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The Spirituality of Henry Venn: A Catholic Appreciation

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Venn and Newton laid the foundations of evangelical spirituality, whose characteristics were early rising, prayer and Bible study and family prayers.¹

Thus Michael Hennell, who also begins his brief contribution on 'The Evangelical Revival in the Church of England' to *The Study of Spirituality* with Venn's letter to his daughter Catherine on the need to rise early for prayer, the object of which is 'to bring us to imitate the meek, humble, patient and loving Jesus, our Saviour and our God'.² Yet, amazingly, this significant figure in the Evangelical Revival has attracted no modern biographer, and recourse must still perforce be had to the excellent and thorough but dated account of J. C. Ryle.³

I have been endeavouring in recent years to discover and discern Venn's seminal and pioneering ministry as vicar of Huddersfield (1759-71), some of which work I hope will shortly appear in public form. My interest in Venn was stimulated initially by geographical propinquity rather than sympathetic nearness in Anglican tradition—Mirfield is but five miles from Huddersfield. But as my research into this giant of the Evangelical Revival, and indeed of the Church of England, progressed, I became aware not only of the seminal significance of Venn's ministry, but also of a depth of spirituality in him, not least of devotion to the sacraments, with which Anglicans of catholic disposition could readily identify, held with a seriousness and sincerity which would put most of them to shame.

One cause of the comparative distinterest in Venn may be that his memory has not been well served by his best known and most substantial surviving work, *The Complete Duty of Man* (1763). This was consciously intended to supplant the anonymous seventeenth century work, *The Whole Duty of Man*, an amazingly influential spiritual *vademecum*,⁴ but to the evangelical mind altogether too latitudinarian in its theological base. *The*

- 1 M. M. Hennell, *Patterns of Development in Anglican Evangelicalism*, *Anvil*, 5.1, 1988, p 72.
- 2 Eds, Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold SJ, SPCK, 1986, p 459.
- 3 J. C. Ryle, chapter on Venn in *Christian Leaders of the Last Century* (1885), reissued as *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1978).
- 4 On *The Whole Duty of Man*, see C. J. Stranks, *Anglican Devotion* (1961), ch. 5.

Complete Duty exemplifies that 'soundness, completeness and balance' which was Venn's abiding bequest to the evangelical party.¹ But all agree that the work does not portray Venn at his best. It is dull and prosaic, lacking literary grace and charm.² Venn blamed the demands made by Huddersfield for his delay in completing it,³ but the reason may well lie in its very heaviness, for Venn himself entertained doubts about the wisdom of publishing it.⁴ His own son found it devoid of 'any trace of the attractive characteristics which we know to have been so prominent in his personal discourse',⁵ while Ryle was disappointed by a work 'neither Saxon, nor sparkling, nor racy, nor anecdotal, nor pictorial'.⁶

Venn does much better justice to himself in some of his shorter and less well known works. In *A Free and Full Examination of the Rev. Dr. Priestley's Free Address on the Lord's Supper, with some Strictures on the Treatise Itself* (1769), he refused to follow the famous West Yorkshire radical Unitarian scientist in condemning the Reformers for their retention of much of catholic Christianity: it was essential to recognize 'the truth with which the errors were intermixed in popery', for eradication of error did not require men 'to cashier the whole system of divinity'.⁷

Venn wrote often of family prayer; his most substantial letter on the subject is that to John Brasier Esq.⁸ Bound with this is his *Letter to Jonathan Scott Esq*⁹, whose sixteen pages yield invaluable insights into Venn's spirituality. We must conquer our spiritual enemies by secret prayer, study of the Bible, public worship, hearing preachers, Christian society and 'much retirement'.¹⁰ A modern catholic will readily recognize 'common life' in 'Christian society', and 'retreat' in 'much retirement':

Unless we love (and contrive as we are able) to be much alone, how can we often and solemnly call to remembrance the evil of our past life, to loath ourselves?—how feel compassion for the sallies of our innate depravity? How, with the blessed Mary, ponder in our hearts the saying of our Lord? How enter deeply into his agony and death, the price of our peace and eternal life?¹¹

Venn does not mention here the sacrament, but its celebration was of great moment to him. His conduct of public worship was impressive for

1 J. D. Walsh, *The Yorkshire Evangelicals in the Eighteenth Century: with Especial Reference to Methodism*, Cambridge Ph D thesis (1956), pp 185-6.

2 L E. Elliott-Binns, *The Early Evangelicals* (1953), pp 402-3.

3 Henry Venn (the younger), *The Life and a Selection of the Letters of the Rev. Henry Venn, MA*, 2nd ed (1835), pp 34, 82.

4 Elliott-Binns, op. cit., p 271.

5 Ibid., pp 402-3.

6 Ryle, op. cit., p 290.

7 *A Free and Full Examination*, pp 4-7.

8 Religious Tract Society, 482.

9 Written 6 Nov 1765, published 1788.

10 *Letter to Jonathan Scott Esq*, p 4.

11 Ibid., p 13.

its reverence, devotion and solemnity.¹ He had a deep love of Anglican liturgy,² and would have agreed with Rowland Hill, whose chapel, which used Anglican liturgy, was the only one in which Venn would consent to minister after 1780, that 'the want of a vivid perception of the excellence of the liturgy' was 'evidence of a lack of spirituality'.³ Right observance of the Sabbath was equally important to him.⁴

The highpoint in Sunday worship was however the celebration of the sacrament. That on 4 February 1762 was 'solemn and affecting'. Venn fixed his people's attention on Lamentations 1:12 ('Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?') and trusted that many 'sat down under his shadow with great delight, and His fruit was sweet'. As ever, preparation was paramount; Venn found increasingly that the benefit gained from prayers, sacraments and means of grace bore an exact proportion to the care he took to implore the operation of the Holy Spirit in them.⁵

While Venn resolutely preached faith alone, his detractors were wide of the mark in accusing him of ignoring the importance of good works, since the people he touched lived manifestly holy lives, which required the same critics to allege inconsistently that he carried holiness to unnecessary lengths.⁶ Venn lived on earth as a citizen of heaven; joy at the prospect of his impending death revived him sufficiently to delay his departure for a fortnight.⁷

Henry Venn's firm, quiet evangelical faith and spirituality was the vital bridge between the local and highly idiosyncratic pioneering ministry of Grimshaw, and the second generation evangelicalism carried by Venn's natural son, John, and spiritual son, Simeon, to the nation and the world. He merits greater attention from evangelical historians. May a catholic goad them into giving him his due?

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1 Walsh, pp 198n, 199n; Manuscript of Henry Venn, 1824.

2 *Life and Letters*, pp 51, 174-5.

3 E. Sidney, *Life of Rowland Hill*, p 86; Walsh, p 200.

4 *Life and Letters*, p 50; *Memoirs of Rev. J. Cockin* (Idle, 1829), pp 52, 55-6; Henry Venn, *An Earnest and Pressing Call to keep Holy the Lord's Day* (Leeds, 1760).

5 *Life and Letters*, p 90.

6 *Ibid.*, p 27.

7 John Venn, *Annals of a Clerical Family* (1904), p 104.