

Simplicity and the Religious Past in Victorian Britain

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Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, *Victorian Reformations: Historical Fiction and Religious Controversy, 1820-1900* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 300 pp., \$39.00 paper.

Mark D. Chapman, *The Fantasy of Reunion: Anglicans, Catholics, and Ecumenism, 1833-1882* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 329 pp., \$99.00 cloth.

This is a book about historical imagination [demonstrating] alternative ways of imagining history and of conceiving of the relationship of past to present. (Mark Chapman, *The Fantasy of Reunion*)

The two books under consideration here are complementary studies in the conceptualization of Christian history and its impact on nineteenth-century Britain. They both explore how particular segments of European Christendom perceived the impact of the Reformation and the resulting divisions within the Christian church. It is only mildly ironic, given the state of historical and literary studies, that the one cast in terms of “imagination,” “myth,” and “fantasy” is the history. In *The Fantasy of Reunion*, Mark D. Chapman explores “alternative ways of imagining” church history, from the dreamy uncertainty of the Tractarian endgame to “the triumph of the church of the present,” embodied in the Vatican Council of 1870 (7). The book that “sees” is the study of the texts of lesser

novels of the nineteenth century, focusing on "Protestants celebrating the triumph of the Reformation [...] and Catholics arguing that failure lurked at the heart of the Reformation project from the beginning" (*Victorian Reformations* 203). Whether it was evangelical authors reading their nineteenth-century anxieties into the Protestant Reformation, or romantic churchmen fantasizing that the great schism might be overcome, the conclusion that the subjects of these studies drew was that the past was a weapon, or a tool to be used for higher spiritual ends.

Burstein's study is, in essence, a collection of perceptive essays on various literary representations of the relationship between Protestants and Catholics in Britain between 1820 and 1900, and it should be read that way. Much like a Victorian periodical, *Victorian Reformations* treats literary episodes without attempting a larger cultural assessment. Though the title suggests that she will be dealing with *the* Reformation as it is treated in Victorian literature, this is only occasionally done. Three of the book's chapters are devoted to novels of John Wycliffe and Lollardy (1328-1384), *Barnaby Rudge* and the Gordon Riots (1780), and works related to Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498). Burstein links these topics to issues that Victorians certainly could view through a Reformation lens, but then, what controversial religious issue of that age couldn't?

Burstein argues that "controversial fiction played a crucial role in nineteenth-century popular religious and literary culture," and does much by her close readings of the various novels to demonstrate a pervasive belief in an "authentic, providential history underlying all human action through the self's realization of error and consequent transformation" (3). A part of her purpose is to undertake something "virtually unknown in literary studies," the careful treatment of the "controversial historical novel" – historical fiction that "explicitly foregrounds questions of faith [...] in order to *convert* the reader" (4). Most of the novelists considered are Protestant, but from various camps. Catholic authors figure more prominently in Chapter Five, which analyzes "how Catholic novelists pulled apart the neat connections between modernity and Protestantism" (143). This subgenre of historical fiction has been little treated, according

to Burstein, because it was so frequently carried out by non-canonical writers, whose works appeared in “an inexpensive single-volume format from explicitly religious publishers” (9). While cheap religious novels, written by lesser talents and published by small presses, might attract historians of the period interested in publishing practices and readership, their didacticism has not enticed literary scholars. Yet it is the pedagogy of the novels, especially the evangelical ones, that Burstein finds intriguing and which she seeks to explain. “The evangelical novelist,” she argues, “does not simply read the Reformation as an allegory or analogy for Victorian cultural and religious controversies; instead he or she (frequently she) fictionalizes Reformation crises so that the reader may learn to recognize that the present threatens to *repeat* the worst aspects of the past” (16-17).

Victorian Reformations suggests the sense of purpose that these writers felt as they reflected on the religious experience of Britain. But in a book dedicated to lesser-known authors writing across the better part of the nineteenth century, it is notable that Burstein opens with a chapter on Walter Scott’s two reformation novels from 1820, *The Monastery* and *The Abbot*; and closes with an analysis of Charles Dickens’ *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), written more than half a century before the concluding date of the study. Indeed, these are the two best chapters of the book. But their inclusion and positioning immediately raise two important questions related to a broad understanding of common literature and its authenticity in reflecting larger cultural values: How do Scott and Dickens speak to the function and practice of the non-canonical writer hoping to “convert” the reader? and How did religious and cultural change across time affect the practice and definition of controversial religious fiction? Dickens, for instance, chose “to forget the history of religious struggle altogether,” unlike most of the authors considered in the study (201). And the enlightening coda on Savonarola as Reformation figure seems a pretext for incorporating a novel by a distinctly uncommon writer, who draws conclusions more satisfying than mere conversion. In *Romola*, George Eliot “distrusts activists like Savonarola” (214). “Instead of unambiguously

serving as a proto-Protestant Great Man," as Harriet Beecher Stowe had portrayed him, Eliot's Dominican suggests that "self-contradictions, frustrations, and downright equivocations characterize the march of religious reform through history" (215).

Given the liberties the author has taken with her own thesis, one might fairly wish that she had included another characteristically excellent study in historical fiction and religious controversy – perhaps an expansion of her 2013 introduction to Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888). In many ways this was the quintessential novel of religious controversy in the late Victorian era, a period underserved in *Victorian Reformations*. Ward was not a canonical writer, her goal was conversion, and her work was as infused with lessons as any novel in Burstein's study. In an otherwise unsympathetic review, William Gladstone favorably observed that Ward was "possessed" with a "sense of mission." No less an authority than R.W. Church, friend of Newman and Tractarian apologist, labeled Ward the "Prophetess of a 'New Reformation,'" whose "self-constructed" world of "imagination" was specifically designed to refute the old one. Burstein herself observes in the introduction to *Robert Elsmere* that "the novel's core theological crises" had more to do with "the dustup over the Oxford Movement than to what was actually happening in 1880's theology" (7). If Ward's work was longer than most and published by Macmillan, some discussion of these changes in the marketplace would have done much to explain the deepening interest in religion as the Victorian era progressed.

Victorian Reformations includes elements of both literary history and literary criticism. There is a good deal of contextualization, with Scott's "duology" lying "on the other side of the Catholic Emancipation barrier from the Victorian novelists of the rest" of the study (25). But in the end, Burstein is dealing mainly in criticism, more concerned with specific readings than broad analysis. This approach is rewarding as a way to think about controversial religious novels, less so as a way to understand the religious sensibilities that made the novels controversial. The nature of the study is suggested, for instance, in Burstein's characterization of the role

of religion in Scott's *The Monastery*, with "the Catholic origin story" existing "as both presence and absence, imaginable only as the opposite of the obviously pro-Protestant text on the page" (30). But if such novels reflect "a world in which the Catholic past is not only irretrievable, but inconceivable," where "Catholicism no longer has any role to play in the nineteenth-century British polity" (51), it also clarifies the limitations of historical fiction evidence. Scott in fact inspired a generation of young Protestants – most notably John Henry Newman – to look backward, and thus played his own unwitting part in shaping the Tractarian movement.

The inclusion of Chapter Two, on "The Victorian cult of John de Wycliffe," (1328-1384) is justified by a particular kind of evangelical interpretation of the past. Wycliffe and the Lollards seemed "tailor-made for Protestant progenitor hunting." More than a century before Luther, they "celebrated popular access to the Bible in English [...] savagely denounced the Pope and the mendicant orders, and were skeptical about transubstantiation" (55). Burstein notes the "obvious difficulty" of identifying Wycliffe and the Lollards as "the starting point of the Reformation," given that they were "utterly exterminated," but cogently and cleverly observes that "it was precisely their apparent defeat that made them such powerful figures in the end" (76-77). The degree to which historicity is important in a literary study of this type is nevertheless brought to the fore in this chapter. In discussing Emily Sarah Holt's *The Lord Mayor* (1884), Burstein identifies an important problem associated with most of these historical novels: "the protagonist striving to identify with Christ opens up gendered emotional and psychological spaces that escape *strict historical determination*" (70, emphasis added). This chapter also highlights the tenuous relationship between critical readings and chronological development. Burstein observes, for instance, that "tales of the Lollards" were fitted to reconsolidating the "'Britishness' in British Christianity," which seems to suggest that such novels would naturally arise "when Protestants anxiously contemplated the resurgence of modern Catholicism" (77). Such fears were common in the wake of Catholic emancipation (1829); during the Tractarian movement of the 1830s and

1840s; as a result of high-profile defections to the Roman Church in the 1840s and 1850s, and reaching a national peak during the Papal aggression crisis of the early 1850s. Yet apart from a handful of relatively inconsequential works, most Lollard novels were published in the 1870s and 1880s. Once again, the potential value of Burstein's insight is undermined by questions of chronology. The reason Lollardy was not much invoked prior to the Vatican Council may be a subject for another study, but the second book under consideration in this review, Chapman's *Fantasy of Reunion*, suggests how real events such as the Papal declaration of infallibility (1870) changed everything regarding relationships between Protestants and Catholics, from the ecumenical movement to the mindset of historical novelists (203).

Chapman's careful study is of a noble but unrealized idea, of pious, Christian men with "historical imagination" attempting to "reconstruct their churches" in keeping with a perceived "simplicity of the Middle Ages where all shared in the life of close-knit communities" (1, 27-28). For them, as for most of the novelists covered in *Victorian Reformations*, the "relevance of the past for the construction of identity in the present went unquestioned" (1-2). Given an "ecclesiastical situation marked by competition and historical conflict," however, their chance of success was "negligible" (27). If *The Fantasy of Reunion* is the history of a failure, however, it is also a "prehistory of ecumenism," in which the author clarifies the "leading thrusts and specific emphases of the theology and identity" of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in the nineteenth century (1). Though Chapman's work is altogether one of history, its imaginative tenor is as prominent as that of *Victorian Reformations*. For the novelists Burstein treats, there was not much concern for precise doctrines, but rather a kind of "proto-Protestantism" in which Wycliffe, for instance, could be as plainly read into the story as John Foxe or Charles Dickens, a generalized doctrine in which the modernism of anti-Catholicism outweighed any specific aspect of triumphant Protestantism (70). Chapman's heroes, never more than a small minority in either the Anglican or the Roman Catholic Church, were committed to an equally

general and unrealized “embodiment of the great undivided Western Church of medieval Christendom” (4).

Having made clear the improbable nature of the enterprise, Chapman examines a number of mostly disjointed approaches to possible reunion. In Chapter One he focuses on the Oxford Movement, which “emphasized the continuity, catholicity, and apostolicity” of the Anglican Church (3). Here he introduces two of the principal churchmen who figure prominently throughout the ecumenical debate in Britain – Edward Bouverie Pusey (the dreamer) and John Henry Newman (the skeptic). Chapman is especially good in elucidating their “rival versions of catholicity,” with Pusey’s “patristic fundamentalism” (to use a phrase by Peter Nockles) pushing Newman further and further into his doctrine of development (22). By the time of Newman’s conversion in 1845, he had clearly come down on the side of historical modernism – “there simply could not be the degree of probability required for faith”; Catholicity was ultimately to be understood as “a contemporary phenomenon” (23-25). For Newman, apostolicity was the “central thrust of the tracts,” and impossible to reconcile with the catholicity of the Roman Church (24).

Chapter Two, the story of the Association for the Promotion of the Unity of Christendom, suggests how little of substance was ever accomplished in the ecumenical debate through the associationalism common to that age. It features “perhaps the most famous and influential dreamer of dreams,” Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, and his patron Ambrose Lisle March Phillipps (28). The Tractarians with whom Phillipps began corresponding in the mid-1830s were not generally enthusiastic. Some like W.G. Ward did feel that “Roman Catholic sympathy for the Tractarians” in the wake of Newman’s Tract 90 was a harbinger of reunion “at hand,” but Newman himself believed that such enthusiasm might damage the more immediate task of Anglican reform (32). Phillipps pressed on, and in 1857 “judged that the time was ripe” for founding the Association for the Promotion of the Unity of Christendom (36). The organization was officially condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, and rejected even by those with some idyllic sympathy with the cause. According to Newman,

the success of the Association would "require a miracle 'in the same sense in which it would be a miracle for the Thames to change its course and run into the sea at the Wash instead of the Nore'" (61).

Chapman's treatment of Pusey's *Eirenicon* (1865-70) and Newman's reaction in Chapters Three and Four is especially useful in understanding the specific doctrinal issues that were almost always absent in the writing of controversial novels. Despite the "thick correspondence" that ensued, however, and the valiant efforts of men like Alexander Forbes, it all came to nothing. Gladstone, who was a good friend of Forbes and sympathetic to the general idea of reunion, was skeptical about the prospects for reunion, not the least because of his intimate understanding of the conservatism of Church leaders like Manning. "Every occasion that arises for an ecclesiastical proceeding at Rome," Gladstone wrote to Forbes in 1867, "seems to be made use of as a preconcerted plan for the purpose of tightening every definition needed to complete that extreme theory of papal power." Ecumenical reunion, never much more than the dream of a "fanciful historical imagination," completely foundered on the ultramontane ambitions of the Catholic Church and the ultimate results of the Vatican Council (156-57).

Attempts to redefine ecumenism in the wake of the Vatican Council led to a "different style of ecumenical dialogue," rooted in "hostility to the errors of Rome" and "on support for alliances of national catholic churches" (298). Although this distancing from Rome made it possible for more prominent figures of the religious establishment to participate openly, and for approaches to Eastern Orthodoxy, the heightened nationalism that characterized international relations from the 1870s made such nation-based solutions impossible. If the ecumenical movement proved unsuccessful – even fanciful – it was not, however, without tangible result. The Elizabeth Tower and the Oscott College Chapel are still worth a visit, and continue to speak to a particular kind of medievalism that once had wings.

Neither *Victorian Reformations* nor *The Fantasy of Reunion* deals with English society as a whole; or with English religious society; or even

with the majority of Anglicans, Catholics, or Nonconformists. These are studies on the margins, of true believers who believed that the past was simple and useful. The subjects of these books, like Pugin's architectural remains, are well worth a visit. At a time and place where religion was central in the public consciousness, when it was "not less possible to disbelieve religiously than to believe religiously" (John Morley, *On Compromise*, Chapter 4), the complex nature of religion must be hunted down in a hundred small places.

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