

Renewing the Christian Imaginary through the Church building

Alison Milbank

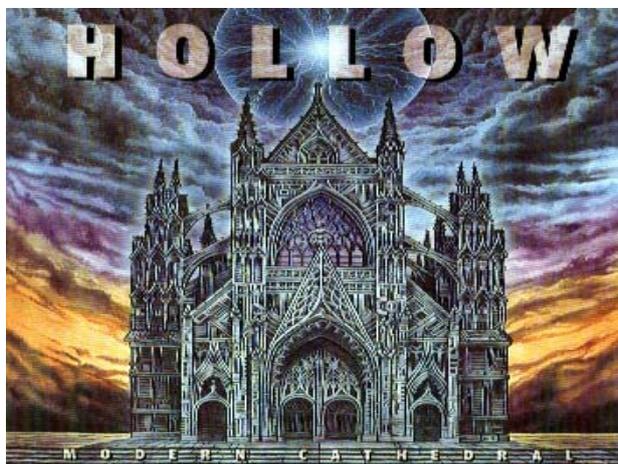
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I am now quite well known, if not notorious, for suggesting, with my co-author of *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions*, Andrew Davison, that what is dismissively called 'inherited church' actually has value, not just as heritage but as central to our mission today. I am accused of being nostalgic, of pitting an ideal parish against the worst examples of Fresh Expressions, and of failing to take account of how distant Christian faith and culture has become from the lives of ordinary people. I am not going to focus on this debate in our time together, unless you want to, but rather present a theology of time and space, which undergirds a belief in the Church as an institution and series of practices that can speak to the longings and needs of people in the 21st century. For in a recent survey, 40% of those questioned visited a church building for prayer or a bit of peace. Cathedrals attract larger numbers of visitors all the time, who come not only to gape like tourists but to light candles. Recently, I persuaded the Chapter of Southwell Minster to place leaflets on Christian doctrine, beliefs about death etc and how to pray in large numbers of copies in our candle chapel. In ten days the whole lot had gone! And Southwell is a rural cathedral in a non-touristy Midlands backwater, if Robin will forgive my so describing our beautiful little town. In Lambley, a village church where I was once a curate, whenever the church was open people would call in. So it is in any church that is left open. Just because fewer people attend church on a Sunday, there is no reason to believe that it is the building that is responsible for their non-appearance. So what I shall offer in our three sessions together is a way of beginning to conceive a theology that comes out of an awareness that sometimes the place draws people to Christ and only we get in the way. As the poet-priest David Scott puts it in a poem about the surplice: 'We have put these garments on for centuries. / They persist. We wither and crease inside them'. Only God could put on a body in time and space and not wither and crease inside them, but make limitation large and spacious.

In these 3 talks I want to suggest ways in which we can begin to make sense of our mission to preach the gospel of incarnation and redemption and new life - but by taking a step back. Our problem today is that many people have lost any sense of a religious dimension in their lives. It is still there – how could it not be? But they have lost all connection to it. And to begin evangelism is to help people to recognise the depths to their own person. So the approach I wish to take is broadly phenomenological in philosophical terms, meaning the conceiving of who we are and the reality through our bodily perceptions, and how our

perception of time and space discloses to us the real. I am interested in ways in which the tactile and sensory experience of a holy place can reorder our experience in a religious direction. The first talk sets up the project theologically. In the two further talks I shall first examine the way in which we can use art and architecture to reorder our spatial religious awareness, and secondly, I shall examine the role of narrative and drama in reordering our sense of time. The two are intimately connected, of course, as in the case of bell-ringing. In Elizabeth Jennings' poem, 'The Bell-Ringer, the bells not only mark sacred time but 'renew the town, discover it/And give it back itself again, the man/ pulling the rope collects the houses as /thoughts gather'. Bells have been central to the Queen's Jubilee celebrations this summer, and to the Olympic celebrations, including the torch perambulations, which are frequently welcomed by the bells.

This reorientation of experience is central to the project of restoring the religious imaginary. This term, 'the imaginary' is used by cultural critics to describe the common mental furniture by which a community creates its imagined world and its limits. Religion has played a central role in this activity but is less and less 'good to think'. Fortunately, cathedrals have still considerable symbolic power. Anniversary celebrations of the blitz have featured the photograph of the dome of St Paul's , its cross aloft above the destructive smoke, while the ruins of Coventry and its peaceable rebuilding continue to enjoy considerable importance in



the West Midlands. My nephews started spontaneously playing 'Winchester Cathedral' on their iphones this Christmas, and the heavy metal band, The Hollow, had considerable success with their album, 'Cathedral', reissued this Christmas, showing a distinctly rayonnant French Gothic west front on the cover.

Funerals royal and celebrity or those of the dead by violence keep cathedrals in the public eye, and their sheer power as buildings keeps people flocking in to visit, if not to pray (though we are all aware of the hundreds of inchoate prayers that do make their way to our altars or are left by candle sconces). Our opportunities to welcome, influence and enlighten, are possible because the building itself still possesses public importance. And this is equally true of the parish church, in its own way. Think of Soham church after the murders of the little girls, or Tewkesbury in the floods.

In November of last year, Benedict XVI finally consecrated Gaudi's great unfinished cathedral of the Holy Family in Barcelona. In his homily on that occasion, he had important

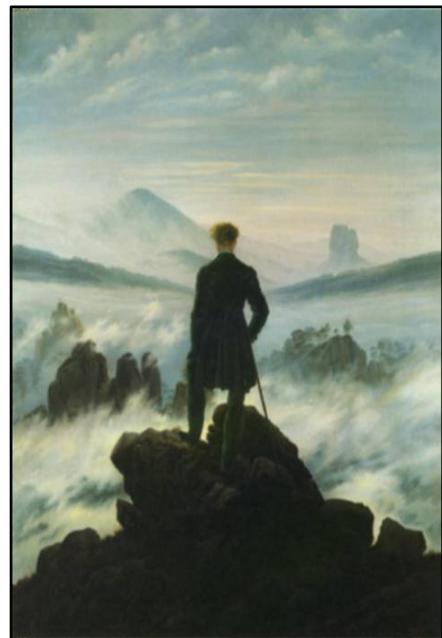


things to say about the purpose of a cathedral or church. In concluding he said that *'Gaudi, by opening his spirit to God, was capable of creating in this city a space of beauty, faith and hope, which leads man to an encounter with Him who is truth and beauty itself. The architect expressed his sentiments in the following words: "A church [is] the only thing*

worthy of representing the soul of a people, for religion is the most elevated reality in man".

Here Benedict unites the two functions of a church which I want to explore this afternoon: first, sacred space as an encounter with beauty and truth that leads us to the origin of those transcendentals in God himself; secondly, an understanding of what it means to be human – our 'elevated reality' as creatures, which enables us to be creative, like Gaudi himself.

Among many of my students at Nottingham, as well as my children's university friends, there reigns a secular, atheist orthodoxy. Not only are they unbelievers but they believe they have no religious sense. And yet, as tutorial meetings reveal, their hearts are churning cauldrons of turmoil, longings, unfulfilled desires, and a sort of homesickness for something they cannot name. I believe it is no accident that one of the few reproductions of paintings among the greeting card section of the student union shop is this image by Caspar David Friedrich, 'Wanderer above a Sea of Fog,' which vividly embodies Augustine's famous lines from his *Confessions*, *'our hearts are restless until they rest in You'*, or Dante's description, following a later line in the *Confessions*, that God is *'the sea, to which all things flow, that it creates, and nature forms.'*





Friedrich, a devoutly Christian Romantic painter demonstrates in all his work this searching of the soul for truth and beauty, which he frequently embodies in the form of a church, whether in mystical form resting like God's throne in the clouds, surrounded by cherubim, or rising up out of a mountain like a giant pine.



With its complexity, depth and excess, a cathedral is a most appropriate place in which to awaken the dormant religious sense: to open on to mystery. Its size, its sheer scale, even its strangeness, and the bizarre activities going on within it render it what the cultural critic Michel Foucault terms a 'heterotopia' or 'other place/place of otherness', a site that is both within society and constructed by it but by its very perfection and difference questions and destabilises our structures of thought and practice. The modern 'buffered' self sufficient subject needs to be estranged from his or her instrumental attitude to time and space and a cathedral is central enough to be part of the mental furniture, but strange enough to shock and disorient the visitor. This can happen through the stumble on the worn step – like Proust's famous 'spot of time' in the Guermantes courtyard – or the uncertainty about which way to move in a great space of a nave crossing, by the withdrawn meditation of a statue glimpsed in a dark recess, by the distant sound of choir practice, the ironic glance of an impish grotesque figure in a niche, someone praying in a corner. Cathedrals in continental Europe, despite the usual lack of friendly stewards to greet the visitor, or the occasional surly

conciierge of dusty postcards, often give a stronger sense of the religious precisely because they are intent on their own life and purposes: individuals pray and light candles, masses are said, and the visitor is aware of a lived experience with its own rhythms and time. Foucault has a word for this too: 'heterochrony'

I am not suggesting that we should do away with our welcomers, ignore health and safety, or do away with our signage, bemusing the casual visitor completely. Nor can an Anglican cathedral be a mirror of Catholic piety. But we do need to take seriously the building not as a dead object but a living organism, of which we are a part, and one that has its own role to play in evoking the religious sense. D. H. Lawrence's *Will Brangwen* sees Lincoln Cathedral as '*a seed in silence, dark before germination ... a great involved seed, whereof the flower would be radiant life inconceivable.*' We know that every cathedral from Durham to Guildford is in constant repair and rebuilding, that we are also always adding new things, from gargoyles to lavatories and works of art. As those privileged sometimes to be alone in these great buildings, we know how the stones settle and seem ready to speak. There is a wonderful moment in Susanna Clarke's modern fantasy, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norell*, when the figures in York Minster all start talking at once of what they have seen and experienced, judging the humans who bring violence and destruction in their wake. Victor Hugo in *Notre Dame de Paris*, calls the building a great book, but it is like the book in a fairy tale: one that speaks in its own voice. Geoff Stephens' song, 'Winchester Cathedral' that my nephews played me over Christmas chides the building for not speaking:

Winchester Cathedral

You're bringing me down

You stood and you watched as

My baby left town.

You could have done something

But you didn't try

You didn't do nothing

But let her walk by.

Now everyone knows how much I needed that gel

She wouldn't have gone far away if you'd started ringing your bell.

A cathedral has the power to make us experience the world beyond the self not as dead object over which we have power but as subject: call, challenge and mystery. It evokes two aspects of the religious sense: first, the pull of something beyond the self, beyond the physical, its towers or spire pointing heavenward, its nave pulling one into a centre, its crypt

to the supernatural depths, its worship and music lifting us to transcendence. But secondly, it allows us to understand the cosmos and the physical world itself in a new way. Religion, meaning tying together links us not only with God but through that divine connection with the rest of creation. To a Christian perspective, the world is contingent, gaining its being from a divine origin but from that divine perspective it is then set free from our appropriation.

In a recent public debate, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek described our contemporary experience of reality as that of someone playing a computer game. The graphics are fully realized in the foreground but run into dead ends and cul de sacs where they give out and one can go no further. We are, of course, engaging with the physical world as much as our ancestors ever did, but our experience is culturally mediated by our technology in a way that hides the process of construction. Our relation to the tools that make our lives possible – mobile telephones, mp3 players, televisions and cars – is much more instrumental. We cannot mend these electronic items nor do we often understand the materials from which they are constructed. So we either use them as if they were nothing, or else we stand before their power like helpless victims. Like Karl Marx's famous danse macabre of the commodities in *Capital* they seem to take on a quasi-human agency: my husband's car, if it skids, cuts off the brake function, for example, denying him the power to stop on a slope.

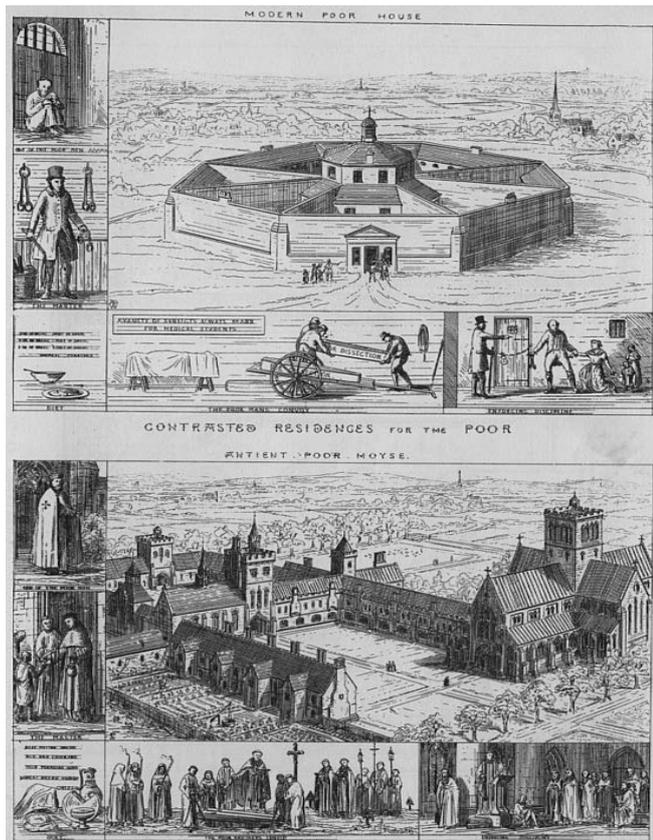
An ancient cathedral is the height of medieval technology, constructed by means of complex engineering and technical skill. But unlike the mp3 player, it shows its working. We are made aware of the power of natural materials: wood, iron, stone. You can often see and feel the tensile energy of vaulting, or see the function of a flying buttress. At Ely the non-vertiginous can ascend the lantern to marvel at its mode of construction. When restoration is carried out at Durham, the new work displays its newness, being dated. Cathedrals are also readable in mathematical terms, being carefully ordered according to numerology and classical theories of proportion, which all go back to the human body. Augustine's *De Musica* is a very influential text but it is as much about proportion and geometry as it is about music itself. Teaching someone to experience all this allows a new relation to the world beyond the self that is unalienated in the Marxist sense. We have mason's marks to show who shaped each stone, even if we have no individual names; we can name the quarry from which each stone is hewn; the mud for bricks. Hard human labour is there for all to see. The cathedral's construction is thus a mode of critique of our modern attitude to the inanimate world of things.

In the nineteenth century the revolutionary Victor Hugo, in France and Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin in Britain, all looked to the Gothic church as a challenge to contemporary

capitalism and economic injustice. Carlyle takes the Abbey Church of St Edmundsbury as foil to Victorian political economy.

Pugin the Catholic architect makes a whole volume of *Contrasts* between nineteenth and thirteenth and fourteenth century social practices relate to architecture, as in this example.

The modern Benthamite panopticon and workhouse punitive attitude to the poor is contrasted to the medieval almshouse, liturgical dignity for all and public beauty of the abbey. This is certainly an idealised picture but modern historians bear out the fact that the attitude to the poor takes a new turn for the worse at the



Reformation, with the downgrading of the acts of charity, and English social provision of the thirteenth century was the best until the coming of the welfare state. The point about the use of the great church as critique of commodity capitalism, however, was that it allowed a vision of difference: another way of living, with other values. And this is as true of a modern church building as of an ancient one.



One of the main areas of interest for the Victorian social critics was the stone carving. Although the myth of the carver doing whatever he liked is not quite accurate, there is no doubt that considerable artistic and iconographical freedom was allowed to the mason. They followed drawings and other patterns on some occasions but had an astonishing energy and wit of expression, which gives to the medieval church its intense sense of lived experience. The whole of life is represented – birth, death, urination, copulation – as in this example from Strasburg. Not only human activities but all manner of creatures are to be found, from camels to unicorns, snails to elephants.



Here is a lion, and here a new ceiling boss at Ely made by Peter Ball. My own cathedral at Southwell is rich in foliage, especially in the Chapter House,



where a variety of trees and wild flowers are presented

with vivid realism, as here.



These schemes are often quite deliberate and authorised by clergy, especially in the case of the Southwell Chapter House. They are part of the same theological vision that made the illuminated gospels and other medieval holy books. The cathedral

represents the whole book of creation, just as the Jewish temple, as Margaret Barker and other scholars have made us aware, embodied the seven days of creation in Genesis. Benedict shows how this vision of the role of the building inspired Gaudi too:

In this place, Gaudí desired to unify that inspiration which came to him from the three books which nourished him as a man, as a believer and as an architect: the book of nature, the book of sacred Scripture and the book of the liturgy. In this way he brought together the reality of the world and the history of salvation, as recounted in the Bible and made present in the liturgy. He made stones, trees and human life part of the church so that all creation might come together in praise of God.

The church was therefore a giant Benedicite: *'O all ye works of the Lord, praise ye the Lord.'* Humanity finds its role as giving names and life to these other creatures, as their representative and priest. There is therefore a strong ecological theology embedded in the stones. (commend Barker's Bible and Creation book)

This is possible because the act of representation of animal or leaf sets it free from our control. In an important essay, 'On Fairy-stories', the fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien shows how human creative imagination makes this possible. One of the functions of the fairy-tale or authored fantasy story is to enable the recovery of a clear view of the world. *'I do not say, seeing things as they are, and embroil myself with the philosophers'* he writes but *'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them as things apart from ourselves.'* We read about golden apples and silver pears so that we return to a reality of green apples, but

seeing them with a new realism, a shock of their thisness, Those of us who are visually challenged can get this effect with a new prescription: suddenly the world looks super-real, pressing itself on our eyelids

Our society treats oil and wood as commodities to be exploited, and animals more and more as inert instruments of our consumption – the new farming practice of continuous milking and gigantic and unnatural herds being a clear example. In a cathedral every object challenges us with its presence and subjectivity. Either a little carved bird is pecking happily at a vine, or it is regarding us with an ironic eye. Its removal from forest to cathedral emphasizes both its createdness – it is a work of the human, trembling hand and marked by that – and its excessive life. As at the stable in Bethlehem, according to the poet W., H. Auden, so here *‘everything became a You and nothing was an It’*.

The creatures encountered in stone carving and glass are also surprisingly friendly, even humorous, partly by the expressive nature of the style of carving, and its exaggeration. They embody the moderate and participatory realism of medieval Thomism in which to know something, whether a daisy or a stone carving, was to recognise its form – its daisyness, its stoniness, its integrity as an object, its proportion and relatedness, and thus to unify with it. The element of exaggeration in carving and glass alike enabled this act of recognition, which was one in which the relation of the individual manifestation of the daisy or stone imp was linked back to its divine origin in its truthfulness and beauty. This quality Thomas called radiance or *claritas*. It is to this neo-platonic participatory mode of knowing and its light metaphysics that we owe the development of window openings and tracery in our cathedrals. It makes the structure a subject rather than an object, a mediation too rather than an idol.

This mode of relation, this way of knowing an object, is at the heart of a very influential little book, *The Religious Sense*, by Luigi Giussani, a priest and secondary school teacher, who is the founder of the huge lay movement, Communion and Liberation, in the Catholic Church. His book is all about evoking the religious sense, which relates us to God, through our encounter with reality in its physical as well as spiritual reality. He calls this relational quality in experience, ‘ana’:

*This reality with which we collide releases a word, an invitation, a meaning as if upon impact. The word is like a word, a ‘logos’, which sends you further, calls upon you to another, beyond itself, further up. In Greek, ‘up’ is expressed in the word ‘ana’. This is the value of analogy: the structure of the ‘impact’ of the human being with reality awakens within the individual a voice which draws him or her towards a meaning which is farther on, farther up – **ana**.*

In a church it is not only the beauty of madonnas or angels which has this analogical function, the ugly figures too participate in the mystery. Cathedrals in particular, modern as well as medieval, are full of contemporary expressionist carvings and medieval grotesques. In a fable entitled, 'On Gargoyles' G. K. Chesterton provides a theological justification for this in the words of the priest who had originally designed a pure and beautiful structure:

*"I was wrong and they are right.
The sun, the symbol of our father, gives life to all
those earthly things that are full of ugliness and energy.
All the exaggerations are right, if they exaggerate the right thing.
Let us point to heaven with tusks and horns and fins
and trunks and tails so long as they all point to heaven.
The ugly animals praise God as much as the beautiful.
The frog's eyes stand out of his head because he is staring at heaven.
The giraffe's neck is long because he is stretching towards heaven.
The donkey has ears to hear-let him hear."*

*And under the new inspiration they planned a gorgeous cathedral
in the Gothic manner, with all the animals of the earth
crawling all over it, and all the possible ugly things making
up one common beauty, because they all appealed to the god.
The columns of the temple were carved like necks of giraffes;
the dome was like an ugly tortoise; and the highest pinnacle was
a monkey standing on his head with his tail pointing at the sun.
And yet the whole was beautiful, because it was lifted up in one
living and religious gesture as a man lifts his hands in prayer.*

As the historian Carolyn Walker Bynum has pointed out, the word 'monster' derives from the Latin verb to show, 'monstrare' and dragons and Leviathans show the power of God. In a cathedral they are put to use: gargoyles direct water away from the building; a dragon is a handle for the infirm or fatigued to hold to go up the steps from the Southwell Chapter House, and is firmly put in his place by St Michael over a doorway



Monsters in medieval manuscripts are a sign to pay attention: to read, mark and inwardly digest the holy text, and green men so ubiquitous in our churches of this period are similar figures, often masticating the branch, as here at Ely.



Meaning to show, the monster is there to point beyond himself, like every object in the medieval book of nature. For Giussani, writing after phenomenology, every object still has this provocative character – this excess. ‘Reality’ he writes, ‘presents itself to me in such a way that solicits me to pursue something else...Faced with the sea, the earth, the sky ... I am not impassive. I am animated, moved, and touched by what I see. And this motion is towards a search for something else. To make sense of something, to respond to it, is already to move beyond it. Why do poets compare their mistress’s eyes to something else: ‘she walks in beauty like the night...’? if not because to see something that affects us is already to see it meta-physically, beyond its physical appearance.

A cathedral takes that signifying potential we experience in daily life and raises it to a new self-consciousness. There is no detail in a cathedral, its art, its structure, its music and liturgy that is not analogical because it is a gigantic sign system and engine of the religious sense, as it is also, as Gaudi pointed out, of human aspiration. New cathedrals are just as self-conscious, indeed, rather more orderly sign systems because of the relative speed with which they are raised.

As sign systems they are also revelatory in a deliberately beautiful fashion. Modern art and art theory shies away from the beautiful and is more comfortable with art as critique and deconstruction, indeed they shy away also from materiality in favour of art as idea. A cathedral is not only a patron of modern art but one that enables a new aesthetic, which still uses words like beauty but has a generous understanding of what beauty might be, not a self-sufficient perfection but one that is ‘ana’ calling us further, beyond itself. One indeed, that embraces the ugly and suffering body but makes a harmony that does justice to a fallen world.

It is a beauty that is participatory, calling the self into relation with it. As the Christian Platonist theologian, pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite wrote in *The Divine Names*, beauty ‘is given this name because it is the cause of the harmony and splendour in everything, because like a light it flashes onto everything the beauty-causing impartations of its own

well-spring ray. Beauty 'bids' all things to itself...and gathers everything to itself.' 76 We can see how the beauty of Christ in the gospels allows others to be beautiful. Encounters with Him cause a new stillness and harmony to those he 'abides' with in the gospels. I asked a colleague once how she came to faith and she replied, 'because Christianity is so beautiful it must be true.' To the world that built our ancient church buildings beauty, truth and goodness went together, having their union in the divine life. If our mission as cathedrals is to be centres of truth-seeking, leading people deeper into the Christian mystery, we need also to see beauty as evangelical. *'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings'*.

I have ranged far and wide in this talk, to offer a theology of the church building as an engine of the religious sense, calling us beyond, ever farther, and offering a theology cosmic in scale, which embraces the whole of experience. In the two next talks, I shall seek to earth this theology in practice, in our work of education, to see how this theology of participation can be engendered.

To finish, I give a quotation not from Benedict XVI but from our own Anglican Reformation theologian, Richard Hooker, who wrote: *'All things therefore are partakers of God, they are his offspring, his influence is in them.'*