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Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and Gender in England, 1830-85

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Of late, the Virgin Mary has become somewhat fashionable in academic circles. This prominence reflects her long-lasting cultural influence as an international historic and spiritual figure. Miri Rubin's recent magnum opus *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (1) provides a much needed global examination of the cultural significance of the Virgin Mary over the *longue duree*. On a more localised level, Bridget Heal's *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany* (2) and the book under review here, Carol Engelhardt Herringer's *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and Gender in England, 1830?85*, provides a narrower focus and allows for the confessional and cultural understandings of denominational differences to shine through. Herringer, in this fine work, aims to develop a 'comprehensive and culturally situated analysis of Victorian representations of the Virgin Mary' (p. 5) which she argues tells us much about the Victorians.

Herringer's incisive introduction sets out the parameters of her examination. Importantly, this is not a book about devotional culture or religious theology, but one that analyses the sometimes rancorous discourses on the Virgin Mary written by typically male, clerical, English authors who, according to Herringer, reflected the influential majority of those who published disputations on the Virgin Mary between 1830 and 1885. This periodicity is crucial to her argument as during this 55-year period, Protestant concerns about the

Virgin Mary were heightened not by the immigration of Irish Catholics (they figure minimally in this history) but by those members of the educated elite that converted to Catholicism or were influential Anglo-Catholics. Herringer claims that prior to 1830 there were few controversies within and between the denominations regarding the Virgin Mary and after 1885, confrontational discourses declined significantly. Herringer opts for a dual approach, considering the discourses regarding Mary from two confessional identities, one broadly Catholic and the other broadly Protestant. Under the Catholic umbrella, she groups Roman Catholics with 'advanced Anglicans'. These were typically members of the Church of England's high church Anglo-Catholic movement, particularly Tractarians and ritualists, who supported the further Catholicisation of the Established Church and had theological and liturgical beliefs roughly similar to Catholics. Doctrinally, Herringer argues, these Anglicans had in contemporary terms 'advanced in their religious beliefs beyond that which the Church of England officially sanctioned' (p. 14). The Protestant side of the equation includes most Anglicans as well as dissenters such as Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Aware these categorisations could lead to generalisations, she does nuance the sometimes divergent discourses in subsequent chapters so as to eschew over-generalisation. Despite chapters titled ' The Catholic Virgin Mary' and 'The Protestant Virgin Mary', representations of Mary of Nazareth, Herringer makes clear, were not uniform and this is evident especially in her final chapter on the formation of Victorian masculinities.

Catholic and advanced Anglicans saw the Virgin Mary as a model mother of Christ, loving and supportive but also integral to his ministry. She was, Herringer argues, a 'powerful woman with an extensive sphere of action'. (p. 64) Her independence was visible from the beginning, when at the Annunciation she deliberated before she agreed to bear the Christ child. This Catholic Virgin Mary was more than simply a loving mother, she actively participated in her son's ministry becoming a model disciple. Pope Pius IX?s 1854 promulgation, *Ineffabilis Deus*, attested to the Immaculate Conception of Mary, thus she was declared conceived without the stain of original sin. This was already a commonly held Catholic belief, based more on church tradition than on scripture, and promoted the Virgin Mary to a higher plane of devotion by giving her a singular grace and privilege. Many advanced Anglicans, while in accord with many Catholic understandings of the Virgin Mary found this decree problematic. They along with most Protestants protested that this dogma was not scripturally based, appeared to raise Mary to a status alarmingly close to that of Christ and diverted attention from the Trinity. Overall, this Catholic Virgin Mary was much too commanding and influential for Protestants. Their Virgin Mary, Herringer notes, though ?blessed?, functioned primarily as a child-bearer. The Protestant Mary was a wife and a mother of several children and according to some Protestant detractors, wasn't even a particularly good mother. How could she lose Jesus in the temple? Herringer points to a subtle undermining of the image of motherhood from within this discourse (a rather surprising turn of events given the centrality of motherhood generally in Victorian culture). The Protestant Mary appears as a stage mother, interfering in Jesus's ministry. This made her a rather suspect model of womanhood and potentially, according to Protestant commentators, more powerful than her son.

Both Virgin Marys' were a product of a mid-Victorian culture. In many ways, these discourses gel well with the 19th-century ideas of women's separate sphere and the perceived view that women's piety and prayerfulness led to a higher moral authority. However, the Catholic Mary goes a step too far for many Protestants and was perceived as a threat to masculine authority. Herringer convincingly argues that the attributes of the Protestant Virgin Mary reflect male tensions with the changing role of women in English culture. Threatened by women's incursion into the public sphere, male, typically clerical, Protestants used this discourse to at least discursively return women to an imagined private sphere. There were also Protestant concerns regarding the intercessory role of Mary and fears that Mary diverted the faithful from their direct personal relationship with God, thus unsurprisingly, Protestants rejected Marian devotion. The cultural politics of the time were also crucial to these representations of the Virgin Mary. The decree *Ineffabilis Deus* , reminded all of the authority and power of the Roman pontiff over the Catholic faithful only a few years after the 'Papal Aggression' had inflamed Protestant passions.(3) This Protestant Virgin Mary was an alternative to and a reaction against the Catholic Virgin Mary. She marked key differences between Protestant and Catholic beliefs. Protestant culture, in this instance, was united not necessarily by common beliefs, but certainly by a common antipathy towards the Catholic Virgin Mary.

Important to this interpretation is the knowledge that models of masculinity for Victorian clergymen were shifting also; the normative models of manhood once assumed by men of the cloth were now awkward in a Protestant clerical world reshaped by factors such as the evangelical revival and the Oxford Movement. The final chapter on the formation of Victorian masculinities powerfully brings these tensions to the fore and grounds the representations of the Virgin Mary in the lives of four individuals, two Protestants and two convert Catholics. Herringer's biographical approach considers how these four men defined the Virgin Mary in ways which shaped their construction of masculinity. Protestant champion of muscular Christianity Charles Kingsley maintained that Anglo-Catholics and Roman Catholic men were effeminate. He saw their worship of the Catholic Virgin Mary, who he depicted as a powerful semi-pagan goddess, as particularly emasculating as it replaced Jesus in devotional practices. His form of Protestantism drew a rigid dividing line between the masculine and the feminine. Tractarian theologian Edward Bouverie Pusey, saw the Virgin Mary as a good mother and a model of motherhood, but with limited authority. His own model of lived masculinity espoused the separate spheres dichotomy with Mary firmly placed in the private sphere. Even his association with Anglican sisterhoods, Herringer claims, was evidence of this hierarchy; he placed himself as the spiritual and administrative head of the sisterhoods he was involved with and allowed women 'conditional' autonomy (p. 163). (While I don't doubt his own belief in his authority over the sisterhoods, I would question that this administrative authority existed in practice.) Oratorian Frederick Faber was by all accounts an unusually emotive convert Catholic whose spiritual published works were popular but at times problematic even within the Roman Catholic Church. His adoration of the Virgin Mary led him to support a masculinity that idealised the feminine but his Mary was unique in that the privileges given to her, would never belong to another woman. Probably the most famous 19th-century Catholic convert John Henry Newman saw nothing amiss with the power and authority of the Catholic Virgin Mary. He saw a harmony between masculinity and femininity which Herringer says blurred gender boundaries and made Newman's Virgin Mary a model for both men and women. These four case studies point to the diversity of possible representations of the Virgin Mary and provide important new insights into an understanding of 19th-century masculinities in relationship with a female figure.

However, this same chapter too quickly (pp. 172?5), dismisses the influence of the Virgin Mary on Protestant women. Although I'd agree that the Virgin Mary was probably not a considerable model of womanhood for most Protestant women, I remain more convinced of Kimberly VanEsveld Adams's study *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism* that concludes the Madonna could be encountered in a way that ?promised the elevation and empowerment of women?.(4) I would have liked Herringer to provide a more probing analysis on constructed renditions of the Virgin Mary and femininities from the published works of female authors.I think also that it would have been helpful to address the Marian discourse authored by Catholic and Anglo-Catholic women. Would a careful reading of published material have brought out a Mary that was something other than the usual symbol of domesticated womanhood? Certainly, I have found in my own

work in the archives of Catholic religious institutes that the Virgin Mary could be used to bolster female authority. For example, Cornelia Connelly, founder of the Catholic religious congregation the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, wrote to Bishop Thomas Grant:

> I took your letter ... and read it to Our Lady of Sorrows asking her in her own sweet meekness to listen to it, and the interior answer I got was ?burn the letter & tell the Bishop to forget what he wrote & to come and tell you what more you can do than you have done.? I have burnt it my Lord, & now will you come and tell me what more I can do than I have done?...(5)

Connelly used the Virgin Mary to challenge the bishop to rethink his decision on matters with which she disagreed. Catholic women?s congregations often held Mary as their model of life, and while they developed a rhetoric that glorified women's piety and self-effacement, their actions tell another story of women with enough agency to develop and manage international institutions that operated schools and hospitals and developed intricate social welfare programmes. Did they construct a model of Mary that validated these activities? The publication of the biographies of founders such as Augusta Theodosia Drane's, *Life of Margaret Mary Hallahan: Foundress of the English Congregation of St. Catherine of Siena of the Third Order of St Dominic* (1869) or even publications by some women religious like Mary Potter, founder of the Little Company of Mary, could bring additional insights into the discourses on Mary.(6) In addition, Catholic confraternities, sodalities and guilds were dominant features of parish life, and many, like the ever popular Children of Mary confraternity, retained the Virgin Mary as their model of lay life. These institutions published Rules of Conduct that could include representations of the Catholic Virgin Mary. While this book does an excellent job in exploring the Virgin Mary and masculinities, its comprehensiveness is limited in that it seems to quickly relegate Mary's impact on femininities as nonexistent for Protestant women and adding nothing new to the usual trope of the domesticated model of womanhood for Catholic women.

I have two small quibbles which relate to Herringer's depiction of Anglo-Catholic sisterhoods as having 'less autonomy' than Roman Catholic sisterhoods (p. 51). Susan Mumm's work argues quite the opposite as will Joy Frith's upcoming book on Anglican sisters and identity politics.(7) While it is true that for many bishops Anglican sisters were *persona non grata* and this ostracisation probably hampered the growth of some sisterhoods, it *de facto* encouraged more convent autonomy not less. Many Anglican sisterhoods, especially in this time period, operated outside the sanction of the bishop. Catholic congregations, on the other hand, could not even open a convent in a diocese without the approval of the bishop; this was not true of Anglican sisterhoods. And while many Protestants certainly preferred deaconesses over Anglican sisterhoods (p. 89), they were rarely married in the 19th century and the deaconess life was certainly not as attractive to Protestant women as were sisterhoods given only 431 women became deaconesses in the 19th century and several thousand women became professed Anglican sisters.(8)

Importantly this work suggests new directions for research. While it succeeds in illuminating the dichotomy between Protestant and Catholic attitudes towards the Virgin Mary, these outlooks are in the main, male, clerical and middle-class. This analysis of discourse needs to be balanced by a cultural history that examines in the same detail the personal piety and religious devotion which was also a part of this discussion of the 19th-century Virgin Mary. Despite Mary Heimann?s excellent work, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (9), there still exists a lacunae on the cultural meanings and practice of the devotions to the Virgin Mary. People experienced the Virgin Mary not in the abstract but in ritual and custom. Devotional life was not limited to church spaces despite the spectre of anti-Catholicism; it was visible and public on the streets of Britain. It was not so unusual to see Catholic school students, like those mentioned in the annals of the congregation of the Holy Family of Bourdeaux, marching along the streets of London in a procession headed by banners of the Sacred Heart and the Virgin Mary.(10) Importantly too, the Virgin Mary could be found in private spaces and an analysis of devotional culture from the standpoint of the domestic interior is sorely needed. How important was the Virgin Mary to Catholic and Anglo-Catholic working-class families? How did material culture and the interaction of devotions and emotions figure into Irish or English religious

practices? This working-class Virgin Mary also needs to figure into any comprehensive analysis of the representations of the Virgin Mary.

In sum, this is a compelling and valuable work, engagingly written, well-organised and a welcome addition to the debates on the Victorians and religion in the nineteenth century. It is a cultural and social history of the Victorians' engagement with a religious figure that played an important role in the cultural imagination of the Victorians. There is, however, another chapter of this story that needs to be told, one that develops a Virgin Mary that comes from the wider majority of Catholics and Protestants. Herringer has set the bar for more research to be done on this fascinating topic.

Notes

1. Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, CT, 2009).Back to (1)
2. Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 2007).Back to (2)
3. The formal re-establishment by Rome of the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales in 1851 led to some violent and extreme Protestant reactions that centred on the belief that this 'Papal Aggression' was focused on the conversion of England.Back to (3)
4. Kimberly VanEsveld Adams, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism* (Athens, OH, 2001), p. 226.Back to (4)
5. Radegunde Flaxman, *A Woman Styled Bold: the Life of Cornelia Connelly, 1809?1879* (London, 1991), p. 276.Back to (5)
6. Mary Potter, *The Path of Mary* (London,1878); Mary Potter, *Mary?s Call to Her Loving Children, etc.* (London, [1882]).Back to (6)
7. Susan Mumm, '"A Peril to the Bench of Bishops": sisterhoods and episcopal authority in the Church of England, 1845?1908', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 39, 1 (2008) 62?78; Joy Frith, *Anglican Sisterhoods and the Politics of Victorian Identity* (Manchester, forthcoming).Back to (7)
8. *The Beginning of Women's Ministry: The Revival of the Deaconesses in Nineteenth Century Church of England*, ed. Henrietta Blackmore (Woodbridge, 2007), Appendix 2; A.M. Allchin, *The Silent Rebellion: Anglican Religious Communities 1845?1900* (London,1958), p. 120. The actual numbers of Anglican sisters professed is difficult to quantify given the limited access to convent archives. Susan Mumm has collected approximately 2200 biographies from the 28 sisterhoods who granted her access to their archives. Susan Mumm, *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain* (London, 1998), pp. xiv, 227.Back to (8)
9. Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1995).Back to (9)
10. Holy Family of Bourdeaux Archives: Tower Hill Annals, August 1885.Back to (10)

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