

Liturgical Constraints and Openness in Divine Address

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Abstract

While some constraints are necessary to the correct performance of liturgy, both the nature of liturgical language and its wider setting argue for openness. In the case of language, examples are drawn from scripture, formal liturgy and hymns to suggest that their power derives in part from their open, poetic character. The multivalent character of metaphor can help draw worshipers into dialogue with God. Because all metaphors are partial and inevitably fail at some point, elimination is not the best response to perceived inadequacies but the introduction of complementary images. Equally, instead of viewing the setting as a constraint, as in the Hindu concept of *darshan* it should be seen as an opportunity for God to speak through human artefact. While architecture is briefly addressed, the main focus is on stained glass. Pope Gregory's "Bible for the illiterate" is quite wrong. Once the rules behind particular styles are appreciated, not only can its power to communicate divine presence be activated but also at times original reflections that go well beyond the merely "illustrative." Examples range from medieval glass at Canterbury, Chartres and Sens to the work of modern artists such as Harry Clarke, Tom Denny, and Douglas Strachan.

Keywords

Architecture, darshan, divine encounter, hymnody, liturgical revision, metaphor, poetry, stained glass

1. Introduction

Liturgical practice seems to oscillate between tight regulation of what is said and done, and more liberal regimes. The difference can be seen, for example, in the contrast between a variety of medieval rites and the imposition of a single Tridentine pattern from the sixteenth century onwards, or again in more recent times between the uniformity of the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) and the richness of alternatives in *Common Worship* (2000). Yet it would be a mistake to think of the modern world

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as universally characterized by a return to greater freedom. The Episcopal church in the United States banned the use of its original prayerbook when it introduced a new one in 1979, while quite a few American denominations allow the use of only one hymnbook.¹ Such narrow controls might be defended on several, quite legitimate grounds: such as the preservation of a common culture; avoidance of congregations being misled by no longer easily intelligible vocabulary; even a closer approximation to truth.² But on the other side needs to be set how we understand the precise manner in which the sacrament is received. Of course, doctrine asserts an objective presence however the liturgy is performed but the subjective appropriation of that presence is an altogether different thing. Is the communicant to be seen as entirely passive or, as in other forms of personal encounter, can we envisage an interchange, a learning process? In response, liturgists might point to the different symbolism implied by standing to receive,³ or the way in which the whole service is now understood to convey Christ and not just the moment of reception. But neither point is sufficient in itself. Very authoritarian models may still be in play, with word and sacrament alike seen as conveying what we ought to believe rather than inviting a more open exploration. In advocating the latter approach, my intention is to suggest that even existing liturgies could be much better used to encourage the deepening of personal and corporate discipleship, in which the raising of questions becomes as natural in the context of public worship as in private prayer or Bible study. To indicate why, I want to consider, in the first place the poetic character of liturgical language and then, secondly, its wider ambience which takes us well beyond words.

2. Liturgy as Poetry

One prejudice I know I share with Michael Ramsey is hostility to “This is the word of the Lord,” the present favored liturgical response to the reading of scripture.⁴ When celebrating in retirement at Durham, he was known on occasion to pronounce instead, with a little twinkle in his eye, “This is the word of Paul,” or whatever. The problem with the official recommendation is that it assumes not only an easy endorsement of what has just been heard but also that the Bible’s message may be immediately absorbed, without any further wrestling with the text. The result is congregations uniformly supposing that they are dealing with “facts,” whether these be historical, biographical, moral, or

1. Including the Episcopal church.
2. An obvious example of the last is the almost universal elimination of “Christian children all must be / mild, obedient, good as he” from Frances Alexander’s “Once in Royal David’ city”.
3. The passivity of kneeling is sometimes contrasted with the strong notion of corporate responsibility taken to be implied by standing. There remains, though, ambiguity in such symbolism given the continued practice of receiving the host in the mouth even when standing. This was, after all, traditionally taken to underline our passivity before grace—like fledglings in the nest, as suggested by Aquinas and many others.
4. While *Deo gratias* (“Thanks be to God”) is recommended for use after the epistle in the sixteenth-century mass of Pius V, *Verbum Domini* (“This is the Word of the Lord”) was a recommendation from *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani* of 1969 which was adopted by the Second Vatican Council and soon followed by Episcopalians and Lutherans, although it can of course be traced to the New Testament itself (cf. 1 Pet 1:25 and 2 Cor 9:15).

theological and, thus, failing to interact with the deeper symbolism often present. Even stories of miracles are seldom just about their stupendous character. The account of the one at Cana, for example, provides repeated indicators to suggest that it has far more to do with the quality of life that the risen Christ can bring.⁵ Indeed, the way in which the same story can sometimes be used by each of the evangelists to bring out a different aspect of a potential relation with Jesus as Lord illustrates well how far the gospels are from being mere biographies. An intriguing example is the story of the centurion's servant.⁶ Whereas Matthew uses the incident to stress the distinctiveness of the centurion's faith in contrast to others, Luke underlines his dependence on the Jewish community and their dependence on him, while John turns out to be different again, in making the miracle one of the signs of Jesus' significance.⁷ Thus, as well as providing an historical basis, the gospels also can be seen as imaginative works of art that seek to encourage deeper perspectives on our own lives, and that is one reason the Ordinary of the liturgy should reflect similar objectives.⁸

This is why it seems to me that modern revisions of the liturgy were wrong to move away from use of the full version of the centurion's words of approach to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed." Presumably, the simplification ("I am not worthy to receive you") was proposed because most people would no longer immediately recall the passage from which it was borrowed. But note the resultant change in imagery. Instead of welcoming Christ as an indwelling presence with oneself playing the part of host, the simple "receive" conjures little more than the notion of a healing pill on the lips. But also gone are all those resonances with other uses elsewhere of indwelling, not least of Christ himself "tabernacling" in our world during the incarnation,⁹ having come from "the bosom" of his Father, with us now invited in turn to recline on his.¹⁰ Much has been written in recent years about the intertextuality of scripture, about the way in

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5. Hence six jars as a sign of imperfection, or the absurd overprovision of wine (between 120 and 180 gallons). The literalism of even some liturgists is illustrated by the fact that Anglican lectionaries sometimes omit the opening phrase in John 2:1 "on the third day." On my view this is not a mere historical detail which can easily be omitted but rather the opening clue for interpreting the entire passage.
 6. Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10; John 4:46-54.
 7. To the ordinary English reader, John's version sounds like an entirely different incident but it should be remembered that in Greek the same word can be used for both "servant" and "son," while John's "royal official" is likely to be more technically accurate since this part of the country was not as yet directly under Roman rule.
 8. See further my forthcoming book *Gospel as Work of Art: Imaginative Truth and the Open Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).
 9. Most modern translations (e.g., NRSV) ignore the imagery in John 1:14, 18. Gone as a result is any connection with the behaviour of John's ideal disciple at 13:23: "reclining next to him" in NRSV.
 10. John 1:18: "close to the Father's heart" is the NRSV's less vivid alternative.

which one passage evokes, whether intentionally or not, a number of others.¹¹ If these words are one example, Cranmer's success in alluding to the dilemma of the Syro-Phoenician woman is another obvious case in point in which, whatever his intention, a far more complex dialectic than just humility is effectively evoked.¹² Yet, surprisingly, such instances are an aspect often neglected by the modern biblical translator, with liturgists then following suit.

In widening the theological range of the anamnesis, modern liturgists have done an excellent job in setting the "remembrance" in a much broader context, but in almost exclusively drawing on biblical imagery alone to remedy earlier defects is there not a danger of encouraging congregations to believe that historical precedent will almost invariably provide a solution?¹³ Is the richness of the notion of God not reflected in part by the very fact that all metaphor about so different a reality at some point inevitably fails, and so even the finest attempts of formal liturgy or even scripture itself must always be seen as at best an approximation? So, by all means correct the present imbalance in feminine imagery by drawing on some suitable scriptural texts,¹⁴ but not at the expense of congregations acknowledging that they are part of a community that is easily misled into patriarchal notions by a term such as "Father Almighty,"¹⁵ or, to take a different example, finds in its traditions a consistent prejudice against left-handers!¹⁶ In other words, we need a more relaxed attitude to such failures. Imagery is the beginning of a process of reflection, not its end.

Equally to be resisted is the idea that God cannot declare anything new through established metaphors. Part of the point about imagery is surely that it cannot be controlled, that it invites development, and so, while negative use does emerge, so too do unexpected and positive new directions. Take, for instance, the *Agnus Dei*, often interpreted as a

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11. Particularly influential in recent years have been the studies of the American scholar, Mary Carruthers: *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), *The Medieval Craft of Memory*, ed. with J. M. Ziolkowski (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) and *Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
 12. The Prayer of Humble Access was Cranmer's own composition, with its evocative words: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table." In the original gospel context the exchange includes various challenges to conventional relationships, such as the woman's challenge to Jesus' words as well as a general interrogation of attitudes to race and animals.
 13. There are of course exceptions, as in the American Book of Common Prayer with its reference to "the vast expanse of interstellar space ... and this fragile earth, our island home" (Eucharistic Prayer C).
 14. Common Worship makes good use of "A Song of Jerusalem our Mother" (No. 38 from Isa 66) but surprisingly not of Isa 42:14-25, "God like a woman in labour."
 15. Even a theologian as great as Karl Barth insisted that "the one word explains the other; the Father is almightiness and almightiness is the Father": *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM, 1949) 46.
 16. With not only Christ always "at the right hand" of the Father but even in judgement the left being a place of condemnation (Matt 25:33).

deliberate counter to the eastern rejection of the legitimacy of such an image.¹⁷ While its use in John's Gospel probably has primarily a sacrificial reference,¹⁸ taking scripture as a whole, there are many other possibilities,¹⁹ and in liturgy these are multiplied further by the additional influence of musical accompaniment.²⁰ Indeed, even a happy accident can also sometimes contribute, as in the common interpretation of the phrase "with all the company of heaven" in Cranmer's version of the Preface (in the Eucharistic Prayer) to mean the saints or general mass of humanity now in heaven.²¹ Most modern versions of the liturgy exclude such a possibility but, despite such an interpretation sitting uneasily with traditional Christian eschatology, it is of course a common community belief.

The point in allowing congregations to perceive the inadequacy of some of the tradition's metaphors as well as elsewhere exploring them more freely and more deeply is that the congregation can then be released from thinking of themselves as trapped into passive acceptance of any particular account of an image's meaning. Nowhere is this perhaps more necessary than in the church's hymns, where the original poetic version has seldom been allowed to survive into our modern hymnbooks. Admittedly, this is sometimes exactly the right judgement,²² but more often than not behind such decisions lies a patronizing assumption that the congregation needs to be protected from possible misunderstandings. Nor is this only a recent phenomenon. Already in the nineteenth century, John Newton's description of Christ as our "husband" (whether we are female or otherwise) in his hymn "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds" was commonly vetoed in favor of "brother" or "guardian,"²³ yet behind that image stands a long tradition of Christian spirituality which portrayed the soul as feminine.²⁴ As an extreme instance, one might note what has happened to Folliott Pierpoint's hymn "For the beauty of the earth."

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17. Introduced into western liturgies by the Syrian Pope Sergius I (687–701), perhaps in conscious opposition to the decision of the eastern council of Trullo in 692 (canon 82) that Christ could only be represented as a man.
 18. The words attributed to John the Baptist at John 1:29 are subsequently taken up in John's allusive reference to the Passover lambs beings killed as the crucifixion took place (John 19:14). There is probably also a reference to Isa 53:7 ("like a lamb to the slaughter"), given that the same Greek word is used.
 19. Such as the substitute lamb of Gen 22:13, and the very different ram of judgement ("with seven horns") at Rev 5:6.
 20. The final plea for peace often sets a quite different tone, for example in Mozart's and Fauré's Requiem (both in D Minor), suggesting, as they do, less an intercession and more a peace already achieved.
 21. In terms of Cranmer's intentions, "company" was simply another word for the "troop," "regiment," or "host" of angels.
 22. Perhaps the most commonly quoted example is the first line of Charles Wesley's "Hark! the herald angels sing." In its original version Wesley used a word for the vault of heaven that was already disappearing from common usage even in 1739: "Hark how all the Welkin rings."
 23. *Hymns Ancient and Modern: New Standard* (1983) and *The New English Hymnal* (1986) both have "Brother."
 24. To give two examples almost at random, that of the poetry of St John of the Cross or the final line of John Donne's poem "Batter my heart, three-person'd God": "Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me."

Whereas in its origins every aspect of the world and human endeavor had been portrayed as a eucharistic offering, in most modern versions this has become transformed instead into a general hymn of praise for the natural world.²⁵ Any impetus towards further reflection was thereby lost, as well as of course most of its powerful imagery.

Similarly, then, attempts to remove images of blindness and deafness travel along quite the wrong track. Of course, everything should be done to avoid maligning the physically challenged.²⁶ But watering down such imagery does not seem to me to be the answer. Instead, supplementation is required that puts the visually impaired in a positive light.²⁷ Otherwise, the extensive use of such imagery in Jesus' own teaching and practice will come to be seen as simply wrong, rather than, like all metaphors, limited and circumscribed in its own particular way. Such criticism of contemporary revision is certainly not intended to deny the existence of some powerful imagery in modern hymnody,²⁸ but it is to question how cautious that element in liturgy has become. The injunction from the Australian poet, Les Murray (d. 2019) that religion's metaphors should not be controlled (with God conceived of as the poetry "caught" in any religion, "not imprisoned")²⁹ needs honoring, not as now the exception but instead the general rule. Only that way will God's ability to speak to the congregation through the poetry of the past be correspondingly strengthened rather than seriously diminished.

3. The Wider Ambience: Architecture and Glass

But if one way in which liturgy could be presented as more of an encounter is if its literary symbols were treated as more open; another is if the whole background of the liturgy in a particular building were taken as an address that needed interrogation and response. To state an obvious but often ignored fact, it is quite impossible to preach a sermon on divine immanence in a Gothic church or an argument for a simple lifestyle against a Baroque backdrop, without at the least engaging with why the context seems to proclaim something quite so different. Otherwise, listeners will

25. The text survived in full in the *English Hymnal* as late as the 1933 edition, whereas the *New English Hymnal* (1986) not only omitted the last three verses but also substituted "Lord of all" for "Christ our God."

26. The approach I am reacting against here is well illustrated in Brian Wren's *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Singing* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) where "Lord," "Father-like" and "King" are all critiqued, along with the image of blindness in "Amazing Grace": esp. pp. 179–80. For a more extended treatment of my own views, see my *God and Mystery in Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 73–109.

27. Brilliantly achieved in the poetry of the blind Presbyterian minister, George Mattheson. For some examples, see I. C. Bradley (ed.), *O Love that will not let me go: Meditations, Prayers and Poems by George Mattheson* (London: Collins, 1990) 49–59, esp. 54–55. As Mattheson observes, the shadow is sometimes precisely where God is to be found: e.g., Isa 32:3.

28. E.g., Graham Kendrick's image of "hands that flung stars into space / to cruel nails surrendered": from his song "The Servant King."

29. The theme of his familiar poem, "Religions are poems." The contrast is between expression ("caught") and definition or control ("imprisoned").

experience, whether consciously or not, two opposing pulls, between what is said and what is seen. Yet most clergy simply ignore the wider backdrop against which their ministry is practiced. To quote a familiar example, to counter the praise being heaped on Sir Basil Spence for his creation of the new cathedral, the then Provost of Coventry remarked that Christians can worship God just as well in a tin shanty.³⁰ While this is true, what was ignored in the comment was any recognition of the fact of how different the felt experience of the divine presence would be in each case.³¹ Architecture is after all a language, and, as writers on religious architecture have often argued, one in which specific things are said about God and in which, to put matters more provocatively, the divine speaks about itself.

The reason why I am confident that the latter, stronger assertion can be made is because each of the major western styles reflects aspects of the natural world, and so, if we believe in God as creator, each provides some reflection of divine activity at work.³² Indeed, if one reads the major defenses of particular approaches, it is often the case that a stronger version of this claim is to be found: namely, that the style in question is the most accurate in reflecting the ways of the creator. Such, for instance, was John Ruskin's claim for Gothic in its nineteenth-century revival, with the straightness of classical lines firmly condemned as unnatural.³³ However, I am not convinced that the argument pulls definitively in any one direction. Sometimes nature shows itself as ordered (as in natural laws) and so supports Classical architecture; sometimes as playful and exuberant (as in nature's variety or the intricacy of a leaf) and so Baroque; and sometimes as soaring to infinity (as in the horizon or a towering tree) and so Gothic.³⁴ Each competing style may, therefore, be claimed to reveal some particular aspect of the divine handiwork. But more is required in a church building and so, perhaps not surprisingly, the accompanying art is often used to convey an apparently opposing but in fact complementary or supplementary message. Soaring Gothic spires and their insubstantial windows are, therefore, balanced by the immanence and sheer human naturalness of Gothic art, as in

30. For Provost Williams' remarks, see Louise Campbell, *Coventry Cathedral* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 241–42. The liturgist Peter Hammond was also critical in his *Liturgy and Architecture* (London: Barrie & Rockcliff, 1960) 6–7. For a more detailed response to both critiques, see my *God and Enchantment of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 344–46.

31. In the tin shanty much more reliance would need to be put on fellow worshipers, whereas Coventry is surely able to speak in its own right even without musical accompaniment and other liturgical action.

32. For expansion on some of the points which follow, see the section on "Meaning in Religious Architecture" in my *Divine Generosity and Human Creativity: Theology through Symbol, Painting and Architecture*, eds. Christopher R. Brewer and Robert MacSwain (London: Routledge, 2017) 151–203.

33. Ruskin's attack on Classical architecture as unnatural is to be found both in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *Stones of Venice* (1851).

34. Classical had its intellectual defenders for application to religious architecture in Vitruvius, Alberti, Palladio, and Serlio; Gothic in Suger, Pugin, and Ruskin; Baroque in the Italian Guarino Guarini and the French Claude Perrault.

the Man of Sorrows or the Child playing with Mary's veil,³⁵ just as the great downward thrust of the mighty pillars of Romanesque architecture find their counterpoise in elongated figures stretching heavenwards, as in Gislibertus' work at Autun.³⁶ Or, to provide a rather different example, note how the carefully ordered progress of the courts of the Temple at Jerusalem contrasted with the mysterious incomprehensibility of the divine asserted at its heart.³⁷

These are matters to which liturgists in the West do not usually devote much attention, but the situation is quite otherwise in Hinduism. The key moment in worship is seen not as what worshipers or their priests do but in the actions of the divine: the gods deigning to "see" the worshiper rather than the other way round, in a process known as *darshan*.³⁸ Of course, in Christianity the coming of divine presence in the eucharist is all but universally acknowledged but such a perception is seldom extended to the context as a whole, to the architecture as such as well as to particular artefacts in the buildings. By contrast for the Hindu worshiper, statues of gods are ways of being seen by them, while the structure of the temple is according to rules strictly laid down as a reflection of divine reality.³⁹ It would seem to me that this wider sense of divine presence would be well worth recovering for Christian churches as well, the sense that merely to enter them is already to be addressed by God. It is an implicit awareness that even non-believers can have,⁴⁰ so why such hesitancy among liturgists?

Admittedly, accompanying art is sometimes given extensive treatment, especially when found centrally placed behind the altar.⁴¹ But, rather than pursue a familiar path, let me make the task more difficult for myself by choosing stained-glass windows. Such a choice to complement what I have said on architecture may seem somewhat

35. Even angels smile as at Rheims, while the elevation of the host was of course used to mark a supreme moment of immanence. It is important to note that it was only with the introduction of Gothic in the twelfth century by Abbot Suger at Saint-Denis that depictions of the crucifixion began to show extensive signs of suffering, and so convey now primarily an immanent rather than transcendent message (divine identification with human suffering rather than triumph over it).

36. Romanesque is the only style which lacks its own architectural advocate, but the sheer weight of Romanesque pillars would seem to support the interpretation of such a style as all about secure or settled immanence, in the manner of a forest of oak.

37. In other words, a horizontal contrast rather than a vertical one, as in Gothic art and architecture.

38. Instead of speaking of going to worship, Indians commonly speak of an intention "to take darshan": Diana L. Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 4.

39. For some of the guiding principles, see R. Champakalakshmi, *The Hindu Temple* (London: Greenwich Editions, 2001), esp. pp. 27–78.

40. As in Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going" (1954), more especially its final verse, and that despite his own irritation at more religious interpretations of the poem.

41. Examination of altarpieces almost forces consideration of their role in relation to a wider whole in a way that individual items of art may not. See, e.g., Caterina Limentani Virdis, *Gothic and Renaissance Altarpieces* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002); Rainer Kahsnitz, *Carved Altarpieces: Masterpieces of Late Gothic* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

surprising, given the relatively low esteem in which such work is frequently held, but since of all the artistic elements in a typical church it is also the most common it makes good sense to ask what has gone wrong and what might be done to rectify the situation. A frequent response among the generality of the public is to treat stained glass as though it amounted to no more than a sort of colorful wallpaper, while the more educated blame what are seen as its rather sentimental conventions. The problem with either form of dismissal is that not only is the rejection based on unjustified assumptions but it also leads to alternative artistic “solutions” that come with their own set of problems. In the latter case I am particularly thinking of the widespread introduction of icons into western churches which at the very least suggests a real lack of nerve about the value of native, western traditions.⁴² Orthodox icons are favored because they are seen as a good way of evoking an alternative world, but the irony is that this is equally the aim of much western religious art: it is merely that it sets out to achieve the same objective in a significantly different way.

Western art has been plagued by the assumption that the aim of western artists has been to “illustrate” the biblical story. So let us begin our consideration by reflecting on the aims of medieval glass. First thoughts might well suggest that illustration was indeed the aim, inasmuch as the view was effectively canonized in Pope Gregory’s interpretation of glass as the church’s Bible for the illiterate.⁴³ But not only is it unlikely that glass could ever have acted entirely on its own (interpretative help would have been necessary from sermons and so on),⁴⁴ as with painting and statues there would also have been further interpretative issues raised by the artists themselves, as they sought to engage viewers with the significance of the story. So, as with the evangelists, it was telling the story with a particular slant which secured whatever point they thought it important to convey. In other words, like the typical sermon, stained glass offered an interpretation which was concerned to deepen viewers’ faith, something that it could not do unless they were prepared to engage with just such a possibility. To ensure this, stained-glass programmes in medieval churches, therefore, seldom just illustrated what scripture said; instead, as in a sermon, themes were developed, and often in directions independent of other artistic work in the building.⁴⁵

42. Seen, for example, centrally placed in Westminster Abbey or in the University Church, Oxford. Yet it is odd to find them used in such a different way from Orthodoxy where it is the totality of numerous themed icons which is meant to convey the precise nature of our relationship with heavenly realities.

43. Gregory the Great, *Letters* XI, 10.

44. Persuasively argued in Lawrence C. Duggan, “Reflections on ‘Was Art Really the “Book of the Illiterate”?’” in *Reading Images and Texts: Medieval Images and Texts as Forms of Communication*, eds. M. Hageman and M. Mustert (Brepols: Turnhout, 2005) 63–108.

45. An aspect now increasingly recognized by art historians who suggest programmes directed at different levels of response, from lighted candle to pious scholarly reflection; see Richard Marks, “Medieval Stained Glass: Recent and Future Trends in Scholarship,” *Journal of Stained Glass* XXIV (2000) 62–79, esp. 69ff.

Typology was undoubtedly the most common pattern. While some applications would now seem to us decidedly artificial,⁴⁶ others could easily lead viewers to reflect more deeply on the wider implications of Christ's teaching. Take, for instance, the famous Good Samaritan window at Chartres where parallels are drawn with the opening chapters of Genesis.⁴⁷ While Augustine's basic interpretation of the parable is followed,⁴⁸ it is here further universalized by these parallels, with us all now seen as pilgrims in a life over which Christ presides throughout, offering us the viaticum of his body.⁴⁹ Another form of reflection was the use of inference from the way in which the story had already developed. For example, once western art had moved the annunciation from the well or spinning wheel to the reading desk it was but a short step to ask who had taught Mary to read Isaiah's prophetic words.⁵⁰ So scenes appear of Anne teaching her daughter, their popularity ensured by later medieval aspirations among women to be able to read.⁵¹ While most such moves are largely literary in inspiration as with the Augustine example mentioned above, it would be wrong to think of the glass artist only engaged in slavish imitation. The first moves towards Anne as teacher may well have been visual, while typology could sometimes work in reverse with new scenes created for the life of Christ,⁵² or even imaginative reinterpretation of particular incidents as at the foot of the cross where Mary and John are replaced in one instance by Ecclesia holding a chalice and the archangel Michael with his sword no longer red with fire but green all over.⁵³ It is even possible to watch innovation at work in some particular church, as in the move to a kneeling Gabriel in York Minster or its presentation of the Ascension not only with Mary but also sun and moon.⁵⁴ Again, purely formal

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46. For example, in the cathedral at Canterbury, Balaam on his ass and the prophet Isaiah at a city gate are used as types for the Journey of the Magi; see Madeline Harrison Caviness, *The Early Stained Glass of Canterbury Cathedral c. 1175–1220* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977) 121; figs. 19–23.
47. Wikipedia provides some images under the Good Samaritan Window, Chartres Cathedral: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Good_Samaritan_Window,_Chartres_Cathedral.
48. With the Good Samaritan as Christ and the inn as his church.
49. The theme of travel was suitable for a window paid for by shoemakers. The reading of what Christ is holding as bread (and so as a viaticum) remains contentious. There are similar windows at Sens and Canterbury.
50. Such domestic actions are retained by Orthodox icons, whereas in the West the banderol which was initially introduced to provide Isaiah's words (Isa 7:14) was eventually replaced by a reading desk.
51. For a good example in All Saints, North St., York from c. 1420, see Virginia Chieffo Raguin, *The History of Stained Glass* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003) 122 (also available at <https://www.allsaints-northstreet.org.uk/stainedglass.html>); for another from Marsh Baldon, Oxfordshire, see John Baker, *English Stained Glass* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978) Pl. 38.
52. As at Canterbury where Moses leading the people out of Egypt is balanced by Jesus leading his followers away from a pagan icon: illustrated, Raguin, *History*, 67.
53. At Sens: illustrated, Raguin, *History*, 78 (also available at <https://www.therosewindow.com/pilot/Sens/w120.htm>).
54. Thomas French and David O'Connor, *York Minster: The West Windows of the Nave* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 50–52, 56.

requirements could result in change, as when all the panels in a particular light were now expected to be devoted to the same story or theme.⁵⁵ Hopefully, the point of my examples is now clear. The aim of medieval glass was anything but simple illustration. It could be and often was deeply reflective, as well as sometimes like other medieval art even humorous, or very occasionally obscene.⁵⁶ The idea of God saying something new to worshippers through such glass is thus an entirely coherent notion.

But, it may be said, I am ignoring the principal defect of stained glass in churches, which is that it overwhelmingly comes from a low point in its creation, in the nineteenth century. But again, I wonder whether criticism is lodged at the right place. As in architecture, the medieval was taken as normative but with this huge difference: that small groups of images were in the main abandoned and one light assigned a single theme so that it could be more easily read. In short, it is again necessary for viewers first to be attuned to the intentions and characteristic stylization if ever they are likely to draw anything of value out of the ensemble. Not that such glass was mere imitation of the medieval; there was, for instance, much more of an engagement with the details of nature.⁵⁷ Moreover, although the conventions are quite different from icons, there is still the same intention to invite us into an alternative world that by its difference can then help to critique our own. In other words, in both cases it makes no sense to complain that the reality of terrible suffering is avoided. The point is that by incorporation into that story deep suffering can be transformed, a point that Renaissance art makes even more dramatically by insisting that the crucified body of Christ remain beautiful on the cross, precisely because in a sense it did, not through Jesus not suffering but through his suffering being transformative for the good.⁵⁸ Again, there was much more a sense of attempting an integrated whole, as in the joint work of the well-known firm Clayton and Bell with architects such as George Street.⁵⁹

Yet, despite nineteenth- and early twentieth-century glass being much nearer to our own time, even in the case of artists whose work is greatly admired, there is surprisingly little attention given either to variations in the type of iconography deployed or strategies used to engage viewers with the Christian story. Instead, discussion among academics is overwhelmingly about technique (whether revival or new invention) and the resultant beauty and disposition of vibrant color. There is not the space here to attempt a better balance.

55. As can be seen by comparing the Prodigal Son windows at Chartres and Bourges, with the former having two scenes of dissipation (prostitution and gambling) and the latter feast and loss of robe balanced by its opposite; see Wolfgang Kemp, *The Narratives of Gothic Stained Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 22–34.

56. For the former, see Sarah Crewe, *Stained Glass in England, 1180–1540* (London: HM Stationary Office, 1987) 52–62; for the latter, and a window from Boppard, see Raguin, *History*, 142–43.

57. Part of Victorian attitudes generally, but supported by the poetry of Keble: see William Waters, *Angels and Icons: Pre-Raphaelite Stained Glass 1850–70* (Worcester: Seraphim Press, 2012). A good example is the addition of a threatening wolf to a Good Shepherd window (at St Peter's, Eype) which is nonetheless placed in the midst of beautiful flowers: Waters, 174.

58. Contemporary Christians often contrast Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece with, to their detriment, works such as those by Raphael and Perugino but in my view that is to misjudge the very different symbolism involved: see my essay on "Worshiping with Art and Architecture" in my *Divine Generosity*, 190–203, esp. 191–93.

59. Waters, *Angels and Icons*, 70, 74. Seen in churches such as St James the Less, Westminster.

At most what I might be able to suggest is how significant a role a better understanding of background assumptions could play in enabling such stained glass once more to function as a means through which God speaks to worshippers. On this question a useful contrast to draw is between two of the best-known stained-glass artists of that time, Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933) in the United States and Harry Clarke (1889–1931) in Ireland.

Although Tiffany is now more famous for his lamps and other such furniture, in his own day his reputation for stained-glass work stood extraordinarily high. This was in large part because of the new techniques which he employed,⁶⁰ the result of which was to obviate any necessity to follow the traditional metal divisions in the glass. While the result was an appearance which more closely resembled painting and much stronger colors, much of his work, though still aesthetically pleasing, now seems altogether too closely tied to the optimism and universalism of the American church of the time.⁶¹ By contrast, Clarke's themes are much more wide-ranging and indeed also much closer to traditional Christianity, although it is intriguing to note that not only is nature still very prominent but also more obviously positive themes such as the nativity, saints or the ascension far outnumber treatments of the crucifixion.⁶² That said, he remains Ireland's most popular stained-glass artist, and one can quite understand why, once his original context is taken fully into account. Both Tiffany and Clarke were not only heirs of the pre-Raphaelites but also contemporary with Art Nouveau and Art Deco.⁶³ What all three movements shared was a romantic element which at its worst became mere escapism but which, when viewed more charitably, could be interpreted as offering an alternative perspective on the world: see it as it might be rather than as it "really" is or apparently presents itself. One result was the stained-glass windows of Alphonse Mucha in St Vitus's Cathedral in Prague,⁶⁴ but another was the work of Harry Clarke in which what might be described as "contemporary" faces for the saints are combined with costumes of extraordinary richness and complexity. The Mother of Jesus, for example, becomes at one and the same time our contemporary (her face) and inhabitant of a world so exotic that it cannot possibly be known anywhere here on this

60. In 1894 he patented a process known as favrile glass, according to which color is fired into the glass itself when hot, often with two colors mixed giving it an iridescent quality.

61. Messages of hope are conveyed by beautiful natural scenery with even angels replacing a more explicit Christian message (as in his window for "I am the Resurrection and the Life"). One window, though, I would defend is his Gethsemane where rather than the usual scene, Christ is shown encouraging his disciples. For examples of his work, see Catherine Shotick, *Eternal Light: The Stained-glass Windows of Louis Comfort Tiffany* (Chicago: Driehaus Museum, 2020), esp. no. 15 & 17.

62. As can be seen from Lucy Costigan and Michael Cullen, *Strangest Genius: The Stained Glass of Harry Clarke* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2010). But the crucifixion is by no means ignored, e.g. 116ff (the stations of the cross), 164 (the Mother of Sorrows).

63. Known in German as Jugendstil, Art Nouveau flourished between c. 1890 and 1910, Art Deco roughly between 1912 and 1932.

64. Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939) first became known as one of the leading figures in Art Nouveau. His cathedral stained glass dates towards the end of his life, from 1931.

earth.⁶⁵ Even her shoes are more suited to dancing at a party than the practicalities of attending to care of her child.⁶⁶ In other words, the transcendent aspect of the Christian story is introduced not by traditional symbols of otherness but rather through pushing the apparently worldly in exotically beautiful costume into another world altogether, so extravagantly implausible has the whole scenario become. The continued popularity of Clarke's work demonstrates that the strategy can still work, but of course it was very much easier when ideas in contemporary art more generally at least bore some relation to his own way of thinking. Clarke's preference for "opulence and complexity of design" may seem to stand at a great distance from modern Christian approaches but, as I have been seeking to emphasize throughout this article, it is precisely by rejecting too narrow a range of options and engaging imaginatively with alternative possibilities that church art can encourage fresh ways of thinking.⁶⁷ Indeed, one can see the process at work occasionally in Clarke himself with his selective innovations in imagery.⁶⁸

Although many of the best-known artists of the twentieth century continued to use figures,⁶⁹ quite a few followed the tendency of art more generally, towards more abstract approaches.⁷⁰ In itself there is nothing wrong in that but, given that nineteenth-century glass still dominates in most churches, it would seem to me essential that some basic training in its appreciation should be given to congregations, so that God is given the ability to speak through it, in offering yet another way of accessing the biblical message of salvation. Perhaps an easy way-in might be to encourage attention in the first instance to more recent work where contemporary religious aspirations and what one finds in the stained glass are likely to be more closely allied. Take, for instance, Scotland's best-known artist from the twentieth century, Douglas Strachan (1875–1950). While his work has been criticized for too close identification with a sort of Presbyterian nationalism,⁷¹ it is important to recall that the country's return to the use of stained glass was relatively recent.⁷² So the vibrancy of his imagery and color could be interpreted as an attempt to push his fellow Scots that bit

65. As even casual attention to her clothes will reveal: for examples, see Costigan and Cullen, *Strangest Genius*, 37, 76, 110–11, 185, 193, 237, 254. The web is less helpful but for one example try <https://roaringwaterjournal.com/2014/12/21/the-nativity-by-harry-clarke/>.

66. Costigan and Cullen, *Strangest Genius*, 92, 111; for similar treatment of the Archangel Gabriel, see 184.

67. Lucy Costigan and Michael Curran, *Dark Beauty: Hidden Detail in Harry Clarke's Stained Glass* (Kildare: Merrion Press, 2019) 31.

68. As in female shepherds at the nativity, or a Holy Family in which Joseph dominates: Costigan and Cullen, *Strangest Genius*, 59, 216.

69. Marc Chagall's work in France, Britain, and the United States is probably the best known.

70. For a range of excellent examples (including Dibbets, Léger, Manessier, and Matisse), see Xavier Barral I Altet, *Stained Glass: Masterpieces of the Modern Era* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007). The year of the book's publication also witnessed the unveiling of Gerard Richter's window in Cologne Cathedral.

71. Juliette MacDonald, *Aspects of Identity in the Work of Douglas Strachan* (PhD, University of St Andrews, 2003) 181–236; available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10023/7357>.

72. The first stained-glass commission for the Church of Scotland since the Reformation did not occur until 1856. The developing story in Scotland is told in Michael Donnelly, *Scotland's Stained Glass: Making the Colours Sing* (Edinburgh: Stationary Office, 1997).

further.⁷³ At any rate, his integration of the landscape into his biblical themes did encourage some sense of divine address through means other than the word,⁷⁴ as did his strong stress on Jesus' humanity.

Strachan's appeal to nature is a theme powerfully endorsed by an English graduate of the same college where Strachan had once taught, Edinburgh College of Art. The work of Tom Denny (b.1956) has only really come to prominence in the early years of the twenty-first century. In cathedrals such as Durham, Gloucester, Hereford and Leicester, as well as numerous parish churches, from a distance his windows appear as almost an abstract blaze of color, whereas closer inspection reveals figures in various forms of transformative interaction with their environment. While inspiration from the nature mystic Thomas Traherne and streams of light coming from the cross might suggest too little attention to the more negative aspects of existence,⁷⁵ such criticism would soon prove altogether unjustified. Like Raphael he includes in his account of the Transfiguration, the boy suffering below,⁷⁶ while in work dedicated to the poet Ivor Gurney we are not allowed to forget the devastation of the trenches, or for that matter the traumatic elements in the story of Richard III, with Christ's actions interlaced with Richard's sorrows and humiliation.⁷⁷

But in what sense might any of this be seen as a divine initiative or darshan, when stained glass is so obviously a human creation? Admittedly, we cannot, unlike with architecture, speak of it as part of the imitation of nature as divine creation. Instead, we are dealing with purely human artefacts. Yet the common theological interpretation of the sermon as divine address reminds us that even texts that move quite far from the original Bible story can be viewed as God using human creativity to communicate something more of the divine will and purposes. So here also in a similar way, with in neither case it being necessary to assume any kind of divine take-over of the human, as it were. Rather, as with the metaphorical language of liturgy with which this article began, it is a matter of allowing an area that is already imbued with divine intention to

73. Although his use of strong color was anticipated by Alf Webster, significantly Donnelly entitled his section on him "An Orchestrator of Colour."

74. As in Christ in the storm at the seaside towns of Largs and Skelmorlie, and Good Shepherd windows at Inverchaolin and Colmonell which allude to the surrounding countryside, although giving Christ' blue cloak the form of the Scottish saltire in the latter case does seem to me (as to MacDonald, *Aspects of Identity*, 199, 231) a step too far.


75. As in his treatment of Traherne and the crucifixion in his two windows on Traherne in the Lady Chapel of Hereford Cathedral. For illustration and discussion, see *Glory, Azure and Gold: The Stained-Glass Windows of Thomas Denny*, eds. Antonia Johnson and Josie Reed (London: Reed Contemporary Books, 2016) 53–57. The images discussed are also available on the websites of the various cathedrals.

76. As in the Transfiguration Window at Durham Cathedral; see Johnson and Reed, *Glory, Azure and Gold*, 59–66; following Luke 9:28–43.

77. For the Ivor Gurney windows at Gloucester, see Johnson and Reed, *Glory, Azure and Gold*, 81–88. The Redemption windows in Leicester Cathedral were created in 2016 to mark the reinterment of the king's newly discovered remains.

communicate anew,⁷⁸ thanks to the inherent openness of symbols in word and image that by their very nature strive to push beyond any constraints humans unwisely attempt to impose on them.⁷⁹

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78. The stained glass is already imbued with divine intention in view of its gospel themes.

79. I am grateful to Bridget Nichols for helpful advice and encouragement, and for comments on points of detail to Gregor Duncan and Ann Loades.