

# Understanding Carroll's Theological and Philosophical Views

By John Tufail

## Strand the First - The Jowett Controversy

Lewis Carroll matriculated at Oxford in May 1850. This meant that he lived through some of the most turbulent years in the history of this venerable institution. He also had to endure during the first fifteen years of his tenure the experience of his beloved Anglican Church attempting to tear itself apart. In print, at least, Lewis Carroll was no 'shrinking violet'. Once he found his feet and had established his tenure (from 1855 on, when he became a Master of the House and sub-librarian) he did not hesitate to put into print his thoughts and criticisms of all aspects of Oxford University affairs.

Despite the fact that Carroll's interventions are very well documented, there remains to this day a great deal of confusion about Carroll's theological and political development and his particular stance regarding the many controversies the university endured, especially during the years prior to publication of the first 'Alice' book. A period during which he was both professionally and financially vulnerable.

The enduring idea of Lewis Carroll in the popular imagination, therefore, is that cited by Hudson in his influential 'Illustrated Biography':

**"W. Tuckwell, an observer from New College, saw the dark side: 'Austere, shy, precise, absorbed in mathematical reverie, watchfully tenacious of his dignity, stiffly conservative in political, theological, social theory, his life mapped out in squares like Alice's landscape, he stuck discords in the frank harmonious camaraderie of College life,' (Hudson D. 'Lewis Carroll; An Illustrated Biography', Constable, London 1976)**

In turn, Hudson appears to have felt secure in citing Tuckwell as an authority as it fits, in most respects with the picture of Carroll drawn by his nephew, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, Carroll's first biographer. Both Carroll's 'conservatism' and his political adherence to 'Conservative' politics is a constant theme of Collingwood's biography:

**"But in 1861 (Lewis Carroll) was anything but universally popular, and I am afraid that Mr Dodgson, nothing if not a staunch Conservative sided with The majority against (Benjamin Jowett." (S, Dodgson Collingwood, *Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*, Fisher Unwin, London, 1898 (2nd edition, 1899)**

The issue to which Collingwood is referring is the matter of the Greek Professorship and Mr Jowett's salary. The Post of Greek Professor was an endowed position that had, for many years attracted a salary of £40:00 per annum. By 1861, this had become a derisory sum of money for such a prestigious post. A proposal to increase the sum was therefore put forward. Unfortunately, Dr Jowett's contribution to 'Essays and Reviews' had attracted a great deal of ire from an influential group within Oxford. Led by the redoubtable and extremely 'High Church' Edward Bouverie Pusey (Then, the leading Tractarian) a strong opposition to the proposal was mounted.

Carroll made a brief reference to the debate in an 1861 diary entry:

**November 20th: Promulgation, in Congregation, of the new statute to endow Jowett. The speaking took up the whole afternoon, and the two points at issue, the endowing a Regius Professorship, and the countenancing Jowett's theological opinions, got so inextricably mixed up that I rose to beg that they might be kept separate. Once on my feet, I said more than I at first meant, and defied them ever to tire out the opposition by perpetually bringing the question on (Mem.: if I ever**

**speak again I will try to say no more than I had resolved before rising). This was my first speech in Congregation.**

Both Collingwood and, later, Hudson cite this intervention as 'evidence' that Carroll was supporting Pusey in the debate. Even Morton Cohen, in his 1995 'Lewis Carroll, a Biography', states unequivocally that; 'Charles opposed Jowett's cause...'. However, given that it was Pusey who was deliberately 'inextricably' doing the mixing up, it is hard to reconcile Collingwood and later Hudson and Cohen's interpretation with what Carroll actually says.

This contretemps took place in 1861. However, the issue of the salary of the Regius Professor of Greek refused to lie down. So long as Jowett held the Chair, there remained those determined to use this issue to punish him for his unorthodox views. Pusey first sought to have Jowett's salary charged to the University rather than to the revenues of Christ Church College. A Christian College should not be expected to support a heretical teacher. However, the Hebdominal Council refused to countenance this proposal. The issue was returned to Convocation for resolution.

In 1865 the issue was finally resolved. An award, not of the original £400:00, but a challenging £500:00 was voted - unfortunately not before a great deal of religious and secular blood had flowed through Oxford's halls and corridors. This gave Lewis Carroll another, and more considered opportunity to enter the fray.

1865 was a particularly busy year for Carroll. A year that included the publication of 'Alice in Wonderland', the publication of his political squib, 'The Dynamics of a Particle' and, as it happened, the publication of his most thoroughly worked out satirical squib. A superb satire on the events and personalities involved in the 'Jowett Affair'.

'The New Method of Evaluation as Applied to Pi' was a squib of nearly 3,000 words, presented in the form of a mock-mathematical treatise. Carroll notes the germination of this in a diary entry:

**March 3. (F). A day or two ago an idea occurred to me of writing a sham mathematical paper on Jowett's case taking Pi to symbolise his payment,'**

Within two weeks of this germination, Carroll had produced the paper and distributed, 'About 80 copies sent round the Common Room'. It should be noted that Carroll had this document professionally printed at his own expense, There were no photocopiers in Carroll's day and printing was an expensive business - as, at this stage of career was Carroll's penchant for satire, irony and mischief.

The work is divided into an Introduction and five sections. It begins:

**'The problem of evaluating Pi which has engaged the attention of mathematicians from the earliest ages, had, down to our own time, been considered as purely mathematical. It was reserved for this generation to make the discovery that it is in reality a dynamical problem: and the true value of Pi which appeared an ignis fatuus to our forefathers, has at last been obtained under pressure.'**

The tone is set with fine irony. Carroll, re-stating his position in his intervention in Congregation some years earlier is basically saying that it has always been assumed that the question of the Salary for the Greek professorship was purely a financial matter. However it now appeared that every question but that of financial equity had been applied. The result being, that after much internecine conflict, waste of time and resources, and flayed tempers, Convocation had been forced (under pressure') to bow to the inevitable.

The first section of the pamphlet is very much reminding the reader that he had warned that this would happen. 'Reductio ad absurdum was attempted, and it was asked (by Carroll, of course), "Why should Pi not be evaluated?". The section continues; ':

**'Several ingenious substitutions and transformations were then resorted to, with a view to simplifying the equation, and it was at one time asserted, though never actually proved, that the 'y's were all on one side. However as repeated trials produced the same irrational result, the process Was finally abandoned.'**

This, again, is a restatement of Carroll's incredulity and dismay at the irrational nature of the proceedings. Given that it was Pusey who was mainly responsible for this, it is clear against whom this section is directed. However, Carroll then turns his pen in the direction of the Liberal Canon, Athur Penrhyn in a section entitled 'Penhryn's method.' Penhryn satisfied attempts by the Liberals on the Convocation to 'rig' a majority by :

**'Transforming (A.P>S. into a new scale of notation: it had hitherto been, through a long series of terms, entirely in the senary... it was now transformed into the denary.'**

A.P = Athur Penrhyn, 'S' = Secular, thus 'Secular Liberalism'. Carroll is referring to the fact that the Puseyite Majority ('senery') that had been secure for a number of years ('terms') had been overturned by the expedient of increasing Convocation by ten ('denery') members. Coincidentally, of course, all ten of the new members were Liberals. The term denary is also a pun on the word 'denare' ('coin' = materialism). The section concludes:

**'Under this modification, the process of division was repeated, but With the old negative result'.**

The machinations of the Puseyite and Liberal members had merely resulted in a stalemate.

Section IV of the pamphlet, 'Elimination of 'J' (Jowett) comprised an attack on the various underhand and what Carroll clearly considered unethical parallel measures taken to remove, punish or embarrass Jowett:

**'... in an earlier age of mathematics J would probably have been referred to Rectangular axes, and divided into two unequal parts.'**

And section V satirises the fact that sheer pressure succeeded in achieving what reason and common sense had failed to do, i.e. increase Jowett's salary:

**'The result differs considerably from the anticipated value, namely 400.0000 still there can be no doubt that the process has been correctly performed and that the learned world may be congratulated on the final settlement of this most difficult problem.'**

However, the most revealing section of this complicated satire is section II ('The Method of Indifferences', which identifies specifically the nature of the controversy and shows Carroll distancing himself from both Jowett and Pusey's religious positions (and, significantly From that of his close friend, H.P. Liddon, a close follower of Pusey). This section is worth quoting in full :

## **II. The Method of Indifferences**

**This was a modification of "the method of finite Differences", and may be thus briefly described:**

**Let E = Essays and R = Reviews: then the locus of (E=R) referred to multilinear co-ordinates, will be found to be of a superficies (i.e. a locus possessing length and Breadth, but no depth) Let v = novelty and assume (E+R) as a function of v.**

**Taking this superficies as the plane of reference we get-**

**E= R=B**

(therefore)  $EB + B^2 = HL$  (By the last Article)

Multiplying by P,  $EBP = HPL$

**It was now necessary to investigate the locus of EBP: this was found to be a species of Catenary, called the Patrician Catenary, which is usually defined as "passing through origin, and containing many multiple points". The locus of HPL will be found almost entirely to coincide with this. Great results were expected from the assumption of (E+R) as a function of v: but the opponents of this theorem having actually succeeded in proving that the v-element did not even enter into the function, it appeared hopeless to obtain any real value of Pi by this method.**

Clearly some 'translation' of this section is required. (E+R) is simply a reference to Essays and Reviews. These were a series of articles by a 'Broad' (B) range of seven theologians (including Jowett) attempting to respond positively to the challenges posed to traditional Church dogma by the scientific advances of the 19th century. Most especially the works of Darwin and Lyell. Jowett's essay, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture' appeared to many to be the least radical and offensive. But to High Church Dogmatists such as Pusey and Liddon (HPL) it was by far the most insidious as, from their point of view, it challenged the whole 'authority of the Word of scripture by admitting it to interpretation (what Jowett called 'progressive revelation'. To Pusey, and others, this essay was a heresy as it appeared to stand in conflict to the long-standing dogma of 'divine revelation' that accepts the Bible as a document inspired by God ('The Word') . By tradition, this implies that the Bible cannot be held open to interpretation - yet this is precisely what Jowett was saying. Jowett's essay called for the Bible to be open for critical analysis and interpretation in the same way that any other book - yet at the same time acknowledging that the Bible was not 'any other book', but unique and sacred. The actual words Jowett used, that led to his arraignment, were:

**(the Bible) 'is to be interpreted like other books, with attention to the character of its authors, and the prevailing state of Civilisation and knowledge, with allowances for peculiarities of style and language, and modes of thought and figures of speech. Yet not without a sense that as we read there grows upon us the witness of God in the world, anticipating in a rude and primitive age the truth that was to be, shining more and more unto the perfect day in the life of Christ, which again is effected from different points of view in the teaching of the Apostles.'**

These views (in the eyes of the High Church at least) cut through some of the most fundamental tenets of the Anglican Church. Most notably it appeared to challenge the concept of 'Divine Inspiration'. To many it appeared to say, 'the Christian faith is whatever the fashionable philosophy of the day says it is',

There is little doubt that Carroll would have taken issue with Jowett (as his squib does) both in terms of logic and on theological grounds. At this time, and for several years prior, Carroll had been attending the Church of F. D. Maurice in Vine St (London). Maurice was the leader of the Christian Socialist Movement and another major target of the Pusey-led High Church movement. He publicly criticised Jowett's paper because of 'the absence of theology in the volume' and, especially, 'the neglect of the full revelation of God in Christ.' We know from Carroll's diary comments, letters to Mary Brown, Syllie and Bruno and other sources that Carroll wholly concurred with this pre-eminence of scripture. Carroll's reference to the 'v-element' not entering into the function is among other things a particularly barbed dig at the Puseyite wing who, both through 'Tracts for the Times' (the publications of the 'Tractarian/Oxford Movement of whom Pusey was probably the sole remaining light) and also Pusey's own 'Library of the Fathers', a series of books commissioned by Pusey intended to show that the Tractarians were basing their arguments faithfully on the teachings of the early fathers of Christianity - were simply doing what Jowett was recommending - a re-interpretation of scriptures 'for the times'.

The 'multi-linear coordinates' refers to the fact that Jowett was one of seven contributors, each having their own agenda and viewpoint. Carroll obviously feels that that the articles, as a whole, are superficial ('possessing length and breadth, but no depth') claiming that they are irrelevant ('indifferent'), as the assumed 'novelties' (i.e. heresies)

turn out, after all not to be so. This is a specific reference to the fact that a charge of heresy brought against Jowett was dropped.

The equation 'E=R=B' refers to the fact that elements of both the 'High' and 'Low' Church did, after all, contribute to the Essays.

The Patristan Caternary was a reference to Pusey's 'Library of the Fathers', Pusey's post Tractarian attempt to keep the 'Oxford Movement' flame alight. Ironically, Carroll's father was a contributor to the Library, writing an Essay on Tertullian.

However, it is the introduction of 'Origen' into the equation that really reveals Carroll's main target in this 'squib'.

Here there is little doubt, because none of the other characters 'fit into the frame'. Among the protagonists, Pusey and only Pusey had constantly referred to Origen as a source and justification for his view of Christianity. In 1855 Pusey Published 'Notes on a Sermon - the Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist'. In this book, Pusey quoted Origen extensively, but selectively.

Pusey was not only 'High Church' but was at the extremes of the High Church Movement He practiced flagellation and was the leading exponent of the Doctrine of 'Eternal Damnation'. He was also, very much, a proponent of two biblical/theological views. First, that the old testament takes precedent over the new testament (Jesus, after all, was the son of God not God himself). Secondly, and importantly, that the bible is not a 'metaphoric' document - that each word in the bible is literal, fixed and blessed so.

Origen, however, does not talk about eternal damnation. Rather he uses the Platonic metaphor of a 'cleansing fire'. Most translators and commentators believe that Origen used the phrase as a metaphor of God. Origen's position appears to be that the for the duration of a person's natural, material existence, the soul is trapped, like the body, within the confines of space and time. God, however, being the creator of space and time as well as all other things, exists outside these constraints and is thus unknowable and incomprehensible. However, when a person dies, the souls escapes the twin prisons of space and time and is, therefore allowed into the True presence of God. It is this confrontation that is Origen's 'cleansing fire'.

Carroll, as a keen and close student of Coleridge, would also have been fully aware that not only did Origen believe in the doctrine of the scriptures as metaphor, but in his many compilations, introduced metaphor and allegory into the texts.

And that Origen, rather than believe in eternal damnation believed in universal salvation is undoubted as it was for this 'heresy' (amongst others) that he was anathematised by the 5th Ecumenical Council in 535 AD.

All of this of course is in complete opposition to the beliefs professed by Pusey - but are very close to Carroll's theological views.

The problem that Pusey faced was simple. Origen was widely acknowledged as the Church's first great theologian. It would be impossible for Pusey to say his teachings were based on 'first principles' - going back to the teachings of the early fathers, without acknowledging Origen. And this was why Carroll included the reference 'Passing through Origen and including many multiple points'.

For Pusey, the issue was fundamental. The Jowett controversy was just a small part of what he saw as an extremely serious challenge to the authority of the Anglican Church and the basic tenets (the 32 articles and the three Creeds) upon which the Church was based. To Pusey three things were absolute both in terms of faith and of meaning. These were the inviolability of 'The Word' discussed above, the concept of 'Original Sin', and the idea of 'Eternal damnation' for those deemed unrepentant or beyond Salvation. Of the three, the one closest to Pusey's heart - the thing that most of all kept the Christian flock

close to the fold, was the idea of Eternal Damnation. Pusey's views on this were clearly defined in a letter he wrote on the subject to Bishop Wilberforce in February 1864:

**'One can hardly think of anything for the hidden blasphemy of that judgement which declares to be uncertain which our Lord taught, and for the loss of the countless souls which it will involve, if not repudiated by the Church. For nothing, I suppose. Keeps men from any sin except the love of God or the fear of Hell.'**

The occasion of this letter was the news that the conviction on the charge of heresy against Henry Bristow Wilson had been overturned by a judicial committee of the Privy Council, Wilson, who was Vicar of Great Staughton in Hertfordshire had, in his essay, challenged the doctrine of 'Eternal Punishment' as well as 'denying the inspiration of Holy Scriptures'.

The third of the trilogy charged with Heresy over the publication of Essays and Reviews was Professor Rowland Williams, like Pusey, a professor of Hebrew. Williams held the Chair in Hebrew at Lampeter College, Cardiff and the living of Broad Chalke in Wiltshire. Williams, like Wilson (unlike Jowett) was also found guilty by the Dean of Arches.

Although subsequently acquitted, the opprobrium attached to the initial finding effectively destroyed both Wilson and Williams.

Pusey, however, saw no irony in the fact that his zeal, and that of his fellow zealots had rained upon Wilson and Williams the same cruel punishment that had been applied against Origen many centuries earlier.

It would appear, therefore, that Carroll's position on this critical affair was to place 'a curse on all your houses'. Primarily condemning the Pusey and Liberal factions, but also chastising Jowett for good measure.

There is some evidence that Carroll did, initially at least, have at least a measure of sympathy for Pusey's position. In an exchange of letters between Carroll and F.D. Maurice on the 'Jowett affair', Maurice replied to a letter of Carroll's (March 2 1863) in which he answered a point made by Carroll in the following fashion:

**'You next proposition is that there are certain Christian Truths which if a man in an accredited position of preacher (i.e. Jowett) shall openly deny, it becomes the duty of those who have accredited him (i.e. the Oxford University authorities) to protest against, and if possible, to prevent his any longer to act for us with this authority.' I copy the words, you will perceive at once the error of contradiction which is in them.'** (Lewis Carroll's Diaries (Volume 4), Wakeling E. (footnote. P. 168)

Unfortunately, Carroll's letter to Maurice has not survived so there is insufficient information available to be sure of Carroll's intent. For example was he playing Devil's advocate or genuinely finding a justification for Pusey's reasons, if not his actions? If the latter, it appears that Carroll modified his views between the time the controversy first began in 1861 and its resolution (and the appearance of the Squib) in 1865.

An illuminating aside to the Pusey affair was provided by Athur Penrhyn Stanley, Dean of Westminster and a good friend of Carroll's, both aligning themselves to the Broad Church movement. In 1863 Stanley was in Rome, where he was invited to an audience with Pope Pius IX. As Stanley was about to leave the Pope commented, 'You know Pusey? When you meet him, give him this message from me - that I compare him to a bell, which always sounds to invite the faithful to church, and itself always remains outside.'

A decade later, Carroll wrote 'The Hunting of the Snark'. The main protagonist of which was The Bellman, a captain without a navigator, relying on a map devoid of signs or instructions who led his hapless crew on a doomed journey.

In the meantime Carroll increasingly sought his spiritual guidance and comfort elsewhere. From 1862 on, Carroll eschewed attendance at St Mary Magdalene, the prestigious University Parish Church and instead travelled each Sunday to London to attend St

Peter's Church in Vere St (just off Oxford Street), where the incumbent was the radical and controversial F.D. Maurice.

Carroll's diary for July 20 1862 reads; 'Morning and afternoon at Vere St. Mr Maurice preached both times. I like his sermons very much.' Carroll continued to attend Vere St on a regular basis throughout this period of turmoil as is confirmed by a diary entry of April 7 1867. 'Went as usual to Vere St Chapel..' Maurice resigned his position at Vere St in 1869. It is not known when Carroll last attended Vere St, his attendances being so common that they only credited a mention in his diary when associated with another event (most commonly meeting up with his Close Friend George MacDonald (the writer accredited with influencing Carroll into writing and publishing 'Alice in Wonderland').

F.D. Maurice is often described as a 'Socialist' and is seen more as an icon of the Left than the Right'. It is true that Maurice was one of the leading lights and the acknowledged spiritual guide of the Christian Socialist Movement - the most extreme manifestation of the Broad Church movement, but it is often forgotten that the term 'socialist' had a completely different meaning and connotation in the mid-19th century than it has today. ALL the leading lights of the Christian Socialist Movement were, in Political terms supporters of the fairly new 'Conservative Party' - a renaming of the Tory party. They were utterly opposed to the Liberal party's views on society, religion and economics. They were socialist in the sense that they believed that people were primarily social animals, part of an organic and spiritual whole that was 'society' or 'nation' or even 'race' The sum of the whole was greatly superior to the sum of the individual comprising that whole. What made this so were precisely such things as religious and moral Truths, commonality of interests whatever a persons station, protection for the weak and unfortunate, and the value of labour. The Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli made this clear in his 'state of England' novels in much the same way that America's great president Abraham Lincoln later did in his writings and speeches.

Thus, it is important to understand that when writers such as Collingwood, Hudson and others, describe Carroll as 'Conservative' (with the capital 'C', this is the type of Conservatism Carroll came to believe in.

To what extent the Jowett controversy helped form his views is unclear. It is known that his interest in the the Neo-Platonic philosophy that underpinned the ideas of people like F.D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley, Tennyson and others he drew idea and inspiration from, came early. In the early 1850's in fact. It may be that the Jowett controversy merely confirmed his views and broke the last link had with Pusey.

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