

The *S*piritual  
*H*istory of  
ENGLISH



ANDREW  
THORNTON-NORRIS

*Foreword by David Clayton*



LINCOLN, NE

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To my Mother and Father





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## FOREWORD

WHAT MAKES A PIECE OF LITERATURE or art Christian? Some would say just the content, that is, *what* is said; others would say both the content and the form, because the way in which certain truths are conveyed can communicate them more fully. It's not just *what* you say that's important, but also *how* you say it. If this is the case, the style of prose or poetry can be Christian (or un-Christian), as much as the meaning of the words considered apart from that style. As an artist and a teacher of art, I have long maintained that the style of art is every bit as important as the content, and that since the Enlightenment style has declined because artists have rejected the traditional Catholic forms.

In this slim volume, the English Catholic poet Andrew Thornton-Norris does for poetry and prose what I have been trying to do with visual art. He relates the actual structure of the writing and the vocabulary used in it to the worldview of a given age. He shows us, for example, that even if the poet or novelist is sincerely Catholic and trying to express truths that are consistent with the Faith, he is at a great disadvantage if he is seeking to express those truths with vocabulary and poetic forms that reflect a post-Enlightenment culture.

I agree with the author's analysis of the phases of modernity, which he sees as ever-greater degrees or manifestations of the Protestant heresy. Chapter by chapter, he analyses and critiques the worldview of the Enlightenment, down to the present day. The philosophies behind Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism are each

presented as differing reactions against Christianity and, ultimately, against the authority of the Catholic Church. He then connects each with the cultural forms it engenders.

Because he is dealing with the English language, he first describes the rise of the language as a distinct vernacular and connects this with the presence of the Faith. He argues that the very idea of the English as a nation comes from the Church, through Pope Gregory the Great and his emissary, St Augustine of Canterbury. He then describes how the language and its literature developed in light of the spread of Christian teaching, through the influence of figures such as Bede, Alcuin of York, and King Alfred the Great. Then, after the great heights of writers such as Chaucer and finally Shakespeare, he argues that the trajectory has been downhill from there. As he puts it in the beginning of his concluding chapter: "This book has argued that English literature has declined, almost to the point of non-existence. In this and previous chapters we examine what remains: the entrails, or shipwrecks, so to speak. It has argued that this decline has been concurrent with that of English Christianity, and it has examined the relationship between these two phenomena."

This means that Mr Thornton-Norris is much more suspicious of the Romantic poets than many other Catholic commentators. I like the idea of this, firstly because it makes me feel less of a philistine for finding them dull, but also because this parallels exactly my analysis of painting—that the Romantics and all thereafter are, in substantial and important ways, inferior to earlier Christian artists and artisans. The same seems evident to me in Neoclassicism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. Mr Thornton-Norris clearly believes that through the prism of literature, one can identify problems with the whole culture, which are at root related to the rejection of the Faith and its forms



of worship. This idea is also very similar to my own about visual art, and appeals to me on a similar level.

The author is discussing general trends; he has no intention of dismissing all examples of English literature in these later periods. Rather, he points out the great disadvantage suffered by those poets and novelists who were trying to express something that is consistent with the Faith in an era that breathed a different atmosphere. They were restricted, generally, to the vocabulary and structural forms of the language at the time in which they lived, and because these were affected by one form or another of a post-Enlightenment anti-Catholic worldview, they always faced a struggle to rise above the cramping conventions and assumptions of their time.

*The Spiritual History of English* is full of luminous ideas that deserve careful pondering. May this new edition from Os Justi Press place its insights into the hands of many more readers who are seeking to understand the cultural crossroads at which we stand and the conditions necessary for the rebirth and flourishing of all the arts, especially the art of the poetic word.

David Clayton

March 21, 2024

St. Benedict of Nursia





## PREFACE

**T**HIS BOOK IS THE PRODUCT OF AN intellectual, spiritual, and personal journey for which the model is that of St. Augustine of Hippo. I was brought up by lapsed Protestant parents in England in the 1970s and 1980s. I had a normal English state school education and studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Oxford University (dropping the third subject after the first year). My teachers were secular: liberals, socialists, and, even at Oxford, still, communists. I went behind the Iron Curtain whilst studying there to see what it was really like.

After Oxford I wanted to write. It took me six years to discover that English Romantic literature was no longer possible. It had existed in the context of Protestantism. It took me another nine years to discover that this was no longer possible either. The logic that it had contained from the beginning had worked through to its conclusion: that Protestant orthodoxy was a paradox.

I had become a classicist and an Anglo-Catholic, following T. S. Eliot; but now I found that I had no choice but to become a Roman Catholic. I had discovered that only the Magisterium could redeem the individualism of modern society.

I would like to thank the people who helped me to write this book.

A. T.-N., December 2009



The publication of a second edition by Os Justi Press has given me the opportunity to revise the text, in some places

considerably, with the assistance of Dave Capan and Peter Kwasniewski. David Clayton graciously provided the Foreword. The Epilogue is new.

A. T.-N., March 2024



## INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP between religion and literature in England. It is also a book about the English language and its spirit. It examines the incarnation of metaphysics or belief in the language and the literature of a people. It begins with the foundation of England at the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions and it follows this relationship through to the present day, when the prevailing religion or belief system is secular or pagan: a religion of humanity, of human rights, equality, and material progress, enforced by law. As Edward Norman has shown, this “modern state is as confessional as its predecessors,” it’s just that the underlying belief system it enforces is not quite so easy to identify.<sup>1</sup>

This book is in part a response to the author’s experience of this secular state, its system of education, and its secular culture. It considers the spiritual response to those formative experiences of someone seeking the truth of human existence, which may seem to be a rather quaint activity in the secular materialist marketplace, where the struggle to realize one’s self in the world, to achieve one’s potential in materialist terms, is the norm.

Nonetheless, it considers the various possibilities available to someone seeking a way of understanding and articulating the experience of being in the world, and the taking leave of it, which is most satisfactory. It is an attempt to understand and to assess the dominant culture in which people are raised and educated: what it has to offer to the individual, and to humanity as a whole, both now and in historical terms. The

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<sup>1</sup> Norman, *Anglican Difficulties*, 70–71.

attempt is therefore an intellectual one, an investigation of literature, philosophy, theology, and history, among other things.

But it may be that a conclusion can only be reached through a *transcendence* of the intellect. While such an understanding will have an intellectual and rational basis, the origins and consequences of that process are emotional or instinctive, and defined by experience, including cultural experience. The conversion of the heart is more important than that of the mind, for that is what governs the will, while the consolation and hope provided are directed to the heart, not to the intellect. This may be challenging to the post-Enlightenment rationalist mentality, but that mind has recently begun to examine the basis of its own faith in pure reason. And it is a similar idea to that of the unconscious motivation for actions — one of the ideas that has disrupted Enlightenment confidence in pure reason; the other being the absence of a reliable deity.

The relationship between these different aspects of the human personality includes the relationship between individual and collective knowledge, the authority of inherited tradition, and the cultural development of individual consciousness, creativity, and judgement. Any conclusion drawn will be based on a judgement of the perceived truth of the evidence as presented and experienced, and of the character and nature of the witnesses, rather than simply the validity of scientific or philosophical argument.

Belief is formed by more than rational argument: metaphysics and belief are related but not identical matters. Belief provides the context for the discussion of metaphysics, and for judgements about it, but metaphysics does not determine belief: it is its consequence. Metaphysics may help to understand, structure, and account for belief, but belief operates at a deeper psychological level: the level of experience, the level at which literature and culture operate.

The subject matter they deal with, their content, is that of experience, which includes religious experience and that of contemporary secular humanism or paganism. The dominant manifestation of this is the Puritan-derived belief that spiritual goodness (“election”) on a social or a personal level is manifested in material circumstances; for example, achievement and progress, in health, wealth, or technological advance.

The answers provided by this secular humanism did not address certain aspects of the author’s own experience; in particular, those *in extremis*, of difficulty or blessing. The adequacy of sending someone out into the world with the spiritual resources of modern secular humanism was therefore, at the very least, questionable. The secular explanations, responses, or accounts did not have the language, understanding, or reasons with which to respond, express, or account for such experience. Whether it was seen from an Anglo-Catholic or Roman Catholic perspective, the only real alternative to secular humanism or paganism was the same: orthodox ecclesiastical Christianity.

It is unlikely that any spiritual tradition outside the Western ecclesiastical one could have been satisfactory. Even in the post-Christian West, the historical construction of culture and the personality is such that any growth or development of spiritual understanding is in practice ultimately inseparable from Christianity and its cultural legacy, while the maintenance of orthodoxy is likewise inseparable from the authority of a church. Movement in any other direction is, in this respect, simply a form of Protestantism.

Meanwhile, socialist materialism offered no real spiritual alternative to capitalist materialism. Each is a “world-immanent” rather than “world-transcendent” means of interpreting and giving meaning, purpose, and depth to existence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between “world-immanent” and “world-transcendent” is found in Burleigh, *Earthy Powers*, 5, derived from Eric Voegelin

Materialism is the problem, not the solution. Although intimations of this prospect had been gleaned from some of the historical literature encountered through the secular education and culture, and literature itself had provided some answers, it only went so far, and could not answer all the questions.

In seeking a secular explanation and knowledge in literature, poetry was a possibility, and the most prominent contemporary poet of the time was Philip Larkin. His master was Thomas Hardy, and the tradition they represented was one derived from Puritanism. This was the "English Line" of Romantic poets, whose origins were in Milton, Gray, Collins, and Wordsworth, and ended with Edward Thomas, Robert Frost, and Larkin himself.<sup>3</sup> This line remains the dominant English poetic sensibility or mode of response, even in such technically "modernist" writers as Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill. It is the literary incarnation of the empiricist attitude to the natural world contained within the rise of modern science, and the sceptical philosophy, Puritanism, and romanticism that are associated with it. It is a modern form of paganism: manifested variously as a cult of the individual personality, the mind, the body, creativity, pleasure, nature, or other political, material, or cultural values. It includes a mystical understanding of nature, the world, or the person which believes in things beyond those verifiable through the scientific method, while rejecting the dogmas of ecclesiastical Christianity.

This mode of thought also includes Scientism: the widespread belief that nothing may be believed in which is not verifiable through the scientific method, or is not susceptible

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in his *The Political Religions*. The Hegelian idea of the State is one in which religious attributes are found in the secular state, and is the origin of the genocidal state.

<sup>3</sup> In *The English Line*, Powell-Ward associates this tradition with Puritanism.



to scientific proof. This represents an attitude to the scientific method, and so to knowledge, which is one of pure faith. The assumption that the scientific method is the only reliable or valid method of answering all questions, in any field of human knowledge other than the physical, is not in itself provable or verifiable as true, and is thus self-contradictory.<sup>4</sup>

By comparison, the grounds for faith in religion or the arts as reliable or verifiable means of acquiring knowledge in these fields have secure foundations. They are the means by which humanity has always sought to understand itself, its existence, its nature, and its moral universe, and it has brought immense rewards. The alternative has failed to do so.

Therefore, in one respect this work is an *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, a history of religious opinions or beliefs and their relationship with literary tendencies. In a more important sense, however, this book is a lament: that there is no living literary tradition, or that it is so prosaic as to consist of nothing more than non-fiction.

It is sometimes argued that non-fiction has become the only literary form capable of dealing with the complexity of the present. This may be grounded in the pre-modern tradition of literature as rhetoric. The ancient world made no value distinction between poetic or prose literature, so perhaps neither should we. In examining these claims, this work is also a plea, or a manifesto, for the revival of literature in England. It argues that the revival of orthodox ecclesiastical Christianity may be the precondition for this

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<sup>4</sup> See Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, for the lifting of the Aristotelian proscription of metabasis, the translation of methods from one science to another, and Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, for the modern invention of the secular not as temporal (between the Fall and the Last Things) but as spatial, a place beyond the sacred. See also Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University," for the need to "overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable, and . . . once more disclose its vast horizons."

revival, as our historic literary tradition depends upon it in ways to be examined.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this work is also a consideration of the possibility of and conditions necessary for poetry and poetic prose, or fiction, in the present.

The work of Maurice Cowling provides the escape from the dominant romantic sensibility, in particular through his study of the intellectual process of de-Christianization, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*. The process is that of the conversion of the confessional state from one founded on Christianity to one founded on secular humanism or paganism. He asserts that it is "Catholic, ecclesiastical Christianity . . . which is Christianity,"<sup>6</sup> that, despite the importance of other forms, it is the Church which has provided that essential continuity over centuries which Christianity has enjoyed. He implies that it is unlikely that the Anglican form can survive in a secularized society, that an "independent ecclesiastical power" is required, as well as that the clergy have the "requisite normality, serenity and self-confidence to address the Christianity which is latent in English life."<sup>7</sup>

What Cowling saw was that all political positions were derived from religious positions, as were artistic or cultural tendencies. Cowling's question when attempting to understand any thinker, writer, or political actor was always "What is his religion?" Any attempt at reduction or translation of these religious motivations or beliefs into secular or ideological terms would always leave out something essential. It is thus a liberation from the ideology of the post-Christian

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5 Steiner, in *Real Presences*, gives an account of the reason why belief in God may be essential to the Western creative tradition. He sees the origin of creativity as being a "pious envy" or rage, a determination to create an alternative universe which is more to the author's own taste. In this way all great art contains the real presence of the original creator as well as that of the immediate creator, and it is why the postmodern world, with its belief in absence, lacks such art.

6 Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine*, 3:697-98.

7 Cowling, 3:x.

consensus, which shapes contemporary education and cultural activity.<sup>8</sup> The idea is then to project this approach back to the relationship between religion and literature beyond modern England, and also beyond doctrine, to look at the wider manner in which religion is incarnate in artistic values — the subject which obsessed T. S. Eliot throughout his life. Cowling considered literature to be a crucial modern vehicle of doctrine, both religious and post-religious.

He began his first volume with a quotation from Carlyle's Lecture on "The Hero as Man of Letters" of 1840: "The writers of Newspapers, Pamphlets, Poems, Books, these are the effective working church of a modern country."<sup>9</sup> The third volume began with another line from the same work, "Of all Priesthoods, Aristocracies, Governing Classes at present extant in the world, there is no class comparable to the Priesthood of the Writers of Books."<sup>10</sup> And he concluded with the question of whether there was really a connection between Christianity and any cultural and academic endeavour. Whether a Roman Catholic could find Catholicism in a particular style of architecture, for example: as Pugin had done in the Gothic, identifying the Classical with paganism; and as Pevsner was accused of doing in finding in "international modernism" a post-Christian religion of "egalitarian uniformity."<sup>11</sup>

This book is an examination of those texts and of the English soul, but it is also a book about religion and culture in general, and the effects modernity has had on each, which are similar across cultures. Modernity itself is examined by studying a particular version of it: England and its

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8 Cowling, 3:xx-xxiii.

9 Carlyle, "The Hero as Man of Letters," May 19, 1840, in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, cited in Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine*, 1:xi.

10 Cited in Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine*, 3:3.

11 Questions posed by David Watkin, the architectural critic. Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine*, 3:693.

literature — a version of modernity quite benign by comparison with some others. But spiritual questions and those of culture and civilization are always serious, as are those of the relations between religion, politics, and culture. England, as the first industrial nation and the earliest example of a nation-state, with a long literary culture to sustain it, is a good laboratory in which to examine them, and serves as an exemplary account of national and literary development into the modern world.

This work is also a study of the English language, and the values and influences that have gone into its development. As a spiritual history of literature as it has developed in England, it also includes discussion of works in Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, and Italian, and works in English produced by writers who were born or lived in other countries.

The English language developed in a particular place, among a particular group of people, subject to particular influences, so it incarnates some of the characteristics and experiences of these people, as does the literature. And as that language has spread, so those influences, that literature, and that culture have spread all across the world.

While this book is a history of English literature from the introduction of the tongue to the present day, it is not an encyclopaedic history, but rather an attempt to understand the present by examining the past. It suggests that the orthodoxies surrounding the study and practice of literature, and of religion, are in dire need of revision. The subject is a specific element of the history of literature: the metaphysics of literature, and the manner, method, and mode of its incarnation in literary form. This work deals with the metaphysical and formal essence of that history, rather than the detail, and examines poetry more than prose, because poetry is the most spiritual literary art: the closest to music and to prayer, and because the nature of spiritual transformation

can be seen most clearly in the development of the poetic image and of technique.

Clarity, breadth, limpidity, and simplicity are spiritual as well as rhetorical virtues, and the spiritual poverty of language is of the highest spiritual significance. In contrast, the widespread use of jargon and code in academic and intellectual presentations of intellectual, cultural, and spiritual matters is a deliberate impairment of communication, a refusal to be intelligible. This is a practical rejection of the possibility of a common criticism and judgement, and a disdain for truth itself. "We have sunk to a depth in which re-statement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men," wrote Orwell.<sup>12</sup>

It has become possible, customary, conventional even, to view the history of English literature from a non-Christian perspective, although its history is inseparable from the Christian religion. The distortion of this perspective, which Eliot described as a "new kind of provincialism, not of space, but of time,"<sup>13</sup> is a barrier to the real appreciation and understanding of English literature, and the Christian and Latin Classical foundations of the European civilization and culture of which it is, or was, a part. This distortion is also a barrier to realizing the personal significance and value of liturgy, prayer, and religious traditions, our spiritual inheritance and understanding, and the culture they engendered for almost two millennia.

The metaphysics and the culture that have replaced it leave the individual alone to face his difficulties and blessings, and the profound questions of mortality, sin, and loss that are always with us. The fruit of this is the existential sickness of the art and culture we see around us. Vice versa,

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12 Orwell, review of Russell's *Power: A New Social Analysis* (1938), in *The Collected Essays*, 375–76.

13 Eliot, "What Is a Classic?," *Selected Prose*, 130.

this decline in cultural standards has affected the liturgy of the Church. The tolerance of inferior texts is a consequence of the decline both of cultural standards and of orthodox belief. The coarsening of liturgy is a coarsening of the spirit as well as of the sensibility. The work of translation from Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and from the modern European vernaculars, is a living proof of the importance of interpretation, of active engagement with the texts, rather than the naive and sometimes dangerous belief that their meaning is literal, immanent, and indisputable. This danger shows the religious need for a culture which sustains the critical faculties of humanism, to ensure that religion is a living intellectual as well as practical belief, and that it does not become a superstition or too literalistic in its interpretation of sacred texts, but also to ensure that humanism does not become a religion in itself.<sup>14</sup>

The crisis facing Christianity in England, regardless of ecclesiastical form, affects religion, wisdom, understanding, and belief in general. But the different church and religious structures are affected in different ways, and some doctrinal and liturgical responses are more successful than others. Throughout history, the relationships between English literature, the Church, and the Crown have been intimate; so, the challenges to sacramental worship in our day, whether in the Roman or the English church, bear upon the fate of each. It may be, however, that only a belated counter-reformation in England led by the monarchy can resolve that crisis, with all the implications for English culture that that implies. What we identify is a religious problem, for which logic dictates a religious solution.

It might seem strange to associate literature with the Church, especially when so much of it seems designed to provoke, challenge, or reject the Church. But this shows the

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<sup>14</sup> See Eliot, "Religion without Humanism."

power, influence, and authority that the Church has had within the culture, without which that culture is weakened if not destroyed. Therefore, at the centre of this study is the relationship between literature and belief. The central question is whether literature requires a particular religious context to survive: whether for English literature, this context has been and can only be ecclesiastical Christianity. Without such a context, literature may become a merely private activity, unsustained by any sense of collective purpose at the deepest level, and therefore divorced from the collective memory and any possibility of collective achievement, all of which are essential for great works of art.

The liberal belief system that has taken the place of Christianity is just the opposite of such a religion. It is a refusal to believe in anything, except the freedom to believe in and to do whatever you want, so long as you allow others to do the same. The resulting relativism and multiculturalism is corrosive of tradition, especially literary tradition. Despite the fact that “Englishness is the principle of diversity itself . . .”<sup>15</sup> it still requires the preservation of a historic core for diversity not to become dispersion. Meanwhile, that liberal belief system shows itself as relative, deconstructing itself, so to speak. When belief becomes a purely private matter, faith is no longer disciplined or deepened by religious authority or doctrine. But the orthodox Christian believes that the doctrine of Original Sin, and the life in the spirit which is called for in response, is the greatest liberation of all.

A Christian literature may be, as Cowling suggested, “the only plausible link between historic orthodoxy and any orthodoxy which is likely to command the future.”<sup>16</sup> What the Church did, as we shall see, was to sustain a culture of preservation of the standards of the past against which the

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15 Ackroyd, *Albion*, 448.

16 Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine*, 3:698.

achievements of the present could be measured. She thus established and sustained a living tradition, within which creativity could be nourished and guided. She also provided a context within which art or the individual were prevented from becoming a religion themselves.

Accordingly, my intention is to show another way of looking at English history, and English cultural history in particular, to seek to develop an integrated understanding of religion, culture, and politics, and to uncover a hidden or hermetic theology, which is perhaps even more important in a post-Christian culture.