
MARTYR'S PULPIT; REVISITING THE MATERIAL AND THE METAPHORIC RHETORIC OF GOTHIC REVIVALIST ARCHITECTURE

BASANTH THOMAS BABU

basantbb20@gmail.com, +918593872040

Kuzhimullil house, Pazhaya road, Koothattukulam

P.O, Ernakulam (Dist), Kerala. Pincode -686662,

ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS:

Gothic Revivalist
Architecture,
Gothic Architecture,
Victorian sermons,
A.W.N Pugin,
Brooks, Pulpit,
Exeter Cathedral,
Eucharist,
Martyrdom,
Martyr's Pulpit.

This paper titled Martyr's Pulpit; Revisiting the Material and the Metaphoric rhetoric of Gothic Revivalist Architecture envisages to provide an object biography of Exeter Cathedral's famed Martyr's Pulpit by expounding the inherent semantic symbolisms and architectural metaphors attributed to Gothic Revivalist Architecture in the Victorian era. The Martyrs inscribed on the pulpit faces metaphorically symbolise the Christian ideal of salvation through martyrdom and evoke symbolisms of the 'Altar' and the 'Eucharist'. The pulpit owing to its symbolic and material functions draws a parallel with a cathedral- a site of sacrifice (intellectual and physical) which points to the Eucharist that forms the cornerstone of Christianity. This paper uses Gothic Revivalist Architecture's connotative aspects to delineate on the public and intellectual discourse the pulpit shapes.

Martyr's Pulpit; Revisiting the Material and the Metaphoric rhetoric of Gothic Revivalist Architecture

The Martyr's Pulpit designed by Gilbert Scott at Exeter Cathedral traces its history back to the 1870s. The pulpit, on a stem with shafts and with a flight of stone steps has bowed faces with figure groups and individual figures in niches under nodding gables. The pulpit commemorates the Martyrdom of Melanesia's first bishop John Coleridge Patteson, who was the nephew to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the former deacon at Exeter Cathedral. Bishop Patteson was killed by the natives of the Solomon Islands in 1871, mistakenly taking him for one of the blackguard pirates who had murdered their kin. The central panel of the pulpit shows Bishop Patteson's body being placed in a canoe by the Nukapu

natives and sent in the direction of the schooner from which the bishop had come. The North Western panel of the pulpit depicts England's first martyr St. Alban being beheaded during the Roman occupation of Britain around 300 AD while the Southern Panel shows St. Boniface embarking on a voyage to preach the gospel to the heathen in Germany. The pulpit is carved out of local sandstone called 'Beerstone', the name echoing the Devon locality from where the rock was mined.

Commissioned during the Gothic Revival era, the pulpit is a piece of Church architecture that draws heavily on the semantics of decorated medievalism. Chris Brooks deliberates on the medievalism of Gothic revival as an "evocative reference to the past" which could be recontextualized infinitely as a store house of formal elements comprising of pinnacles, tracery and pointed arches that gives space to wider semantic identities or possibilities (Brooks 52). The pulpit embodies the Victorian predilection for Churches and especially the inherent religious connotations that marked its form. Standing true to the tradition of Gothic revival, George Gilbert Scott has designed the pulpit akin to a revivalist cathedral. The pointed arches of the three faces of the pulpit remind the onlooker of the lofty architectural marvels of the Gothic age, the high arches of erstwhile cathedrals. The twin niches to which the martyrs St. Paul and St. Boniface are assigned translate into long windows found in Gothic cathedrals of England. Vaulted ceiling prevalent in the era is present above the three faces, occupying the imaginary roof of the cathedral. In Peter N. Lindfield's opinion, Gothic Revival is a largely "un-interpreted" corpus of abbey ruins and "mutilated" medieval mass of buildings which in turn establish the Victorian thirst for glories of the past (Lindfield 3).

The scenes of Martyrdom depicted on the three panels of the pulpit figuratively hint towards the Eucharist, thus enclosing a distinct Cathedral energy within the pulpit itself. The exterior Gothic revivalist architectural cues are amplified and held in place by the rhetoric of martyrdom synonymous with the purpose of the pulpit as an oratorial instrument that amplifies oration through a raised platform, a pedestal. Examining the spirituality of Martyrdom enables clearer comprehension of the Eucharistic energy. Martyrdom is quintessentially a Christian endeavour at perfecting God's love by sacrificing one's physical body for Christ and through which act, the body testifies to the ideal of Christian perfection. In this act of Martyrdom, the physical body is sanctified and raised or elevated figuratively to a higher realm (Clark and Honsokou 32). The Martyrs were also the first ones to be "elevated to the altars", to use the title "saints" and to receive ecclesial veneration (Clark and Honsoku 34). This promotion to greater heights is physically manifested by the pedestal of the pulpit that works to raise the orator to a higher plane, making his persona exhort and advice the congregation or gathering. It also implies the subsequent effacement of human weakness that is converted into divine providence at the hands of this elevation. Eucharist is the exulted reproduction of Christ's martyrdom termed Passion, put in practice to enable the common man to take part in Christ's Martyrdom by consuming his body and blood (73).

The Pulpit by acting as a metaphor for a cathedral is simulating the Eucharistic call through the sermon that blazes in its altar. It is the sermon that sanctifies the altar, akin the altar that invites the believer to take part in Christ's martyrdom. The Eucharist narrates the agape of Jesus through the providence of body and blood, materially exchanging the idea of self-sacrifice to the believer while the sermon on the pulpit translates the martyrdom experience to literal progression of words. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a Sermon as "A discourse usually delivered from a pulpit and based upon a text of Scripture for the purpose of giving religious instruction or exhortation". Sermons attached discourse meaning to the Eucharist carried out in the altar, like the panels on Scott's pulpit that synthesize the idea of Eucharist through Martyrdom. The sermon played a key role in instructing and informing the congregation on the utter necessity to remain sanctified during the age of Victoria. Victorian sermons had to cater to a time of changing standards of belief and conduct. Biblical faith was put to test by the natural, biological and social sciences. The stalwarts that led these challenges were Lyell the geologist, Chambers the encyclopedist and amateur astronomer, Charles Darwin the biologist and Herbert Spencer the sociologist (Davies 285). The pulpit thus worked to ground faith in Martyrdom's essentialist claim and used the Eucharist as euphemism to bring about this effect. Sermons had become integral institutionalized instruments that disseminated the spirit of bodily sacrifice to the wider Christian public, they aided in shaping the discourse of truth in that time and since the Victorian era was a transitory period, the need to fully realize the values invested in a martyr were crucial and inescapable.

The Pulpit works to raise the preacher to greater heights of power, divinity and most importantly amplifies the sermon. The preacher occupies a space above the congregation and being reserved primarily for men of orders, the pulpit safeguards its sanctimonious status-quo. The congregation, usually a patchwork of people from varied classes and intellectual plane tune into the gospel administered by the preacher whose status in the socio-cultural environment stands raised or glorified than the congregation in general. Victorian preaching was a defensive act in the nineteenth century, the major responsibilities being borne by the preachers to reply to the "difficulties" of the time. Even though their primary task was to keep faith alive and burning, it was the secondary task that informed a lion's share of their sermons, to safeguard and sustain in pristine integrity the validity of Christian ethical imperatives. Anglican and Dissenting ministers of the time used the pulpit to issue ethical and economic guidance to the congregation (Davies 285). The Victorian pulpit was the playground for famous names like Disraeli and Bright, Bradlaugh, Gladstone and Henry Irving. The public's reliance on the pulpit as an instrument of political power that raises the preacher is substantiated by the fandom that the Victorian sermon-tasters brought out. In the public arena, the pulpit was hailed by the educated and wealthy men.

Women were rarely allowed the opportunity to ascend the steps to a pulpit.

Victorian pulpits become an exhibition of power during the annual sermons preached either at the assembly of a denomination or at the yearly gathering of a charitable or missionary organization. These exhibitions came to symbolize the infinite endurance that God himself is made of. The preachers and audience alike were put through many such rigorous exercises. Edward Irving had to pause twice during the Annual sermon of the London Missionary Society in 1824 to regain his strength as the sermon was three and a half hours long. Hymns were sung during the interval of pause (Davies 286). The Victorian populace preferred the structured sermon that clearly emphasized the preacher's knowledge quotient and thus the pulpit came to symbolize wisdom. The sermons much like George Gilbert Scott's Gothic revival architectural style were trying to revive and nurture the past, the ethical values of the bygone eras. This attribute of the sermon is realized through revivalist pulpits like the Martyrs pulpit at Exeter Cathedral. A.W.N Pugin's buildings inherit their meaning through the long literary tradition of Gothic Revival in Britain with more emphasis being given to architectural truth- truth to structure, to function and to material. He states that this fusion is inseparable and that in Gothic buildings, meaning manifests a material presence as does the physical presence of Christ in Catholic canon of eucharist. Gothic thus comes to mean salvation, spiritual and social (qtd.in Brooks 240). Victorian pulpits were cast in the reflection of Christ and had to wage wars against the utilitarian and functional architectural trends that were emerging by the middle of the nineteenth century. Sermons were also facing the onslaught of time through Social Darwinism and newer ethics of utilitarianism that threatened to erase the traditional foundations of theology (Davies 288). Instead of grounding themselves entirely in the orthodoxy of the past, Victorian preachers like their architect counterparts started using the 'ruins' of the past to reconstruct a new, historical and experimental format of sermonizing synonymous with the Gothic Revivalist tradition of architecture that brought out a new style of architecture from littered pieces of ruination. Evangelical Victorian preachers had to suffer literary martyrdom or intellectual death at the hands of Victorian novelists. They heavily criticised sermons as lack-lustre unwarranted authorial narratives devoid of any quality. The sermon and its preachers regularly figured in the works of Victorian authors like Dickens, Trollope and Eliot in satirized flavour. Literary stalwarts of the age failed to comprehend the generic values of the sermon and the broad variation that occurred within the genre (Sell 1). Victorian novels portrayed the evangelical preacher as a port-bellied, smooth talking mediocre man who was more inclined to the tea cakes that came at the end of the sermon than the richness of the content that he spoke. George Eliot describes a preacher as a "Goshen of Mediocrity with small ability, middling morale, superficial knowledge and full of bigoted narrowness and unctuous egoism" (qtd. In Sell 2). The sermon thus has denigrating portrayals of its essence in narratives set in the time. Another reason that contributed to the decline of sermon is the crisis of faith that

plagued evangelical preachers. Many prominent preachers spiraled into a loss of faith. The narrative of ‘Crises of Faith’ in literature turned literary martyrdom of the preacher into a powerful tool of exposition in narrative, often the parodied preacher tones being used to narrate incidents and thus the reader’s encounter with the ‘sermonic mode’ in literary studies. Victorian sermons viewed from the vantage point of the culture illuminates the means by which the populace made sense of the world around and assimilated world news. For instance, in October of 1857, the Queen announced a national fast day in the backdrop of the Indian Mutiny that had just taken place. Don Randall argues that it was the fast day sermons that shaped the public understanding of the mutiny in his work *Autumn of 1857: The Making of Indian Mutiny* (qtd. In Sell 11). The literary martyrdom of the preachers thus shaped public opinion on a broad range of issues.

In short, the pulpit played a key role in Victorian society. Beyond the borders of its material symbolism as a sacred article used in worship, the pulpit figures as the advocate of Christianity’s agape through the sermons and their symbolic code of eucharist. It also worked to shape the public discourse, leading to a wholesome growth of the populace. Like a Christian Cathedral, the pulpit served the needs of the public- as a material object used for worship, as the source of ethical and moral didacticism and finally through the cultural perspectives that it evoked.

REFERENCE

Brooks, Chris. *The Gothic Revival*. Phaidon Press, 1999.

Clark, Patrick M., and Annie Hounsokou. “AN OVERVIEW OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF MARTYRDOM.” *The Spirituality of Martyrdom*, Catholic University of America Press, 2016, pp. 9–36. JSTOR, JSTOR, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1d8hbdw.5.

Clark, Patrick M., and Annie Hounsokou. “MARTYRDOM AND THE EUCHARIST.” *The Spirituality of Martyrdom*, Catholic University of America Press, 2016, pp. 73–80. JSTOR, JSTOR, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1d8hbdw.7.

Lindfield, Peter N. “Understanding Gothic Architecture in Georgian Britain.” *Georgian Gothic*, NED-New edition, Boydell & Brewer, 2016, pp. 7–41. JSTOR, JSTOR, doi:10.7722/j.ctt1d3923m.6.

Sell, Jeremy Michael. *Victorian Sermonic Discourse: The Sermon in Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Society* - ProQuest. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1836064766?accountid=10792>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2020.

“Sermon, n.” OED Online, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/176489>. Accessed 1 Mar. 2020.

It is remarkable how close the details of the unfolding pandemic in the novel parallel our own COVID-19. The easily transmitted disease, which literally turns its victims blue, is first