



Dissecting modernist religion in Gottfried Keller's *Das verlorene Lachen*

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Abstract

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In the wake of the Enlightenment and heavily influenced by serious challenges in Biblical scholarship to conventional doctrines, various kinds of liberal theology emerged in European Protestantism of both the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. Within the Calvinist-Zwinglian churches of Switzerland, this came to expression in, inter alia, progressive religion which stood in marked contrast to confessional orthodoxy. The novelist Gottfried Keller had been influenced by the German atheistic philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach in the 1840s and shortly thereafter gained prominence as one of the most gifted Swiss writers of his era. In his novella "Das verlorene Lachen", Keller systematically rejected confessional Reformed orthodoxy, liberal currents in the Reformed churches, Roman Catholicism and Protestant nonconformity as intellectually archaic and out of harmony with the democratic and egalitarian spirit of the times, either products of supporters or a stratified social system which he found unacceptable.

Opsomming

Die ontleding van die modernistiese geloof in Gottfried Keller se *Das verlorene Lachen*

In die voetspore van die Verligting, en sterk onder die invloed van ernstige opposisie in die vorm van opponerende standpunte wat konvensionele Bybelse leerstellinge uitgedaag het, het verskeie liberale teologieë in sowel die Lutherse en gereformeerde tradisies na vore gekom. In die Calvinisties-Zwingliaanse kerke van Switserland het dit onder andere tot uiting

gekom in progressiewe godsdiens wat in skille kontras teenoor die ortodokse belydenis gestaan het. Die skrywer Gottfried Keller is rondom 1840 beïnvloed deur die Duitse ateïstiese filosoof Ludwig Feuerbach, en het kort daarna beroemd geword as een van die mees gevierde Switserse skrywers van sy tyd. In sy novelle "Das verlorene Lachen" het hy die ortodokse reformistiese belydenis, liberale strominge in die gereformeerde kerke, die Rooms-Katolieke godsdiens en Protestantse nonkonformistiese sistematies verwerp as intellektueel argaïes en uit pas met die demokratiese en egalitêre gees van die tyd, produkte van die ondersteuners van 'n gestratifiseerde sosiale sisteem wat hy as onaanvaarbaar beskou het.

1. Keller and radical criticism of Christianity in Switzerland

In Switzerland, as elsewhere in Europe and beyond, numerous literary artists joined philosophers and other commentators in subjecting contemporary developments in religious life to varying degrees and kinds of criticism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Particularly in Protestant circles this was an era of rapid transformation. In the wake of the Enlightenment, the challenge of natural science to received doctrinal verities, and the unfolding of radical Biblical scholarship, especially emanating from Germany, further undermined conventional patterns of spiritual behaviour and loyalty to the ecclesiastical establishment. Some men of letters aimed satirical lances at what they regarded as atavistic and irrelevant doctrines while retaining their belief in at least some of the fundamental tenets of Christianity; others rejected the faith totally. It was in many respects the beginning of the modern age in which we still live, a time when large numbers of people remained faithful to traditional patterns of religious life while many others were leaving those ways behind. In an age of increasing religious pluralism, the churches were struggling to maintain the loyalty of their members.

The two most prominent Swiss novelists of this era, Gottfried Keller (1819-1890) and Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825-1898), both natives of Zürich – which was the principal locus of liberal political and religious thought in nineteenth-century Switzerland but also a centre of Reformed orthodoxy – stood in the forefront of the radical dismissal of Christianity. One vehicle of Keller's attack was his novella *Das verlorene Lachen* (literally "The lost laughter" but mistranslated into English as *The lost smile*), in which he lambasted the principal modernising currents within the Swiss Reformed churches while also rejecting nonconformist separatism and Roman Catho-

licism as unsatisfactory alternatives for the disaffected. This vital dimension of his authorship has never received its due, however, probably owing both to literary critics' preoccupation with Keller's assault on the *de facto* caste system he perceived burdening Swiss society and their lack of comprehension of the theological factionalism discussed in the text. Particularly the nonconformist sect to which two of the key characters in the plot belong has been overlooked. In the present article it is my intention to redress this general *lacuna* by examining in the context of Swiss church history how Keller placed the various *Richtungen*, or directions, in Swiss Protestantism as well as popular Catholicism under the loupe and dismissed them all as inadequate for progressive people of his era. It will be shown that to a critical mind which had already concluded, under the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach, that theism was a product of the imagination, no form of Christianity, including efforts to harmonise certain traditional doctrines with a post-Enlightenment mentality, was cogent.

That Keller should emerge as a radical critic of Christianity as it was represented in both peasant and bourgeois society probably surprised none of his acquaintances. One of his biographers, J.M. Lindsay, recorded that Keller's widowed mother, Elisabeth Scheuchzer, a doctor's daughter from the village of Glattfelden near Zürich, "was sustained by a strong faith in God the Provider, but her religion had no great devotional intensity" (Lindsay, 1968:13). How this maternal piety may have affected her son is unclear. Lindsay also opined that he "was not deeply affected by his confirmation as a member of the Zwinglian church" but that "his mind was not altogether closed to religious impressions". Some of these reportedly came from reading "books of a mystical or pantheistic character", not least those of Johann Richter, popularly known as Jean Paul (Lindsay, 1968:15). In any case, Keller led a dissolute and unstable early life after losing his father at the age of five, being at odds with his mother after she remarried, becoming involved in numerous fights, being expelled from a school in Zürich, and beginning an unsuccessful career as a landscape painter. He studied briefly at the University of Munich but returned to his hometown in 1842, penniless, addicted to alcohol, and without a degree. After a six-year interim in Zürich, he resumed his studies at the University of Heidelberg under the atheist Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), whose *Das Wesen des Christentums* in 1841 deepened Keller's scepticism. In that volume, the influential German philosopher argued that the notion of God was merely a varying projection of various people's ideals, not an objective reality which existed outside the human

mind. Keller agreed and gave up whatever belief he previously had possessed in God, immortality, and other fundamental Christian doctrines. Moreover, during these pivotal years in Heidelberg he again failed to earn a degree, and in 1850 he began a stint in Berlin, living as an impoverished writer before returning anew to Zürich. In the early 1860s Keller finally found professional success as a civil servant and writer, though many more years would pass before he conquered his pugilistic temperament, and he never won his chronic bout with the bottle (Boeschstein, 1969:5-9; Neumann, 1982:17-28).

Some of Keller's early biographers noted that as he approached death he expressed a personal interest in Christianity. For that matter, Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, who visited him shortly before Keller's death in 1890 and wrote a memoiristic piece about him shortly thereafter, reported that the ailing but mentally alert man had broached Biblical and other religious themes. "In our youth the Bible was misused with us, but there are such beautiful things in it," he had declared, "especially in the Acts of the Apostles" (Meyer, 1985: 184). Others have questioned the historical significance of this and pointed out that in any case the anti-religious dimensions of his writing, although they became more moderate as he aged, were for decades primary themes.

At any rate, the contextual exploration of Keller's reactions to the varieties of Christianity he experienced in Switzerland has lagged far behind certain other dimensions of scholarly investigation of this renowned author. Initial steps were taken by Zollinger-Wells more than half a century ago in a study which left fundamental questions about the historical context unanswered (Zollinger-Wells, 1954). Typically, critics have noted his indebtedness to Feuerbach but not proceeded beyond that linkage to an exploration of the ecclesiastical terrain which Keller found unappealing or attempted to understand why he reacted variously to different forms of the Christian faith. Richard Ruppel (1998), to cite one particularly relevant example, perceived in *Das verlorene Lachen* obvious disillusionment with religious life generally. However, despite his emphasis at the outset of his brief analysis on the underlying phenomenon of modernisation and social change, he did not evince a comprehension of the fundamental contours of the nineteenth-century Swiss ecclesiastical terrain, i.e. the significantly varying denominational and theological emphases from which the citizens of the Helvetic Confederation could then choose and through which Keller swashbuckled in this novella (Ruppel, 1988:171-189). Other recent treatments of Keller

have inexplicably failed to mention *Das verlorene Lachen* (Godwin-Jones & Peischl, 1988; Hart, 1989; Hertling, 2003).

Keller's original collection of novellas, *Die Leute von Seldwyla*, was published under this title in 1856. *Das verlorene Lachen* appeared in the expanded edition, which was issued eighteen years later. In the interim Swiss society, including its unfolding constellation of Protestant denominations, had continued to evolve. The foundation of its modern federal system of government which finally brought political stability to the country was laid with the constitution of 1848, which was modified in 1874, when primary schooling was made mandatory in all the cantons. Switzerland was also beginning to enter the Industrial Revolution. A railway network began to appear in 1847, though for many years it was not well integrated. By 1860 there were more than 1 000 kilometres of track, and this doubled in the next decade. The national population inched up from slightly under 2 400 000 in 1850 to approximately 2 670 000 twenty years later. More pronounced was the growth of the urban population. That of Zürich more than trebled during these two decades to some 57 000, allowing it to surpass Geneva as the largest Swiss city. But to a considerable degree the social fabric of rural Switzerland lagged behind, and it maintained a class structure that had changed little for centuries.

2. Divisions in Swiss Christianity

Das verlorene Lachen is not only a scathing indictment of the stratification of rural Swiss society which Keller perceived as antithetical to the democratic trends of the latter half of the nineteenth century but also a sceptical dissection of the theological fissures that ran through the Reformed churches of Switzerland at that time and a presentation of Keller's belief that no form of Christianity as he knew it was satisfactory to the progressive mind. In conditions which varied greatly from one canton to another, pastors and lay members of the Swiss Reformed churches were sharply divided into mutually hostile camps, while Roman Catholicism remained the faith of more than 40 per cent of the population and was especially strong in rural areas. Small, nonconformist religious groups continued to proliferate and challenge the near-monopoly these older confessions had held on public religious life for centuries. Methodist missionaries from the United Kingdom, for example, began to evangelise in Switzerland in 1816, and the country's first Baptist church was gathered in 1847. Non-Protestant religious dissenters further complicated the religious landscape. Emissaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints, or Mormons, undertook proselytism in some of the Swiss cantons from 1850. Keller's formative years and the early part of his literary career, in other words, were in a time of religious foment, both within the Reformed tradition and in Switzerland generally.

The cleavage among the Reformed during Keller's most prolific years of literary creativity was not an entirely new phenomenon. It had been a recurrent theme in the ecclesiastical history of Switzerland for several decades and gained a great deal of public attention in, for example, the successful conservative resistance to the appointment of the radical German theologian David Friedrich Strauss to a professorship in Zürich in 1839 and the unsuccessful efforts to halt the appointment of Eduard Zeller to a similar position in Bern eight years later. But the war of words was becoming more heated and structured when Keller published the augmented edition of *Leute von Seldwyla*, partly because the belligerent parties had recently organised formal associations for the advancement of their positions. The "Freisinnigen", or modernisers, founded their "Kirchlicher Reformverein" in 1866 to promote theological liberalism, reform the confessions and liturgy of the church, and offer alternatives to pietistic modes of spirituality. The conservative reaction came to fruition five years later when the "Evangelischen", also called the "Positiven", constituted their Schweizerischer Evangelisch-kirchlicher Verein", which *inter alia* upheld traditional doctrinal formulations and declared that the Apostles' creed should remain in use as part of the sacrament of baptism. As the eminent Swiss church historian Rudolf Pfister pointed out, both parties were well represented in the cantons of Zürich, Bern, Graubünden, Aargau, Basel, and Geneva (Pfister, 1984:261-267). In some cities, the acrimony, especially that arising from disputes over the calling of pastors and the election of ecclesiastical officials, was so great that some large parishes found it necessary to have two clergymen, one whose ministry was directed primarily at the liberal members and the other at the conservatives in the divided flock. As Pfister observed, on the local level tensions over these matters disaffected large numbers of Swiss Reformed Christians who either withdrew and joined nonconformist churches which had spread to Switzerland or gave up on organised religious life generally. This trend, which was also noticeable in many other European countries, occurred simultaneously with the turning away from ecclesiastical life by many Swiss intellectuals and much of the nation's working class (Pfister, 1984:268).

3. Dismissing antiquarian orthodoxy

In brief, *Das verlorene Lachen* traces the spiritual sojourn of a young Swiss man and, more so, his wife during the third quarter of the nineteenth century as they endure the economic vicissitudes of a society in transformation and encounter manifestations of Christianity in it. Jukundus Meyenthal from the village Seldwyla is a politically active army officer with ecological ideals and appreciable interpersonal relational skills but virtually no conventional religious depth. Justine Glor, the daughter of a prosperous family in the village of Schwanau, grows up in a pietistic milieu of which her grandparents are the principal representatives. But the pastor of the Reformed church to which her family belong is a post-orthodox modernist, and she, together with many parishioners, participates fully in the liberal reform movement on the local level. Many of the other residents of Schwanau, however, have little or nothing to do with the church.

Keller loses little time in dismissing the orthodox position as antiquated and irrelevant to modern man. His principal representative of it is Justine's grandmother, whose confrontation with Jukundus highlights the spiritual cleft separating the old from the new in attitudes towards conventional religion. The narrator describes her as "quite orthodox", and she looks with favour upon Jukundus' reading of the Bible, even though it is merely out of intellectual curiosity, for she is one who is "convinced that reading the Bible was inherently beneficial". Approaching him, she declares her conviction that he "still has a little fear of God" (Keller, 1989: 530). The strength of her own faith is represented as *inter alia* a product of her elderly status, "for at her advanced age she always loved to think about God and eternity" (Keller, 1989:532). Moreover, she fails to comprehend how far removed Jukundus' secular thought is from her own orthodox Christian spirituality. After conversing with him, the elderly lady can assure Justine that her young husband "has a little real fear of God in him; he himself has just confessed it to me!" (Keller, 1989:532).

The redecoration of the village church where Justine worships is itself a criticism of the theology of a bygone era. The structure was already hundreds of years old at the time of the Reformation, and as the narrator explains, for three centuries, i.e. since the parish turned Protestant, its congregation had rejected adornment of it in order to concentrate more fervently on the inward, spiritual imagery of the story of redemption (*Erlösungsgeschichte*). But that vision itself had disappeared, to be replaced by religious art as a superficial sub-

stitute: "Now that this, too, had fallen victim to the throes of time, external decoration had to be used to adorn the tabernacle of the undefined." (Keller, 1989:540.)

Conspicuously absent from Keller's treatment of conservative Christianity is any specific explanation of why he rejected it. One gets the impression that he thought he was writing primarily for like-minded compatriots who shared his conviction that orthodox manifestations of the faith were simply passé, indeed so self-evidently so that elaboration on the matter would have been extraneous.

4. Disillusionment with liberal religion

More detailed is Keller's dissection of the progressive movement in the Reformed churches. The anonymous pastor of the parish in which Justine's family lives is the principal manifestation of this. Indeed, the narrator declares without reserve that "the pastor stood in the foremost line of the fighters for the church to be reformed, the religious congregation of the future". Little of a specific nature is said about his personality; the narrator merely reports that throughout his "young years he had in general been liberal and preached beautifully, so that the flocks whom he shepherded were well edified, even if they were not always certain on what ground they were actually standing". Clearly the modernistic impulses of youth are at work: "Under the protection of secular power and following the example of entrenched leaders, the younger generation had attained a freer view of the pulpit as well as freer movement in life." (Keller, 1989:536-537.) Religious conservatism was in remission, at least below a veneer of liturgical continuity: "The strictly orthodox direction had been imperceptibly pressed aside to a mere defence of its existence, although this was not noticeable in the outward form of the service of worship." (Keller, 1989:537.) No explicit power struggle in that parish is recorded in *Das verlorene Lachen*, and no detailed reasons for the rejection, or at any rate the erosion, of confessional orthodoxy in it are given. Moreover, for some time it remains intact, at least on a subliminal, tacit basis. It was a church where "otherwise, Christ remained Saviour and Lord, and one did not tamper with the unity and personality of the world's order or the immortality of the soul". Outwardly, theology remained "a closed science" unaffected by secular thought, even though sceptics quietly had begun to question the validity of doctrines and question their personal immortality. People whose intellectual constitutions had been shaped by the Enlightenment and rationalists were not res-

pected for attempting, for example, to provide scientific explanations for miracles (Keller, 1989:537).

Yet this comfortable and smug state of affairs had begun to change, partly owing to unidentified discoveries in physics and, no less significantly, “new philosophies, which hung their slogans like old hats on one nail after the other, evil and bold phrases, proliferated, and there was a great compulsion for repeating opinions and expressions.” Some members of the clergy saw no need to become alarmed or change their ways, while others climbed on the bandwagon. “The pastor in Schwanau had placed himself into the latter group, because it was not possible for him to live in a way that was contrary to the spirit and the culture of the times as he understood them.” (Keller, 1989:537-538.) In accordance with his culturally dictated *Weltanschauung*, he rejected theism and absolute divine omnipotence as understood in the Reformed tradition: “The pastor thus taught that one must concede to natural science that a personal ruler of the universe and a theology about that could no longer exist.” The purpose of faith was reduced to filling the believer’s spirit with a sense of the inexplicable. The administration of this sense in a solemn and sacred way was the province of theology, the clergy, and the church (Keller, 1989:538). Where, if anywhere, Jesus Christ was in all this is not mentioned in *Das verlorene Lachen*. One does not even find him cited as the unparalleled moral teacher many Unitarians and other liberal Christians on both sides of the Atlantic proclaimed him to be during the nineteenth century. Keller portrays the modernising direction in the Swiss Reformed churches as essentially a glorification of contemporary culture using historic art to adorn the worship of it.

Having dismissed orthodox Reformed Christianity as archaically irrelevant, Keller reveals the hollowness of the pastor’s post-Protestant cultural religion by narrating parts of a sermon he delivers. In the process, this modernist cleric inadvertently demonstrates the irrelevance of his own religion. Railing against the nominal parishioners who refused to attend his services of worship, he calls such indifferent souls “cold”, “indifferent”, and “arrogant”, a superficial lot who believed they could live without the teachings of the church. The pastor suggests this explanation for the disaffection of such a non-participant: “Because in a century-old struggle we have liberated the church from the armour of dogma, *he* no longer has to believe in anything, to fear anything, nothing more to hope for, nothing which he cannot say better than any clergyman.” (Keller, 1989:542.) This angry minister is apparently blind to his own role in

creating the culturally captive spiritual vacuum which passes as religion.

It is a self-defeating *cul-de-sac*, and before the conclusion of the narrative the pastor has declined to virtual non-existence, a development which is not an unexpected sequel to Keller's presentation of the hollowness of his spirituality. When Justine goes to him for advice and counsel after the collapse of her family's fortune, she finds her clergyman, who has not visited them for a long time, exhausted and impoverished. He acknowledges that his ministry was driven by pecuniary motives. He had discovered that his religious faith was contingent on his material well-being, and that the two had gone down together. "I had to confess that year in and year out, whenever I was alone, I did not feel the slightest need to think about the crucified man whose name my life's vocation bore, and who nurtured men, that my heart and all my mind were focussed on the world and its pleasures ..." (Keller, 1989:569.) This revelation leaves Justine disillusioned and seeking desperately for a form of the faith to which she can cling.

Long before this, indeed when the liberal pastor's ministry is still at least superficially intact and Justine is deeply involved in the life of the parish church, Jukundus distances himself from him. This young Swiss is not an autobiographical figure, but more than any other in *Das verlorene Lachen* he serves as Keller's spokesman. Jukundus is positively depicted as an idealistic, ecologically inclined person with appreciable interpersonal relational skills if very little business acumen. His *Weltanschauung* is secular, and his interest in religion is a matter of curiosity, not personal conviction. In a conversation with Justine's pious grandmother, who asks whether he fears God, he replies, "I believe that as that matter itself is concerned, I have something like a fear of God, in that with regard to fate and life I am not capable of exercising any irreverence." Jukundus adds that "the greatest religious enthusiasts and fanatics usually do not have any fear of God; otherwise they would not live and behave as they actually do" (Keller, 1989:531). He cannot conscientiously share in his wife's ecclesiastical life because, in the words of the narrator, "in his naïve love of truth, it is impossible for him to uphold the appearance of a churchliness which, at least for thinking men, was untrue" (Keller, 1989:545-546).

In a heated exchange, Jukundus confronts the pastor, who has delivered a lecture on the symbiotic relationship of the church and fine arts. The clergyman declares that religion has given birth to art. Jukundus disagrees vehemently: "I do not share your view that

religion has produced art. I believe, actually, that art exists on its own and that it has carried religion along the way and led it a great distance!” (Keller, 1989:547.) This verbal duel reflected a contemporary debate in Switzerland. In 1873 C.W. Kambli, a Reformed minister in Horgen near Zürich who was an outspoken exponent of liberal theology, published a lecture in which he argued that a major purpose of art was to make religious truths visible. Moreover, he declared categorically that “all great misunderstandings [and] all historical errors” stemmed from confusion about the relationship between the religion and art or a failure to appreciate that sensory perceptions must be subordinated to the absolute truths of religion. Kambli added that “writing only has value as an *image*, as a *symbol* of the transcendent absolute, which we simply cannot recognise, and its errors or intentional deviations from reality only do damage, when one ascribes validity to them as material recognition”. He thought it was a sign of cultural decline or stagnation when religious doctrines were interchanged with “sober knowledge” (Kambli, 1873). The fictitious pastor in Schwanau was apparently inspired at least in part by Kambli; the similarity in the words they utter about religion and art is too striking to have been coincidental.

5. The brief encounter with Roman Catholicism

The disillusioned Justine’s quest for an acceptable manifestation of Christianity involves a very brief encounter with the Roman Catholic tradition. This is juxtaposed with signs of the modern world. Sitting by the lake knitting one evening, she notices the steamships on it and working-class men passing by on the road. Eventually a small and “ancient” (*steinalt*) woman stops near her to catch her breath. She is on a pilgrimage, an archetypical Catholic activity to an otherwise unidentified Marian shrine in the mountains several hours away. Her piety, of course, is incompatible with the kind of liberal Protestantism manifested in Keller’s novella, but Justine nevertheless has a friendly conversation with her, asking why, at her age, she has not joined fellow pilgrims in making the journey with either of those icons of nineteenth-century mechanisation, the train and the steamship. In her reply, the elderly woman discloses how closely she adheres to the piety of a bygone era: “Oh, that would not be a credit and not a sacrifice for me, a poor sinner!” The Virgin Mary stands at the centre of her spiritual life: “I walk on my old feet to the most blessed Mary, Mother of God, and then I am with her not only before her holy altar, but she accompanies me on every step and keeps me upright when I am about to drop, just like a good daughter would her weak old mother!” She assures Justine that the Virgin

Mary has great wisdom and is sufficiently powerful to do anything. As if this encomium were not enough to alienate Justine, the pilgrim begins to wrap her rosary around Justine's hands, but Justine returns it, shaking her head without saying a word. All of this Catholicism is simply at odds with her mind-set. She closes the incident after the pilgrim departs into the shadows of the evening by crying, "Catholic!" and shaking her head in disbelief (Keller, 1989:572-573). Obviously her own spiritual journey cannot lead to Rome.

Placing the incident in historical context, it should be borne in mind that *Das verlorene Lachen* was written during the politically and theologically reactionary pontificate of Pius IX and that a liberal counter-current within the Catholic tradition which rejected *inter alia* the doctrine of papal infallibility proclaimed at the First Vatican Council in 1870. Large protest meetings ensued in several Swiss cities the following year, when the Swiss Union of Liberal Catholics (*Schweizerischer Verein Freisinniger Katholiken*) was formed. This was part of an international movement which soon resulted in the formation of the Old Catholic Church when many German, Austrian, and Swiss parishes, including that of Zürich, severed their ties with the Holy See. These developments received extensive coverage in the press in Switzerland, where at the age of thirty-five Eduard Herzog, the first bishop of what was called the Christ Catholic Church (*die Christkatholische Kirche*) was consecrated in 1876 with Bern as his see. In Zürich the new denomination inherited what had been property of the Roman Catholic parish; its members who became Christ Catholics were excommunicated by the older body (Pfister, 1984:306-310).

6. The Fröhlichianer, Neutäufer, or Evangelische Taufgesinnte

In *Das verlorene Lachen* Keller reduces the increasingly pluralistic Swiss denominational matrix by creating two characters to represent the multifarious non-Reformed Protestants. The sympathetically described elderly mother and daughter who belong to a religious group which is purposefully identified only vaguely. Referring to a period decades earlier, the narrator states ambiguously that "around that time poor, nameless preachers appeared who sought adherents among the humble people for some sect and baptised the converts". The doctrines of the new religious body are expressed only in the most general terms which, however, suggest restorationist and millenarian impulses: "They taught the pure, original Christianity as it, in their opinion, could be found in the Bible without erudition, if

only one interpreted each word literally in the German translation which was at their disposal. The primary thing was to lead a new, sanctified life every hour of the day and everywhere; moreover, the faithful should form a firm bond of love and mutual attachment in order to strengthen themselves and be prepared for the great hour of the judgment of the world.” (Keller, 1989:575-576.) In his construction of their untutored lay evangelists, Keller made their intellectual naïveté stand out in bold relief. None of them, he declared, “even knew the theological difference between Peter and Paul, and none of them knew who the Romans actually were, whose soldiers had crucified the Saviour” (Keller, 1989:577).

In his multi-volume biography of Keller, which was published in three volumes in the 1890s, Jakob Baechtold reported that the two members of the sect who appear in *Das verlorene Lachen* were inspired by neighbours of Keller, a family named Marti who belonged to the “Neutäufer” (i.e. re-baptiser) sect (Baechtold, 1894:22-24). That was one of numerous Christian denominations which emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, drawing its members from both the reformed church and anabaptist bodies. Its principal founder was Samuel Heinrich Fröhlich (1803-1857), after whom its adherents were sometimes called the “Fröhlichianer”. As a native of Brugg between Zürich and Basel, he was a popular but critical vicar in the village of Leutwil in the canton of Aargau whom the parish council dismissed in 1830. Soon thereafter Fröhlich was in contact with the British Continental Missionary Society and changed his position from paedobaptism to believers’ baptism. He himself was baptised anew in Geneva in 1832. A few weeks later Fröhlich and 38 followers who had also been rebaptised constituted the “Gemeinschaft der Taufgesinnten” (i.e. Community of the Baptist-minded), a denomination which, despite ecclesiastical and civil opposition, proliferated in parts of Switzerland and among Swiss emigrants overseas but never became a major player on the stage of Swiss church history (Alder, 1976:19-46).

Despite his lampooning of these sectarians, Keller allows that they have nurtured spiritual contentedness and a certain happiness. In her despair, Justine thinks of the mother and daughter who were known for their particular piety and, despite their poverty, evinced great peace of mind. Furthermore, Justine recalls that their pastor and the members of this “foolish and ignorant sect” gave the impression of being like the first generation of New Testament Christians (Keller, 1989:573). Indeed, her respect for them was so great that she had considered converting them to her own church

(Keller, 1989:574). Now, some years later, she decides to find them in their new home near an undisclosed city.

When Justine does so, however, she discovers that they cannot fulfil her own spiritual longings. She confesses to them that she has lost her religious faith and states that in her quest for happiness she hopes they can share the secret of their joy and peace of mind by imparting to her "something new, not yet experienced, and overpowering". Their answer, however, is Christian orthodoxy. In the narratorial voice Keller describes it as "the old, hard and barren story of Original Sin, God's Atonement through the blood of His Son who would soon come to judge the living and the dead, the resurrection of the flesh and the bones, Hell and eternal damnation, and unconditional belief in all these things". Further removing them from the liberal spirit of the times and making their message even less palatable to Justine, the two women "spoke in simple imitation of their preachers, unadorned and without refinement, indeed in an imperative way by demanding belief with every other word they uttered" (Keller, 1989:585). None of this, of course, was exclusively the province of any one sect; it was all common currency in the conservative Swiss Reformed churches. And that dimension of the religious establishment was what Justine had left behind and to which she at no time evinced a desire to return. To Keller, Christian orthodoxy was no longer viable in a world come of age. He apparently thought that it gave some antiquarians peace of mind only because they knew of nothing more intellectually advanced and simply failed to comprehend that in the nineteenth century many progressive thinkers, both Christian and non-Christian, no longer accepted the premises on which those assumed truths were based.

7. Conclusion

As indicated earlier, in both Switzerland and elsewhere the seeds planted during the Enlightenment germinated during the latter half of the nineteenth century and came to fruition in the twentieth century. The theological foment of that era foreshadowed much that Christianity has experienced in recent decades. Not the least of these developments was the alienation of large numbers of people from the churches, especially those which have attempted most fervently to adapt their doctrines to fit the contours of the modern mind. At least in the eyes of their critics, their efforts have tended to backfire; in numerous cases one can find the greatest popular appeal in those churches which have shunned liberal theology and

continued to offer firm anchoring points amid rapid social, intellectual, and cultural change (Kelly, 1972).

That said, it can hardly be ignored that in much of what was once known as “Christendom” secularisation continues apace, and in many quarters the Christian faith has not met the challenges of modernism effectively. There are, to be sure, numerous twentieth-century examples of people who identified themselves as either atheists or agnostics but eventually became apologists for Christianity – C.S. Lewis, Malcolm Muggeridge, and others. Gottfried Keller was certainly not a harbinger of that phenomenon. To him, having been convinced before returning to Switzerland that theism in general was an imaginative construct, a projection of the human mind, no form of Christianity that he encountered had the cogency to change his opinion. All seemed outmoded, arcane, or hollow.

As literary art, *Das verlorene Lachen* is consequently a heavy-handed dismissal of prevailing forms of religious belief and practice in a rapidly modernising society. On the other hand, as a historical document, it reveals much more about the mentality of Gottfried Keller than it does about the ecclesiastical landscape of Switzerland. The denominational and theological mosaic of Swiss Protestantism became increasingly complex during the nineteenth century, and perceptions of religious life there, not least as recorded in imaginative literature, also fragmented. Obviously one cannot gain a comprehensive image of the place of Christianity in Swiss society by viewing it through the lens of any single author, whether sceptics like Keller or, at the other pole of the spectrum, Johanna Spyri, whose renowned *Heidi*, with its explicitly spiritual message of forgiveness and reconciliation inspired by the parable of the prodigal son, was published in two volumes in 1880 and 1881. The quest for a comprehensive, disinterested impression of Christianity in Switzerland during the period under consideration necessitates looking at the country’s evolving religious landscape from multiple perspectives. *Das verlorene Lachen* is an articulate record of how it appeared by one of the most talented and outspoken Swiss *littérateurs* and least dispassionate observers of his generation. If Keller’s criticism was cynical and, given his preconceived notions about God and Christianity, virtually foreordained, in much of its indictment of the hollowness of theological compromising it nevertheless speaks to our own times.

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Key concepts:

Keller, Gottfried
modernist religion
Swiss Protestantism
Switzerland: liberal theology

Kernbegriffe:

Keller, Gottfried
progressiewe godsdienst
Switzerland: liberale teologie
Switserse Protestantisme