

INVISIBLE PILGRIMS

The Franciscan spirit in England after the Reformation.

This is not an academic paper.

Academic research should be detached, analytical, but the kind of work I've pursued has been very personal. An idea might ring a personal bell and I want to know if it's true or it's only a ringing in my own ears. A chance discovery might mean something to us when others have disregarded it and it sets us on our trail. Those people, objects, or ideas we explore become part of ourselves and we draw them into our lives. We become unashamedly emotional because we would not spend so much time and genuinely exhausting work if we weren't driven by a personal passion. This kind of study is part of our vocation.

This is, to a certain extent, a record of a personal quest. It's also a proposal to myself for what might be a very long course of study. It might not have any value to anyone else. It might just be a product of my own limited vision. It's part of my vocation, and part of my own pilgrimage, even if it might be a wander into misleading but pretty paths. This story is, in part, a prelude to a project that will keep me out of trouble, or push me into it, for years to come.

ENGLISH FRANCISCANS

There's something a bit odd, perhaps creatively uncomfortable, about being an English Franciscan. A Roman Catholic member of one of the orders has a continuous history of thought and activity from Francis onwards. We have a sudden break in the 1530s. The monasteries are closed and the religious orders are expelled. What happens to our history? Do we pretend nothing happened and adopt the following centuries of Catholic Franciscan tradition as our own? Or do we accept that we have a different local tradition that brings an extra quality to the world-wide Franciscan family?

Of course we are followers of Christ in the way of St Francis and not something separate from the Church as a whole. The riches of centuries and so many traditions are overwhelming so this need not be a big part of our lives.

We all enjoy different poets, writers, sacred places. There is a very wide variety of approaches – and it's unnecessary to limit ourselves to Anglicans. Many Anglicans also love non-conformist hymns. Bunyan, theologically a long way from the sort of moderately high church I tend to like, is very important to me, coming from Bedford and having walked on paths on which he walked. As I will explain later.

We can enjoy this wealth but I am looking at a specific area and a question which intrigues me.

After the Franciscans were driven out of England did anything remain? Did a Franciscan spirit continue and, perhaps, influence some of those English divines, and attitudes, after the Reformation?

Francis was not trying to be original. He wasn't inventing a new religion. He was being as close to Christ as anyone ever could be. The broad core of Franciscanism is common to all Christianity, but Francis had a new and intense focus. It might reasonably be said to be impossible to distinguish a spirit in England that was Franciscan and not simply Christian. I suggest that there might be a few threads, not necessarily important, which show a unique colour in the tapestry.

We can't begin to imagine the shock of Reformation. The destruction of art and culture was on a massive scale. It might have been a good thing and a necessary break but as a

musician I can listen to the music that survived by chance, just a fraction of what there was, and know that English church music was the most sophisticated and beautiful in Europe – and this highest or high art was to the glory of God and, very significantly, available to anyone of any station who wandered into a major church. But the Reformation happened. We have to get over it.

The Franciscans had been a major part of English life. The universities were dominated by Franciscan academics. England (and the British Isles) had been a very major part of Franciscanism. Many of the most important theologians and philosophers were from these islands – Alexander of Hailes. Roger Bacon, William of Ockham, Duns Scotus. Bonaventure nearly became Archbishop of York. The Third Order included as central a figure in this moment of change as Sir Thomas More. Within a few decades any open involvement with catholic orders would be dangerous. Very importantly, the English church wrote off centuries of theology and philosophy in a search for uncorrupted authenticity. By the 17th century Bonaventure, the greatest Franciscan theologian, was a reviled figure because he was only known through an extreme and outrageous book “The Psalter of Mary”, seen as the worst kind of Roman excess. The book has nothing to do with Bonaventure at all.

The friary at Greenwich was founded in 1415 as house of the new order of Observant Friars. This became an important centre, with 140 friars and close royal connections. Queen Catherine may have been a tertiary and a regular visitor. The friars were strongly on her side and against the King's plans for a divorce. This would lead to disastrous conflict, though at first the king tried to bring them round with gifts. Princess Elizabeth was baptised at Greenwich with grand ceremony in 1533. The friars had already become suspect for reasons which might surprise us. They were thought to be verging towards Lutheranism and the king was proud to be the Defender of the Faith against Luther's evil reforms. By the 1530s some orders were arguing strongly for reform and it seems some Franciscans happily moved sideways into Protestantism. Though Thomas Cromwell made arrangements from the Greenwich friars to leave the country at least thirty were tortured and executed.

In the 1520s the Friar John Ryckes wrote a book of spiritual guidance “The Ymage of love.” This was printed by Wynkyn de Worde and sixty copies sent to the Bridgettine Abbey at Syon. (See FULLER for many references to Ryckes.) Ryckes' work was written specially for the nuns at Syon – which suggests that these communities did not live hermetically sealed from each other and the world but worked together.

How little we know of the reality of early 16th century religion in England. Here was a Friar in a large establishment, rife with reformist thinking, printing a book for an astonishing Abbey which was a centre of spirituality and possessed a large library of spiritual writings. Syon had been established by Henry V in 1415 as part of a vast project which included the new palace at Richmond and a series of religious buildings around it. By the time of Henry VII this was a centre of high Renaissance culture, art, music, theology. The church at Syon was as big as Salisbury cathedral. It was ripped down when it was just over a hundred years old and replaced by a grand house for the Duke of Somerset – though the building survived long enough for Henry VIII's body to rest at Syon on its way to Windsor. Due to its bloatedness and corruption the corpse exploded while it was there.

A decade or so before the English Reformation Ryckes is aware that change was needed:

“If we look well upon holy scripture and upon the old living of good Christian men, if books be true, we may see and know that we are now out of the way and full unlike to the priests and religious in old time.” (FULLER p. 53)

In the past the church, he writes, was simple:

“Then were treen chalices and golden priests, now be golden chalices & treen priests.” (FULLER p. 60)

Ross Fuller sees Ryckes as part of a movement to a “New Devotion”, a secular monasticism as developed by the Brotherhood of the Common Life in the Netherlands, with emphasis on the individual as the temple. This “New Devotion” slid gently into Lutheranism, and yet Ryckes is writing from a Franciscan point of view. He himself may have become a Lutheran while many of his brothers met terrible ends. His book certainly did have a life after the Reformation. It was reprinted in 1587 and again in 1647 as something that might be of value in those troubled times. Who might this later edition be aimed at? Ryckes, with his puritanical criticism of images, doesn’t seem to appeal to catholic or high church minds.

NAUGHTY FRIARS

In Elizabethan England friars and monks had become either figures of fun or sinister and evil characters. At the time of the Spanish Armada popular culture could easily associate any Catholics with the very serious threat of invasion, but in the years following the friars and monks became stock figures and this continues for two hundred years and more, with a large swathe of late eighteenth century gothic literature being dominated by the evil plotting of various monks and Jesuits. It’s fortunate that better writers, like Jane Austen, turned away from this tasteless stuff.

An example of how popular culture saw Franciscans is Robert Greene’s play “Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay”, first performed in about 1590. This derives from earlier stories about Roger Bacon. Bacon was a significant figure in the beginnings of modern science, and the Franciscans played a part in looking at the world scientifically. If God can be known in nature it is good to know how nature works. Bacon became associated with pseudo-science and alchemy in the middle ages but by the mid 16th century protestant prejudice had turned him into a demon-served necromancer.

This leads to entertaining and powerful stories but it is also a sign of something genuinely sinister that we have no yet grown out of. Medieval science was forward looking. The medieval church supported scientific research. No one was ever prosecuted or burnt at the stake for scientific discoveries. Galileo’s disputes were about authority and the nature of knowledge rather than his theories themselves. The popular view of the middle ages is partly the result of Protestant propaganda. (See HANNAM pp.1ff)

In the play Bacon, and the purely fictitious Bungay, are out and out magicians. There are odd traces of the real Bacon in that the play’s Bacon uses a magic mirror. The real Bacon studied optics. The play features the story of Bacon’s prophesying Brazen Head, familiar, perhaps, from Masefield’s “The Box of Delights.” Curiously Masefield’s Punch and Judy man, Cole Hawlings turns out to be the Franciscan Ramon Lull, who has found the elixir of life.

Another, more benign but possibly equally damaging, Elizabethan popular image of the Franciscans is Friar Tuck. The jolly venal friar is not, of course, either a historical figure or a character associated with the early versions of Robin Hood. Robin Hood’s story is set in the time of King Richard the Lionheart and King John, in the 12th century before St Francis’s ministry. The Robin Hood stories developed over a long period, drawing together several elements. Friar Tuck seems to have begun in the second half of the 15th century, developed in May Day plays and to have become a regular feature in later Tudor times when the stories would have seemed to have come from an already distant dream of Merrie England.

SHAKESPEARE THE FRANCISCAN

If we take note of the way Friars had become stock dramatic characters in the 16th century and continued to be for two hundred years and more, and at how propaganda very rapidly distorted the picture of medieval culture, we may see how very different Shakespeare’s world is.

The deeply unpleasant Christopher Marlowe had written in Doctor Faustus:

“I charge thee to return and change thy shape,
Thou art too ugly to attend on me.
Go, and return an old Franciscan friar;
That holy shape becomes a devil best.” (1.3.25-28)

(This effectively counts out Marlowe as a Shakespeare in disguise as I will demonstrate.)

Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, a copy of which was placed in every church in an act of mass brainwashing that has rarely been surpassed in history, mentions:

“...the spiteful malice of these spider-friars, in sucking all things to poison, and in forging that which is not true.” (FOXES p. 107)

By 1611 the stock character of the wicked friar had become an overused cliché. George Chapman wrote in “May-Day”

“Out upon’t, that disguise is worn threadbare upon every stage, and so much villainy committed under that habit that ‘tis gown as suspicious as the vilest.”
(SHAKESPEARE p. 314)

In spite of the opportunities to introduce corrupt or satanic holy men into his historic plays or comedies Shakespeare avoids such easy targets. In contrast to the popular figures Shakespeare allows good Catholics to appear in his plays, and these are predominantly specifically Franciscan.

In one of Shakespeare’s earliest plays, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, a Friar Laurence and a Friar Patrick are mentioned.

“’Tis true, for Friar Laurence met them both
As he in penance wander’d through the forest.
Him he knew well; and guess’d that it was she,
But, being mask’d, he was not sure of it.
Besides, she did intend confession
At Patrick’s cell this even, and there she was not.” (5.2.38)

Confession to a priest was strongly disapproved of as a catholic enormity, in Elizabethan England, but Shakespeare refers to it elsewhere, and in every case Shakespeare’s friars are good men, though also very human.

Romeo and Juliet has Friar Laurence and Much Ado About Nothing has Friar Francis, both good men with a role in the denouement of the story, not stock villains. The question of how catholic Shakespeare was himself has been argued over at enormous length. Whatever his personal religious commitment was he wrote with a deep concern for catholic theology. Hamlet is a rich field of questions over purgatory and subtle investigations of the question of merit, in conflict with the Calvinist views of the time. He never makes fun of the religious life. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream Theseus warns Hermia of the difficulties of becoming a nun, vaguely made Grecian by the reference to “chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon” and yet “thrice blessed they that master so their blood.”

Measure for Measure has an extraordinary Franciscan presence. The Duke lives in the disguise of a friar, under the guidance of Friar Peter, leaving Angelo in charge of Vienna. The play is all about vice, punishment and moral decisions. The central female character is

Isabella, specifically a “votress of St Clare”, with a Sister Francisca as a colleague. Isabella has not taken her final vows and the play leads to her temptation to relinquish her virginity to Angelo in order to save her brother, Claudio. The ending of the play is curious. The conventional climax in a society that had a deep distrust of religious orders, would be for Isabella to abandon the order and marry. The audience might take that as a satisfactory outcome, but Shakespeare seems to leave the end open. Claudio has been saved anyway, thanks to the return of the Duke, and the Duke, in the last lines, proposes to Isabel:

“.....Dear Isabel,
I have a motion much imports your good;

Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,

What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.”

But everyone leaves before any answer is given. Isabella has given no sign at all that she would be interested in any such offer and any sign of acceptance would clash violently with her character throughout the play. It's as if Shakespeare was aware that he had arrived at dangerous moment. Could Isabella, on the late Elizabethan stage, have turned away and remained a Sister of St Clare, a purely catholic heroine?

It's all very odd. Shakespeare's positive presentation of Franciscans is not explained by his sources. He was writing 60 and 70 years, two or more generations, after the expulsion of the orders from England. Where did his attitude come from? It's a bottomless question. Some writers have looked for signs that Shakespeare knew Italy, and found detailed knowledge of Franciscan sites in the Merchant of Venice – and yet in other plays geography is recklessly disregarded.

There is no reason to suppose that Shakespeare was a catholic, but perhaps it was possible to have a surprisingly sympathetic attitude in the face of the dominant puritan Calvinist mood. The Queen, in her private worship, was as catholic in her worship as she could be.

THE FRIAR OF VENICE

If you search for the Venetian friar Francesco Giorgi (or, in Venetian style, Zorzi) on Google many of the references which come up are about his influence on Shakespeare, in particular the “Serenade to Music” in The Merchant of Venice. Lorenzo speaks to Jessica, Shylock's daughter, of the Music of the Spheres:

“There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eye'd cherubins:
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.”

This is a traditional idea going back to classical times. All the references to this influence of the Friar of Venice which you stumble across on-line derive from an article by Dame Frances Yates, the great historian of esoteric tradition. Her books are fascinating and intensely researched studies of the influence of occult thought on culture and politics. Shakespeare and Giorgi are discussed in “The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age”, published in 1981. (YATES) Yates suggests that Shakespeare not only took the idea of the harmony of the spheres from Giorgi's massive book “De Harmonia Mundi” but that his play also has underlying themes from Jewish cabala. The play features Jewish characters, Shylock and Jessica, who, contrary to what some people say, are treated with astonishing sympathy

compared to the popular attitudes of the time – including those of Christopher Marlowe in “The Jew of Malta”. It’s set in Giorgi’s home city. Yates’s theory is attractive but there is no evidence you can get your teeth into.

The effect of Yates’s book has been to associate Giorgi with the occult tradition and magic. There is no magic in “De Harmonia Mundi”. It may be esoteric but it isn’t occult

Francesco Giorgi (born 1466) was an important figure in religious politics in Venice. In 1500 he was guardian of the monastery of San Francesco della Vigna. He famously advised the monastery on the appropriate mathematical proportions for their church, based on threes in celebration of the Trinity. This is a physical expression of the theme of harmony. He was closely involved with Venetian Jews and is said to have converted Rabbi Marco Raffaele to Christianity. Giorgi did become familiar with cabala and his book includes a passage which uses cabbala to show the relationship of the name Jesus to the name of God. This is a passing detail in a massive book that aims to show how all things come from unity and, amongst everything else, how all religions have traces of truth.

Giorgi had a connection with England which may have brought him favour in high places. He was involved with the very detailed research to support Henry VIII’s case for an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. (Henry was never divorced from any of his wives.) Giorgio worked with the English agent Richard Croke and made contact with the rabbinical scholars who might give a ruling on the legitimacy of a marriage to the king’s brother’s widow. Though a case could be made Giorgi was warned to drop this hot potato by the Venetian senate. There is a possibility that Giorgi came to England in 1530 or 1531. His friend the ex-rabbi Marco Raffaele certainly did come to England as an exile at that time.

De Harmonia Mundi was published in Latin in 1525 and in a French translation in 1579. Though it’s impossible to prove that it had a direct influence in England it’s an elaborate expression of the ideas that drove the Italian Renaissance and inspired Elizabethan culture. The core theme, the underlying harmony of all creation was common currency, but it is tempting to imagine the book as the ultimate manual for poets and artists, people like Shakespeare and Spenser, and their contemporaries in France. It was certainly available in the library of Cambridge University and there are echoes of its themes, if not of the book itself, in Peter Sterry, the final writer I am going to talk about.

It may be a rather decadent feast of esoteric imagery but, as Joscelyn Godwin writes:

“...every page shines with Giorgi’s own Franciscan piety. For there is only one purpose behind his enterprise: to be reunited with God.” (GODWIN p. 185)

As a composer I find the idea of the book immensely attractive. I haven’t read it. I expect very few have. There is no English translation apart from a few extracts translated by Joscelyn Godwin. I have a summary of its contents (SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN p. 305ff) which makes its structure and concept clear.

The book is divided into three Cantos, or Songs. Each canto is divided in eight “tones”, corresponding to a musical scale. The first book is about Creation and shows how all things come from Unity and how harmony runs through everything that exists, from the planets, that are the source of each tone of the scale, or mode with an individual quality, down to the smallest object. Giorgi lists all the traditional correspondences of plants, stones, scents with which medieval doctors were familiar.

The second canto is devoted to Christ, with a strongly Johannine theology, showing how all things come from the Word, in God, and how Christ contains all things and all harmonies within Himself. The third Canto is devoted to Man, and how man is a microcosm of all harmonies and can be lead back to God and unity through Christ.

Giorgi's positive attitude towards Creation is very Franciscan – though the celebration of nature and beauty had become central to the Italian Renaissance. His optimism extends to the next world as, in common with the English writers I am going to discuss, he tends towards the idea, derived from Origen, that ultimately all people will be saved. The end of Creation is that

“We will sing perfect and harmonious songs – so God grants – because we will sing in the highest together with the angels.” (SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN p. 315.)

I would like to think that Giorgi's great book influenced the sparkling creativity of the English Renaissance. It's impossible to be sure without direct references. It certainly belongs to the spirit of the time.

Of course after Copernicus, Galileo and Newton no-one saw the solar system as a series of spheres surrounding the earth. It just wasn't like that. These ideas of universal harmony were obsolete.

Were they?

The classical and medieval image of the cosmos was not scientifically derived from observation of the stars. It was based on an understanding of harmony as a fundamental principle. The cosmos imagined by Plato, Cicero and beyond was a picture of harmonic proportion to which the moving planets seemed to correspond. The planets may not move like that but harmony remains. Giorgi's worldview, also that of Dante and the middle ages, is still “true”.

FRANCISCAN MIRRORS UNDER CROMWELL

On the face of it John Bunyan seems a long way removed from the kind of 17thc divines I might look at for traces of Franciscan survival. Calvinists, whether Church of England or non-conformist, may be taken to be the enemy camp – all that nasty predestination, the strongly judgmental attitude to sinners within their churches. They don't seem to value Creation. Bunyan's Christian seems very eager to get out of this world and away from its vanities. All the same, Bunyan played a critical part in setting me off on my own pilgrimage.

There is a local tradition in Bedfordshire that the Pilgrim's Progress passes through real places that Bunyan knew, where he walked on his preaching and baptising expeditions. Forty years ago and more I found this very exciting – the idea of the symbolic journey through real places, along the River Ouse, by the holy well at Stevington, Bunyan baptising in osier beds. The Baptist preacher might not have thought like this at all – but I was fascinated by the idea that the places we really travel through can have a meaning. Something is being communicated to us as we walk. How can this be?

By the time I was in my late twenties this had become an important theme – an inducement to study. By 1981 I was writing a lot and focussing my ideas. I had been led to all kinds of interesting and esoteric places. A very strong belief that I fixed upon has remained with me.

If we think of God speaking to us (or revealing himself) through the world it is not through what we think of as “nature” but through everything – every aspect of the world and our experience. It might be a meeting on the road, a story we associate with the place, an underground bunker from the cold war as much as a grove of trees, a piece of music that accompanies our footsteps.

This question, of how we relate to the world and God through it, is my study – and this is what has led me to the Franciscan tradition. There are useful ideas in Plato and in some esoteric traditions, but now I can see that it was Francis, praising God with all creation, and his followers, particularly Bonaventure, who most help me to understand what I was looking for. Their theology still rings true today. A passage in Ilia Delio's “A Franciscan View of Creation” made me literally shout “hurray!” (DELIO)

This is a theme that, to me, is a distinctive feature of Franciscanism and which of which I can search for echoes in 17th century England. It isn't uniquely Franciscan and there is no reason why all Franciscans should support it. This is a personal quest so all I can claim is that I am looking for people who support a way of seeing the world that has been important to me. I suppose this might be nothing more than a search for people who agree with me. Is that everyone's religious quest?

This question of how Creation is related to God is something which, whether they are aware it or not, divides Christians into two distinct camps.

The two opposing viewpoints are Creationism and Emanationism. Both of these are simply ways of trying to understand something which may be beyond our understanding.

Creationism, in this case, is not a literalist belief in the Book of Genesis but the view that Creation is something made by God and separate from God. Creation is a thing, or combination of many things, formed by the hand of God into which we are placed as custodians. God is outside, or above, this Creation but may occasionally intervene through the spirit or through miracles. This view (and both of these are simply human viewpoints) can be positive. We may see ourselves as humble custodians of God's gifts. It may lead to an attitude that the Creation is something made for us to do what we like with. It can also be associated with a theology in which Creation is not valued in itself and that our lives are spent detaching ourselves from it and reaching only to God – which can also happen in the case of Emanationism.

Emanationism sees Creation as something united to God. It's not a separate work but a window into God. It isn't God, but it is our view into God. Everything shines with God within it. It exists as a constantly living, infinitely colourful, projection of God's pure light. If we see the world aright we are led towards God. Everything that exists has a constant desire to return to its source. (For Creationism/ Emanationism see MILNE p 31)

The negative side of this can be that we think nothing in Nature is real. The positive view is that, through seeing the world clearly, we know God's love and are drawn back to God.

Bonaventure is unequivocally on the side of emanation.

“This the whole of our metaphysics: it is about emanation, exemplarity, and consummation; that is, to be illumined by spiritual ways and to be led back to the supreme being.”

“Any person who is unable to consider how things originate, and how they are led back to their end, and how God shines forth in them, is incapable of achieving true understanding.” (BONAVENTURE 2 p, 6)

This is the heart of the Platonic tradition. This is at the heart of Giorgi's harmonious cosmos, and at the heart of the work of Ficino who translated rediscovered Platonic texts in the late 15th century and searched for Christian parallels. It is not something added to Christianity at a late stage. This emanationist viewpoint was part of Jewish theology at the time of Christ. Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, was influenced by Platonism.

This may not, in a scientific sense, explain anything, but this Franciscan view of Creation gives me a way of thinking about the questions I had been asking for thirty years, right back to those walks in the footsteps of Bunyan. It's only one aspect of Franciscan Tradition and is far less important than the desire to live a Christ-like life in the manner of St Francis, but it is the focus for what my personal quest and a thread to follow in this search for survivals of the Franciscan Spirit.

Without an acknowledged source, it is always going to be impossible to be sure whether an English theologian has been directly influenced by Franciscan thought or has been inspired

by earlier common sources. In at least one case, though, the parallel with Bonaventure is very close indeed, perhaps too much to be a coincidence.

The 17thc group of theologians known as the Cambridge Platonists were, on the face of it, Calvinist puritans who went back to classical philosophy to look for ideas that were based on reason and might create common ground in a time of violent argument.

Of the thinkers who were actually based at Cambridge the outstanding figure is John Smith. His various Discourses, principally on the theme of living a good life, were published posthumously. He is the most peaceful, gentle and elegant of the Cambridge Platonists. It was a chance glance at one particular passage of Smith which set me off on this search:

“God made the universe and all the creatures therein as so many glasses in which he can reflect his own glory. He hath copied forth himself in the creation, and, in this outward world, we may read the lovely characters of the divine goodness, power and wisdom. In some creatures there are darker representations of God; there are the prints and footsteps of God; but in others, there are clearer and fuller representations of the Divinity, the face and image of God.” (Cragg p.127)

To me, at least, this reads as virtual paraphrase of Bonaventure. The image of “glasses”, or mirrors, is typical of Bonaventure and “footsteps” is a translation of Bonaventure’s technical term “vestigis” for the marks of God imprinted on Nature. These two ideas appear together in the opening lines of Chapter Two of Bonaventure’s “Journey of the Soul into God.” Whether this is a deliberate or conscious use by Smith or is a pure coincidence, it is, for me, a clear sign of the Franciscan spirit at work in this period:

“Concerning the mirror of things perceived through sensation, we can see God not only through them as through his vestiges, but also in them as he is in them, by his essence, power and presence.” (BONAVENTURE 1 p. 69)

I find the explanation of vestiges in “The Souls Journey” slightly disappointing, as if we are observing things intellectually purely as symbols rather than valuing them for what they are. Elsewhere Bonaventure goes a step further and writes of all works in creation being products or images of the Word – as if everything by being itself shines with God’s image. The beauty of a thing actually is God’s beauty.

Plato might suggest that things are only ever poor copies of an Ideal thing but In the Christian Platonism of Bonaventure a tree shines with God by being uniquely itself rather than a copy of an unattainable perfect tree

The platonic view is that God contains in Himself the patterns or archetypes of all things. For Bonaventure this is still true but ultimately there is only one pattern, one Idea, the Word. Ultimately every object in creation is a reflection of one archetypal work in God, the Word, which is infinitely loving and gives itself in an infinity of forms. (See BONAVENTURE 2 p. 7)

This, I feel, is a wonderful concept and lifts this theology onto a higher level. This idea that things revealed God through their individuality inspired a later Franciscan fellow traveller, the officially Jesuit Gerard Manley-Hopkins who was a particular admirer of Duns Scotus.

Smith’s primary concern is for how we make ourselves good, how we make our own vision clear enough to be able to see God in the world. We have to become Christ-like to be able to read the world aright:

“Thus many a good man may walk up and down in the world as in a garden of spices, and suck a divine loveliness from every flower. There is a two-fold meaning in every

creature, as the Jews speak of their law – a literal and a mystical – and the one is but the ground of the other....”

(Cragg p. 128)

This passing idea, that the world can be read on more than one level, in the same way that we read scripture, is also found in Bonaventure. To Bonaventure scripture is like a forest. This Book of Nature is not something fixed and separated from God but a glass through which God's light shines continually. (More like a Kindle?)

“And seeing God hath never thrown the world from himself, but runs through all created essence, containing the archetypal ideas of all things in himself...a soul that is truly...god-like...cannot but everywhere behold itself in the midst of that glorious, unbounded Being who is indivisibly everywhere. A good man finds every place he treads on holy ground; to him the world is God's temple; he is ready to say with Jacob, “How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God.”

(John Smith: The Excellency and Nobleness of True Religion, Chapter 8 CRAGG)

As with Bonaventure we can discover God's light in creation and in our own souls – the second stage of Bonaventure's Journey into God.

The Cambridge Platonists tend to emphasise reason very strongly, as an antidote to the unreasoning passions of 17th century religious conflict. Reason is important to Bonaventure, as long as it is tempered by love and doesn't lead to the analytical excess of Aristotelians like Aquinas. Smith's praise of reason is Platonic here -

“God hath stamped a copy of His own archetypal loveliness upon the soul, that man by reflecting into himself might behold there the glory of God...Reason in man being *lumen de lumine*, a light flowing from the fountain and father of lights...was to enable man to work out of himself all those notions of God which are the true groundwork of love and obedience to God and conformity to him.” (The excellency and noblesse of true religion) (CRAGG p. 95)

The archetypal realities of God can shine in our Souls as well as in the world. We need to polish up our own glasses to let the light shine clearly within and without.

“It is to be feared that our nice speculations about what concerns us in theology have tended more to exercise men's wits than to reform their lives.” (CRAGG p. 31)

Smith is, in theory, a Calvinist divine, but this platonic view of the world seems to be quite distinctive from a Calvinist world view in which the world was created at the beginning but is occasionally manipulated by God. The most visionary, and hardly known, of the 17th century writers, Peter Sterry, stretched what could be considered to be properly Calvinist to the absolute limit. The most familiar and loved of these Platonist writers, Thomas Traherne, was from the opposite camp – Oxford rather than Cambridge, Royalist rather than Cromwellian, High Anglican rather than Calvinist.

FELICITY AND THE MASQUE OF LOVE

I first came across Thomas Traherne by opening a book of his poetry in a library and being delighted by how mad it looked. In 1977 I found myself living in a bedsit in Teddington, where he died, and I treated myself to the Oxford edition of his works in a local bookshop. I tried to visit his memorial in the church but a vicar with a bucket was cleaning and wouldn't let me in.

Traherne is by far the most Franciscan-seeming divine of the 17th century and by far the most well-known. That he has become well known is a kind of miracle. He did publish an

academic book "Roman Forgeries" in his lifetime and a more characteristic but formal "Christian Ethics" was published posthumously but his life was mostly spent in a quiet Herefordshire village. His other work has gradually been rediscovered. His most startling work the "Centuries" was bought from a London bookstall in the late 19th century. A manuscript was plucked from a bonfire, partly burned, and several texts have fairly recently been unearthed, in an uncatalogued volume in Lambeth Palace library.

Traherne has become famous for a few wonderful and endlessly quoted passages about creation as experienced in innocence. This overfamiliarity does him a disservice. He can launch into mystical rapture but he also wrote tough arguments against the Calvinist, Dr. Twisse. (Traherne was very much against Calvinist predestination) He may have had visionary tendencies but he was a very devoted priest, living and working with down to earth people in his parish of Credenhill.

Traherne was, it turns out, a prolific writer. The new complete works is currently aiming at nine substantial volumes. The "Centuries" and the collection known as "Poems of Felicity" stand out from the mass of words. They are not, at least the "Centuries" are not, written for publication. The "Centuries" are addressed to a friend, as a kind of spiritual manual. This might have been Susannah Hopton, who lived nearby and had a small religious community around her. She published devotional books herself, based on catholic originals.

Louis Lohr Martz, writing in 1964 when far less was known of him, detected the general shape of Bonaventure's "Soul's Journey" in Traherne's "Centuries" (MARTZ) though there is no direct evidence that Traherne knew Bonaventure. It is more likely that Traherne was inspired by many of the earlier writers who had influenced Franciscan theology and that these had been selected and combined through his own personality and vision. The "Centuries" are written in a completely informal, personal style. It's incredibly refreshing and readable compared to most 17th century devotional writing.

The book seems to be unfinished. It stops part of the way through the fifth set of 100 short passages. There is a sense of completion, though, and the work progresses from child-like simplicity to visionary complexity. It does follow Bonaventure's journey loosely, in moving from finding God in Creation, through Christ and the cross, on a journey upwards, but it ends with celebrating God in everything rather than taking the "way of negation" through "the cloud of unknowing" into God alone.

The most famous passage is the innocent vision of the world where "the corn was orient and immortal wheat." Traherne sees the world as illuminated with God and that our sins obscure the vision. To Traherne love is an immense "alluring" force that draws us towards God, and drives everything in creation. This is certainly close to Bonaventure who developed a Trinitarian theology of love from the earlier Victorines – who do appear to have been known in 17th century England.

All love comes from God and is all one love, just as the three Persons of the Trinity are One:

"Lov in the Fountain and Lov in the stream are both the same... Though it Streameth to its Object it abideth in the Lover, and is the Lov of the Lover." (TRAHERNE C 2:41)

In Love we live in each other, in the deepest spiritual sense, and we also live in Christ.

A Franciscan parallel in Traherne is his insistence on poverty as a necessary factor in being able to find God in the world. His poverty is not, though, literal, he owned property in Hereford, but he did live as simply as possible. He is very insistent on the principle that by owning nothing (or perhaps being detached in an Ignatian sense) we own the whole world – and so can everyone else.

"You never Enjoy the World aright, till the Sea it self floweth in your Veins, till you are Clothed with the Heavens, and Crowned with the Stars: and Perceiv your self to be the

Sole Heir of the whole World: and more then so, because Men are in it who are every one Sole Heirs as well as you. Till you can Sing and Rejoyce and Delight in God, as Misers do in Gold, and Kings in Scepters, you never Enjoy the World.” (TRAHERNE C 1:29)

He may be rather over enthusiastic and he admits himself that he could button-hole people and talk endlessly about “felicity”, but Traherne isn’t soppy. Everything focusses on the cross:

“The Cross is the Abyss of Wonders, the Centre of Desires, the Schole of Virtues, the House of Wisdom, the Throne of Lov, the Theatre of Joys and the Place of Sorrows; It is the Root of Happiness, and the Gate of Heaven.” (TRAHERNE C1:58)

Gordon Mursell introduced me to my last character on the “if you like Traherne you’ll like him even more” basis. He was right. Otherwise I would never have got to know Peter Sterry. If I had come across him without this recommendation I might have passed him by. Sterry was not only a Calvinist, but Cromwell’s personal chaplain. In his earlier days he preached sermons which declared that God must be on the side of the New Model Army because it was winning.

Sterry did not leave any accessible works to compare with Traherne’s “Centuries”. There are treasures, though, in his letters. After the restoration of Charles II Sterry retired to Sheen, near Richmond, and set up what he called a “lovely society”, a family religious community reminiscent of Little Gidding. His views become peaceful and gentle. He wrote letters to his family, poetic essays and poetry. The introductory chapter of his long and convoluted “Discourse on the Freedom of the Will”, published posthumously in 1675, speaks at length about the value of having opposing views in order to reach the truth and he beseeches us to accept opposite arguments and love our enemies. The title suggests a deadly puritan tract but Sterry stretches Calvinism as far as it will go. God may predestine people but as He is infinitely creative He may create infinite alternatives for us - and, like John Smith, Sterry is an Origenist and wonders whether everyone might be saved in the end.

The introductory section, though, sets forth Sterry’s basic beliefs. He has a Trinitarian view of Creation, with all things deriving from one archetypal source, the Word, which is close to Bonaventure’s:

“The Idea, in this sense, is the first and Distinct Image of each form of things in the Divine Mind...Every Idea of each Creature is this Idea, bringing forth itself according to the inestimable Treasures of the Godhead in it, into innumerable distinct figures of it self in the unconfined Varieties of its own Excellencies and Beauties, so that it may enjoy itself, sport with it self, in these, with endless and ever new Pleasures of all Divine Loves.” (STERRY 1 p. 149)

Everything that exists is a copy, or emanation, of the Word, but in infinitely varied form, and these infinite works exist in a constant state of play, or performance.

This is what is wonderful about Sterry, and as far as I know completely original. His writing is full of musical imagery. He accepts the traditional idea, elaborated by Giorgi, that there are fundamental harmonies in everything, resonating down from the Music of the Spheres, but Sterry writes about music as music, a completely different angle. Harmony is a static thing. Music is active, made up of complex patterns of notes and harmonies, and of concords and discords. Music is like the world, and God speaks through Creation in a hidden music:

“Every single Note in this sacred Musicke is a particular and singular Forme in the Divine Works...These single Notes are contrary to another, are distinguished into flatts, and sharpes, Concords and Discords: struck singly by a rude Hand, like to the

Dancings of Witches, or howlings of Devils. These same Notes, the flatts, the sharpes, the Discords, the stops, the breaking of Notes, as the Divine Harmony by an excellent Order, and Just Degrees of Decents slides into them, reconviles, and marries them into answering, and suitable Notes... Thus they become the sweetest Rellishes of the Musicke, most necessary, and delightull Parts of it, which bear the Universall Harmony Itselfe, as a Pearle-seed in their Bosomes, and a Crowne of Dyamonds upon their Heads." (STERRY 2 p. 174)

Sterry writes as if he is intimately familiar with the instrumental music of the period. To the puritans elaborate church music was suspect and theatres were closed under Cromwell, but private instrumental music had developed into a new high art in England since the end of the previous century. This consort music was built on the complex interplay of several parts, usually on viols, with accompanying organ or keyboard. The music was like a philosophical conversation, and advancing harmonic technique meant that it could explore the widest range of expression and touch the strangest and darkest of discords. Sterry recognises this as a true image of what the world is like. We hear God's music in the interplay of light and shade, discord and concord in creation. This is not simply a static idea of Harmony but a living music in which many parts can interweave, sometimes creating creative discord, and all having their own life but forming a whole. Music had evolved a language that could represent the working of God in the world and help us understand it. This dark 17th century music, particularly William Lawes and Orlando Gibbons, is as much part of the English spiritual tradition as the poetry of Herbert, a poet who played this music himself.

Elsewhere Sterry writes of the Trinity playing in Creation as in a Masque, "a divine play, composed and acted by themselves in the riches of their divine spirit" (STERRY 2 p. 119) and "a mixt dance of divine Beauties, and loves, to quicken, soften enlighten, sweeten all." (STERRY 2 p. 120)

Sterry's imager of the Consort of Musicke is more than a metaphor. Music itself is part of the world, a laboratory in which we study how things are formed, how many small things in relationship combine to make a language.

God made everything, visible and invisible. We have to look at all things as being of God, as infinitely varied products of the Word. This has to mean everything – including the difficult, discordant parts, the shadows, the sharps and flats. St Francis praised God with all the four elements, from which everything in Nature is made, as well as with Sister Death. It's not Franciscan, or Christian, to look for God only in green fields and flowers. Even those are complex works. The flower may have diseases and parasites. The field may contain bones and pieces of shrapnel.

We have to know God in all, in the whole, not just in the pretty bits.

Everything that has Being reflects God's Being, as Sterry says elsewhere. God is in all. God is not a Deus ex Machina, occasionally reaching down from above the stage. The whole performance emanates from God.

The works of God, as Bonaventure, Smith, and Sterry all tell us, are all images of the Word, however small. Nothing exists on its own, as a separate thing. Everything is made of many smaller parts.. Sterry's image of the masque or dance reminds us of something that should be obvious. Everything exists in relationship with other things Everything exists in performance, constantly forming new relationships, new works. Every relationship is a part of the work of the Trinity. God's very nature is love and relationship. Love draws us all to perform and create. When we walk through a forest or a town we are creating an aspect of that place. We are audience, composer and performer. We cannot think a place is dead and godless if we're there. Maybe we have a part to play.

It's a very hard job to learn how to listen, let alone how to perform. All these theologians grapple with the question of how we can be "good people." We have to learn enough, or forget enough, to allow the "sea itself to flow in our veins."

The Affirmative Way is as difficult as the Negative Way. Satan, our personal trainer, keeps telling us to look at the pretty flowers or listen to nice relaxing music (both are good in their proper place) just as he tries to persuade us, if we try to contemplate, that we have finally reached God when we have simply arrived at a comforting parody of God, or a nice snooze. (The Cloud of Unknowing is as relevant as it ever was.) The only music in the Negative Way is Silence.

Our first step to finding God in the most difficult times or places is to accept reality. Simply doing this can be revelatory.

My study, of which this is a part, is towards a Musical Theology, of forming, performing, listening. Sterry provides me with a text for my work. I feel everything I am working on could be a commentary on this one paragraph.

Sterry is writing to his son. He has in mind the idea, which Giorgi, Ficino and other Renaissance Platonists wrote about, that we have in our souls the same harmonies as ring through the spheres and through all creation. Sterry, Traherne and Smith sing loudly about the beauty of the world and they are sure that everything comes from God, diversity springs from Unity. The more we know that music in Creation and that beauty the more we are drawn by love through the mirror towards the source of love, our true home.

"Let us ever remember that we are here in our pilgrimage and Disguise. Let us have our own country and the way to it ever in our hearts...I know nothing pleasanter, than that which David sung to God; Thy Statutes are my Songs in the house of my pilgrimage. Even in this earthly body, the Manifestations of the Love, and beauty...are Songs, harmony, Musick made by the heavenly spheres of the divine beings themselves in us, by the Charms of which even our house, our Pilgrimage, and all things in it are turned into heavenly Dances and Delights."

I have imagined, if nothing more, that there is a particular spirit which was focussed and formed in St Francis and his followers. I have followed just one trail of this spirit here, looking at the way we look for God in Creation. I am sure the same Spirit flows through English religious life in other ways. It seems to have poured smoothly into some aspects of Lutheranism. It may have percolated gently into the Quaker tradition. It doesn't belong to any one church or denomination. These people I have spoken about, working in a broken and shadowy England, are part of my personal tradition – they may not appeal to everyone. They are a few of the Invisible Pilgrims who accompany me on my journey.

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