THE TRACTARIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD AS SACRAMENT AND SYMBOL

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The Oxford Movement (1833–45) may be seen as a reaction both to eighteenth century rationalism and to the excessive individualism of the Evangelicals. The Tractarians made the discovery that the universe is a symbol of the divine and that redemption is corporate. The Tractarians were romanticists who viewed nature as a parable and as an analogy of the spiritual world. As Francis Oakeley wrote in 1841, “Forms are the expression of the Mind of the Spirit.”

This essay has three functions some of which overlap. First, there will be an exposition of the Tractarian understanding of the world as sacrament/symbol. This will include, *inter alia*, a discussion of the famous sacramental principle. Second, an attempt will be made to trace the sources of the Tractarian view of the world in 1) Scripture; 2) the Alexandrian doctrine of the *oikonomia*; and 3) Bishop Butler’s doctrine of analogy. It seems significant to me, for example, that Butler commences his famous work on analogy with a quotation from Origen, who saw the cosmos as pervaded by symbols and types of the invisible world. Third, the final section will contain a critical assessment of the Tractarian understanding of the world.

I. The Tractarian Understanding of the World

The Tractarians emphasized the ascetical, ethical and practical aspects of Christianity. As Marvin O’Connell notes in his profound study of the Oxford Movement, the Tractarians searched the literature of the early Church in order to find paradigms for right conduct.  

world. As Yngve Brilioth observes, these sermons went a long way in both creating and shaping the peculiar character of Tractarian piety. (2)

Although these sermons are the chief focus of my essay, they are supplemented by the works of other Tractarians. The eight volumes of the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* were preached to Newman’s congregation at Oxford and Littlemore between 1835 and 1841. Many commentators agree that in these sermons Newman attempts to bring his audience to “realize the unseen world”. This emphasis on realizing the unseen world has its *Sitz im Leben* in Newman’s personal talents as preacher, literary artist and poet. What does it mean to realize the unseen world? This is a large question the outlines of which can only be traced.

Under the general theme of realizing the unseen world there are seven sub-themes. These are: having a strong faith, trust, self-denial, suffering, prayer, holiness and recognizing the nothingness of this present world. In this essay I am concerned only with this last theme, namely, recognizing the nothingness of this present, visible world. This concept pervades the *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. (3) Newman says that the Christian understands the fleeting and ephemeral character of life on earth. This becomes apparent especially in times of crisis or in limit-situations. Newman writes:

“In time of misfortune we’re led even more to understand the nothingness of this world, we distrust it and are weaned from the love of it... till at length it floats before our eyes merely as some idle veil, which can’t hide the view of what is beyond it; we begin to perceive there’s but two beings in the whole universe, our own soul and the God who made it”. (4)

I would maintain that the above passage epitomizes Newman’s understanding of the world as sacrament and symbol for these reasons. First, Newman and the other Tractarians understand the visible world to be a veil and a curtain. Newman held this view of the earth as a veil and curtain already in 1828. At that time Newman was grieving over the death of his sister, Mary, who died very young. In a letter dated 10 May, 1828, Newman

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writes, "Dear Mary seems embodied in every tree and hid behind every hill. What a veil and curtain this world of sense is! beautiful, but still a veil". (5)

Second, the invisible world is found beyond the curtain of the visible world. Newman and the Tractarians believe that the invisible world is, on the whole, a much higher world than the visible world. Why so? The presence of God in the invisible world makes that an incomparable world. (6) Newman tended to mistrust the reality of material phenomena and, correspondingly trusted in the thought of two absolute and "luminously self-evident beings", myself and my Creator. (7) This line of thought had its roots deep within Newman's heart. He held such a view of the world ever since his first conversion at age fifteen.

It would be incorrect to simply say that in distinguishing between the visible and the invisible world Newman denigrates the visible world à la Plato and Plotinus. Newman and the Tractarians would retort that not everything in the invisible world is simply more important than the visible world. In the visible world one finds human persons and the Tractarians would say that nothing under heaven is more precious than the human person. (8)

Many Victorian scholars are aware of the fact that the Tractarians distinguish between the visible and the invisible world. A careful reading of the pertinent literature shows, however, that, in point of fact, a distinction is made between three worlds: 1) the world of brute animals; 2) the world of the senses; and 3) the world of spirit, wherein God and the angels dwell. (9) Newman, for example, sees our present, visible world connected both to an inferior world, the world of brute animals, and to a superior world, the world of God and the angelic hosts. Newman is interested in showing our connection to an inferior world in order to prove that our connection to a superior world makes sense. (10)

Newman sees the distinction between the visible and the invisible world related to divine providence. On earth providence works beneath a veil so that the visible disguises the invisible. The visible world has its own system of fixed laws and principles. God, however, acts through, with and beneath these fixed laws and principles. The providence of God has two features: it is both particular and personal, so that providence secretly cooperates and concurs with that system which we all experience.

Newman calls the visible world, "the instrument, yet the veil, of the world invisible, – the veil, yet still partially the symbol and index: so that all that exists or happens visibly, conceals and yet suggests, and above all

9. PPS IV, p. 205.
10. PPS IV, p. 206.
subserves, a system of persons, facts, and events beyond itself”.

(11) Newman adds that the visible world, the Bible, the Church, the state and the human person are all types, representatives and organs of an unseen world, truer and higher than themselves. Newman writes that, “The only difference between them is, that some things bear their supernatural character upon their surface, are historically creations of the supernatural system, or are perceptively instrumental, or obviously symbolical: while others rather seem to be complete in themselves, or run counter to the unseen system which they really subserve, and thereby make demands upon our faith”.

For Newman, then, the whole visible world is a sacrament and symbol of the invisible world. The Tractarians speak of this notion under the heading of the sacramental principle, or the sacramental system, namely, the doctrine that material phenomena are types and instruments of real things unseen. (13) The word of God in Scripture, for example, has a deep meaning. The Tractarians would say that the word itself has a sacramental function to perform. Newman, for example, calls the word of God, “the outward form of a heavenly truth, and in this sense a mystery or Sacrament”.

The sacramental principle has its source in the Incarnation, the central truth of the Gospel and the source of all dogmatic principles. Earth and heaven, the visible and the invisible world are joined together in the Incarnation. Newman calls the Incarnation the archetype of the sacramental principle. The sacramental principle means that things in the world look the same as before, but are no longer the same. An invisible power has now taken hold of them. When God would consecrate us, he takes the elements of this world as the means of “real but unseen spiritual influences”.

The Tractarians look upon both the world and the Church as a sacrament and symbol. The Tractarians believe that the Church is essentially the sacramental system, whose various forms of appearance are not only types and symbols, but true instruments of grace. (16) The Tractarians see the Church as a storehouse and direct channel of grace. This idea led to the thought of the Church as a living body, a sacramental organism impelled by the Holy Spirit. The Church was thought to be constructed, from inside to outside, by the Holy Spirit. The Tractarians consider the Church to be a

living being with its breath, its limbs and its head. This view of the Church is remarkably similar to the ecclesiology of Johann Adam Möhler and other theologians in Germany influenced by the German Romantics.

In short, the Tractarians had a romantic view of both the Church and the world. They encountered mystery lurking at every turn. The Tractarians felt that the bare intellect merely skims along the surface of reality, and that the real world lies hidden beneath the appearance of things. We see such a view of the world in Newman’s epitaph, Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem. The Tractarians consider the Church, on the other hand, to be the external body of religion, the fruit of the Spirit, the Divine Architect who planned and constructed the Church. As Francis Oakeley wrote in 1841, “Forms are the expression of the Mind of the Spirit.”

II. Sources of the Tractarian View of the World

It is not easy to pinpoint the exact sources of the Tractarian understanding of the world as symbol and sacrament. In the case of Newman, for example, he never took over the ideas of others wholesale, but always modified them. Newman’s appreciation of the invisible world and, concomitantly, his sense of the unreality of the empirical world were ingrained attributes. These characteristics were sharpened and directed but not created by his first conversion at age fifteen.

It would be foolhardy to discount the influence of Scripture on the Tractarian understanding of the world. Throughout the poems of John Keble’s The Christian Year, one finds the close and abundant knowledge of Scripture. Keble likes to weave his words with those of Scripture. In his sermon, “Primitive Tradition Recognized in Holy Scripture,” written in 1836, Keble quotes the Greek text of Scripture and argues the way a nineteenth century exegete might.

In regard to Newman we know that he memorized long passages from the Bible, for example, the entire Epistle to the Ephesians, verbatim. The Apologia tells us that “I was brought up from a child to take great delight in

reading the Bible.” Newman’s supposedly dark view of the world also derives from Scripture. He says that we tend to overvalue the pleasures of this world, whereas Scripture stresses the other side. Throughout the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* Newman constantly refers to Scripture as a court of appeals for his understanding of the world as sacrament and symbol.

To what extent Newman’s understanding of the world was tinged by Calvinism is a moot question. We do know that when he was fifteen the Rev. Walter Mayer gave Newman some books with calvinistic leanings. It might be argued that the distinction Newman makes in the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* between the Visible Church (which exists for the Elect) and the invisible Church (the body of the Elect) is a calvinistic one. If, however, Newman’s sense of the unreality of the empirical world was an ingrained characteristic, then perhaps the reading of such evangelical writers as Thomas Scott and J. Milner merely confirmed that which Newman all along thought to be the case. It seems to me that the common pursuit of holiness was the knot which bound the Evangelicals and the Tractarians together. I agree with David Newsome that the phrase “Holiness rather than peace” was the inspiration of the Evangelical revival and one of the chief sources of Newman’s yearning for unworldliness.

Scholars conversant with the Oxford Movement agree that the Tractarian understanding of the world as a *negativum* finds further confirmation in the writings of the Alexandrian Fathers, particularly Origen and Clement of Alexandria. Alf Haerdelin, for instance, feels that Newman’s view of nature has a Platonic tinge to it in contradistinction to say a Romantic one. He argues that for Newman nature/world hides God rather than reveals him.

I feel uneasy with Haerdelin’s interpretation. It seems to me that Newman’s view of the world is influenced more by the English Romantics than it is by the Alexandrian Fathers. I would concede the fact that it is extremely difficult to trace very precisely the influence of Romantic literature upon the Tractarians. I concur with Michael Bright’s judgment that the often vague and elusive spirit of Romanticism permeates Victorian religion, in general, and the Tractarians, in particular. It seems significant to me that when John Keble became Professor of Poetry at Oxford, he openly admitted the indebtedness of his poetry and thought to Wm. Wordsworth by reading a eulogy on the poet whose nature mysticism and

The glorification of the deep sympathies of life had, in part, inspired *The Christian Year*. (28)

The main problem involved in showing the influence of Romanticism on the Tractarians has to do with the definition of Romanticism. Some traits commonly associated with Romanticism are these: a dedication to feeling as opposed to reason, organicism, a genuine respect for antiquity, a preference for the natural and the picturesque, and the imaginative and even mystical apprehension of the supernatural. (29)

The Romantics distinguish between the world of actual appearances, which to common sense is the only world, and the ideal world, which is eternal, infinite and absolutely real. Far from denigrating the phenomenal world, the Romantics take a sacramental view of it. Carlyle, for example, could refer to nature as "the Living Garment of God". By this he means to say that nature is suffused with God. Wordsworth, too, in *Tintern Abbey* strikes a similar note. He feels,

"A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things". (30)

The Romantics are especially interested in the supernatural, in sharp contrast to Alexander Pope and the eighteenth century poets, and are aware of the fact that in their poetry the supernatural can only be approached asymptotically. Hence the Romantics have a penchant for using symbols. Symbols can both express the infinite and are organically related to the realities they represent. The Tractarians are also interested in the suggestive power of symbols. Newman, for instance, saw the need of figurative or symbolic language in order to give expression to the mysteries of Christianity. He writes in the *Arians of the Fourth Century* that when the human mind is occupied by some vast and awful subject, it expresses its feelings figuratively or symbolically since ordinary words will not convey the admiration, nor literal words the reverence which possesses it. (31)

It would transcend the parameters of this essay to demonstrate how the

entire Tractarian understanding of the world as symbol and sacrament may be viewed as a reaction to liberalism or secular humanism which said that the whole of life was to be found in the empirical world. One may easily marshal arguments to prove that the greatest accomplishment of the Tractarian movement was the restoration of this other-worldly temper. The spiritual world (which the Tractarians believed was revealed in sacramental experience) was a world charged with the grandeur of God.\(^{(32)}\)

Another influence of the Tractarian understanding of the world as symbol and sacrament has to be Bishop Butler's famous work, *The Analogy of Religion*. One may say, without exaggeration, that the Tractarians were men of two books, Hooker's *Laws* and Butler's *Analogy*. We know that around 1833 the *Analogy* was added to the list of standard authors for the final examination at Oxford.\(^{(33)}\)

J.H. Newman tells us in the *Apologia* that he learned the sacramental principle directly from Butler's *Analogy*.\(^{(34)}\) Butler makes an analogy between God's works in nature and the actions of God vis-à-vis revealed religion. Butler wants to show that just as in nature God uses various means to achieve his purposes, so too in the order of salvation. The sacramental principle has, for Butler, an apologetic/practical purpose, whereas Newman turns it into an ecclesiological principle with theological consequences. This is yet another illustration of the fact that Newman usually modifies the ideas of others rather than adopting them wholesale, as was pointed out earlier on in this essay.\(^{(35)}\)

In the *Essay on Development* (1845) Newman refers to Butler's *Analogy* to uphold his theory concerning the development of doctrine. Based on an analogy with the world, Newman argues that there has to be a development of doctrine. He writes, "The change of seasons, the ripening of the fruits of the earth, the very history of a flower is an instance of this; and so is human life".\(^{(36)}\) To support this view Newman makes reference to Butler's *Analogy*. Newman would have no difficulty with the Scholastic axiom, *Gratia non destruit, sed perficit naturam*. Newman could accept such an axiom because he sees God as the "Author of Nature" and the "Author of Grace".\(^{(37)}\)

I wish to end this section with a question: To what extent is the Tractarian understanding of the world influenced by the seventeenth century Caroline divines? I am not prepared to answer this question with reference to each of the Tractarians. I will do so only in respect to Newman.

As far as I can ascertain, there seems to be no evidence that Newman

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34. *Apologia*, p. 28.
read the Caroline divines before his involvement in the Oxford Movement. Newman came to the Anglican divines by way of the Church Fathers and not the other way round. As Thomas Parker shrewdly observes, as Newman was preparing his lectures on the *Prophetical Office of the Church* (1837), “one has the impression of a man discovering more fully a whole system of theology, that of the Anglican divines, with which, hitherto, he had no more than a nodding acquaintance”.

### III. A Critique of the Tractarian Understanding of the World

Part of the difficulty in evaluating the Tractarian understanding of the world has to do with the thickness of the fog surrounding the term, “world”, itself. The term, world, may mean the world of brutes, the empirical world or the ideal world, the world of spirit. The term may also refer to the post-lapsarian world, in which sin is present but which has been redeemed in Christ, or it may mean the inferior world, apart from God. This latter view of the world finds expression in Tract No. 1 written in 1833 where we read, “Is it not our very office to oppose the world, can we then allow ourselves to court it?”

I wish to pose two questions in regard to the Tractarian understanding of the world. First, is it biblical? I would say that the Tractarian understanding of the world as sacrament and symbol was based on Scripture, at least the way Scripture was understood in the nineteenth century. It is another matter altogether, if the question means does the Tractarian understanding of the world as sacrament and symbol square with the findings of contemporary exegesis? To pose the question the latter way seems anachronistic at best and unfair at worst. The Tractarians did not have at their disposal such methods as form and redaction criticism, which present-day exegetes do.

I would maintain, though, that the world functions as an eschatological concept for the Tractarians. Of course, they do not use the term, eschatology, but the concept is there, at least implicitly. In the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* I, Newman says that the true Christian rejoices in terrestrial goods in such a way as to be indifferent when they go and deals with the world as though he/she had no dealings with it.

Second, did the Tractarians have a negative view of the world? Initially, it may seem that they did. One may be tempted to consider the Tractarians’ search after the supernatural and the world of spirit as a repudiation of the phenomenal and empirical world. One may point to: 1)
Pusey's description of monastic institution as a refuge from the vanities of the world; 2) Newman's quasi-monastic community at Littlemore; and 3) one may interpret in a dualistic fashion these remarks of Pusey:

"The less we live for things outward, the stronger burns our inward life.
The more we live amid the distractions of the world,
the less vivid is the life of the soul.
The more we live to things unseen,
the less hold will this world of sense have over us". (41)

I would say that the Tractarian understanding of the world appears to be neither dualistic nor unduly pessimistic, but rather realistic. Although the Tractarians insist on the subservience of the empirical world to the invisible world, they do so partly in reaction to liberalism or secular humanism which overemphasized this present, visible world as if it alone existed. Then too, the Tractarians are totally committed to the doctrine of the Incarnation wherein the reconciliation of the two worlds is brought about. (42)

One may ask what were the Tractarians really like when not in academic attire or in cassock and surplice. Despite their personal self-discipline and austerity, they were very human. Keble, Newman, Hurrell Froude and Pusey kept a horse at Oxford and used to ride. Froude was a daring rider across country while Pusey hunted three days a week and was reputed to be a good shot. Froude also loved the sea and was a fearless yachtsman. Even Newman played the violin and trained the rustic choir in his days at Littlemore. I mention these facts to show that in their own, personal lives the Tractarians were not kill-joys, but sincerely loved the world. However, they were mindful of the one thing necessary, personal holiness. About them all was the beauty of holiness and holiness was one of the chief aims of the Oxford Movement. (43)

I have one further observation. At times, the Tractarian understanding of the world as a negativum is so uncompromising that one ventures to say, "Thou protesteth too much". This is particularly true in regard to the sermons of Newman and Pusey. I have the impression that Newman, for example, is struggling himself to believe in the existence of the invisible world. This view of Newman finds confirmation in the notes entitled "The Unseen World" written in 1876:

"I deny that there is any world but the sensible world. A Creator, Personal God, Angels, Souls, are mere traditions and fancies."

"Is this so? have I not as clear a proof of the unseen world and its constituent parts as of the seen?"(44)


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