Writing and Religion in England, 1558–1689
Studies in Community-Making and Cultural Memory

In Memoriam

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Chapter 4
Religion as Contention and Community-making in *The Faerie Queene*, Book I
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The starting-point for this chapter will be three emblematic figures in canto x of ‘The Legend of Holiness by in Book I of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, but also to be found as part of an eighteenth-century altarpiece in Hammarö Church (see Plate 1), a mediaeval church several times rebuilt and enlarged, situated just south of Karlstad, Sweden. The images function as cultural memories by depicting the Christian graces, that is, female embodiments of the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, by Spenser named Fidelia, Speranza and Charissa (daughters of heavenly Caelia). As such, they are commonplace, but I want to draw attention to their function in the Church and in Spenser’s poem, as an introduction to certain structural anomalies of the poem, and in particular to what appears to be two conflicting storylines in Book I. From this investigation I will finally draw some conclusions on the poem’s potential for religious contention and community-making.

The relation between the two forms of representation, pictorial and textual, will be central to my investigation. Not only do the Hammarö statues relate to a scriptural text and call out for a linguistic interpretation, but Spenser is famous for his use of emblematic imagery in *The Faerie Queene*. John Manning points out that strictly speaking “there are no emblems in Spenser”,¹ yet, as Mason Tung elaborates, the poet is, through language, constantly “inventing images in an “emblematic” mode . . .[.] the result of [his] “imitating” in the “tenor” and the “vehicle” of his images the metaphorical relation between the motto and the picture of an emblem”.² It is this

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¹ A.C. Hamilton et al. (eds), *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto, 1997), p. 247. Both the 1590 and 1596 editions of the poem include a single woodcut without accompanying text, depicting St George and the dragon (reproduced on p. 156 in the Longman edition of *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton et al. (Harlow, 2001)). The closest we get to an actual emblem is the 1596 title page, which includes a depiction of Hope, the second of the three theological virtues. Carrying the motto ‘ANCHORA SPER’, it shows an anchor held by a hand reaching down from a cloud (reproduced on p. 27 in the Longman edition).

metaphorical relation between the textual and pictorial in canto x, and elsewhere in Book I, that interests me.

But first a look at the actual buildings at Hammarö and in canto x of the Legend of Holinesse.3 Hammarö Church was built during the early fourteenth century as a wooden stave church on the site of an even earlier wooden church, and still has fifteenth-century wall paintings preserved in the sacristy. The church was refit and expanded to its present size in 1748; it was partially restored in the 1930s when it also received its present wooden shingle exterior, and it has also been equipped with conveniences such as heating and electricity. A present-day visitor therefore enters a diachronic structure that may be analysed layer by historical layer, from the thirteenth-century soapstone font (possibly a leftover from the previous church), the fourteenth-century original structure (consisting of the present-day choir and sacristy), the fifteenth-century paintings and the 1748 altarpiece, to the twentieth-century lighting and heating devices. The Swedish sixteenth-century Reformation is a significant turning-point in this chronology, but even if the church consists of ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ layers, nowadays this is not a cause for contention: the church is perceived synchronically as a building for liturgical use in which the layers intersect, representing the ecumenical merging of traditions.

The House of Holinesse, the centrepiece of canto x and indeed of the whole Legend, is also a physical structure which in contrast to the ‘rich array and costly arras’ of the House of Pride (FQ, I. iv. 6), is characterized as ‘plain’ (FQ, I. x. 6), glossed by A.C. Hamilton in the Longman edition of the poem as ‘a glancing allusion to the uncluttered Protestant church’. Yet while its walls may be plain and uncluttered, the House of Holinesse is populated by a rich tapestry of resident emblematic figures more often found in the stonemasonry or pictorial art of a Catholic cathedral: not only are the three theological virtues there, but also characters such as Amendment, Penance, Remorse, Repentance, as well as the ‘seven Bead-men’ (FQ, I. x. 36) embodying the corporal works of mercy.4 Like the church at Hammarö, the House therefore consists of confessionally significant characteristics that can be interpreted by its visitors either as a mixture of conflicting values or as a structure created for practical use that integrates features from various confessional traditions. Indeed, the House of Holinesse can in turn function as an emblem for The Faerie Queene as a whole: while the text of the poem, unlike the Hammarö Church, has remained relatively fixed across the centuries, its reception has not (something to which we shall return). One reason for the variety of responses from readers and critics, not least in confessional terms, is that the poem in itself is unusually stratified, exhibiting a wealth of

cultural layers, including as it does aspects of classical philosophy and myth as well as contemporary religion and politics, often simultaneously, if precariously, coexisting within its allegorical universe.

The three Christian graces (being daughters of Caelia, the matron of the House of Holinesse, as well as being prominently displayed at the very top of the Hammarö altarpiece) are important features of both buildings, and in both they can be interpreted as symbols of the merging of religious traditions. The Hammarö altarpiece was added during the 1748 expansion, so that the graces therefore stem from the church’s Lutheran rather than Catholic period. However, the iconography of the three wooden statues, while based on a verse from the New Testament (1 Corinthians 13: 13) had been developed during the Middle Ages and can be found depicted in countless medieval statues and pictures. The version in the Hammarö Church has Faith placed at the top centre, with Hope and Charity placed slightly lower, the three forming a triangle surrounding the Shekinah,6 depicted as a sun adorned with the Tetragrammaton (the Hebrew letters designating the name of God). Unlike some representations (including Spenser’s), the three graces are not distinguished by the colour scheme of their clothing, but by what they hold in their hands: Faith is holding a golden chalice in her right hand and a cross in her left; Hope is leaning on an anchor with her right hand and is holding a dove (presumably the one Noah sent out from the Ark) in her left; Charity is holding a child with her right hand, with a second child clinging to her right leg, while her left hand is holding a Sacred Heart (gold with red flames).

Spenser’s description in canto x shares important features with the Hammarö altarpiece, but also elaborates on other aspects of the iconographical tradition. The three ladies are introduced as the daughters of Caelia. Linked together, Fidelia and Speranza enter first. Fidelia “was arrayed all in lilly white, / And in her right hand bore a cup of gold” (FQ, I. x. 13). Fidelia’s golden cup connects her most clearly with the Hammarö depiction of Faith (even though Spenser adds an enthroned serpent within it),7 but a book in her left hand ‘both sign’d and sealed with blood’ is a symbol analogous to the cross depicted in the altarpiece, Christ’s sacrificial death in both cases being the object of faith.8 Spenser’s description of her ‘sunny beams… / That could have daz’d the rash beholders sight, / And round about her

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4 All quotations of the poem, given in the text by Book, canto and stanza, are from the revised Longman edition of Spenser’s The Faerie Queene (see footnote 1 above).
8 As a reference, we may compare it to the depiction of Faith on French medieval cathedrals as described by Émile Mâle: Faith ‘is seated on a bench, holding a shield on which at Paris a cross is seen, at Chartres a chalice, at Amiens a cross in a chalice. In the north porch at Chartres Faith fills the chalice with the blood of the Lamb slain on the
head did shine like heauens light” (FQ, I. x. 12) has in Hammarö been transferred to the central image of the Shekinah. Speranza is next. Again, Hope resting her right hand on a (rather dull-looking) silver anchor in the Hammarö altarpiece is repeated in her “silver anchor ... / Whereon she leaned euer” (FQ, I. x. 14). For once, Spenser is less forthcoming than the altarpiece in that we are not told what Speranza does with her left hand, though his description of her heavenly gaze - ‘And euer vp to heuen, as she did pray, / Her steadfast eyes were bent, ne swarued other way’ - is not repeated at Hammarö.

Charissa is not present at first since she is recovering from her latest childbirth, but after Redcrosse has been instructed by Fidelia and Speranza, he is ready for her:

She was a woman in her freshest age,  
Of wondrous beauty, and of bounty rare,  
With goody grace and comely personage,  
That was on earth not easie to compare;  
Full of great love, but Cupids wanton aire  
As hell she hated, chaste in worke and will;  
Her necke and breasts were euer open bare,  
That ay thereof her babes might sucke their fill;  
The rest was all in yellow robes arayed still.

A multitude of babes about her long,  
Playing their sportes, that ioyd her to behold,  
Whom still she fed, whiles they were weak and young,  
But thrust them forth still, as they waxed old:  
And on her head she wore a tyre of gold,  
Adorned with gemmes and owches wondrous fayre,  
Whose passing price vneath was to be told;  
And by her syde there sate a gentle payre  
Of turtle doves, she sitting in an Iuyory chayre.  
(FQ, I. x. 30–31)

Once again the right hand, this time holding on to a young child, connects the two representations, with a single additional child in Hammarö having to stand in for the fecundity of Charissa’s “multitude of babes”. The altarpiece is also more bashful in its depiction of Lady Charity than is Spenser with Charissa, whose ‘neck and breasts were euer open bare’ to facilitate the feeding of her children, while adding the more recent Catholic image of the Sacred Heart. 9 Spenser for his part fills in the picture with additional iconicographic references not found in the 'altar' (The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France, trans. Dora Nussey (New York, 1958), p. 113).

The Argument acts as a verbal motto for the canto’s pictorial description, summing up the narrative lessons Redcrosse has to learn: ‘he is taught repentance’ is the shorthand for all the emblematic characters he is about to encounter within the House itself, while ‘The way to heuenny blesse’ encapsulates his climb up, and vision from, the Mount of Contemplation.

Following directly upon the Argument, however, we get another kind of summary that carries quite different connotations:

Alacoque (canonized in 1920); see The Catholic Encyclopedia <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/>.


10 There is even a corresponding relationship between the whole poem, a ‘continued Allegory’, and Spenser’s Letter to Raleigh, in which the poet explains that: ‘SIR knowing how doubtfully all Allegories may be construeth, and this bookes of mine, which I have entituled the Faery Queene, being a continued Allegory, or darke conceit, I have thought good … to discover unto you the general intention and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I have fashioned … In that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention’ (Spenser, The Faerie Queene, pp. 714–16).
What man is he, that boasts of fleshly might,
And vain assurance of mortality,
Which all so soon, as it doth come to fight,
Against spiritual foes, yields by and by,
Or from the field most cowardly doth fly?
Ne let the man ascribe it to his skill,
That thorough grace hath gained victory.
If any strength we have, it is to ill,
But all the good is God's, both power and eke will.

(FO, I. x. 1)

This time we are getting a backward glance through Book I that sums up Redcrosse's moral and spiritual shortcomings so far, thereby stressing the need for his visit to the House of Holiness. What is striking, however, is the change of tone and content. Where Redcrosse in the Argument is described as Una's 'faithful knight', here he is hinted as on par with any man who 'yields' and 'cowardly doth fly': indeed the inclusive 'we' of line 8 joins him to the rest of mankind, whose only strength 'is to ill'. While the stanza comments on Redcrosse's emblematic meeting with Despair in the previous canto, it is first and foremost a tissue of scriptural quotations with a Puritan bias. Four different Bible passages are alluded to directly in the stanza, creating a network of scriptural references that scholars have usefully discussed in terms of free will and predestination (see the notes in the Longman edition of the poem).

The initial stanza, as has been noted by James Schiavoni, is placed rather uncomfortably at the start of this particularly emblematic canto: 'Book I Canto X of The Faerie Queene begins with what many critics take to be the most theologically Protestant, not to say Calvinistic, stanza of the entire poem, yet the canto goes on to present the most blatantly Roman Catholic imagery in Spenser's epic.'12 For Schiavoni, this becomes a starting-point for a argument that sees St Augustine as a community-making bridge between the two confessional movements. As for my own reading, while I would be the last to downplay the importance of that Father of the Church for Spenser,13 I want to open up the investigation of the canto and the book in terms of a tension between a predominantly text-based Protestant culture and a more picture-oriented Catholic one. In terms of Hammarö Church, it is the tension between the mediaeval stave church with its inner walls completely covered with scenes from the Bible and Church history, and the Lutheran 1748 expansion that places the pulpit, symbolizing the preaching of the word, at the centre of a building in which most of the wall-paintings are literally erased to the point where it resembles the 'plaine' state of Spenser's House of Holiness.14 Yet, to anticipate my conclusion, it is also the 1748 expansion that adds the altarpiece with its depiction of the three theological graces, which by reintroducing Catholic pictorial art into the now-Protestant building creates a bridge between the two communities, just as Spenser populates his plain House with living representations of the same graces.

It is therefore not only a question of the theological content of the first stanza as against the rest of the canto, but of the cultural difference between direct scriptural quotation and pictorial story-telling. As James Knapp reminds us, 'sixteenth-century England witnessed the transition (however slow, complicated and incomplete) from an image-laden mediæval culture to a Protestant culture of the Word'.15 Patrick Collinson had earlier argued that from the 1580s (when the Legend of Holiness was written), English Protestants 'began to direct the eye, that potentially idolatrous eye, inward' to the point where

... there are no pictures in the ordinary and literal sense, only what might be called word pictures ... By this time England had moved from a cultural phase which may be described as iconoclastic, characterised by the attack on unacceptable images but consistent with the enjoyment of good images, to an episode lasting some few decades around 1600 which Karl-Josef Höltgen has called iconophobic, rejecting all material images.16

For Knapp, Spenser functions as a litmus test: the cultural change can be seen in the poet's movement from his early woodcut-illustrated The Shepheardes

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13 See Åke Bergvall, Augustinian Perspectives in the Renaissance (Uppsala, 2001).


Calender to The Faerie Queene, in which all illustrations have been internalized, in Collinson’s phrase, into ‘word pictures’. As Knapp is fully aware, however, the tension between the two cultures is also seen within The Faerie Queene itself, with its ‘density of visual imagery [being] a component of a residual visuality that continued to influence Spenser’s production despite his immersion in the dominant iconic culture of the Reformation’. For the remainder of this chapter, I shall try to disentangle these iconophobic and iconophilic layers in the Legend of Holiness.

The distinction between the verbal and the pictorial is felt throughout the Legend, creating in the process two contrasting storylines, one of which I will provisionally term ‘Catholic’ and one ‘Protestant’, lines that finally merge in canto x before the book concludes with the climactic dragon-fight. Whereas Sir Guyon, hero of the second book of The Faerie Queene, sets out on a single quest that is fairly linear by comparison, Redcrosse plays dual roles: one in which he is the saviour and one in which he is saved. The first of these storylines is basically the retelling of the legend of St George: Redcrosse as the hero who rescues Una and her parents from the dragon. His heroic role is emblematically presented already in the first stanza of canto i through the visual description of his ‘mighty armes’:

A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
Ycladd in mightie armes and siluer shieldes
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remain,
The cruel marks of many a bloody fielde.

As additional pictorial detail is added in the following stanzas, such as the ‘louely Ladie’ with her ‘lowly Asse’ and ‘milkewhite lambe’ (the latter never to show up again), the reader is invited on the basis of these visual representations to register a cultural commonplace by identifying the knight with St George. By calling this storyline ‘Catholic’, I want to draw attention not only to the pictorial description of the mediaeval saint’s legend that forms its basis, but to a Catholic understanding of ‘holiness’ which posits that at least some Christians can in fact lead such a blameless and holy life that they are able to imitate Christ, in the Legend of Holiness to the point of re-enacting the crucifixion and resurrection in its final two cantos.

However, it is significant that the knight is not given the name ‘St George’ until after he has been restored in the House of Holiness, when Contemplation foretells that ‘thou Saint George shalt called bee’ (FQ, I. xi. 61; emphasis in the original). This verbal reticence establishes a pattern for the rest of the book: first we get a pictorial representation of a character, and only later (sometimes much later) do we get the verbal identification. Often these initial emblematic representations turn out to be false: the characters are rather the opposite of what they appear to be. This perceptual uncertainty between the emblematic depiction and the ‘motto’, in this case the name, influences our view of the knight. As almost all commentators note, the unnamed young man’s emblematic identification is subverted already by the second half of stanza 1, initiating what I have termed a Protestant counter-narrative:

Yet armes till that time did he never wield:
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,
As much disdaining to the curbe to yield:
Full jolly knight he seemed, and faire did sitt,
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt.

(FQ, I. i. 1)

The knight is revealed to be as green as the plain he pricks, never having been in battle and just barely able to master a horse that stands in for his own unruly passions. His ‘mighty armes’ hang loose about him, while the ‘old dints of deepe wounds’ seen on his shield are marks left by earlier users. As I have argued elsewhere, at this point ‘Redcrosse’ is an ‘empty signifier’, and by the time he loses his armour and in canto ix arrives in Despaire’s ‘hollow cawse’ even his status as Christian is questioned.

The most damning word in the stanza is the inconspicuous ‘seem’d’, since not only does it suggest a doubt as to whether the young man is a ‘Full jolly knight’ but the same word will throughout the book be connected to its truly deceitful and deceiving characters: it is Archimago and Duesse who usually ‘seem’ to be what they are not, being wolves in sheep’s clothing. Their mock attire fools even Una, the embodiment of Truth, who is deceived by Archimago disguised as Redcrosse

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17 The one exception being a single woodcut of St George and the dragon (see note 1 above).
20 The reader finds out about his name as early as The Faerie Queene, I. ii. 11–12, although he is there introduced as his evil double, Archimago, dressed up to look like him: ‘Saint George himselfe ye would have deemed him [that is, Archimago] to be.’ As for Redcrosse, it is the aberration from the name that is stressed: ‘The true Saint George was wandering far away, / Still flying from his thoughts and golde fear’; ‘Will was his guide, and griefe led him astray.’
21 Bergvall, Augustinian Perspectives, p. 160.
22 By the unreliable Despaire, it is true, and his accusation is immediately gainsaid by Una, who has faith in God’s mercy, yet her rebuttal of Despaire is not based on the knight’s presumed innocence. To claim—as in the note to The Faerie Queene, I. xii. 16—that ‘only Despaire claims that the knight suffers by his own fault’ (A.C. Hamilton in the Longman edition) is to let him off the hook a little too easily.
in *FQ*, I. iii. 26, not to speak of Redcrosse being completely taken in by Duessa’s visual fraud:

What man so wise, what earthly wit so ware,
As to decry the crafty cunning of were,
By which decept doth maske in visour faire,
And cast her coulsours did deepes in graine,
To seeme like truth, whose shape she well can faine,
And fitting gestures to her purpose frame,
The guilelesse man with guile to entertaine?
Great maistresse of her art was that false Dame,
The false Duessa, cloked with Fidessas name.  

(*FQ*, I. vii. 1)

I am not arguing that Redcrosse is evil like Archimago or Duessa, but that right from the start there is a competing story in progress, a Protestant, even Puritan, iconoclastic narrative that questions appearances and strips away the deceit of outward show, just like Una ‘strips Duessa quight’ (*FQ*, I. viii. Argument). According to this reading, a knight dressed up in borrowed armour, even when he is the titular hero of *The Legend of the Knight of the Red Crosse, OR Of Holiness* (subtitle to Book I), is as likely as not to flee the field and yield to his foes since ‘any strength we have, it is to ill’ (*FQ*, I. x. 1).

On the narrative level, the two storyline create tensions that have puzzled critics. If Redcrosse is supposed to be a Christian from the start, even a soldier of Christ, why does he need to learn faith, hope and charity in the House of Holiness? A related concern has been the ‘well of life’ and ‘tree of life’ that rejuvenates him during his dragon-fight (*FQ*, I. xi. 29 and 46), two allegorical symbols that have traditionally been seen as ‘baptism and communion’.23 Rosemund Tuve, however, challenges this ‘Calvinistic’ interpretation of Redcrosse in her study of the pictorial elements in Spenser: ‘Why does he need to be baptized in a “well of life” that “guilt of sinfull crimes cleane wash away”? [FQ, I. xi. 29–30]’? From her ‘Catholic’ perspective she argues against ‘the forced and awkward equation with the two sacraments that were accepted by Protestants, baptism and communion – an interpretation surely partly motivated by an interest in proving Spenser to be Calvinistic in temper’.24 Agreeing with Tuve, Thomas P. Roche, editor of the Yale edition of *The Faerie Queene*, adds: ‘Yet if they [the tree and well] are read here strictly only as the sacraments, the narrative is made to say that Redcrosse, who wears the armour of faith even before the poem begins, is baptised only at this point.’25 Unwittingly, Roche here pinpoints the dilemma between a visual presentation of Redcrosse wearing ‘the armour of faith’ and a ‘narrative’ that seems to say something else.

While the Arguments at the head of each canto, as we saw earlier for canto x, retain the initial emblematic picture by referring to the knight as ‘The Patron of true Holiness’ (canto i), ‘Redcrosse Knight’ (canto vii, and vii and ix), or, most incongruously, ‘the faithfull knight’ (canto iv and v, in which he is jousting for Duessa within the House of Pride), the actual poem tells a very different story. Right from their meeting with Archimago,26 creator of false images and instigator of Redcrosse’s split vision, Una and the knight are ‘diuided into double parts’ (*FQ*, I. ii. 9). After he joins up with Una’s false double Duessa (named ‘Fidessa’), he suffers a steady moral and spiritual decline as he battles over Duessa’s love with Sans foy and Sans joy (‘faithles’ and ‘joyles’), and joins company with the seven deadly sins in the House of Pride. Only in the Argument to canto viii – the very nadir of the knight’s downward journey, when as a result of fornication with Duessa he loses his emblematic armour and is defeated and imprisoned by Orgoglio (‘Pride’) – do we get a different perspective:

Faire virgin to redeeme her deare  
Brings Arturhe to the fight;
Who slayes the Gyaunt, wounds the beast,
And strips Duessa quight.

Here it is Una who redeems Redcrosse, not the other way around; this in fact is the alternative story in much of Book I. When not separated from her, the knight is depending on the ‘faire virgin’ to save him (often from himself). In canto i, already she rescues him from ‘Eouors endlesse treine’ by shouting the scriptural admonition ‘Add faith vnto your force’ (*FQ*, I. i. 18–19), while even after she has brought Arthur to the rescue in canto viii she has to save Redcrosse again in canto ix, this time from Despair. Only after entrusting him to the care of Caelia and her three daughters can she revert to her traditional role of helpless virgin as she watches him kill the dragon ‘safe from daunger far descreye’ (*FQ*, I. xi. 5).

These alternative storylines open the poem up to contrastive readings. Returning to a point I made earlier, studying the reception of *The Faerie Queene* is not unlike entering the church at Hammarö: one notices a plethora of confessional markers. Even limiting oneself to a sampling from the past century, the poem or its author has been read.

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at one time or another been designated Protestant, Calvinist, Puritan, Calvinist but not Puritan, not Calvinist, Reformed, low church and not Puritan, conservative Anglican, unquestionably anti-Roman Catholic, Erasmian, mediaeval and/or Catholic, Augustinian, or Patristic/Greek Orthodox. Only rarely has the poem been described as containing ‘simple Christian dogma, as it was then understood by Catholic and Protestant alike’. No other English literary work has elicited a more varied spectrum of often contentious opinions regarding its religious affiliation. Scholars studying the poem’s political allegory have had reason to highlight the conflicts between Protestant England and Catholic Spain, while for others, such as D. Douglas Waters, a whole academic career has been made from investigating its more general anti-Catholic aspects. Readings of the poem as a virtual battleground are most forcefully expressed in articles written

32 Darryl J. Gless, Interpretation and Theology in Spenser (Cambridge, 1994), p. 46.
34 Whitaker, ‘The Theological Structure of The Faerie Queene’, Book I.
38 Schiavoni, ‘Predestination and Free Will’, p. 178.
39 Harold L. Weatherby, Mirrors of Celestial Grace: Patristic Theology in Spenser’s Allegory (Toronto, 1994).
40 Ellrodt, Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser, p. 119; Carol V. Kaske in her recent Spenser and Biblical Poetics (Ithaca, NY, 1999) settles for a more open-ended stance: ‘I do not prejude the case by calling Spenser’s poetics “Protestant”; Spenser’s precise doctrinal allegiance, whether “Anglican” (whatever that means in the sixteenth century), Reformed, or patristic, is still being debated and may be eclectic, depending on the passage or the issue’ (pp. 4–5).

during the Second World War: Jefferson B. Fletcher traces Spenser’s ‘attacks on the Roman ecclesiastical system’, while Paul N. Siegel, signing his article from ‘Camp Ellis’, sees Redcrosse as being in ‘the wars’ as ‘the true personification of the Church Militant’. He sums up the poem: ‘All of life is presented as an endless battle in The Faerie Queene’. This is not the time or place to sort out this intricate web of opinions, even if I had the inclination or ability to do so. I rather want to connect it to the main thread of this paper. There is a marked interest in the visual and emblematic aspects of Spenser’s poem in those studies that have a ‘Catholic’ or ‘mediaeval’ slant, Rosemond Tuve’s Allegorical Imagery in particular, while the closer one gets to the Puritan end of the spectrum, the greater the preoccupation with text-based dogmas, not seldom anchored in a discussion of the ‘Calvinistic’ first stanza of canto x. I agree with Richard Mallette that the Legend of Holinesse ‘is not arguing or even allegorizing a theological position but manipulates features of various discourses’, but I want to broaden the spectrum of discourses from Mallette’s preoccupation with ‘Protestant arte praedica’, to also include discourses inspired by residual Catholic visual culture, especially the partially defaced cultural memories still seen in the artwork both within and without English churches.

While some of the critical contention is caused by more or less tinted scholarly speculations, it is encouraged by the fissures of the text itself. However, there are distinctions to be made related to the different ontological status of canto x as compared to the rest of the book. Only in canto x do we find a sustained and successful attempt at community-making. The first nine cantos, as well as the dragon-fight at the end, are played out in a fallen world that displays all the tensions and contentions of which humanity is capable, not least within the spheres of religion and politics, a world in which nothing is quite what it seems and where no single vision exists. The unity of Una is almost immediately challenged by the duplicity of Duesse, and virtually all the ‘good’ characters have their false counterparts: Redcrosse/Archimago, Una/Duesse, Fidelia/Fidessa, Caelia/Abeessa, Humility/Malven, and so on. It is also a world where everyone, even the savours, need saving. That Redcrosse is rescued at different times by both Una and Arthur we have already seen, but the same is true for Una and even for Arthur himself. Una of course is saved from the dragon in canto xii, but before she can save Redcrosse from Despaire in canto ix, she must herself be delivered by Arthur’s ‘good reason, and well guided speech’ from the grief that ‘breeds [her own] despaire’ (FQ, I. vii. 41–2). Arthur for his part is propitiously saved from Orgoglio’s ‘hidesus club’ by the bright light of a shield that, significantly, ‘did
O God, of grace, of love, of thee will
This water be of mine, and thou be peace.
And pour this common baptism on me
She and thine, the cross, the cross, the cross,
'Neath this poor table, bread and wine be meet.
And give me, for thy name's sake, peace, grace, and rest.

And in thine armour, with thee vault, will
Thou make me strong, going hence to fight; for me to be true,
O God, of grace, of love, of thee will
This water be of mine, and thou be peace.
And pour this common baptism on me
She and thine, the cross, the cross, the cross,
'Neath this poor table, bread and wine be meet.
And give me, for thy name's sake, peace, grace, and rest.
That wonder was to heare her goodly speech:  
For she was hable, with her wordes to kill,  
And rayse againe to life the hart, that she did thrill.  

(FQ, I. x. 19)

Redcrosse is reduced to the anguish of a wounded conscience, not unlike the suicidal thoughts caused by Despaire's rhetoric, but Speranza, with assistance from her mother Caelia, brings in the 'Lanct' Patience to undo Despaire's work, applying Catholic remedies expressed in striking visual detail:

In ashes and sackcloth he did array  
His dainty corse, proud humors to abate,  
And dieted with fasting every day,  
The swelling of his wounds to mitigate,  
And made him pray both early and eke late:  
And ever as superfluous flesh did rot  
Amendment readie still at hand did way,  
To pluck it out with pincers fyrte whot,  
That soone in him was lefte no one corrupted iott.

And bitter Penance with an yron whip,  
Was wont him once to displese every day:  
That sharpe Remorse his hart did prickt and nip,  
That drops of blood thence as a well did play;  
And sad Repentance used to embay,  
His blamefull body in salt water sore,  
The filthy blottes of sin to wash away.  
So in short space they did to health restore  
The man that would not liue, but erst lay at deaths dore.  

(FQ, I. x. 26–7)

With a 'cured conscience' (FQ, I. x. 29), Redcrosse is now ready for Charissa's instruction 'in every good behoves, / Of loue, and righteousness, and well to donne' (FQ, I. x. 33), followed by a visit to the 'holy Hospital' where her seven beasmen show him how to practice the 'godly worke of Almes and charitee'. The end result is startling, considering where he comes from:

Shortly therein so perfect he became,  
That from the first vnto the last degree,  
His mortal life he learned had to frame  
In holy rightousenesse, without rebuke or blame.  

(FQ, I. x. 36–45)

Only now, when the three graces have restored him can Redcrosse without hypocrisy don his armour and assume the name of St George, and even get a brief glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem from the Mount of Contemplation.

Yet we must not draw the wrong conclusions from this stanza. It is only within the context of the House of Holinesse that Redcrosse is 'without rebuke or blame'. The poem makes it very clear that as soon as he makes use of his armour, returning 'Backe to the world, whose joyes so fruitlesse are', he will need to 'wash [his] hands from guilt of bloody field: / For blood can nought but sin, and wars but sorrows yield' (FQ, I. x. 60 and 63). Canto x functions as the earthly manifestation of the City of God (with its heavenly counterpart seen from the Mount), but even as Redcrosse imitates Christ in the dragon-fight, he is back in the imperfect world of the first nine cantos, a world where Archimago is still trying his bag of tricks (FQ, I. xii. 24–37), and where Spanish Catholics fight English Protestants.48 Within that House and that canto, however, a community-making vision beyond current religious, political and epistemological strife is presented, a space in which there is no longer Catholic against Protestant, English against Spanish, and where pictures and words are no longer in conflict or used for falsehood. As the Hammaro altarpiece combines a Protestant emphasis on a New Testament text with a Catholic visual representation that includes an image of Charity holding a Sacred Heart, so Spenser, in the three graces, reaches beyond contemporary contentions to a vision of a shared community. And as the central image of the Hammaro altarpiece combines Hebrew letters with a picture of the sun to capture the unspeakable mystery of the Godhead, so Spenser throughout The Faerie Queene uses an emblematic method to capture truths that need the combined efforts of picture and language in order to be expressed.

48 I am referring to the celebrated simile comparing the dragon's 'blazing eyes' in The Faerie Queene, I. xi. 14 to the beacons lit at the approach of the Spanish Armada of 1588, in fresh memory at the time of writing.
49 Based on the same New Testament text that inspired Spenser's House of Holiness, King Henry VIII had in his last public speech exhorted the divided English people to put aside their religious differences: 'Charity is gentle, charity is not envious, charity is not proud .... What love and charity is amongst you when the one calleth the other heretic and "Anabaptist", and he calleth him again "papist", "hypocrite", and "Pharisee"?'(as quoted in Shagan, Popular Politics and the English Reformation, p. 232), a sentiment later echoed in the Anglican 'Homily Against Strife and Contention', also known as 'A Sermon Against Contention and Brawling'.

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