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| Title | “Oh Christianity, Christianity” : Problems of Christianity in Poetry |
| Author(s) | K.O.アンダスン |
| Citation | キリスト教と諸学 : 論集, Volume5, 1991.3 : 1-10 |
| URL | http://serve.seigakuin-univ.ac.jp/refs/modules/xoonips/detail.php?item_id=2995 |
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“ Oh Christianity, Christianity ” : Problems of Christianity in Poetry

by Kenneth O. Anderson

Western culture is inextricably bound up with Christianity. Nowhere is this more evident than in poetry (even pop music is steeped in Christianity: e.g. the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby", the Rolling Stones' "Salt of the Earth", Bruce Springsteen's "Adam Raised a Cain", etc.). Such poetry is often preoccupied with the difficulty of living up to Christian ideals or with doubts about the veracity of the Christian faith. Unlike hymns, which, as Peter Levi has noted, have "a certain falsity, an archaism and formality that pretend to a spirit they are not quite able to sum up",¹ such poems strike home. They are about ourselves as we really think and behave, in contrast to how we'd like to think and behave. As such, they may seem to have been written in a spirit of disillusionment; but such disillusionment is more welcome than sanctimony, as a blast of cold air is more invigorating than a blanket of stale, hot air.

In "The Latest Decalogue", for example, Arthur Hugh Clough looks at how we interpret the Ten Commandments to suit our convenience:

Thou shalt have one God only; who
Would be at the expense of two?
No graven images may be
Worshipped, except the currency:
Swear not at all; for, for thy curse
Thine enemy is none the worse:
At church on Sunday to attend
Will serve to keep the world thy friend:
Honour thy parents; that is, all
From whom advancement may befall:
Thou shalt not kill; but need'st not strive

Officiously to keep alive;
 Do not adultery commit;
 Advantage rarely comes of it:
 Thou shalt not steal; an empty feat,
 When it's so lucrative to cheat:
 Bear not false witness; let the lie
 Have time on its own wings to fly:
 Thou shalt not covet; but tradition
 Approves all forms of competition.
 The sum of all is, thou shalt love,
 If anybody, God above:
 At any rate shall never labour
 More than thyself to love thy neighbor. ²

Matthew Arnold expresses his distress about the weakening of Christian faith in his famous "Dover Beach":

... The sea of faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating to the breath
 Of the night-wind down the vastedges drear
 And naked shingles of the world...³

Thomas Hardy, an agnostic, wishes wistfully that he could believe wholeheartedly in Christianity or in its efficacy. In "The Oxen" he says that

... If someone said on Christmas Eve,
 'Come; see the oxen kneel
 In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
 Our childhood used to know,'
 I should go with him in the gloom,
 Hoping it might so.

In "the Darkling Thrush", Hardy speaks of a thrush singing ecstatically of "some blessed Hope, whereof he knew And I was unaware" ⁵--the Hope, of course, being Christianity. In a poem written at the advent of World War I, "Channel Firing", the spirit of a dead preacher, Parson Thirdly, laments that all his earthly efforts to teach Christianity have seemingly led to naught, and wishes that while he was on earth that "Instead of preaching forty year...I had stuck to pipes and beer." ⁶

T.S. Eliot bemoans the fact that church attendance is going down in
"The Rock": "... the Church does not seem to be wanted/In country or
in suburb; and in the town/Only for important weddings. " Philip
Larkin takes up this problem in his superb poem "Church Going":

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new --
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What shall we turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,

A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and organ-pipes and myrrh?
O will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation— marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these— for which was built
This special shell? For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that many dead lie round.⁸

Like all good poems, "Church Going" needs to be read and re-read slowly and thoughtfully, and if that is done more will reveal itself each time the poem is read. The opening line, of course, can be read both in the sense that the church is empty and physically abandoned and in the sense that, even when peopled, there may be "nothing going on" there mentally or spiritually that is worth caring about: a gathering of Laodiceans. Likewise, the last line can be read as telling us that the dead are literally entombed in the floor of the church (as with so many British churches) so that, reminded of our own mortality, we may reflect on it and grow wise; or the line may be read as telling us that living churchgoers (including ourselves) are spiritually dead, and that one may

grow wise by becoming aware of this and endeavoring to change it.

Larkin makes a point that, as I've said, strikes home : despite the church's fall into disuse, we still feed a need for spirituality, a hunger to be serious, a hunger for something or Someone to lift us beyond our mortality. Walter de la Mare speaks of this spiritual yearning in his fine poem about the cathedral at Stowell Park, Gloucestershire, "Frescoes in an Old Church" :

Six centuries now have gone
Since, one by one,
These stones were laid,
And in air's vacancy
This beauty made.

They who thus reared then
Their long rest have won;
Ours now this heritage—
To guard, preserve, delight in, brood upon;
And in these transitory fragments scan
The immortal longings in the soul of Man. ⁹

D. J. Enright echoes Larkin's thoughts in his poem "Sunday". In this poem, he tells how his parents sent him and his siblings to Sunday school even though they did not go themselves, and noted how removed the school seemed to him from Christianity:

... In Sunday school a sickly adult
Taught the teachings of a sickly lamb
To a gathering of sickly children.

It was a far cry from that brisk person
Who created the heaven and the earth in
Six days and then took Sunday off.

The churches were run by a picked crew
Of bad actors radiating insincerity.
Not that onethought of them in that way,
One merely disliked the sound of their voices.
I cannot recall one elevated moment in church,
Though as a choirboy I pulled in a useful
Sixpence per month.

Strange, that a sense of religion should
Somehow survive all this grim buffoonery!
Perhaps that brisk old person does exist,
And we are living through his Sunday.

The speaker of Enright's poem, like that of Larkin's, having grown disaffected from the church, no longer attends; yet, as in Larkin's poem, still feels "a sense of religion". God seems absent, but perhaps it is because we humans are living through His Sunday — i. e., a period when He seems to be invisible — and He will later, after all, appear to us again.

John Betjeman satirizes an elderly lady churchgoer in the time of World War II in his amusing poem "Westminster Abbey." The woman prays for God to bomb the Germans but spare their women, "And if that is not too easy We will pardon Thy Mistake." Most of all, she adds, "Don't let anyone bomb me." She asks God to protect the black forces who are protecting the British Empire "And, even more, protect the whites." She asks God to "put beneath Thy special care/One-eight-nine Cadogan Square" — her own address, of course. She confesses that she, like all humans, is a sinner, but has "done no major crime"; she promises to come to Evening Service when she has the time. She asks God not to let her shares go down and finally, at the end of her prayer, tells God, "And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait/Because I have a luncheon date." ¹¹

In a more somber vein, Betjeman speaks of the panic and doubt a young man feels at the death of an old man he loves and admires, in "On a Portrait of a Deaf Man." The speaker of this poem vividly imagines the decay of the old man's body: "...his mouth is wide to let /The London clay come in"; "I do not like to think/Of maggots in his eyes"; "...now his finger-bones/Stick through his finger-ends." This appalling end is contrasted with the vitality of the old man when alive, his wisdom, his

kindness to the young man, until the speaker concludes, "You, God, who treat him thus and thus, /Say 'Save his soul and pray.' You ask me to believe You and /I only see decay. " ¹² It may be easy to fault this young man for weakness of faith, but who can face the death of a loved one and not feel even a tremor of doubt? The thought of death can inspire fear and bring one close to God, but it can also make one doubt God, or the goodness of God. It is very hard for us humans to see beyond the World of our senses. As T.S. Eliot says in "Four Quartets", "... human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality. " ¹³

Rarely has anyone spoken more brilliantly about the doubts which can assail a would-be believer than Stevie Smith. In poems such as "How Cruel is the Story of Eve", "Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell", "Was He Married?", "Oh Christianity, Christianity", "How do you see?" and many others, she hits the nail on the head so hard that one wonders if anyone will ever be able to extract it from the wood in which it is buried. Two quotes must suffice as examples of a major body of work:

Is it not interesting to see
How the Christians continually
Try to separate themselves in vain
From the doctrine of eternal pain.

They cannot do it,
They are committed to it,
Their Lord said it
They must believe it.

So the vulnerable body is stretched without pity
On flames for ever. Is this not pretty?¹⁴
And the second one:
... Oh Christianity, Christianity,
Why do you not answer our difficulties?
If He was God He was not like us
He could not lose.

Can Perfection be less than perfection?

Can the creator of the Devil be bested by him?
What can the temptation to possess the earth have meant to him
Who made and possessed it? What do you mean?

And Sin, how could He take our sins upon Him? What does it mean?
To take sin upon one is not the same
As to have sin inside one and feel guilty.

It is horrible to feel guilty.
We feel guilty because we are.
Was He horrible? Did He feel guilty?
You say He was born humble — but He was not.
He was born God —

Taking our nature upon Him. But then you say
He was perfect Man. Do you mean
Perfectly Man, meaning wholly? Or Man without sin? Ah
Perfect Man without sin is not what we are.

Do you mean He did not know that He was God,
Did not know He was the Second Person of the Trinity?
(Oh if He knew this and was,
It was a source of strength for Him we do not have)
But this theology of emptying you preach sometimes —
That He emptied Himself of knowing He was God ——— seems a
theology of false appearances
To mock your facts, as He was God whether He knew it or not.
Oh what do you mean, what do you mean?
You never answer our difficulties...¹⁵

As well as in poems about Christianity, in recent years there has been an
upsurge in translations of the poetry of the Bible itself. One of the best
is the Jerusalem Bible.¹⁶ The King James Version of the Bible, which so
many Christians depend on, is, in a way, too familiar to us: it has the
comfortable feel of an old, well-worn shoe. The language, beautiful as
it is, no longer strikes us freshly. In addition, the archaisms are often
passed over too quickly and misunderstood. What a shock — a pleasant
one — to dip into a translation such as the Jerusalem Bible and read
its poetry, the poetry of sharp, clear, contemporary language. It is like
cold water dashed into one's face. Passages we thought we knew well are
suddenly new again, and once more we are tantalized by how much

mystery there is in the Bible, how little we still know about its treasures.

One recent translation that has made a real difference in interpretation is Stephen Mitchell's brilliant translation of Job. Many readers of Job in the King James Version have felt, as I have, disturbed by the way God talks to Job, as if He were sneering. As Stevie Smith aptly puts it, "Hurrah for the grand old heavenly gusty creator Lord/Who said to Job, don't bother me son, I'll do as I please my word. " " Moreover, Job comes across as a mere worm, a wretch who, in the face of God's wrath, says that he will "abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes" (*Job 42 : 6*). But Mitchell makes a good case for what Job actually says to be, "Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust. " As Mitchell says,

Job's comfort at the end is his mortality. The physical body is acknowledged as dust, the personal drama as delusion. It is as if the world we perceive through our senses, that whole gorgeous and terrible pageant, were the breath-thin surface of a bubble, and everything else, inside and outside, is pure radiance. Both suffering and joy come then like a brief reflection, and death like a pin.

He feels he has woken up from a dream. That sense, of actually seeing the beloved reality he has only heard of before, is what makes his emotion at the end so convincing. He has let go of everything, and surrendered into the light.¹⁸

I wish there were space enough to quote Mitchell's translation of Job and his brilliant comments on it (dealing with the above problem and many others that confront the readers of Job) in their entirety. As there isn't, I urge anyone who wishes to read them. They are startling, stimulating and satisfying.

I also wish there were space enough to include many more of the interesting poems that have been written about the problems of Christianity. I have mentioned only a very few, in a very discursive fashion. It is gratifying to read them, gratifying to find that others besides oneself have also been perplexed or distressed by Christianity, and have expressed

their distress so clearly and beautifully. " Confession is good for the soul " : good for the poet's souls, and good for ours.

Notes

- 1 . Peter Levi, *The Penguin Book of English Christian Verse* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 21.
- 2 . Ibid, p. 248.
- 3 . Ibid, p. 255.
- 4 . Ibid, pp. 258-9.
- 5 . Christopher Ricks, ed ., *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 469.
- 6 . *The Penguin Book of English Christian Verse*, p. 260.
- 7 . T . S . Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1974), p. 162.
- 8 . Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Farrar, Straus, Giroux and The Marvell Press, 1989), pp. 97-8.
- 9 . Charles Causley, ed ., *The Sun, Dancing: Christian Verse* (London: Puffin, 1984), p. 216.
- 10 . Ibid, p. 205.
- 11 . John Guest, ed ., *The Best of Betjeman* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 49-50.
- 12 . Ibid, pp. 52-3.
- 13 . T . S . Eliot, *Collected Poems*, p. 190.
- 14 . James MacGibbon, ed ., *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 387.
- 15 . Ibid, pp. 518-20.
- 16 . *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, N . Y ., Doubleday and Co ., Ltd ., 1988).
- 17 . *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*, p. 351.
- 18 . Stephen Mitchell, trans ., *The Book of Job* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p. xxviii.