Religious Experience in Modern Poetry

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INTRODUCTION

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy.
Thine has a great hook nose like thine;
Mine has a snub nose like to mine.
Thine is the Friend of all Mankind;
Mine speaks in parables to the blind.
Thine loves the same world that mine hates;
Thy heaven doors are my hell gates.

The Everlasting Gospel
William Blake

Man is a religious animal, a homo religiosus possessing a natural inclination towards the sacred. Mircea Eliade, a phenomenologist of religion, talking about the overwhelming presence of the sacred in the seemingly profane world, says that modern man, even if he proclaims to be non-religious, is nevertheless "nourished and aided" by the activity of his unconscious, which helps him resolve a crisis or restore his threatened psychic equilibrium. The inward process "reintegrates a religious vision of life" which lies deep and can be "eclipsed in the darkness of his unconscious".[1]

Poetry is a perfect medium to express religious experience: the human words interacting with the divine Logos create an intimacy that other forms of art cannot attain. Robert Bridges talked about it in his lecture, *The Necessity of Poetry*:

> As to the relation of Poetry to religion. True Religion, the conviction and habit of a personal communion between the soul and God, is of too unique and jealous a temper to allow of any artistic predominance: and yet we find the best expression of it in Poetry: indeed the poetic expression of the

[1] Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion.* New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963, p. 213.

> spiritual life is of such force that its beauty may hold the mind in slavery to false ideals.[2]

Indeed poetry is not theology, and it cannot function as an illustration of ideals, false or true. Ideals may emerge from poems but the present discussion will not concern doctrinal issues, debates and arguments. The book's aim is to follow the path which leads religious experience into words, by analysing if and how modern poets manage to render the spiritual in verse.

The fragment of *The Everlasting Gospel* was quoted above in order to justify the authors selected for the following discussion. They are modern poets who try to grapple with mysterious realities that give form to human experience by way of either the religious or the mythical; to paraphrase William Blake, some of them possess "hook" and others have "snub" noses.

All poetry is private, and even if the poet hides himself behind a persona, the reader will naturally assume that the speaker's voice is that of the author's. Religious experience is most intimate and difficult to express in words. In the Anglo Saxon *The Dream of the Rood*, the tree that was made into the Cross relates its story from the time it was hewn on the edge of the forest until it received the God-man. Christ is presented as a hero and Crucifixion as an ordeal of strength: Anglo-Saxons would have found it difficult to accept a god who was weak and suffered defeat. The tree speaks and the reader wonders whose religious experience it relates – that of a "new Christian" or an "old pagan" warrior, confused about his faith?

John Donne insisted that religious experience needs the human language to be expressed, claiming that the soul of man is incorporate in his words.[3] And yet Donne's poems were not been published until after his death in 1633, which means that the soul of the poet "incorporate in his words" perhaps sought self-expression rather than sharing its most intimate experience with a wide public. John Donne was born a Catholic, who, after a painful battle of faith, converted to Anglicanism and chronicled his wrestling with God in poetry. In his lifetime those who did not conform to the national church found it difficult to speak their mind, at least in London, which Donne described as "A Purgatorie, such as fear'd hell is", full of vile and grotesque creatures, with faces "as ill / As theirs

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[2] Bridges, Robert. *The Necessity of Poetry: An Address Given to the Tredegar & District Co-Operative Society*, Nov. 22, 1917. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1918, p. 43.

[3] Donne, John. *The Sermons of John Donne.* eds George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957.

which in old hangings whip Christ". Donne's younger brother Henry was arrested and tortured for having a priest say Mass in his room. John Donne lived in a world where it was better to keep religious experience private, as a "soul's expression". William Shakespeare followed a different path. Professor Gerard Kilroy, in his illuminating analysis, demonstrates two allegorically presented responses to the Catholic Church in *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet, inspired by the figure of Beatrice in Dante's *La Vita Nuova,* is both the blessed Virgin and the church, a saint who does not move, a fixed shrine, whereas Romeo represents the pilgrim church, erring. The pilgrim sonnet is a perfect illustration of a suppressed religious experience:

> Every aspect of pilgrimage heightened in those fourteen lines was forbidden, and pilgrimage, an act of faith, belonged to a suppressed Catholic world, a world of tangible shrines and images of saints that were worn smooth with kissing by lips and touching by hands.[4]

In today's reality poets do not fear arrest or torture for expressing religious experience in verse. Nor are they interested in doctrinal orthodoxies, scriptural authority or sectarian arguments. They convey the subjective experience of the divine by retreating to the private scale of the personal or confessional lyric, or choose to cultivate the Bleakean religious imagination in the secular age when, in the words of Charles Taylor, "religion does not vanish but, in losing univocal authority, diffuses itself through society in forms of 'individualized bricolage'".[5]

The monograph offers chapters on authors who treat religious experience both as a theme and as a way of poetic practice. Chapter one is devoted to a postliberal theological discussion of the poetry of R. S. Thomas and John Betjeman. I try to establish a link between theology and spirituality, arguing that religious experience is specific to a particular cultural context.

Chapter two is a close reading of two long poems whose titles and themes relate to a specific liturgy – Geoffrey Hill's *Tenebrae* and T. S. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*. The poets are participants in the rituals which either lead or fail to lead them to a spiritual rebirth.

Chapter three illustrates the mythological awareness of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, the poets who create, or re-create, the myth of the White Goddess, endowing it with, respectively, a British or Irish dimension.

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[4] Kilroy, Gerard. *Lest Faith turn to Despair. The Pilgrim Church in "Romeo and Juliet".* A lecture given at PPWSZ Nowy Targ, May 18th, 2018.

[5] Quoted in Wilson, James Matthew. *Catholicism after Catholicism in Irish Poetry.* breac. A Digital Journal of Irish Studies: University of Notre Dame, (August 14, 2014), p. 3.

Chapter four offers a discussion of two “unbelieving mystics”, D. H. Lawrence and Dylan Thomas, who find the divine manifested in Nature.

Finally, chapter five focuses on the mystical experiences of Gerald Manley Hopkins and Elizabeth Jennings.

The poets read in the course of the present study attempt to discover themselves in the world, which involves establishing their own position in relation to the spiritual and the divine. In doing so they reveal the nature of their own creative process, which renders religious experience in verse.

CHAPTER ONE

FAITH MANIFESTED IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The chapter will present religious experience in the light of postliberal theology, which claims that faith is superior to rational belief and emphasizes the narrative value of scriptures, rituals and traditions of the church. Postliberal theologians, such as George Lindbeck, Hans Wilhelm Frei, Stanley Hauerwas, Ronald T. Michener, and Peter Ochs, state that the Christian doctrine is unintelligible unless embodied in the church and in the religious community; thus faith becomes manifested in language and culture. They claim that religious experience is specific to particular cultural contexts rather than culturally universal or pre-thematic and pre-linguistic.

R. S. Thomas – A Poet Theologian?

It seems that tracing the postliberal theological alignment of a poet who is also a priest should prove to be revealing. My choice has fallen on R. S. Thomas (1913-2000), a country clergyman, a village parson who in the course of forty-two years of ministry in small Welsh rural parishes published sixteen collections of poetry. As such he joined a gallery of outstanding priest poets, for example, John Donne, Henry Vaughan and George Herbert, who, according to William Countryman, made religion survive "by the grace of God communicated through the spirituality of the poets".[1]

It would be interesting to investigate if the verses of Rev. Thomas could be read as a paradigm of a religious doctrine. The poet himself gives a most convincing account of the relationship between poetry and religion, referring to Coleridge's concept of primary and secondary imagination and

[1] Countryman, L. William. *The Poetic Imagination. An Anglican Spiritual Tradition*. New York: Orbis Books, 2000, p. 189.

claiming that poetry and religion are best when unifying powers of imagination:

> What is the common ground between religion and poetry? Is there such? Do definitions help? If I say that religion is the total response of the whole person to reality, but poetry the response of a certain kind of person, I appear to be doing so at the expense of poetry. Perhaps Coleridge can help us here. The nearest we approach to God, he appears to say, is as creative beings. The poetry by echoing the primary imagination, recreates. Through his work he forces those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer the primary imagination themselves, and so, in a way, nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action… Now the power of the imagination is a unifying power, hence the force of metaphor; and the poet is the supreme manipulator of metaphor. This would dispose of him as a minor craftsman, among many. The word needs the unifying power of the imagination. The two things which give it best are poetry and religion.[2]

R. S. Thomas became a deacon in the Anglican Church of Wales in 1936. Between 1936 and 1978, he served in churches located in six different Welsh towns. Although there is a temptation to label him as "a village parson", living in a comfortable cure, pursuing some scholarly or literary interests, perhaps keeping bees or collecting butterflies, in fact R. S. Thomas displayed a very "undomestic" and subversive streak: in a prophetic vein he believed that poetry and priesthood are both vocations of the word, veiled in mystery. He claimed that Christ was a poet and the New Testament was poetry. And he preached the New Testament in its poetic context. Thomas insisted that "the ability to be in hell is a spiritual prerogative"[3] and he turned out to be uncompromising, both as priest and poet. Geoffrey Hill commented

> the real austerities of R. S. Thomas's craft at times corrupted and contaminated by a desire to demonstrate the austere by a desire to grasp austerity as a principle by which to conduct oneself as priest and poet.[4]

For Thomas, being a poet was an extension of his calling, but his religious poetry is poetry, not religion. He does not illustrate ideas in his verse; the opposite is the case: ideas emerge from poems. McElhenney

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[2] Thomas, R. S. Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*. 1963, pp 8-9.
[3] Merchant, W. Moelwyn. *R. S. Thomas.* University of Arkansas Press, 1990, p. 53.
[4] Hill, Geoffrey. *R. S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral* in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R. S. Thomas*. ed. Damian Walford Davies, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003, p. 57.

says that Thomas's poems mirror the bazaar of God, and that in the Bible he finds God talk and God's talk.[5] God communicates with man through images rather than words, and in that way overcomes limitations of speech. In Thomas's poetry God speaks through several characteristic signs: the cross, the rainbow, the hand. Or he can reveal himself to a priest, kneeling:

> Moments of great calm,
> Kneeling before an altar
> Of wood in a stone church
> In summer, waiting for the God
> To speak; the air a staircase
> For silence; the sun's light
> Ringing me, as though I acted
> A great role.
>
> Kneeling

The priest poet hopes to hear God speak in the church building while he is kneeling before the altar. The synesthesia of the sun's light ringing makes the reader think of the summoning of bells, of a stage prepared for a great performance "as though I acted / A great role". It is very quiet with "the air a staircase for silence". The setting is ready for the revelation and appropriate for communication with God: not the poet's private room but in the priest's communal domain; in the church building. The "audiences" and the "close throng of spirits" wait for God's word. The priest asks God to "prompt" him, but realizes that God speaking through a human reduces the significance of the message:

> Prompt me, God;
> But not yet. When I speak,
> Though it be you who speak
> Through me, something is lost.
> The meaning is in the waiting.

Thomas refuses to be friends with God. He cannot conceive of the divine in human terms. W. V. Davis says that *Kneeling* begins an "apocalyptic" period in R. S. Thomas's poetry, his "dark night of the soul".[6] Waiting and kneeling are recurring images. The poet's theology

[5] McElhenney, John G. *A Masterwork of Doubting Belief. R. S. Thomas and His Poetry.* Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013, p. 105.
[6] Davis, William V. *R. S. Thomas. Poetry and Theology*. Baylor University Press, 2007, p. 28.

seems to be that of via negativa. In kneeling and waiting, we do not discover what God is but what he is not; in other words, kneeling and waiting will not culminate in the revelation of the presence of God. Thomas said in *The Echoes Return Slow*: "You have to imagine a waiting that is not impatient because it is timeless". However, it does not mean that you wait in vain. In the words of Ward, "God is creator, God elicits a kind of pleading from mortals which is called prayer and isn't answered but it is not ignored".[7]

The poem *Via Negativa* illustrates that although God's reality is beyond human comprehension and description, man can approach the divine through the senses and intuition:

> Why no! I never thought other than
> That God is that great absence
> In our lives, the empty silence
> Within, the place where we go
> Seeking, not in hope to
> Arrive or find.
>
> *Via Negativa*

God is "great absence", "empty silence", "the darkness between stars". We try to "deduce him" from the signs: echoes, footprints. Like Thomas the Unbeliever, we put hands into his side, hoping to find it warm. And yet it is not possible to conceive of God in human terms:

> We look at people
> And places as though he had looked
> At them, too; but miss the reflection.

The Yale school of postliberal theology, also known as narrative theology, emphasizes "not so much the cultural story (our story) but the biblical story (THE story), where we must allow the biblical world to absorb our world rather than vice versa".[8]

By feeling Christ's wound we feel absorbed by the biblical world. True, literal language cannot describe God, but religious language, the language of the Bible, contains many genres, such as prophecy, law, wisdom narrative, which cannot be reduced to reason.

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[7] Ward, John Powell. *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas*. Wales: Poetry Wales Press Ltd, 2001, p. 191.

[8] Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John Mc Dowell, T. A. Noble. eds *New Dictionary of Theology. Historical & Systematic* (Second Edition), England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016.

An illustration of how the biblical story literally enters our world and sweeps us with the tide can be found in Thomas's *The Coming*:

> And God held in his hand
> A small globe. Look, he said.
> The son looked. Far off,
> As through water, he saw
> A scorched land of fierce
> Colour. The light burned
> There; crusted buildings
> Cast their shadows; a bright
> Serpent, a river
> Uncoiled itself, radiant
> With slime.

Christ, the son of God, looks at the world onto which he shall come as the Saviour. It is interesting that R. S. Thomas uses images of light in a negative sense. Normally, via analogia, light signifies revelation and illumination. In the poem, the light, along with a bright serpent and a river radiant with slime, indicates a false epiphany; one immediately thinks "fair is foul, foul is fair". The world badly needs spiritual rebirth and moral regeneration:

> Many people
> Held out their thin arms
> To it, as though waiting
> For a vanished April
> To return to its crossed
> Boughs.
>
> *The Coming*

People hold out their arms to "a bare tree that saddens the sky", which signifies the Cross and Crucifixion. The world of people and the world of God are separate until the Son decides: "Let me go there", and thus the biblical world absorbs our world. According to postliberal thinkers, the biblical truth is the capacity of the text to draw readers into a Christian framework of meaning: "God grants us true belief in order to give us a share in God's life […]. In the movement of God's Word in preaching and sacrament, God brings about a correspondence of our whole life to God's self. The outwardly moving, self-relating divine ground of truth serves

God's purpose of making us bearers of Christ's image by bringing us to true beliefs about God's Triune self".[9]

Hauerwas calls it "not making the gospel credible to the modern world but making the world credible to the gospel". The world will find its place in the Gospel of God, as it does in *The Coming*. God can always choose, or find man, if He pleases, but for man it is not possible to touch God. The poem *Threshold* begins:

> I emerge from the mind's
> cave into the worse darkness
> outside, where things pass and
> the Lord is in none of them.

The darkness and dark nights imply mystical experience but the darkness outside is worse, and there is no sign of God. Where to go next? The poet is trying to balance on the threshold but eventually decides to reach his hand towards heaven in the hope that God will stretch his arm in his direction:

> What
> to do but, like Michelangelo's
> Adam, put my hand
> out into unknown space,
> hoping for the reciprocating touch?

The allusion is to the famous painting by Michelangelo, *Creation of Adam*, where God stretches his arm and Adam tries to touch God's fingers but there is a gap between them, which symbolically can be read as a lack of communication, or a separation, a distance which makes it impossible for the human and the divine to meet and shake hands: the story of the Bible is not our story which we can interpret as we please. I do not know what and if R. S. Thomas thought about postliberal theology. However, it is clear that according to him, spiritual experience can be conveyed through the medium of a powerful symbolic language. He elucidates

> The need for revelation at all suggests an ultimate reality beyond human attainment, the *mysterium tremendum et fuscinans*. And here, surely, is common ground between religion and poetry. But there is the question of the mystic. To him the *Deus absconditus* is immediate; to the poet He is mediated. The mystic fails to mediate God adequately insofar as he is not a

[9] Dorrien, Gary. *The Future of Postliberal Theology*. The Christian Century Foundation, (July 18-25, 2001), pp 22-29.

> poet. The poet, with possibly less immediacy of apprehension, shows his spiritual concern and his spiritual nature through the medium of language, the supreme symbol.[10]

As Sam Perry observed, "The paradoxical situation of writing poems about the limitations of language would be easy to despair".[11] R. S. Thomas tried to render his mistrust of language through applying Derridean deconstruction to his poems, where, according to the words of Ben Astley, "Thomas undermines what we believe the poem must be about". The play of words corresponds with the enigmatic message of God, who speaks through disconnected signs.

> This is why Thomas gives us contrary interpretations to consider. He exposes the conflict within the nature of all language […] With no possibility of articulating God in a logically consistent way, Thomas is attempting to show how the illogical and the impossible can be expressed through a metaphoric or figurative language that is aware of the fundamental instability of all discourses.[12]

The language of a poet fails to render God. In *The Combat*, the concluding lines read

> We die, we die
> with the knowledge that your resistance
> is endless at the frontier of the great poem.

The poet tries to articulate what is beyond words, to transcend the limitations of language, and to render in words God's silence. Perhaps "innocent marches of vocabulary" are inadequate, and that is why the poet has to resort to Derridean games of words.

> But who you are
> does not appear, nor why
> on the innocent marches
> of vocabulary you should choose
> to engage us, belabouring us
> with your silence.

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[10] In R. S. Thomas, *Selected Prose*. ed. Sandra Anstey, with an introduction by Ned Thomas. Bridgend Poetry Wales Press, 1999, p. 49.
[11] Perry, Sam. *Hoping for Reciprocal Touch: Intimations of the Manus Dei in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas*. Literature & Theology, Vol. 21, No 2, (June 2007), p. 179.
[12] Astley, Ben. *Somewhere Between Faith and Doubt*: *R. S. Thomas and the Poetry of Theology Deconstructed*. Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays, Vol. 4, 1998, pp 74-93.

God does not speak; he "belabours" poets and makes them engaged with his silence. But God's resistance "is endless at the frontier of the great poem", which allows for multiple interpretations: either the great poem will never be created or God's resistance will constitute its foundation. Finally, the poet openly admits

> For the failure of language
> There is no redress.

But God speaks, "in / ways we have yet to recognize / as speech".[13] He reveals himself to man in his creation. In the poem *Alive*, we read

> Many creatures reflect you, the flowers
> your colour, the tides the precision of your
> calculations. There is nothing too ample,
> for you to overflow, nothing so small that your
> workmanship is not revealed. I listen
> and it is you speaking.

The poet tries to speak in the same manner; while distrusting the language as an adequate signifier of meaning, he employs symbols to mediate a sense of the divine. In the vein of postliberal theology, a biblical narrative can draw believers in a Christian framework of meaning, "giving them a share in God's life".[14]

Thomas does that in *Emerging*.

> I begin to recognize
> you anew, God of form and number.
> There are questions we are the solution
> to, others whose echoes we must expand
> to contain. Circular as our way
> is, it leads not back to the snake-haunted
> garden, but onward to the tall city
> of glass that is the laboratory of the spirit.

The laboratory of the spirit can produce the essence of God, whose ingredients are derived from "questions we are the solution to" and others "whose echoes we must expand to contain". God is omnipresent in his creation, the biblical narrative of the "snake-haunted garden" absorbs us but does not lead us back; our world is made credible to the Gospel in the

[13] Thomas, R. S. *Nuclear*. Collected Poems, 1977, p. 317.
[14] Dorrien, op. cit.

tall city of glass and pushes us onward into the future of our lives. Our ability to recognize and hear "God of form and number" depends on our will "to expand" and "to contain": in other words, we have to be receptive to the message of God that can be concocted in the laboratory of the spirit. For Thomas, being a poet was an extension of his calling. As a priest he tried to find a language that could bring his parishioners closer to God.

R. S. Thomas wrote about his private combat with Deus Absconditus and lamented the inadequacy of poetry to render the divine. He also gave an account of his struggle as a village parson to find God in his religious community, striving from the communal to the universal. The task was not easy.

> There was a church and one man
> served it, and few worshipped
> there in the raw light on the hill
> in winter, moving among the stones
> fallen about them like the ruins
> of a culture they were too weak
> to replace, too poor themselves
> to do anything but wait
> for the ending of a life
> they had not asked for.

The poem *Poste Restante* presents a church and a congregation where few worshipped. The imagery is suggestive of decay: "fallen", "ruins", "too weak" denote stagnation and inaction. The priest seems to well belong with the setting.

> The priest would come
> and pull on the hoarse bell nobody
> heard, and enter that place
> of darkness, sour with the mould
> of the years. And the spider would run
> from the chalice, and the wine lie
> there for a time, cold and unwanted
> by all but he, while the candles
> guttered as the wind picked
> at the roof.

Nobody heard the bell, nobody wanted the wine. Again, the diction marks decay and use: "sour", "mould", "spider", "cold", "unwanted". There is no bond, no rapport between the priest and his congregation. But the "bare meal", the wine from the chalice, made the priest see "his face",

the face of God, staring at him from the stained glass window, "cracked glass", "with the lips moving like those of an inhabitant of a world beyond this". The poem's title is *Poste Restante*, a letter with no address but which has an addressee; "you, friend", and begins with

> I want you to know how it was,
> whether the Cross grinds into dust
> under men's wheels or shines brightly
> as a monument to a new era.

After the addressee has read the story of a bleak church and the alienated priest who saw God's face with the lips moving, he will treat the poet's final question as purely rhetorical – of course, the Cross shone brightly, the church "sank to its knees", and the world regained its natural trajectory, "the earth turned from season to season" like the wheel of a great foundry. The priest marked the date of his revelation in the book, and the Cross did not grind into dust "under wheels". As in all Thomas's poems, signs lead man to God.

R. S. Thomas spoke honestly about his ministry in *Echoes.*

> I was vicar of large things in a small parish. Small-minded I will not say, there were depths in some of them I shrank back from, wells that the word "God" fell into and died away, and for all I know is still falling. Who goes for water he must prepare for a long wait. Their eyes looked at me and were the remains of flowers on an old grave. I was there, I felt, to blow on ashes that were too long cold. Often, when I thought they were about to unbar to me, the draught out of their empty places came whistling so that I wrapped myself in the heavier clothing of my calling, speaking of light and love in the thickening shadows of their kitchens.

Thomas was aware of the drudgery of his service and, quite good-humoredly, with a touch of sarcasm, described his congregation as deep wells that take a lot of time and effort before they give water. His mission was to blow on the cold ashes of their faith; cold from the draught whistling "out of their empty places", he continued to speak of light and love. And he spoke in the postliberal "religious-contextual" manner, through metaphors whose content has been enriched by a previous prototypical employment. Their application causes the object to which they are applied to be seen in multiply-reflected light: they are traditional or canonical metaphors, and as such they bear the content of faith itself.[15]

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[15] McClendon, James Wm. *Bibliography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002, p. 89.

In the poetry of R. S. Thomas, the holy cannot be accessed through a dialogue, encounter or confrontation of "wrestling in the dark". In the words of Charles Williams, "Good poetry does something more than allude to its subject, it is related to it, and it relates us to it".[16] Thomas related readers to the divine by echoing in his verse the primary imagination of God.

John Betjeman and Aesthetics of the Spirit

Given that post-liberals accentuate a communal enterprise of the church, the poetry of John Betjeman (1906-1984) can be seen as a perfect literary parallel to the theological tenet. Betjeman is a poet whose religiosity begins in the cultural and social sphere, in a church as a building and the Church as an institution and a community. John Betjeman was one of England's best-loved Poet Laureates (1972-1984), second only to Tennyson in his popularity, an expert in church architecture, furnishing and monumental sculpture. Betjeman the Laureate was a spokesman for the nation; he saw the Church of England as a framework for national spirituality. He wrote numerous poems on ecclesiastical and religious themes. A lifelong Anglican, in his verse he reflects a perpetual struggle of faith and doubt but also openly comments on the social and spiritual failure of the Church; the vanity of her clergy and parishioners who abuse the Anglican creed, which constitutes the foundations of Englishness. Betjeman as architectural critic defends England's heritage manifested in city churches, gas lamps, Victorian railway stations, and the Metroland. Likewise, as Poet Laureate, he defends the Church of England, though is far from being her unabashed apologist. Religious experience for Betjeman is made possible through ritual narratives and practices of worship and rites.

Faith comes next; spiritual awakening is prompted by a specific "culturally linguistic" or "religious-contextual" experience, as defined by George Lindbeck and clarified by Jennifer A. Herdt.

> The statement that "readability comes from good performance, not adherence to independently formulated criteria" can sound a bit like a crude pragmatism but read in context, it is simply a denial of access to an external authority, along with an affirmation that religious claims are

[16] Williams, Charles. *The English Poetic Mind*. Wordsworth Collection, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011, p. 3.

> nevertheless subject to confirmation and disconfirmation as the lives that embody them bump against reality.[17]

In the context of chosen poems by John Betjeman, I will try to illustrate how the Poet Laureate "bumped against reality".

That for Betjeman a building of the church comes as a path to faith we can see in his early poem *N. W. 5 & N. 6*., where he writes about his visits to church as a young boy in the company of his Calvinistic nurse, whose religious sensibility was that of hell and sinners burning in flames. The fear that the young boy felt stayed with him throughout his adult life.

N. W. 5 & N. 6 are the postal codes of the north London suburb where Betjeman spent his early childhood and the St Ann Brookfield Church, where he was baptized, whose building he describes as "sad" in the poem. Before he gets to the church, the poet recalls memories of his childhood days, and, typically, his recollections concern sensual experience rather than cause and effect sequences of events: the colour of "red cliffs" and "lily-like electric lights", the smell of Irish stew and "the smell of prams", the sound of "roar of seas" and "roar of London trams". In a similar vein, he remembers visits to church and hearing "world without end", a phrase from the *Gloria patri* that follows the psalm and canticles in the Anglican service of Morning and Evening Prayer, which made him think of the unrelenting wrath of God. Calvinism, with its doctrine of total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints, and re-reading the Bible in an austere prayer house, was represented by Betjeman's "cheap nursey-maid, sadist and puritan", who claimed to have been predestined to the flames of hell.

> And if I do die, will I go to Heaven?
> "You will. I won't.
> World without end – do it still".

It is characteristic that the poet's childhood memories of the church do not include any details: the building of St Ann is "sad", there is no prompt, no painting, altar, crucifix, no beautiful detail of the furnishing that could elevate the boy towards the love of God. Instead there is only "sphere succeeding sphere into eternity and God's dread will". The closing line is a confession of terror and fear of the wrath of God, which never left the poet. In his *Calvinist Evensong*, the poet recalls eavesdropping on

[17] Herdt, Jennifer A. *Putting on Virtue. The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 388.

Evensong in an Anglican parish by a Calvinist preacher and his congregation of six women.

> For Calvin now the soft oil lamps are lit
> Hands on their hymnals six old women sit.
> Black gowned and sinister, he now appears
> Curate-in-charge of aged parish fears.
> Let, unaccompanied, that psalm begin
> Which deals most harshly with the fruits of sin!
> Boy! pump the organ! let the anthem flow
> With promise for the chosen saints below!
> Pregnant with warning the globed elm trees wait
> Fresh coffin-wood beside the churchyard gate.

The poet eavesdropping "in the dark" is terrified. The religious practice of Calvinists does not lead him to God and hope of redemption. The women are "black gowned and sinister", in the anthem they sing he reads the message of "fruits of sin". The images are suggestive of death and decay, even elm trees are "pregnant with warning" and recall "fresh coffin wood beside the churchyard gate". Such rituals lead the congregation to God, but their God is like their religious practice, gloomy and terrifying.

A similar experience is recalled by the poet as he was passing through Matlock Bath, the eponymous Derbyshire town, and heard a hymn sung by a Nonconformist congregation. The act of singing hymns is more than a choral performance. Hymns foster the community and bring the singers closer to God.

Betjeman visited Matlock Bath at the time of his liaison with Lady Elizabeth Cavendish, whose brother owned nearby Chatsworth House. The town is a tourist resort, made famous, among others, by accounts of Byron and Ruskin. Betjeman does not extol the beauty of the landscape but focuses on a Sunday School run by one of the Methodist churches. Many biblical images and references – "Bethesda's limpid pool", Siloam's "shady rill" – make the poet feel a sense of doom; he has a vision of "houses folding", of the towering cliffs of the Heights of Abraham crushing down and sweeping the town away in a "thermal steam". The hymn sung in the Sunday school, *Pilgrims of the Night,* is about death and damnation.

> And from the whiteness, grey uprearing,
> Huge cliffs hang sunless ere they fall,
> A tossed and stony ocean nearing
> The moment to o'erwhelm us all
> Eternal Father, strong to save,

How long wilt thou suspend the wave?

How long before the pleasant acres
Of intersecting Lovers' Walks
Are rolled across by limestone breakers,
Whole woodlands snapp'd like cabbage stalks?
O God, our help in ages past,
How long will Speedwell Cavern last?

In this dark dale I hear the thunder
Of houses folding with the shocks,
The Grand Pavilion buckling under
The weight of the Romantic Rocks,
The hardest Blue John ash-trays seem
To melt away in thermal steam.

Like the *Calvinist Evensong* in the Calvinist service, the hymn frightens the poet, who imagines the strict austere "Nonconformist setting" of the children's life: "shivering", waiting their doom of "the father's whip", in their "attic bedrooms shriek with fright".

Deep in their Nonconformist setting
The shivering children wait their doom–
The father's whip, the mother's petting
In many a coffee-coloured room;
And attic bedrooms shriek with fright,
For dread of Pilgrims of the Night.

The rock and the water do not convey the Christian symbols of the church or regeneration. Appalled by his vision of the Sunday School children singing "Pilgrims of the Night", the poet shivers with a sense of doom.

Perhaps it's this that makes me shiver
As I ascend the slippery path
High, high above the sliding river
And terraces of Matlock Bath;
A sense of doom, a dread to see
The Rock of Ages cleft for me.

An Eighteenth-Century Calvinistic Hymn is Betjeman's most sincere and, at the same time, the most appalling account of Calvinism. Characteristically, his suffering is both physical and mental. He describes

his afflictions – vomiting, bleeding, leprosy and torment of the soul – thanking God for whichever calamity he sends.

> Thank God my Afflictions are such
> That I cannot lie down on my Bed,
> And if I but take to my Couch
> I incessantly Vomit and Bleed.

His guilt is that of enjoying worldly pleasures – "Dancing, Backgammon and Cards" – and his punishment is damnation in "Hell's ne'er-ending flames". There is an ironic and satirical streak in the poem; Betjeman mocks the Calvinist tendency toward a masochist spirituality.

The poet's perception of the Church as a building changed when he began to visit churches on his own, as a student at the Dragon School in Oxford, thus initiating his lifelong habit of church crawling. "Crawling" through the churches of London and hundreds of parish churches, which he detailed in his *Shell Guides* to the counties of England, eventually consolidated into his mammoth 1958 *Guide to English Parish Churches*.

Betjeman had known Holy Trinity church in Sloane Street since his Chelsea boyhood. He wrote a poem about it before his thirtieth birthday, and in the 1970s led a Victorian Society campaign to save Holy Trinity from demolition. The church was designed between 1889 and 1891 by the art-architect, John Dando Sedding (1838-1891), who said that "it is well for a man to have a circle of religious exercises that can so hedge him about, so get behind his life and wind themselves by long familiarity into his character that they become part of his everyday existence".[18] Sedding believed that architecture is a divinely inspired art. When visiting Holy Trinity, Betjeman must have felt the same. Religious experience is accessed through the ritual; an acolyte singing, lighting six white tapers, the fragrance of incense and lily flowers, the warm censer round the poet's bruised heart makes him feel grateful to the acolyte as he turns to God, asking to send "penitential showers" on "this pale acolyte".

> *An Acolyte singeth*
> Light six white tapers with the Flame of Art,
> Send incense wreathing to the lily flowers,
> And, with your cool hands white,
> Swing the warm censer round my bruised heart,
> Drop, dove-grey eyes, your penitential showers
> On this pale acolyte.

[18] Homan, Roger. *The Art of the Sublime: Principles of Christian Art & Architecture*. Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006, p. 129.

The poet reveals many details about the church's interior. It is not just any church building but specifically Holy Trinity, Sloane Street: "the tall red house", the doors with sardonyx and gold, the windows overlooking Cadogan Square. The poet refers to the paintings by James McNeill Whistler, "The Battersea Dawn (Cadogan Pier)" and also his most famous "Arrangement in Grey and Black. Portrait of the Poet's Mother", which gives the poem a sense of familiarity as the speaker's heart is turned "Motherward". Quoting after Philip Larkin, we can say that "the eye leads the spirit",[19] and through the familiar circle of religious exercises comes the revelation: "Behold! Behold! your King!"

It would be difficult to define Anglicanism as a doctrine. Countryman claims that "the uniqueness of Anglicanism is that it has no uniqueness".[20] In other words, Anglicanism is a hybrid of attitudes rather than a set of dogmas. For the sake of the following analysis, I have selected some of the most important Anglican tenets. The first is the insistence on community: originating from the superior position of a national church, Anglicanism represents a framework for Englishness; Anglican cultural significance surpasses its religious dimension.[21]

The cultural, communal and social dimensions imply finding succour in values shared by other believers, expressed in religious practices that stem from tradition and history. Another characteristic attitude of Anglicanism is an acceptance of mystery, which means being ready to be satisfied with no answer in the belief that the human brain cannot always access the Absolute, which Neill defines as "a conviction that truth is larger and more beautiful than our imperfect minds are able to comprehend or to conceive".[22]

Anglicanism relies on a dialectic of presence and absence, the alternating faith and doubt in the search of God, in which Countryman sees a unifying principle of spirituality of the Church of England.[23]

Deus Absconditus, a hiding God, is a recurring theme of Anglican priest poets, which reflects the apophatic conception of the divine. Anglicanism emphasizes the incarnation as the central doctrine of Christianity; if God became man, man can reach the divine; he can meet God in his life in the reality that surrounds him.

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[19] Larkin, Philip. *Required Writing*. London: Faber, 1983, p. 207.
[20] Countryman., op. cit., p. 192.
[21] Wolf, William J. *The Spirit of Anglicanism*. Wilton (CT): Morehouse-Barlow, 1979, p. 158.
[22] Neill, Stephen. *Anglicanism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958, p. 422.
[23] Countryman, op. cit., p. 5.

John Betjeman became utterly devoted to Anglicanism, which he understood in aesthetic and sacramental terms. His faith was accessed through the religious traditions, rituals and practices of Anglicanism, which constructed his religious experience and made it possible. The poetry of Betjeman is the poetry of doubt. In the words of Harvey: "His poetry of doubt rests on a foundation of Christian faith and draws its restless energy from the perpetual tension between these two poles of experience".[24]

In the poem *Longing*, the poet, listening to the Easter bells, doubts his faith:

> Oh! ordered metal clatter-clang!
> Is yours the song the angels sang?
> You fill my heart with joy and grief—
> Belief! Belief! And unbelief…
> And, though you tell me I shall die,
> You say not how or when or why.

Betjeman's faith is in a state of constant flux between spiritual assurance and doubt, which consolidates his belief.

This belief was put to the test when confronted with the painful reality of the crematorium, where "little puffs of smoke without a sound / show what we loved dissolving in the skies". The final couplet of *Aldershot Crematorium* is a very honest confession.

> '*I am the Resurrection and the Life*':
> Strong, deep and painful, doubt inserts the knife.

John Betjeman's poetry is a celebration of England through the celebration of her established Church. But the Church is not only the doctrine, it is also the community. Betjeman's love of church architecture brings him closer to God, and the community of believers sharing his faith, not only at present but across the centuries, consolidates his sense of belonging. The poem *Sunday Afternoon Service in St. Enodoc Church, Cornwall* is set in Trebetherick, in the churchyard of which John Betjeman's father and John Betjeman himself lie buried. The church is situated in the sand dunes on the River Camel estuary, and, supposedly, lies on the site of a cave where Enodoc lived as a hermit. The setting is

[24] Harvey, G. M. *Poetry of Commitment: John Betjeman's Later Writing.* Dalhousie Review, 1976, pp 112-114.

familiar, the tinned tenor of the bells is urging the congregation: it is time for the Sunday afternoon service, five to three:

> Come on! Come on! And it is five to three.
>
> Paths, unfamiliar to golfers' brogues,
> Cross the eleventh fairway broadside on
> And leave the fourteenth tee for thirteenth green,
> Ignoring Royal and Ancient, bound for God.
> Come on! Come on! No longer bare of foot,
> The sole grows hot in London shoes again.
> Jack Lambourne in his Sunday navy-blue
> Wears tie and collar, all from Selfridge's!
> There's Enid with a silly parasol,
> And Graham in gray flannel with a crease
> Across the middle of his coat which lay
> Pressed 'neath the box of his Meccano set,
> Sunday to Sunday.
>
> Still Come on! Come on!
>
> The tinny tenor. Hover-flies remain
> More than a moment on a ragwort bunch,
> And people's passing shadows don't disturb

The poet knows the congregation and he recalls the Sunday look of the villas:

> The Ransom mower's locked into the shed.
> 'I have a splitting headache from the sun',
> And bedroom windows flutter cheerful chintz
> Where, double-aspirined, a mother sleeps;
> While father in the loggia reads a book
> Large desultory, birthday-present size,
> Published with coloured plates by Country Life,
> A Bernard Darwin on the English Links
> Or Braid and Taylor on The Mashie Shot.
> Come on! Come on! he thinks of Monday's round -
> Come on! Come on! - that interlocking grip!
> Come on! Come on! he drops into a doze -
> Come on! Come on! more far and far away
> The children climb a final stile to church;
> Electoral roll still flapping in the porch -
> Then the cool silence of St Enodoc.

He remembers the minutest details of the interior:

> My eyes, recovering in the sudden shade,
> Discern the long-known little things within –
> A map of France in damp above my pew,
> Grey-blue of granite in the small arcade
> Late Perp: and not a Parker specimen
> But roughly hewn on windy Bodmin Moor,
> The modest windows palely glazed with green,
> The smooth slate floor, the rounded wooden roof,
> The Norman arch, the cable-moulded font –
>
> All have a humble and West Country look.
> Oh "drastic restoration" of the guide!
> Oh three-light window by a Plymouth firm!
> Absurd, truncated screen! oh sticky pews!
> Embroidered altar-cloth! untended lamps!
> So soaked in worship you are loved too well
> For that dispassionate and critic stare
> That I would use beyond the parish bounds
> Biking in high-banked lanes from tower to tower
> On sunny, antiquarian afternoons.

The service is about to begin, Tom Blake “stalks over from the bell-rope to his pew”, “Miss Rhoda Poulden pulls the tremolo, the oboe, flute and vox humana stops;” the weary clergyman begins “Dearly beloved... ”. Nothing unusual, but the thoughts of the poet “loom enormous” to the cliff and the sea, to Enodoc, “that Cornish saint”, and ultimately and inevitably, to God:

> Oh kindly slate of these unaltered cliffs,
> Firm, barren substrate of our windy fields!
> Oh lichened slate in walls, they knew your worth
> Who raised you up to make this House of God
> What faith was his, that dim, that Cornish saint,
> Small rushlight of a long-forgotten church,
> Who lived with God on this unfriendly shore,
> Who knew He made the Atlantic and the stones
> And destined seamen here to end their lives
> Dashed on a rock, rolled over in the surf,
> And not one hair forgotten. Now they lie
> In centuries of sand beside the church.
> Less pitiable are they than the corpse
> Of a large golfer, only four weeks dead,

The poem concludes with the congregation singing the Fourteenth Psalm. The most important tenet of Anglicanism is its cultural dimension. The Church is a spiritual community, where individual experience is shared and finds succour in the faith of others. For Betjeman, the act of singing can foster the community; he called hymns "the poems of the people".[25]

Betjeman's earliest verses were written in imitation of the Anglican hymnal, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. The poet was an active member of the parish community: he served as a people's warden, learned the art of bell-ringing, organized a parochial youth fellowship at All Saints, Farnborough, wrote the parish history, and took up a ministry of visitations to terminally ill patients at St Bartholomew's Hospital.

He served the community but could also express his indignation at their shallow spiritual foundation, which can be seen in the poem *Christmas*. Englishmen seem to celebrate the surface of Christmas tradition, with paper decorations, shops, silver bells, tissued fripperies, cheap bath salts and ugly ties.

> Provincial public houses blaze
> And Corporation tramcars clang,
> On lighted tenements I gaze
> Where paper decorations hang,
> And bunting in the red Town Hall
> Says "Merry Christmas to you all."
>
> And London shops on Christmas Eve
> Are strung with silver bells and flowers
> As hurrying clerks the City leave
> To pigeon-haunted classic towers,
> And marbled clouds go scudding by
> The many-steepled London sky.
>
> And girls in slacks remember Dad,
> And oafish louts remember Mum,
> And sleepless children's hearts are glad,
> And Christmas-morning bells say "Come!"
> Even to shining ones who dwell
> Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.

There are preparations made in the church as well:

[25] Lowe, Peter J. *The Church as a Building and the Church as a Community in the Work of John Betjeman.* Christianity and Literature, Vol. 57, No 4, 2008, p. 578.