

CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE

A Personal View

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THE artistic record of the Church in England over the last hundred years is indeed a dismal one. Dull, drab and even ugly churches, in what passes for a period style, are furnished with clumsy woodwork, characterless plaster statues and fussy, over-decorated altars, exhibiting so often a general air of tawdriness which can scarcely fail to depress and may actually repel a seeker after peace and beauty in God's house. There are, of course, exceptions. There are always exceptions; but no more than enough of them to prove the rule and to show the tremendous opportunities which lie within our grasp.

The reasons for this unhappy state of affairs are not difficult to discover or to understand. The restoration of the English Hierarchy, and the emergence of the Church from obscurity, took place at a time when artistic taste in this country had sunk to its lowest ebb. The classical tradition had had its last flourish in the first two decades of the century, in the form which we now call the Regency style. But it flourished then not as the accepted tradition in which all men worked and within which the genius of the time found new expression, but as one of several styles, an alternative to more exotic forms borrowed from the East, or to the revived 'Gothick' manner. There was no longer any accepted grammar of architecture, or any universal standard of artistic criticism. The Romantic Movement in literature had been followed in the graphic arts, and the paintings of Claude and Poussin had fired the imagination of patrons of architecture. Horace Walpole had built Strawberry Hill, Beckford his monumental 'folly' of Fonthill Abbey; while others, no less enthusiastic, built in Greek, Hindoo or Egyptian according to their fancy.

Into the midst of this chaos sounded the magnificent thunder of Pugin. What contempt he pours upon his contemporaries!

'One breathes nothing but the Alhambra,—another the Parthenon,—a third is full of lotus cups and pyramids from the banks of the Nile,—a fourth, from Rome, is all dome and

basilica; whilst another works Stuart and Revett on a modified plan, and builds lodges, centenary chapels, reading rooms and fish-markets, with small Doric work and white brick facings . . . this may, indeed, be appropriately termed the carnival of architecture: its professors appear tricked out in the guises of all centuries and all nations: the Turk and the Christian, the Egyptian and the Greek, the Swiss and the Hindoo march side by side, and mingle together; and some of these gentlemen, not satisfied with perpetrating one character, appear in two or three costumes in the same evening.'

These are stirring words; and we, realising so well the disastrous results of the chaos he condemns, sympathise with him and perhaps feel something of the burning enthusiasm which drove his pen.

But what does he offer in place of the chaos? The next sentence provides the answer:

'Amid this motley group (oh! miserable degradation) the venerable form and sacred detail of our national and Catholic architecture may be discerned; but how adopted? Not on consistent principle, not on authority, not as the expression of our faith, our government, or country, but as one of the disguises of the day, to be put on and off at pleasure, and used occasionally as circumstances or private caprice may suggest.'

'Venerable form and sacred detail.' These words are the clue to Pugin's dogma and to the whole of the later and more damaging phase of the Gothic Revival; the phase in which the design of buildings became inextricably bound up with moral issues, in which the post and lintel of the classical form were labelled Pagan, and the glorious achievements of ancient Greece were but grudgingly admitted to be 'perfect expressions of an imperfect system'.

Thus Pugin, with no more authority than his romantic attachment to all things medieval, declared sacred a particular manner of building which had developed in Northern Europe during a brief three hundred or so years of the Church's history. Perhaps his voice alone would not have carried very far. But there were other voices saying the same things with different motives; for the Tractarians, determined upon the revival of pre-Reformation forms of worship, had realised that the revival of Gothic architecture was essential to their purpose. Pugin, on the other hand,

saw the restoration of the earlier forms of worship as an important step in the revival of 'Pointed or Christian architecture'. Had either of these faltered the Gothic Revival must have died with the Romantics: together they carried all before them, and artistic and ethical values became hopelessly confused.

It is fashionable now to laugh at the Gothic Revival. We realise the fallacy of Pugin's argument that one form of arch or shape of window is sacred and another profane, one Christian and another Pagan. We realise, too, that no living architecture can come from an attempt to take up again a form of building which developed naturally in different conditions and in another age, and was the subconscious expression of those conditions.

Or do we realise these things? There is still a strangely persistent tendency to regard certain architectural forms as 'churchy' and others as the opposite of that hideous word. Some still appear doubtful whether any but a 'Gothic' building can decently form the background to Christian worship, or even to the private life of a priest; and the height of absurdity is surely reached when temporary huts and even mobile mission caravans must be tricked out with pointed windows and sham diamond glazing! There is, also, ample evidence of the illusion that the most expensive materials are necessarily the most beautiful, and many an altar has lost its simple dignity under a riot of marble, gold-leaf and lace.

From the earliest days of enduring building man has always put his finest work into his temples.¹ It is our misfortune and our sin that in the present century the temples so favoured have been those of Commerce rather than of God. In this age of so little faith we can only hope and pray for the day when once again our churches will become the chief and finest buildings in every community, for a new age of faith which will perhaps see the rise of another spontaneous art form comparable with the Gothic of the North and the Baroque which followed with the Counter-Reformation in the South of Europe. The fact that no such form has yet emerged should only encourage us to a greater determination to clear our minds of the barnacles of revivalism.

1. This fact is clearly demonstrated in *A History of Religious Architecture*, by Ernest Short, recently published in a new and revised edition (Eyre & Spottiswoode 30s.). From a very wide knowledge the author shows clearly how the form of religious buildings has resulted from the nature of belief and observance, tempered by social and climatic conditions. This is a most enjoyable book, and can be warmly recommended to all who are interested in the subject.

While the huge financial burden of providing schools dominates the Catholic situation, the cost of new churches must be kept to the barest minimum. But this very fact can be our salvation, for we can embrace cheerfully the discipline of absolute simplicity, the discipline under which the Cistercians, among others, produced their most glorious work. We can take full advantage, as our Catholic forefathers always did, of the possibilities of the newest developments in structural science as means to our end. We can use to the full the natural beauty of stone and wood, brick and tile, and of the newer materials with which man's ingenuity has provided us; and we can strive, by thoughtful handling of space, colour and light, to produce in our churches that atmosphere of tranquillity in which a man can best pray undisturbed.

'Well-building hath three conditions: Commodity, Firmness and Delight.' No better basis for architectural criticism has been expressed than this phrase of Sir Henry Wotton. The purpose of a building will suggest its plan. It must be well constructed to provide shelter and comfort to the users without waste of material or labour; and, above all, its shape, texture and colour must give pleasure to the beholder. The fact that a building, be it church, dwelling-house or railway station, does not resemble any previous buildings designed for the same use is not a valid basis for criticism, provided that it satisfies these three conditions.

As to the churches we have inherited, we can do little to alter their shape, however ugly; but we can do much, if we but have the will, to put an end to their drabness, to clear away their ornate fussiness and so make them more fitting homes for the Body of Christ.

We are not, as must too often appear to our separated brethren, members of a sect which flourished briefly in the Middle Ages, only to be swept away on a tide of Enlightenment. We are not struggling vainly to revive something which is dead. We are members of the living Body of Christ. A glorious opportunity exists for us to demonstrate this clearly and boldly in every outward expression of our faith.