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Colette Crossman

Seeing the Sacred: Burne-Jones's Reception as a "Great Religious Painter"

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Abstract:

This article reconstructs Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones's little-known reputation as one of the "great religious painters of the world" through previously unexamined texts by artists, clergy, critics, and novelists appearing in books and periodicals, both Christian and secular in nature, between the late 1880s and early 1900s. Furthermore, it analyzes how audiences used and interpreted his images for sacred purposes. Examining this body of art writing restores a missing chapter of Burne-Jones's reception history, dismantles art historians' assumption of nineteenth-century Britain as a time of endemic doubt and lost faith, and reveals unexpected continuities between "Victorian" and "modern," as well as the subjectivity of "sacred" and "secular," in the years before and after 1900.

Seeing the Sacred: Burne-Jones's Reception as a "Great Religious Painter"

by Colette Crossman

Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898) is best known today as a star of the Aesthetic Movement, the Arts and Crafts partner of William Morris, and an influence on European Symbolism. In the decades before and after 1900, however, he enjoyed yet another popular identity in Britain as one of the "great religious painters of the world."^[1] Between 1889 and 1916, numerous books and articles in religious periodicals by clergy, artists, and journalists emerged emphasizing the spiritual meaning of Burne-Jones's art, his personal faith, and his images' potential as didactic tools for religious instruction. As the Anglo-Catholic priest Alfred Gurney (1843–1898) reminded readers of the Christian *Newbery House Magazine* in 1893, "There is . . . another point of view besides that of the art-critic."^[2] There were those such as Gurney who, writing from a faith perspective, inquired into "the real significance of [Burne-Jones's] work . . . its deepest and truest inspiration . . . the ultimate secret of its commanding influence."^[3] Burne-Jones's "most enthusiastic devotees," eminent art critic Claude Phillips (1846–1924) concurred in 1885, "are those who profess to find in his works . . . poems symbolizing the higher and nobler problems of life and the mysteries of faith."^[4] Frequently using interpretive methodologies borrowed from the pulpit, such critics approached Burne-Jones's artworks as texts to be explicated for religious truths.^[5]

Their perception of Burne-Jones's work as religiously significant was not without basis. The artist studied theology at Oxford University with the desire to take holy orders.^[6] In 1856, however, he relinquished those plans to take up painting and ecclesiastical design.^[7] In addition to medieval legend and mythology, the Bible and Christian iconography were frequent subjects of his paintings, drawings, watercolors, and stained glass. Throughout his life Burne-Jones upheld an ongoing, if unorthodox, spiritual commitment rooted in Christian principles.^[8]

Writings about Burne-Jones by clergy or directed towards Christian audiences have been largely overlooked, however, due to the critical emphasis on a different type of religion—the aesthetic "worship of beauty"—that emerged with his rise to art world stardom at the Grosvenor Gallery's "temple of art" in 1877. Today, art historians continue to focus on the perceived avant-gardism and proto-abstraction of Burne-Jones's aestheticism and symbolism in efforts to legitimize his place in the modernist canon.^[9] Underlying such interpretations are the problematic associations of "Victorian" with "religion," and "modern" with the "secular." Exploring the unexamined body of spiritually motivated art writing about Burne-Jones spanning the years just before and after 1900, however, unearths a more complex reality. At the turn of the twentieth century, when secularization theory and modernism would presume to find a break from "traditional" ideals such as Victorian faith and piety, a new interest in the religiosity of Burne-Jones and his work paradoxically emerged. When considered through the interdisciplinary lens of religious visual culture, this unrecognized chapter of the artist's reception history attests to the continued agency of Christian belief and practice in modern Britain. The religious afterlife of Burne-Jones's art well into the early twentieth century, then, underscores the fluidity of boundaries between Victorian/modern and sacred/secular, and their resistance to easy delimitation.

Burne-Jones's Religious Audiences

Between 1889 and 1916, five books by ministers from varying denominations tackled the subject of Burne-Jones's art. The "lay sermons" of Scottish Congregationalist theologian Peter Taylor Forsyth (1842–1921), *Religion in Recent Art: Being Expository Lectures on Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Watts, Holman Hunt, and Wagner* (1889), presented a case for religion as the most effective entrée into art for the general public. He argued that Burne-Jones's imaginative spirit was the remedy that contemporary Christianity needed to survive in modern society.^[10] Future Dean of Canterbury and progressive Anglican preacher Frederic William Farrar (1831–1903) featured Burne-Jones's 1879 *Annunciation, Adoration of the Magi* tapestry, and *Tree of Life* (fig. 1) as great religious artworks in *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art* (1894).^[11] In 1905, liberal theologian and Christian Socialist Henry Scott Holland (1847–1918), Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral, published his review of Georgiana Burne-Jones's *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* in *Personal Studies*, quoting passages that referenced the painter's religious views and portraying his career as socially and spiritually motivated.^[12] In *Sermons in Art by the Great Masters* (1908), Reverend James Burns (1865–1948), minister of Stoke Newington Presbyterian Church, preached Christian lessons and morals from Burne-Jones's *Star of Bethlehem* (fig. 2).^[13] In 1916, Burne-Jones made a brief but significant appearance in *The Cross in Modern Art: Descriptive Studies of Some Pre-Raphaelite Paintings*, in which Baptist evangelist John Linton (1897 or earlier–after 1916) presented *The Tree of Life* (fig. 1) as the exemplar of what he considered the Pre-Raphaelites' revolutionary form of a new modern religious art, more universal and humanitarian in its outlook.^[14]



Fig. 1, Edward Burne-Jones, *Tree of Life*, 1894. Mosaic. St. Paul's Within-the-Walls, Rome. Photo courtesy of St. Paul's Within-the-Walls, Rome. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 1887–90. Watercolor and bodycolor. Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham. Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:3AEdward_Burne-Jones_Star_of_Bethlehem.jpg. [\[larger image\]](#)

Religious periodicals published in Britain during the years just before and after 1900 carried at least seven essays on Burne-Jones penned by clergy, as well as others by artists and mainstream journalists. The religious press flourished in Victorian Britain, with most faith traditions, church denominations, and religious organizations publishing magazines, newspapers, quarterly reviews, or annuals that ranged in tone from overt evangelism to subtle moral improvement. More than 3,000 national, parochial, and local titles targeted a wide range of general and denominationally specific readerships. Although by the end of the century secular journalism had outpaced the religious press, several publications still enjoyed circulations of more than 100,000 into the twentieth century.^[15] Art writing and exhibition reviews were consistent features within religious periodicals and warrant greater attention by art historians for what they reveal about overlooked art reception patterns and practices.

Periodicals took special notice of Burne-Jones's 1892–93 retrospective exhibition at the New Gallery. Gurney, the vicar at St. Barnabas, Pimlico, offered a review entitled "Christian Mysticism at the New Gallery" for the theologically sophisticated readers of the *Newbery House Magazine*.^[16] Also in 1893, artist Horace Townsend (1859–1922) presented his middle-class female readership of the evangelical Religious Tract Society's *Girl's Own Paper* with a detailed analysis of *The Days of Creation* (figs. 3–9).^[17] Prolific novelist L. T. Meade (1854–1914) published a two-part feature entitled "The Painter of Eternal Youth: Edward Burne-Jones" in the 1894 *Sunday Magazine*, a journal for general family audiences comprising moralizing short stories and essays by biblical scholars or prominent clergy.^[18] Art critic Arthur Fish (active 1895–1923) included Burne-Jones's *Adoration of the Magi* tapestry and St. Paul's-within-the-Walls mosaics in his historical survey of angel iconography in the 1897 *Quiver: An Illustrated Magazine for Sunday and General Reading*, a nondenominational weekly founded for the "Defence of Biblical Truth, and the Advancement of Religion in the Homes of the People."^[19]



Fig. 3, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation*, 1870–76 in their original frame, illustrated Sotheby's, London, June 13, 1934, no. 99. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, www.harvardartmuseums.org

[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The First Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[larger image\]](#)

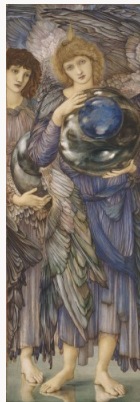


Fig. 5, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Second Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Third Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 7, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Fourth Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Current location unknown. Previously Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 8, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Fifth Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 9, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Sixth Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[larger image\]](#)

In 1898, Burne-Jones's death, and the memorial exhibition held at the New Gallery in the same year, prompted renewed reflection on his life and work in the religious press.^[20] In the 1899 issue of the Jesuit-owned periodical *The Month: A Catholic Magazine*, art critic and biographer A. Streeter (act. 1894–1900) concluded through formal analysis of Burne-Jones's works that his art embodied a Gothic austerity, modern melancholy, and the principles of aestheticism.^[21] Later that spring, President of the Society of British Artists Wyke Bayliss (1835–1906) highlighted *The Days of Creation* (figs. 3–9) and the St. Paul's Within-the-Walls mosaics in Rome (fig. 1) in his tribute to Burne-Jones, "The Painter of the Golden Age," in the popular monthly magazine *Good Words*, which provided edifying light reading, sermons, and pious fiction for families.^[22] Also in 1899, in the evangelical penny weekly *Great Thoughts from Master Minds*, Wesleyan minister Robert Percival Downes (1842–1924) impressed upon his working-class readers the

uplifting poetic effect of Burne-Jones's art.^[23] In 1901, journalist Alfred Thomas Story (1842–1934) featured Burne-Jones in his series "Great Religious Painters of the World" in the *Sunday Strand*, a Christian offshoot of the well-known *Strand* magazine, intended for family Sabbath reading. Poised at the dawn of a new century, Story wrote with wistful retrospection about Burne-Jones's biblical paintings as spiritual and mystical protests against empiricism, science, and the ugliness of modern life.

While Burne-Jones's 1892–93 retrospective exhibition, and his death and memorial exhibition in 1898, explain, to an extent, the uptake in writings about the artist in the waning years of the nineteenth century, they do not explain the new affirmation of his religiosity. Certainly, the 1890s saw a Catholic revival among aesthetes and intellectuals, a heightened fascination with Eastern religions, and a flourishing of alternative belief systems such as theosophy, spiritualism, and Rosicrucianism. Perhaps it would therefore not be unusual to observe simultaneous increased concern for the religious implications of Burne-Jones's art. What is noteworthy, however, is that this trend played out largely in writings by traditional Protestant Christian authors, and lasted well into the twentieth century. Religious essays about Burne-Jones appeared in books until 1916, although similar articles in the religious press largely ceased after 1901. This phenomenon may be partly accounted for by the declining circulation of religious journals, amid the proliferation of mainstream periodicals by the early twentieth century. That published religious interest in Burne-Jones ceased during World War I is perhaps not coincidental.

Faith and Religious Motivation

In addition to a unanimous avowal of Burne-Jones's art's religious significance, several trends can be observed throughout these art writings. Notably, nearly all authors connected the work's religious impact with the artist's own faith. Many hypothesized that the spiritual agency of Burne-Jones's art stemmed from its maker's authentic belief in that which he painted. For example, in 1893 Townsend postulated that had *The Days of Creation* (figs. 3–9) not "been wrought with a wholly reverential and almost devotional spirit, the result would have inevitably been one that would have jarred upon our innermost feelings of sanctity and solemnity."^[24] In 1897, Fish proclaimed Burne-Jones's work "truly religious in artistic feeling" and counted him among the nineteenth century's "front rank of great religious artists," who Fish felt embodied the early Italian painters' spiritual faith.^[25] In his 1908 "sermon" on *The Star of Bethlehem* (fig. 2), Burns detected a "revelation of the artist's own faith" in the flowers blooming around the baby Jesus and felt the "spirit of things ecclesiastical" pervaded his oeuvre.^[26] Linton likewise deduced in 1916 that Burne-Jones's and the Pre-Raphaelites' art "was in the profoundest sense religious because they were religious men."^[27]

Only Forsyth, writing in 1889, was undecided on the matter. Admitting he could not discern Burne-Jones's views on his Christian subject matter, he contended the point actually mattered very little. Rather, he postulated that it was the artist's "pious and true" imagination that breathed new life into Christianity by helping viewers comprehend the context and emotion of biblical events.^[28] The sole Catholic critic, Streeter, was the only doubter of Burne-Jones's religious sincerity. In 1899, he claimed the artist adopted the trappings of early Christian art and ritual, "yet their *spirit*—the spirit of Faith—he has never attained. . . . The ascetic *form* is there, but the *spirit* is wanting."^[29]

Other critics focused less on the artist's faith and instead characterized Burne-Jones's career as a religious vocation, often citing his early clerical ambitions as a lasting influence. Bayliss and Downes, writing in 1899, represented him as a minister of God and a minister of art, respectively.^[30] Story argued in 1901 that Burne-Jones sought to connect humankind with the divine and that he embodied Ruskin's call to devote one's art to moral and spiritual ends.^[31] In 1905, Holland cast Burne-Jones's production of beautiful objects as a socio-religious mission designed to serve the "suffering and toiling populations, such as he pitied and loved."^[32]

Teaching Religion through Art

Regardless of their view of Burne-Jones's personal faith, clergy and those writing for religious journals embraced Burne-Jones's art as a didactic tool, particularly in periodicals meant for Sunday reading. Targeted to families or youth, these illustrated magazines provided religious instruction and edifying leisure activity for the Sabbath. Accordingly, the articles they ran about Burne-Jones incorporated bible verses and gleaned moral and Christian value from the artist's life and work. Adopting a dramatic, narrative style, they often disguised spiritual teaching as entertainment.

Exemplifying this approach was Townsend's 1893 analysis of *The Days of Creation* (figs. 3–9), in which he reinforced Christian teachings about the beginning of the world. "Let me lean over your shoulder as you scan them and briefly tell you what I think you ought to see in them, and how you ought to look at them," he implored the young readers of *Girl's Own Paper*.^[33] Townsend wove scripture throughout his prose, using the Book of Genesis to describe Burne-Jones's iconography. He invoked a heightened sense of drama by conjecturing, "into [the fourth angel's] face seems to have crept a hint of some foreboding" and discerning a glimpse of "that glittering, coiling abomination, the Serpent" in the sixth day's panel.^[34] Meade similarly projected theatricality into her analysis of *Morning of the Resurrection* (fig. 10) the following year by using present-tense action verbs and imagining the characters' emotional states. For example, "Suddenly as [Mary] speaks, the faces of the listening, watching angels change; awe mingled with ecstasy steals over them."^[35] This was not criticism so much as storytelling, with the seasoned fiction writer breathing life into Burne-Jones's visual tales.



Fig. 10, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Morning of the Resurrection*, 1886. Oil on wood. Tate, London. Photo: © Tate, London, 2015. [\[larger image\]](#)

Other Sunday magazines made a role model of Burne-Jones's perceived moral character. In keeping with the populist tenor of *Good Words*, Bayliss subtly imbued his 1899 article with

reminders of Christian values and beliefs and highlighted the principles he believed led to Burne-Jones's success—education, broad intellectual interests, well-chosen friendships, a virtuous wife, and a strong work ethic.^[36] Downes likewise elaborated on Burne-Jones's "Patient Unwearying Toil," pointing out to *Great Thoughts's* working-class readers in 1899 that genius was not simply innate but required dedication and hard labor. These virtues, he maintained, were essential to Burne-Jones's career and revealed through his extensive preparatory drawings.^[37]

Burns's *Sermons in Art* (1908) carried didacticism to an extreme degree, using *The Star of Bethlehem* (fig. 2) as a visual platform from which to preach about the Magi's quest and response to Jesus. He considered Burne-Jones's Magi archetypes of spiritual pilgrimage expressing the soul's quest for God. Furthermore, Burns argued, the image teaches that "Christ is the goal" and that those who search will find him.^[38] Finally, Burns believed that the submissiveness of the Magi in *The Star of Bethlehem* suggested that true sacrifice involved offering not only material possessions but also one's self to God.^[39]

Sermons on Art

Religious criticism about Burne-Jones often employed a writing style that readers would recognize from the church pew, that of expository preaching. This popular mode of sermon delivery in the nineteenth century expounded at length upon a specific Bible text, using its context, related verses, examples, and commentary to educe meaning and apply that to parishioners' lives. Clergy and journalists in the religious press at times applied a parallel interpretive method to Burne-Jones's art. They began by attending to subject matter and artistic intent, and then continued on to draw relationships between compositional details and scripture or Christian doctrine to make the imagery, and its application to religious life, clear and understandable. Spiritual beliefs, as much as visual cues, formed the basis of their reflections.

Forsyth laid the groundwork for this methodology in *Religion in Recent Art* (1889), which he subtitled "Expository Lectures." Feeling that current art criticism did not sufficiently elucidate contemporary art's religious significance, Forsyth sought to demonstrate how the methods of expository preaching could offer the general public a more accessible entry point into pictures. "Expository preaching is coming back into fashion and use, and it need not be confined to scriptural texts," he proposed.^[40] Forsyth advocated a middle ground between extreme subjectivism and adhering too strictly to the artist's stated intentions. He warned against both laying on meanings not supported by the visual evidence, and the excessive literalness he observed in current scripture interpretation.^[41] Forsyth made no pretense that artists would endorse such expository readings but insisted that imaginative freedom was necessary to mine the inherent spiritual content of great works of art. He admitted that his explanations of pictures might be flawed or in "danger of forcing a meaning" but that "what some of you distrust, perhaps, is not the interpretation of particular points, but this style of interpretation altogether."^[42]

Subsequent writers embraced the interpretive freedom of Forsyth's expository method. In 1893, Gurney confessed his primary interest was not the artistic quality of Burne-Jones's work but rather "its deepest and truest inspiration . . . having regard to broader and more fundamental issues."^[43] In 1893, Townsend stressed the role of imagination in the interpretive

process, deeming the best paintings those that "require us to use our own imagination to supplement . . . those hints of the painter's, that are all he is enabled to place upon the canvas." [44] Burns carried on Forsyth's legacy by directly connecting preaching and art criticism in his 1908 *Sermons in Art*. When analyzing *The Star of Bethlehem* (fig. 2), he first recounted the historical and biblical basis for the Magi, as well as their iconographic precedents in art, before excavating Christian lessons from Burne-Jones's treatment of the story.

The various readings of *The Days of Creation* (figs. 3–9), in particular, illustrate this expository style of art writing. Most authors surveyed here highlighted specific iconographic details and supplied ample commentary about their purported Christian messages. Many quoted verses from the Book of Genesis, and Gurney and Meade also cited New Testament passages to elaborate on the angels' connotations. [45] Gurney furthermore read the sixth panel typologically as prefiguring Jesus's coming and symbolic marriage to the Church. [46] Townsend saw in the angels' expressions a foreshadowing of the fall of man and a sinfulness that would descend on God's creation. [47] Bayliss interpreted the progressive accumulation of angels throughout the panels as conveying the idea that, "not only shall God's work endure, but His servants who do His pleasure shall endure also, and shall rejoice together with Him when the day comes." [48] Through this expository process, each author effectively recreated the same artwork according to his or her belief system. For such Christian viewers, the act of reading a painting was synonymous with the act of reading the Bible.

Sanctification of the Secular

The freedom of expository interpretation allowed authors to make religious associations with even Burne-Jones's mythological, allegorical, or medieval works, and many argued that a sacred meaning permeated his entire oeuvre. The prevalence of Christian readings of *Le Chant d'Amour*, *Pygmalion and the Image*, or *The Wheel of Fortune*, among others, exposes the ambiguity of the definitions of "sacred" and "secular." As Downes recognized at the turn of the century, sacred and profane were two sides of the same coin. "Hard by the world of fantasy and silence lies the solemn, glorious world of Religion," he reminded his readers, surmising that similarly, "Hades . . . lies hard by the gate of Paradise," in Burne-Jones's art. [49]

In 1889, Forsyth found particular sanctity in Burne-Jones's reinvention of myths, arguing that the artist invested ancient legends with contemporary spiritual resonance. [50] Likewise, Bayliss eulogized a decade later, "Every Myth which brings / Light of out darkness seemed imaginings / Of God, or things that God himself had made" when rendered by Burne-Jones's brush. [51] Downes was broader yet in his definition of Burne-Jones's "Religious Suggestiveness," construing all of his figures as pilgrims on a spiritual journey toward salvation. "Thus the minister of Christ" from Burne-Jones's youth, Downes concluded, "blends with the inspired artist, and the Greek legend or the poet's dream is pervaded with Christian thought and spiritual aspiration." [52] In 1916, Linton discerned in the work of Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelites "a real kinship between religion and the highest Art, whatever its form." [53] He concluded by borrowing a quote from Esther Wood's study on Rossetti and his circle: "[They] have not secularized the highest things; but they have sanctified the lower." [54]

The Golden Stairs (fig. 11) offers one case study of this phenomenon. Victorian critics and modern-day art historians have found in the painting's musical allusions, indeterminate subject, and monochromatic, rhythmic parade of maidens a quintessential expression of the

Aesthetic movement. Ironically, however, it seems one of aestheticism's most salient characteristics, its absence of narrative, enabled audiences to fill the void with their religious imaginations. In 1901, Story explained to his *Sunday Strand* readers that although *The Golden Stairs* lacked an explicit subject, it has "so delightful and suggestive a character that it deserves a story all to itself." This the author readily supplied, speculating, "the artist had in his mind . . . a fair heavenly host, a tuneful crowd of angels, descending the golden stairs from above to heighten and sweeten the lives of men with strains of celestial music."^[55] In 1893, Gurney portrayed the women as "penitents" on a "penance-path" (the staircase), symbolic of a spiritual journey that would eventually lead upwards again into the "sunshine." First, he reminded his readers, they must "traverse the cloister into which their leader is even now turning, and as she catches a far-off glimpse of the altar, lifts hands and heart and voice for very gladness."^[56] The following year, Meade asserted of *The Golden Stairs*, "this lovely vision is not without its meaning." She interpreted the women as descending "straight from heaven to earth," simultaneously symbolizing both the "spring-time of youth" and that season's other "time of resurrection and rejoicing," presumably understood as Easter by the *Sunday Magazine's* audience.^[57] After characterizing all of Burne-Jones's figures as loiterers at the gates of heaven, listening for God, Downes proposed in 1899 that the maidens in *The Golden Stairs* are already on the other side, "wending their way from one part of the Palace Beautiful to another." Acknowledging that the painter gave few clues to the women's origin or destination, "it is clear," Downes continued, "that the air of Paradise doth fan the house."^[58]



Fig. 11, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Golden Stairs*, 1880. Oil on canvas. Tate, London. Photo: © Tate, London, 2015. [\[larger image\]](#)

Conclusion

Clergy and authors contributing to religious journals, then, approached Burne-Jones in ways that were different to other kinds of art writing, since their primary concern was the moral edification and spiritual life of their readers. Their responses focused on the artist's faith and his work's religious significance rather than solely the formal and artistic qualities of his work. Often modeling their interpretive strategy on current preaching trends, they interacted with Burne-Jones's art based on its perceived relationship to scripture or congruence with their personal convictions. The religious understanding of Burne-Jones's work relied, in part, on authors and readers imaginatively supplementing pictorial narratives with biblical or moral associations based on individual faith perspectives. Their vision reflects historian David

Morgan's definition of religious visual culture as encompassing "a complex assemblage of seeing what is there, seeing by virtue of habit what one expects to see there, seeing what one desires to be there, and seeing what one is told to see there."[\[59\]](#)

Scholarship on religious visual culture thus offers a useful framework for considering the reception patterns of these critics. As Morgan has observed, "what makes an image 'religious' is often not simply its subject matter or the intentions of the person who created it but the *use* of the image as well as the context of its deployment and interpretation."[\[60\]](#) The adaptation of Burne-Jones's painting, tapestry, and stained glass as a platform for published sermons or for Sabbath instruction in the domestic sphere suggests that art was being consumed and employed for sacred purposes well into the twentieth century. While aestheticism may have avowed a religion *of* art, substituting beauty for God, some authors and readers apparently engaged with religion *through* Burne-Jones's work. This body of literature therefore evidences the increasingly privatized, personalized ways that traditional Christianity was practiced outside of the pulpit or church pew around 1900, as religion lived within the spaces of the everyday. As religious visual culture theorists have demonstrated, "the *sacred* is just as often found in ordinary (*profane*) times and places as it is in extraordinary, 'sanctified' times and places."[\[61\]](#)

This was certainly true also in the way that religious use of Burne-Jones's art encompassed mythological, medieval, and allegorical subjects as well as biblical ones. That a paragon of aestheticism such as *The Golden Stairs* (fig. 11) could elicit multiple religious interpretations underscores the multivalency of Burne-Jones's objects and the subjectivity of sacredness. The fact that authors, editors, and readers often moved back and forth between "art" and "religious" writing, producing and consuming both, further attests that "sacred" and "secular" resist any neat division.

Examining this previously overlooked literature, then, disrupts assumptions about not only Burne-Jones's reception but also the relationship between religion and modernity in Britain around 1900. Most histories of Victorian art are tacitly informed by secularization theory, which posits society's teleological progression from a "religious" (primitive) to a "secular" (rational, enlightened) condition whereby the sacred loses relevance and influence. Such changes are taken to be inevitable, universal, and irreversible characteristics of a modern world.[\[62\]](#) In Britain, this has resulted in a dichotomy between a "Victorian" nineteenth century steeped in "religious" concerns and a "secular," modern twentieth century. Although in recent decades sociologists and historians have dismantled secularization's ties to modernity and questioned the timing and degree of its occurrence in Britain, historians of Victorian art still routinely cast the period as one of precipitous religious decline.[\[63\]](#) Burne-Jones has appeared to exemplify this picture of lost faith and religious indifference. Furthermore, by misperceiving the secular as a necessary condition of modernity, such a view has ensured an almost exclusive focus on those abstract and progressive tendencies of Burne-Jones's aestheticism and symbolism that seemingly align him with this misguided view of modernism.

Recovering this lost chapter of Burne-Jones's reception history therefore provides a more textured understanding of his work and the religious context in which it operated. These art writings support the idea of Christianity's changing yet continued relevance in both fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century Britain and reveal how some individuals enacted and

interpreted their beliefs through art as part of their lived religious experience. Recognizing these trends, as well as the fluidity of "sacred" and "secular" in the years before and after 1900, dismantles the artificial "Victorian/Religious" vs. "Modern/Secular" construct. Consequently, the door is opened for more multi-faceted scholarship on Burne-Jones that acknowledges aspects of his life and work beyond simply those deemed avant-garde.

Colette Crossman specializes in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British art with a focus on religion in Victorian art and visual culture. She earned her M.A. from the Courtauld Institute of Art and her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland, where she wrote a dissertation on the intersection of Edward Burne-Jones's religious practice and artistic identity. Her research has been supported by fellowships from the Huntington Library, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, and Yale Center for British Art, among others. Colette is immediate past president of Historians of British Art and a longtime member of its executive board. Her career spans over 17 years as a curator, educator, and academic liaison at institutions such as the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the Kimbell Art Museum.

Email the author [drccrossman\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:drccrossman[at]gmail.com)

Notes

- [1] Alfred T. Story, "Great Religious Painters of the World: Sir Edward Burne-Jones," *Sunday Strand*, July 1901, 32–39.
- [2] Alfred Gurney, "Christian Mysticism at the New Gallery," *Newbery House Magazine*, March 1893, 293.
- [3] *Ibid.*
- [4] Claude Phillips, "Edward Burne Jones," *Magazine of Art* 8 (June 1885): 290.
- [5] George Moore testified to the Victorian prevalence of art writing by clergy when he joked that with exhibitions of religious art "if . . . one of the dignitaries of the Church can be induced to accept a little excursion into the perilous fields of art criticism, all will go well with the show." George Moore, *Modern Painting* (London: Walter Scott, 1893), 179.
- [6] Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Macmillan, 1905), 1:38.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 1:114–15.
- [8] See Colette Crossman, "Art as Lived Religion: Edward Burne-Jones as Painter, Priest, Pilgrim, and Monk" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2007).
- [9] For example, Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone, eds., *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Watts: Symbolism in Britain, 1860–1910* (London: Tate Gallery, 1997); Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones, Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998); and Alison Smith, Tim Barringer, and Jason Rosenfeld, eds., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design* (London: Tate Publishing and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
- [10] Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art: Being Expository Lectures on Rossetti, Burne Jones, Watts, Holman Hunt, and Wagner* (Manchester: A. Heywood & Son, 1889), v.
- [11] Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art* (London: Hodder & Stoughton; New York: George H. Doran, 1894).
- [12] Holland's review originally appeared in *Commonwealth*, the journal of the Christian Social Union, which he founded and edited. Henry Scott Holland, *Personal Studies* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton and Co. Ltd., 1905).

- [13] James Burns, *Sermons in Art by the Great Masters* (London: Duckworth, 1908). Burns authored at least two other texts on art specifically for clergy: *Illustrations from Art for Pulpit and Platform* (London: J. Clarke & Co., 1912) and *Illustrations for Preachers and Teachers, Taken from Literature, Poetry and Art* (London: J. Clarke & Co., 1925).
- [14] Linton's book was published in London although by 1916 he had immigrated to Canada. John Linton, *The Cross in Modern Art: Descriptive Studies of Some Pre-Raphaelite Paintings* (London: Duckworth, 1916).
- [15] Margaret Rachel Beetham and Mark Knight, "Religious Journalism," *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, accessed January 2, 2013, <http://c19index.chadwyck.com>.
- [16] Gurney, "Christian Mysticism," 293–302. The *Newbery House Magazine's* subtitle was "A monthly review for churchmen and churchwomen," and its inaugural issue described it as "intended especially for the clergy and laity of the Church of England." "Newbery House and Its Founder," *Newbery House Magazine*, July 1889, title page, 1.
- [17] Horace Townsend, "'The Days of Creation' by Edward Burne-Jones," *Girl's Own Paper*, April 15, 1893, 456–59.
- [18] L. T. Meade, "The Painter of Eternal Youth: Sir Edward Burne-Jones," *Sunday Magazine*, June 1894, 392–97 and July 1894, 471–75.
- [19] Arthur Fish, "Picturing the Angels," *Quiver: An Illustrated Magazine for Sunday and General Reading*, February 1897, 323–30 and July 1897, 774–75.
- [20] A published catalog accompanied the exhibition. See *The New Gallery Exhibition of the Works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, with introduction by J. Comyns Carr (London: New Gallery, 1898).
- [21] A. Streeter, "Thoughts on the Art of Edward Burne-Jones," *Month: A Catholic Magazine*, January 1899, 25–38.
- [22] Wyke Bayliss, "Sir Edward Burne-Jones: The Painter of the Golden Age," *Good Words*, March 1899, 189–97.
- [23] R. P. Downes, "A Great Painter: Sir Edward Burne-Jones," *Great Thoughts from Master Minds*, April 1, 1899, 6–8.
- [24] Townsend, "Days of Creation," 457.
- [25] Fish, "Picturing the Angels," 774–75.
- [26] Burns, *Sermons in Art*, 58, 73.
- [27] Linton, *Cross in Modern Art*, 6.
- [28] Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art*, 99–101.
- [29] Streeter, "Thoughts," 37.
- [30] Bayliss, "Edward Burne-Jones," 194; and Downes, "Great Painter," 6.
- [31] Story, "Great Religious Painters," 33, 39.
- [32] Holland, *Personal Studies*, 262.
- [33] Townsend, "Days of Creation," 456.
- [34] *Ibid.*, 459.
- [35] Meade, "Painter of Eternal Youth," 394.
- [36] Bayliss, "Edward Burne-Jones," 196.
- [37] Downes, "Great Painter," 6–7.
- [38] Burns, *Sermons in Art*, 70.
- [39] *Ibid.*, 72.
- [40] Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art*, vii.
- [41] *Ibid.*, vii–viii.
- [42] *Ibid.*, 115.
- [43] Gurney, "Christian Mysticism," 293.
- [44] Townsend, "Days of Creation," 456.
- [45] Gurney, "Christian Mysticism," 294; and Meade, "Painter of Eternal Youth," 473.
- [46] Gurney, "Christian Mysticism," 294.
- [47] Townsend, "Days of Creation," 459.
- [48] Bayliss, "Edward Burne-Jones," 194.

- [49] Downes, "Great Painter," 8.
- [50] Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art*, 64.
- [51] Bayliss, "Edward Burne-Jones," 189.
- [52] Downes, "Great Painter," 8.
- [53] Linton, *Cross in Modern Art*, 6.
- [54] Esther Wood, *Dante Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement* (London: S. Low, Marston and Co., 1894), 224. Quoted in Linton, *Cross in Modern Art*, 9.
- [55] Story, "Great Religious Painters," 34.
- [56] Gurney, "Christian Mysticism," 301.
- [57] Meade, "Painter of Eternal Youth," 471.
- [58] Downes, "Great Painter," 8.
- [59] David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 74–75.
- [60] *Ibid.*, 55.
- [61] S. Brent Plate, introduction to *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 9–10. Emphasis in original.
- [62] For secularization theory, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (London: Watts, 1966). Peter Berger later reversed his position.
- [63] For revisionist scholarship on secularization theory, see, for example, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999); Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001); Timothy Larsen, *Contested Christianity: The Political and Social Contexts of Victorian Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004); and Sally M. Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (September 2003): 581–603.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Edward Burne-Jones, *Tree of Life*, 1894. Mosaic. St. Paul's Within-the-Walls, Rome. Photo courtesy of St. Paul's Within-the-Walls, Rome. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 1887–90. Watercolor and bodycolor. Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham. Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%3AEdward_Burne-Jones_Star_of_Bethlehem.jpg. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation*, 1870–76 in their original frame, illustrated Sotheby's, London, June 13, 1934, no. 99. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, www.harvardartmuseums.org.

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Fig. 4, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The First Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Second Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Third Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Fourth Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Current location unknown. Previously Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Fifth Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, . [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Sixth Day*, 1870–76. Watercolor, gouache, shell gold, and platinum paint on linen covered panel prepared with zinc white ground. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Morning of the Resurrection*, 1886. Oil on wood. Tate, London. Photo: © Tate, London, 2015. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Edward Burne-Jones, *The Golden Stairs*, 1880. Oil on canvas. Tate, London. Photo: © Tate, London, 2015. [\[return to text\]](#)