christianity.

Cooke maintains in “A Higher Life” that just as there can be no separation of “Divine words from the Divine illustrations,” or laws of nature, so can there be no distinction between the cultivation of the “Higher,” or God-filled, life within and the outward manifestation of that “indwelling presence” in daily existence. As she explains, “If the Bible insists on anything, it is that its teachings shall so regenerate the life of man, so enter and recreate his whole living that he shall become a ‘living epistle, known and read of all men,’ a daily witness, a shining light, a city set on a hill.”³⁸ As in much of her work, Cooke focuses here on regenerating the life of the Christian, not on converting the unbeliever, and she forges a connection between the mission of the regenerated Christian and that of the Christian nation when she employs John Winthrop’s metaphor, “a city set on a hill,” for his Puritan experiment in Massachusetts Bay.³⁹ Cooke goes on to offer examples of several Christians—a businessman, a housewife, and a church officer—who profess to “be seeking a higher plan of religious experience” but whose words and actions bespeak lives of selfishness, dishonesty, hypocrisy. Fervently she insists that there is but one way to achieve the “higher life,” one way to “reach that indwelling presence which we desire ardently”: to do the will of God. The means for ascertaining the will of God is, of course, the Bible, that “book of common sense . . . written for the heart of man, by Him who alone knows that heart intimately.”⁴⁰

³⁸Rose Terry Cooke, “A Higher Life,” *Independent*, November 1874, p. 4. The interpolated text is from 2 Corinthians 5:15.

³⁹John Winthrop’s phrase from “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630) had its origins in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:14[KJV]): “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.”

⁴⁰Cooke, “A Higher Life,” p. 4.

Cooke's effort to define the "higher" Christian life addressed a need in post-Civil War America. By the mid-nineteenth century, Gary Dorrien writes, middle-class Protestants were beginning to worry "about accelerating urbanization, declining public morals, and eroding religious faith."⁴¹ After the war, the growth of cities, the rapid pace of industrialization and technological progress, the intensification and changing face of immigration, the unprecedented attention to material wealth, the increasing authority of science, and the spread of religious complacency all combined further to erode evangelical Protestantism's capacity to influence the nation's moral and civic well-being. And so, as evangelical Christianity's sovereignty seemed to be waning precisely when, adherents thought, it was most required, they vowed that its relevance was more vital and its benefits more essential than ever.

We recognize this urgency in William Dean Howells's "Certain Dangerous Tendencies in American Life," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1878. Arguing that Americans' attraction to material wealth has been degrading their "moral or spiritual force," Howells notes that "the disintegration of religion has proceeded rapidly" since the war. Now "a depository of social rather than of religious influences," the contemporary Protestant church can do little "to aid in the moral regeneration" of a country facing unprecedented challenges to its civic vibrancy, stability, and order. Nonetheless, he concludes, we "must insist on the necessity of sincerity and of knowledge on the part of religious teachers. We need the development of a religion for this world, for the needs and duties of life here."⁴² As the editor of the *Atlantic*, Howells was not interested in promoting a specific religious agenda. Like *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly* proclaimed itself to be the "exponent" not of particular factions or sects but of "the American idea" in general, which would keep "in view that moral element which transcends all persons and parties and which alone makes the

⁴¹Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology*, p. 180.

⁴²William Dean Howells, "Certain Dangerous Tendencies in American Life," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1878, pp. 387, 388, 389, 401.

basis of a true and lasting national prosperity.”⁴³ But as certain core values seemed threatened, the editor of the *Atlantic* felt moved to call for a renewal of the “nominal faith or religion of the country”—“evangelical Protestantism”—and the regeneration of the “moral impulse” in American life.⁴⁴

In the years before Howells encouraged religious leaders to effect this “moral regeneration,” several leading Protestants had already been preaching a theology of Christian character and conduct. In *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (1866), Horace Bushnell had, according to one contemporary reviewer, figured Christ as a God who came into the world “to acquire with man a character, and thus to secure the influence of character,” or ““moral power,”” in the individual Christian.⁴⁵ In the late 1860s, Henry Ward Beecher was promoting the “fruit of religious belief” and preaching that “the tests of worthy belief are practical.”⁴⁶ In the same issue of the *Independent* in which Cooke’s “A Higher Life” appeared, an anonymous author (probably the religion editor, Washington Gladden) applauded a speaker at a religious conference for defining religion not as “sentiment, feeling, or faith” but as “downright goodness, God-fearing morality, and right living.”⁴⁷ Writing for the *Independent* the year before, Rev. J. M. Buckley reaffirmed for the magazine’s readers the centrality of spiritual regeneration, or “the inward change,”⁴⁸ but in a collection of sermons published in 1876, Gladden argued that inner transformation must be accompanied by the outward manifestation of genuine faith. Although a “change of heart does take place when one becomes a Christian,” the only real measure of the Christian life, Gladden insisted, is the believer’s conduct in the world: “If you want to know the certainty of these things, you must put them into practice. If you wish

⁴³Quoted in Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 2:499.

⁴⁴Howells, “Certain Dangerous Tendencies,” p. 387.

⁴⁵Quoted in Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977), pp. 150–51.

⁴⁶Quoted in Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology*, p. 211.

⁴⁷“Righteousness,” *Independent*, November 1874, p. 16.

⁴⁸J. M. Buckley, “Sudden Conversions and Gradual Conversions,” *Independent*, May 1873, p. 581.

to find out whether a machine will work, you set it a-going. If you want to know whether a coat will fit, you put it on. The religion of Christ is a practical religion; and the only test which you can apply to it is the test of use."⁴⁹

When she published "A Higher Life" in 1874, then, Cooke was voicing her opinion on a topic she knew was, as she said, generating "a great deal" of discussion "by religious people and in religious papers"—and that would continue to do so in the years ahead.⁵⁰ Her effort therein to define authentic Christian practice sharpened her thinking about the proper relationship among spiritual regeneration, commonsense biblical truth, and performing the will of God, an exercise that would, in turn, yield rich results in the local color magazine fiction she produced throughout the decade. Some of her stories on "the higher life," among them "Ann Hyde's Mission" and "One of Them," deliberately draw upon formulaic narrative models of Christian experience, featuring in particular the personal sacrifice and edifying example of women.⁵¹ But Cooke also began, especially between 1877 and 1880, to apply the "test of use" to the stingy squires, hypocritical deacons, and abusive husbands of New England's communities and, in the process, dramatized their situations with greater focus, complexity, and acerbity than she had in "Aceldama Sparks." By embedding her liberalized, evangelical theology in the everyday lives and religious practices of her New England villagers and voicing the most overt critiques of Calvinist beliefs and behavior through the colorful

⁴⁹Washington Gladden, *Being a Christian: What It Means and How to Begin* (1876; rpt. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1972), p. 52. The religious editor of the *Independent* from 1871 to 1874, Gladden "sought" to use the publication "to renew and redirect the moral power of American religion" (Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology*, p. 274). He went on in 1878 to establish the periodical *Sunday Afternoon*, the purpose of which was to make religion a "regenerating force" in American society and to encourage Americans to "mix Christianity" directly with "human affairs" (quoted in Jacob Dorn, *Washington Gladden: Prophet of the Social Gospel* [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968], p. 68).

⁵⁰Cooke, "A Higher Life," p. 4.

⁵¹Published in *Sunday Afternoon* and the *Independent* respectively, "Ann Hyde's Mission" (1878) and "One of Them" (1879) are conventional spiritual melodramas in which the commitment of self-sacrificing women to a "higher life" effects the religious conversion and emotional restoration of the men in their lives. See my essay's penultimate section.

dialect of her characters (while still retaining her outspoken narrators), she created fiction that is at once remote from the lives of the majority of her readers and yet relevant to their social and moral, if not specifically religious, concerns. Gavin Jones notes that regionalist writers resorted to dialect-speaking characters to represent the “soul of America in the rugged racy vernaculars of a rustic past.”⁵² In the religiously inflected stories she wrote for the era’s literary magazines, Cooke called upon the commonsensical rural New Englanders she had brought to life to express the “soul” of a natural or authentic Christian faith—the kind of faith that, according to “A Higher Life,” she hoped her fellow Christians would themselves practice.⁵³



“Christian!—*you* a Christian! You’re a dyed-in-the-wool hypocrite.”

—Mabel Eldridge, in Cooke’s
“Mrs. Flint’s Married Experience” (1880)

“Squire Paine’s Conversion,” published in *Harper’s* in 1878, is perhaps the most straightforward example of how Cooke used multiple voices to enhance the drama and theological significance of her fictional constructs. The story features a prominent New England storekeeper who treats everyone in the village—his wife, his daughter, his customers—with a singular lack of charity. When the Squire forbids his daughter to see the man she loves, thus forcing her to elope, the family housekeeper delivers a magnificent sermon in which she upbraids the Squire for his manifold failings:

⁵²Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 39.

⁵³Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, p. 104, notes that antebellum American women writers used the vernacular to express “the voices of ardent, ‘natural’ Christians who make revisionary claims on the social order.” In her best local color stories, Cooke’s layering and repetition of the voices of humble but theologically intelligent characters produces a realism not to be found in the “natural” Christianity of the sentimental novelists.

Samuel Paine, you ain't no Christian, not 'cordin' to gospel truth, ef you have been a professor nigh on to forty year. You no need to think you was converted, for you never was. Folks ain't converted to meanness an' greediness an' self-seekin', an' wrath an' malice. . . . Ef you was a minister in the pulpit, or a deacon handin' the plate, you ain't no Christian 'thout you act like one; an' that's the etarnal fact on't.⁵⁴

Throughout the story, Cooke's narrator holds forth on a wide range of subjects, including the Squire's character flaws, but it is Aunt Roxy, with her bold personality and down-home, plain-spoken ways, who propels the drama, facilitates the Squire's spiritual transformation, and lends a distinct, even divine, authority to the judgment directed at him. Aunt Roxy's words, the narrator claims, are "God's own words, pelted at him . . . by Roxy," and Roxy herself admits that it "'twa'n't me re'lly," preaching to the Squire, "but somethin' makin' a tin horn out o' my lips to rouse him up to judgment."⁵⁵ Fetterley and Pryse maintain that "Cooke's narrative voice serves primarily to authenticate and reinforce the dialect voice of her characters."⁵⁶ But the opposite is true as well: Cooke's "dialect voice" lends authenticity and authority to the narrator, who turns from the story's action to address the reader directly. By "creating a form that allows her to share fictional space with her characters," Fetterley and Pryse go on, "Cooke positions her narrator as one who listens to her character's stories and thus teaches her own readers how to be listeners."⁵⁷ By means of their mutually supportive authority, then, Roxy and the narrator together invite the reader to sympathize, perhaps even to identify, with a theological point of view that is supported by the Lord's "gospel truth."⁵⁸

⁵⁴Cooke, "Squire Paine's Conversion," in *Somebody's Neighbors* (1881; rpt. New York: Garrett, 1969), p. 119.

⁵⁵Cooke, "Squire Paine's Conversion," pp. 121, 118.

⁵⁶Fetterley and Pryse, *Writing Out of Place*, p. 186.

⁵⁷Fetterley and Pryse, *Writing Out of Place*, p. 185.

⁵⁸Janet Auten argues that the "narrative intimacy" nineteenth-century women regionalists forged enabled them to exert "a shaping influence" on their readers ("Parental Guidance: Disciplinary Intimacy and the Rise of Women's Regionalism," in *The Only*

Clear-sighted, strong-minded, outspoken women function as the Lord's mouthpieces in two other stories that have been characterized as among the most "fully accomplished" in the writer's oeuvre: "Freedom Wheeler's Controversy with Providence" (1877), and "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience" (1880).⁵⁹ Published in the *Atlantic* and *Harper's* respectively, each story focuses on hard-hearted New England men of an earlier era—the first a young farmer, the second an old deacon—who, despite being professing Christians, sacrifice their loved ones to achieve their own selfish ends. Both stories also offer exceptionally grim representations of the rigid, male domination of rural, pre-industrial New England villages and of life's painful difficulties within them, especially for women. Cooke's female characters speak the plain truth to abusive men in power and clarify for everyone concerned—readers of the story included—the true meaning of Christianity. Freedom Wheeler's second wife, Melinda, moves him along the road to conversion with a diatribe addressed to the company gathered for her son's baptism: "He ain't no Christian! . . . Christians ain't that sort, growlin' and scoldin', and fightin' with the Lord that made him, cos he couldn't hev his own way."⁶⁰ Likewise, in "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience," Mabel Eldridge indicts Deacon Flint for his cruel and hypocritical treatment of his wife: "Christian!—*you* a Christian! You're a dyed-in-the-wool hypocrite. If you're pious, I hope I shall be a reprobate."⁶¹ As in "Squire Paine's Conversion," outraged women, speaking their minds in plain, regional parlance, wrest moral authority from the men they

Efficient Instrument: *American Women Writers and the Periodical, 1837–1916*, ed. Aleta Cane and Susan Alves [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001], p. 67). For more on nineteenth-century American women writers' creation of narrative intimacy, see Melissa Homestead, "'Links of Similitude': The Narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Author-Reader Relations at the End of the Nineteenth Century," in *Jewett and Her Contemporaries: Reshaping the Canon*, ed. Karen Kilcup and Thomas Edwards (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), pp. 76–98.

⁵⁹Ammons, intro. to *How Celia Changed Her Mind*, p. xxx.

⁶⁰Cooke, "Freedom Wheeler's Controversy with Providence," in *How Celia Changed Her Mind*, p. 86.

⁶¹Cooke, "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience," in *How Celia Changed Her Mind*, p. 122.

confront and, in so doing, lend an air of personal authenticity and intimacy to the narrator's more historically removed didacticism.

In addition to marshaling individual female characters whose actions support the narrator's point of view, Cooke also assembles a chorus of dialect voices that offers ongoing theological commentary on the action and focuses well-informed theological attention on the spiritual state of erring male protagonists. The chorus in "Freedom Wheeler" is composed of two elderly, maiden aunts who frequently remark on their nephew's recalcitrant personality, the nature of his increasingly ferocious controversy with God, and eventually on the course of his spiritual transformation. Based on the characters Ruey and Roxy in Stowe's *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, Aunt Hannah is gentle, kind, and soft spoken whereas, as her name implies, Huldah is energetic, blunt, and argumentative.⁶²

Of good Puritan stock, Hannah and Huldah are well versed in the Assembly Catechism,⁶³ and they view life in thoroughly religious terms. Hannah, a contemplative thinker, is the family's liberal, compassionate theologian; Huldah, the resolute doer, is a strong professor of Calvinist belief and the harshest, most forthright critic of her nephew's behavior. Throughout the story, Huldah, representing the Calvinist orthodoxy of the women's youth, and Hannah, exemplifying the gospel-oriented, maternal theology she has absorbed in the course of her work as a midwife and nurse, help clarify, in collaboration with the narrator, the gendered theological issues at the heart of Freedom's

⁶²The connection with Ruey and Roxy is made in Fetterley and Pryse, *Writing Out of Place*, p. 185. Another source for Cooke's use of the "chorus" is Stowe's depiction of Miss Prissy, the village seamstress in *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), who often concludes her obscure references to community secrets "with a general sigh and lamentation, like the confidential chorus in a Greek tragedy" ([rpt. Hartford: Stowe-Day, 1978], p. 193). In "Women's Masterpieces," Donovan comments briefly on Cooke's use of the chorus for thematic and structural purposes (in *Challenging Boundaries: Gender and Periodization*, ed. Joyce Warren and Margaret Dickie [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000], p. 34).

⁶³Ammons comments, "The Assembly's Catechism was a declaration of faith created in 1643–44 by the Westminster Assembly, a gathering of learned ministers appointed by the Puritan government of England under Oliver Cromwell" (*How Celia Changed Her Mind*, p. 262).

“controversy” and eventual conversion. So central are the aunts to the story, in fact, that their choral responses constitute a subplot, one in which the women’s differing theological orientations are continually being identified, negotiated, discussed. By means of her chorus of two, Cooke is able to affirm the theological concerns that she shares with her Calvinist forebears—obedience to God’s will, in particular—even as she privileges the redemptive power of human and divine love, the generosity of God’s grace, and the importance of genuine, everyday Christian conduct, as mandated by New Testament scripture. The female-centered love that, in the story, is the means for effecting God’s grace is repeatedly expressed through the mutually reinforcing voices—or the reported beliefs—of all the women in the story: Freedom Wheeler’s two wives, his daughters, and, of course, Hannah and Huldah. By the end of the story, following his slow but sure conversion, Freedom’s understanding of the deity has shifted from the willful, punishing God of his Calvinist upbringing to the loving, relational God of his enlightened female relatives.

Cooke employs a similar narrative strategy in “Mrs. Flint’s Married Experience.” The story concerns the fate of an older, widowed woman who, for various reasons, all of them misguided, believes she would be better off marrying the widowed deacon of a nearby village than continuing to live in her daughter’s home. Unfortunately, Deacon Flint is as hard and stingy as his name suggests, and the widow is gradually worn down by—and eventually dies from—his harsh, unloving treatment. Although his niece, Mabel, vigorously lectures him, Deacon Flint remains spiritually unregenerate to the end. Much of the story is thus devoted to critiquing the Deacon’s cruel, hypocritical behavior and exposing the ways in which he uses the authority of scripture and the patriarchal church hierarchy to maintain his hold on power.

Among the many characters Cooke gathers to comment on the Deacon are two individuals who, although they exist on the community’s social margins, are intimately involved in the lives of its more notable inhabitants. Polly Morse, a housekeeper and seamstress, has worked for the Deacon, and Israel Grubb

has served as a handyman and gardener for many of the town's leading citizens. Although the interactions between Polly and Israel are certainly less central to the story's dynamic than the choral responses of Huldah and Hannah were to theirs, the housekeeper and handyman's conversations nonetheless serve several important functions: they help structure the story; they leaven an otherwise tragic sequence of events with local color humor; and they interpret the gender issues at the story's heart, highlighting in particular men's inability to understand women. In dialect laced with pungent, homely expressions, Polly and Israel's choral commentary also addresses important theological concerns regarding Mrs. Flint's experience of marriage.

Mrs. Flint might easily appear to be the blameless victim of a cunning and manipulative man, but Cooke wants to explore her responsibility, including its religious implications, for entering into a bad marriage. Polly argues that the widow bears no blame for her fate. "I sorter thought the Lord sent every thing't happen'd to folks," says Polly, "a zealous theologian" who, the narrator comments, believes "the Saybrook Platform and the Assembly's Catechism to be merely a skilful abridgment and condensation of Scripture." Israel, on the other hand, offers an opinion that seems to have been lifted straight out of the writings of Yale's Nathaniel Taylor: "I expect we're to blame for wilful sins, ain't we? And I guess we fetch 'flections on ourselves sometimes."⁶⁴ Israel also introduces the notion that humans are incapable of fathoming God's plan. When Polly notes that she doesn't see how he can make his ideas on free will "jibe with 'lection and fore-ordination," he replies:

I don't know as I'm called to, Polly. I don't believe the Lord's ways is jest like a primer, for everybody to larn right off. . . . Land! Ef I was to set sail on them seas o' divinity, I should be snooped up in the fust gale, an' drownded right off. I b'lieve He is good, and doos right, anyhow. Ef I can't see the way on't, why, it's cause my spiritooal eyes ain't big enough. I can't see into some littler things than him, and I don't hold to takin' up the sea in a pint cap: 'twon't carry it, nohow.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Cooke, "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience," pp. 114–15.

⁶⁵Cooke, "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience," p. 115.

Although Israel's comment serves as a rejoinder to Polly's devotion to Calvinist doctrine, as spelled out in the Saybrook Platform and Assembly Catechism, it also alerts the reader to one of the story's central theological concerns: that Christians should humbly acknowledge the limits of religious doctrine or, as Israel puts it, that our "spiritooal eyes," aren't "big enough" to comprehend the ways of God. That Cooke calls on a man to express this theological insight is particularly germane in a story about the masculine abuse of domestic and ecclesiastical power, and lest the reader miss the point, Cooke creates a scene in which a pastor, having failed to persuade Mrs. Flint to make a public confession before the congregation, falls to his knees and prays for God's guidance: "Come thou in the might of thy great gentleness and thine all-knowing sympathy and love," he prays, "and show this child of thine the right way."⁶⁶ The *New Divinity*, Cooke wants to impress upon her readers, is not for women alone.



They are as "living epistles, known and read of all men," though they be the poor of this world, rich only in faith, and love, and good works.

—The narrator of Cooke's "Saint the Second" (1885)

Writing in the *Christian Union* in 1889, Cooke explained that she intended the Freedom Wheelers, Squire Paines, and Deacon Flints of her imagination to serve as "illustrations of the fact that there are men who degrade their office, and should not be respected merely because of their office; and also to enforce the Scripture, 'For if judgment begin in the house of God, where, then shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?'"⁶⁷ When she offered this gloss on her fiction, Cooke was no longer specializing in the local color writing that dominated her oeuvre

⁶⁶Cooke, "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience," pp. 126–27.

⁶⁷Cooke, "The Deacon," *Christian Union*, 7 March 1889, p. 318.

in the 1870s and early 1880s, nor was she being published regularly in *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. She had found the religious press to be generally more responsive and remunerative than other periodicals, and, like other women writers of the era, she was gradually being denied access to the elite literary magazines.⁶⁸ In the years before her death in 1892, therefore, Cooke largely produced the kind of Christian morality tales that she had contributed to the religious magazines since the early 1870s, and all of her novels—*Happy Dodd: or, She hath done what she could* (1878, 1887); *No: A Story for Boys* (1886); and *Steadfast, The Story of a Saint and a Sinner* (1889)—are explicitly devoted to religious themes. Today, literary critics tend to subscribe to Josephine Donovan's distinction between the "powerful" work Cooke produced in her local color phase and her largely forgettable, "derivative Sunday school moral tales."⁶⁹ But Gerald Kennedy challenges this dichotomy, arguing that there is a noteworthy continuity between Cooke's local color fiction, which addresses the "dwindling of spiritual devotion in Protestant New England," and her overtly religious fiction, which moves beyond her critique of old New England's religious practices to focus more positively on "the active Christian life."⁷⁰ Cooke's collection "*Root-bound*" and *Other Sketches*, published in 1885 by the Congregational Publishing Society, provides an excellent case in point.

⁶⁸For the economic difficulties Cooke experienced in the last years of her life and her need to keep "boiling the pot," see Downey, "Biographical and Critical Study," pp. 97–98. Although Cooke endured ongoing financial difficulties with the Congregational Publishing Society, the press that published her *Root-bound* (1885), she contributed frequently to the religious periodicals the *Congregationalist* and *Youth's Companion*. They paid her, Cooke claimed, "better than anywhere else" (quoted in Downey, "Biographical and Critical Study," p. 83). For a discussion of how Cooke and other women writers were excluded from the *Atlantic Monthly* and other elite literary periodicals in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, see Boyd, "'What! Has She Got into the *Atlantic*?'" pp. 5–36; Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); and Susan Williams, *Reclaiming Authorship: Literary Women in America, 1850–1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁶⁹Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature*, p. 68.

⁷⁰J. Gerald Kennedy, "The Short Story and the Short-Story Sequence, 1865–1914," in *A Companion to American Fiction: 1865–1914*, ed. Robert Lamb and G. R. Thompson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), p. 153.

From the title story, “Root-bound,” to “Two Saints,” from “The Deacon’s Week” to “The Minister’s Motto,” the *Root-bound* collection consistently features characters who give selflessly to others, particularly the unfortunate; who strive to follow the will of God, particularly as it is set forth in scripture; and who, when they experience backsliding or become aware of personal failings, let themselves be schooled in the ways of the Lord. Always their spiritual growth results in action in the world, the doing of good works, and often they set a powerful example for other Christians. As the narrator says of Miss Ann Pratt in “Saint the Second,” these characters often serve as “‘living epistles, known and read of all men,’ though they be the poor of this world, rich only in faith, and love, and good works.” In this story, the saintly protagonist sacrifices her “vigorous independence” to care for her elderly stepfather, while in “The Minister’s Motto” a young village pastor gradually learns to renounce his own selfish desires and “to follow in the steps of that Master who ‘pleased not himself.’”⁷¹

Although she uses techniques that appear in work we consider more “powerful” and artistic—the use of ordinary country people to engage in instructive dialogue or to narrate a story, for example—Cooke does not strive in *Root-bound* for the thematic and narrative complexity, the social and historical richness, or the realistic rendering of detail she achieved in “Freedom Wheeler” and “Mrs. Flint.” Instead, she generally employs a third-person narrator who functions as teacher and preacher, often making use of scripture to illustrate a lesson or drive home a point; she creates characters, most notably women, who are two-dimensional manifestations of model Christian conduct; and, although her stories are set in communities with names like Dorset and Barton, she generally makes no attempt to specify the location, geographically or historically, or to render the setting in any detail. In creating such tales, Cooke clearly demonstrated her ability to adapt her

⁷¹Rose Terry Cooke, *Root-bound and Other Sketches* (1885; rpt. Ridgewood, N.J.: Greg Press, 1968), pp. 107, 97, 240. Note how Cooke repurposes the text from 2 Corinthians 5:15 that she had highlighted in “A Higher Life.”

narrative skills to the expectations of different publishing outlets. Whereas publications like *The Atlantic Monthly* printed what they considered good literature and worked to promote an American literary canon,⁷² Candy Gunther Brown explains that religious publications were most interested in reinforcing “a larger narrative of the relationship of Christians to the world” and that their readers sought to confirm their identities as Christians and find inspiration for and reinforcement of their spiritual values.⁷³ Indeed, says Brown, religious literature in the nineteenth century served to create a “textual community” of believers who would be inspired by those publications “to promote their own and others’ progress in holiness.”⁷⁴ The promotion of holiness is, in fact, a prominent theme in many of the *Root-bound* tales, where self-sacrificing women in their families or ministers in their pulpits actively cultivate the spiritual well-being of others and instruct them in the ways of the Lord.

Because the pieces in *Root-bound* forthrightly promote the “higher life,” or “holiness,” among late-nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants, the stories they tell are inevitably unambiguous and formulaic. As “moral tales” or fables of Christian conduct, they perform important cultural and spiritual work for what Brown calls their “textually defined pilgrim community.”⁷⁵ Like Cooke’s letter to the *Christian Union*, moreover, the late stories serve to underscore for today’s readers the cultural work at the heart of Cooke’s more complex, religiously inflected local color stories. For it was Cooke’s commitment to the “higher life” that inspired her to combine the techniques of literary

⁷²For a discussion of the literary mission of the *Atlantic Monthly*, see Boyd, “What! Has She Got into the *Atlantic*?” p. 12; Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 80–81; and Mott, *History of American Magazines*, 2:492–515.

⁷³Candy Gunther Brown, “Religious Periodicals and Their Textual Communities,” in *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, ed. Scott Casper et al., vol. 3 of *A History of the Book in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 277.

⁷⁴Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 95, 12.

⁷⁵Brown, *Word in the World*, p. 95.

regionalism with the concerns of postwar evangelical Protestantism, creating in the process an artful collaboration between her narrators and dialect characters and expertly weaving into her characters' daily conversations and activities a theology of Christian conduct. That Cooke deployed this literary theology in publications as seemingly disparate as the *Independent* and *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Root-bound*, that she incorporated her literary theology in narratives both purposefully formulaic and intentionally literary, also demonstrates the ubiquity and fluidity of religious discourse in the nineteenth century as Protestantism struggled to maintain its hegemony in the rapidly expanding, rapidly diversifying American nation.⁷⁶



The biblical meaning of repentance is to turn around and start a new path. In a religious framework, it means realizing you have made a moral mistake and deciding to change your behavior. It's not enough to feel guilty or sorry for something; genuine repentance requires a change in decisions and actions, by moving in a different direction. Merely admitting you were wrong is not enough. You have to change.

—Jim Wallis, “Wall Street, Repent!” (2010)

American readers today would surely benefit from greater familiarity with Cooke's writing. Her trenchant, tragic, but nonetheless amusing stories about New England life provide a thought-provoking contrast to the equally delightful, but often more benign, fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. Cooke's work also invites us to complicate our understanding of literary realism at the end of the nineteenth century to include what I have elsewhere called the “Christian

⁷⁶Drawing on the work of Sandra Zagarell, Augusta Rohrbach suggests that we consider the “various ‘registers’ of discourse” in Cooke's writing “as simultaneous and constitutive, rather than mutually exclusive” (*Truth Stranger than Fiction*, p. 131).

realism” of much of her regionalist writing,⁷⁷ to consider more fully the significance of her avowedly Christian morality tales, and thus to further our efforts to make religion, as Tracy Fessenden encourages us to do, a “more legitimate category of analysis in American literary and cultural history.”⁷⁸ If we are serious about tracing the progress of Cooke’s spiritual commitments and about placing her work in both a literary and historical context, we will, I believe, discover not only the continuity in her art and views but in our nation’s engagement with religion as well.

Although the consensus that late-nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants struggled to maintain, and to which Cooke contributed, has fractured, religious concerns remain very much at the center of our national discussions and debates. In the past many months, President Barak Obama originally declined to meet with the Dalai Lama at the White House, a decision he reversed several months later; a cross in the Mojave desert (now stolen) has been the subject of a lawsuit concerning the separation of church and state; Glenn Beck’s claim that “social justice is a perversion of the gospel” has generated an energetic conversation about the meaning of both social justice and the gospel message; the public theologian Jim Wallis has called on the leaders on Wall Street not just to apologize but to repent, that is, to change their ways; Christian leaders have spoken out against the new immigration law in Arizona, some vowing civil disobedience in the name of God’s higher law; American Muslim scholars have produced a YouTube video to repudiate the messages of radical Muslim clerics; and Americans around the country are debating the rights of Muslims to build mosques where they choose to do so. Although these are matters of national import, they play out, as Cooke well understood, in the intimate spaces of our homes, our classrooms, our places of business, our town halls, and, of course, our churches, synagogues, and mosques.

⁷⁷My “The Cruelty of Husbands,” p. 78.

⁷⁸Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, p. 12.

At the heart of issues, controversies, and conflicts such as we are experiencing today are the questions that most interested Rose Terry Cooke: What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to live the “higher life” and be true to the gospel? What, finally, does it mean to live a life consistent with one’s beliefs? As they did in the nineteenth century, Christians still argue about the essential nature of their faith and their mission in the world, and they still question, even insist upon, the role of faith in public life. Followers of other faiths, in America and around the world, do so as well. An understanding of Rose Terry Cooke’s literary theology thus reminds us that, regardless of our religious affiliations, cultivating a broad-based theological literacy in our global age is both neighborly and prudent. As the Dalai Lama recently argued in the *New York Times*, “Harmony among the major faiths has become an essential ingredient of peaceful coexistence in the world. From this perspective, mutual understanding among these traditions is not merely the business of religious believers—it matters for the welfare of humanity as a whole.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹Tensin Gyatso, “Many Faiths, One Truth,” *New York Times*, 24 May 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/opinion/25gyatso.html?src=tp>.

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