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When 'Perverts' were Religious: The Protestant Sexualisation of Asceticism in Nineteenth-Century Britain, India and Ireland

Dr Dominic Janes

Dept. of History of Art, Birkbeck College, 43 Gordon Sq., London WC1H 0PD, UK
d.janes@bbk.ac.uk. 07870 157187.

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Abstract

Anti-Catholic polemics from the mid-nineteenth century made frequent comparison between religious practices in Britain, Ireland and India. The supposed atrocities taking place at locations such as Lough Dearg in County Donegal and at 'Juggernaut' (Jagganath) at Puri were denounced in terms which hinted strongly at a striking combination of extreme asceticism and perverse sexual enjoyment. In the same period the word 'perversion', which had hitherto referred to apostasy, started to develop connotations of sexual deviance. Protestant sexualised readings of Catholic and Hindu asceticism appear to have been an important site for the development of conceptions of deviant sexuality in general and masochism in particular.

Keywords

Asceticism, masochism, religion, sexuality

The word 'pervert' gained its contemporary association with sexuality in the mid-nineteenth century. The primary meaning of this term before that time was, in the words of the Oxford English Dictionary, 'a person who has forsaken a doctrine or system regarded as true for one thought false', in other words, an apostate. The first use in this sense cited by the dictionary's editors dates to 1501. By contrast the first citation of the use of the word to refer to 'a person whose sexual behaviour or inclinations are regarded as abnormal and unacceptable' is from 1856.¹ At this time the word was most commonly employed by critical observers to describe those Protestants who had converted to Roman Catholicism. Such perverts were widely discussed at the time because Britain had just gone through a major wave of anti-Catholic agitation centred on the 'Papal Aggression' of 1850. This was the phrase used by Protestant opponents to describe the re-establishment through Papal fiat of the Roman Catholic Episcopal hierarchy in a country where it had been suppressed since the Reformation.² It was the very celibacy of the Roman Catholic priesthood that led Protestants to suspect them of sexual impropriety. It was feared that those who rejected the 'natural' sexual outlet offered by marriage would find their gratification in alternative ways. Those who converted and became Roman Catholic priests could, therefore, be projected as having acted for perverse sexual reasons. Similar suspicion fell upon those who wished to develop celibate lives outside the Church of Rome. Thus, the persons and bodies of those participating in the early Victorian revival of Anglican monasticism were also favorable sites for the development of sexualised conceptions of perversion because their ascetic practices were read, not as spiritual heroism, but as the result of tastes that were perverted in fascinatingly dubious ways.³

The opponents of the Victorian revival of Catholicism in both its Roman and Anglican forms were frequently inspired by traditions rooted in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century which gave birth to Methodism. Evangelicals tended to have a particular dislike for what they saw as the liturgical obsessions of Catholicism, which appeared to many to border upon idolatry. However, it is important to emphasise that evangelical spirituality was not simply a matter of dematerialised meditation on Scripture. The example of Christ's physical and mental suffering and death, through which He was understood to have atoned for our sins, meant that bodily privation and suffering was an issue of central importance during the period from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries that Body Hilton has referred to as the 'Age of Atonement'.⁴ It is notable, in this context, that the holders of such beliefs had the habit of suspecting Catholic ascetic self-denial as being a sensual activity connected with the experience of perverse pleasure.⁵

Campaigning against Catholicism was also hard-wired into the process of the evangelical revival since this movement was directly concerned with spreading its version of Christian truth at home and abroad. The Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts had been founded in 1701, but it was only later in the century that missionary activity rose spectacularly in scale with the founding of a series of organisations such as the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (1786), the Baptist Missionary Society (1792), the London Missionary Society (1795) and the Anglican Church Missionary Society (1799). These organisations were not simply involved with bringing the Gospel to the Heathen, but with competing in the process with Roman Catholic missions. The elaboration of the supposed horrors of life in pagan and Catholic lands played a crucial role in fund-raising activities back in Britain. The resulting campaigns against slavery, and against the alleged abuse of women had a powerful effect such that they significantly modified the previously 'prurient... interest in native sexuality'.⁶ The imperial encounter came to be subject to close

scrutiny which critiqued both the role of British officials and local religious leaders as being implicated in regimes of immoral desire.⁷ However, it is important to stress that the imputation of misconduct in the Empire, as in the case of the Catholic revival in Britain, was developed through the sexual imaginations of Protestant outsiders. Similar, and in some cases identical, polemical approaches were taken towards, for instance, the (to us) strikingly different religious expressions of Roman Catholic and Hindu asceticism. This may suggest that an element of what was taking place was the Protestant sexualisation of rival forms of religious expression. In this article, I will go on to explore the issue of whether the denunciation of the imputed embrace of suffering on the part of Irish and Indians alike acted to deflect attention from the sexualised aspects of Protestant Imperialism. Such an analysis can provide the basis for approaching a wider project aimed at exploring the degree to which Protestant anti-asceticism functioned as a form of cultural imperialism, the aim of which was the creation of a supposed dichotomy between the perverse embrace of bodily humiliation as a form of pleasure on the one hand and the dutiful acceptance of godly and imperial burdens on the other. I will begin by comparing Protestant readings of religious festivals at Lough Derg in Ireland and Jagannath in India, before exploring the relationship of such descriptions to contemporary understandings of sexuality and religious otherness.

Lough Derg (also spelt 'Derg') in Donegal in north-west Ireland contains an island which, legend has it, was the site of penitential trials undergone by St. Patrick. Regular pilgrimages have been taking place since the Middle Ages. These centre on the remains of the original monastery on the site. John Healy, a 'recent pilgrim' in 1878 and a strong defender of the shrine noted that the 'penitential austerities were in ancient times exceedingly rigorous. The station lasted for a period varying from nine to fifteen days [it was now down to three]...' Each day during the 'station' the kneeling pilgrim made the circuit of the church seven times, of the large 'penitential bed' six times, and of the smaller ones three times each. Nutrition was limited to bread and water and substantial periods of each night were given up to communal prayer.⁸ These 'penitential beds' on Station Island belong to the Celtic monastic period and are, in fact, the foundations of monastic cells consisting of rings of boulders.⁹

The austerities of prayer and penitence on the isle were soundly denounced by many opponents, perhaps the most influential of whom was the Irish novelist and convert to the (Protestant) Church of Ireland, William Carleton. Having visited several years previously, he wrote up his experiences in a violently polemical manner for the evangelical Caesar Otway, who published them as 'A pilgrimage to Patrick's purgatory', in *The Christian Examiner and Church of Ireland Gazette* for 1828. Carleton's experience at Derg is presented as horrific. He talked, for instance, of the torment of the 'pavement of stone spikes [of which the paths were made], every one of them making its way along my nerves and muscles to my unfortunate brain. I was absolutely stupid and dizzy with the pain'.¹⁰ This bizarre suffering, however, was quite useless, since the Catholic faithful believed that as a result of this experience they were then absolved and could go forth and sin all over again, since they supposedly held that 'a person who has neglected religion until advanced in years need not then feel very deep remorse for his dissolute life nor very serious apprehensions at the hour of death if he has performed a station to Lough Derg'.¹¹ However, the rigours of the pilgrimage were so great that many died in the process and so failed to live to take part in further debauches. Carleton concluded that:

there is not on earth with the exception of pagan rites - and it is melancholy to be compelled to compare any institution of the Christian religion with a Juggernaut - there is not on earth, I say, a regulation of a religious nature more barbarous and inhuman than this. It has destroyed thousands since its establishment, has left children

without parents and parents childless. It has made wives widows and torn from the disconsolate husband the mother of his children.¹²

The comparison with 'Juggernaut' is a reference to the Jagannath Temple at Puri on the Bay of Bengal, south of Calcutta, in India. This place was a byword for supposed pagan cruelty because of its display of erotic relief-carvings and, it was alleged, performances of human sacrifice on the part of worshippers who threw themselves, or being thrown, under the wheels of the giant chariot of the deity.¹³ In 1827 the comparison of Dearg with Juggernaut had been raised in Parliament by Sir William Plunkett, a Protestant Irish Whig who was in favour of Catholic emancipation, and who, at this date was Attorney General for Ireland. He denounced Henry Maxwell, Baron Farnham, who, allegedly, at a Reformation Society meeting

after declaring 'that Popery and Slavery were twin sisters', and introducing some other expressions equally applicable to both, went on to say, 'it is because I wish to behold my fellow-countrymen alike enjoying all the blessings of freedom, that I desired to see them liberated from a system, far more galling than that which would bow them down to worship before the idol of Juggernaut'.¹⁴

This did not cause much scandal among Protestants, but the response of Dr Doyle, Roman Catholic bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, certainly did, since he countered that it was the Church of Ireland that was the Juggernaut. Plunkett commented, in a later parliamentary debate, that 'the expression had subsequently become popular, and the use of it was adduced as a proof that Roman Catholics were guilty of applying offensive epithets to the Protestant clergy'.¹⁵

There appears to have been a concerted propaganda campaign among various Protestant elements to reassert the moral equivalence of Hindus and Catholics. The term Juggernaut was suddenly in wide use in denunciations of alleged Roman Catholic atrocities, as in the lyrics of 'For the anniversary of the battle of the Boyne', published in Robert Young's (1800-c.1870), *The Orange Minstrel, or Ulster Melodist* (1832): 'this hellish Papist band / Thus with blood deep stain'd the land / And ere their fiendish rage was satiated / To the Juggernaut of Rome / Without pity for their doom / Two hundred thousand victims immolated...' etc.¹⁶ And, in 1845, it led the Methodist, William Baggaly, to title his own 'exposé' of Lough Dearg, 'The Juggernaut of Popery'. In the course of this tract he alleged that the whole enterprise was a money-making exercise which cynically exploited superstitious ignorance in just the same way as he supposed was taking place at Jagannath.¹⁷ In other words, in both regions, the uncaring religious authorities were exploiting the peasants and living high on the commercial spoils.

By this time, repeated denunciations of the spectacles at Puri had been penned by Christian missionaries.¹⁸ What really went on at festival pilgrimages to Jagannath in the early nineteenth century is not certain. What is clear is that the allegation of stupidly or perversely chosen suffering, mortification and death levelled at Juggernaut (as at Dearg), is but one facet of the denunciation of Indian religion in general, and its ascetic aspects in particular. Holy ascetics, sadhus, were treated with scorn, as in the poem by Edward James of 1841 which described a 'living idol... The Yogi – man alone in name'.¹⁹ Emotionless, he goes to pray:

At other shrines, to Gods of stone,
With breasts as callous as his own;
And ear as deaf, and harden'd eye

As reckless of humanity.²⁰

Similar generalisations surface with wearying frequency in British treatments of Indian religious and philosophical practices. Religious polemicists were given to pontificate in the most generalising and essentialising manner on the subject of ‘the Hindoo’, even though the very word Hindu itself is nothing more than a western confection derived from the name of the River Indus.²¹

Many Protestants were influenced in their (lack of) appreciation of Hindu ascetics by their own reservations towards the revival of monasticism in Britain.²² This process was enabled by the progress of Catholic legal emancipation in Britain, but was part of a wider monastic revival in continental Europe and in America.²³ In 1835 land was purchased at Mount St. Bernard in Charnwood Forest for the Cistercians. This was the first such monastery since the Reformation.²⁴ The most widespread aspect of the monastic revival was the development of sisterhoods, many of them established within the Church of England in the wake of the pro-Catholic Tractarian movement active at Oxford University in the 1830s, such as the ‘Sisters of Mercy’ established by Lydia Sellon in Devonport in 1848.²⁵ Four years later a particularly blistering attack was mounted on Sellon’s community by a former Church of Ireland minister Michael Hobart Seymour. Disillusioned after several years spent in unsuccessful proselytization amongst the Catholic peasantry he had crossed to England only to find the forces of Rome in the ascendant in the citadel of Protestantism itself. Seymour established himself as one the most vociferous and eloquent anti-Catholic campaigners of his time and swiftly gained a reputation as man who was tireless in bringing to light (alleged) Catholic abuses of decency and morality. Speaking at the Assembly Rooms in Bath, he contended that Sellon indulged in strange degradations of her sisters such as requiring certain women ‘in all respects her equals, and in many her superiors in life, to dress in the poor dress of the poorest of poverty’s children, and [then she] prepares them to traverse the streets to sell pin-cushions and thread and needles. She imposes upon others, tender and delicate in their rearing, the discharge of loathsome and disgusting operations – the very lowest offices of a domestic establishment. She constantly sent out others to walk the streets at midnight, appearing as girls living in a low and vicious court...’²⁶ In other words, in his view, Miss Sellon was systematically subjecting the sisters in her charge to multiple forms of humiliation which extended to forcing them to appear like common prostitutes.

The implication behind this allegation was the same as that behind attacks on the supposed goings-on at Dearg and Jagannath: that tyrannical authority figures were exploiting ignorant devotees and deliberately causing them suffering and humiliation. Moreover, whilst it was suggested that financial gain was a motivating factor, there also lurked the suggestion that sexually perverse power-dynamics were also involved. The same set of associations surfaced in a series of sensational exposés of life in the cloister which presented fictional accounts of scandal in the form of factual reportage. Typical of this genre is ‘Against her will’, a story in the collection *Secrets of the Cloister* (1869). In this story we read that Eveline St. Vincent ‘belonging to a most bigoted Catholic family... felt a positive pleasure in executing the penances that her father confessor inflicted upon her, because she imagined that mortifying the flesh was acceptable in the eyes of the Deity’.²⁷ It had been determined when she was two that she should take the veil and she was, in her ignorance, ‘like a lamb going to the slaughter.’²⁸ The convent was near Chelmsford and very strictly – not to say perversely - administered; for instance ‘kissing the floor and the naked foot of the reverend mother, were penances of a humiliating and disagreeable nature’ to which the nuns were subjected.²⁹ Once, thinking that Eveline had written a letter to a person outside the convent and had hidden it about her clothing, the reverend mother ‘obliged her to take off all her clothes in the presence

of the whole community, and searched her while she was kept standing there in her tunic or chemise, and shivering in the cold.³⁰ We are told that ‘it was no uncommon thing for sisters to be afflicted with mania, hysteria and actual madness’.³¹ One such, Sister Religiosa, threw herself from a tower after having become insane. In no time Eveline turned against the faith and managed to escape. She promptly met a nice man, and they married. She was ‘received into the Protestant faith, and together they went abroad, happy as the day was long... Eveline recovered her health and her beauty increased. Instead of sinking into an early grave unmourned, unwept, in the convent, she became the happy mother of children and her large fortune enables her to dispense charity with an open hand.’³²

The published version of Seymour’s speech in Bath caused so much excitement that he was invited to talk again on the subject at the same venue. This time he addressed an audience of fifteen hundred men since the subject matter of convents was by now deemed unduly torrid for the ears of English ladies. Seymour declared that nunneries were ‘wrong, unnatural in principle and immoral in practice’.³³ He pontificated on the subject for four hours. In his first talk Seymour had gone so far as to accuse Nicholas Wiseman, Roman Catholic archbishop of Westminster, of serious moral impropriety and, by so doing, rapidly drew forth a detailed refutation of the claims. The Cardinal utterly denied Seymour’s assertions of monastic madness, greed, suffering and immorality, saying that modern nunneries are sacred and flourishing, rather than, as was supposed, ‘living graves’.³⁴ He countered the accusation that he himself was in the habit of issuing a fearful anathema against anyone helping a girl to escape a nunnery when he had the girl kneeling before him (i.e. in the pose of submission) by asserting that ‘the whole of this scene, with which Mr. S[eymour]. plays, like an Indian sorcerer does with a cobra, to the horror of the beholders... is an ingenious device of a fertile Protestant brain.’³⁵

With this comment, Wiseman, like Doyle, was attempting to partner India with Protestant rather than Catholic practice, by suggesting that it was those two religious realms that shared a similar, and sinister, obsession with power and manipulation. However, it was the spectacularised nature of religious ritual in general, and the visible ostentation of ascetic practices in particular in Catholicism and Hinduism, that rendered these two as particularly vulnerable to pairing. This was the standpoint, to take the example of another Irish Protestant, Richard Blakeney, as expressed in his *The Journal of an Oriental Voyage in His Majesty's Ship Africaine* (1841), in which he wrote, making direct comparative reference to those pre-eminent sites of error and horror, Juggernaut and Dearth, that ‘the reader must be at once struck by the similarity existing between the penances of the Heathen and those of our Roman Catholic brethren’.³⁶ Writing of the violation by a Catholic priest of a nun in Madeira, he commented, ‘how plainly does not holy Scripture, but also facts, condemn the system of celibacy and monasticism as pregnant with evil. What claim has the Church of Rome to holiness as a distinctive mark of Catholicity while she not only permits but also leads her members by unlawful restraints to the commission of that which the Lord of Hosts hath forbidden’.³⁷ In other words, by disallowing the married state for priests they were driven to illicit lust and the commission of atrocities. Monasteries and nunneries could only give birth to vice and perversion through the rapacity of priests and the weaknesses of the inmates.

What this account pointedly does not say is that this voyage, during which Blakeney served on board as a Lieutenant, ended with one of the most extensive series of courts-martial in the Royal Naval during the course of the Napoleonic Wars, as a result of which, on 1 February 1816, four men were executed for buggery, and two were whipped (sentences of 200 and 300 lashes respectively – the latter reduced to 170, on doctor’s orders due to endangering of life).³⁸ This was the most substantial sodomy scandal of its time. It was also the only instance where modern scholarship has suggested the existence not simply of

occasional transgression, but of a queer subculture on board ship that appears to have been tolerated to the extent that perpetrators hardly bothered to conceal their sex acts. In the majority of sodomy trials the evidence suggested carefully concealed instances of forced sexual relations which frequently involved the rape and abuse of boys by adult ratings.³⁹ In this case, it was the harsh, same-sex environment on board one of His Majesty's ships was precisely what facilitated the 'the commission of that which the Lord of Hosts hath forbidden', but it was seemingly unthinkable to suggest that it was the imperial project itself, as opposed to personal sinfulness, that led to scandalous immorality. Roman Catholicism and Hinduism, on the other hand, were treated by Protestants of the empire as systems which were directly responsible for the moral transgressions of their adherents.

It was this thinking that led Richard Mant, an Englishman who became a Church of Ireland bishop, to opine in his *History of the Church of Ireland, from the Reformation to the Revolution* (1840), that in the years before Protestants sought to limit the excesses at Dearg, 'vast multitudes of pilgrims promiscuously crawled, painfully exercising their bodies with penitentiary inflictions, but crowning the tortures of the day with nightly scenes of revelry, intemperance, debauchery and riot and exhibiting by their subsequent conduct scant fruits of penitence'.⁴⁰ Such thinking not only implied the sexual abuse of power by the religious authorities, but the enjoyment of their subjection by those taking part. Similarly, whilst Seymour's attack was based on well-established anti-Catholic prejudices his sexualised reading of the ascetic rigours of the Plymouth sisterhood is notable because of its congruence with the phenomena that were shortly to be labelled 'sadism' and 'masochism'.

These words made their first appearance in English in C. G. Chaddock's 1892 translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). He, in turn, derived the words from the tastes and literary works of the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) and from *Venus im Peltz* (*Venus in Furs*) of 1870 by Leopold Ritter von Sacher-Masoch (1836-95). These terms, therefore, were first coined by sexologists as part of the late-nineteenth-century medicalisation of the self.⁴¹ Krafft-Ebing, as expressed in the 1892 translation, wrote that 'by masochism I understand a peculiar perversion of the psychical *vita sexualis*, in which the individual affected, in sexual feeling and thought, is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex; of being treated by this person as by a master,—humiliated and abused'.⁴² As psychological pathologies these were thought to represent peculiar over-development of what were held to be the normal and healthy male tendency toward control and the female tendency toward submission. Sadism, thus, represented an over-exaggeration of masculine traits in men, or their appearance in women. And masochism, represented the over-exaggeration of feminine traits in women, or their appearance in men.⁴³ The language and ideas of Continental sexology were not widely employed in Britain until after World War One. This means that the sexualised evocation of suffering (or the evocation of sexualised suffering, depending on whether one believes that perversion was in the eye of the beholder) by Seymour cannot easily be talked of as being evidence of sadomasochism because that language was not then available. However, if one takes the view that sexual practices produced linguistic expression, rather than the other way about, the scandalous reputation of the Plymouth sisterhood can be seen as having played a role in the development of awareness of alternative sexualities based on unorthodox configurations of power.

The erotic potential of pain was a widely employed theme in Victorian pornography, as can be illustrated by the three volumes of bibliographic discussion of pornographic materials assembled by the London textile-trader, Henry Spencer Ashbee.⁴⁴ He comments, in his introduction to the first of these books that, 'the propensity which the English most cherish is undoubtedly Flagellation. That the rod has been used in all Roman Catholic

countries by the priests as an instrument to serve their own lubricity is of course not to be denied;... yet this vice has struck deeper root in England than elsewhere.' Moreover, he goes to claim that 'no English bawdy book is free from descriptions of flagellation'.⁴⁵ He showed strong dislike for the Roman Catholic priesthood but this did not stop him from devoting hundreds of pages to the examination of confessional manuals and to the accounts of the transgressions of priests real or imagined.⁴⁶ Manuals intended to aid priests in dealing with sexual sins confided to them in the course of confession were widely treated by the British as pornographic publications. In fact the legal regulation of pornography in England from the later nineteenth century relied on a definition of obscenity derived from a case brought under the Obscene Publications Act (1857) concerning the circulation of *The Confessional Unmasked*. This was an anti-Catholic pamphlet (first edition, 1836) that purported to undermine the institution of the confessional by reprinting sections of manuals devoted to sexual indiscretions.⁴⁷ Roman Catholic institutions which were intended to regulate and punish sexual activity were, therefore, interpreted in Britain as being the means for the elaboration of perverse forms of eroticism.

The particular convenience of scenes of eroticised suffering in other countries was that the viewer could convince themselves of their own superiority and disapproval concerning the proceedings. Yet the British Protestant enthusiasm for erotica that centred on scenes of punishment had perhaps been encouraged as a result of evangelical drives for moral reform which emphasised the sinfulness of mankind. Such viewpoints laboured hard to strip the imputation of virtue from Irish and Indian practices of austerity and, it can be argued, did so precisely because of the competition they offered to Protestant notions of virtuous self-denial. Alan Davies has commented in his article, 'Tradition and modernity in Protestant Christianity', that although 'few, if any [Protestants] would regard themselves as ascetics... Yet elements of the puritan ethic – the sense of stewardship, the preciousness of time, the organisation of talent, the abhorrence of laziness, the tempered soul, the moderate and ordered life – remain as perennial characteristics of Protestant spirituality'.⁴⁸ Catholic and Hindu practices, through their ostentatious visibility, constantly threatened to eclipse Protestant practices of personal spiritual heroism and, thus, there was a powerful incentive to re-present them as flamboyantly corrupt.

The literary scholar John Kucich has published a series of works in which he places a theory of masochism at the heart of the British Protestant imperial project'.⁴⁹ In order to understand the willingness of Protestants to sacrifice their comfort, and often their lives, for the Empire, he brings forward a theory of masochism which is centred on 'the production of omnipotent fantasy by means of pain-seeking behaviour'.⁵⁰ In this process, the imperial conquerors mentally configured themselves as suffering, Christ-like figures who, under God, took the burdens of the world on their shoulders. The noble sufferings of the Protestant Briton provided scripts of heroism which disempowered the moral critiques of opponents.⁵¹ The moral justificatory mechanism of Kucich's 'imperial masochism' only works in the seeming absence of public pleasure. It was crucial that personal suffering was divorced from visible enjoyment, since moral authority depended precisely on the notion of being subject to unjust imposition. The reality, however, was that a key aim of the imperial mission was the production of power and wealth, and thus of pleasure. This may help to explain, firstly, the repeated denial of personal pleasure on the part of those in His or Her Majesty's Service and the repeated, almost obsessive identification of perverse, quasi-masochistic structures in the cultures of the conquered.

This is an example of what is referred to in psychoanalytic thought as projection. Peter Gay explains his use of this concept in his analysis of aggression in nineteenth-century bourgeois life:

[Freud] argued that so far as they are not justified by real exploitation or real persecution, people making an enemy will adopt the psychological maneuver of projection. They defend themselves against their unacceptable thoughts or wishes by expelling them from their own mind into the outside world, onto the convenient Other. This mechanism provides a highly supportive way of living with one's failings; it permits the denial that one is subject to those failings in the first place and then opportunely discovers them in strangers or adversaries, real or imagined.⁵²

Because religion played such an important constitutive role in identity in the nineteenth-century such projection often took place onto almost any religious Other than that of Protestantism. An example of this was *The Fathers of the Desert; or an Account of the Origin and Practice of Monkery among Heathen Nations* (1850) by Henry Ruffner. This book showed the degree to which an American Presbyterian College President could share the same prejudices as his missionary counterparts in Ireland and India. In this work he went into great detail in order to compare the exotic practices of late Antiquity, later monasticism and the practices of the 'Hindoos', 'Boodhists' and 'Mohametans'. For example, he contrasts the self-lacerations of Christian hermits with 'Hindoos who have a hook placed through their back muscles and are whirled round by it on the end of a chain, for the good of their souls and the applause of spectators'.⁵³ Such a person acts to assert 'a proud superiority over the vulgar herd of his fellow men'.⁵⁴ The origins of such behaviour was, in his opinion, pre-Christian. He drew his readers' attention to what he referred to as the 'pagan nunneries' of ancient Rome and Peru, and argued that 'the same principle is prevalent through the East, and seems an essential element in what we call Orientalism'.⁵⁵

The word 'Orientalist' was widely employed at that time to refer to someone who studied the 'East', a zone that more or less applied to areas that were Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. However, as Ruffner's usage indicates, Orientalism was also seen as a foreign system of behaviour. In his famous study published in 1978 Edward Said argued that such readings represented the viewpoints of prejudiced outsiders which acted conveniently to justify the western imperial project.⁵⁶ The critique of Said's view of Orientalism, let alone the study of Orientalism as a whole, is a major academic field which cannot be reviewed in detail here, but for my current purposes it is important to stress the role played by sexual fantasies in western constructions of the Oriental Other. What might appear to have been clearly differentiated religious traditions were assimilated into a projection of foreign perversity. Thus, when Richard Burton penned the pioneering 'terminal essay' on homosexuality to his unexpurgated translation of the *Arabian Nights* (1885-8), he theorised that such desires were common in a 'Sotadic zone' (the name being derived from Sotades, a Greek poet, who had written about male desire).⁵⁷ Though Muslims happened to be living in much of this area it was in fact the hot climate that predisposed them to unnatural lusts.⁵⁸ It is notable, however, that the annotations on Burton's copy in his library of the 'terminal essay' focus attention back onto Europe. This suggests that he had come to question the attribution of perversion to an inherent quality of foreigners and foreign lands. It is significant that he expressed the thought that there was nothing more 'grotesque' than Orientalism drawn from the 'depths of European self-consciousness'. However, we will never know the result of his continued researches because his wife burned the results.

A recurring figure in Orientalist thought was the eastern despot, as explained in Alain Grosrichard's *Structure du sérail: la fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'Occident classique* (1979).⁵⁹ In his introduction to the English translation, Mladen Dolar explains that in this fantasy:

what else is the entire despotic machine but a gigantic system of organisation, regimentation... ?

The machine is fuelled by a one-way stream of goods, produced by an infinite self-sacrifice of all subjects, which rolls toward the despotic centre for the sole enjoyment of the despot. Ultimately it is epitomised by the flux of 'sexual goods' reserved for the exclusive use of the despot.⁶⁰

Such despotism allegedly linked material and sexual appropriation in a single system. As understood by British Protestants it was not a question of Western decency versus Eastern vice because Roman Catholic Europe was positioned *within* the category of the Other. Thus Fears of Catholicism and Islam in the nineteenth century shared a focus upon oppressive (and, acknowledging the anachronism of the use of the term, sadistic) rule.⁶¹ It was in this spirit, albeit with a jocular slant, that *Punch* in 1851 depicted the Pope as an Ottoman Sultan puffing with pleasure on his water pipe seated on a chair on which was written 'Mahomet is his Prophet'.⁶²

Oriental perversity was, thus, not limited to the lands of the East, but through the agency of the Roman Catholic Church was rampant in Ireland and increasing even closer to home. The supposedly perverse pilgrimages of Hindus and Catholics were, of course, only observed by those who had been on their own journeys of discovery. This was the structuring principle behind *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), a lurid novel by the Irish Protestant (he was a descendent of French Huguenots), Charles Maturin. In this, his most famous work, scenes of suffering show the reader the iniquities and perversities of both Catholic Europe and the Indian subcontinent. The fanaticism of the latter is displayed as being quite the equal of the former since it is claimed that the worshippers of Juggernaut had quite as much faith as 'the Catholic votarist does in the penance of St. Bruno, or the exoculation [gouging out of the eyes] of St. Lucia, or the martyrdom of St. Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins'.⁶³

A significant aspect of Protestant viewing of such austerities and atrocities was that these were insistently analysed through the use of various crude forms of comparative religion. A particularly persistent theme was the supposed moral equivalence of Catholicism and other religions. On the one hand, such polemic can be understood as a continuation of tropes deriving from the Reformation, but such an approach bears with it the danger of missing changes in the motivation for anti-Catholic discourse as it evolved over time. For example, it was only with the expansion of the British Empire in the early modern to modern periods that widespread knowledge was made available concerning modes of asceticism in the Indian sub-continent. Furthermore, attitudes to the relations between virtue and suffering were enmeshed in ongoing cultural changes which encompassed not simply Christian faith, but also attitudes towards work, duty and sexuality (to name just three important issues).

In particular, evangelical movements for moral renewal at home and abroad set increasingly high standards for personal behaviour which emphasised the shameful nature of bodily desires. Ascetic self-denial became an important aspect of British imperial manhood as a result of the increasing influence of missionary efforts to reform both natives and officials alike. The ostentatious self-display of ascetic suffering became peculiarly exciting and dangerous because it threatened to suggest that the underlying motivation for British self-control was pleasure and mastery. Erotic deviance was projected onto the religious Other in a way that constructed foreign ascetic behaviour as excitingly pornographic. The display of perverse punishment further invited Protestant intervention to punish those responsible, thus providing those involved in the imperial enterprise with sources of erotic fulfilment which were not visible as such.⁶⁴

This article has not attempted to determine the real motivations of Catholics and Hindus who went on pilgrimage and went through ascetic austerities. Rather, I have been exploring Protestant representations of such practices. These consistently acted to discover pain and pleasure in perverse combination as at Dearg where the peasants were, supposedly, tortured by day and then partied all night. But what if this discovery of perversity is a product of the Protestant gaze and of Protestant creativity? Men such as Baggaly told of their sufferings on pilgrimage, but those narrative denunciations were delivered with lip-smacking delight. Such phenomena as the sinister spiky ‘beds’ of Lough Dearg and the sexually explicit relief carvings at Jagannath provided Protestants with relishable spectacles of abject pleasure from which they could safely disassociate themselves through moralising invective. But these very moral discourses also confined Protestants to narrow codes of behaviour, in which unorthodox or novel forms of pleasure could only be enjoyed through textual discourses of denunciation. That very moral bondage, evoking and denying erotic fulfilment in the same breath, suggests that the cultural antecedents of masochism could be found, not only in the outer reaches of the empire, but also close to home.

Word count 8000

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³ See Walter L. Arnstein, *Protestant Versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England: Mr. Newdegate and the Nuns* (Columbia, 1982), with Peter F. Anson, *The Call of the Cloister: Religious Communities and Kindred Bodies in the Anglican Communion* (London, 1964) and *Building up the Waste Places: the Revival of Monastic Life on Medieval Lines in the Post-Reformation Church of England* (Leighton Buzzard, 1973).

⁴ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford, 1988).

⁵ Useful introductions include Geoffrey Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago, 1987); K. Ishwaran (ed.), *Ascetic Culture: Renunciation and Worldly Engagement*, *International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology* 73 (Leiden, 1999) and Mayeul de Dreuille, *The Rule of St. Benedict and the Ascetic Traditions from Asia to the West* (Gracewing, 2000).

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(Madison, N.J., 2002) and Diane Robinson-Dunn, *The Harem, Slavery and British Imperial Culture: Anglo-Muslim Relations in the late Nineteenth-Century* (Manchester, 2006).

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⁹ 'Penitential beds', *Lough Derg: Bringing you the Gift of Hope*, www.loughderg.org/heritage/penitential-beds, accessed 5 July 2011.

¹⁰ William Carleton [Anon., 'W.'], 'A Pilgrimage to Patrick's Purgatory', *Christian Examiner and Church of Ireland Gazette* 6 (April-May 1828), pp. 268-86 and 343-62, at pp. 345-6; and, in expanded form, *Father Butler. The Lake Dearg Pilgrim. Being a Sketch of Irish Manners* (Dublin, 1829), p. 256. On Carleton, and the place of Derg in constructions of Irishness involving religion and nationalism, Peggy O'Brien, *Writing Lough Derg, from William Carleton to Seamus Heaney* (Syracuse, 2006), pp. 29-47.

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¹² Carleton, 'A Pilgrimage', p. 349 and *Father Butler*, p. 265.

¹³ Andrew Rudd, 'India as Gothic Horror: Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Images of Juggernaut in Early Nineteenth-Century Missionary Writing', in Shafquat Towheed (ed.), *New Readings in the Literature of British India, c. 1780-1947*, *Studies in English Literatures* 9 (Stuttgart, 2007), pp. 41-64.

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