

Book Reviews

***Crisis of Doubt - Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* by Timothy Larsen. Published in the United States by Oxford University Press 2006, pp 317, £ 17.50 ISBN 978-0-19-954403-5**

Peter Lepcha is a Lecturer at Salesian College Siliguri Campus, and Co-ordinator of Vocational Training Courses.

The author Timothy Larsen is Carolyn and Fred McManis Professor of Christian Thought, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, USA, and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. The book *Crisis of Doubt* is a well researched book, lucid in reading as well as well argued to state the premise 'the crisis of doubt' against 'the crisis of faith'. Larsen begins with a powerful critique of the "crisis of faith" literature, and some of the misrepresentations that he uncovers are indeed grotesque. As the title suggests this book discusses about the crises of the faith the Victorians underwent and this book has as its dominant theme the discussions on religion in the nineteenth century England. This book no doubt exposes the weakness of Christianity as it was done by new Darwinian thinking which criticized the Biblical conception of the creation of the universe. The present work focuses on the free thinking and secularist leaders who came to the faith and those who left the faith. As skeptics, they had imbibed all the latest ideas that seemed to undermine faith; nevertheless, they went on to experience a crisis of doubt, and then to defend in their writings and lectures the intellectual cogency of Christianity. The Victorian crisis of doubt was surprisingly large. Telling this story serves to restore its true proportion and to reveal the intellectual strength of faith in the nineteenth century.

The book is divided in to 10 Chapters beginning with the one on 'Crisis of Faith' where we read how the nineteenth century faith suffered because of the birth of the new movements and scientific developments in the brave new world followed by eight others delving into the history of prominent nineteenth century individuals who reconverted and ending with the final chapter that makes an in depth assessment of the phenomenon the author tries to highlight. In the second chapter we read about William Hone who was a free thinker and a secularist who comes to reconsider his position on faith and belief. The third chapter deals with yet another secularist lecturer who makes a reversal from his secular thoughts that at one time influenced the free thinking in the century to reassert the claims of faith. Fourth chapter deals with Thomas Cooper who was sentenced for two years for seditious conspiracy where he attacked the 'organised Christianity' and later came to declare his skepticism towards his erstwhile stance from the gaol. In the fifth chapter we read about another skeptic John Henry Gordon who looked at the Bible from a skeptic's point of view because of the German Transcendentalism which further got strengthened under the English

unbelief of the age. In the sixth chapter we read about Joseph Barker who began as a believer, but grew as skeptic but later accepted the possibility of communication with disembodied spirits. Seventh chapter talks about John Bagnall Bebbington who was an atheist and started deriding the preachers but later he himself became a lay evangelist. The eighth chapter reads about John Sexton who besides being a secularist lecturer engaged himself in many other activities as that of a communist, spiritualist, and medical reformer and so on. But later he too turns out to be a reconvert apologist for rest of his life. In the ninth chapter Larsen summarizes about the various secularists who became reconverts and we get to see how nineteenth century England faced this crisis of doubt when we see a huge number of the learned people leaving the mainstream religion and becoming secularists. Finally in the tenth chapter Larsen culminates the crisis of doubt by citing scholarly arguments. He says that there was a crisis of faith in nineteenth century Britain but there was also a crisis of doubt. Perhaps there were crises of doubt.

As we delve in to the finer strands of the thought that the author guides all the readers into, we are made to realize that a succession of free thinking or Secularist leaders in nineteenth-century England reconverted back to Christianity. As skeptics, they had read, meditated and lectured about the secular ideas they upheld. But many of them rejected this skepticism and were reconverted to Christianity because of the intellectual grounding it provided. So the author tries to reveal the intellectual strength of Christianity of the nineteenth-century. We come to realize that the title refers to an antithesis thoroughly running throughout the book: converts to atheism reverting to Christianity, and indeed becoming leading church lights of their day, who help build a fortress for faith even amidst crisis of faith.