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THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF W. D. HOWELLS*

Kenji Akamine

Throughout his life and long literary career, William Dean Howells (1837-1920) had a great interest in religion, as attested by the numerous opinions on religious topics he expressed in his letters, memoirs, essays and fiction. Howells' interest in religion was social and ethical, rather than purely theological, and he believed that religion had much to do with the welfare of mankind. While believing that material and economic factors in the social environment were important in determining man's character, Howells could not disregard the strong influence of intellectual and religious factors which entered man's life.¹ His views of religion supplied powerful motives not only for his religious criticism but also for his literary, social and economic criticism; they were a constituent part of his attitudes toward life and literature. The purpose of this study is to see what kind of religious background and beliefs Howells had, mainly through an examination of his letters, memoirs and essays, so as to obtain a basis for analytic studies of his literary theory and practice. Measuring the effect of Howells' religious background and beliefs on his fiction and other writings is outside the scope of this present study.

I

In his lifetime, Howells was strongly influenced by two persons. The first of them was his Swedenborgian father,

William Cooper Howells (1807-1894), who presided over Howells' religious training and taught him how to become a moral individual. To some extent, Howells in his later years grew away from the theology of his father, but he kept many of the attitudes fostered by his Swedenborgian upbringing.² Howells writes in *A Boy's Town* (1890), an autobiographical sketch of their life in Hamilton, Ohio, in the eighteen-forties, that his grandfather was a fervent Methodist, but that his father, after many years of skepticism, became a believer in the doctrine of Emanuel Swedenborg in 1834, and that the children were brought up in that faith. Swedenborgianism was not only their faith, but their life. The Howells family did not go to church, because Swedenborgians in the community were so few that there were no services of the "New Church." But the family lived according to the teachings of their religion.³

Howells' father conceived all tangible and visible creation as an adumbration of spiritual reality, and accepted revelation as the mask of interior meanings. He regarded the soul as its own keeper and the sovereign chooser of heaven or hell, but always master of the greatest happiness possible to it. And he thought of himself as nothing in himself, and only something from moment to moment through influx from the Lord.⁴ Howells as a boy once heard his father explain to one of their neighbors that

the New Church people believed in a hell, which each cast himself into if he loved the evil rather than the good, and that no mercy could keep him out of without destroying him, for a man's love was his very self. It made his blood run cold, and he resolved that rather than cast himself into hell, he

would do his poor best to love the good.⁵

It seems clear that to the Swedenborgians, the essential aspect of religion was an ethical life, especially man's acquisition of habits of good behavior towards his neighbors. During Howells' entire upbringing, the stress was on behaving rather than on believing.⁶

That his family belonged to a minority religious group undoubtedly gave the young Howells freedom to observe and discuss objectively the established religious organizations around him. He also had many occasions to discuss religion with other young people of the community. At his father's printing office in Jefferson, Ohio, which became a popular gathering place after it was opened in 1852, Howells, as a boy, enjoyed a great deal of talking with the young people of the town. The topics of the discussion ranged from politics and literature to religion. They disputed over such questions as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, which were, Howells tells, openly doubted among many of them.⁷ It was also at his father's printing office that the young Howells became acquainted with the writings of Thomas Paine, who had, in his *Age of Reason* (1794-95), attacked the excess and wrong of the Biblical religion represented by the organized churches.⁸ About the same time, Howells read George Eliot's translation (1848) of *The Life of Jesus* by the German theologian David F. Strauss, and it "destroyed whatever faith in revealed religion was in young Howells."⁹ Receiving these influences, Howells grew increasingly skeptical about religion as such, until he became particularly intolerant of the dogmas and creeds of the organized churches. Howells' skepticism of his earlier years even

caused him to cast doubts upon the doctrine of Swedenborg, which he had been following faithfully, together with his parents, brothers and sisters.

In 1860, Howells partly referred to his loss of faith in his poem, titled "Lost Beliefs."

One after one they left us;
The sweet birds of our breasts
Went flying away in the morning;
Will they come again to their nests?

Will they come again at nightfall,
With God's breath in their song?
Noon is fierce with the heats of summer,
And summer days are long!

O my Life, with thy upward liftings
Thy downward-striking roots,
Ripening out of thy tender blossoms
But hard and bitter fruits! —

In thy boughs there is no shelter
For the birds to seek again.
The desolate nest is broken
And torn with storms and rain.¹⁰

In addition, Howells' letter of January 28, 1872, addressed to his father, reveals his growing skepticism toward Swedenborgianism, and casts a light upon the concept of religion which he had formed under his father's influence.

In Swedenborg I'm disappointed because I find he makes a certain belief the condition of entering the kingdom of heaven. I always tho't [sic] that it was a good life he insisted upon, and I inferred from such religious training as you gave me that it made no difference what I believed about the trinity, or the divinity of Christ, if only I did right from a love of doing right. Now it appears to me from the Testament that Christ was a man directly, instead of

indirectly, begotten by a divine father; and for this persuasion, which I owe to the reason given me of God, Swedenborg tells me I shall pass my eternal life in an insane asylum. This is hard, and I can't help revolting from it. I am not such a fool as to think I can do the highest good from myself or that I am anything in myself; but I don't see why I cannot be humble and true and charitable, without believing that Christ was God. I am greatly disappointed, and somewhat distressed in this matter. At times I'm half-minded never to read another word of theology; but to cling blindly to the moral teachings of the gospels. I should like extremely to talk with you.¹¹

But nevertheless Howells seems to have kept what he had obtained from his father's religious training intact, for to the Howells of the eighteen-eighties, religion, described in a state of ideal perfection, was a "force which makes for better men and for better conditions of living"¹² in the world. And he had never lost faith in the "spiritual values of altruism, love, morality,"¹³ which were real to him, and which he believed might be found in any true religion.

II

The other person who strongly influenced Howells was the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). Tolstoy's humanitarianism caused Howells to undergo a great religious reawakening late in the eighteen-eighties, when Howells was forty-eight. The acquaintance with Tolstoy's books brought Howells a "new awareness of the possibilities of Christianity if it could be accepted literally as a way of life."¹⁴ Howells' reading of Tolstoy began in October, 1885, with *The Cossacks* (1863),

and continued with *Anna Karenina* (1873-76), and shortly covered all of such theological writings as *My Religion* (1884), which last is Tolstoy's sincere testament of the firm religious conviction he had reached after his literal reading of Christ's message.

In *My Religion*, which has also been translated into English under the title *What I Believe*, Tolstoy reduced Christ's teaching to five commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, especially Matthew v. 21-48: (1) live at peace with all men and never consider your anger against any men justified ... (verses 21-26); (2) do not make the desire for sexual relations into an amusement... (27-32); (3) never take an oath to anyone, anywhere, about anything (33-37); (4) never resist the evil-doer by force, do not meet violence with violence (38-42); and (5) do not consider the people of other nations to be enemies... but love them and do good to them (43-48). And Tolstoy wrote:

The fulfilment of Christ's teaching expressed in the five commandments, would establish the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God on earth is the peace of all men one with another. Peace among men is the highest blessing attainable by man on earth.... All five commandments have but that one aim—peace among men. Men need only trust Christ's teaching and obey it and there will be peace on earth; and not such a peace as men devise, temporary, accidental, and partial, but a general peace, inviolable and eternal.¹⁵

Deeply moved by the serenity and depth of Tolstoy's religious conviction, Howells said: "[Tolstoy's] books perpetually teach me that the good prevails, and always will prevail whenever men put self aside, and strive simply and humbly to be good."¹⁶

The tone of the above passage is exactly the same as that of Howells' letter previously quoted, and shows that Howells maintained his interest in men's striving toward goodness. It is obvious that Howells was reawakened by Tolstoy's testimony, which caused Howells to become aware of the possibilities of Christianity. What moved Howells most was Tolstoy's frank acceptance of Christ's moral teachings in his steadfast conviction that "Jesus Christ came into the world to teach me how to live in it, and that He meant literally what He said when He forbade us luxury, war, litigation, unchastity, and hypocrisy."¹⁷ Declaring that Tolstoy showed him a new way, Howells said that now he knew rationally what he had known instinctively before.¹⁸ Howells was stimulated to seek to find the counterpart of his earlier beliefs in Christianity. The result of his search he reveals in his review of Tolstoy's *My Religion* in an "Editor's Study," wherein he displays a sign of agreement and admiration for Tolstoy, who, Howells writes, "does not relegate the practice of the Christian life to some future period, but himself attempts it here and now."¹⁹

In short, Tolstoy's influence caused Howells to accept the ethical aspect of Christianity with frankness; and it became thenceforth a great moral force in Howells' literature as well as in his life. Increasingly unhappy over the injustice he encountered, Howells looked hopefully to religion as a force that could effectively "remedy the evils of the social orders."²⁰ Howells was reawakened by Tolstoy's honesty and sincerity, and determined to make conscious efforts toward the application of the true teachings of Christ in everyday life. He wrote to his friend, Howard Pyle, on April 30, 1895, "Christ is easy to

believe in; he is here and has always been here....”²¹ Furthermore, Howells confessed that he could never look at life in the mean and sordid way that he had done before he read Tolstoy.²² Thus, in this period of life, the great ethical force of Tolstoy made Christianity quicken into life in Howells’ heart for the first time since his boyhood.²³ Howells wrote:

Tolstoy gave me heart to hope that the world may yet be made over in the image of Him who died for it, when all Caesars [sic] things shall be finally rendered unto Caesar, and men shall come into their own, into the right to labor and the right to enjoy the fruits of their labor, each one master of himself and servant to every other. He taught me to see life not as a chase of a forever impossible personal happiness, but as a field for endeavor towards the happiness of the whole human family; and I can never lose this vision, however I close my eyes, and strive to see my own interest as the highest good. He gave me new criterions, new principles, which, after all, were those that are taught us in our earliest childhood, before we have come to the evil wisdom of the world.²⁴

Howells wrote that Tolstoy’s literature “both in its ethics and aesthetics, or its union of them, was an experience for me somewhat comparable to the old-fashioned religious experience of people converted at revivals.”²⁵ But it was, strictly speaking, a re-awakening of the ideas and sentiments fostered by his father which had remained latent in him, rather than the “turning of a pagan to the good news of Christ.”²⁶ The Tolstoyan influence gave Howells a new awareness of the criteria and principles of novel writing in the old field of literature which he had been cultivating since his

early manhood. "I need never again look for a theme of fiction;" wrote Howells, "I saw life swarming with themes that filled my imagination and pressed into my hands."²⁷ And one of the immediate effects of Tolstoy was evident in Howells' readiness to accept literally the "example of Christ, who provided a standard of conduct on earth toward which man must strive even though he will never attain it."²⁸ And now Howells wished to be a "good Christian" as well as a good citizen.²⁹ After his reawakening experience under Tolstoy's influence, Howells regarded the teachings of Christianity, with its principles of altruism, essential to his aspirations for the race, and conducive to the highest good which he hoped for humanity.³⁰ In his firm conviction that the moral doctrine of Christ alone could bring love and peace on earth, and show a new direction to modern society, Howells now looked hopefully to Christianity.³¹

III

Therefore, Howells was greatly troubled when he came to notice the obvious cleavage between his idea of Christianity and the doctrines of the Christian churches in reality. Especially, he was disappointed to find dogmas, creeds, and schism in the Christian churches. Howells felt that the Christian church was far removed from what he considered the true ground of Christianity.³² In the same sense, other revealed religions appeared to Howells different from what he believed a true religion ought to be; they deprived people of the love of neighbors and peace of mind by dogmatically making certain beliefs the condition of entering the Kingdom

of Heaven; and consequently, they set people astray, instead of guiding them into the right avenue of life. Moreover, the activities of such religious organizations tended to become remote from people's everyday affairs. Hanna Belcher, in her article on Howells' attitude toward religion, writes that Howells

appeared always to associate the institution of religion with creeds, dogmas, theologies, for all of which he possessed small patience, and he did not think of churches as effective agencies for correcting the evils of society.³³

Thus the two major religious experiences, i. e., his education and training in the doctrine of Swedenborgianism and his religious reawakening under the influence of Tolstoy, made it impossible for Howells to become a "Christian" in the ordinary sense. According to Edwin H. Cady, who sums up this point of Howells' character, Howells "never became, in the ordinary churchly sense, a Christian. Theologically, metaphysically, intellectually, even perhaps spiritually, he remained an agnostic."³⁴ But that detachment, Cady adds, gave Howells certain advantages both in life and art, because it kept him from saintly arrogance, the fanatic pride of formal humility, and absolute knowledge, while keeping him focused on people and their troubles, and tolerant and humane.³⁵

Howells, then, never embraced the religious doctrines of established churches, and his religion was, to put it in a few words, "simple and hereditary."³⁶ He believed in a religion that gave wisdom, goodness, comfort, and peace of mind to all mankind. Oscar W. Firkins puts Howells' religious beliefs in strikingly symbolic words:

[The beliefs to which Howells clung] consisted mainly in the double hope ... of a pilotage in this errant universe using wisdom and goodness as its final compass and lodestar and of a harbor offering reunion to those whom the storm has divided and peace to those whom it has buffeted and misled.³⁷

To sum up, the core of Howells' religion resided in his concept of true religion as a force which makes for better men and better conditions of living in the world, and that concept furnished the basis for his social theories.³⁸ There is, in Howells' opinions on religion, no mention of the tight relationship between man and a personal God. Hanna Belcher sums up Howells' religion:

Christianity shorn of its creeds, its dogmas, its theologies, its rituals, and its superstitions; Christianity reduced to the teachings and practice of Jesus; Christianity as a way of building a better world for a nobler humanity — that was the real religion of Howells.³⁹

Notes

* This is an expanded version of a section of my unpublished M. A. thesis on "William Dean Howells' Criticism of Religion: His Motive and Method," submitted to the University of Colorado in 1962. The thesis was directed and read by Professors Francis C. Robinson and Charles H. Nilon.

Professors Chotoku Higa and Kozen Nakachi of the University of the Ryukyus have kindly read the paper and given me valuable suggestions for improvement.

¹ Olov W. Fryckstedt, *In Quest of America: A Study of Howells' Early Development as a Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), p. 218.

² In 1900, when he was sixty-three, Howells called Swedenborgianism his "inherited faith." See his *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, ed. David F. Hiatt and Edwin H. Cady (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), p. 192.

³ See William Dean Howells, *A Boy's Town* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), pp. 11-12. For the date of William Cooper Howells' official conversion to the principles of Swedenborg's New Church, i. e., 1834, see Kenneth S. Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 34. William Cooper Howells wrote two Swedenborgian tracts, *The Science of Correspondences*, and *The Freewill of Man and the Origin of Evil*, published as pamphlets by the New Church Press of London. See *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, ed. Mildred Howells (Garden City, N. J.: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928), I, 165—hereafter cited as *Life in Letters*. Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was born in Stockholm and became a noted and versatile scientist, publishing extensively in such fields as mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology, mineralogy, anatomy, and physiology. After a long career as a civil servant, he was retired in 1747 and devoted his remaining years to the spiritual revelation that he said had come to him in 1745. He continued to write on religion until his death in London. After

his death, the New Jerusalem Church based on his teachings was organized in England (London) in 1787 and in the United States (Baltimore) in 1792. The doctrines of Swedenborg and the New Church may be briefly outlined as follows:

- (1) There is one God, the Center of the Universe, acting through the spiritual world into the natural world. Jesus Christ is a manifestation in time of God himself.
- (2) The spiritual world is in the natural world as the soul is in the body. Just as the soul is the center and source of all human activity, so is the spiritual world the source and center of all natural growth and life.
- (3) Every natural object is conceived to be the effect, and therefore the expression, of spiritual causes. Those effects "correspond" to those causes; hence their capacity, when properly understood, to reveal the spiritual meaning contained in them.
- (4) When an individual dies, he is raised in his spiritual body to the spiritual world. There he lives, either in heaven or in hell, depending on the character he had achieved on earth.
- (5) All religion is related to life and the life of religion is to do good.

See L. B. De Beaumont, "Swedenborg," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n. d.), XII, 129-132; The Rev. Thomas Child, "The New Church, Commonly Called Swedenborgian," *Religious Systems of the World*, rev. ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1906), pp. 652-656; Benson Y. Landis, *Religion in the United States*, Everyday Handbooks, No. 294 (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), pp. 50-51; and Inge Jonsson, "Swedenborg, Emanuel," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), VIII, 48-51.

⁴ William Dean Howells, Introd., *Recollections of Life in Ohio from 1813 to 1840*, by William Cooper Howells (1895; rpt. Delmar, N. Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1963), p. vi.

⁵ Howells, *A Boy's Town*, p. 12.

⁶ Howard M. Munford, "The Genesis and Early Development of the Basic Attitudes of William Dean Howells," Diss. Harvard 1950, as quoted in Fryckstedt, p. 220, n. 18.

⁷ See William Dean Howells, *Years of My Youth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1916), pp. 89-106.

⁸ William Dean Howells, *Impressions and Experiences* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896), p. 23.

⁹ Owen Wister, "William Dean Howells," *Atlantic Monthly*, 160 (Dec., 1937), 713. Strauss held the view that "religion—Christianity in particular—is an expression of the human mind's capacity to generate myths and treat them as truths revealed by God to man." See Hayden V. White, "Strauss, David Friedrich (1808-1874)," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, VIII, 25.

¹⁰ William Dean Howells, "Lost Beliefs," *Atlantic Monthly*, 5 (April, 1860), 486, as quoted in Arnold B. Fox, "Howells as a Religious Critic," *New England Quarterly*, 25 (June, 1952), 202.

¹¹ *Life in Letters*, I, 165-166.

¹² Hanna G. Belcher, "Howells's Opinions on the Religious Conflicts of His Age as Exhibited in Magazine Articles," *American Literature*, 15 (Nov., 1943), 274.

¹³ Belcher, p. 274.

¹⁴ Fox, p. 204.

¹⁵ See Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession, The Gospel in Brief and What I Believe*, trans. Aylmer Maude, The World's Classics, 229 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940), pp. 370-406.

¹⁶ William Dean Howells, "Lyof Tolstoi," *Harper's Weekly*, 31 (April 23, 1887), 300.

¹⁷ Howells, "Lyof Tolstoi," p. 299.

¹⁸ William Dean Howells, "Lyof N. Tolstoy," *North American Review*, 188 (Dec., 1908), 852.

¹⁹ "Editor's Study," *Harper's Monthly*, 72 (April, 1886), 808.

²⁰ Belcher, pp. 274-275.

²¹ *Life in Letters*, II, 61.

²² William Dean Howells, *My Literary Passions/Criticism & Fiction* (1895/1891; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1968), p. 188.

²³ Edwin H. Cady, *The Realist at War: The Mature Years, 1885-1920, of William Dean Howells* (Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1958), p. 8.

²⁴ Howells, *My Literary Passions*, pp. 183-184.

²⁵ Howells, "Lyof N. Tolstoy," p. 851.

²⁶ See Cady, *The Realist at War*, p. 8.

²⁷ Howells, "Lyof N. Tolstoy," p. 852. Reading Tolstoy "profoundly affected Howells, intellectually, aesthetically, and morally, and led to his formulating the concept of complicity and his writing the so-called 'economic novels,' " which include *Annie Kilburn* (1889), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), *The Quality of Mercy* (1892), and *The World of Chance* (1893). It is significant that Howells' theory of complicity had been derived in part from Swedenborg. See Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, eds., *Mark Twain-Howells Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard

Univ. Press, 1960), II, 597 and 651.

²⁸ George N. Bennett, *William Dean Howells: The Development of a Novelist* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1959), p. 164. Tolstoy wrote: "...the perfection pointed out to Christians is infinite and can never be attained; and Christ delivers his teaching with the fact in view that complete perfection will never be attained, but that striving towards full and infinite perfection will constantly increase the good of men, and so that good can be endlessly increased." Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude, The World's Classics, 445 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), p. 116.

²⁹ Howells, *Impressions and Experiences*, p. 151.

³⁰ Belcher, p. 272.

³¹ "Christianity is to [Howells,] not the water and wine, the loaves and fishes, the empty tomb, the harps and crowns, but a rule of life which can neither be given nor taken away by any of these, and which is real whatever becomes of them." Helen T. and Wilson Follett, "Contemporary Novelists: William Dean Howells," *Atlantic Monthly*, 119 (March, 1917), 370.

³² With the political economist Richard T. Ely, who wrote a book called *Social Aspects of Christianity* (1889), Howells agreed that Christian churches' work was "primarily to make justice and peace and love at home upon the earth, and secondarily to save souls for heaven thereby." "Editor's Study," *Harper's Monthly*, 80 (Feb., 1890), 484, as quoted in Belcher, p. 274.

³³ Belcher, p. 292.

³⁴ Cady, *The Realist at War*, p. 9.

³⁵ Cady, *The Realist at War*, p. 9.

³⁶ Oscar W. Firkins, *William Dean Howells: A Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1924), p. 23.

³⁷ Firkins, p. 24.

³⁸ Belcher, p. 274.

³⁹ Belcher, p. 277.

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