ENTERING INTO THE KINGDOM: CHARLES DICKENS AND THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL REGENERATION

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Date
1981

Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Abstract
Not only did Charles Dickens respond to the political and social scene of Victorian England, he was touched by the religious climate as well. He was particularly affected by the serious and long term attention given to discussions of doctrines about spiritual regeneration, conversion, and baptism which coincided with his own interest in the "discipline of the human heart" as a prerequisite for personal and social reformation. Although Dickens was significantly touched by the secular humanism of Carlyle, his thought and writing indicates equally important influence by the Evangelical, Sacremental, and Incarnational groups active in nineteenth-century religious life. There appears valuable, and as yet unnoticed, evidence indicating influence on Dicken's thought by Frederick W. Robertson, a Broad Church Anglican who preached in Brighton. Dicken's interest in spiritual rejuvenation and his concern about the role of the church in English life are clearly indicated in his reportage, his letters, and his minor prose. There is even some evidence of his interest in certain of the controversies over baptismal ritual and doctrine that occupied national attention in the 1840's and 1850's. Dickens's interest in spiritual rebirth and baptism is indicated in his fictional creation of complex patterns of baptismal immersion arranged in a typological manner in Our Mutual Friend which indicate his increasingly Incarnationalist attitude toward human spiritual growth. In this novel, a pattern of water crossings and water immersions, together with subsidiary motifs of fairy tales and biblical allusion, reaches its most potent and resonant development. Beginning early in his fiction, the pattern of patriarchal "god father" and the plot element of water crossing that figures prominently in novels like Martin Chuzzlewit becomes a pattern of water immersion accompanied by growing emphasis on the responsibility of each character to make his own life rather than to accept the imposed scheme of a benevolent "father" figure. As Eugene Wrayburn, John Harmon/Rokesmith, Lizzie Hexam, and Bella Wilfer become regenerate, they acknowledge the fact of their shared mortality and recognize the reciprocal mutuality that must characterize regenerated human relationships. Consequently, they work together to establish a redeemed community within the City that appears able to touch the world of Society and require it to notice their refusal to accept its values. Finally, Dicken's exploration of the possibilities of human regeneration permitted him a way to work toward the reunion of his own personal psychic disjunction arising from his childhood "Blacking Warehouse" trauma. Approaching a resolution to his own psychic disjunction, Dickens celebrates the baptismal recognition of the necessity of unselfish love for the redemption of humanity and himself.

Keyword
English literature

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