Thanks to Henry VIII's penchant

for disposing of his wives and his consequent excommunication, Roman Catholicism was driven out of England, or at least driven underground. With it went so-called idolatry, smashed from cathedral to parish church, and none more frantically than shrines to the Blessed Virgin Mary, that archetypal Mediterranean mother. Those who think the stolid English were never Marists should think again.

The most famous place of pilgrimage, the priory shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk, was built to commemorate visions of Mary which came to the pious young Saxon noblewoman Richeldis de Faverches in 1061, just before the Norman Conquest. Legend goes that she saw Mary three times. She was transported to the dwelling in Nazareth where Gabriel told of the birth of Jesus and there she was asked by the Virgin to build a replica of the house at Faversham and dedicate it as a memorial of the Annunciation. According to Catholic tradition, Mary told Lady Richeldis "Let all who are in any way distressed or in need seek me there in that small house you maintain for me at Walsingham".

Miraculously, the humble Holy House was assembled overnight from materials Lady Richeldis had provided. She maintained a prayer vigil in the house until her death; her son, Geoffrey de Faverches, ensured that the priory (parts of which stand today) was constructed.

Among royal patrons of the shrine were Henry III, Edward III, Henry IV, Edward IV, Henry VII and no less a figure than Henry VIII himself, who visited Walsingham three times before ordering its 1538 destruction as part of his Reformation. Other visitors had included Erasmus and Catherine of Aragon.

But the new regime meant business. Henry's Bishop Latimer, himself later burnt at the stake for alleged heresy, relished

the prospect of incinerating a selection of Mary effigies. In reference to Our Lady of Worcester he wrote: "She hath been the Devil's instrument, I fear, to bring many to eternal fire; now she herself with her older sister of Walsingham, her younger sister of Ipswich, and their two sisters of Doncaster and Penrhys will make a jolly muster in Smithfield. They would not be all day in burning."

Bishop Latimer's list of English and Welsh Marist shrines was not inclusive. Bishop Egwin of Worcester is said to have founded Evesham (Eof's ham) Abbey on the site of a vision of the Virgin Mary by a swineherd, Eof, in 701 AD. Then, shortly after the Norman Conquest, Abbot Helsim visited Denmark on a peace mission. His ship ran into a terrible storm on its return voyage across the North Sea. Helsim, believing that the boat was foundering, was deep in prayer when a vision of the Virgin Mary stilled the storm. Mary asked Helsim to introduce the feast of the Immaculate Conception into England and Normandy.

Other encounters included Thomas à Becket, who it's said met with Mary several times – the first, when he was only 20, she used to show him a red cassock, symbol of his destiny as priest and martyr. Becket's 1170 murder in Canterbury Cathedral at the hands of Henry II's knights and speedy canonisation by Pope Alexander III is perhaps the headline example of struggle between Church and State over the centuries. The Reformation, followed by the return to Catholicism of Mary I and the re-establishment of the Church of England by Elizabeth I, left the faithful – and most people counted themselves among the faithful – with all sorts of added cultural loyalties to reconcile. Catholic parents had somehow to bring up their children in the new Protestant ways. What seems to have happened under Elizabeth, once she'd finally plucked up courage to sanction the beheading of her Catholic half-cousin Mary Queen of Scots, is that the Church of England was allowed to embrace much of the ritual of Roman Catholicism, minus of course the saints and the idols, in what's now known as the Elizabethan Religious Settlement. Turbulent times, symbolised by the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, were never distant, but with the modulated English of the Authorised version of the Bible, published in 1611 – and authorised by the new king, James 1 – religion appeared to have settled into a tolerant middle way between the so-called Papists and the Calvinist strictures of continental Europe.

It hadn't, of course. Charles 1, Cromwell and Civil War were almost on the horizon. But the interregnum of relative peace was also a time of great creativity for English poets and playwrights. As the still

centre of such turmoil, the poet-priest George Herbert constructed a literary metaphor of his Anglican faith, published posthumously in 1633, the year of his death from consumption shortly before his fortieth birthday. *The Temple*, a collection of sacred poems, explores the meaning of faith to a highly gifted and influential aristocrat who, after a brilliant early career at Cambridge, opted for the life of a country rector.

In his deceptively simple style, Herbert works his way via his introductory Church Porch to the Altar, the Scriptures, the Church Floor and issues like Humility or events like Trinity Sunday. Then suddenly, after Avarice, this extraordinary prefaced couplet:

Ana(MARY/ARMY)gram
How well her name an Army doth present
In whom the Lord of Hosts did pitch his tent.

In his excellent annotated Everyman edition of Herbert's poems, C.A.Patrides points out that the phrase "pitch his tent" is a literal translation of John 1.14 'the word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. All the same, it seems a particularly English way of putting it, the unborn Jesus preparing to do battle with the world from the stronghold of Mary's womb.

Herbert calls the poem which follows, "To all Angels and Saints". It spells out the new Anglican theology on the Virgin Mary and why he, though sorely attracted to her, cannot place her on the same plinth as Christ:

In the poem's first direct reference to Mary she moves from being compared with an army to other more precious qualities:

I would addresse
My vows to thee most gladly, blessed Maid,
And Mother of my God, in my distresse.
Thou art the holy mine, whence came the gold,
The great restorative for all decay
In young and old;
Thou art the cabinet where the jewell lay:
Chiefly to thee would I my soul unfold:

Here comes the rub: Herbert, albeit reluctantly, states Anglican doctrine that Jesus himself did not claim special status for his mother.

But now (alas!) I dare not; for our King
Whom we do all jointly adore and praise,

Bids no such thing:
And where his pleasure no injunction layes,
('Tis your own case) ye never move a wing.

Additionally, Jesus will need all his strength at Judgment Day, and Mary veneration must not be allowed to deplete his powers:

All worship is prerogative, and a flower
Of his rich crown, from whom lyes no appeal
At the last houre:
Therefore we dare not from his garland steal,
To make a posie for inferior power.

And, concludes Herbert, Anglicans won't miss out by not being party to the old beliefs:

Although then others court you, if ye know
What's done on earth, we shall not fare the worse,
Who do not so;
Since we are ever ready to disburse,
If any one our Masters hand can show.

To rub salt into Marist wounds, Herbert includes in *The Temple* his eulogy to the British Church, purloining images of Mary to represent the Anglican persuasion. His poem stages an attack both at "she on the hills" – Roman Catholicism, with its brazen allure – and the Calvinism of "she in the valley", skulking with her hair about her ears.

THE BRITISH CHURCH

I joy, dear Mother, when I view
Thy perfect lineaments, and hue
Both sweet and bright.

Beauty in thee takes up her place
And dates her letters from thy face,
When she doth write.

(The reference is to Lady Day, the Annunciation, March 25, which still marked the start of the legal year in Herbert's time.)

A fine aspect in fit aray,
Neither too mean, nor yet too gay,
Shows who is best.

Outlandish looks may not compare:
For all they either painted are,
Or else undrest.

She on the hills, which wantonly
Allureth all in hope to be
By her preferred,

Hath kiss'd so long her painted shrines,
That ev'n her face by kissing shines,
For her reward.

She in the valley oh so shie
Of dressing, that her hair doth lie
About her eares:

While she avoids her neighbours pride,
She wholly goes on th'other side,
And nothing wears.

By contrast, the mean or middle way, the British way – Herbert states in a manner which reeks of complacency given the upcoming events of the seventeenth century – is the one chosen by God. And Mother is of course the Church, not the Virgin Mary.

But dearest Mother, (what those misse)
The mean thy praise and glory is,
And long may be.

Blessed be God, whose love it was
To double-moat thee with his grace,
And none but thee

He had a strong precedent in Shakespeare himself, whose famously xenophobic apology for England by Richard 2, beginning "This royal throne of kings, this sceptr'd isle..." also refers to a moat guarding its sanctity, whose subjects

Fear'd by their breed and famous by their birth,
Renowned of their deeds as far from home, –
For Christian service and true chivalry,–
As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry
Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son:
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land...

According to Bridget Heal's study of the cult of the Virgin Mary in sixteenth and seventeenth century Germany, where Protestant and Catholic practices lived side by side, tolerance was more the order of the day there. Martin Luther believed that Marian images were not in themselves idolatrous and spelt out his own acceptance of Mary's own immaculate conception. Marian feast days were incorporated into the Protestant popular calendar much in the way that the seasonal celebrations of the Old Religion had been subsumed into Christianity.

The English Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins grew to love Herbert's work before converting to Catholicism and becoming a Jesuit priest. It's a measure of the strength of Herbert's spiritual searching and devotional power that Hopkins admitted to remaining personally indebted to the earlier poet-priest, Mary-denier or no.

In modern times, reconciliation and ecumenism has become the norm even in the UK. Walsingham is considered a place of pilgrimage for both Catholics and Protestants. Following a Roman Catholic procession there in 1897 the Walsingham Holy House was rebuilt by Fr Alfred Patten, an Anglican priest, with the Anglican shrine completed in 1938. Meanwhile, the restored fourteenth century Walsingham Slipper Chapel, where medieval pilgrims removed their shoes before vigils at the Holy House, has become the Roman Catholic National Shrine. Within the Anglican shrine is the Chapel of the Life-giving Spring of the Mother of God, established for Pan-Orthodox worship by a roving Orthodox community.

Pope Benedict XVI's historic state visit to Britain in September 2010 was dogged by demonstrations over claims that the Pontiff is still too lenient on child-abuser priests, while His Holiness was eager to underline the host nation's urgent need to re-embrace Christian principles. On the whole, however, it was a good-natured sequence of set-pieces, faithfully covered by Sky News (has Rupert Murdoch done a personal deal with Rome?) If Marism was hardly on the menu, an enlightening moment took place at the entry to Westminster Abbey, a church porch well known to George Herbert, when Benedict arrived there for Friday evening prayers.

Among clerics greeting the Pope was the Rev Jane Hedges, Canon Steward of Westminster, part of whose role is to ensure visitors feel at home in the abbey. The two shook hands, all smiles. Remember, this, the prime Mother Church in the British Isles, was a Benedictine monastery for its first 600 years of existence and is dedicated to St Peter. Edward the Confessor is among Catholic

Mary, Jesus and the saints remain defaced in Utrecht Cathedral, Holland.

monarchs buried here. For the Pope to be welcomed at Peter's very church door by a woman priest, and to proceed to exchange homilies with the Archbishop of Canterbury (Beckett's successor and head of the world Anglican persuasion) amid clouds of incense - the Pope demure in white, the archbishop in garish colours with a funny hat - was surely pushing ecumenism to its limits.

Just about the only intruder to cloud a Mary-less weekend was Our Lady of the Taper of Cardigan, whose wooden effigy complete with candle was freighted with Benedict's approval from the Catholic National Shrine of Wales to Westminster Cathedral (the centre of British Catholicism) for Saturday morning mass. Was her presence some sort of compensation for side-lining Mary or simply for the lack of a Welsh dimension to the Pontiff's 2010 state visit, 450 years after the Dutch Reformation ?

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