

# Charles Dickens: His Controversial Religious Identity

Prof. M. K. Harmoush,

Foreign Languages and Literature Department,

Faculty of Arts & Humanities,

King Abdul Aziz University.

## ملخص البحث:

لدى معظم النقاد حقيقة راسخة تفيد ان الروائي الانجليزي (١٨١٢-١٨٧٠) تشارلز ديكنز كان على العموم مسيحيا نموذجيا . ولكن قراءة الكثير من رواياته تدل على انه ليس بهذا الوصف. لقد تبين ممن عاصروه من الكتاب والنقاد انه لم يكن مخلصا لتعاليم الدين المسيحي. ومن خلال كتاباته، ممكن التخمين ان تشارلز قد ادار اهتماماته الى مذاهب مثل النفعية والوجودية التي كانت شائعة في عصره . هذا البحث يتقصى اثر انتماءات ديكنز الدينية والفلسفية من خلال قراءة متفحصة لرواياته.

## Abstract

Charles Dickens (1812 - 1870) critics arrived at a general conviction that Dickens, the novelist, is a Christian of the broadest kind. However, upon reading many of his novels, we have come to realize that Dickens is not a Christian of the ideal type; rather he showed himself, like many of his

colleagues in the Victorian age, unfaithful to the teachings of Christianity. It may be suggested that he turned, through his experience to philosophies, current in his time, such as Unitarianism and even existentialism. This paper traces Charles Dickens's religious and philosophical identity through reasonable readings of his novels.

Generally speaking, "In all his writings, Charles Dickens—a Christian of the broadest kind—is outspoken in his dislike of evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism but, especially in his fiction, he is very reluctant to make professions of a specific faith beyond the most general sort of Christianity."(Cody, *The Victorian Web*,1988).

Reading *Great Expectations* may confuse the reader regarding Dickens' religion; he seems to some readers a little bit doubtful or vague about his religious views. We consider the opening part of his novel, *Great Expectations*, where he says "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip"(www.gutenberg.org. Chap. 1). It seems from this passage that he does not like the name of his father Pirrip and the Christian name Philip, the reader may speculate about Dickens's real religion since he does not like the Christian name of his father or his Christian name; and as the text reveals above that he calls himself Pip which means that he does not want to belong to his father or his Christian

tradition; rather he chooses an identity of his own self. In other words, he was not satisfied with the current religion so he comes to choose a religion for himself, perhaps neither this nor that but we think in between both.

Charles was not very much interested in religion: "There is little positive evidence about Dickens's religious thinking throughout the twenties and thirties, but it is in the latter decade, a period of significant reform in England, that he was at his most unrestrained in his religious satires" (Schlicke ,1999). Charles detached himself from the church to embrace liberty and equality.

A critic says Charles "was not a religious novelist, though he lived in an age of religious novels. Like so many Victorian writers, he was not even a conventional Christian. Looking back at the novelist's routes, the reader may learn more about Dickens identity. Charles was brought up in the Church of England, but Dickens was not conspicuously devout, although his mother may have succumbed briefly during his youth to a bout of evangelical fervor which he may have felt was oppressive and which may help to explain his lifelong aversion to evangelicalism and the presence in his work of several sardonic portraits of psalm-singing, sermonizing evangelicals who are thoroughly hypocritical. Mrs. Joe in *Great Expectations* refuses to hear Christmas Carols, a sign that hits to her dissatisfaction with the Christian tradition (Cody, the Victorian Web).

In fact, Charles's parents were not serious religious people; it is said that "Dickens's parents were Anglican, but evidently entirely uninterested in the dogmas of the Church of England and probably not very regular in their worship" (Schlicke , 1999). Dickens describes the church as a "bleak house"(Fletcher, 2012).

A yearlong celebration of Charles Dickens' life and works will begin on the 200th anniversary of his birth, Feb. 7, with a wreath-laying at London's Westminster Abbey.

It seems a fitting gesture, given that the Abbey's Poets' Corner houses the famous writer's remains. But it is also ironic in light of Dickens' distaste for religious structures and rigid dogma.

We cannot ignore a fact that Dickens, a member of the Church of England (Anglican), believed deeply in Jesus as savior and in his moral teachings, but many of the novelist's most avowedly Christian characters represent the worst in religion: greed, hypocrisy, indifference to human suffering, arrogance, self-righteousness and theological bullying.

Seth Pecksniff is an unctuous English architect whose insincere behavior made the name Pecksniff synonymous with hypocrisy. He appears in Dickens's novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (serialized 1843–44).

Mrs. Jellyby is a satiric character in Dickens's novel *Bleak House* (serialized 1852–53) and one of his more memorable

caricatures. Matronly Mrs. Jellyby is a philanthropist who devotes her time and energy to setting up a mission in Africa while ignoring the needy in her own family and neighbourhood.

Uriah Heep is the villain in Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* (serialized 1849–50). The name Uriah Heep has become a byword for a falsely humble hypocrite.

In Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (serialized 1837–39) the Artful Dodger is a precocious streetwise boy who introduces the protagonist Oliver to the thief Fagin and his gang of children, who work as thieves and pickpockets.

Fagin is one of the villains in Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* (serialized 1837–39) and one of the most notorious anti-Semitic portraits in English literature. He is an old man in London who teaches young homeless boys how to be pickpockets and then fences their stolen goods. Although a miser and exploiter, he shows a certain loyalty and solicitude toward the boys. The Artful Dodger is one of Fagin's thieves and, for a time, so is the young Oliver Twist. At the novel's end Fagin is executed for complicity in a murder. Bill Sikes is a violent, brutish thief and burglar in Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* (serialized 1837–39)(Britannica, 29 November 2021).

There are traces of anti-Catholic sentiments in Dickens novels. Eslick says that "Dickens experience undergoing internal religious conflict and catholic is not the best

religion. Some times religion is, for Dickens, “superstitious and unreliable.” (Anti Catholicism ..., PhD, University of York, 2011).

In Dickens’s narrative novels, the Bible becomes a paradoxical code that provides him with ‘contradictory interpretations of experience’ (Larson, 2009).

One of the more conspicuous features of Dickens’s fiction is the absence of a sustained religious subject that is unsatisfactory or unhelpful. Many critics find Dickens religious context ‘unconvincing’. Some say that his works are ignorant of the very elements of religious faith (Heatley, P.2). "He was more interested in the general spirit than the specific letter of the faith," says Brian McCuskey, who teaches English at Utah State University, "holding broad, loose beliefs, he had little patience for either institutional or evangelical Christianity."

Dickens' wildly popular Victorian novels, McCuskey writes in an email, "criticize evangelicals as being meddlesome at best and hypocritical at worst." To Dickens, says Barry Weller, a professor of English at the University of Utah who specializes in 19th- and 20th-century British literature, "any sectarian commitment got in the way of essential Christianity." It was Christian zealots' attitude toward the poor that bothered Dickens the most. "What we find again and again in the novels is that [these Christians] want to do charity in a wholesale rather than individual way," Weller

says. "They are not sensitive to the needs of individual families and their situations. Instead of giving them what they need, they hand out a bunch of [religious] pamphlets. When they visit the poor as representatives of religion, they seem more eager to impress [on the needy] a certain doctrine than try to help them" (Stack, 7 February, 2012).

So where did Dickens get his wariness toward Christian institutions?

Empathy began early with The novelist's father, John Dickens, a clerk in the naval office, being "loquacious, feckless, grandly theatrical," writes Kenneth Benson in a biographical sketch for the New York Public Library, "and highly skilled at amassing debts."

After a somewhat idyllic childhood, the 12-year-old Charles, was sent to work for 12 hours a day, Benson writes, "pasting labels on bottles at a tumbledown, rat-overrun shoe polish factory on the Thames."

The elder Dickens landed in debtors' prison, where he was joined by his family. The future novelist had to walk three miles a day to the prison from his factory job. Eventually, the family went free, but the young Dickens never forgot the trauma.

According to Stack, "These cruel turns of fate — his humiliating enslavement to menial labor and his father's imprisonment and disgrace — would haunt Dickens for the

remainder of his life," Benson writes. "Abandoned children and orphans like Pip — the hero of *Great Expectations* — are everywhere in his work, and abandonment of course need not be literal to wound deeply and permanently." (7 February, 2012)

The experience also gave him an instinctual empathy for the suffering masses and an antipathy for those proclaiming the Christian gospel who failed to care for them.

In Dickens' novels, many scenes illustrate the churches' institutional neglect of the poor, including a parish's cruel treatment of Oliver in *Oliver Twist* and Jo, the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House* staring up uncomprehendingly at the cross at the top of St. Paul's cathedral, which seems very, very far away.

Many Christian characters symbolize negative values, especially the "gluttonous Rev. Chadband in *Bleak House*, who spouts platitudes and sweats train oil, or the fanatical Mrs. Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, who keeps secret from her son the fact that she is not his real mother". Despite all this, Dickens also enjoyed positive experiences with religion. The first person who taught him to read," Weller says, "was an Anglican clergyman in Rochester where the family was living."

As a successful writer, Dickens became involved in many charitable causes, including homes for "fallen women" and orphanages, he says,

Dickens connected his intense empathy for children's suffering with Jesus' own receptiveness to the young and innocent, Weller says, and alludes frequently to the Christian savior's example in the New Testament.

The novelist believed strongly in "the moral values of Christianity — self-sacrifice, charity, compassion, forgiveness," McCuskey writes, "and his heroes and heroines embody those values."

One of those values is a kind of conversion. The clearest exemplar is Ebenezer Scrooge.

Changing your life • Here's a question that comes up over and over for Dickensian characters: Is there a possibility of genuine transformation?

"People turn themselves into caricatures by becoming mechanical," Weller says. "It's breaking free of incrustation of habit that enables a good life."

One of Weller's favorite passages is on the last manuscript page of Dickens' final and unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*:

A brilliant morning shines on the old city. Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful, with a lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air. Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and fields — or, rather, from the one great garden of the whole cultivated island in its yielding

time — penetrate into the Cathedral, subdue its earthy odor, and preach the Resurrection and the Life. The cold stone tombs of centuries ago grow warm; and flecks of brightness dart into the sternest marble corners of the building, fluttering there like wings.

Dickens uses religious language, Weller says, "to talk about a sense of renewed cities and ruins."

Yet, he shuns Christian terms like "conversion" to describe what happens to his characters. The novels can be read as "secularizing Christianity," McCuskey says, "wresting those values away from institutional religion and making them individual and personal."

In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is visited by ghosts, not angels, but the pilgrimage through his own past, present and possible future has the same effect: He is eager to alter his destiny: "I am not the man I was," Scrooge says to the Last Spirit. "I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse."

Even Dickens' most overtly religious work, *The Life of Our Lord*, emphasizes Christ's "humanity and moral lessons," McCuskey says, not his divinity.

In this small volume, the novelist pens a simplified version of the New Testament for his children, which retells the Gospels' familiar stories and parables.

"It outlines his faith," great-great-grandson Gerald Charles Dickens writes in the introduction, "which was simple and deeply held."

The book concludes with a plea to "do good, always" and to live, without boasting, the "quiet" Christian qualities of love, gentleness, meekness and humility.

Perhaps Dickens' view of bifurcated religion is best illustrated by the character of Joe Gargery, the blacksmith in *Great Expectations*. Pip calls him a "gentle Christian man," McCuskey says, and he is "probably the most Christian of all Dickens' characters." But Joe, the scholar adds, "is not comfortable in his Sunday church clothes." 'I hope you say your prayers every night,' said another gentleman in a gruff voice, "and pray for the people who feed you, and take care of you, like a Christian."

"Yes, sir," stammered the boy. The gentleman who spoke last was unconsciously right. It would have been very like a Christian, and a marvelously good Christian, too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of him. But he hadn't, because nobody had taught him."

"The blessing was from a young child's lips [Little Dick — fellow sufferer], but it was the first that Oliver had ever heard invoked upon his head; and through all the struggles and sufferings of his after life, through all the troubles and changes of many weary years, he never once forgot it."  
in *Oliver Twist*

"It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

A Tale of Two Cities

"In a word, I was too cowardly to do what I knew to be right, as I had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong." Great Expectations

"Remember! — It is Christianity to do good, always — even to those who do evil to us. It is Christianity to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to do to all men as we would have them do to us. It is Christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts, and never make a boast of them, or of our prayers or of our love of God, but always to show that we love Him by humbly trying to do right in everything. If we do this, and remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in peace." The Life of Our Lord.

P Utah State University English professor Brian McCuskey will discuss Charles Dickens' life and works at 7 p.m. Feb. 7 in the Logan Library's Jim Bridger Room. The event is free.

Dickens' novels are literary constructs, and the opinions of his characters are not necessarily those of the author. Nonetheless, the degree of sympathy or irony in his representations of religious characters may provide oblique indications of his own position: He believed that,

historically, religious conflict had led to cruelty, bloodshed and intolerance. He thought that religion unnecessarily suppressed people's enjoyment of life, and he was a great supporter of the movement to allow places of entertainment to open on Sundays – which at the time was most people's only work-free day.

Dickens had little liking for priests and bishops, religious rites, and thought that complex theological ideas were a barrier to faith: “there are many examples of Nonconformist clergymen in Dickens's novels, but nearly all of them are depicted as charlatans or hypocrites, who do not live up to the values they preach. He punished the Amens tremendously.” Mr Wopsle is a church clerk and he is Dickens representation of a corrupt religion. This expresses Dickens views on religion as he says that Mr Wopsle had a Roman nose which suggests that Dickens disliked Roman Catholics which is true.

Some quotations from Dickens’s *Great Expectations* show his ambivalent attitude about religion:

I've just started reading Dickens this week and came across this passage when reading today, still quite relevant: "Mrs. Joe was a very clean housekeeper, but had an exquisite art of making her cleanliness more uncomfortable and unacceptable than dirt itself. Cleanliness is next to Godliness, and some people do the same by thier religion."

Yes, Dickens was very interested in exposing hypocrisy, and so religious hypocrisy, as well as the foolishness of religious extremes, come up often.

Dickens was raised in the Church of England, but in his early thirties he embraced Unitarianism. Dickens was outspoken about his impatience with the doctrinal details of the Christian faith and the institutional church. (Ryken, 2019)

Dickens has no sympathy with the doctrines of the church. (Frazee, pp119 -143)

Although Dickens was baptized and reared in the Church of England and was a nominal Anglican for most of his life, he turned to Unitarianism in the 1840s as a Broad Church alternative. He associated with Unitarians until the end of his life. Early experience with Dissenters gave him a lifelong aversion to evangelical zeal, doctrinal disputation and sectarianism. Equally unsympathetic with High Church Anglicanism, he feared that the Oxford Movement might lead the English back to Roman Catholicism. Dickens, however, favored civil rights for Catholics and even once hoped his daughter would marry the Catholic Percy Fitzgerald, one of his literary protégés.

Dickens's religious beliefs were those of most 19th century British Unitarians.

(Hromatko, December 23, 2001)

Unitarianism is a Christian religious denomination. Unitarians believe that God is only one person. Unitarians reject the Trinity and do not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Followers of Unitarianism also do not accept the concepts of original sin and of eternal punishment for sins committed on earth...in the mid-19th century—Unitarianism moved away from a belief in the necessity of the Bible as the source of religious truth.

Unitarian Universalism is not an atheist movement, but a religious movement into which some atheists may comfortably fit. The movement proclaims the importance of individual freedom of belief, and it includes members from a wide spectrum of beliefs.

Unitarian worship will tend to use gender-inclusive language, as well as language and concepts drawn from a wide range of religious and philosophical traditions.

a system of Christian belief that maintains the impersonality of God, rejects the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, and takes reason, conscience, and character as the criteria of belief and practice.

characterized by a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning". Unitarian Universalists assert no creed, but instead are unified by their shared search for spiritual growth, guided by a dynamic, "living tradition".

There is no Unitarian creed - i.e. there is no specified list of things that Unitarians must believe. Unitarians are sceptical about any one person or tradition possessing the whole truth. They are also increasingly aware of the inherent value of diversity for the wellbeing of the natural world,

Whatever our theological persuasion, Unitarian Universalists generally agree that the fruits of religious belief matter more than beliefs about religion-even about God. ... Some UUs believe in reincarnation, and some believe there is no afterlife.

In Dickens's novel *Hard Times* (serialized and published in book form in 1854) Gradgrind is the proprietor of an experimental school where only facts are taught. For Dickens he embodies the unsympathetic qualities of the utilitarian social philosophy prevalent in Victorian England.

Moreover some of Dickens readers find in his fiction element of existentialism, a philosophical theory emphasizing the individualism in action and free will, as demonstrated in PhD dissertation by Hai Na in 2014, at The City University of New York.

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