Charles Dickens does not often figure prominently in discussions of Victorian religious literature. Neither his faith nor his spiritual anxieties, whatever they might have been, have received extended or memorable literary expression. Unlike Tennyson, for example, who wrestled for years with doubts prompted by the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833, Dickens left no In Memoriam to record a spiritual crisis and journey. He was, to the contrary, reticent about his private religious views. In the last extant letter he wrote before his death, while asserting “his veneration for the life and lessons of our Saviour,” he added that “I have never made proclamation of this from the housetops” (1879 Letters 2.515).

Although he did not proclaim his faith from the housetops, however, ample evidence exists from which to sketch an outline of his religion. He was very familiar with the King James Bible, particularly the New Testament (he disapproved of the Old Testament), and his novels abound with biblical echoes and allusions. In 1849 he wrote an abridged, simplified, demystified version of the Gospels for his children, printed long after his death as The Life of Our Lord. He frequently introduced religious rhetoric into his novels, especially to make poignant deaths more edifying. In Dombey and Son, for example, as the repentant prostitute Alice Marwood slides toward death, Harriet Carker reads the Bible to her:

Harriet . . . read the eternal book for all the weary, and the heavy-laden; for all the wretched, fallen, and neglected of this earth – read the blessed history, in which the blind lame palsied beggar, the criminal, the woman stained with shame, the shunned of all our dainty clay, has each a portion, that no human pride, indifference, or sophistry, through all the ages that this world shall last, can take away, or by the thousandth atom of a grain reduce – read the ministry of Him who, through the round of human life, and all its hopes and griefs, from birth to death, from infancy to age, had sweet compassion for, and interest in, its every scene and stage, its every suffering and sorrow. (923; ch. 58)
Although he generally reserved this kind of rhetoric for the public medium of his fiction, on several occasions he testified privately and more directly to his beliefs. In 1847, for instance, he informed a correspondent that “I really do not know what orthodoxy may be, or what it may be supposed to include. . . . But my creed is the creed of Jesus Christ, I believe, and my deepest admiration and respect attend upon his life and teaching, I know” (Pilgrim Letters 5.45).

However straightforward the appearance of this “creed,” the idiosyncratic quality of Dickens’s religion begins to emerge from its very phrasing. What exactly is “the creed of Jesus Christ,” for example? Is it the same as the traditional Christian creeds, or is Dickens bypassing overelaborate “orthodox” professions of faith and claiming for himself and Christ some purer, simpler creed? (Did Christ, for that matter, profess a “creed” about himself?) Dickens’s formulation seems curious, moreover, in its bland, rather banal expression of “deepest admiration and respect” for Christ’s life and teaching, a phrase more suggestive of a retirement dinner testimonial than of strong religious affirmation.

Though he drafted this tepid testimonial on the Feast of the Annunciation, moreover, he was very likely unaware of the occasion, for he was profoundly uninterested in the theology and doctrines of any church, let alone the question of liturgical calendars, feasts, and rituals. In this respect, he was simply ultra-Protestant, with no use for any authoritative system of ritual or belief, and with a high confidence in his own ability to understand the plain (to him) meaning of the Gospels. So far as he had any creed or theology, it was a sort of ethical humanism – liberal, practical, philanthropic, and devoid of mystery, immanence, or sacredness. The supernatural never really touches the ground in Dickens’s theology: “The mystery is not here, but far beyond the sky,” he advised a correspondent in 1850 (Pilgrim Letters 6.26). His belief even in Christ’s divinity as enunciated in trinitarian creeds (the Apostles’ and Nicene, for example) hardly seems to have been intense – during the early 1840s, in fact, he attended Unitarian services. He was hostile to any hint of formally defined theological doctrine or dogma, as distinguished from humanitarian good-feeling, and he detested religious enthusiasm, in particular that of Puritans and Evangelicals. His first novel, The Pickwick Papers (1837), includes an unattractive Evangelical, Mr. Stiggins; more than thirty years later his last (unfinished) novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870), features an even more repellant evangelical, Mr. Honeythunder.

Dickens also detested and feared Roman Catholicism. Barnaby Rudge (1841) is sympathetic with Catholics attacked by mobs during the 1780