

GARY COLLEDGE

DICKENS, CHRISTIANITY AND THE LIFE OF OUR LORD: HUMBLE  
VENERATION, PROFOUND CONVICTION. (Continuum, 2009) x + 183 pp.

Reviewed by Christine Colón

Anyone who has read *Bleak House* will remember the vividness with which Charles Dickens critiques Christianity through the character of the [Reverend Mr. Chadband](#). As poor Jo struggles to stay awake in the midst of the verbal assault that Chadband would call a sermon, readers cannot help but wonder at a Christian faith that seems so antithetical to the teachings of the New Testament, which repeatedly reveal Christ's love for the sick and the poor. Dickens's novels are, in fact, full of characters like Chadband, who claim to be Christians but fail to live their lives according to the model of Christ. Looking at all of these negative images of Christianity, readers may wonder about Dickens's own relationship to the Christian faith. Is he a concerned insider critiquing a church he fundamentally supports, or a disillusioned outsider satirizing a church he has forsaken? Gary Colledge now asks us to

consider this question. From his exploration of Dickens's little-read work *The Life of Our Lord*, he concludes that Dickens was actually a concerned insider whose agreement with the fundamental beliefs of Christianity did not keep him from exposing the flaws he saw in the Victorian church.

In his opening chapters, Colledge demonstrates the value and importance of his study. Arguing persuasively that Dickens's relationship with Christianity is much more complex than scholars have thought, he makes the case for grappling with the intricacies of Dickens's Christian beliefs. They clearly deserve more study. While scholars such as Dennis Walder, Andrew Sanders, Janet L. Larson, and Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton have begun to explore them in depth, the negative portrayals of the church in Dickens's novels have led many other scholars to underestimate the role that Christianity played in his life and works. They may recognize a vague Christian framework for his moral concerns, but they do not investigate his Christianity. Colledge challenges his readers to do so.

For Colledge, Dickens's *The Life of Our Lord* (TLOL) is the key to his Christian faith. Though scholars have slighted this book because Dickens

wrote it solely for the spiritual education of his children and did not wish it to be published, Colledge argues that it reveals what Dickens believed to be the essentials of Christianity. Using evidence from Dickens's letters that reveals his desire to help his children revere Christ as their savior, Colledge plausibly infers that a father seeking to illustrate the truths of Christianity to his children would focus on the issues he considered most important. In this context, Colledge's contention that *TLOL* may be used as "an outline of the fundamental elements that underpinned Dickens's Christian worldview"(3) is persuasive.

Colledge bolsters his argument by drawing clear boundaries for his analysis. He is careful not to set Dickens up as a theologian and *TLOL* as a "theological treatise" (vii). Both assertions would be difficult to support since Dickens, ever mindful of his young audience, does not engage his readers in theological debate but rather presents the story of Christ as a model for moral behavior. But as Colledge points out, even though it is not a carefully reasoned theological argument, *TLOL* is still a valuable means of determining Dickens's ideas of the essentials of Christianity. Colledge's decision to investigate *TLOL* in the context of other biblical commentaries and devotionals written in

nineteenth-century Britain is the strongest component of his study. By placing *TLOL* in this context, Colledge allows scholars to begin to see *TLOL* as a conscious interpretation of the New Testament rather than as an unpublished children's story that simply replicates pious clichés of the mid-Victorian period.

While Colledge's overall discussion is sound, several of the details of his argument are problematic. Take, for example, his discussion of the careful construction of *TLOL*, which is an important consideration if we are to see this work as an "outline" of Dickens's ideas about Christianity. Dickens may have used the work to tell his children about the essentials of the faith (and particularly about Christ as a model for Christian living), but does it really display the "painstaking and conscientious crafting" that allows us to discover the intricacies of Dickens's Christian faith (9)? Even if (as Colledge claims) Dickens's choice of stories, his organization, and his language all reveal his interpretations of the New Testament, these elements of the work do not necessarily furnish enough implicit theology to determine how Dickens thought on important Christian doctrines. And despite the claim that he is not treating Dickens as a theologian, Colledge does seek to explain his views on

such theological issues as providence, creation, death, heaven, judgment, hell, Christ's divinity, forgiveness of sins, atonement, original sin, and total depravity. The question then arises: how much theology can we draw from a children's story that Dickens did not want published? For the last part of this question Colledge has a simple answer: Dickens did not want *TLOL* to be published because he cared more about its spiritual value to his children than about its entertainment value to a wider audience (36–37). But is entertainment value—or the lack of it—an adequate explanation? A private work written by one member of a family for the edification of the rest and read repeatedly in that family context may be approached differently than a work written for publication, where the author has no familial connection to his readers. In the family context, the author may use the work as a starting point to provoke questions and requests for clarification. It may become, then, a catalyst for more intense discussions, particularly as the children grow older and are more familiar with the story. The deeper exploration of the realities of Christianity may come from the discussion rather than from the work itself and may not be inherent in the original text.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, *TLOL* provides only a superficial look at many of the important issues that Colledge addresses. As readers, we can plainly see Dickens's concern with the moral imperatives of Christianity as they are embodied in Christ, for Dickens concludes his tale by reminding his children that "[i]f we...remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in Peace" (128). This concept is clearly a foundational principle for Dickens's Christianity, but many other issues that surround the figure of Christ are left unanswered in *TLOL*, which calls into question the idea of using it as an outline for anything beyond the moral example of Christ. For instance, we would not expect Dickens to debate the fine points of substitutionary [atonement](#) for his children, but surely a carefully composed outline of his theology would provide us with a clear sense of something as fundamental as the deity of Christ. Many readers of *TLOL* have sensed a Unitarian focus in Dickens's portrayal of Christ, for Dickens remarks that Jesus "will grow up to be so good that God will love him as his own son" (12). Colledge has an excellent discussion of the complexities of religious language, particularly "Son of God," which is used in very different ways by Anglicans and Unitarians, but he elides some of the difficulties in

*TLOL* by saying that Dickens is simply presenting a careful “non-sectarian” portrait (107). Orthodox Anglican readers would surely be disturbed by the idea that Jesus’ goodness inspired God to “love him as his own son,” and Unitarian readers would question Dickens’s later portrayals of Christ as forgiving sins and healing individuals through his own power. While the overall evidence from Dickens’s novels and letters seems to show—as Colledge argues—that he remains an orthodox Anglican but tries to avoid theological controversies, the Dickens of *TLOL* seems rather to be, in Janet Larson’s phrase, “Mr. Facing-Both-Ways” (*Dickens and the Broken Scripture* 11).

The confusing portrait of Christ’s divinity is not the only problem with *TLOL*, for if we look closely at Colledge’s argument, we discover that it barely touches several other important issues. In his discussion of Dickens’s view of God the Father, Colledge’s strongest evidence comes from Dickens’s novels and letters rather than from *TLOL*, for “the basic conceptual aspects of God’s person and character,” he says, “are assumed but not explicitly articulated” in *TLOL* and views of providence are “more evident in other writing” (41–42).

Likewise, Colledge’s account of what Dickens believed about death and

heaven owes more to his analysis of [Little Nell's death in \*The Old Curiosity Shop\*](#) than to his examples from *TLOL*. If *TLOL* does indeed outline Dickens's ideas on Christianity, shouldn't they be more visible in its pages?

Colledge's argument is at its best in his section on judgment and hell, where *TLOL* does seem to clarify issues that are elusive in Dickens's other works. Here, his evidence from *TLOL* helps readers see Dickens in a more complex way as we discover how supernatural evil and God's wrath are part of Dickens's worldview (73). With this argument, Colledge addresses an aspect of Dickens's Christianity that is easily ignored or misunderstood if we look only at his novels, and *TLOL* does provide a clarifying perspective. For the most part, however, *TLOL* does not seem to fulfill the role that Colledge sets out for it.

This difficulty becomes evident in Colledge's final chapter, which explores Dickens as a Christian writer. Ultimately, what we learn from *TLOL* does not add much depth to the overall discussion of Dickens's Christianity that has circulated since Dennis Walder's [Dickens and Religion](#) (1981). In arguing that Dickens should be seen as an orthodox Anglican who refused to

engage in doctrinal disputes, Colledge cites Philip Collins's *Dickens and Education* (1964) and Humphry House's *The Dickens World* (1941), both of which question the depth of Dickens's Christianity. But beyond faulting the tendency to categorize Dickens as a Broad Church Anglican, Colledge barely grapples with more recent scholarship on Dickens's religious commitment. For example, even though he mentions Walder's *Dickens and Religion* (1981), Janet L. Larson's *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (1985), and Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton's [\*Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England\*](#) (2003), he does not discuss how his discoveries in *TLOL* confirm or challenge their perceptions of Dickens's beliefs. In fact, his final contention that *TLOL* emphasizes the "centrality of Jesus" and makes his example "the exclusive and sufficient guide for the life of faith" (151–52) does not provide much more insight into Dickens's Christianity than Peter Ackroyd's very brief discussion of it in his 1990 biography. It's important to stress the "centrality of Jesus" to Dickens's worldview when refuting earlier critics who refused to recognize it. But since recent scholarship on Dickens and Christianity tends to confirm this centrality, Colledge's conclusion lacks both originality and complexity.

Colledge's study of *TLOL* is valuable because it draws attention to a little discussed work that provides some interesting glimpses into Dickens's Christianity, particularly regarding his views on God's wrath and judgment. Colledge also places Dickens's ideas in the context of several important religious controversies of the mid-Victorian period and helps us to see *TLOL* as a conscious interpretation of the New Testament. Unfortunately, however, Colledge's work ultimately does not fulfill its promise; it does not show that *TLOL* can be used to map the complexities of Dickens's Christianity. *TLOL* may clarify a few issues, but it does not tell us much more about Dickens's Christian faith than we can learn from his other works. While it does, as Colledge says, reveal "Dickens's understanding of the life of faith and the simplicity of following Jesus" (152), and while it counters the false Christianity displayed by characters like Chadband, so does Dickens's portrayal of characters like Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit. Colledge's study demonstrates that *TLOL* re-affirms certain foundational ideas about Dickens's Christianity. But he does not quite demonstrate that it provides us with "profound insight into [Dickens's] life and work" (152).

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