

# “Tin Heaven”? Church Architecture and Poverty

By Ayla Lepine | Volume 4.1 Winter 2018

Historic churches and cathedrals are both responses to and shapers of socio-economic circumstances. The glory of God and the pride of humanity can appear to be startlingly similar and even masquerade as one another in raising funds and establishing foundations for a major building project, whether this took place in the twelfth century or the twentieth. Buildings consecrated as holy places for the worship of God are, regardless of their style or period, beacons of counterculture that insist upon lives lived by the standards of the Beatitudes and good news for the poor, and a promise—no matter how often disregarded or broken—to follow Christ in humility and simplicity.

Poverty, in the sense of simplicity and freedom from the desire for material wealth, is an ancient virtue and a requirement for the religious life. Poverty, in the sense of deprivation and a depth of suffering inflicted on individuals and vast groups by the negligence and malice of those in positions of abusive power, however, is not to be confused with the understanding of poverty as freedom and simplicity. One form of poverty liberates. The other crushes.

The pain of poverty is the pain of exclusion, whether arbitrarily or systematically. In his influential book *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard writes, “Outside and inside form a division. . . . The dialectics of *here* and *there* has been promoted to the rank of an absolutism according to which these unfortunate adverbs of place are endowed with unsupervised powers of ontological determination.”<sup>[1]</sup> Bachelard speaks of architecture that reflects social thresholds and can contribute to the common good or reinforce division. He desired both inclusion and intimacy in meaningful architecture that can create community cohesion, tearing down what divides us by building spaces that encourage flourishing.

A church deliberately established in an area of profound urban poverty may be intricately ornate, offering a glimpse of radiant beauty in the midst of hardship. In contrast, some would suggest that simplicity and a more minimalist approach to beauty would breathe peace into the bodies of worshippers regardless of socio-economic circumstances. Still others would suggest that the way a church looks, its age, or its interior ornamentation and furnishings, have little if anything to do with the community that it houses. In this view, a building would be a mere envelope within which the riches of God’s grace are available to all, responding to profound economic injustice on a global scale with a resounding hospitality of fellowship that is not rooted or expressed in the architecture that merely surrounds it with a covering. The Bible offers multiple views on the relationship between sacred space, architecture, and simplicity (or ornate ostentation), from opulent temples and palaces to the Son of Man who has nowhere to lay his head.<sup>[2]</sup>

This article explores Christian architectural history in relation to poverty by considering a cluster of case studies in British contexts from the nineteenth century to the present, aware that the ideas presented here are a brief and focused interpretation of a theme that is as urgent as it is universal.

## **The “Tin Heaven,” Hadlow Down, East Sussex**

In 1885 the Baptist minister Henry Donkin moved to the village of Hadlow Down in East Sussex and

founded a new mission.<sup>[3]</sup> With slow beginnings, it became a fully-fledged mission chapel in the early 1920s, with permission to officiate marriages and take a full and public part in local Nonconformist worship. The building that Donkin commissioned was one of the thousands of “tin tabernacles” that dotted the United Kingdom, the British Empire, and North America, purchased and erected by every type of Christian denomination, from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth.<sup>[4]</sup> Most of these affordable prefabricated corrugated-iron sacred spaces have long since been demolished or have rusted away, but the one in Hadlow Down survives. When he founded it in the 1880s, Donkin named his new mission chapel “The Tin Heaven.”

Donkin’s project, one tin tabernacle among many, was connected to the proliferation of cheaper industrially produced materials and, paradoxically, to a desire for social outreach and simplicity as a counterbalance to the oscillation between economic boom and bust. On July 10, 1857, John Ruskin delivered an explosive lecture at the Manchester Art Treasures exhibition. Britain, like much of the world, was gripped by an anxious mood brought on by a major economic crisis.<sup>[5]</sup> Ruskin turned his full attention to the relationship between art, religion, and the socio-economic issues of poverty in both general cultural and specific local terms. He argued that, when wealth was not fairly distributed, all suffered both culturally and spiritually, and he pointed out that the acquisitive and territorial attitude to wealth in the modern age could never be compatible with Christian ethics.

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With references to the Book of Proverbs, Ruskin claimed that “where there should have been providence, there has been waste; where there should have been labour, there has been lasciviousness; and wilfulness, when there should have been subordination.”<sup>[6]</sup> A decade later, Ruskin returned to Manchester and lectured again on the “Spirit of Poverty” and its positive medieval connotations, firmly connected with simplicity and Christ-like humility rather than with the deprivation, hunger, and suffering that he and his contemporaries saw around them.

Modern socio-economic suffering was the outcome of a rampant greed that resulted in the double-impooverishment of the souls of the wealthy and lives of the poor. One response was to reconsider Christian forms of worship and architecture in light of economic justice and ethics. Out of this debate, and not without Romanticism and idealism alongside depth of commitment to improving lives both spiritually and pragmatically, many advocated a return to medieval styles of architecture to signal a return to a mind-set in which medieval monastic simplicity (though perhaps not the stratification of the feudal system) could breathe new life into a gluttonous and greedy capitalism.<sup>[7]</sup> Ruskin was simply one voice, albeit an influential one, among many. In 1869, inspired by the Rule of St. Francis, Ruskin wrote to a friend that he wished to “form a society—no matter how small at first, which shall vow itself to simple life in what is called poverty, that it may clothe and cleanse, and teach habits of honour and justice—to as many as will receive its laws among the existing poor.”<sup>[8]</sup>

**All Saints Church, Margaret Street, London**



*All Saints Church, Margaret Street, London - David Nicholls, 2015*

A short walk north from one of the world's busiest and most lucrative shopping districts, Oxford Street in London, the spire of All Saints Margaret Street rises high above the buildings established for commerce and materialism. In 1849, the Gothic Revival architect William Butterfield set about designing All Saints in collaboration with the Ecclesiological Society, a group of Anglican clergy, historians, and architects who sought to revive architecture of the Middle Ages and a theology for the Church of England built afresh on the foundations of Christianity prior to the Reformation.<sup>[9]</sup> This Anglican church would become the seat of a new movement in the Church and in the arts, its strident polychromatic brick exterior giving way to a glittering and stirring interior iconographic program in marble, tiles, painting, and stained glass. Its monumental reredos, painted across the whole of the east wall, vividly tells the tale of Christ's Nativity, Crucifixion, and reign in heaven. Originally designed by the artist and church historian William Dyce, it was repainted by the designer Ninian Comper in the early twentieth century, when the sanctuary's vaulted ceiling was also repainted deep blue with glittering stars and shields featuring instruments of the Passion. At the same time, a frieze of child martyr saints of the Early Church was inserted on either side of the reredos. Taken together, this iconographical program weaves together the life of Christ and the witness of Christians to the reality of suffering and hope.

Directly opposite, on wooden chairs at the back of the nave, on any day of the week, groups of homeless people are asleep. Each day the clergy offer the Eucharist to the sound of rhythmic snoring. Some are awake and sit drowsily through the services. Other visitors wander in to take in the radiant narratives of symbol and figurative art in the glass and on the walls, taking a moment or two in their schedule of meetings and shopping to breathe peace. These lives lived in parallel worlds come together in an uneasy yet authentic way, day by day, adjacent to the vast strip of luxurious shops and seemingly endless cash flow.

The church was designed to bring the beauty of holiness to life in liturgy and in the human heart. For now, in the midst of cuts to social services and challenging economic circumstances for so many, exhausted homeless people stretch out along the chairs in the warm, golden glint from the colorful reredos, the manger, the cross, and the angels of heaven surrounding them.

### **St. Michael's Ethiopian Church, Calais**



*St Michael's, Calais - Liam Stoopdice, 2016*

A few miles of land and ocean away, during the summer of 2015, the crew of a popular British Broadcasting Corporation television programme was filming in France. Specifically, they arrived at a church in the refugee camp in Calais to film a Christian music program titled *Songs of Praise*.<sup>[10]</sup> The episode drew controversy and raised awareness of living conditions in this in-between place, filled with people—many of them children—hoping to make their way from France to Britain.

St. Michael's is—or was, as it has since been demolished—an Ethiopian Orthodox makeshift church constructed from any materials that were available: scrap wood, duct tape, plastic cladding, fragments of carpet. The Anglican priest Giles Fraser described it as “a place of raw prayer and defiant hope.”<sup>[11]</sup> He spoke with one of the refugees, who grinned when he told him that the people who originally built St. Michael's had made it to England.

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There is a parallel with the arrival of a Lampedusa Cross to the chapel of Pembroke College, Cambridge, one of the many crosses made in Sicily from the wreckage of migrant boats overflowing with people desperate to make their way across treacherous waters to Europe. The chapel was designed by the renowned Baroque architect Christopher Wren, and its noble Classical interior features finely veined marble columns. When the migrants' cross first arrived, the Dean and Chaplain, James Gardom, lashed it to one of Wren's marble columns with bright blue rope designed for marine use. The contrast was stark, and it remains so, a deliberately piercing monument to the power of the cross and the urgency of the global refugee crisis.

Another report from Calais explained that the priest at St. Michael's was fearful that the BBC programme could draw both positive and negative attention, and did not want to risk giving his name or the names of others to the broadcasters. The church, with its A-frame roof and defiant little wooden cross, looked remarkably like a Victorian tin tabernacle: a symbol of the Church's quest for simplicity as

much as the crushing reality of poverty and its desperate outcomes. A symbol of hope and sign of God's compassion, it is also a symbol of the socio-economic inequality that continues to ravage our world, "rich and poor, one with another."<sup>[12]</sup>

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[1] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), 211-12.

[2] Matthew 8:58.

[3] "Gate House Baptist Chapel," *The London Gazette*, 17 December 1918, p. 14844.

[4] Nick Thompson, *Corrugated Iron Buildings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

[5] Charles W. Calomiris and Larry Schweikart, "The Panic of 1857: Origins, Transmission, and Containment," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Dec. 1991), 807-834.

[6] John Ruskin, "The Political Economy of Art," Manchester, 1857, quoted in Michael Wheeler, *Ruskin's God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163.

[7] See Michael J. Lewis, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000); Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[8] Letter to Susan Scott, Verona, May 14, 1869, Ruskin Library and Archives, Lancaster University.

[9] Paul Thompson, *William Butterfield* (London: Routledge, 1971).

[10] Giles Fraser, "Songs of Praise Shows the Calais Migrants Do Not Sing Alone," *The Guardian*, 16 August 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/16/songs-of-praise-calais-migrants-common-link-christianity> [accessed November 25, 2017].

[11] Giles Fraser, "The Migrants' Church in Calais," *The Guardian*, 7 August 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/aug/07/migrants-church-in-calais-place-of-raw-prayer-and-defiant-hope> [accessed November 25, 2017].

[12] Psalm 49:2.

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