

High Church Anglicanism: Practice and Poetry

Elizabeth Ludlow

In the piece above, Timothy Larsen cites from W.J. Conybeare's 1853 *Edinburgh Review* article in which he describes the three stands of the Church of England: High, Low, and Broad. By High, Larsen explains, Conybeare "meant an emphasis on the Catholic nature of the Church" (00). This emphasis on the continuity of pre-Reformation Catholicism in the Anglican Church led to the reinstatement of six practices by the Tractarian or Oxford Movement (the movement which dominated the High Church in the Victorian period). As Emma Mason and Mark Knight explain, these included:

the use of sacraments within the Church; episcopacy, or the governing of the church by bishops; the notion of the Church as a 'body' in which all believers were linked to Christ; the observance of daily prayers and fasting; visible devotion, that is, church decoration; and the promotion of medieval ritual. (91)

The impetus to reinstate these practices and to emphasise the historical continuity of Catholicism was initiated by John Keble's assize sermon on "National Apostasy" in 1833. The Oxford Movement then went through a period of crises in the years leading up to John Henry Newman's secession to Roman Catholicism in 1845 before it matured and was shaped by wider social and cultural currents in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The rationale for the reinstatement of the six practices outlined above was expressed at length in a series of 90 theological pamphlets named *The Tracts for the Times* (1833-1841), written by High Church clergy including Richard Hurrell Froude, John Keble, John Henry Newman, Edward Bouverie Pusey, and Isaac Williams. *The Tracts* advocated for the legitimacy of the Church Catholic and repeatedly looked to the Primitive Church as a model; they took various forms including exegesis, storytelling, conversation and edited selections

from the work of the Church Fathers and the Caroline Divines. A concern with lived experience runs through them as the authors debate fasting, the sacrament of the Eucharist, private prayer, and Bible reading. They came to an end with Newman's controversial examination of the difficulties of the 39 Articles in Tract 90 (an examination that was to lead to his condemnation by fellow Anglicans and his subsequent conversion) but the effects of the Oxford Movement endured throughout the era and are still felt in Anglo-Catholicism today.

As Nicholas Lossky explains, the Tractarians received from the Fathers "a specific sense of the very nature of theology": the main characteristic of which involves a recognition that it is "practical" rather than speculative (77-78). Although scholars of the Oxford Movement have continued to stress the Tractarian emphasis on social outreach as a central and organic element of its development and have explored the way in which the leaders of the Oxford Movement saw the interconnectedness between theory and practice, the longevity of the (largely twentieth-century) perception that the movement was concerned primarily with the theoretical and ornamental and that the "Tractarians forgot the world" has been hard to shift (qtd. Skinner 334). While Simon Skinner has highlighted the significance of the marginalised sources "especially rich in social commentary" including "quarterly journalism and the early Tractarian fiction of the late 1830s and early 1840s" (334), I want to draw attention here to the central place of poetry in disseminating doctrine and articulating the lived experience of High Church Anglicans.

Tractarian poetry reached a far wider audience than the *Tracts for the Times* and, as G.B. Tennyson has argued, was as much "cause and symptom" as it was a "result of the Movement" (8). The significance of John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827), which contains poems reflecting on Sundays and feast days of the liturgical year, cannot be over-estimated. With his *Lyras* (collections of ancient and modern poetry and hymnody), Orby Shipley

responds to what he perceived as the “literary craving” for religious poetry that *The Christian Year* had engendered (iv). Kirstie Blair describes how the first of these Lyras, Newman’s *Lyra Apostolica* (1836), had “set in motion a tradition whereby poetic anthologies were understood as weapons in a religious cause” (214). In what follows, I want to extend Blair’s recognition of how Rossetti’s contribution to several of Shipley’s Lyras reveals her “engagement with controversial issues central to Catholic understandings of form in faith, namely a reverence for the sacraments, expressed primarily through ritualistic structures” (211) through a reading of “The Love of Christ which passeth knowledge”.

“The Love of Christ” was first published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862) and then included in both *Lyra Anglicana* (1864) and *Lyra Messanica* (1864). Through it, Rossetti offers a characteristic contribution to Tractarian doctrine in the way she enacts the dynamics of the liturgy and invites a revisioning of personhood through an imagined encounter with Christ. The poem is written in the second person: the speaker is Christ and the listener is every Christian soul. From the start, an incarnational theology is espoused as Christ stresses the pangs of taking on flesh: “I bore with thee long weary days and nights [...] | For three and thirty years” (1). In the second verse, Christ stresses the daring absoluteness of his embodiment:

Who else had dared for thee what I have dared?
I plunged the depth most deep from bliss above;
I not My flesh, I not My spirit spared:
Give thou Me love for love. (5-8)

In these lines, the expression of divine love in Christ’s taking on of flesh is shown to lead to a reflection on what it means to return that love and to re-configure an understanding of personhood. The response that is called for following a recognition of Christ’s daring “plunge” into the depths of the earth and to his unflinching solidarity to the earth, which include participating in its terrifying rhythms including thirsting in “daily drouth” and

trembling in the “nightly frost” (9, 10), is a recognition of the self as carried, rejoiced over, and loved.

The agony of the crucifixion is expressed in the second half of the poem as Christ calls on the believer to find a “hiding-place” in his wounded body (24). In addition to recalling the ritualism of the Eucharist, the imagery of the Passion that runs through the poem can be associated with the Tractarian concern with the Patristic tradition of typological interpretation whereby the Old Testament is read in the light of the New. In the commentary on the poem that she offers in her concordance, Nilda Jiménez explains how, in the line, “Did thorns for frontlets stamp between Mine eyes” (18), Rossetti associates the crown of thorns placed on Jesus’s head before his crucifixion with the commandment in Deuteronomy 11.18: Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes” (xi). Rossetti’s recurrent use of such conflation points her typological approach to reading the Bible and to enacting and extending the Tractarian theology surrounding the revelation of personhood in the incarnated figure of Christ.

To conclude, I want to point to the final two lines of the poem (“So did I win a Kingdom, - share my crown;/ A harvest, - come and reap.” (27-28)) as indicative of the Victorian High Anglican incarnational vision and the radical commitment to the participation in the divine activity of sharing love with the marginalised and maintaining justice and caring for the created world. This radical commitment involves sharing the place of Christ on the “racking cross” (25) at the heart of the earth.

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