

Trinity College Cambridge  
26 October 2014

**A (VERY BRIEF) HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY  
IN BRITAIN IN 7 OBJECTS**

**The Reformation at its Afterlife  
15th century painted rood screen at  
St Michael and All Angels, Barton Turf, Norfolk**

2 Kings 18: 1–7    1 Corinthians 8

Alexandra Walsham

The object around which this address [on Reformation Sunday] revolves is a defaced panel from a late fifteenth-century painted rood screen in the parish church of St Michael and All Angels, Barton Turf, which lies a mile from the small village it serves on the northern edge of the Norfolk Broads. Hidden away in a still quiet corner of England, this exquisite but blemished remnant of medieval art bears graphic witness to the passions unleashed by a religious revolution that transformed the history of Christianity in Britain fundamentally and forever. We do not know who scratched out the face and eyes of the seraphim depicted here and the motivations of the anonymous man (or woman) who carried it out remain mysterious and obscure. But the ferocity and fervour with which this image has been mutilated are poignant and striking. The bold vertical and horizontal strokes speak the language of powerful emotions: of anger, fear, hatred, and zeal.

Nor can we date this act of iconoclasm with any precision. It may have taken place in the early heady years of England's Reformation in the mid sixteenth century – in the wake of Henry VIII's dramatic break with Rome and the series of theological and liturgical changes, punctuated by temporary pauses and reversals, which followed. Imposed by official order from above but also fuelled by evangelical feeling springing up from below, these reforms not only wrought a series of ruptures in Christian doctrine and practice but also reconfigured the very buildings and spaces within which people had worshipped for centuries. Monasteries were dissolved and dismantled and cathedrals and churches stripped of statues, images, relics, altars and other visual reminders of the repudiated Catholic past. The attack on the Barton Turf panel may, alternatively, be the product of the renewed spasms of religious violence that accompanied the bloody civil wars of the 1640s, when some contemporaries eagerly grasped a long awaited opportunity to complete and perfect the Reformation begun by their predecessors a hundred years before. In the first half of that decade, the puritan William Dowsing systematically toured the counties of Suffolk and Cambridgeshire purging their churches of surviving residues of medieval popery and of the material traces of the programme to restore the 'beauty of holiness' closely associated with the policies of Archbishop William Laud – a programme that some ardent saw as a project to pervert, if not reverse, the Reformation itself. Dowsing

came to this very chapel in Trinity on 29 December 1643 and, according to the record he kept in his journal, demolished four cherubims. Much other apparatus and furniture had been removed in anticipation of his visit by the master's wife, who was anxious to preserve it from the 'sacrilegious hands' of those who sought to destroy hallowed objects as 'badges of superstition' and as seductive invitations to return to the Church of Rome.

It is easy for us to look upon the defaced panel at Barton Turf with a similar sense of loss and regret: to lament the damage done to it as a vicious assault upon our cultural heritage, as a species of vandalism and as an aesthetic atrocity. But this is to misunderstand the meaning of iconoclasm – an act that one leading historian has aptly described as the central sacrament of Protestant reform. The Reformation in Britain and Europe was a movement that endeavoured to recover the primitive purity of Christianity and to prune away the corruptions and abuses perceived to have accumulated around it during the Middle Ages. Like the earlier and later cycles of Christian renewal which it imitated and anticipated, it was a movement committed to breaking down the physical and metaphorical obstacles and barriers that divided human beings from God and to reigniting and intensifying personal faith.

Protestants found in biblical history a template for recreating true religion as it had been practised by Christ and the apostles, as well as a mandate for removing impediments to it. Approaching the second commandment (thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image) as a living code of law that remained in force, they regarded representations of sacred beings as anathema and equated images of saints, angels, Christ and the Father with those of the false deities to which pagan peoples erroneously made obeisance in the pages of Scripture. In the godly kings of the Old Testament – Hezekiah, Asa and Josiah – they identified a model for contemporary monarchs and magistrates to follow: rulers who did 'that which was right in the sight of the Lord' and removed the high places, images, and groves which the children of Israel had turned into objects of veneration themselves. They saw the brazen serpent which Hezekiah broke into pieces in our first reading as a precedent and an incentive for their own war against the idols that kindled the wrath of God. And if texts such as these underlined the necessity for those in authority to take urgent steps to protect the souls of their subjects, they also imbued ordinary people with the belief that they had a responsibility to be their brother and sisters' keepers and to preserve the spiritual health and welfare of the nation as a whole. They impelled and justified the initiatives of private men and women who chopped down the market and wayside crosses that dotted the late medieval landscape under cover of night, climbed up high to cut off the carvings of angels on hammer beam roofs and to break stained glass windows, burnt and pulverised offensive pictures into dust, and reduced statues and shrines to rubble. They sanctioned too the actions of those took knives and axes to decorated rood screens like the one at Barton Turf – screens upon which were surmounted great wooden crucifixes accompanied by figures of the Virgin and St John the Evangelist and which symbolised the separation of the clergy and laity repudiated by the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Paradoxically these acts of destruction were inspired by Christian compassion and love; they were driven by the conviction that those with knowledge had an obligation to remove the stumbling blocks that stood in the path of those weaker in faith. And this brings us to the second reading I have chosen this evening: Paul's epistle to the Corinthians regarding the use of Christian freedom and liberty. This too was a passage to which English Protestants turned repeatedly for guidance about how to live their lives to the edification of those that surrounded them. It is a passage not about idols themselves but about the eating of meat offered in sacrifice to them: in other words, about things indifferent – not inherently wicked or explicitly prohibited by Scripture, but which circumstances render offensive, scandalous and dangerous to the consciences of other people. Epitomising the powerful communal imperative at the heart of the Reformation, it was a passage that its adherents read less as a permission than a command and which itself sowed the seeds of the religious conflicts that destabilised Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – conflicts that often turned on the clash between the prescriptions of the authorities and the internally driven ethics of individuals acting in accordance with sincerely held convictions. It is a text that lays out the duties that Christians owe to their neighbours and that underlines the demands and constraints that belief and faith place on the moral minutiae of our daily existence.

It also exhorts us to humility. 'Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth', writes St Paul. 'If any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know'. These were themes to which he returned in chapter 13, where he declares 'though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing'. 'Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up'. 'Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away'. He goes on: 'When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.' And the process by which partial knowledge would give way to perfect knowledge of which he wrote so eloquently here was a paradigm not merely of individual spiritual growth but also of the impulses that underpinned the Reformation itself. For this was a movement that envisaged itself as rolling back centuries of ignorance and darkness and transporting the English populace once again into shining daylight. The childish things that the Protestant reformers sought to set aside were the idols made of matter and the idols imagined in the mind of which the Barton Turf rood screen was, for them, a compelling emblem.

Finally, I want to return to an aspect of this object that I have so far left unremarked, and that is its very survival. Why did the iconoclast who defaced it not seek to demolish this set of medieval panels depicting the nine orders of angels, together with the Virgin Mary and Saints Apollonia, Sitha and Barbara, completely? Henrician, Edwardian and Elizabethan religious injunctions recurrently called upon parish officials to 'utterly extinct and destroy ... all monuments of ... idolatry and superstition, so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glass windows, or elsewhere'. But these instructions were not carried out to the letter here, nor in a number of parishes around the country.

In some places this probably reflected the persistence of conservatism and the weakness of the Tudor state's bureaucratic machine, dependent as it was on the cooperation of ordinary people: its indexes some of the ambiguities of England's long and idiosyncratic Reformation. But in others it may betray a different instinct: a desire to preserve physical reminders of the very past that had been cast off as a memorial and warning to future generations – a memorial of the vanquishing of idolatry and error and a warning of the perils of backsliding towards it again. In this way, the voids, silences and scars created by the Reformation became its own remembrancers. Broken images, scratched out faces, and bare ruined choirs became symbols and touchstones of a process that had not ended triumphantly but which was a perennial and unending struggle both to subdue and to renew. The Christian life too entails both forgetting and remembering: we must carry the past with us as we travel through the present and into the future, because we cannot move forward without looking backward or without acknowledging our own mistakes, limitations and disappointments.

Ultimately, it is impossible to open a window into the soul of the man or woman who mutilated the Barton Turf rood screen and discover what drove them to disfigure the face of this seraphim. The memories and resonances it now evokes are multiple, confused and variable. The meaning of this object is not the tragedy of a beautiful image obliterated or the theological principle and religious passion that propelled someone in the sixteenth or seventeenth century to deface it so savagely, but rather the enigma of the leap of faith that both its creation and destruction entailed. And in the end that faith remains a mystery: an amalgam of doubt, hope and certainty that is so deep, personal, and ineffable that it transcends historical analysis and defies human comprehension.