

**Diarmid A. Finnegan, “Exeter-Hall Science and Evangelical Rhetoric in Mid-Victorian Britain.” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16 (2011): 46-64.**

The Victorian ‘crisis of faith’ fascinates scholars: it has been categorically accepted as a historical event and then categorically complicated and contradicted (indeed, Finnegan’s article appeared in the journal with three others on Victorian religion). Victorian science – whether biological or geological – often gets the blame. But scholarship in the last two decades has painted a more complex picture, highlighting the sheer variety of configurations of science and religion in the Victorian era. Finnegan’s article adds specific detail to this scholarly picture of Victorian faith, investigating the multiple rhetorical strategies used to ‘harmonise’ evangelicalism and science in a series of YMCA-sponsored lectures at London’s Exeter Hall. Considering the effect of site on sermon, Finnegan argues that these syntheses of science and evangelicalism were “a fragile local accomplishment conditioned by the reputation of the venue” (64).

Finnegan’s well-organised article first gives the history of Exeter Hall and the YMCA lecture series that found its home there in the 1840s. Opened in 1831 and seating over 3,000 people, Exeter Hall quickly became both the leading platform for evangelical causes and a “metonym for evangelical attitudes” (48) – and for the shortcoming of evangelicalism. Through the discourses of its leaders and critics, Exeter Hall became “a clearly demarcated rhetorical zone policed by the Hall’s proprietors” (49). The YMCA’s lectures series moved easily into this space, concerned as it was with providing edifying entertainment and instruction to young men in need of spiritual instruction. Yet the lecture series also had to counteract Exeter Hall’s reputation for religious enthusiasm and irrationality. Seeking “cultural credibility,” it turned to science as a rational, while auxiliary, component of Christian piety and practical morality (53).

After outlining general methods used to harmonise science and religion, Finnegan explores two specific links made in the lectures between science and evangelical values forged by the venue itself. Invoking Exeter Hall’s abolitionist rallies of the 1830s, lecturers turned to science to prove that all humans were of one race, supporting both evangelical zeal for abolition and the evangelical doctrine of original sin. Science also justified missions as progress was only achieved through the work of humans, particularly Christians, and provided a tool for missionaries engaged in intellectual debate with pagans. Thus the lectures harmonised science with Christianity through its construction of other peoples and the British relationship to them. But they also integrated science into the personal, moral, and practical of Christian life. Re-capturing science for Christianity, they constructed science as part of evangelical self-culture, rather than a threat to moral development, as long as it remained subordinate to the Bible.

Finally, Finnegan turns from the successful harmonisations of “evangelical piety and scientific credibility” (46) to the challenge Richard Owen’s 1863 YMCA lecture offered them. Contravening Exeter Hall convictions and conventions, Owen gave science authority over the Bible, seeing it as the key to correctly interpreting certain passages, like the Genesis creation account. The ambivalent responses to Owen’s lecture from the YMCA leadership reveal the tensions within evangelicalism

towards science. These tensions, coupled with wider cultural shifts and with the reputation of the venue, contributed to the decline of the lecture series in the 1860s.

Like many studies that focus on the varieties of religion or science in the Victorian period, Finnegan's article is rich in detail and information – both a blessing and a curse. The detail makes his argument compelling and revelatory of cultural variety. Yet this close-up effect obscures the connections between what is happening in the detail image and the larger cultural patterns. Although Finnegan mentions that his snapshot fits within the broader cultural trends of platform culture, public science, and integrated oral and print cultures, he does not show exactly how it does so. For example, he concludes that the lectures responded to “changing norms of public speech” (64) but he does not explain what those changing norms were nor how exactly the lectures responded to them. Thus, with its detail, the article reads like the core evidence used to support a larger argument – perhaps a much broader research project.

What is most innovative about this article is what makes it relevant to scholars of literature and science: Finnegan focuses on the *rhetoric* used to integrate science into evangelicalism and how that rhetoric responded to the place in which it was spoken. He uses the methodologies of the geography of knowledge to understand the rhetoric and function of Victorian public science in a religious context. Implicitly, he suggests that scholars need to think about spaces and places when they think about literature and science in any period.

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