

# The Conflict between Faith and Reason in Matthew Arnold and Tennyson

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## ABSTRACT

The Victorian era witnessed profound intellectual and spiritual upheaval as traditional religious convictions were increasingly challenged by scientific discoveries, rationalist thought, and emerging historical criticism. This paper explores how Matthew Arnold and Alfred Lord Tennyson—two central literary voices of the period—engage with the conflict between faith and reason, a defining concern of nineteenth-century England. Through a close reading of seminal works such as Arnold's *Dover Beach* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, alongside their critical writings, this study demonstrates that both poets articulate a pervasive crisis of belief brought about by modern skepticism. While Arnold presents a bleak vision of a world where the "Sea of Faith" has receded and emphasizes the need for culture, morality, and human solidarity as substitutes for lost religious certainty, Tennyson adopts a more hopeful stance, striving to reconcile emotional faith with scientific rationality. Ultimately, this paper argues that despite their differing resolutions, both poets illuminate the Victorian struggle to redefine spiritual meaning in an age of doubt.

**Keywords:** Victorian crisis of faith, Matthew Arnold, Alfred Lord Tennyson, faith and reason, *Dover Beach*, *In Memoriam*, scientific rationalism, religious doubt, Victorian poetry, spiritual meaning, cultural humanism, poetic reconciliation.

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## INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century in England was marked by profound intellectual transformation and cultural anxiety. This was a period in which traditional religious certainties—built over centuries of Christian belief—were increasingly confronted by emerging forces of scientific inquiry, rationalist philosophy, and historical-critical approaches to the Bible. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) questioned the Biblical account of creation and introduced evolutionary theory, which implied a naturalistic explanation for human existence. Similarly, new geological discoveries revealed the immense age of the earth, challenging literal interpretations of scripture.

German higher criticism further destabilized established doctrines by encouraging readers to treat the Bible as a historical document rather than an unquestionable divine authority. These developments collectively produced what scholars often refer to as the Victorian crisis of faith, a widespread feeling of doubt, confusion, and inner conflict. In this environment of intellectual upheaval, poets emerged as some of the most influential voices who could express the emotional, spiritual, and philosophical uncertainties of their age. Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) and Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), two of the most significant Victorian poets, responded powerfully to the tension between faith and reason.

Although their perspectives differ, both grapple with similar questions: Can traditional faith survive in an age dominated by scientific progress? What is the role of spirituality when reason undermines belief? How can individuals find meaning in a world where divine certainty is fading? Matthew Arnold often portrays a world where faith has retreated and modern skepticism dominates. His poetry conveys a deep sense of loss, expressing the emptiness left behind by the erosion of religious conviction. In contrast, Alfred Lord Tennyson acknowledges doubt and scientific challenges but aims for reconciliation.

His works frequently move toward a renewed form of faith—one that coexists with scientific rationality and emotional intuition. This paper examines how both poets negotiate the conflict between faith and reason, drawing on close readings of *Dover Beach*, *In Memoriam*, and their related critical writings. By analyzing their literary strategies, thematic concerns, and philosophical positions, this study highlights the parallels and divergences in their treatment of the Victorian crisis of belief. The broader aim is to show how Arnold and Tennyson offer complementary yet distinct insights into humanity's ongoing struggle to balance spiritual longing with intellectual progress.

## **2. Victorian Crisis of Faith: Historical Context**

The Victorian period in England was characterized by rapid transformation, not only in technological and scientific realms but also in intellectual and spiritual life. Scholars often describe the nineteenth century as an age undergoing a profound “crisis of faith,” in which long-established religious beliefs were challenged by new ways of thinking and knowing. This crisis did not occur suddenly; rather, it evolved gradually as various intellectual, social, and scientific forces reshaped people’s understanding of the world. One of the most significant contributors to this shift was the rise of scientific discoveries that cast doubt on the Biblical creation narrative. The publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 provided a natural, evolutionary explanation for the development of life, directly undermining the idea of divine creation. Advances in geology, by scientists such as Charles Lyell, revealed evidence of a much older Earth than the one described in scripture, further weakening literal interpretations of the Bible. As a result, many Victorians found themselves torn between scientific evidence and religious doctrine. Industrialization also played a crucial role in this crisis. The growth of factories, urbanization, and mechanization altered traditional ways of living and working. While industrial progress brought economic growth, it also led to overcrowded cities, harsh working conditions, and widening class divisions.

These social changes raised moral and ethical concerns, leaving individuals questioning the fairness of society and the presence of divine justice. The sense of alienation and displacement caused by industrial modernity contributed to a growing feeling that the old religious explanations no longer provided adequate answers. At the same time, philosophical rationalism and skepticism gained prominence. Thinkers like Auguste Comte, who introduced positivism, and John Stuart Mill, who emphasized human reason and empirical thinking, promoted intellectual systems that prioritized observation, logic, and scientific inquiry over religious faith. Their ideas encouraged a worldview in which knowledge was derived not from revelation but from rational investigation. Such philosophies emboldened many Victorians to question traditional beliefs, while simultaneously creating a vacuum of spiritual certainty. Additionally, the rise of Biblical criticism, especially from German scholars, transformed how people approached religious texts.

These critics analyzed the Bible as a historical and literary document, examining its origins, authorship, and inconsistencies. This approach challenged the belief that the scriptures were infallible or divinely dictated, creating further tension between faith and reason. As ordinary readers encountered these new interpretations, the authority of religious institutions weakened, and doubt spread among the educated classes. In this atmosphere of intellectual upheaval, poetry emerged as an essential medium for articulating the personal and emotional dimensions of the crisis. Poets like Matthew Arnold and Alfred Lord Tennyson expressed the anguish of spiritual uncertainty, the fear of a universe without divine presence, and the yearning for moral and emotional stability in a changing world. Their works gave voice to the anxieties of their contemporaries and offered alternative frameworks for understanding the relationship between humanity, faith, and reason. Poetry thus served as both a mirror and a refuge—a way of confronting doubt while seeking new forms of spiritual meaning.

## **3. Matthew Arnold: The Melancholy of Lost Faith**

Matthew Arnold stands as one of the most influential voices expressing the spiritual disillusionment of the Victorian era. His poetry captures the emotional landscape of a society struggling to adapt to the decline of traditional religious belief. Arnold does not merely critique the disappearance of faith; he vividly portrays the psychological consequences of living in a world where religious certainty has dissolved. His works often reflect a deep longing for stability, coherence, and moral guidance—elements that once anchored human life through Christianity.

### **3.1 “Dover Beach” and the Retreat of the “Sea of Faith” (Elaborated)**

*Dover Beach* (published in 1867, though written earlier) stands as Arnold’s most powerful poetic expression of the Victorian crisis of faith. The poem begins with a serene and picturesque depiction of the sea, which quickly transforms into a symbol of profound spiritual desolation. Arnold introduces the metaphor of the “Sea of Faith” to represent the historical fullness of Christian belief:

“The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full...  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.”

The imagery evokes a world from which the sustaining tide of faith is steadily receding, leaving humanity exposed and unprotected. This “melancholy” withdrawal signifies the impact of scientific rationalism, industrial change, and philosophical skepticism on Victorian society. Reason, symbolized by the encroaching modern worldview, has eroded the traditional foundations of belief, resulting in a universe that appears fragmented, uncertain, and devoid of divine order. Arnold’s depiction of the modern world as one that “hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light” underscores his conviction that the loss of faith generates a moral and emotional vacuum. The poem thus becomes a lamentation—a mourning for a spiritual unity that has vanished from public and private life.

**3.2 Arnold's Search for Alternatives to Religion** Despite his sorrow over the decline of faith, Arnold does not advocate a return to rigid dogma or traditional orthodoxy. Instead, he proposes thoughtful alternatives that emphasize ethical living and cultural development.

- **Culture as a Substitute for Religion:** In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold argues that culture—defined as the pursuit of human perfection through knowledge, beauty, and moral refinement—can serve as a stabilizing force in an age without religious unity. Culture becomes a guiding principle capable of nurturing moral sensibilities.
- **Human Fellowship and Moral Responsibility:** Arnold believes that compassion, sympathy, and human solidarity can compensate for the loss of divine authority. He urges individuals to find meaning and stability in relationships and collective ethical commitments.
- **Literature as a Source of Spiritual Fulfillment:** For Arnold, great literature can perform the role once held by scripture: to inspire, educate, and morally elevate individuals. Poetry becomes a secular scripture, capable of reconnecting humanity with its deeper emotions and values.

Thus, Arnold embodies a rational skepticism tempered with a desire for ethical permanence. His works reveal a mind deeply committed to reconciling the moral needs of humanity with the realities of modern intellectual thought.

#### **4. Alfred Lord Tennyson: The Struggle Toward Reconciliation**

While Arnold mourns the loss of faith, Alfred Lord Tennyson adopts a more hopeful and reconciliatory approach. His poetry acknowledges the disruptive impact of scientific rationalism, yet he continuously strives to discover a renewed form of faith that can coexist with modern knowledge. Tennyson's work reflects the emotional journey of a man torn between doubt and belief, ultimately seeking harmony rather than surrender.

##### **4.1 In Memoriam: A Journey from Doubt to Faith**

Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850), a long elegiac poem written after the death of his close friend Arthur Hallam, is one of the most significant literary explorations of Victorian religious doubt. The poem spans nearly seventeen years of emotional struggle, during which Tennyson confronts profound existential questions about God, nature, and the purpose of human life.

The poem famously acknowledges the harsh indifference of nature:

"Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed."

This image portrays nature as violent and unforgiving—seemingly incompatible with the idea of a benevolent God. The advances in evolutionary science reinforce this conflict by revealing a natural world driven by competition and survival. Yet, unlike Arnold, Tennyson does not succumb entirely to spiritual despair. Through the long process of grieving, reflection, and emotional transformation, he eventually affirms:

"I trust that God is love."

This statement marks Tennyson's shift toward a renewed, reinterpreted faith. Rather than relying solely on doctrinal certainty, he embraces a form of belief grounded in intuition, personal experience, and emotional resilience. *In Memoriam* thus becomes a spiritual journey—moving from doubt, through struggle, to a hopeful reaffirmation of divine presence.

##### **4.2 Faith and Science in Tennyson's Later Poems**

In later poems such as *The Higher Pantheism* and *Locksley Hall*, Tennyson continues to explore the relationship between scientific progress and spiritual insight. Rather than viewing faith and science as opposing forces, he suggests that they can enhance one another:

- **Faith Can Evolve with Reason:** Tennyson argues that religious belief need not remain static; it can adapt to new scientific knowledge, growing more refined and resilient.
- **Divine Presence Through Nature:** In *The Higher Pantheism*, he suggests that God may be understood not through literal interpretations of scripture but through an intuitive perception of the divine within the natural world.
- **Human Love as Spiritual Revelation:** For Tennyson, love serves as a window into eternal truth. It becomes a form of evidence—emotional rather than empirical—that hints at a benevolent spiritual order underlying existence.

Tennyson's approach is thus conciliatory and integrative. He neither rejects scientific rationalism nor abandons faith. Instead, he advocates a balanced worldview in which reason informs spirituality and spirituality enriches reason.

**5. Comparative Analysis: Arnold vs. Tennyson**

Matthew Arnold and Alfred Lord Tennyson stand as two major poetic voices who reflect the Victorian era’s internal struggles with religious uncertainty and intellectual progress. Although they confront the same cultural dilemma—the tension between faith and reason—their emotional responses, philosophical outlooks, and poetic resolutions differ significantly. A careful comparison of their works reveals deeper nuances in how each poet engages with the crisis of belief.

**5.1 Tone and Emotional Outlook (Elaborated)**

Aspect	Arnold	Tennyson
Tone	Melancholic, pessimistic	Hopeful, reconciliatory
Faith	Declining, difficult	Doubtful but potentially recoverable
Resolution	Humanism + culture	Reaffirmation of a modified, modernized faith

Arnold’s poetry, particularly *Dover Beach*, expresses a tone of sadness and resignation. He laments the retreat of faith and often portrays the world as fragmented, unstable, and devoid of spiritual certainty. For Arnold, the loss of religious belief results in emotional desolation, and this despair permeates his poetic voice. Tennyson, while acknowledging doubt and the destabilizing effects of modern science, adopts a fundamentally different emotional stance. His tone is ultimately hopeful, striving toward reconciliation. In *In Memoriam*, he begins in despair but moves toward a renewed affirmation of faith, suggesting that faith can evolve and strengthen through intellectual struggle. Thus, Tennyson’s emotional outlook is more constructive and encouraging.

**5.2 Relationship Between Faith and Reason (Elaborated)**

- **Arnold’s Perspective:** Arnold views reason—particularly scientific rationalism and modern skepticism—as the primary force responsible for dismantling traditional religious belief. For him, reason exposes the fragility of dogma and erodes the “Sea of Faith” that once unified society. Rather than resisting this intellectual shift, Arnold accepts it as inevitable. His solution is not to revive faith but to seek secular substitutes, especially culture, ethical living, and human solidarity.
- **Tennyson’s Perspective:** Tennyson does not perceive reason as an outright enemy of faith. Instead, he understands scientific inquiry and rational thought as challenges that compel faith to grow deeper and more personal. In *In Memoriam*, reason intensifies his questioning, but emotional intuition and spiritual yearning lead him to a renewed belief in a loving God. Thus, for Tennyson, reason refines and enriches faith rather than destroying it.

Their differing attitudes reflect two broad Victorian responses to modernity: resignation and adaptation.

**5.3 Conception of the Divine**

- **Arnold’s Conception of the Divine:** Arnold gradually moves toward agnostic humanism, where God becomes an absent or unknowable entity. His writings suggest that moral order and meaning must be constructed by humans rather than bestowed by divine authority. The divine, in Arnold’s view, becomes symbolic rather than literal—a cultural ideal rather than a metaphysical truth.
- **Tennyson’s Conception of the Divine:** Tennyson maintains a belief in a compassionate and purposeful divine presence. While he acknowledges that traditional doctrines may be incompatible with scientific discoveries, he believes God can be recognized through forms such as human love, moral striving, and the gradual progress of humanity. His God is more philosophical and universal than dogmatic, embodying love and unity.

Thus, Arnold's divinity is abstracted into ethical ideals, while Tennyson’s divinity remains spiritually intimate and emotionally sustaining.

**6. The Poets as Voices of Their Age**

Matthew Arnold and Alfred Lord Tennyson are not only individual poets but also representative voices of the Victorian struggle with belief, modernity, and identity. Their poetry reflects the central dilemmas of their age, making them significant cultural interpreters.

**Both poets articulate:**

1. **The tension between inherited religious belief and modern intellectual challenges:** As science, rationalism, and historical criticism destabilized traditional Christianity, both Arnold and Tennyson used poetry to explore the resulting inner contradictions.
2. **A deep emotional need for spiritual meaning:** Despite intellectual doubt, neither poet abandoned the human longing for comfort, purpose, and transcendence. Their works highlight the psychological impact of lost certainty.
3. **Attempts to redefine faith under the pressure of rational inquiry:** Their poetry expresses the Victorian desire to reconstruct spiritual understanding in a world increasingly shaped by reason.

**Yet, the solutions they offer diverge:**

- **Arnold:** He advocates for *culture, moral refinement, and human connection* as replacements for diminishing religious authority. Arnold's approach reflects the secularization of Victorian consciousness.
- **Tennyson:** He seeks to preserve faith by adapting it—through emotional insight, philosophical reflection, and acknowledgment of scientific truth. His work reflects the era's hope that modernity and spirituality could coexist.

Together, they represent two distinct yet complementary responses to Victorian doubt: one leaning toward humanistic secularism, the other toward reformed spiritual continuity.

### CONCLUSION

Matthew Arnold and Alfred Lord Tennyson offer profound, enduring insights into the Victorian confrontation between faith and reason. Arnold's poetry captures the melancholic reality of a world where the once-dominant "Sea of Faith" is receding. His vision is one of ethical humanism, where individuals must construct meaning through culture, moral responsibility, and human empathy in the absence of divine certainty. Tennyson, by contrast, presents a narrative of spiritual struggle and renewal. Through works like *In Memoriam*, he confronts scientific skepticism directly but ultimately reaffirms a transformed, modernized faith grounded in love, intuition, and personal experience. His poetry suggests that faith can evolve alongside reason and that spiritual meaning remains attainable even in an age of doubt. Both poets encapsulate the broader Victorian attempt to balance spiritual yearning with intellectual honesty. Their writings continue to resonate in the contemporary world, where similar tensions persist. In an era marked by technological progress, scientific advancement, and ongoing philosophical questioning, Arnold and Tennyson remain vital voices illuminating the timeless human search for meaning, certainty, and belief.

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