

feature. It might, however, be taken to imply that the Holst relationship is the major factor in the *destin* of Frank—as opposed to the relationship with Sissy. Perhaps the two relationships should not be considered separately. In the other two novels the spiritual overtones are far less evident.

One might discuss the title. Some titles are riddles, to which the clever or initiate might guess the answer. If your subject is 'man clothed' you may well call your book *Barnaby Rudge* or *Little Dorrit*. When it is 'man naked', 'man pitted against himself, as in Dostoevsky' (a quote from Simenon) he must carry a name that, like some Scriptural names, expresses his struggle, his mission, or his achievement. There have been two English titles to *La Neige était sale*—*The Snow is Black* and, the current one, *The Stain on the Snow*. I find neither convincing. To me Frank is the snow. His ultimate love demands the chastity of ice. But you have only to read the book to see how much dirt there was about.

Joseph Berington—'Prophet of Ecumenism'?

by J. Derek Holmes

The Reverend Joseph Berington (1743-1827) has never had a particularly good press even from sympathetic Catholic historians. This is almost certainly due to the fact that he was a leading supporter of the cisalpine, if not gallican, Catholic Committee and was one of those Catholics who believed that an Oath of Supremacy, properly understood, was not incompatible with Catholic principles. As a result of his attitude and activities, he was at one stage censured by the bishops and deprived of his faculties. Berington himself felt that English Catholics had suspected him since he taught philosophy at Douay where he was regarded as being too modern and bold in his philosophical opinions, and that this explained the later questioning of his orthodoxy.¹ Joseph Gillow simply claims that Berington's 'love of novelty and of the affected liberality of the day created great prejudice against his writings, which, however, was considerably removed before his death'.

Yet according to a 'Memoir' published in the *Catholic Miscellany*,² Berington made 'the first open and bold attack . . . on the immense mass of Protestant prejudice that had been accumulating against Catholics for more than two centuries', while the *Reflections addressed*

¹*Catholic Miscellany*, Vol. IX (1828), pp. 371-2.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 225, 298.

to the Rev. John Hawkins was described as his 'principal work on religious controversy'. The story of this particular publication began in America during 1784 when Charles Wharton, one of the first American Jesuits, published his *Letter to the Roman Catholics of the City of Worcester*. This personal *apologia* for leaving the Church was addressed to the English Catholics whom he had served as chaplain. The author professed his love and affection for the Catholic clergy and expressed his regret that he had felt in conscience obliged to act as he did. His principal argument centred on a desire for intellectual freedom which, he claimed, was denied to him in the Catholic Church. This *Letter* was especially effective because it was written in a polished and cultivated style, while the rejection of traditional doctrines such as transubstantiation or ecclesiastical infallibility and the impossibility of salvation outside the Church were expressed in a moderate and dignified way.¹

John Carroll, the first American bishop, answered Wharton in America. Back in England, Wharton's *Letter* was published and supported by a former Benedictine, John Hawkins, and Berington replied in his *Reflections* which were, to use his own description of English Catholics, 'honest, liberal, humane and generous'. Berington, who clearly admired Carroll, claimed that the future bishop was well aware 'how many abuses had crept into the vulgar practice, and how much the discipline of his Church had departed from primitive simplicity'. Berington declared that Carroll 'would take to himself and his ministers that independence on the Roman See, which is their Christian right'. Carroll would also avoid those disputes which disturbed the peace of the Church, he would permit the use of the vernacular, and reform

'that cumbrous weight of ceremonies and unmeaning pageantry which, the warmer imaginations of some nations, and the material conceptions of others, had introduced into European practice.— In a word, all that he would reform, which rational piety and a proper sense of the dignity of religion should point out to him as deserving of it.'

Berington, for his part, describing himself as 'a *rational* Catholic', refused to associate himself with 'that mass of absurdities, which you and others vainly represent' and he put forward his own suggestions for healing the divisions among Christians.

'I think, were the members of two Churches honestly disposed to unite, things might be done by an obvious method. Let their creeds be mutually produced, fairly explained, and on both sides such concessions made, as would soon occur to men, who should be inclined to concord. Heaven knows, as I have elsewhere observed, how thin that wall of separation is which divides us from the Church of England! yet neither of us, I fear, are acquainted with that temper of mind, upon which, as the most essential requisite, the

¹J. T. Ellis, *Catholics in Colonial America* (Baltimore, 1965), pp. 416-18.

whole business hinges. Labour, Sir, to generate this Christian spirit, and your labour will merit praise. The language of your *appeal* will not do it. You there tell us, our religion is not from Christ, that it is a deviation from all antiquity, that it is foolish in its practice, ridiculous in its discipline; and in the next breath you talk of concord, of mutual forbearance, of respect for prejudices—and of what do you not talk? This can never do; If we may ever be friends, let there be an end to controversy.'

Berington proclaimed himself to be a friend of universal toleration and an enemy of all ecclesiastical establishments. He granted that all Churches were intolerant and therefore uncharitable. As for himself, he wrote,

'Many things, I confess, in the Catholic belief weigh rather heavy on my mind, and I should be glad to have a freer field to range in.'

Furthermore, the way in which Berington spoke about the Reformers, the position of the pope, the use of Latin and the 'practices, abuses and follies, which are too common among the lower orders of people in some Catholic countries' could not but give offence to his less 'enlightened' and 'liberal' co-religionists;¹ these would also be offended by the addition of a cisalpine appendix, 'Roman Catholic Principles, in reference to God and the Country'.²

Berington himself discussed the reaction to his *Reflections* as well as his own attitude towards religious controversy in a long letter to the Vicar General of the Northern District:

'... it is the approbation of such men, as yourself, who are able to form an accurate judgment of religious controversy, that I principally look to as the reward of my labours. The work in question, I am happy to know, has been generally well received by the class of men, I allude to, some of them have expressed an admiration of it, to which, from my own conviction, it is not entitled. There are, however, less indulgent critics; of whom not the least considerable, I am told, are in your district. If they would attend to the motives which direct me in writing, I have too good an opinion of their hearts, to think they would be so violent. They would know, that I chiefly write to inform, and by so doing, to remove the prejudices of Protestants. My language therefore must be principally adapted to them; and for this reason, I often judge it proper to depart from terms, which the schools may seem to have consecrated, and to speak a more modern language. Experience has convinced me that my judgment was well-founded; for I know that I have been instrumental in reforming the minds of many Protestants. But though my language may sometimes vary from common forms; my adherence to the thing signified is not the less sincere. My religion has been to me an object of the most serious inquiry, for many years; and,

¹*Reflections addressed to The Rev. John Hawkins* (Birmingham, 1785), pp. vii, 19-20, 22, 25, 56, 71.

²B. Ward, *The Eve of Catholic Emancipation* (London, 1911), Vol. II, pp. 270, 302-3.

I trust, I have learned to discriminate *Revealed truths*, from matters of *opinion* and *discipline*. These two I can treat with a decent freedom; and it is but a just compliment to the dignity of revelation so to do. Unfortunately my Critics, I fear, have as yet this important business to learn.'

Berington explained the passage in his *Reflections* dealing with the position of the pope¹ and then went on;

'I know of nothing else, that I could wish to alter—But, at all times, as I have nothing in view but to do good, it would indeed be very inconsistent with this declaration, not to be disposed, to retract, to omit, or to amend any expressions, which might be judged exceptionable. I pretend to no exemption from the common lot of weak human nature. They who know me best can say, what have always been my dispositions. To pretend to please certain men is, I am aware, a ridiculous attempt; but I wish such men could be made sensible, that I have never written a line, which I wished them to read. Wrapped up in their own self-sufficiency, it is only there they can find sentiments, orthodox and pious enough, to give them pleasure. Why will they quit that dear abode, to converse with me, who am but a common man, gifted with none of those superior lights, which they possess in so full a measure? I hear some of these indulgent men are busy in extracting some propositions from my works, which they propose to get censured. My Compliments, if you please, to any of them, who may fall in your way: assure them that I applaud their zeal, but that I wish they would use some expedition, as I have a large work just going to press, which will be ready for their criticism, before they shall have finished with the first.'²

Another of Berington's ironic rather than irenic statements was the famous retraction which he issued after he had publicly supported an Anglican controversialist, refused to condemn the Reformers indiscriminately, and shown himself to be critical of certain aspects of Catholicism such as the authority of the pope, the existence of monasteries and the law of celibacy.

'Viewing in the Roman Bishop the first Pastor of my Church, I should not have acknowledged that any part of the power at any time claimed by him was acquired by human means, and was lawfully resisted, and though I might perhaps be permitted not to believe in papal Infallibility, I should have maintained a portion of inerrancy to reside in the ministers of her Church more than might save her from grievous errors, that is, more than is necessary to preserve the sacred deposit of Faith. Of monastic institutions I should not have said that to many they were the source of misery, to some the source of happiness; and in their foundation and continuance I should have expressed much interest; and not have wished that the law of celibacy, which I

¹See also, *Catholic Miscellany*, Vol. X (1828), pp. 85-7.

²Berington to Chadwick, 29th July, 1786, Ushaw College President's Archives, C5. Quoted with the kind permission of the President.

falsely termed burthensome to many, were repealed. That my Church ever persecuted, I should not have conceded, and should have gloried in the intolerance of her professions. I should have represented every part of the Protestant Reformation as schismatical, and to all its authors indiscriminately have ascribed unworthy motives.'¹

Needless to say, Berington found himself still suspended until he made a more satisfactory declaration.

The English cisalpins regarded themselves as part of the movement towards a new age of reason and liberalism in all spheres of life including religion. They were advanced and enlightened, self-conscious liberals opposed to all obscurantism, and perhaps most important of all, they were tolerant. Charles Butler, for example, was famous for his broad-minded and charitable attitude towards Protestants. Berington himself published proposals for ecumenical Sunday schools which would be based on the Bible, avoid sectarianism and teach 'essential' Christian doctrines which would be acceptable even to Unitarians. Doctor Alexander Geddes, the great biblical scholar, perhaps best summarized their attitude in his verse;

No more Religion, with fanatic hand,
Shall fan the fire of faction in the land;
But, mild and gentle, like her heavenly sire,
No other flames but those of love inspire.
Papist and Protestant shall strive to raise
In different notes ONE great CREATOR'S praise.²

Or as he put it in the words inscribed on his monument:

Christian is my name, and Catholic my surname;
I grant that you are a Christian as well as I;
And embrace you as my fellow disciple in Jesus.
And if you are not a disciple of Jesus,
Still I would embrace you as my fellow man.³

As a result, the religious opinions of the cisalpins must undoubtedly be treated with caution, though it is questionable how far their views can be dismissed as simply latitudinarian or unorthodox. For instance, John Kirk believed that '*when the essentials of Catholicity are left untouched* the nearer it is brought to a level with Protestantism the better'.⁴ Berington himself was conscious that it would be wrong,

¹B. Ward, *The Dawn of the Catholic Revival in England* (London, 1909), Vol. II, pp. 213-14.

²Quoted by Eamon Duffy in his excellent and illuminating study, 'Ecclesiastical Democracy Detected', *Recusant History*, Vol. 10 (1970), p. 196.

³Ward, *Dawn*, II, p. 247. Geddes' biblical scholarship was bitterly satirized by his fellow Catholics:

When G . . . had ceased on his Bible to work,
Because it would suit *neither chapel nor Kirk*
Had fretted his Gizzard, because all the printers
Declar'd not a copy would sell in ten Winters:

One pious Catholic expressed the hope that 'his translation will serve for nothing but to wrap up pepper and spices, or become offerings to Cloacina'. (Banister to Rutter, 7th June, 1790, Upholland College Archives.)

⁴*Recusant History*, Vol. 10, p. 315. Italics mine.

‘to have misstated any doctrines, that so they might appear more palatable; to have disguised any opinions, that their seeming harshness might be softened; to ridicule any practices, that the reputation of a mind superior to vulgar prejudices, might be acquired; in a word, to have departed, in anything, from the line of simple truth.’¹

Furthermore, although Berington at one time seems to have contemplated the possibility of schism, it is by no means clear that he seriously intended to try to bring it about and was probably threatening in order to gain concessions.

Berington has been well described as ‘theologically, an extremist, with sufficient natural conservatism to save himself from a breach with the Church of which he considered himself a loyal and moderate priest.’² He represented the more insular and independent English theological tradition which was to be destroyed by a more rigorous ultramontane mentality and replaced by a much stricter attitude towards ‘orthodoxy’. Although this traditional attitude towards theological definition and ‘heresy’ as well as ecclesiastical discipline and devotion stopped short of heterodoxy, English Catholics were willing to accept a man’s sincerity as a sufficient test of his orthodoxy.

There was after all no strong tradition of theological scholarship which would have enabled English priests and bishops to deal firmly with doctrinal disputes, while the system of lay patronage and the fact that the vicars apostolic were regarded as senior colleagues rather than superiors, inhibited their role as guardians of ‘orthodoxy’. Berington himself was essentially old-fashioned and he never fundamentally departed from the traditional attitudes of the recusant Church; he even fought the old battles of the secular clergy, for bishops in ordinary and against ‘undue’ papal interference. Consequently, much of his influence over the clergy was due to the fact that they recognized in his writings many of the traditions and values which they shared and which they recognized to be in danger.

On the 1st of December, 1827, Joseph Berington died, according to the Vicar of Buckland,

‘as he had lived, serene, resigned, in the full possession of his mental powers, a true Christian in death as in life, and any one who had witnessed his passage from this world, could not have failed mentally to exclaim—*let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his.*’

The Vicar’s tribute to Berington is worth repeating;

‘for the long period of thirty-four years, this truly venerable man discharged his sacred functions in so even and upright a manner, as to merit and secure the affections of those over whom he had the charge, and at the same time to avoid giving offence to his Protestant brethren: to all he was equally kind, benevolent, and

¹*Catholic Miscellany*, Vol. IX, p. 371.

²Eamon Duffy, ‘Doctor Douglass and Mister Berington’, *Downside Review*, Vol. 88 (1970), p. 247.

bountiful. Sincere, pious, just, and true, he walked through his pilgrimage on earth respected and beloved; and it may be doubted whether his loss is most regretted by those under his own charge, or by the Protestants of Buckland, and its neighbourhood'.¹

But perhaps the tribute which would have pleased Berington most was a simple sentence from his long Epitaph—'His object was truth, not victory', a sentence which might well have been remembered by later generations of Catholics.

It is, of course, somewhat 'forced' to regard Berington as a 'prophet of ecumenism', especially since his 'enlightened' and 'liberal' theological approach now seems just as old-fashioned as the traditional attitudes of the recusant Church. Nevertheless, there are aspects of his thought which could prove helpful in modern ecumenical discussion and which are certainly superior to the attitudes later adopted by the ultramontanes and integralists. These would include, for example, Berington's whole approach to religious controversy, his ability to adopt more modern and measured language, his willingness to distinguish matters of opinion and discipline from revealed truths, and his defence of the more flexible approach towards Catholic 'orthodoxy'. In any case, Berington would at least have sympathized with contemporary ecumenical endeavours, which is more than could be said of many of his co-religionists even today!

¹*Catholic Miscellany*, Vol. IX, pp. 380-2.