

Making Space, Taking Space: Spatial Discomfort, Gender, and Victorian Religion

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This paper reflects on the uncomfortable relationship between gender and space in the Victorian Church of England, using the example of popular and parliamentary responses to the rise of Anglican religious communities for women. It examines the controversy surrounding the establishment of more than 90 communities for women in the Church of England between 1845 and 1900, in order to highlight prevailing social and cultural assumptions about legitimate female space.

The history of convents had been gendered from the beginning. When early Christians in third century Egypt began to experiment with the separated life, men became hermits. Hermitage was considered unsuitable for women, because it would provide no protection against the danger of rape or murder in the solitary's life in the desert. For women, the 'religious life' as opposed to marriage and family, was communal from the very outset. This tradition was destroyed in England in the aftermath of Henry VIII's break from Rome. While there were some Roman Catholic communities in England in the Victorian period, they kept a very low profile, as their legality was in question. When Anglican sisterhoods began to appear in the 1840s, they attracted publicity far disproportionate to their original size. Opponents of convents in this period developed an interesting symbolic turn. While the convent had traditionally been viewed as a retreat for women tired of the world, as healing and tranquil space for women of all conditions, anti-convent agitation depicted convents as indescribably hellish prisons, spaces with no redemptive properties at all.

Anglican sisterhoods themselves occupied equivocal and disputed space within the Victorian Church of England, disavowed by both the church leadership and by the dominantly Protestant popular culture of the era. Their conflict was played out in the pulpit and the press, in the courts, in Parliament, and in the streets and through acts of public disorder, including a number of unseemly riots. In this paper I am going to focus on the disputes over the physical space occupied by Anglican women religious, of whom there were about 10,000 by the century's end.

The most obvious space occupied by these women was the convent itself. The revival of sisterhoods within the Anglican tradition were an experiment, and one made without financial support from the Church of England. Convents were purchased or built from the member's own funds, and in some instances, from donated funds. In the early years they were ordinarily rented, and were very unlike romantic visions of neo-Gothic piles. They were improvised buildings on insecure tenure on which it would have been foolhardy to spend much money. Sister's buildings, like their very existence as women's communities, were uncertain ventures. All Saint's first convent was typical—"a block of dark old London houses with narrow passages, made to communicate with one another.

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[It] was not an ideal conventual building: it was even suggestive of sordid poverty.”¹ Furthermore, they were established in slum districts, and shared the general character of their neighbourhood. Other buildings maintained by nuns were often gifts from their supporters: these could be inconveniently located and very unsuitable for their purpose.

As communities matured and grew in size, confidence, and wealth, purpose-built convents were commissioned. Ordinarily addicted to the style of the Gothic revival, Street and Butterfield were favored architects. No one seems to have considered the irony of these all-women organizations choosing the Gothic, a style that was praised by Victorian architects and artists for its ‘manliness’.² Typically, these convents were combined with buildings designed to allow the community to carry on its outreach work. Convents were an expensive commitment and a provocative statement of permanence. However, their linkage to work buildings may have made them somewhat less offensive, because of the obvious practicality of having hospitals or orphanages on site.

Convent-building was very expensive. The Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage built a Victorian-Gothic home designed to house thirty penitents and eight sisters, with workroom, laundry and classrooms, for £2,600 in the 1850s.³ Another Anglican sisterhood’s Shoreditch hospital complex cost £15,600 by its completion in 1881, including a convent, and All Saints Sisters of the Poor’s hospital for incurables at Oxford cost approximately £33,000: the community’s own members seem to have provided the greater share of the money. One Ascot Priory sister donated £35,000 to her community’s building fund.⁴

Of course, not all communities followed the fashion for expensive neo-gothic architecture when erecting convents. Saint Saviour’s Priory built a utilitarian and low-cost convent in Hackney in the 1880s, it resembled a massive brick barracks. Their Mother Superior designed it to emulate “the early model tenements, with stone corridors and staircases and tiny windows”. The precariousness of the entire enterprise was emphasised by the convent’s interior being divided into rooms and cubicles by wooden partitions, which could be removed if the community failed, and the building needed to be sold for flats.

Several communities built enormous complexes through donated funds. Most impressive of all was the Sisters of the Church’s construction of St. Mary’s Broadstairs, built during the 1890s as a tripartite institution: convalescent hospital, orphanage, and convent. By the time the complex was complete in 1897, it housed 300 children, had two large warm water swimming baths, special facilities for children with spinal disease, and a convent with novitiate, at a cost, including furnishings, of £60,000.⁵

¹ Alice H. Bennett, *Through an Anglican Sisterhood to Rome* (London: Longmans, 1914), 7

² Hester Davenport, ‘A Gothic Ruin and a Grecian House: Tennyson’s *The Princess* and mid-Victorian architectural theory’, *Victorian Studies* 4 (1989): 225-6.

³ CSMVW Archives, *Report for the Year 1855 of St. Mary’s Home for Penitents at Wantage* (Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1856), 8.

⁴ T.J. Williams and A.J.Campbell, *The Park Village Sisterhood* (London: SPCK, 1965), 122; Henry D. Nihill, *Sisters of St. Mary at the Cross*, (London: Kegan Paul, 1887), 169-70; Lambeth Palace Library Archives, Benson Papers 55, ff 18-21.

⁵ *Some Memories of Emily Harriet Elizabeth Ayckbowm, Mother Foundress of the Community of the Sisters of the Church* (London: Church Extension Association, 1914), 197-8.

While convent building may not sound particularly sinister now, it aroused enormous public curiosity in the nineteenth century. It is hard to think of other buildings on this scale built by women for women in the period, and great hostility was expressed, as well as suspicion of their motives and purposes. These convents became spectacles, at best operating under intense local scrutiny, and at worst subject to attack, vandalism, and arson.

To Victorians, convents were perceived as putting up a 'keep out' sign on women's space. Men were considered inappropriate in convents and were not welcome, with the exception of the chaplain (an employee of the community) who visited daily for the celebration of the mass. Victorian sisterhoods arose in a culture comfortable with 'men-only' space in public schools, universities, and the professions. Woman-only space was hard to envision, with the partial exception of girls' schools, which were generally mocked for their frivolity, superficiality, and excessive sentimentality. Building or taking over space where men could not enter was a direct challenge to men's sense of entitlement to all space. This was an enormous affront to cultural sensibilities, and evoked an astonishing level of anxiety.

Public debate over the unacceptability of convents displayed an interesting circularity of assumptions. Because communities insisted on privacy, this was conflated with secrecy. Secrecy was assumed to be necessarily shameful, and therefore sinful. Sin, in the context of a woman-only space, was assumed to be sexual or sadistic. This symbolic tension was played out in the material world in disputes over convent inspection and the confessional controversy. The growth of convent/confessional-based pornography is a recognized feature of the period, one I will return to later in this paper.

Throughout the period from 1850 to 1880, repeated attempts were made to legislate for the inspection of these woman-only spaces, in the belief that a façade of piety concealed a chaos of disordered sexuality, criminality, and sadism. Convent pornography and the convent inspection movement owe their origin, in part, to fears about the absolute control of space by women living without men. Even among those who defended the right of women to live undisturbed within their communities, considerable anxiety was expressed about the physical ambiguity which the convent provided.

The convent inspection movement is most frequently associated with the career of Charles Newdegate, Tory MP for North Warwickshire, who was convinced that 'an increasing number of innocent English maidens [were being tempted] to chain their souls to irrevocable vows of obedience and to immure their bodies within red-brick convent walls.'⁶ He was not alone: in 1852 demands were being made for 'the *suppression* of these dens of infamy.'⁷

Newdegate led the movement to legislate for convent inspection, in the belief that women were held in these establishments against their will, and fearful that convent cellars might double as prisons and torture-chambers for uncooperative nuns. There were

⁶ Walter L. Arnstein, *Protestant versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England: Mr. Newdegate and the Nuns* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 62.

⁷ A Protestant, *Nunneries* (London: 1852), 7.

several attempts to gain Parliamentary assent to legislate against, or at least inspect, convents in 1853 and 1854. Anti-convent sentiment underwent a temporary lull in the wake of the positive publicity garnered when Florence Nightingale took 14 Anglican sisters and 10 Roman Catholic sisters to the Crimea in the autumn of 1854. However, this effect was brief. More attempts to inspect convents were defeated in 1863, 1864, and 1865, sometimes by only a handful of votes; forty-five petitions to allow inspection arrived in Parliament in 1869, and 134 in the following year. As the *Morning Advertiser* proclaimed, ‘If lunatic asylums are bound to admit a Government inspector, why should a nunnery, which is but another sort of lunatic asylum, be left altogether uncared for and unwatched?’⁸ Gladstone capitulated to parliamentary pressure in 1870, and the result was a select committee to report on the law respecting conventual and monastic institutions, which reported later that year. It recommended changes in the law to clarify the legal position of convents, but did not advocate forced inspection, and was seen as a triumph for sisterhoods, both Anglican and Roman.

Convent pornography is a tiresome and distasteful business to read, revolving as it does around the themes of imprisonment, force, and sadism. It was a flourishing genre in the nineteenth century, and played on traditional anti-Catholicism, often concocting ‘authentic narratives’ out of venerable anti-clerical tales long in circulation among Continental writers. It is my contention, however that the genre also played heavily on concerns about uncontrolled female space. Titles such as *From the Curate to the Convent* indicated a downward spiral morally as well as a spatial relocation. The classic of the genre, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, sold over 300,000 copies in the 25 years after its publication in 1835. As its fraudulent author⁹ observed in her preface, ‘Speedy death...can be no great calamity to those who lead the life of a nun...I sometimes fancy myself again...shut up in the Convent....Sometimes I stand by the secret place of interment in the cellar; sometimes I think I can hear the shrieks of the helpless females in the hands of atrocious men....’¹⁰ Crucially, she based the authenticity of her case upon her memory of space, offering to go through the convent with impartial witnesses, ‘that they may compare my account with the interior parts of the building’. Much of the book—when not chronicling lurid tales of rape by priests, murdered infants, and imprisoned nuns—offers a detailed and very specific description of the convent’s internal

⁸ Cited in Arnstein, 135.

⁹ Maria Monk was born in Canada around 1816. She suffered a brain injury in childhood, and according to her mother’s testimony became ‘ungovernable’ from that date. She became a prostitute, and entered a convent’s Magdalene asylum in Montreal. Expelled from the asylum, aged eighteen and pregnant, she met William K. Hoyte, a leader of nativist anti-Catholic sentiment. Hoyte and Monk became lovers, and together they traveled to New York, where Hoyte called upon other nativists, including Rev. J. J. Slocum, Rev. George Bourne, Theodore Dwight; collectively they wrote the *Awful Disclosures*. Maria Monk is believed to have contributed details of the city of Montreal and of the practices she observed in the Magdalene asylum. This much is known because shortly after the publication of the *Awful Disclosures*, the authors began to fight amongst themselves over the profits, and several suits and counter-suits were initiated in the New York courts: it was determined that Slocum was the principal author, Hoyte and Bourne were major contributors, and the others offered suggestions. Slocum and Maria Monk banded together in suing the others and their publishing house. Maria Monk then left Hoyte to become the companion of Slocum, while still under-age.

¹⁰ ‘Maria Monk’, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (London: Senate, 1997), xvi.

layout and use of physical space, as testimony of the author's *bona fides*. The book's key metaphor is that of abused space.

How unexpected ... will be the disclosures I make! Shut up in a place from which there has been thought to be but one way of egress, and that the passage to the grave, they [the priests] considered themselves safe in perpetrating crimes in our presence, and in making us share in their criminality as often as they chose, and conducted more shamelessly than even the brutes. These debauchees would come in without ceremony... both by night and day... within the walls of that prison-house of death, where the cries and pains of the injured innocence of their victims would never reach the world... The more they could torture us, or make us violate our own feelings, the more pleasure they took in their unclean reveling; and all their brutal obscenity they called meritorious before God.¹¹

Convent walls, despite most Victorian convents having none in reality, provided a powerful metaphor for the dangers that might lurk in places closed off from masculine investigation: warnings about the tales which 'the walls of nunneries, which are fast rising all over the land' could tell, are commonplace.¹² They combine the traditional symbolism of walls as representing female virginity, and its reversal in convent pornography, as well as suggesting to the Victorian observer, prisons and asylums. Anti-convent literature became, in Hofstadter's phrase, 'the pornography of the Puritan.' Advocates of convent inspection quite consciously sought to stress the relative values of place in their attacks, with one warning that it would be 'a fatal day for England if ever England's wives and daughters were led to deem the confessional a more sacred place than the home.'¹³

Confessional pornography,¹⁴ closely linked to its convent cousin, arose in a chaperonage culture, where middle and upper class women did not spend meaningful periods of time alone with men to whom they were not related. Added to this was the discussion of thought and behaviour required by confession. As one opponent of the confessional saw it, impropriety was almost inevitable:

Let two of the opposite sex sit down together, and carry on a conversation in which the subject of lascivious thought and action forms the chief topic, and can it be supposed for one moment that the two will escape with unsullied virtue? Consider the nature of the questions the priest is permitted to put to ladies, and the latitude allowed to him in the Confessional; and further consider the possibility of his penitent being young and beautiful, and the fact of his being unmarried, and will any one of competent experience and judgement maintain that the religious element in the priest is sufficiently strong to prevent the manifestation of the

¹¹ *Awful Disclosures*, 118.

¹² Bouchier Wrey Savile, *A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Pusey on the 'Catholic' Practice of Auricular Confession, etc.*, (London: 1877), 47.

¹³ Cited in Arnstein, 95.

¹⁴ Confessional pornography might more properly be considered titillation rather than pornography. It relied on suggestion and inference rather than on description, and was circulated more widely in the Protestant mainstream as a result.

sexual passion, which must grow out of such circumstances?...it is impossible for him to keep his conduct pure...A man with the constitution of an icicle might pass through such an ordeal unscathed; but even in that case, what about the penitents? It is tolerably well known that similarly cold-blooded mortals among the fair sex are few and far between.¹⁵

This anxiety about men and women was exacerbated by the nature of the questioning undertaken in confession, and by the physical location of the event. This was not the confessional box of continental Catholicism—Anglican churches had lost such furniture in the aftermath of the Reformation—but was ordinarily the vestry. The vestry acted as a liminal space within the sacred space of the church. It was where the clergy robed for service, but it was open to people in a way that the altar area was not. The vestry was seen as part of the sacred ground of the sanctuary, but was open to the public on invitation. Discussing sexual matters and other sins in this space created conflicting images of sanctified protection and defilement of both place and person.¹⁶

Thus the High Church movement was accused of ‘turning many a quiet place of worship into a Ritualistic brothel.’¹⁷

The Alfred Poole case was a scandal in 1858, when Poole, a curate in a London parish, was deprived of his license by the Bishop of London, with the Archbishop of Canterbury confirming the deprivation on appeal. This case involved alleged abuse of the confessional and revolved around Poole’s use of the sacred space to ask women about their sexual practices. The rector of the parish where Poole was curate fulminated against attempts ‘to exasperate the public mind against my Curate by the mention of a darkened chamber, and exaggerations of that kind’: he was at pains to explain that confessions at St. Barnabas Church were conducted in the vestry, lighted by two windows.¹⁸ The testimony against Poole, given by a young married woman, shows the danger imputed to confessional space in popular rhetoric. A perfectly ordinary vestry becomes a ‘dark room’, suggesting moral as well as physical blindness and sexual danger, all encapsulated in one repeated phrase.

Mr. Poole then said...that I must come to him on Monday evening to make open confession. I went on the Monday at 9 o’clock to his own room...He [told me]...that I must open my mind to him as my holy father, and that GOD had given him the power to remit or retain all my sins, and that he had the keys to heaven. He then told me that I must go into a dark room with him on the following Friday at 3 o’clock...I was taken by him through the parsonage into the dark room, where I could hardly see: he then locked the door: he went into the room in a black gown, he then put a white one over it, with a girdle round his waist: he then told me to kneel down before a large cross placed upon a table,..he was seated in a chair by my side; he then said –’You must do as your holy father tells you,’...At the end of another fortnight I went to him again on a Friday at 4

¹⁵ Saladin, *The Confessional Exposed: as it exists in the Church of Rome and the Church of England* (London: W. Stewart, nd), 41-2.

¹⁶ Presbyter Anglicanus [Joseph Hemington Harris], *Auricular Confession*, (London: 1852), 9.

¹⁷ Saladin, 34.

¹⁸ Robert Liddell, *A Letter to the Lord Bishop of London, on Confession and Absolution, with Special Reference to the Case of the Rev. Alfred Poole* (London: J.T.Hayes, 1858), 33.

o'clock: I was taken by another way into the dark room; I knelt down the same as before....¹⁹

Francis Power Cobbe bemoaned the 'coarseness' of anti-Confessional literature.²⁰ But although she disapproved of the sexual overtones of these attacks, she too deplored the confessional as potentially crossing the boundary between religion and home. The Confessional, among even the soberest commentators, was viewed as threatening to invade the home, with the priest and his female helpers as the advance party of a force attacking on domestic privacy and loyalty. This makes the Confessional a remarkably mobile space: physically located in a church, but capable of invading domestic privacy and undermining family ties.

The Confessional was imagined as a source of contamination, and its 'exposers' defended their publication of unseemly details because it was thought 'to show England that her ruin is likely to come to her from what she reverentially considers her holy places...[so that]...the fierce light of public opinion would quickly blast this foul den of incipient sacerdotalism.'²¹

Attacks on the confessional clearly elide secrecy and the private space involved with sexual danger and potential sexual excitement: one traveling lecturer on the subject attacked it in terms reminiscent of the sexual kidnapping any reader of the Old Testament would be familiar with, condemning

...that secrecy which at present invests it with a species of dangerous excitement. Let not our daughters be dragged off secretly to the confessional with these feelings of half terror, half delight, with which they are now hurried away to stolen interviews with wandering Jesuits.²²

Even the public lectures given around Britain were capable of transforming space. Ordinary public rooms became men-only spaces for the duration of the anti-confessional lecture tours. Advertising for anti-confessional public lectures was designed to both titillate and to insult, through its 'men only' headlines and its implied attack on the modesty of those who advocated the practice: 'Ladies not admitted (except such as frequent the Confessional), or gentlemen under eighteen years of age.'²³

The physical and spiritual boundaries around church and home also became clouded by the divisions between Protestant and Catholic; the confessional was described as 'allowing their clergy to overstep those bounds which separate us of the Reformed Protestant Church from the Church of Rome.'²⁴ Confession was described as the building block in a superstructure of error: the 'true base upon which the whole politico-Pagan edifice stands'.²⁵ Immured in convents and corrupted by confession, sisters were doubly in the wrong space—morally as well as physically. In the eyes of their contemporaries,

¹⁹ Liddell, 38-9.

²⁰ Frances Power Cobbe, *Auricular Confession in the Church of England* (London: H. Brace, 1872), 3.

²¹ Saladin, 31.

²² W.C. Magee, *Auricular Confession and Priestly Absolution: a Lecture* (London, 1852), 20.

²³ Robert Steele, *The Priest in the Confessional: a warning with Evidence, against the Immorality and Blasphemy of 'Priests in Absolution'* (London, the author, 1877), 30.

²⁴ Steele, 27.

²⁵ Steele, 31.

women should be in the home, but it was unclear what category of space a convent fell into: was it an extension of the home, as its defenders sometimes claimed? Convents were private space for the women living in them, but they were public because of the cultural fascination with them and because of their public work with women and children, often carried out in the convent complex. It was not clear if they were a refuge from the world, or an essential part of God's work in and for the world, or some kind of liminal hinterland. Advocates often sought to portray them as an extension of the heavenly order into earthly space, while their opponents just as earnestly sought to prove that they were an outpost of hell.