George MacDonald's Doors: Suspended Telos and the Child Believer

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GEORGE MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) has a thing or two to say about God's plan. A fairy tale in which the happily-ever-after is the pure faith of a child, the novel serves up its eponymous princess, eight-year-old Irene, as a something of an Every Girl. Irene faces two intersecting dramas. First: buried in a series of subterranean caverns, a host of devolved goblins plots to kidnap her and force her to marry their prince. Irene's new friend, a working-class miner named Curdie, learns of the scheme and endeavors to save her. Meanwhile, the princess befriends her great-great-grandmother, a lady God-figure who lives in her attic, spinning a mysterious thread and eating pigeons' eggs. Irene struggles to believe in her grandmother—perhaps because the woman appears intermittently, often vanishing without explanation—but the child's spiritual crisis seems to culminate in the telos of a symbolic baptism, her doubts retrospectively justified as necessary steps on the path to unqualified belief. As in much of MacDonald's work, the physical and the spiritual plots are shown ultimately to be united. When a miraculous flood wipes away both Irene's doubts and the goblins themselves, we understand the resolution to have been the grandmother's plan all along.

In chronicling the seeming triumph of Irene's faith (and everyone else's), the novel lends itself, perhaps too readily, to a reading through what Mark Knight calls the "faith and doubt paradigm" inaugurated by J. Hillis Miller's influential study, *The Disappearance of God* (1964). According to Knight, Miller's critical tradition "positioned belief in the Christian religion as the losing side in a battle with modern skepticism, and the stories told were typically ones in which faith gave way to a doubt deemed more credible and more modern."[1] In this view, MacDonald is the naysayer's naysayer, invoking doubt only to vanquish

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it. We could read *The Princess and the Goblin,* with its literally disappearing grandmother, as an attempt to reckon with God's absence, something of a feeble antidote to "classics of 'faith and doubt,'"[2] such as "In Memoriam" and "Dover Beach." Given the way MacDonald figures faith as closure, the author seems to reinforce the opposing paradigm Knight describes.

Recent scholars of the "religious turn" have taken pains to rewrite the "secularization thesis" that assumes religion to have gradually receded to the domain of private belief.[3] Joining theorists like Jürgen Habermas, Talal Asad, and Charles Taylor in rethinking paradigms of secularization, literary critics have complicated Miller's reading, making it impossible to reduce religious beliefs and behaviors to dying breeds. Kirstie Blair and Charles LaPorte, for instance, subvert Miller's disappearance narrative by demonstrating the impact of religious controversies on Victorian poetry. Additionally, Joshua King proposes that critics "highlight the intersection of nineteenth-century reading, religion, and conceptions of the nation; and include in our studies a wide range of texts, from poems to newspapers."[4] Perhaps most pointedly, Timothy Larsen has suggested that scholars replace the "crisis of faith" narrative with its opposite, recognizing prominent "reconverts" who encountered a "crisis of doubt" and returned to their various religious folds.[5] For these scholars, among others,[6] the point has been to shed the critical habit of thinking about the Victorian era purely in terms of religious decline and instead recognize the centrality of religion, within and beyond Protestant Christianity, in Victorian culture.

What, then, are we to make of a writer like MacDonald, who seems not only to embrace the now-tired opposition between faith and doubt but to mobilize it as religious propaganda for children? Certainly, if there were a canon of believers in nineteenth-century literature, MacDonald would occupy a central place. And in part because of his work on and with childhood, he presents a particular problem for scholars analyzing religious belief in the period. MacDonald deploys the categories of belief and doubt explicitly, in children's terms, and thus enforces the narrative of the Victorian "crisis of faith" that held sway for so long, albeit from the opposite vantage point, emphasizing the religious over the skeptical. His work also aestheticizes the showdown between belief and doubt only to insulate the child believer from the nasty world of inconvenient spiritual questions. In the very verve with which MacDonald brings his theological attention to bear on children's literature, he risks the "ideological violence" of the Abrahamic religions that, as Mark Night observes, continues to make some scholars "nervous"

about rethinking religion.[7] It is little wonder he has not presented an attractive case to most recent efforts to recuperate Victorian religiosity.

And yet MacDonald's work can be particularly useful in complicating ideas about Victorian religion precisely because he invokes this troublesome faith/doubt binary so directly and because his use of the fairy-tale form stages questions about belief in unique and unavoidable ways. Indeed, his *Princess* books in particular seem uncannily prescient about the complex legacy of the struggle between belief and doubt. On one hand, as we shall see, MacDonald assumes belief to be the foregone conclusion of spiritual struggle. His allegiance to the principle of universal reconciliation evinces his conviction that belief, a form of cosmic closure, is inevitable. But he also productively complicates the belief-and-doubt paradigm by framing it within questions about design, development, and the temporal process of belief.

To the extent that the novel represents MacDonald's theology,[8] Irene's journey reflects the scandalous doctrine conventionally attached to MacDonald's name, the principle of universalism. MacDonald believed—along with a small but noteworthy cohort of theologians from Schleiermacher to *Essays and Reviews* contributor H. B. Wilson—that all lost souls would eventually be redeemed by the unstoppable love of a benign creator. Even if it takes eons, universalism claims, God will get his way—and good thing, too, because ultimate reconciliation recasts hell as torturous but temporary. Because it instigated arguments about hermeneutics and translation, God's temporal existence, and Christ's descent after crucifixion, universalism was a contentious concept. Given MacDonald's steadfast espousal of the unorthodox doctrine, which cost him his job at Arundel's Trinity Congregational Church in 1853, Princess Irene's development comes to seem all the more allegorical, her internal pilgrim's progress serving as a spiritual recapitulation of what will happen to us all: we may struggle with doubt and perhaps even succumb to outright unbelief, but ultimately, by reembracing the ideal faith of the child, we will step out of a finite hell and into the waiting arms of the divine.

Although MacDonald's universalist theology seems to reinforce faith as the ultimate victor in an inevitable battle between (good) belief and (bad) doubt, his fairy tale suggests a perpetual and intersectional relationship between faith and skepticism. MacDonald's experiment on belief in his *Princess* books is testament to Christopher Lane's recent argument for "how integral religious doubt became to large swaths of Victorian culture" even in arenas that seemed to banish it.[9] By placing

these competing perspectives in symbolic and structural tension so explicitly within the works—and, moreover, by framing those perspectives through the lens of a character's growth and development—MacDonald undertakes a surprisingly schematic takedown of spiritual telos, refusing to endorse the unilateral conclusions of his theological work.

In what follows, I identify four points at which MacDonald undermines the universalist telos he seems to endorse, demonstrating the author's paradoxical treatment of immaturity as the locus of spiritual process. This compromised treatment of closure resituates MacDonald's broader intellectual projects in his sermons and in his fiction as contributions to Victorian discourses about religious identity. Given his emphasis on process—in particular, a process of faith defined by a paradoxical "child-heart"—we might begin to consider MacDonald less an unequivocal defender of faith and more a theorist of religion in conversation not only with other theologians debating eternity, but also with scientists and social theorists trying to define what Ilana M. Blumberg has recently described as "the active processes of religion-making."[10] Indeed, as we shall see, MacDonald thinks of religion in much the same way Matthew Arnold describes the process of culture, as "[n]ot a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming."[11] By reconceiving the belief-and-doubt paradigm and dramatizing its association with the discourse of design, MacDonald theorizes an intermittent religious subjectivity. That discontinuous perspective eschews the pressures of terminal meaning and validates diverse, optional, and even impermanent spiritual attachments as legitimate modes of identity formation. Thus, MacDonald's work contributes to Sebastian Lecourt's theory of an "aesthetic secularity [in the Victorian period] that emphasizes hybridity, heterogeneity, and the ability to keep multiple values in play."[12] For MacDonald, childhood is not a phase of doubt to be outgrown but rather a strategic temporal position that facilitates a process-oriented religious subjectivity.

1. Universalism, Development, and Design

Universalism was and is a risky doctrine. From its roots in Origen, Clement, and Gregory of Nyssa, the concept of ultimate reconciliation has been one of the most divisive in Christian theology, attracting public condemnation from at least 543 to the present day.[13] The principle underwent several revivals. It came into somewhat disreputable vogue in the mid-nineteenth century, when a series of theologians influenced by Schleiermacher attracted public censure for their views. In 1853

F. D. Maurice suggested that the conventional translation of the Greek *aionios* to "everlasting"—as in everlasting punishment—in fact connoted a discrete era. The proposition lost him his professorial chair at King's College, London. Seven years later, after proffering his tentative "hope" for posthumous redemption in his essay "The National Church" (1860), H. B. Wilson was charged with heresy and condemned at the Court of Arches.[14] But the doctrine continued to gain support, and the 1860s and 1870s saw a small wave of universalist texts, including Thomas Rawson Birks's *Victory of Divine Goodness* (1867), Andrew Jukes's *The Restitution of All Things* (1867), and Samuel Cox's *Salvator Mundi* (1877), all attempts to theorize an afterlife more consistent with a fundamentally benign deity. In 1878 Frederic William Farrar, dean of Westminster, gave a series of sermons passionately defending universalist theology and simultaneously denying he was a universalist.[15] The proliferation of these treatises testifies to the complexity of the issue, which begged questions about interpretive authority, God's place in time, and where Christ went when he died, but the basic premise of ultimate reconciliation posed a considerable threat to traditional interpreters of scripture. In questioning the eternity of damnation, universalism compromised the leverage of divine punishment: Hell might be terrorizing, tormenting, torturous—but you could wait it out.

Public advocates of universalism from Maurice to MacDonald were punished with trials, financial penalties, or the losses of their positions; yet, as Church of England cleric F. W. Farrar observed in 1878, it was "openly, or more often tacitly, accepted by an ever-increasing number of our most thoughtful and educating living divines."[16] Farrar's assessment was correct; in his comprehensive study *Hell and the Victorians,* Geoffrey Rowell echoes Farrar's claim, suggesting that it was a quietly popular belief, even when it was not avowed explicitly. We may think about universalist theology from the 1860s to the 1880s as a subtle form of dissent and a testament to the richly variable landscape of Victorian forms of belief.

In some ways, universalist theology was an optimistic, if misguided, byproduct of globalization. Due largely to international missionary efforts, many Victorians chafed at the idea of ubiquitous eternal damnation. As the empire expanded, theologians and the lay public alike were forced to reckon anew with those Farrar called the "vast mass of mankind," the "undecided" who were "not utter reprobates any more than they are saints."[17] Wilson, likewise aware of the "neutral character of the multitude," acknowledged that most people on the planet had never heard of Christianity.[18] As

such, he envisioned the majority of the earth's population, lacking the right opportunity to spiritually mature, in a state of arrested development. The fear that so many virtual innocents would be damned with hardly the chance to complete their conversion prompted believers to reimagine their God as a friendlier being if they were to retain him.

The issue quickly became a major crux of spiritual crisis. Even Charles Darwin, the forerunner of development himself, cited eternal damnation—not creationism—as the primary instrument of his deconversion: "I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true," he writes in his autobiography, "for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this," he concludes with a choice pun, "is a damnable doctrine."[19]

For his part, MacDonald more or less agreed with Darwin. But by framing redemption as the natural consequence of divine order, MacDonald's theory of universalism incorporated eschatology into his theodicy. Universalism was, for this author, an eschatological representation of the principle of teleology, which he endorsed both implicitly and explicitly. In other words, it was a question of not only God's goodness (morality) but also his design (cosmic order). MacDonald's most conspicuously universalist sermons ring with the confidence that even where progress is not discernible, God's design operates quietly in the background. For instance, in "Consuming Fire," MacDonald simultaneously insists upon God's telos and undermines it:

> [T]he whole labour of God's science, history, poetry—from the time when the earth gathered itself into a lonely drop of fire from the red rim of the driving sun-wheel to the time when Alexander John Scott worshipped him from its face—was evolving truth upon truth in lovely vision, in torturing law, never lying, never repenting; and for this will the patience of God labour while there is yet a human soul whose eyes have not been opened, whose child-heart has not yet been born in him.[20]

Although the author's exact orientation toward science has been debated, this passage gives lie to any claim that he sought to avoid science altogether. Rather, he weaves together competing interpretations of scientific progress in an irresolute treatment of teleology.

In the excerpt above, MacDonald acknowledges disciplines that were beginning to distinguish themselves into separate domains of knowledge—science, history, literature—wrangling them back together under God's "labour." One effect of this grouping is to sanitize the

scientific and historical work that seemed to produce new forms of knowledge as just so much evidence of God's ultimate law. But the phrase "when the earth gathered itself" should be recognized as a stark departure from conventional Christian accounts of progress and even from more liberal denominations like Congregationalism. MacDonald places the earth—and not God—in the subject position. This suggestion that change happens spontaneously—"the earth gathered itself" rather than being preordained by the creator's vision—does away with God's plan even as it ostensibly bolsters his "labour." These lines, in fact, read much more like Darwin than William Paley. In this formulation, God's benevolent plan becomes a "torturing law," akin to the uniformitarian laws of progress that scientists were coming to recognize as unfeeling forces. As a result, the God MacDonald elsewhere depicted as a deeply intimate figure comes to look anonymous, hardly invested in the "child-heart[s]" of the masses. By promoting a genealogy of individual progress beginning in chaos before the formation of the earth and ending in a unique "child-heart," this sermon excerpt satisfies both traditional accounts of divinely guided progress and growing developmentalist discourses.

Rather than quibbling over the six days of creation, MacDonald's universalism embraces torturously slow change. Given enough time, anything could happen—the evolution of single-celled organisms into humans, yes, but also the continued spiritual evolution of all souls that would one day reach God. The very length of the sentence above, which exceeds my excerpted portion, enacts on the page the eons-long progress MacDonald seeks to convey. Yet, true to his doctrine, he sets a beginning and end to the development he describes: it begins with the earth's spontaneous birth but ends with a designated telos, the worship of a single man, Alexander John Scott, and the correlated triumph of belief over doubt. Such is an efficient way of making the universal seem again to be deeply personal, as it was for MacDonald himself. The structure of this phrase, then, performs MacDonald's macrocosmic vision: growth from chaos, where the earth acted of its own agency, to the telos of God's plan, represented here by Scott as the culmination of MacDonald's own belief.[21]

This passage appears doctrinally confused, but I suggest instead that contradictions in the text arise from MacDonald's theology itself. In depicting ultimate reconciliation as the foregone conclusion of the universe, MacDonald works himself into a paradox: on one hand, as his oeuvre espouses, MacDonald was confident that God's plan—his

designs—would be accomplished eventually. That is, at least in part, the message of his *Princess* books. Conversely, such confidence in the total completion of God's will throws into question the individual's. Universalist confidence in an inevitable divine plan risks undermining the personal agency that MacDonald, with his post-Romantic commitments, could not abide.[22] Universalism is inherently bent toward determinism, whereby the individual faith MacDonald valued so deeply is reduced to meaninglessness under the crushing weight of God's design.[23] However, the ideology also features a developmental paradigm that allowed for paradoxical impulses: the simultaneous confidence that all would be right in the end, combined with a focus on incremental and often invisible change—that is, a period of suspended development that made room for improvisation and agency. The "child-heart" that seems like the telos of spiritual struggle, in other words, is in fact a forum for thinking about belief and doubt as coconstitutive and unsettled religious attachments.

MacDonald's universalism, then, departs from that of his contemporaries in that it is at once a fundamentally teleological creed and also a doctrine of indeterminacy. In preaching the ultimate reconciliation of all souls—even impenitent sinners—MacDonald recycles teleological claims that were already becoming, by the 1860s and 1870s, a little threadbare. At the same time, universalism rewrote the narrative of the individual life so that death was in fact *not* final and so that some sort of posthumous incubation period allowed for possibility and growth. As we shall see, MacDonald's relationship to teleology is, consequently, far more fraught than his endorsements of an "ordered world" would suggest (*Unspoken Sermons*, 27). Indeed, despite reading even Jesus's earthly decisions as evidence of the unstoppable force of God's plan (76), MacDonald prized spiritual agency, insisting that even children could exert spiritual choice.

This sophisticated treatment of design—at once endorsed and suspended—appears frequently in MacDonald's work and especially his children's fairy tales, which he recognized explicitly as extensions of his homiletic work and which complicate its possibilities. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the author approaches the problems of teleology by constructing a story of progress that is chock-full of forestalling and diversion—and that is also conspicuously absent of closure. The depiction of development advocated by the fairy tale, then, embraces the comfort of ultimate belief—one of the primary attractions of universalism—while

preserving the values of process, continuation, and perpetuation in spiritual experience.

2. Progress and Suspended Telos

In his sermon "Consuming Fire," MacDonald builds his theory of progress on two premises. First, God's progress is inevitable even when it is invisible. Second, reconciliation with God is a distinct telos of belief, which the author repeatedly characterizes as a vision completed: "when once he [the doubter-turned-believer] does see it, it is so plain that he wonders he could have lived without seeing it" (*Unspoken Sermons*, 28). Roughly unified in their presentation of the deity and his processes, the sermons are sure of themselves. As a form for imagining the implications of these spiritual commitments, however, *The Princess and the Goblin* undermines each of these premises. In both the novel and its sequel, MacDonald diverts narrative representations of growth and development at nearly every point.

The first of MacDonald's compromised spiritual symbols, an overwrought thread, appears at the outset of the novel when the speaker—a fictionalized MacDonald—introduces the God-grandmother to an imagined child reader.[24] "What do you think [Irene] saw?" he asks. "A very old lady who sat spinning." "Spinning," we are made to realize, resonates both as a pun and as a technology of belief. The embedded child reader, aware that "spinning" works over time, identifies the association: "Oh Mr. Editor! I know the story you are going to tell! It's The Sleeping Beauty; only you're spinning too, and making it longer."[25] Readers understand, as the child does, that the thread metaphor is both predetermined and overdetermined. It turns out that the grandmother is spinning the physical manifestation of Irene's faith, a fine silver thread that leads the princess out of harm's way. In doubling down on the polyvalent uses of the term "spinning," the author projects this narrative of faith: the child, engaging imaginatively with fairy stories, will associate the tropes of the fairy tale with the makings of faith. By recognizing and correctly interpreting the thread, the child reader will subordinate her doubts to the telos of belief.

MacDonald's play on spinning situates Irene's spiritual journey squarely within the teleological discourse he takes up in his homiletic work. Should we miss the message, the grandmother makes explicit that her thread is an instrument of design: "I am spinning this for you, my child," she tells the girl (100). An idealized iteration of teleological

belief, the thread becomes a representation of both Irene's progress and the grandmother's intentions for the girl: "The thread is too fine for you to see it," she tells Irene; "[y]ou can only feel it . . . follow the thread wherever it leads you . . . remember, it may seem to you a very roundabout way indeed, and you must not doubt the thread" (121–22). MacDonald's emphasis on Irene's faith as having been designed by the great-great-grandmother intensifies the novel's teleological commitments; thus, it seems to parrot the crowning vision he attributes to God in his sermons. In "Consuming Fire," for example, the author had already outlined this dynamic: "For [God] regards men not as they are merely, but as they shall be; not as they shall be merely, but as they are now growing, or capable of growing, towards that image after which he made them that they might grow into it" (*Unspoken Sermons*, 37). *The Princess and the Goblin,* likewise, is riddled with suggestions such as this one, that the grandmother sees Irene both as she is (a doubter) and as she will be (a believer) when she inevitably submits to the grandmother's plan.

Reading constructs belief. By engaging with the tale, child readers are meant to accept the beliefs that MacDonald himself has "spun" on their behalf and to reject troublesome doubts. But as a metaphor, the thread also exposes the contested status of the categories of both faith and skepticism in the 1870s. Despite the grandmother's insistences that Irene "must not doubt the thread," the vehicle of the metaphor is very fine indeed. Oftentimes, Irene cannot see it at all. As a physical representation of the promise of faith, the thread may link Irene to her grandmother, but it might also snap. It may look like a direct route between the child and God, but its association with fantastical stories also suggests that it, too, is fancy. Acknowledging Irene's justified doubts, MacDonald simultaneously espouses design and hints at the precariousness of the comfort it offers.

Rather than the vector of progress toward a promised endpoint that it seems to be early on in the narrative, the thread indefinitely resists resolution and serves as an instrument of deferment. A poor substitute for spiritual intimacy, the thread actually separates the child from God, emphasizing her isolation. For instance, when goblins capture her friend Curdie, the thread does help Irene rescue him, but it brings her no closer to her grandmother:

> [Irene] soon found her grandmother's thread, which she proceeded at once to follow, expecting it would lead her straight up the old stair. When she reached the door, she found it went down and ran along the floor, so that

> she had almost to crawl in order to keep a hold of it. Then, to her surprise, and somewhat to her dismay, she found that instead of leading her towards the stair it turned in quite the opposite direction. It led her through certain narrow passages towards the kitchen, turning aside ere she reached it. . . . Down and down the path went, then up, and then down and then up again, getting rugged and more rugged as it went; and still along the path went the silvery thread, and still along the thread went Irene's little rosy-tipped finger. . . . And still the path grew rougher and steeper, and the mountain grew wilder, till Irene began to think she was going a long way from home; and when she turned to look back, she saw that the level country had vanished and the rough bare mountain had closed in about her. But still on went the thread, and on went the princess. (141–42)

Taking into account MacDonald's willingness to wait for fruition, this passage—in dramatizing the trials she must undertake in order to become closer to God—might appear to chronicle the believer's progress along the path ordained for her. Certainly, one viable reading is that *despite* all these deferrals, Irene will reconcile with the grandmother, embrace belief, and reject doubt. MacDonald's theology is, after all, built upon progress toward perfection: "love," he claims, "is ever climbing towards the consummation when such shall be the universe, imperishable, divine" (*Unspoken Sermons*, 28). But Irene does not get any closer to God. Instead, the thread of her faith leads her further away, isolating her and increasing her misgivings. When the ordeal is resolved successfully, the grandmother is nowhere to be found. Instead of a representation of God's immanence, then, Irene's forward motion only emphasizes God's conspicuous absence. Irene comes to looks less like the ideal child believer and more like Hardy, Eliot, or Tennyson—that is, a figure of continual spiritual negotiation rather than confirmation.

In fact, whenever Irene seems to get close to the God-figure, she is perpetually turned aside. Faith itself comes to be defined by waiting: "still on went the thread, and on went the princess," MacDonald repeats, reiterating Irene's trust but raising the question of whether that trust is in vain. The result is a teleological progress kept in perpetual suspension. Like his depiction of God's torturing law in "Consuming Fire," this thread depends upon a paradoxical fusion of progress and immobility. The repetition of "still on went the thread, and on went the princess" suggests stasis: even as the princess moves forward, she remains "still" in a state of waiting. Here as elsewhere, MacDonald calls attention to the way faith asks the faithful to defer, to hold their questions, to table their objections, and to wait for God's plan. Believers who possess the "child-heart" MacDonald lauded as the end of all progress are those

who are content to wait, who can accept that all will turn out right in the end.

In many ways, the structure of the fairy tale undergirds this idea. Readers can trust that despite the drama of the evil goblins' plot and despite the child's doubts and her nurse's mistakes, the princess will not only survive but also will go on to marry and rule. Even when the goblins appear to have triumphed, we trust the eventuality of a happy resolution. But in deferring indefinitely the children's search for answers, the author also subverts his own assurances of confirmed faith. Simultaneously relying on the excessively designed image of the thread and highlighting the discomfort caused by waiting, MacDonald drives a wedge between religious doctrine and spiritual experience. On one hand, by showing Irene gradually coming to believe in her grandmother and sealing that belief with a pseudobaptism, MacDonald embraces the teleological engine of his universalist worldview. He seems, in other words, to champion belief as both the opposite and the eventual result of doubt. At the same time, he repeatedly foregrounds the precarity of waiting. Even when believers trust in God's plan, as we shall see, they are *not* always guaranteed a proper ending.

According to MacDonald's sermons, spiritual struggle is a natural and necessary component of progress toward perfection. But the fairy story gets at something the sermons cannot: even if belief and doubt are useful categories for describing spiritual experiences, they cannot be taken for granted as fixed metrics of faith. Here, the children's story makes a notable departure from the author's explicit theological schema: MacDonald never allows Irene's journey to culminate in an ultimate acceptance of belief. At each point when she seems to have "found" faith, completing the believer's journey to a union with God, doubt returns in flashes of insecurity. "For one terrible moment," MacDonald writes, "she felt as if her grandmother had forsaken her. The thread . . . had left her—had gone where she could no longer follow it—had brought her into a horrible cavern, and there left her! She was forsaken indeed!" (143). The thread reappears, but even as she insists that "this is the way my thread goes, and I must follow it," Irene continues to question her grandmother (147). Once she successfully uses the thread to navigate the mountain and rescue Curdie, she tries to bring him up to the attic to prove her grandmother's existence. Still, Irene has misgivings: "There was no answer . . . nor could she hear any sound of the spinning-wheel, and once more her heart sunk within her" (152). These persistent moments of skeptical angst are peppered among Irene's assertions of

belief, so they remain an active component of her matrix of belief. Whereas in his sermons, MacDonald insists that every soul will, without exception, arrive at a confirmation of belief—even if they must be tortured into it—here he depicts faith as an intermittent process. Faith is often a vacillation between belief and doubt, and it may never end in closure. The effect is a retheorization of doubt as an active and ongoing component of the fluid process of faith.

3. Architecture and the Nova Effect

In upsetting conventional fairy-tale tropes, MacDonald both endorses and undermines the teleology that guided his theological project. The author may espouse the conviction that every soul will ultimately find its way back to God, but he discards the idea that believers can get hold of the perfected faith he imagined elsewhere. The upshot of this ambivalent treatment of telos is to emphasize not spiritual confidence but instead the ultimate indiscernibility of God's plan—a suggestion made strikingly clear in the fairy tale but denied in MacDonald's homiletic work. In his sermons, MacDonald prophesies a singular moment at which the full vision of God—the "vision of truth" he promises God will make clear—will become clear to every individual. In the fairy tale, however, the fullness of this vision is as unreliable as the grandmother. Irene, the believer, is in fact trapped in a labyrinthine home, the design of which she cannot, despite her best efforts, perceive. If faith and doubt help describe spiritual experience, in other words, the categories are also difficult to separate or even recognize in any meaningful way.

MacDonald depicts spiritual struggle through architecture, what Curdie's mother refers to as "your inside house" (180). As in his later novel *Lilith* (1895), MacDonald frequently employs unknowable buildings to represent religious interiority.[26] In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the author externalizes Irene's struggle with doubt as a maze. While both Curdie and Irene do take spiritual journeys along the mountain roads, MacDonald concentrates their spiritual drama at the site of Irene's house, emphasizing the princess's inability to fully perceive the grandmother's design:

> Up and up she ran—such a long way it seemed to her! until she came to the top of the third flight. There she found the landing was the end of a long passage. Into this she ran. It was full of doors on each side. There were so many that she did not care to open any, but ran on to the end, where she turned into another passage, also full of doors. When she had turned twice more, and still saw doors and only doors about her, she began to get

> frightened. It was so silent! And all those doors must hide rooms with nobody in them! That was dreadful. (50)

Juxtaposing architectural specificity ("third flight," "doors on each side," "turned twice more") with the disorienting repetition of "doors and only doors," MacDonald suggests that although the path forward may seem clear, this pursuit of God is fraught and indiscernible. Rather than a crowned vision of belief, the house becomes the arena of religious discernment. Once again, readers encounter a fusion of progress and stasis. Despite these active verbs—"she ran," "she came," "she found"—the princess seems to make no meaningful progress. Instead, she falls prey to desperation. Just as we have seen in Irene's relationship to the thread, the experience of faith here is not an inevitable progress toward belief but an exercise in deferment.

To be sure, the author would have seen this struggle as all part of the plan. We should recognize that Irene's catastrophe here strikingly echoes a scenario he imagines for the unbeliever in "Consuming Fire":

> [W]hen God withdraws from a man as far as that can be without the man's ceasing to be; when that man feels himself abandoned, hanging in a ceaseless vertigo of existence upon the verge of the gulf of his being, without support, without refuge, without aim, without end—for the soul has no weapons wherewith to destroy herself—with no inbreathing of joy, with nothing to make life good;—then will he listen in agony for the faintest sound of life from the closed door. (*Unspoken Sermons*, 47)

These lines describe the way God will torment every last unbeliever into finally accepting him. Unexpectedly, Irene's fairy tale proffers a darker vision of spiritual odyssey than the sermon about the anguish of an existential hell. In the sermon, MacDonald reassures his audience that "God is here with him" (47). That is, after all, the point of all the torture. Yet in Irene's vignette, the princess does not perceive the grandmother, and she certainly does not recognize God's design. In the sermon, the tortured nonbeliever's listening at the closed door is the final catalyst for the climax of reconciliation; in the tale, even though Irene is actively seeking her grandmother, her ear at the door finds silence.

In place of the thread, which purports to offer directions for progress, MacDonald iterates design here as ever-shifting and unstable. By association, her faith itself is not a fixed order but a pattern constantly in flux. Architecturally, staircases and doors sometimes disappear entirely (50–51). The goblins dig a full system of tunnels beneath the manor, effectively altering its floor plan and annexing its passages into their mountain cityscape (170). The house, in other words, is negotiable

both in the sense that its stability cannot be taken for granted and that its structure must be cautiously navigated. The house's instability suggests that believers may never perceive God's design. There may be a plan (Irene's grandmother certainly has one), but the believer experiences that plan as unknowable and disconcerting. MacDonald makes a distinction between content and form, with the grandmother's injunctions for blind faith left unfulfilled by architectural uncertainty.

Whereas a narrative confident in God's design would present unity with God as inevitable, this text depicts the discovery of God as something more like luck. This representation of unknown possibility should prompt scholars to reconsider MacDonald in the context of recent reinvestigations of Victorian religion. Often, as Colin Manlove points out, MacDonald reads as a post-Romantic both in his idealization of childhood and his depiction of the immanence of God in nature and the imagination.[27] But the proliferation of progressive possibilities in this passage reveals, instead, an author very much in tune with the contested status of faith in the 1870s. Indeed, this moment iterates what Charles Taylor describes as the "nova effect" of the nineteenth century: a moment when belief, "an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options,"[28] becomes rhizomatic, not binary. Put differently, as Lecourt and LaPorte have recently described, "[r]eligion, unmoored from the domain of official power, migrates into the realm of consumer choice, where individuals may choose from the assortment of 'ultimate meanings' and experiment with different kinds of association and affirmation."[29] As the searching believer's speculations, these "doors and only doors" come to look quite a bit like this "assortment" of spiritual associations. The novel does not explore what is behind each of these doors, but they represent for Irene a series of possibilities, of which only *one* leads to the godlike grandmother. What, then, are we to make of the other doors? Do they lead to other faiths? More radical beliefs? Disbelief? MacDonald piles the door options one after another so that the path to the deity shares space with innumerable other paths, each of which Irene could choose to open instead. The highest point—at which she would find God in a simpler depiction of belief—also reintroduces religious dread: what if no one is behind the door after all?

By hinting at these other doors, MacDonald undermines his earlier suggestion that the grandmother is the inevitable choice for Irene. Instead, belief becomes a fluid and intersecting process that can expand and incorporate various and even competing epistemic attachments, like the science he pilfered for metaphors. It is not that doubt is conquered

by belief but that belief is continually laced with doubt in an ongoing "way of life," as Lane describes it.[30] Where a teleological representation of the Christian journey would show doubts ultimately vanquished by solidified belief, the vision of faith MacDonald depicts here incorporates doubt as a perpetual component of belief's temporal process.

4. Spiritual Growth and Abandoned Closure

Despite this questionable relationship to teleology, *The Princess and the Goblin* has long been described in terms of confirmation and result. G. K. Chesterton famously characterized the book as the instrument of his own conversion. He writes that it "made a difference to my whole existence; which helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed."[31] Chesterton's compliment suggests that MacDonald's plan worked: as Irene arrives at belief, so does he. Indeed, even MacDonald himself came to see the work as a culmination of sorts, characterizing it as "the most complete thing" he had done.[32] This assessment is particularly ironic, considering that he refused to complete it.

MacDonald closes *The Princess and the Goblin*, unexpectedly, not with a depiction of Irene and Curdie's inevitable union but by refusing his child reader's request for a conclusion:

> "But we want to know more about them."
>
> "Some day, perhaps, I may tell you the further history of both of them; how Curdie came to visit Irene's grandmother, and what she did for him; and how the princess and he met again after they were older—and how—But there! I don't mean to go any farther at present."
>
> "Then you're leaving the story unfinished, Mr. Editor!"
>
> "Not more unfinished than a story ought to be, I hope. If you ever knew a story finished, all I can say is, *I* never did. Somehow stories won't finish. I think I know why, but I won't say that either now." (191)

This passage replicates MacDonald's experiment with suspended telos. On one hand, he gestures at a later time when he will disclose both the story's ending and his thoughts on endings. At the same time, he acknowledges the discomfort readers feel when a storyteller refuses to assign meaningful closure. Even closure itself is questionable. According to Mr. Editor, the very idea that stories finish might be, after all, a fantasy. The editor's comment that he does not "mean to go any farther at present" suggests that the process of storytelling will continue, but MacDonald resists

our expectation that stories will *ever* end when he insists instead that they "ought" to remain open.

For all his repeated depictions of design, MacDonald gets coy about closure. He indeed went on to tell Irene and Curdie's story in a sequel, *The Princess and Curdie* (1888). The pair ends up married, as expected, but we are not to dwell on their happy union. Instead, MacDonald insists that their marriage solves no problems. Here, too, he gestures at resolution while denying it. In a turn that has long puzzled his readers, the narrative dismisses all happily-ever-after. Irene bears no children, and a new king takes over, pillaging resources and mining underneath the city until he destroys it:

> One day at noon, when life was at its highest, the whole city fell with a roaring crash. The cries of men and the shrieks of women went up with its dust, and then there was a great silence. Where the mighty rock once towered, crowded with homes and crowned with a palace, now rushes and raves a stone-obstructed rapid of the river. All around spreads a wilderness of wild deer, and the very name of Gwyntystorm had ceased from the lips of men.[33]

This conclusion to Irene and Curdie's saga invokes titanic spiritual stakes. In Humphrey Carpenter's view, this moment is the Last Judgment—or the conclusion to a loosely biblical parable. "But it is a very strange Last Judgment," he notes: "no one is saved."[34] Like Irene's doubts, this conclusion is perpetual: just as faith never solidifies into a telos, the narrative itself gives readers only half of a resolution. Irene and Curdie are happy for an interval—and then they die, their legacy demolished.

Considering the genre, this strange apocalypse seems almost inappropriate. In one sense, the destruction of the kingdom suggests that the adventures of Irene and Curdie were in some way all for nothing—a far cry from the author's repeated insistence that all suffering would be justified later. Further, the reversion of the city to wildness also calls up the evolutionary valence of teleological discourse by echoing MacDonald's presentation of the goblins as beings who have simply *devolved:* some have grown "mis-shapen in body," and others have "greatly altered in the course of generations" into the hellish beings they are at the start of the tale (48). People might evolve to be closer to God, but they might also reduce themselves to beasts. There is no point at which evolution (spiritual or otherwise) is complete. If MacDonald means for Irene's spiritual journey to be an allegory of faith, then, that faith no longer seems quite as much a consolation. Progress, in fact, seems less guaranteed and more incidental.

5. Suspension and Immaturity

How should we square MacDonald's repeated denials of closure with his explicit universalist aims? Is MacDonald's prioritizing doubt simply the lurking symptom of his buried disbelief, a fictional representation of discomfort creeping into Victorians' confidence in design? Perhaps Irene's persistent misgivings should be recognized as the author's religious angst rearing its head despite himself. Or perhaps MacDonald, as his conclusion to *Curdie* suggests, means to toss out design altogether, to admit that eschatology is a roll of the dice after all.

I want to suggest instead that MacDonald's seeming destruction of teleological order is the instrument of a more compelling theoretical/theological project. As his multifaceted diversion of closure shows, what seems like a sheer universalist allegory in *The Princess and the Goblin* reflects the author's less commonly recognized engagement with design and development. For MacDonald, the question of design was not only an abstract principle but also a deeply personal one. MacDonald's vision for believers' individual development, in fact, is as compromised as his telos. Ever faithful, the author cannot abandon design altogether. Yet, as his threads and apocalypses show, the relationship between belief and doubt articulated in the *Princess* books is less a holdover of outdated natural history and more a timely engagement with late-century discourses of progress, process, and maturity. The upshot of his experiment with diverted closure, in other words, is a retheorization of childhood that is quite at odds with the one typically ascribed to MacDonald, and yet his diversion helps scholars reconceptualize the role of immaturity in religious theories of the late nineteenth century.

To return to development: what is particularly striking about many Victorian universalist theologies, including and beyond MacDonald's, is the way that they adopt and rely on the vocabulary of immaturity. Childhood itself became an apt metaphor for several universalists who depicted those who had not yet (but certainly would) find their way back to God as "germinal souls," to use Wilson's controversial term.[35] The claim for universalism that got him into so much trouble, in fact, was his modest "hope" that "there shall be found, after the great adjudication, receptacles suitable for those who shall be *infants*, not as to years of terrestrial life, but as to spiritual development—*nurseries* as it were and seed-grounds, where the *undeveloped* may grow up under new conditions—the *stunted* may become strong, and the perverted restored."[36] In Wilson's formulation, to be "germinal"—or childlike, as he imagined colonized

populations—was to be less spiritually evolved, a cosmic child. His vision for the afterlife, accordingly, included this hope for a "remedial process," as Rowell calls it—a posthumous childhood through which recalcitrant or uninitiated dead could make their way to God.[37]

Not surprisingly, given the author's background as a children's author and given that he understood immaturity as an essentially theological concept, MacDonald unsurprisingly aestheticizes his vision for spiritual progress through the faith journey of an eight-year-old. On this point, though, his use of the child as metaphor differs from that of most other universalists. Where thinkers like Wilson envisioned germinal childhood as the racialized early stage of spiritual progress, MacDonald deploys childhood as both the *origin* and the *result* of spiritual growth. On one hand, believers arrive at their fullest state of spiritual perfection—ultimate belief—when they adopt the faithfulness the author saw as the province of childhood. In his sermon "The Fantastic Imagination," MacDonald writes: "The avaricious, weary, selfish, suspicious old man shall have passed away. The young, ever young self, will remain" (*Unspoken Sermons*, 44). This sentiment certainly accounts for the long critical tradition of categorizing the author as an echo of the Romantics, but his vision of childhood is not merely the nostalgic idealization of childhood that has so troubled scholars of children's literature.[38] If MacDonald lauds Irene's innate childhood as the source of all good in the world, he also echoes Wilson's sentiments about less developed beings, particularly in the figures of his naïve and unevolved goblins. Just as he imagines childhood as the telos of cosmic development, he also figures immaturity as a dangerous spiritual state that must be abandoned in order to progress.

We should distinguish between Irene's *childhood* and the goblins' *immaturity*—especially with regard to MacDonald's racialized discourses. He imagines the goblins as devolved beings and Irene as an ideal child at least in part due to racist theories of religion that emerged at the end of the century. But the author's treatment of childhood, like his endorsement of design, is less monolithic than we might expect. In his sermon "The Cause of Spiritual Stupidity," the author characterizes childish unbelief as a hindrance to spiritual growth, and he depicts diverging versions of childhood. First, he reiterates his oft-employed illustration of childhood as the endpoint of spiritual evolution: "Cleansed of greed, jealousy, vanity, pride, possession, all the thousand forms of the evil self, we shall be God's children on the hills and in the fields of that heaven" (154). Simultaneously, he condemns the biblical disciples'

child*ish* inability to see the divine goodness right in front of their eyes. Indeed, he imagines the relationship between Christ and his followers as a frustrating one, hampered by the disciples' juvenile incapacity to grasp basic spiritual concepts: "Having thus questioned them like children, and listened as to the answers of children, he turns the light of their thoughts upon themselves, and . . . demands, 'How is it that ye do not understand?'" (148). If childhood is the ideal end of Christian growth, then, childhood also captures the unsophisticated stupidity *out of which* believers—all believers—must mature. Accordingly, this imagined childhood becomes an intermediate state where development occurs, as when MacDonald reiterates his continual confidence in the plan of the Lord. Pointing out that Christ's miracles were, like his own efforts, deliberately didactic, MacDonald casts childhood as the counterpart spiritual audience for design: "The lesson of [Christ's miracles] was that help is always within God's reach when his children want it—their design, to show what God is" (149).

This inconsistent attitude toward childhood arises, undoubtedly, from contradictions in the New Testament, wherein Jesus praises children's ability to receive God's kingdom in the gospels,[39] and Paul condemns the church communities in his letters to the Hebrews and Corinthians for their inability to spiritually advance in understanding.[40] MacDonald however, reworks each of these divergent perspectives into three vital functions that incorporate his long-recognized Romantic vision but also exceed it. For this author, childhood *is* belief—that is, the pinnacle of spiritual progress or the telos to which all cosmic development aims. As Irene's continual spiritual crisis shows, however, the child believer could also experience infinite doubt, and that doubt could hamper her progress. Thus, MacDonald's child character could potentially become a resistant or skeptical believer. Finally, as MacDonald imagines the child of God, the state of childhood operates in a mode of suspended progress, which, as the embodiment of his project related to design, remains in stasis while paradoxically striving for terminal meaning. Rather than reinforcing the belief-and-doubt paradigm by, say, associating Irene with either category, MacDonald suggests that both of these epistemic positions are continual components of an undetermined child-faith.

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, MacDonald imagines childhood as neither the culmination of all belief that he lauds in his homiletic work nor the lamentable origin of Christian growth described by Wilson. Within the text, MacDonald's imagined child reader makes manifest the larger project I have described, wherein the author weaves together progress

and stasis. Note the opening to the first edition of *The Princess and the Goblin*, published in his magazine, *Good Words for the Young*, in 1871, which begins with interruption:

> There was once a little princess, who—
> "But, Mr. Editor, why do you always write about princesses?"
> "Because every little girl is a princess."
> "You will make them vain if you tell them that."
> "Not if they understand what I mean."
> "Then what do you mean?"
> "What do *you* mean by a princess?"
> "The daughter of a king."
> "Very well; then every little girl is a princess, and there would be no need to say anything about it, except that she is always in danger of forgetting her rank, and behaving as if she had grown out of the mud. I have seen little princesses behave like the children of thieves and lying beggars, and that is why they need to be told they are princesses. And that is why, when I tell a story of this kind, I like to tell it about a princess. Then I can say better what I mean, because I can then give her every beautiful thing I want her to have."
> "Please go on." (47)

The reader MacDonald envisions is having none of his didacticism. Familiar with fairy-tale tropes (always princesses!), she understands that this story has been carefully framed by an adult storyteller with designs of his own. Insisting that the editor will make children vain by calling them all princesses, the child in dialogue demonstrates her savvy awareness that the site of storytelling is often also the site of behavioral management. If the story is a vehicle for religious ideology, the child knows it. She is something like what Marah Gubar calls a "collaborator-after-the-fact" and what Victoria Ford Smith has recently explored as part of a larger Victorian literary tradition in which children and adults cocreate meaning.[41] But this child is distinct: she is simultaneously the object of MacDonald's sermonizing effort and its own internal undoing.

The child's interruptions perform their own narrative deferral. While the adult frequently puts the child off by claiming he will explain later, here the child implicitly insists that she, too, can prolong the narrative by refusing to allow its continuation until her questions are addressed—or, as it turns out, until she commands the storyteller to go on. Her comically literal questions—does he mean earthly royalty, or is he speaking spiritually?—display a critic's desire to get to the bottom of things. If, as his monologue suggests, the editor is the keeper of spiritual knowledge, this child is a skeptic.

Consistent with the fairy tale itself, this dialogue refuses to assign closure, so the child's urge to "go on" suggests forward motion but no telos. Rather, as a miniature of the main plotline, the exchange is suspended without resolution. This stasis is the end of the dialogue, so we cannot know if the child reader is sold on the editor's digression on spiritual royalty, which, crucially, itself emphasizes spiritual evolution ("grown out of the mud"). But the child listener's own development is abandoned. The story moves forward, attempting the progress MacDonald advocated in theology, sermon, and fiction. And yet the question of the child's belief remains suspended. Her final words, "Please go on," dismiss the editor's miniature sermon, hide her reaction to his preaching, and insist that the entertainment of the story take precedence over his didactic goals. We do not know the extent of her belief; she may be willing to provisionally accept the terms of his story. But the adult's unhidden goal of conveying spiritual truth through the fairy tale remains unsolved, and the child's judgment held in suspension. As the savviness of this passage suggests, MacDonald's treatment of childhood is not the telos he often suggests. Instead, the *Princess* books in particular retheorize childhood as a state of suspended progress—a fusion between the author's Romantic notions of idealized childhood and his less commonly recognized engagement with Victorian discourses of design and development.

We are left with four representations of suspended progress: a thread that should lead to God but doesn't (or doesn't always); an architectural vision that can never be realized; a novel that claims not to end; and a child reader whose belief is never secured. These frustrations of telos reposition doubt in the author's schema of belief. MacDonald does evoke the drama of warring belief and doubt that has come to seem outdated and inadequate for describing the spiritual history of the period. But he seems presciently aware of the insufficiency of this description. Rather than understanding doubt as a trial to be vanquished, MacDonald figures skepticism in constant, unending relation to faith. The grandmother attempts to convert belief into a binary: "The only question is whether you will believe I am anywhere—whether you will believe I am anything but a dream," but Irene refuses the choice, cannily responding that she "*will* try"—the question of her confirmed belief again left hanging (105). Surely, she believes in her grandmother *more* by the end of the novel. Undoubtedly, progress has been made. But, where Elizabeth M. Sanders discerns a "sense of unification," I am not so convinced that Irene's doubts are vanquished.[42] MacDonald's various

iterations of diverted progress and suspended telos suggest, instead, a narrative unfinished.

MacDonald seems unable to settle on his own conception of doubt. On one hand, as he blankly declares in "The Cause of Spiritual Stupidity," "Distrust is atheism, and the barrier to all growth" (152). And yet, as Jocelyne Slepyan has shown, MacDonald acknowledged his own inability to fully believe: "with all these doubts I am familiar," he writes to John Ruskin, making explicit his own ongoing engagement with the paradigms of belief.[43] As Sanders rightfully points out, one of the more surprising developments of *The Princess and the Goblin* is that the novel positions doubt as involuntary.[44] Part of the innovation of the *Princess* books is to suggest that doubt is simultaneously a facilitator of growth and an ongoing component of belief's natural process. Radically, he configures belief as a religious attachment that can be taken up temporarily or set aside when skepticism is more useful.

MacDonald's multipronged rejection of closure in this children's story recognizes belief as an impermanent phenomenon. As Irene juggles her belief in her grandmother with her responsibility to her family and her attraction to Curdie, the author depicts religious identity as one intersectional facet of subjectivity among many. This sophisticated experiment with telos, then, is not necessarily the effort of an essentially conservative writer clinging to Paley as the last bastion of belief. Instead, the text is a deliberately flexible repositioning of doubt in the perpetual process of faith. Where the novel seems to suggest all doubts vanquished as the telos of belief, MacDonald insists that belief and skepticism are continually intertwined in the formation of a religious identity freed from the need to find epistemic closure.

As a parable of faith, MacDonald's *Princess* books open more doors than they close—to recall his architectural schema—and not just for Irene and her child readers. On one hand, he reinforces the paradigm of belief-versus-doubt by staging an ostensibly teleological growth narrative that subordinates the latter to the former. On the other hand, the effect of his various iterations of suspended telos is to recast the binary between these categories. The suggestion that Irene might *sometimes* believe and *sometimes* doubt goes against the book's surface narrative of her conversion. In this way, MacDonald himself must be recategorized: rather than a blatant defender of the faith, this particular theological project is to suggest that belief itself is—like his childhood—undetermined. The "childlike" faith he so persistently lauded over the course of his career is flexible, ever-changing, and difficult to design.

Notes

1. Knight, "Victorian Literature," 517.
2. Blair, *Form and Faith*, 2.
3. Holsinger, "Religious Turn," 1–3.
4. King, *Imagined Spiritual Communities*, 6.
5. Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt*, 228–38.
6. Knight's "Victorian Literature" provides an up-to-date survey of recent work on Victorian literature and religion. See also LaPorte and Lecourt's introductory essay in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*; LaPorte's "Victorian Literature"; and Blumberg's "keyword" essay, "Religion."
7. Knight, "Victorian Literature," 519.
8. Owning his tendency to "turn [his] stories into sermons" and characterizing his fiction as an extension of his homiletic efforts, MacDonald certainly encouraged association between his children's tales and his theological work. See Greville Macdonald, *George Macdonald,* 375. Scholars have followed suit. See, most recently, Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*; Carpenter, *Secret Gardens*, 83; Manlove, *Christian Fantasy*, 160.
9. Lane, *Age of Doubt*, 3.
10. Blumberg, "Religion," 844.
11. Arnold here addresses the common priorities of religion and culture as evolving processes (Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 33). See also Blumberg, "Religion," 841–42.
12. Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief*, 27.
13. For a contemporaneous perspective on the history of universalism, see Ballou, *Ancient History*. For succinct surveys of universalism in Victorian thought, see Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, and Wheeler, *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians*.
14. On Wilson's trail in particular, see Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 62–89.
15. Almost all of these noted universalists were in fact ambivalent about the doctrine. Farrar, for example, noted that he "dare not lay down any dogma of Universalism" (*Eternal Hope*, xvi). All, however, expressed their theology in terms of optimism, frequently called a "hope," and significantly advanced the doctrine.
16. Farrar, *Eternal Hope,* xxii.
17. Farrar, *Eternal Hope*, 108.

18. Wilson, "The National Church," 309.
19. Darwin, *Autobiography*, 87. Darwin's wife, Emma, specifically expurgated this passage from the original publication of the biography.
20. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 29. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
21. MacDonald noted in a sermon that Scottish theologian Alexander John Scott "stands highest in the oratory of my memory" (*Robert Falconer*, iii). MacDonald credited Scott with the crowning achievement of his own spiritual development—the telos of *his* belief. Hein, *George MacDonald*, 50.
22. On MacDonald in the legacy of the Romantics, see Manlove, "MacDonald and Kingsley," 143; Zipes, *Fairy Tales*, 117; Jenkins, "'I Am Spinning This,'" 326; Long, "Childhood and Faith," 46–47; and Rigsbee, "Fantasy Places," 10. While these analyses offer useful readings of the relationship between MacDonald's religion and his Romantic inclinations, they all downplay the role of doubt in his articulation of faith.
23. On MacDonald's notion that "man was not wholly free to choose evil," see Manlove, "MacDonald and Kingsley," 141.
24. On the grandmother as a God-figure, see Bubel, "Knowing God," 12; Long, "Childhood and Faith," 48; McCulloch, "'A Strange Race,'" 59; and Willis, "'Born Again,'" 25. Carpenter calls her the "nearest MacDonald came to a representation of God" (*Secret Gardens*, 74).
25. MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*, 51. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
26. MacDonald, *The Visionary Novels*, 15.
27. Manlove, *Christian Fantasy*, 164–82.
28. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.
29. LaPorte and Lecourt, "Introduction," 150.
30. Lane, *Age of Doubt,* 123–58.
31. Chesterton, "Introduction," 9.
32. Quoted in G. MacDonald, *George MacDonald*, 412.
33. MacDonald, *The Princess and Curdie*, 254–55.
34. Carpenter, *Secret Gardens,* 84.
35. Wilson, "The National Church," 309.
36. Wilson, "The National Church," 309 (emphases mine).
37. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 117
38. I refer here to Rose's claim that children's literature nostalgically constructs a passive "reader, product, receiver" as its child reader (*The Case of Peter Pan*, 2). That provocative idea inspired Nodelman

to acknowledge that "control is a central issue in, and a central characteristic of, children's literature" and Marah Gubar to argue for methods that "[avoid] essentializing child readers as passive victims." Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*, 162–63; Gubar, *Artful Dodgers*, 33. For the most recent synthesis of and contribution to this debate, see Smith, *Between Generations*, 9–18.

39. Matthew 18:3–5; Mark 10:14–15; Luke 18:16–17.
40. Hebrews 5:13; 1 Corinthians 14:20.
41. Gubar, *Artful Dodgers,* 8; Smith, *Between Generations*, 142–89.
42. Sanders, *Genres of Doubt*, 80.
43. Slepyan, "'With All Sorts,'" 38.
44. Sanders, *Genres of Doubt*, 79–80.

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