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Religion and Ritual

CHARLOTTE RIBEYROL

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, Britain appeared at the vanguard of industrial progress. Although the industrial revolution transformed color thanks to a number of key scientific innovations, such as the discovery in 1856 of aniline “mauve,” the Victorian period (1837–1901) is still often perceived through a colorless filter – as the age of coal pollution and bleak, working-class slums. In his 1884 essay “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,” the critic John Ruskin interpreted this pervasive darkness as the symptom of a diseased, faithless world. Drawing on his diary entries of 1879, he noted:

Sunday, 17th August, 1879

Raining in foul drizzle, slow and steady; sky pitch-dark, and I just get a little light by sitting in the bow-window; diabolic clouds over everything: and looking over my kitchen garden yesterday, I found it one miserable mass of weeds gone to seed, the roses in the higher garden putrefied into brown sponges, feeling like dead snails; and the half-ripe strawberries all rotten at the stalks. And now I come to the most important sign of the plague-wind and the plague-cloud: that in bringing on their peculiar darkness, they *blanch* the sun instead of reddening it ... But in plague-wind, the sun is choked out of the whole heaven, all day long, by a cloud which may be a thousand miles square and five miles deep. And yet observe: that thin, scraggy, filthy, mangy, miserable cloud, for all the depth of it, can't turn the sun red, as a good, business-like fog does with a hundred feet or so of itself. By the plague-wind every

breath of air you draw is polluted, half round the world; in a London fog the air itself is pure, though you choose to mix up dirt with it, and choke yourself with your own nastiness (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 34: 38–9).

In this passage fraught with apocalyptic imagery, Ruskin denounces the evils of modern industrialism and materialism, which not only corrupt the soul of man but also discolor God's most beautiful creations, from sun to rose.

For Ruskin, color was indeed “sacred” – a paradoxical statement for one brought up by a strict evangelical mother, who had taught him to cherish the Word over the lure of the colorful ornaments favored by Roman Catholics. And yet, in spite of the multiple religious and aesthetic “revirements” he experienced throughout his life – and notably his 1858 “unconversion” in Turin in front of the *Queen of Sheba* by Venetian colorist Veronese – Ruskin never wavered in his celebration of “the sanctity of colour” which he strove to reconcile with his love of both Nature and Art in *Modern Painters*:

... take a wider view of nature, and compare generally rainbows, sunrises, roses, violets, butterflies, birds, goldfish, rubies, opals, and corals, with alligators, hippopotami, lions, wolves, bears, swine, sharks, slugs, bones, fungi, fogs, and corrupting, stinging, destroying things in general, and you will feel then how the question stands between the colourists and chiaroscurists, – which of them have nature and life on their side, and which have sin and death.

Finally: the ascertainment of the sanctity of colour is not left to human sagacity. It is distinctly stated in Scripture. I have before alluded to the sacred chord of colour (blue, purple, and scarlet, with white and gold) as appointed in the tabernacle; this chord is the fixed base of all colouring with the workmen of every great age; the purple and

scarlet will be found constantly employed by noble painters, in various unison, to the exclusion in general of pure crimson (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 6: 69).

Drawing on the Scriptures, Ruskin here attempts to moralize color, which the Reformation had targeted as dangerously sensuous, material, opaque, feminine, and superficial. In the preface to his 1904 translation of Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens* – a eulogy of the French Gothic cathedral as a Bible in stone – Marcel Proust quotes Ruskin's opposition between “colourists and chiaroscurists” (Proust 1987: 32), to suggest that the Victorian critic should be remembered not only as a major prose writer, but also as a great chromophile. This “sacred chord of colour” was indeed central to Ruskin's “religion of beauty” explored by Robert de la Sizeranne in his eponymous essay of 1897, *Ruskin et la religion de la beauté* (La Sizeranne 1897). Echoing de la Sizeranne, Proust claims that the source of Ruskin's talent as word painter was due to a form of “idolatry,” a term smacking of both Paganism and Catholicism, which he provocatively repeats throughout his *post-scriptum* (Proust 1987: 50–8). But fifty years before Proust, a Catholic reviewer, commenting on the first two volumes of *Modern Painters*, had already underlined the contradiction in Ruskin's aesthetic celebration of the Gothic and the works of the Italian Primitives:

There is something so transcendently ludicrous in the notion that the Church of Rome is *idolatrous*, and yet that the early medieval architecture was the result of the purest Christian faith and feeling (quoted in Cheeke 2016: 21).

Such conflicting responses to Ruskin's art-writing, as Stephen Cheeke notes, reveal that

The question of the theological significance of the supposedly aesthetic appeal of certain aspects of Church ritual, architecture, and decoration is part of a long struggle

in British culture which foreshadows the emergence of art-writing that is sometimes nostalgic for Christian forms of worship later in the century (Cheeke 2016: 21).

Because Ruskin, as a major cultural commentator on his own age, frequently engaged with the controversies relating to these “aspects of Church ritual, architecture, and decoration,” which intensified in the wake of the Oxford Movement of the 1830s – his wide-ranging writings on color will serve as the *fil rouge* to this chapter. It will be divided into two sections devoted, first, to the nineteenth-century revival of the colors of the Pre-Reformation Church of England and then to discussions of color production and perception in the overlapping contexts of scientific materialism and industrialism, which challenged established religious orthodoxies throughout Europe. If the colors of the medieval past were praised by Tractarians, Ritualists, or Ecclesiologists in their polemical plea for liturgical reform, the invention of aniline dyes for the needs of an expanding textile industry, as well as the new approaches to chromatic perception propounded by Darwinist “free-thinkers,” brought about alternative interpretations of the colorful beauty of nature, which Ruskin celebrated as a divine gift.

“OLD CHURCH OF ENGLAND” COLORS: CHROMATIC NOSTALGIA AND THE GOTHIC REVIVAL

Ruskin’s bleak statement on the soulless “materialism” of the industrial world was echoed by many of his contemporaries, who shared the critic’s belief that theirs was a funereal age. As noted by John Harvey, the fact that men from all classes in Western Europe, as well as the Queen herself following the death of Prince Albert in 1861, were uniformly dressed in black reinforced this gloomy impression (Harvey [1995] 2012: 23–39). In contrast to the colors of female dress, perceived as superficial ornamentation, black was the preferred non-color worn by Anglican clerics:

Anglicanism under Victoria's reign, bearing the imprint of the eighteenth century's evangelical revival, was characterized by its rejection of adornment and its taste for simplicity. Ministers of the Church of England for instance wore a plain black habit, with sometimes a white collar or cravat, and during services the emphasis was placed not so much on the liturgy as on the reading the Scriptures and on predication, the focus being on the idea that faith primarily derives from what is heard (the word) rather than what is seen (the spectacle of religious rites, with their deployment of colour) (Murray 2016: 240).

In order to escape this pervasive darkness and uniformity, several artists and thinkers, including Ruskin himself, turned to the past in search of more dazzling hues which they often longed to revive. The craze for revivals, whether Greek or Gothic, which affected both France and Britain at the time, had a strong chromophile dimension. In 1856, Ruskin thus praised the Middle Ages as the true "ages of gold":

And first, it is evident that the title 'Dark Ages,' given to the mediæval centuries, is, respecting art, wholly inapplicable ... They were the ages of gold: ours are the ages of umber ... The Middle Ages had their wars and agonies, but also intense delights. Their gold was dashed with blood; but ours is sprinkled with dust. Their life was interwoven with white and purple; ours is one seamless stuff of brown (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 5: 321–2).

Ruskin's reading of the darkness and opacity of modernity reflects his ambivalent engagement with the body of color – the blood of the past anachronistically jarring with the dust of the present. Drawing on a Carlylean sartorial metaphor, he contrasts the costly, sacred golds and purples of medieval fabrics with the common "seamless stuff of brown" of modernity which he

describes as “umber,” an earth pigment he certainly understood in its etymological, theologically charged sense, derived from the Latin *ombra* (shadow).

COLOR AND LIGHT: THE “TREASURES OF THE NEW JERUSALEM”

Ruskin or Carlyle embraced the colors of a medieval past united in faith and fervor to question, as well as escape, the bleakness of the industrial present. A similar contrasting approach was adopted in High Church and Catholic circles as praise of the Middle Ages became increasingly equated with a nostalgia for the Pre-Reformation Church. A strong historicizing strain indeed characterized Tractarianism, Ecclesiology, and Ritualism – three overlapping religious currents within the Church of England, which called for a revival of ancient liturgical practices to uphold the waning faith of their contemporaries, increasingly challenged by the agnostic positivism of modern science. As noted by Nigel Yates, there was “a good deal of cross-fertilization” among these three movements, in particular in discussions of church decoration and ecclesiastical vestments (Yates 2000: 49). As a consequence, Tractarians, Ecclesiologists, and Ritualists were indistinctly viewed by their detractors as suspiciously “popish” – especially following the conversion in 1845 of the leading figure of the Oxford Movement, John Henry Newman, who had initially envisaged a “‘via media’ between Catholic idolatry and puritan-evangelical iconoclasm” (Allitt 1997: 52). But since the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, and the Pope’s 1850 re-establishment of a national hierarchy for Roman Catholics in England and Wales (perceived as a form of “Papal aggression”), fear of the growing influence of the Church of Rome in Anglican circles had become widespread. Anti-Catholic rhetoric often focused on the dangerous taste for seductive colors supposedly favored by advocates of liturgical reform, as Roman Catholicism appeared as a theatrical religion of surfaces, which valued the lure of material splendor – and notably of dazzlingly colored fabrics, over the Word of God (Pastoureau 1994: 40).

In the 1840s, Francis Close of Cheltenham, author of *The Restoration of Churches is the Restoration of Popery*, thus ironized: “Romanism is taught *Analytically* at Oxford, it is taught *Artistically* at Cambridge ... it is inculcated theoretically in tracts at the one University and it is *sculptured, painted and graven* at the other” (quoted in Yates 2000: 51). If Oxford was the home of the Tractarian Newman, it was in Cambridge that the Cambridge Camden Society, later known as the Ecclesiological Society, was born. Ecclesiology was defined by its proponents as “the science of church architecture” as well as “the science of Christian Aesthetics” (“Schools” 1847: 2). Its journal, *The Ecclesiologist*, explicitly advocated the use of “Decorative Colour”:

We are surely not called upon to prove that colour is beautiful. If it be not, why employ stained glass at all? We are consistent; we would have every inch glowing. Puritans are consistent; they would have every inch colourless (“On Decorative Colour” 1845: 200–1).

Because it openly broke away from “this grey Protestantism of hue” (“On Flowers as Employed in the Adornment of Churches” 1846: 215), inherited from what Michel Pastoureau has defined as the “chromoclasm” of the Reformation (Pastoureau 1994: 36), William Butterfield’s All Saints’ Church on Margaret Street in London became the model church of the Ecclesiologists (Muthesius 1972: 59). Begun in 1849 and consecrated in 1859, this church, built with alternating bright red and black bricks is a glowing tribute to the Victorian rediscovery of medieval polychromy, in keeping with Ruskin’s recommendations in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). A natural theologian, Ruskin had indeed praised the true colors of architecture” as “those of natural stone”:

I cannot, therefore, consider architecture as in anywise perfect without colour ... Our building, if it is well composed, is one thing, and is to be coloured as Nature would colour one thing – a shell, a flower, or an animal (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 8: 176–7).

At All Saints, both the exterior and the interior glow with color, as the usual white-wash was banned in favor of brilliantly colored geometrical mosaics, stained glass and gilding. (Muthesius 1972: 63–4) Unsurprisingly, this polychrome church soon became one of the most active ritualistic centres in England. But because it betrayed the influence of *foreign* Catholic countries like France or Italy, the question of liturgical colors in both vestments and church decoration was a highly sensitive one in Victorian England. As early as 1840, that is to say, five years before his conversion, Newman had felt the need to respond to accusations from his detractors on the subject of the controversial “rich embellishments” of medieval churches:

The other point commonly insisted on is the Medieval Church’s wealth and splendour, the rich embellishment of her temples, the jewelled dress of her ministers, the offerings, shrines, pageants, and processions, which were part of her religious service. All these are supposed to be denoted by “the purple and scarlet colour, and gold, and precious stones, and pearls,” with which the sorceress in the Apocalypse is arrayed; where mention is also made of the merchandize of gold and silver, precious stones, and of pearls and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet, and all thyine wood, and all manner of vessels of ivory, and precious wood, and brass, and iron, and marble, and cinnamon, and odours, and ointment, and frankincense, and wine, and oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and beasts, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men, and the voice of harpers and musicians, and of pipers and trumpeters. All such magnificence would of course, in itself, as little prove that the Church is Antichrist, as

that any king's court is Antichrist, where it is also found ... Passages such as these, at least show that precious stones are no peculiar mark of Antichrist; which is sufficiently clear even from a later chapter of the Apocalypse, in which jasper, sapphires, and other jewels are mentioned among the treasures of the New Jerusalem (Newman [1840] 1872: 184–5).

In this text, entitled “The Protestant Idea of the Antichrist,” Newman replaces the anti-Catholic assimilation of the Pre-Reformation Church to the Scarlet Whore of Babylon with a reference to Saint John’s vision of the New Jerusalem. The passage from Revelation 21: 9–23 – certainly one of the most colorful in the New Testament, otherwise somewhat lacking in chromatic terms – appears as a particularly apt one as the colorful revelation had already served as a liturgical and theological justification for the use of colored materials in the decoration of Gothic cathedrals in twelfth- and thirteenth-century France. As Otto von Simson observes:

the Christian sanctuary is, liturgically and mystically, an image of the Heavenly Jerusalem ... The medieval dedication rite establishes this relationship in explicit terms and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries appear singularly preoccupied with this symbolic significance of sacred architecture (Von Simson, quoted in Stookey 1969: 35).

Echoing neo-Platonic discussions of divine light in St Augustine, Abbot Suger believed that color was akin to light, that is to say both visible and immaterial, which enabled him to use luminous materials (notably jewels and stained glass) in the construction and decoration of his new abbey at Saint Denis, the first Gothic church, completed in 1144. Not only did Suger conceive a whole new spatial order to let more light into the edifice, he also drew on the Old and New Testaments to justify its luxurious ornamentation, advocating an anagogical shift “from the material to the immaterial”:

Thus, when – out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God – the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues (Panofsky [1946] 1979: 21).

The Victorians may not have been as familiar with the writings of Abbot Suger as with those of Theophilus, discussed by Mary Merrifield in her 1849 translation of *Original Treatises Dating from the XIIth to the XVIIIth Centuries, on the Arts of Painting* (Loske 2016), or of William Durandus, translated in 1843 by the Ecclesiologists J.M. Neale and B. Webb (Durandus 1843). And yet Ruskin’s discussion of the relationship between architecture and theology in his 1870 *Lectures on Art* appears quite close to Suger’s conception of the sacredness of Gothic cathedrals:

Let us take an instance – the most noble with which I am acquainted, the Cathedral of Chartres. You have there the most splendid coloured glass, and the richest sculpture, and the grandest proportions of building, united to produce a sensation of pleasure and awe. We profess that this is to honour the Deity; or, in other words, that it is pleasing to Him that we should delight our eyes with blue and golden colours, and solemnize our spirits by the sight of large stones laid one on another, and ingeniously carved (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 20: 69).

This passage clearly “solemnizes” the colors of the Gothic past, reflected in its most sacred, costly blues and golds. Ruskin draws on the example of the sublime stained glass windows of

Chartres to articulate the visual and the visionary, reminiscent of the luminous “large stones laid one on another” of the New Jerusalem.

Ruskin’s aesthetic and ideological reappraisal of the colors of a medieval past proved also extremely influential throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, especially with artists like William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, who had initially envisaged a career as High-Church clergymen in the wake of the Oxford Movement. Following a tour of the Gothic cathedrals of Northern France in 1855, they finally opted for the artistic path – nonetheless benefiting from the increase in commissions for the decoration of newly built or restored churches fostered by the Gothic Revival and pleas for liturgical reform. Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company notably became very active in reviving the ancient stained glass techniques in which the painting of details of line and shadow in brown or black oxides are fired onto translucent colored glass (Winston 1847). This enabled artists to achieve a transparency – anagogically transmuting color into light, the metaphor for God (Raguin 2003: 10–3) – which eighteenth-century windows painted in enamels on large pieces of glass lacked. The second half of the nineteenth century thus became the most active period in the production of stained glass since the Middle Ages, in Britain, France, and Germany.

Close to the Morris circle, and a keen reader of Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite architect William Burges, who designed the Medieval Court of the International Exhibition of 1862 for the Ecclesiological Society, equally defended the use of color in church decoration – from stained glass to ecclesiastical ornaments and vestments, mural and even missal painting. The image of the New Jerusalem, chosen by Burges to illustrate the colorful origins of sacred architecture on his Great Bookcase (1859–62) – displayed as the centerpiece of the Medieval Court – was also a favorite in the *Ecclesiologist*, a journal to which Burges regularly contributed:

Mere naked form, however graceful in itself is cold and unaffecting; may we not add unnatural? For whether we look at the inanimate works of creation, at the sky or the earth, at the setting sun, the glowing cloud; at the fields, mountains, trees, flowers, or at living objects, animals, reptiles, the glittering fish, the painted bird, the gaudy fly; or again at the description of the Tabernacle, the Temple, or the New Jerusalem; we see that every work of God – and from what other source has man any perception of beauty? – is adorned with colour (“Review of *Glossary* ... 1844: 142).

From “glittering fish” to glowing stained glass, advocates of liturgical reform drew on the dappled beauty of nature to celebrate the sacredness of color – strikingly absent from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

PUGIN AND ECCLESIASTICAL ORNAMENTS

Following a discussion of the writings on coloring and gilding techniques of the medieval monk Theophilus, *The Builder* of June 23, 1860, reported that:

Mr Burges ... saw no reason why the service books in our abbey churches should not be illuminated. It seemed to him that if a memorial of a good and distinguished person were required, it would be far better to produce a magnificent illuminated volume than an ugly bronze statue, which in a few years would become as black as a sweep. Just fancy what a magnificent Book of Common Prayer might be produced for Westminster Abbey if Mr Dyce and Mr Herbert were commissioned to illustrate it (“Royal Institute of British Architects” 1860: 395).

Burges’ proposal to illuminate in medieval fashion the *Book of Common Prayer* – that is, the central text of the English Reformation – was most certainly meant as provocation, especially

as one of the suggested illustrators, the medievalist painter John Rogers Herbert, had converted to Roman Catholicism in 1840 and was a close friend of the Roman Catholic architect A.W.N. Pugin.

Pugin was one of the most vocal proponents of the Gothic Revival in Victorian England. Although Ruskin denied Pugin's influence (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 5: 428–9), accusing him of having converted mainly for aesthetic reasons – “blown into a change of religion by the whine of an organ pipe; stitched into a new creed by the gold threads on priests' petticoats” (quoted in Allitt 1997: 46) – it is evident that the two writers shared a common belief in the chromatic superiority of early Christian art over the modern. However theologically apart, their conception of the Gothic past as “the school of colour” (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 20: 140) evidently shaped nineteenth-century liturgical debates and architectural practice.

Pugin may have converted at the time when the Oxford Movement was in full swing, but his apostasy had more to do with what was happening in ecclesiastical Cambridge at the time. This may seem surprising as Cambridge had a more puritan-evangelical tradition than High-Church Oxford. However, between 1825 and 1830 three Cambridge students, Kenelm Digby, George Spencer, and Ambrose Philipps, were received into the Roman Catholic Church. Ambrose Philipps was a close friend of Pugin's, and both shared a deep fascination with the beautiful ceremonials of the Middle Ages defined as “ages of the highest grace to men; ages of faith; ages when all Europe was Catholic” (quoted in Allitt 1997: 44).

If Pugin's *Contrasts*, published in 1836, two years after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, is devoid of color illustrations, his *Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament and Costume* (1844) paradoxically draws on the new technique of chromolithography to celebrate the rich rituals of the medieval Church. In the introduction, Pugin insists on the importance of colored ornaments to celebrate the glory of God:

But if the exterior of the temple be so soul-stirring, what a burst of glory meets the eye, on entering a long majestic line of pillars rising into lofty and fretted vaulting! The eye is lost in the intricacies of the aisles and lateral chapels; each window beams with sacred instructions, and sparkles with glowing and sacred tints; the pavement is a rich enamel, interspersed with brass memorials of departed souls. Every capital and base are fashioned to represent some holy mystery; the great rood loft, with its lights and images, through the centre arch of which, in distant perspective, may be seen the high altar blazing with gold and jewels, surmounted by a golden dove, the earthly tabernacle of the Highest ... It is indeed a sacred place; the modulated light, the gleaming tapers, the tombs of the faithful, the various altars, the venerable images of the just, – all conspire to fill the mind with veneration, and to impress it with the sublimity of Christian worship (Pugin [1844] 1868: 4–5).

The glossary itself is also full of references to color as a means to retrieve the ritualistic practice of the past. Red – the most popish of hues, connoting both luxury and sin according to Protestants (Pastoureau 2016: 111) – is, for instance, given a particularly long entry (Pugin [1844] 1868: 198–200).

But Pugin's defence of Gothic colors against what he perceived as the dullness of Post-Reformation architecture was far from just an antiquarian hobby. Like the Ritualists – whom he deeply influenced – his discussion of liturgical practice in the medieval Christian church was aimed at reviving the waning faith of his contemporaries. Pugin believed in particular that the visual dimension of ritual was central to the religious experience. The reception of his second wife, Mrs Louisa Pugin, into the Catholic faith, celebrated in the chapel at Alton Towers, illustrates the powerful “impression” produced by a beautiful ceremony, literally high in colors:

The ceremony was grand, and awfully impressive. Agreeably to ancient Catholic custom in this island and to the present practice of the Church in Catholic countries, the aisle of the sacred edifice was bestrewed with odiferous flowers and evergreens, emblematic of the sweetness and never-fading beauty of the Heavenly Zion. From either extremity of the side galleries was extended across the chapel a handsome and tasty festoon of flowerets, from the centre of which was suspended a crown of the same materials directly over the head of the convert. At the appointed hour ... the Rev. Dr. Rock as priest, attended by the Rev. Messrs. Morgan and Fairfax as deacon and sub-deacon, walked in solemn procession from the sacristy to the sanctuary, preceded by the thurifers, acolytes, and torch-bearers. Their vestments were of the richest gold brocade. A grand High Mass was then sung ... Immediately after the Gospel, Dr. Rock exchanged his superb chasuble for a splendid cope ... with which he ... intoned the first words of the ... *Veni Creator Spiritus*, in the old Salisbury chant, which the choir continued with impressive effect (quoted in Adams 2010: 34–5).

Although in keeping with “the present practice of the Church in Catholic countries,” the reference to “old Salisbury” at the end of the passage is also a clear evocation of the “Sarum Rite”, or “Use of Salisbury”, established in the eleventh century and originally used in Salisbury Cathedral. Abandoned after the Protestant Reformation, it was only partly retained in successive versions of the *Book of Common Prayer*. In the mid-nineteenth century, attempts were made to revive this traditional form of liturgy, believed to be authentically English rather than Roman – in keeping with the “Ornaments Rubric” of 1559. In his 1879 essay on *The Ancient Use of Liturgical Colours*, C.C. Rolfe thus includes a table of colors according to the Sarum rite as they should be revived to “mark” specific liturgical seasons (Rolfe 1879: 208–9) In the Catholic liturgy, color symbolism equally signalled the feast of the day. As noted by Murray:

White, which is associated to purity, is worn on Marian feasts as well as for the celebration of virgins, confessors and angels, and also on Holy Thursday, Easter Sunday, the Ascension and All Saints. Red, which suggests the shedding of blood and the fire of the Holy Spirit, is used on the feasts of martyrs and apostles and on Whit Sunday. Black, symbolizing mourning and penance was used for funeral masses, for Advent, Lent and the feast of the Holy Innocents – and green for all the other days (Murray 2016: 243; see also Pastoureau 1989: 219).

The Rev. Daniel Rock (1799–1871), the English Roman Catholic priest and ecclesiologist who celebrated Pugin’s second wife’s reception into the Church of Rome, was an authority both on the old Sarum rite as well as on ecclesiastical vestments, to which he later devoted a volume entitled *Textile Fabrics: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Collection of Church-vestments, Dresses, Silk Stuffs, Needle-work and Tapestries* (Rock 1870) based on the textile collections of the South Kensington Museum. This catalogue was illustrated with colored plates – which contrast with Rolfe’s purely scholarly, unadorned text on ancient liturgical colors, which is nonetheless indebted to Rock:

Almost from the beginning there appears to have been a difference between the usage of Rome and that of England; most certainly there was throughout the Middle Ages. Dr. Rock says: – “Rome herself never uses sky-blue, England in Catholic times did; Rome enjoins black for Good-Friday, England prescribed red.” – [*Church of our Fathers*, vol. ii, p. 259.] ... Probably no one has expressed more deep regret for the change that has passed over the Church of Rome, with regard to the sacerdotal dress, than the late Dr. Rock. As he was a Roman Catholic Priest, and remained in communion with Rome until the day of his death, his writings are especially valuable

upon this subject, and cannot be said to be dictated by any sectarian bias, as might have been the case had he been a member of the Church of England. He clearly shews that a change has been brought about in the very shape of the Roman vestments, exactly corresponding in degree to that which we note with reference to their colour (Rolfe 1879: 193–4).

Following the Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874 which had been introduced to limit ritualistic excesses denounced as “masquerade” (Benjamin Disraeli, as quoted in White 1962: 205), the color of ecclesiastical vestments was evidently still a much vexed question, one which could only be broached with utmost rhetorical precaution. Having noted the “disorganised” use of colored vestments (Rolfe 1879: 6–7), Rolfe thus paradoxically quotes Rock to *discredit* the “unorthodox” colors of modern Roman Catholic vestments on the one hand and to advocate a return to true “old Church of England” colors on the other:

Enough harm has already been done to the Church of England in past centuries, through the introduction of foreign influences and schools of thought, external to her own true system. It would be wise to take warning from the past, and, in this matter, for English Churchmen to stick to their old Church of England colours.

Then again, the modern Church of Rome, in her sequence of colours, is not orthodox. If we apply the triple crucial test of reason, authority, and revelation to that use, it fails as regards the latter. The use of the five Roman colours – red, white, green, violet, and black – is consistent enough, as regards reason or common sense; it is also based upon as good authority, as aught that is comparatively modern can be; but there the matter rests. It is not supported by revelation: the ancient use of the Church of England was (Rolfe 1879: 3).

Rolfe's central claim here is that the use of color in liturgical matters should be sanctioned by the Biblical text rather than by "foreign" practice:

The twenty-eighth chapter of the Book of Exodus contains the one Revelation from God to man of the colours of the sacrificial vestments to be worn in His Church upon earth. In every pure age of the Church this one Revelation, made once for all, has materially influenced her holy ritual worship.

In the fifth verse of this chapter, the Divine command is clearly given: "And they shall take gold, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen," wherewith to make the vestments for those about to minister in the sacerdotal office. No doubt has ever yet been expressed by any commentator, that the "fine linen" implies other than a white material. Thus it is manifest that materials of these five colours were to be used in making the sacrificial vestments, viz. gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and white, – and of these five colours only (Rolfe 1879: 9).

Like Ruskin, Rolfe believed that "the sanctity of colour ... is distinctly stated in Scripture." Rolfe even quotes the Victorian critic twice in both his introduction and conclusion – possibly because Ruskin had succeeded in making the material splendor of the Pre-Reformation past palatable to a Protestant readership.

"GAY AND GAUDY COLORS": THE LURE OF MODERN HUES

If changes in ritualistic practice were perceived as a "popish" threat by many Anglicans – religious orthodoxies were also being challenged on other fronts, and in particular, by industrialism and the rise of scientific materialism.

“Unweaving” the Rainbow: Darwin and the Colors of Nature

Following the controversial publications of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, color became increasingly involved in discussions of animal as well as human perceptions of the beauty of nature. Ruskin, in particular, strongly dissented from both Darwin’s sexualization of nature’s colors as well as from the “naturalization” of the aesthetic sense which the Darwinian physiologist Grant Allen equally believed to be the “necessary result of natural selection” (Allen 1877: vii–viii). Baffled by Darwin’s assertion that

Flowers and fruits have been rendered conspicuous by gaudy colors in contrast with green foliage, in order that the flowers might be easily seen, visited, and fertilized by insects, and the fruit have their seeds disseminated by birds (Darwin, quoted in Smith 2006: 163)

Ruskin felt the need to defend his moral vision of nature and art. *Proserpina* was his response to Darwin’s emphasis on the utilitarian role of deceitful color to lure insects into the sexual act of cross-pollination:

What the colours of flowers, or of birds, or of precious stones, or of the sea and air, and the blue mountains, and the evening and the morning, and the clouds of Heaven, were given for – they only know who can see them and can feel, and who pray that the sight and the love of them may be prolonged, where cheeks will not fade, nor sunsets die (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 25: 414).

In the conclusion to his essay on liturgical colors, Rolfe explicitly draws on the opposition between Ruskin and Darwinian “free-thinkers” to support the Ruskinian claim that nature “teaches us something with reference to the mystic colours of the Law”:

That there is some occult secret sympathy between the outer world of Nature and our most holy Faith there can be no doubt. It is in a measure proved by the fact that he who has most faith in God, has also the most love for Nature. Mr. Ruskin has alluded to this. He says: – ‘We shall find that the love of nature, wherever it has existed, has been a faithful and sacred element of human feeling; that is to say, supposing all the circumstances otherwise the same with respect to two individuals, the one who loves nature most will be always found to have more capacity for faith in God than the other’ [*Fronde Agrestes*, 141] (Rolfe 1879: 222).

Now it is a most remarkable fact that in these wild flowers of Nature we perceive the same mystic colours which are prescribed in the Law for the sacerdotal dress. And it can only be accounted for by considering that in Nature, as in the Church, the influences of God's Spirit are ever at work, and that these holy influences, save when checked by man, produce one and the same result.

There are free-thinkers nowadays who tell us that there is no God; and that Nature is guided and directed by certain occult laws of its own. We Churchmen think otherwise. We believe that God is in Nature, moulding and developing it: – sending the beautiful wild flowers to teach us one great lesson: the green leaves and green grass, another: the clouds, another: the foaming ocean, another: and so on. If these modern sceptics could point out to us in our English hedge-rows wild flowers growing with black petals, instead of with those mystic coloured petals of golden yellow, and blue, and

purple, and red, and white, which we now find, we might then perhaps be tempted to doubt whether the influences of God's Spirit were indeed still working within Nature, as of yore. But Nature is true, and we do not doubt (Rolfe 1879: 223).

Ruskin's praise of the beauty of Nature as a Divine gift, had evidently both a Romantic and a religious dimension, which may recall John Keats' fury against Newton's "unweaving" of the rainbow in his poem "Lamia" (Keats 1992: 1.237, 176). If Ruskin did at times feel a form of unease when confronted with the lure of material color, in particular, with the sensual colors of Catholic Venice (Bullen 2005: 130–1), he often celebrated the rainbow as the prismatic epitome of God's covenant with Man, reflected in the harmonious transparency of Gothic stained-glass (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 10: 457). Therefore, more often than not, his rainbow was pre-Newtonian – that is, holy and ternary – rather than seven-fold:

In that heavenly circle which binds the statutes of colour upon the front of the sky, when it became the sign of the covenant of peace, the pure hues of divided light were sanctified to the human heart forever; nor this, it would seem, by mere arbitrary appointment, but in consequence of the fore-ordained and marvellous constitution of those hues into a sevenfold, or, more strictly still, a threefold order, typical of the Divine nature itself (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 10: 174–5).

Aniline Dyes: from Factory to Church

Ruskin was, therefore, not prepared to welcome the new dazzling gamut of coal-tar based, aniline dyes devised by the chemical industry (Travis 1993), which in Thomas Salter's terms of 1869, had managed to "produce the colours of the rainbow from a lump of coal" (Salter

1869: 162, see also Ribeyrol 2016b). For Ruskin, the aniline revolution brought about by William Perkin in 1856 desacralized color by severing it from nature. The anthropologist Michael Taussig has commented upon this “killing off” of the natural body of color in the mid-nineteenth century:

Then there are the name choices for what are generally thought of as the first synthetic, meaning aniline, dyes discovered in the mid-nineteenth century, the best known of which is mauve, the French name of the common mallow plant ... Such names are fake, allusions to what paints used to be before the industrial production of paints ... The fakeness of these bodies conjured up by market hype is a fakeness brought about because the body was killed off by mid-nineteenth century. What took its place were these names as substitutes for what had gone, and the names were marvelous (Taussig 2009: 43).

Ruskin was more sceptical as to these “marvelous” names devised by nineteenth-century chemists whose “mauves” or “magentas” would never match the poetic “purple sea” of Homer:

...we moderns, who have preferred to rule over coal-mines instead of the sea [and] have actually got our purple out of coal instead of the sea! And thus, grotesquely, we have had enforced on us the doubt that held the old word between blackness and fire, and have completed the shadow, and the fear of it, by giving it a name from battle, “Magenta” (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 19: 379–80, see also Ribeyrol 2016a).

Following his religious crisis, Ruskin became increasingly interested in pagan myths as well as in the Greek color-sense. In his 1870 Oxford lecture on color, he discussed:

... the Greek conviction, that all nature, especially human nature, is not entirely melodious nor luminous; but a barred and broken thing: that saints have their foibles, sinners their forces; that the most luminous virtue is often only a flash, and the blackest-looking fault is sometimes only a stain: and, without confusing in the least black with white, they can forgive, or even take delight in things that are like the *nebris*, dappled (Ruskin 1903–12, vol. 20: 71).

Linda Dowling identifies this dappledness with the Greek *poikilia*, a term referring to the multicolored and changing textures favored by the Hellenes, notably of the Archaic age (Dowling 1989). This *poikilia* was also explored by another Oxford don, Walter Pater, whose approach to pagan art drew on E.B. Tylor’s anthropological analysis of “primitive” religions. By relegating color to the debased status of industrial refuse, the aniline revolution desacralized the “pied beauty” of Nature, which the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins – a pupil of both Ruskin and Pater, who was received into the Roman Catholic Church by Newman himself on October 21, 1866 – lauded in Ruskinian terms in 1877 (Hopkins [1918] 1967: 69). Coal-tar colors thus became an apt metaphor to designate the ills of a modern, materialistic, society, including in debates about ritualistic practice. Although the first aniline dye was patented by an English chemist, *Punch* saw the “mauve measles” as an epidemic originating from France, where the new color “mauve” happened to be Empress Eugénie’s favorite (Garfield 2000: 59–61). This perception of aniline dyes as potentially alien and feminine may equally shed light on why the satirical magazine *Punch* (“Clerical Slips and Skirts” 1859: 115), described the new “mauve” as a “Puseyite” (in reference to the Tractarian E.B. Pusey), effeminate color, associated with ritualistic excesses typical of Catholic ceremonials: “Clergymen ... officiate in the height of Puseyite fashion, wearing vestments of gay and gaudy colors; green, for example, and for aught we know, *mauve*” (“The Disturbances in the Eastern Church” 1859, 37: 122). It is true, as noted by J.G. Davies, that

to meet the growing demand of the high-churchmen of the Church of England and of the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church, Victorian commercial interests were mobilized to supply full sets of vestments and hangings in the “correct” liturgical colours (Davies 1972: 141).

This, in turn, led anti-ritualists to hint that the call for liturgical reform, generally perceived as deeply anachronistic on the basis of its nostalgic praise of the “primitive” – if not pagan – usages of the Pre-Reformation Church, also had a hidden “modern” and materialistic agenda. A broadsheet published on 11 December following a ritualistic crisis at St Sidwell’s, Exeter, thus ironized about the High Church Bishop, Henry Phillpotts:

Henry Fillpotts, formerly head Pot Boy of the Bell Inn, Gloucester, but lately in the *sole* trade, Exeter, begs to inform the Clergy of the Diocese, that he hath been appointed *Sole* Agent, by Mr Gregory Pope, 16, Rome, an eminent manufacturer, for the Sale of Surplices, of the most approved cut and spotless colour ... His next consignment will consist of a few choice lots of Copes and Albs, bearing the true Papal Stamp (quoted in Yates 2000: 182–3).

By describing Pope Gregory as a textile “manufacturer” motivated by greed rather than faith, the broadsheet targeted colorful Anglo-Catholic liturgy as not only superficial and theatrical, but also as materialistic and hence sinful – however “spotless” the new colorful surplices in question. Moreover, as avid “consumers” of new colors and new vestments, high-churchmen were frequently feminized as narcissistic. In a country where clerical costume, like male costume, was uniformly black, delight in bright colors was indeed perceived as dangerously effeminate. In another cartoon by *Punch* published on December 22, 1866 an “ardent ritualist”

is thus depicted complimenting his colleague on his new costume: “O Athanasius, it’s charmingly becoming!” Even if the cartoon is in black and white, the elaborate motifs suggest that the praised vestment is richly decorated in diverse hues. The comment appears as a purely aesthetic one, disconnected from any form of theological or liturgical concerns. What is more, the archaic name Athanasius – deliberately *not* English-sounding – was certainly meant as a thinly-veiled allusion to Newman’s translation of treatises by Athanasius of Alexandria (296–373) – in order to lend an anti-Tractarian touch to the satirical charge.

Chromatic Spectacles in Catholic Decadent Literature

The taste for the “gay and gaudy” colors of the Pre-Reformation past may also be found in the Catholic literature of the *fin de siècle*. Oscar Wilde, who was received into the Roman Catholic faith just before his death in Paris in 1900, after having been “in the toils of the Scarlet Woman” (Wilde 2000: 15) for many years, was certainly a nostalgic chromophile. His praise of color for color’s sake dissociated from any form of “ethical sympathies” – “even a colour-sense is more important ... than a sense of right or wrong,’ he claimed (Wilde [1948] 2003: 1154) – may have set him apart from the moralism of Ruskin, but he certainly shared with the Victorian critic an unconditional love for the more dazzling colors of the past, especially of the Italian past. It is thus evident that his conversion had more to do with his aesthetic – and notably chromatic – fascination with Rome than with the practice of modern Catholics in his native Dublin.

To a certain extent, Wilde’s ambiguous relation to Ruskin is partly reflected in his ambivalent response to color and notably to the changes which affected chromatic materiality in the second half of the nineteenth century. He embraced the aniline revolution which heralded the superiority of art and artifice over natural beauty. Wilde and his acolytes thus flaunted an artificially green-dyed carnation at the premiere of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* in 1892. The

artificial color of this flower was obtained by plunging its stem into aniline malachite green. Robert Hichens then turned this aniline green carnation into a symbol of decadent aesthetics in his eponymous novel published in 1894, a *roman à clef* featuring Esmé Amaranth as the witty Oscar Wilde figure. In the following passage, Hichens satirizes the Decadents' sensual rather than spiritual attraction to the Roman-Catholic Gregorian plain-chant:

The average Anglican chant is one of the most unimaginative, unpoetical things in the world. It always reminds me of the cart-horse parade on Whit-Monday. A brown Gregorian is so much more devotional ... All combinations of sounds convey a sense of colour to the mind. Gregorians are obviously a rich and sombre brown, just as a Salvation Army hymn is a violent magenta (Hichens 1894: 77, also quoted in Murray 2016: 255).

The synaesthetic association of music and color, much favored in Aesthetic and Decadent circles from Swinburne to Wilde, could evoke the “multisensory context” of pagan as well as medieval rituals (Classen 1998: 7; Morgan 2016: 97). The association between Paganism and Roman Catholicism was indeed a common anti-Catholic topos at the time (Murray 2011). In a lecture entitled “Ritualism Traced to its Pagan Origins,” the Rev. H.C. Leonard defined Ritualism as “not the practising of rites, but the overestimation of them” (Leonard 1879: 3). His contention was that Ritualism originated in the sensuous rites of “Pagan Rome” quoting the use of liturgical colors as evidence:

The worship of the Pagan temples was highly ritualistic and imposing to the senses. Music charmed the ear, and the sweet perfume of incense filled the atmosphere. The priests wore vestments of gorgeous colors, those who offered sacrifice to Vesta only being clothed in white (*alba*). One of the orders instituted by Numa Pompilius wore a

scarlet cassock (the *salii*). Another as ancient (the flamines) wore caps with a tuft on the top (Leonard 1879: 7).

But in the passage from *The Green Carnation*, the colors chosen are deliberately *not* liturgical colors. By contrasting the “rich and sombre brown” of the Gregorians with the “violent magenta” of the Evangelical Salvation Army hymn, Hichens may have simply wished to subvert the Anglican scorn for the Catholics’ delight in bright and supposedly artificial (that is, aniline) colors.

And yet, Wilde himself denounced the chromatic vulgarity of his contemporaries, who adopted the fashion for mauve or magenta, as opposed to the superior hues of bygone times. This chromatic antiquarianism is well illustrated in the following passage on ecclesiastic colors in Chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which owes much to the accumulative style adopted in the decadent novel *À Rebours* (Huysmans 1884) by contemporary French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, who also converted to Catholicism:

He had a special passion, also, for ecclesiastical vestments, as indeed he had for everything connected with the service of the Church. In the long cedar chests that lined the west gallery of his house he had stored away many rare and beautiful specimens of what is really the raiment of the Bride of Christ, who must wear purple and jewels and fine linen that she may hide the pallid, macerated body that is worn by the suffering that she seeks for, and wounded by self-inflicted pain. He possessed a gorgeous cope of crimson silk and gold-thread damask, figured with a repeating pattern of golden pomegranates set in six-petalled formal blossoms, beyond which on either side was the pineapple device wrought in seed pearls. The orphreys were divided into panels representing scenes from the life of the Virgin, and the Coronation

of the Virgin was figured in the coloured silks upon the hood. This was Italian work of the fifteenth century. Another cope was of green velvet, embroidered with heart-shaped groups of acanthus leaves, from which spread long-stemmed white blossoms, the details of which were picked out with silver thread and coloured crystals. The morgan bore a seraph's head in gold-thread raised work. The orphreys were woven in a diaper of red and gold silk, and were starred with medallions of many saints and martyrs, among whom was Saint Sebastian. He had chasubles, also, of amber-coloured silk, and blue silk and gold brocade, and yellow silk damask and cloth of gold, figured with representations of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, and embroidered with lions and peacocks and other emblems; dalmatics of white satin and pink silk damask, decorated with tulips and dolphins and fleurs de lys; altar frontals of crimson velvet and blue linen; and many corporals, chalice veils, and sudaria. In the mystic offices to which such things were put, there was something that quickened his imagination (Wilde [1948] 2003: 105).

The eponymous hero here contemplates embracing the Roman Catholic faith – but as this purple passage suggests, it is for aesthetic rather than religious reasons. Dorian's attraction to colorful vestments has no spiritual dimension: the focus is on rich patterns, textures and materials, and colors with no liturgical function. Moreover, this appears as a fleeting craze (only “for a season”) as he also “inclined to the materialistic doctrines of the *Darwinismus* movement in Germany” (Wilde [1948] 2003: 101). In both instances, the attraction is to the material, rather than to the spiritual.

As noted by Murray in her analysis of this chapter, “the passage is filled with passive past participles that underline the artificial and elaborate nature of the colors (‘wrought’, ‘embroidered’, ‘woven’, ‘raised’, ‘figured’, ‘decorated’) – which ostentatiously turn the vestments into ‘collectibles’, rather than devotional objects” (Murray 2016: 244). The

ecclesiastical costumes, here reduced to their spectacular dimension, are praised for their material properties rather than as vehicles of faith. This passage strangely echoes *Punch's* stigmatization of “ardent ritualists” as lured by the beauty of textures and colors for their own sake.

Ruskin’s praise of the “sanctity of colour,” deeply rooted in both the Biblical text and the Holy book of Nature, translated into many of the liturgical debates which agitated the Church of England in the wake of the Oxford Movement. Although he never himself contemplated embracing the Catholic faith, Ruskin’s complex engagement with the colored materials central to the ornamentation of Gothic cathedrals as well as his praise of the dappled beauty of nature epitomized by the prismatic hues of the rainbow found an unexpected echo in ritualistic circles calling for an increased use of color in liturgical practice. Partly under Ruskin’s impulsion as well as that of Pugin, color, both old and new, material and translucent, thus played a crucial role in discussions of religion and ritual in Victorian England. But Ruskin’s apocalyptic rhythms, so indebted to his Evangelical upbringing, equally shaped the literature of the Catholic Decadents, who paradoxically drew on anti-Catholic rhetoric to foster a new religion of art giving pride of place to the dazzling hues and textures of the past, in contrast to the bleakness of industrial modernity.

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