

Re-tailoring the Tailor

***Sartor Resartus* and the Subversion of Victorian Religious Authority**

An criticism of *Contesting Culutral Authority* by Frank Turner

Daniel Zhang

April 26, 2026

I: Introduction

Between 1830 and 1880, a group of Victorian intellectuals challenged the Anglican establishment's authority. Known as the Victorian "crisis of faith," church as the leadership was doubted, and subsequently who counted as real intellectual authority, who taught the youth, and who shaped public opinion. For most of the nineteenth century, it had belonged to Anglican clergy. By the 1870s, scientists such as John Tyndall, "regarded themselves as the logical and natural successors to the priest" (Turner 169). And, T.H. Huxley "refer to himself frequently as bishop and to entitle his essays *Lay sermons*" (Turner 170). Scientific naturalists sought to shift cultural authority, arguing science offered better insight into society, politics, and ethics.

In Chapter 5 of *Contesting Cultural Authority*, Frank Turner argues Thomas Carlyle's moral authority lays a foundation to Victorian scientific naturalists. Turner is right about the outcome, but doesn't expand on the form of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. Read alongside Huxley's 1860 letter to Charles Kingsley, and Tyndall's 1874 Belfast Address, scientists' use of Carlyle was a sophisticated act of subversion. Carlyle's form separates inner "Religious Principle" from the outer "Church-Clothes" of theology. Huxley and Tyndall preserved Carlyle's vocabulary of wonder while tweaking it to fit their "inner-scientific" goals¹ Carlyle had attacked.

¹ Frank M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*. Turner notes that Carlyle's relationship to science was highly ambiguous. John Tyndall even claimed that passages in *Sartor Resartus* "anticipated the formation of the law of the conservation of energy" (134–135). Turner, citing Tyndall, *New Fragments*, 386 "Yet, as this paper demonstrates, Carlyle's ultimate intention was not to explain the world through physical laws, but to preserve spiritual wonder—a wonder that Huxley and Tyndall reduced to fit their scientific naturalist framework." (386) Furthermore, Carlyle actively despised the naturalists' evolutionary conclusions; as Turner records, he once scoffed directly at Huxley in the street: "You're Huxley, aren't you; the man that says we are all descended from monkeys" Turner citing Huxley, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, vol. I, 297

II. Carlyle's Form: The Religious Principle and Its Vestures

Sartor Resartus is a hard to read book. It pretends to be the work of an English editor who is trying to make sense of a chaotic mess of papers by fictional German philosopher Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. The “clothes philosophy”² is Teufelsdröckh’s idea that everything humans build, from social customs to religious institutions, is a “clothing” draped over a deeper reality. Carlyle defines theology and religious institution as “Church-Clothes are, in our vocabulary, the Forms, the Vestures, under which men have at various periods embodied and represented for themselves the Religious Principle” (196). Theology is the outer dress, which Carlyle says, has decayed “in our era of the World, those same Church-Clothes have gone sorrowfully out-at-elbows; nay, far worse, many of them have become mere hollow Shapes, or Masks, under which no living Figure or Spirit any longer dwells” (198). Outer theology (church) has gone “sorefully out-at-elbows”, while inner Religious Principle has not. The metaphor enables this separation as the principal survives even as church systems decay.

The way the book is written mirrors this argument. The editor must sift through “miscellaneous masses of Sheets” (Carlyle 71) of his German philosopher’s writings to evolve printed Creation out of a German printed and written Chaos” (73). The reader does the same, strip away the “outside” absurdity to find the message Carlyle is trying to portray “inside”. In some ways readers are practicing the idea Carlyle is highlighting.

² Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*. Carlyle declares “whatsoever sensibly exists, whatsoever represents Spirit to Spirit, is properly a Clothing, a suit of Raiment, put on for a season, and to be laid off” (67). He sees the metaphor of clothing apply to all human constructions, arguing that “Society is founded upon cloth” (46) and that “in this one pregnant subject of CLOTHES, rightly understood, is included all that men have thought, dreamed, done, and been” (67). Carlyle is saying every wordly concept, from government, authority, to language is merely a clothing that bodies forth a deeper, invisible spiritual reality.

Linda Peterson, in *Victorian Autobiography* reads *Sartor Resartus* the same way. Peterson writes “the conscious division of Teufelsdröckh from his Editor” (33), which she believes “embodies the tension between what Roy Pascal has called “truth” versus “design” (33). Furthermore, Peterson sees it as “an experiment in autobiographical form, one that is essentially hermeneutic” (33). Peterson’s perspective shows *Sartor Resartus* as a book about how to interpret oneself after theology has decayed. The model Huxley and Tyndall picked up on, but instead pushed inner religious principal aside and replacing it with personal.

III. Dual Meaning: Huxley’s 1860 Letter

T.H. Huxley was a biologist and anthropologist that had two relationships with *Sartor Resartus*. He used it both as a personal coping resource and strategic professional weapon; as shown in his letter to Charles Kingsley (Anglican minister) dated September 23, 1860.

Three months after the death of Huxley’s young son Noel, Huxley writes “As I stood behind the coffin of my little son the other day, with my mind bent on anything but disputation, the officiating minister read, as a part of his duty, the words, ‘If the dead rise not again, let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.’ I cannot tell you how inexpressibly they shocked me” (237). He is grieving and angry at the orthodox Christian framing at the loss of his child. Huxley closes the letter stating “if ever the occasion arises when I am bound to speak, I will not shame my boy.” (238)

Huxley then names three “agents of my redemption” (237). *Sartor Resartus* is named first. “Sartor Resartus led me to know that a deep sense of religion was compatible with the entire absence of theology.” This is a representation of Carlyle’s church-clothes analogy that

Huxley alters. Huxley has dropped his outer theology (church, the promise for immortality, the framing of death) and replaced Carlyle's inner theology "a deep sense of religion" with science.

Huxley pivots from his private perspective to public later in his letter, writing to Kingsley that men of science are now "his new school of the prophets is the only one that can work miracles, the only one that can constantly appeal to nature for evidence that it is right, and you will comprehend that it is of no use to try to barricade us with shovel hats and aprons." (238) The imagery is not coincidence. This exact phrase comes from *Sartor Resartus*. "The Clergy of the neighborhood, the ordained Watchers and Interpreters of that same holy mystery, listened with un-affected tedium to his consultations... Blind leaders of the blind! For what end were their tithes levied and eaten; for what were their shovel-hats scooped out, and their surplices and cassock-aprons girt on" (Carlyle 192).

In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle's complaint was that the Anglican clergy was hollow and didn't offer real spiritual meaning. Huxley borrows the same imagery of "shovel-hats" to make the opposite argument. He wants the clergy cleared so that empirical science can answer the questions science can address, and what it cannot answer, he doesn't believe in³. As Turner notes in *Contesting Cultural Authority* it's not as straight forward as one may think, "Often within the same lecture or essay the scientific publicists dealt with matter in two ways - in terms of scientific theory and metaphysical philosophy. In the latter regard, they usually backed away from full materialism... Huxley always said that if forced to answer the unanswerable question,

³ T.H. Huxley, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley* Vol. 1 "I neither deny nor affirm the immortality of man. I see no reason for believing in it, but, on the other hand, I have no means of disproving it" (234). Furthermore, on page 260 "I cannot see one shadow or tittle of evidence that the great unknown underlying the phenomena of the universe stands to us in the relation of a Father—loves us and cares for us as Christianity asserts". He goes on to compare his relationship with the universe's governor to his relationship with "the twelve judges" who "will most assuredly hang me"

he would choose idealism over materialism” (147). Huxley wanted empirical science at the head of legitimate cultural authority, making his independent argument with Carlyle’s form that argued for the inner Religious Principle (worship of God) to shine.

IV. Casting Aside Materialism: Tyndall’s Belfast Address

What Huxley wrote privately to Kingsley, John Tyndall shared similar ideas on the largest public stage of his era. His Presidential Address to the British Association for Advancement of Science: Known as the Belfast Address, Tyndall starts by stating "Science demands the radical extirpation of caprice and the absolute reliance upon law in nature," he tells his audience, sweeping "from the field of theory this mob of gods and demons" (2). He pushes the move to its conclusion in the Address's most controversial passage: "By an intellectual necessity I cross the boundary of the experimental evidence, and discern in that Matter which we, in our ignorance of its latent powers, and notwithstanding our professed reverence for its Creator, have hitherto covered with opprobrium, the promise and potency of all terrestrial Life" (Tyndall 55–56). Tyndall preserves “Power at the heart of nature,” citing Spencer he writes “the whole process of evolution is the manifestation of a Power absolutely inscrutable to the intellect of man. As little in our day as in the days of Job can man by searching find this Power out” (57-58). He keeps Carlyle’s wonder and nescience (what can’t be explained by science) but re-anchors it as “the operation of an insoluble mystery that life on earth is evolved, species differentiated, and mind unfolded from their prepotent elements in the immeasurable past. There is, you will observe, no

very rank materialism here” (Tyndall 58). Tyndall does have a natural supernaturalistic view⁴ but he believes the power lies not in Carlyle’s transcendent God and nature.

Yet at the core it goes back Carlyle’s exact form, Tyndall distinguishes “the feeling and it’s forms” (vi) of religion. Carlyle uses the analogy of clothes to separate church and religion. He argues the church were like “old clothes,” due for replacement. While true belief and religion lie within, beneath the “worn fabrics.” Tyndall uses this form to strip outer theology, while confining religion to “noble issues in the region of emotion, which is it’s proper and elevated sphere” (Tyndall 61). He closes the address by stepping past materialism into Carlyle’s idea of wonder stating “casting aside all the restrictions of Materialism, I would affirm this to be a field for the noblest exercise of what... may be called the creative faculties of man” (Tyndall 64).

There is wonder Tyndall preserves, but it isn’t Carlyle’s definition. As Turner writes on page 143 of *Contesting Cultural Authority* referencing *Heroes and hero worship* by Thomas Carlyle “Science has done much for us; but it is a poor science that would hide from us the great deep sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which all science swims

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*. Carlyle explicitly rejects the dead, mechanistic view of the universe by arguing that physical nature is the visible manifestation of divine mystery. He urges his readers to go beyond the illusions of space and time to see the sacredness of the physical world, declaring: “Then sawest thou that this fair Universe, were it in the meanest province thereof, is in very deed the star-domed City of God; that through every star, through every grass-blade, and most through every Living Soul, the glory of a present God still beams. But Nature, which is the Time-vesture of God, and reveals Him to the wise, hides Him from the foolish” (243). For Carlyle, the empirical laws of science only scratch the surface of a “far deeper Law” (235), and true wisdom consists of viewing the entire finite world, the “Time-vesture of God” (244). In *Contesting Cultural Authority*, we see Turner stating “Philosophically and religiously, Carlyle had been an agnostic long before Huxley embraced the term for his own polemical convenience. In fact few later scientific writers stood more convinced than Carlyle of mankind’s inability to discover or to articulate the answers to ultimate questions.” Turner drastically simplifies Carlyle’s view. Although Carlyle doesn’t believe a lot of questions have answers, it’s due to God’s creation of a finite universe that we are in. Not religious agnosticism. Furthermore, Turner introduces Ruth Barton’s *John Tyndall, pantheist: a rereading of the Belfast address* perspective that “Tyndall’s concept of matter and discovered that Tyndall’s matter was very much a metaphysical and almost mystical intellectual construct that held very real pantheistic and transcendental possibilities” (21). This shows he locates that power within nature itself, but nevertheless, not in transcendent God behind it.

as a mere superficial film.” Stripping out God from natural supernaturalism, Tyndall preserves Carlyle’s form and vocabulary while redefining inner theology as only in “the region of emotion,” while defining believing lies in nature, rather the God behind it.

V. Conclusion

Frank Turner is right that Carlyle's moral authority laid the foundation for the Victorian scientific naturalists' displacement of the clergy. What the texts show is that this transmission was not smooth inheritance but a sophisticated act of subversion of Carlyle’s form. Carlyle's Church-Clothes chapter separated the inner Religious Principle from the outer vestures of theology — but in service of more sincere religion, not less. His shovel-hats metaphor targeted clergy who had failed deeper spiritual quest, not clergy who stood in the way of empirical method. His natural supernaturalism preserved wonder by anchoring it in a transcendent God. Both preserved Huxley and Tyndall preserved Carlyle's vocabulary of wonder and humility while reassigning its anchor. Turner identifies the cultural displacement. The texts show it was made possible not only by Carlyle's ideas in the abstract but by the specific design of his most abstract, enigmatic, and philosophical work. A work whose anti-systematic religious vocabulary could be carried further than Carlyle’s perspective.

Works Cited

Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Henry Altemus, 1899.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*. 1831. Project Gutenberg, fulltextarchive.com.

Huxley, Leonard, editor. *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*. Vol. 1, D. Appleton and Company, 1901.

Peterson, Linda H. *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation*. Yale University Press, 1986.

Turner, Frank M. *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Tyndall, John. *Address Delivered Before the British Association Assembled at Belfast: With Additions and a Preface*. Longmans, Green, and Co., 1874.