RELIGIOUS IMAGINARIES

The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of
Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
Christina Rossetti, and
Adelaide Procter

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As Samuel Palmer recognized already in 1812, nineteenth-century Christianity in England was both united and divided. Though Christian churches held most of the central teachings of Christianity in common, they diverged significantly in polity, theology, and liturgy. For the ordinary churchgoing Christian, denominational divergence emerged most obviously not in theological discussions, seminary debates, or circulated writings but in the public worship service, where communal worship practices shaped and bespoke religious principle. True, the basic elements of Christian liturgy—Scripture reading, singing, prayer, sermon, sacrament—appeared in almost all worship services, of whatever denomination; but as Palmer points out, how these elements ought to be interpreted, or even conducted, remained a subject
of disagreement. To affiliate oneself with a particular form of Christianity, therefore, meant most visibly to choose a distinctive set of liturgical practices. These practices and their import for the religious imaginary and for poetry are the subject of this book. My thesis—that distinctive religious-poetic voices can arise from religious imaginaries formed by and in response to liturgical practice—applies equally to devout men and women who engaged their forms of faith seriously. However, this book focuses on women’s religious poetry, partly because the idea that women’s religious writing shows mostly a conflicted relationship with church needs, at this time, more pressing emendation than an integrated study of men’s and women’s liturgical engagements could give; and partly because I believe the emerging conversation about women’s religious poetry might be most enriched by my approach. That approach seeks not to align but to differentiate women’s religious poetry. That is, recognizing that Victorian Christianity took many forms, this book is attuned to difference rather than resemblance in women’s writing. Though they struggled with some of the same gender issues, Victorian religious women writers crafted individual voices, producing religious work that can more often be associated with male writers or speakers in their own denominations than with other Christian women writers. Religious identity features as importantly as—sometimes more importantly than—gender in the creation of distinctive religious imaginaries and religious-poetic voices. Though unified as Christians, religious women writers in Victorian England considered denominational difference to have enormous import for their understanding of the role of poet, the religious community, the act of scriptural interpretation, and the cultural weight of religious poetry.

In a cultural climate that advocates personal autonomy, it has perhaps been easy to believe that church affiliations largely hinder intellectual inquiry—if not now, then certainly in the past. We can then fail to appreciate the religious and literary value that Victorian men and women often assigned to their church experiences, believing instead that especially women sought to escape from or subvert the forms of Christianity that we (and sometimes they) have associated with patriarchy. But to do justice to women who showed themselves in various ways to be critically astute yet chose to affiliate themselves with traditional forms of faith, we need to ask whether we have too quickly ruled out the affirmative and generative possibilities of (Victorian) religious institutions for women’s (and men’s) writing. This study demonstrates the import of church practices for formal and conceptual experiments in religious poetry by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter.
At its broadest level, this book responds to Dennis Taylor’s suggestion that the appropriate critical response to the ongoing “dilemma of skepticism” about religion may simply be to develop “a sense of the intricacy of the subject.” Since (and even before) Taylor’s call in 1998 for “religious interpretations that are substantial enough to enter into a productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses,” numerous studies of the intersections of literature and religion have appeared. Contributors to the 2006 inaugural volume of the new ELN—an issue devoted to literary history and the religious turn—offered potential reasons for the increased interest in religion by literary critics: a reaction to the mid-twentieth-century rejection of religion in favor of the secularized human sciences; a postmodern skepticism about secularism’s exclusivist claims to truth; and twenty-first-century global events that reveal the ongoing strength of religious commitment. It seems necessary, one contributor wrote, to acknowledge religion as a form of thinking as well as spirituality. As had Taylor, another considered current historicized approaches to literary criticism to make such study more tenable than earlier value-laden approaches. The challenge, all imply, is to find ways of maintaining intellectual seriousness in both critic and text while discussing subjects of faith. These remarks and Taylor’s form the guiding principles for this book: I aim to combine intellectual seriousness with respect for faith commitments to increase our sense of the intricacy of the subject of religion in Victorian women’s poetry.

In one sense, my work participates in what Jude V. Nixon, in the title to his 2004 edited collection, calls Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions. In his introduction to this volume, Nixon also reflects on Dennis Taylor’s advice as he writes that the goal of his collection “is not to re-present Victorian religious discourse as singular but as varied, informing and informed by culture.” The subsequent essays verify that Victorian Christianity was far from monologic, and the historicized approach of many of them reveals as untenable the earlier skepticism about religion’s importance. Indeed, recent monographs on the subject of Victorian writers and religion—such as Mary Wilson Carpenter’s Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies: Women, Sexuality, and Religion in the Victorian Market (2003), Jill Muller’s Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Catholicism: A Heart in Hiding (2003), and Jarlath Killeen’s The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland (2005)—frequently use historicized or material culture approaches to the subject. To some extent, I place the present book within this practice.

Still, I depart from the tendency in many of these studies to view Victorian religion mainly as a cultural construct, overlooked for a time but now
properly recognized alongside class, gender, and race as a historical category worth attention. Nixon, for example, frames Victorian religious discourse primarily in terms of its importance to “British national identity” (1), particularly as tied to “masculinity, race and imperialism” (3). Here, at least by implication, the study of religion serves primarily to further our understanding of other (more important?) Victorian identities. Of course, study of Victorian religion does do that, and we benefit from examining how and why. But this approach might actually be limiting, disposed as it is to see religion only as discourse or ideology: as a set of verbal structures for analysis or as a scheme of ideas not supported by rational argument. Both terms, by assuming or implying religion’s coerciveness, intolerance, or lack of sensitivity for the other, can reduce religion to a set of beliefs or ideas, most of them taken to be unexamined or oppressive. Thus, the critical project is predetermined by its terms to read religious-literary works either for their failures of self-examination—their complicity—or for signs of protest and rebellion. Again, Nixon supplies the example when he writes that Victorian literature is a site where religion, especially institutional religion, is “contested” or “problematically staged” (8). Many contemporary critics seem to have difficulty imagining Victorian religion, especially the church, as more than a contested cultural category or other than a set of unprobed ideas or language, much less as a generative place for literary work.

The seeking for signs of protest and revision has become, in the past decade or two, the primary critical approach taken toward, especially, women’s religious writing. Cynthia Scheinberg observes that most narratives of feminist literary history (to 2002) assume that “women writers who actively supported religious institutions and affiliations were necessarily didactic, submissive, unenlightened, and uncreative reproducers of male religious hierarchy.” Because these terms run counter to the feminist project, critics often ignored religious writing by women or discounted it as a critical lapse in an otherwise worthy body of work. With the rise of interest in religion broadly, this critical position is being reassessed, with more and more work appearing that argues for the subtlety and creativity of women’s religious writing. Scheinberg’s declared goal in *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England* “is to suggest that women’s religious poetry is a site in which we find evidence of women’s creative and original engagement with religious text and theology” (3). Similarly, F. Elizabeth Gray’s recent *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women’s Poetry* argues for the creative contributions of Victorian women’s religious poetry “to Christian discourse, to lyric tradition, and to contemporary
views of womanhood.” This is welcome work. As with Nixon’s, however, Scheinberg’s terms imply that women’s religious writing arises apart from women’s affiliations with a church: she states that women used their poetry “to do the theological work from which they were excluded in most Victorian religious institutions” (3). In other words, exclusion, not participation, drives the poetry. And Gray, who rightly acknowledges that “Victorian women adhered to no one Christian faith,” nevertheless aims to discuss their religious poetry “as a distinct, discrete body of work” (5). Women’s denominational affiliations do not play significantly into Gray’s analysis. While women’s religious writing, therefore, has been recuperated into current critical endeavors in valuable ways, women’s church lives have not (except, perhaps, for Christina Rossetti’s). We seem unable yet to believe that Victorian Christian churches themselves could be generative for women’s religious poetry, and that devout and astute women knew it. Scheinberg, for example, states in her study of two Christian and two Jewish women poets that “to explore the significance of the specific locations of these women in Christian and Jewish religious institutions . . . might serve to limit the ways these women can be read as original religious thinkers” (6). Church, in other words, probably restricts originality.

By contrast, I take the position that to understand religious writing by Victorian women of faith, we must pay more attention to their church affiliations. Whereas Scheinberg believes “these established labels often best refer to issues of practice and worship, but may not be useful when seeking to identify specific contours of the particular woman poet’s religious thought” (6), I argue that the specific contours of each poet’s religious imaginary can best be identified and understood within the context of her chosen denomination’s worship practices. However, I see my work not as a rebuttal to or criticism of Scheinberg’s or Gray’s admirable work but as a response to the hope both critics have expressed for later scholars to link their work to studies of denominational difference. The intricacy of the subject, I believe, requires this attention, not least because the Victorians themselves held denominational affiliation to be important.

My starting point, however, is not in theological differences, though such differences will inevitably play into my discussion. Nor will I attempt what some might call a worldview analysis: a detailing of each poet’s perspective on the ultimate meaning of existence. Along with Roger Lundin—who labels sight (perspective, view) the “most imperial of the senses”—I am interested (in this project) less in “getting the picture” than in “hearing voices.” Therefore, I approach the question of denominational difference and its effect on religious
poetry in terms of liturgy more than (though not apart from) theology. That is, I pay attention to the embodied practices of worship, not only the intellectual elements of belief. I do so mainly because I am persuaded that sustained practices—of any kind—have a powerful formative effect on how we imagine the world and our place in it and consequently on how we talk or write about it. In other words, I acknowledge what Charles Taylor calls a social imaginary that interpenetrates discourse and, forming that social imaginary, what James K. A. Smith calls liturgies, or rituals of ultimate concern. The religious writing of Victorian women of faith, I suggest, takes particular shape and voice because it emerges from Christian religious imaginaries formed—deliberately but also in deeper, unconscious ways—by continual engagement in particular worship practices and environments. Thus, while most recent critics writing on Victorian religious texts focus on what a writer’s religious discourse does to counter or revise institutional dogma or practice, I argue that the writers examined here had a particular religious imaginary because they willingly and regularly engaged in church worship in the first place. Their liturgical participation did not merely influence their religious poetics; it enabled, even generated, their respective religious-poetic voices.

My premises arise primarily from work by Smith, who draws on Taylor and Pierre Bourdieu. In Modern Social Imaginaries, Taylor describes the social imaginary as an understanding of “how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups, and so on” (25). But Taylor does not actually mean anything as limited as a set of answers to questions. To make this clear, in A Secular Age he replaces his earlier definition of social imaginary with one that uses such terms as imagine, notions, images, and underlie: the social imaginary is “the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.” Taylor rejects the idea that our fundamental response to the world is determined by a set of articulated beliefs or propositions. He writes, “Humans operated with a social imaginary well before they ever got into the business of theorizing about themselves.” He continues, “We are in fact all acting, thinking and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand,” backgrounds formed by all kinds of historical and social circumstances and unarticulated expectations. To some extent, we choose the frameworks that shape us, but often we do not. Either way, how we live in the world is at least as much a matter of what images or stories we carry as what propositions
we hold. Rephrased in terms of my project, how Victorian women writers of faith crafted their poetic voices is at least as much—and maybe more—determined by a religious imaginary shaped within their chosen worship experiences as by any set of articulated doctrines. This does not negate doctrine, any more than the social imaginary negates social theory. But it avers, with Smith, that a Christian religious imaginary existed before the early Christian church formulated its historic creeds and confessions: “Before Christians had systematic theologies and worldviews, they were singing hymns and psalms, saying prayers, celebrating the Eucharist, sharing their property, and becoming a people marked by a desire for God’s coming kingdom—a desire that constituted them as a peculiar people in the present.”

People worship before (or at least as) they formulate. A social imaginary directs us back before intellectualizing to a felt or imagined “standing in the world”—from worldview to what we might call worldsense.

Taylor’s idea of a social imaginary can be juxtaposed with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to unpack further the notion of an imagined structure or set of dispositions in the individual (or the group) that are neither entirely subjectively nor objectively produced but arise as a “dialectic of expressive dispositions and instituted means of expression.” Habitus, writes Bourdieu in a lengthy definition in The Logic of Practice, are “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.” Such a habitus is produced by the “conditions associated with a particular class of conditions of existence.” For Bourdieu, being immersed in what he calls a cultural field (institutions, rituals, categories) produces certain values and dispositions that then become naturalized and stay with people across contexts. These values and dispositions allow agency in that the individual can improvise and respond to shifting demands, but these responses are limited—even determined—by the habitus.

The concept of habitus, therefore, though more encompassing than Taylor’s social imaginary in its inclusion of all dispositions, not only those related to social existence, corresponds to Taylor’s concept in its argument that people interact with the world not strictly on the basis of principles or beliefs, nor strictly as products of their material or ideological environments, but in a constant, reciprocal process of negotiation, conscious and unconscious, between cultural fields and individual agency, according to
a set of “structured structures predisposed to act as structuring structures.” Further, like Taylor, Bourdieu emphasizes the place of practice in this dialectic. Practices are not simply the unthinking outcomes of a person’s habitus, he notes, but instead result from “the relationship between, on the one hand, his habitus . . . and on the other hand a certain state of the chances objectively offered to him by the social world.” Practices, in other words, can be shaped, generated, creatively produced out of the dialectic of habitus and circumstance. It is this dialectic that the present book also explores, focusing on the “cultural field” called liturgical practice and on the women writers who generated their religious poetics out of the values and dispositions they acquired, consciously and unconsciously, by participating in certain “conditions of existence.” However, throughout the book, I have chosen to refer to these women’s basic orientation to the world, their structuring structures, not with Bourdieu’s term habitus but with Taylor’s and Smith’s term, the imaginary, as the term more readily consonant with literary endeavor. Bourdieu’s inclusion of values as part of the habitus will be useful to remember, though, particularly in the chapters on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, where the features of the Congregationalist imaginary might sometimes sound more like a set of moral values than a fundamental disposition toward the world.

In drawing on Taylor’s idea of a social imaginary and Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, Smith, in Desiring the Kingdom, also considers the relationship of practices to the imaginary, but he does so somewhat differently than Taylor and Bourdieu do. Where Taylor remarks on the reciprocity of practices and ideas (“If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding”) and Bourdieu on the emergence of practices in the dialectic between habitus and circumstances, Smith insists on “the central role of formative practices” (24), or what he calls liturgies. Liturgies, he writes, “shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world” (25); they are “primarily formative rather than merely informative” (27). Developing what he calls an Augustinian anthropology that holds that our “primordial orientation to the world is not knowledge, or even belief, but love” (46), Smith claims a central role for the affective, which he defines as “a prereflective, imaginative ‘attunement’ to the world that precedes the articulation of ideas and even beliefs” (28n11). For Smith, a prioritizing of the affective over the cognitive, of embodiment over abstraction, of liturgy over doctrine rests on a proper understanding of humans as “fundamentally desiring creatures,” not “primarily believing animals.” He criticizes the
“person-as-believer” and “person-as-thinker” models of the human for their disembodying and isolating effects: “Both the materiality of the body (along with attendant bodily practices) and the specificity of the church drop out of this picture” (45). Attention to the practices of worship—whether directed to secular or religious ends—helps us grasp something of the practitioner’s religious imaginary because such bodily or material practices inscribe habits of being into the heart, to the extent that, though such habits are learned, they become “so intricately woven into the fiber of our beings that they function as if they were natural” (56). Moreover, bodily practices “don’t float in society; they find expression and articulation in concrete sites and institutions” (62). Smith examines the liturgies of the mall, the stadium, and the university, as well as the church. About the latter he concludes that we need “to consider what Christians do—or more specifically, what the church as a people does together in the ‘work of the people’ (leitourgos); [we need] to read the practices of Christian worship in order to make out the shape of a distinctly Christian social imaginary” (134). Smith is not making here an argument about influence, about the unseen work or “flowing” of one person or thing upon another so as to affect the mind or action of that other. Rather, Smith proposes that the practices of worship actually form the religious imaginary. A distinctly Christian imaginary emerges through worship.

Smith’s Augustinian anthropology and examination of secular as well as religious liturgies offers new ground and qualitative depth to studies of worship by such seminarians as E. Byron Anderson and Fred P. Edie. Anderson, like Smith, points to the embodied and affective dimensions of worship in Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves. In an earlier article laying the groundwork for this book, Anderson first sums up James Fowler’s position that an understanding of liturgy as dealing with the kinesthetics or sensory experience of faith allows one “to focus on the imaginal character of the liturgy and its power to suggest, form, and evoke the images that represent our convictional knowing”; he then declares, “The practice of the liturgy is a way of knowing self and other, person and community in the world that is other than and more than a cognitive knowing. Liturgical knowing is affective and physical, imaginal and embodied.” Recognizing the power of embodiment, Anderson even adds that liturgy “may be a dangerous thing. Discussions about [language, gender, race, and disability] all serve to remind us that, as a way of knowing written in mind and body, the liturgy continues, in some cases, to reproduce patterns of patriarchy, hierarchical power structures, and disempowerment,” though it can also “subvert” those very things.
If Anderson and Smith offer qualitative evidence for liturgy’s kinesthetic as well as cognitive impact, Fred P. Edie and other liturgical theologians turn to recent studies in neurobiology to affirm the multiple dimensions of embodied knowing. Edie refers to a well-known 1994 study, *Descartes’ Error*, by Antonio Damasio, in which Damasio, after extensive research, hypothesizes that (in Edie’s words) “brain systems for emotion and cognition are often convergent, overlapping and integrally related. [Damasio] suggests that emotion focuses the attention of the organism and thereby sets the parameters for cognitive activity.” Exploring such “relationally engaged” knowing, Edie finds communal worship to have the capacity “for firing on all epistemological cylinders (heart and body, as well as mind).” In “Sensing the Other in Worship: Mirror Neurons and the Empathizing Brain,” David A. Hogue agrees: “Carefully reading recent studies of the brain, it becomes increasingly difficult for us to consider ourselves as spiritual souls that temporarily inhabit material bodies.” Rather, our bodily experiences have significant import for our spiritual, emotional, and cognitive forms of knowing. Increasingly, in fact, neuroscience is offering evidence of an emotion-cognition convergence that counters a Cartesian body-mind duality.

Outside liturgical studies, neuroscience is also fuelling new feminist theories on the connection between bodily experience, emotion, cognition, and creativity. Perhaps most notable is the theory proposed by Elizabeth A. Wilson in *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Wilson recounts first the twentieth-century disregard in the sciences for the study of emotion, then the “remarkable turnaround in neuroscientific interest in emotion” since the 1990s. After also citing Damasio’s argument in *Descartes’ Error* for the central role of emotion in rationality, she focuses on work by Joseph LeDoux, who uses neurological and evolutionary theories to build a “schema for the various affiliations between emotional and cognitive systems.” Wilson’s purpose is to propose that feminists rethink their rejection of biology in theories of the body; but indirectly, this groundbreaking feminist book sustains Smith’s assertions about the import of bodily practices for the formation of an imaginary. Wilson’s summary that “emotional systems are more intimately connected to bodily sensations than are cognitive systems” (93) correlates with Smith’s suggestion that liturgical practices and environments contribute to the way one imagines the world and one’s place in it.

A few literary scholars are also turning to the neurosciences to reconsider creativity and the arts. Suzanne Nalbantian, in an article coauthored with neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux, even speaks of “neuroaesthetics.”
as she explains data that suggest “art is concerned with the intentional cognitive processing of emotional and sensory material which mobilize defined limbic and sensory cortical territories.” Creativity, in other words, though it has a cognitive dimension, also involves a physical process engaging brain regions that store and neurons that transmit images collected through emotional and sensory processes. “Fragmentary images or prerepresentations” marshal “combinations of pre-existing neurons,” calling up “actual sensory precepts and stored memories from diverse brain territories.” Further, this “reactivated memory processing is not simply a matter of retrieval but rather the result of internal testing and selection among alternative accounts, unconsciously biased by preexisting knowledge or by the emotional resonance of actual memories of past experience.” Creativity is not a simple biological process but rather a complex interplay of cognitive, affective, and sensory components of the brain. As Nalbantian puts it, “In the course of creation, the work of imagination sooner or later engages a selection-by-evaluation mechanism that brings into play the limbic system and its outposts that are active in the context of emotion.”

Nalbantian’s careful explanation of the selection-by-evaluation mechanism engaged in the work of imagination goes some way to dispel possible anxieties about reducing creativity—not to mention religious experience—to merely a biological process, with no room for such prized ideals as the free spirit or such theological concepts as free will. As Wilson points out in Psychosomatic, for feminists especially, biology has been seen as “reductive materiality stripped of the animating effects of culture and sociality” (3); feminists have typically, therefore, “foreclosed” on neurological data and relied heavily on theories of social construction (8, 13). In a challenging move, Wilson argues that tolerating and exploring biological reductionism might actually provide new accounts of the body, and she returns to overlooked elements in work by Freud, Darwin, and others to present her case. Others, such as seminarian Cliff Guthrie, turn again to Antonio Damasio to counter the fear of reductionism: “To discover that a particular feeling . . . depends on activity in a number of specific brain systems interacting with a number of body organs does not diminish the status of that feeling as a human phenomenon. Neither anguish nor the elation that love or art can bring about is devalued by understanding some of the myriad biological processes that make them what they are.” But Nalbantian’s account is perhaps most persuasive, or at least most attractive, in its presentation of creativity as biologically complex.
In recent years, though, some literary scholars, including Victorianists, have seemed not to need Guthrie-like reassurances or new feminist suppositions or even neurological data to justify their critical interest in relationships between the sensory and the affective, or the body, mind, and emotions. Indeed, Victorianists point out that the Victorians themselves often connected the body to the mind. Gregory Tate observes that Tennyson’s poem “St. Simeon Stylites” repeatedly “draws attention to the way in which Simeon’s body influences his mind,” while the line “I am part of all that I have met” in “Ulysses” suggests that the speaker’s “psychology is inseparable from the experiences and circumstances that have influenced it.” Similarly, Marie Banfield observes in her study of period terminology related to the sentiments that “the nineteenth century increasingly saw body and mind, thought, feeling and sensation as inextricably linked.” In *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*, William A. Cohen argues that, in fact, many nineteenth-century writers saw the body as a “sensory interface between the interior and the world.” He notes, “Evolutionary biology and affiliated nineteenth-century sciences promoted the notion that consciousness developed out of the body rather than being implanted in it” and that such ideas clashed with long-held “philosophical and religious ideas of a self or a soul that could act independently of its corporeal habitation.” But, as Smith elsewhere points out, affirmation of the body and of the import of bodily practice has a long history within the Christian heritage as well, though it may have been forgotten at times. Augustine, Smith writes, affirmed embodiment by emphasizing three biblical concepts: the goodness of creation, wherein finitude is not lack but gift; the incarnation of Christ, “wherein the transcendent inhabits the immanent without loss”; and the resurrection of the body, wherein embodiment is affirmed as an eternal state, not a temporary, postlapsarian one. To read Christian poetry through the lens of liturgical practices, therefore, is not to adopt nineteenth-century scientific frameworks that would probably have sat uneasily with the women who produced that poetry; rather, it is to focus on the formations of a religious imaginary through a mode that the writers themselves affirmed by their commitment to worship. At the same time, it grounds us in historical and material practices. As Cohen observes, “Attention to the experiential dimension of the body . . . need not come at the cost of a historical or political account of power differentials” (24). Indeed, in this book, I give an account of such power differentials as they appear in questions of gender.

Putting together philosophical, sociological, liturgical, feminist, neurobiological, and literary studies, I contend that an approach to religious
poetry that takes into account the practices of the church as experienced by the poets is not merely justified but perhaps necessary for a thorough appreciation of that poetry. In this study, I undertake a reading of worship as experienced by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter, in order to understand the distinctive shapes of their religious imaginaries and so read their poetry with care and distinction. That poetry I sometimes designate as religious and sometimes as devotional. G. B. Tennyson, in *Victorian Devotional Poetry,* helpfully distinguishes between these terms. Religious poetry, Tennyson writes, includes “all poetry of faith, poetry about the practices and beliefs of religion, poetry designed to advance a particular religious position, poetry animated by the legends and figures of religious history, and poetry that grows out of worship.” Tennyson describes devotional poetry as that subset of religious poetry that “exhibits an orientation toward worship and a linkage with established liturgical forms.” In this study, I also use religious poetry as the more expansive term, to refer to, for example, poetry that examines faith or exegetes sacred text or recasts religious interpretation; but, as the foregoing pages indicate, I link this wider religious poetry as well as the subset of devotional poetry to “established liturgical forms.” Like Tennyson, I use devotional poetry to refer to that which exhibits a worshipful posture toward the divine; but that posture, I assert, also often includes intellectual perception. In other words, the interrelatedness of cognition, emotion, and embodiment precludes too sharp a distinction between religious and devotional poetry, though the latter frequently carries a stronger worship ethos. Consequently, I sometimes speak of a religious poem as exhibiting a devotional impulse, even if as a whole it would not be characterized as a devotional poem, or of a devotional poem as exhibiting an interpretive impulse, even if as a whole it would not be characterized as exegetical.

I also frequently use the term voice in this study to denote the rendering of the religious imaginary into language. It is, admittedly, a term with multiple meanings and a vexed reception, often linked to debates about the self or identity. I use it, however, neither skeptically (voice as always fabricated because the self does not actually exist) nor idealistically (voice as bespeaking a single, knowable, authorial identity). I use it instead in Peter Elbow’s sense, as a resonant presence of the author, as words that somehow seem to “have behind them the unconscious as well as the conscious” of the writer. In terms of my project, Elbow’s description of resonant voice might be modified to read “words that have behind them the imaginary of the
writer.” Further, in intimating a physical body, voice fits better with my focus on embodied liturgical experience than would discourse, for example. Finally, because voice also intimates individuality, it implicitly allows for differences between persons (Elbow, Everyone, 187), in this case, differences between Barrett Browning, Rossetti, and Procter. In this study, therefore, voice means the expression of the imaginary, the resonance of the imaginary in the poetry, in all its complexity. But in using this term, I do not lose sight of that which is consciously explored, crafted, adapted, or dismissed by the poets. I maintain that these women poets generated poetry out of their liturgical experiences, that they also creatively experimented with voice, form, and issues associated with their worship lives. In this regard, I am less insistent than Smith that practices always precede beliefs, and I am more inclined to view practices as formative but also as critically examined by the women poets of this study.

Before I turn to exploring religious imaginary and voice in these three women poets, I offer a short interlude on Christian liturgy: what are, generally speaking, the practices of Christian worship? As later chapters in this book demonstrate, the exact shape of the liturgy differs by denomination (that is, named churches within Christianity, such as Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, and so on) or even by local church, but, as Smith points out in Desiring the Kingdom, “All Christian worship . . . is liturgical in the sense that it is governed by norms, draws on a tradition, includes bodily rituals or routines, and involves formative practices” (152). It involves common elements that, taken individually and together, constitute opportunities to be in service to God, to acknowledge his worthiness. Before I break up the singularity of Smith’s term “a distinctly Christian social imaginary,” then, I draw on his exegesis of the Christian social imaginary embedded in Christian worship to describe the worldsense shared by the Victorian Christian women poets studied here.

As Smith explains, the historic Christian liturgy begins with a call to worship, often taken from one of the Psalms (for example, “Come, let us bow down in worship”) (160). This call implies that the church is not a voluntary society but a people aware of being called by God to a certain kind of existence in the world. In recognition of their need for help in living before God appropriately, the people respond to the call by requesting mercy or naming their dependence (for example, “Our help is in the Name of the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth”). Usually using the language of Scripture, the minister then extends God’s greeting and blessing to the people (for example, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”). These
opening elements of the liturgy take but a moment but become absorbed into the imagination. They reinforce the dialogic nature of Christian worship and its implicit founding on a relationship between God and people.

This dialogic nature of worship continues when God’s blessing is followed by a reminder of God’s law or requirements for Christian living: “The law,” writes Smith, “though it comes as a scandalous challenge to the modern desire for autonomy, is actually an invitation to be freed from a-teleological wandering” so that adherents find the conditions that are “conducive to flourishing” (176). The law is followed by an honest confession of failure (in the form of a prayer or recitation) to live rightly and love fully, on personal, communal, social, political, and other levels. To this confession God responds with an assurance of pardon (for example, “The Almighty and merciful Lord grant you absolution and remission of all your sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit”). The people who admit failure find forgiveness, hope, and encouragement to action. The religious imaginary carried in the liturgy so far emphasizes a personal relationship founded on ongoing dialogue.

The church service also often includes several instances of song and prayer, as well as a creedal recitation. Smith notes that singing is a bodily action, drawing on stomach muscles, vocal cords, lungs, and tongues, and that song seems to become a mode of bodily memory. The church’s songs can be “an affective, embodied means of training our speech, which is so centrally constitutive of who we are and how we imagine ourselves” (172). In addition, the people’s singing reinforces the idea of community, reminding the people that worship is not strictly about personal spiritual flourishing but about communal human flourishing: “it is training for temporal, embodied human community” (174). This sense of belonging within community is also reinforced by the recitation of a creed, often the historic Apostles’ Creed. Reciting this creed, or summary of the teachings of Christ’s disciples, also contributes to the formation of a Christian imaginary. Smith describes it as a weekly declaration of citizenship in God’s kingdom; as a situating of oneself within a long tradition of faith; and as a rehearsal of “the skeletal structure of the story” in which Christians find their identity (192). Prayer, too, shapes the imaginary, inasmuch as it is a conversation with someone not visibly present but nevertheless believed to be present and attentive, and inasmuch as it assumes that the God to whom the prayer is offered exceeds the worship space. Smith writes, “Prayer enacts an entire cosmology because implicit in the very act of prayer is an entire ontology and construal of the
God-world relationship” (193). Prayer also implies “an epistemic humility . . . [a readiness] to be dependent on a teacher outside of ourselves” (194). Song, creed, and prayer carry a world sense of community, tradition, and story anchored in a God-human relationship.

A Christian worship service also includes reading from the Bible and some form of commentary or sermon on that reading. What does public reading from this book do for the formation of a Christian imaginary? It initiates a new way of reading the world, says Smith (197). Over time, the people who read and hear the exposition of the Christian Scriptures regularly in public worship “begin to absorb the plot of the story, begin to see [themselves] as characters within it” (196). The creation-fall-redemption-consummation narrative becomes the narrative in which they place themselves. They situate themselves on its continuum; its images become their images, until the entire Bible serves as “the fuel of the Christian imagination” (195). Its public reading and commentary validate its public scope, showing the worshippers how they fit together with others, how and why things go on between them (and God) as they do, what expectations are held for them, and the like.

Another important ritual in the Christian liturgy is that of sacrament. Whatever value or interpretation is placed on the sacraments by a particular denomination, all Christian churches practice at least two sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist. These rituals, in general, are seen as intensified moments of God’s grace. The first, Smith writes, contributes to the formation of the religious imaginary by picturing and narrating three things: a religio-politico-social reality in which all believers are equal before God (all are baptized into the Father, Son, and Spirit); a reconfiguration of family beyond the sphere of the home (that is, the church family); and an affirmation of a fundamental antithesis in the world, between what pleases God and what does not (182). Baptism promises and makes “a new person and a new people” (183). The second sacrament, variously termed, is also an action, a ritual that shapes the religious imaginary. Smith calls it “an episode that compresses the gospel into an action” (198). Its meaning is understood in various ways, some of which are explored in later chapters; but generally, the bread and wine of this sacrament are taken to represent the body and blood of Jesus as he died on the cross, broken and poured out in an act of redemption for sinners. In taking bread and wine as symbols of himself, Jesus, Smith writes, hallowed the everyday, the material, the culturally produced. This sacrament therefore suggests that the kingdom of God does not cancel the world or human activity but transfigures it (199–200). Further, the sacrament reinforces Christian time
by remembering the past and looking ahead to the future of restoration. It contributes to an eschatological imaginary, as also the observance of the liturgical calendar does in orienting the telos around a God-man who entered time, departed from it, and will return to it again. This orientation impresses on the Christian a deep sense of the future that also informs the present and stretches to the past (200–201). Finally, as an act of communal eating and drinking, the sacrament functions as a microcosm of the fellowship, justice, love, and hope necessary for the whole world (201–3). Participating in this sacrament shapes a worldsense in which these ends are obtainable through Christ.

The Christian worship service also includes an opportunity for financial giving, for what Smith calls a kingdom economics of gratitude. Worship, he notes, embodies an alternative economy, a reconfiguration of distribution and consumption that counters the capitalist imagination (204). Once again, a liturgical moment helps form a particular worldsense. After all this, the Christian liturgy ends with a sending out and another blessing. Having been for a while in a “practice arena,” worshippers continue being human—as imaged within the liturgy—outside the church. “Thus,” Smith concludes, “the church is a cultural center, not just a spiritual filling station” (206–7). Liturgy forms the prototype for living in the wider human community. It is a “dense and charged” time, “packed with formative power” (208). Kevin Irwin offers a similar recognition of the movement of liturgy from church to world: “Every Christian is influenced, in however minimal or maximal a way, by the liturgy” such that its effects carry over to “how one prays, reflects and acts outside the experience of liturgy.” 27 Indeed, liturgy means “public service.” 28 Its formative power or public service might be challenged by competing secular liturgies, but intentional Christian worship nevertheless powerfully shapes the religious imaginary of those who regularly engage in it, to the extent that their activities outside the liturgy—writing poetry, for example—can yet come forward out of that experience.

Finally, although Smith does not include church environment in his consideration of liturgy’s effect on the Christian social imaginary, in the present study I include architecture and environment as formative for the religious imaginary. Indeed, the neurological studies surveyed earlier would indicate that physical surroundings—whether richly decorated or visually spare—form an important part of the sensory impact of worship on the mind and cognition. Jan M. van der Lans and Henri Geerts, in their study of the impact of setting on worshippers, conclude that the intended effects of liturgy depend on “physical components (building, visual and auditory
Building materials, structures, colors, fabrics, spaces, décor, and the like all signify religious values and contribute images, even stories, to the imaginary, perhaps especially to an imaginary attentive to matters of structure and form in poetry.

Building on Smith’s contention that liturgy plays a formative role in the religious imaginary, I nevertheless speak in my own work not of a single Christian imaginary or voice but of imaginaries and voices, since Christianity, for all its shared beliefs, is not a unified entity. As just one example, different Christian traditions term the sacrament involving bread and wine differently, as the Lord’s Supper, Communion, Mass, or the Eucharist. Tyron Inbody explains how each term carries its own images and stories: the Lord’s Supper—the term used by many Protestant churches, including all Dissenting groups in England—intends a fellowship meal rooted in the Hebrew Passover meal and refigured in Jesus’ last meal with his disciples; consequently, it evokes a narrative of creation to consummation. Communion—the primary term among Anglicans—emphasizes the communal nature of the sacrament, the relationship between Christ and church rather than Christ and individual. Mass—the Roman Catholic term—emphasizes Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and envisions a repeated redoing of that sacrifice as a continual renewing of God’s favor to the individual. The Eucharist—the primary term among Orthodox groups—stresses thanksgiving for salvation; its mood is celebratory and joyful.

Though the three Victorian women poets I study all participated in the sacrament involving bread and wine, their very terms for it imply different assumptions, stories, and images within the broader Christian imaginary that Smith sketches. Indeed, I have chosen Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter for this study partly because they each identified themselves as Christian poets in an age when many were giving up the Christian faith, and so their commitments seem deliberate rather than part of a conforming expectation; but also because they represent among them the three major strands of Victorian Christianity: Dissent, Anglicanism, and Roman Catholicism, respectively. In fact, each of these women made moves within Victorian Christianity that reinforce observations about their religious particularities: Barrett Browning repeatedly associating herself with one or another of the “Independents”; Rossetti becoming increasingly High Anglican; and Procter converting from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. Though these associations are increasingly recognized among critics today, they remain underexplored from the angle I propose.
I consider each poet in paired chapters. The first chapter of the pair explores the religious imaginary fostered by the liturgy of that poet’s particular religious affiliation. Concomitantly, it outlines the issues that a particular liturgy presented to the woman poet who participated in it. Period conceptions of women’s nature and roles figure into these chapter discussions. The second chapter of each pair reads each woman’s religious poetry in light of the imaginary and the issues highlighted in the preceding chapter. Here the distinctive traits of the poetry emerge, the intricacies of the subject that Dennis Taylor suggested we seek. A pattern emerges in these chapters: traditional practices, forms, and beliefs to some extent restricted the woman poet’s religious imaginary as it turned to poetic endeavor; but at the same time, participation in worship enabled the woman poet to imagine and experiment with form, message, and voice in innovative ways. That is to say, though these women were committed to their religious affiliations, they were not blindly or uncritically committed. They did not pretend satisfaction with all dimensions of their community’s practices, but neither did they become religious rebels or even heterodox affiliates. Instead, they turned tension to creative account, conversing with the issues of the community and formulating their religious poetics in ways that both carry and criticize the community’s worldsense.

Congregationalism, among other forms of Dissent, actually refused to use the word liturgy in reference to worship services, since it evoked the possibility of a prescribed form. As the next chapter demonstrates in more detail, Congregationalists, also called Independents, rejected anything that suggested an authority apart from Scripture, including form prayers, creedal statements, and a fixed pattern of liturgy. When Congregationalists wrote about liturgy, therefore, they did so carefully, offering advice rather than rules. The Congregational Service Book (1847), for example, noted of itself that it prescribed “neither Creed nor Prayers,” while Samuel Clarkson’s 1856 Form or Freedom stated that a fixed liturgy would be “as strange and eccentric in the ‘Congregationalist,’ as comets in the ‘solar,’ system.” Still, outlines for worship did appear from time to time for these churches. The Congregational Service Book lists as appropriate the following elements: a call to worship from one of the Psalms, prayer, psalm and hymn singing, Scripture reading, sermon, and parting blessing. Samuel Palmer’s 1812 A New Directory for Nonconformist Churches lists Scripture reading, prayer, psalm and hymn singing, and sermon. Neither list mentions sacraments. Although Congregationalists observed baptism and the Lord’s Supper, they seem not to have valued these as highly as the sermon, generally
speaking of them only as a “perpetual obligation,” with little further commentary.” Palmer rather complained, in fact, that Congregationalists “seldom speak of going to worship, but usually to hear this or the other preacher” (56). This liturgy, I suggest, cultivates a religious imaginary that privileges language over symbol. It attends to the narrative shape of Christianity, its expository inclinations, and its call to action in the world.

A Congregationalist—or, slightly more broadly, an Independent—religious imaginary permeates Barrett Browning’s religious writing both in ways she consciously determined and in less intentional ways. Her religious imaginary privileges the verbal and dialogic over other modes of knowing or communicating. Although she held a broadly Christian view of the material world as testimony to the spiritual, Barrett Browning’s religious imaginary is primarily formed not by symbols conveying grace but by language conveying truth. That is, her sense of the relationship between physical and spiritual worlds was not as theologically sacramental as Rossetti’s. Her approach to religious subjects tended toward the expository rather than the meditative. Consequently, she began writing religious poetry by emulating the hymn, then drew increasingly on the sermon as an effective model for her poetry. Destabilizing elitist and gendered notions, she increasingly imagined the poet as busy with investigation and interpretation rather than awaiting divine revelation. Her poetry gravitates more and more toward expansive forms that feature multiple voices; these voices increasingly unite intellectual work and emotive language rather than consign them to separate types of poetry. It also increasingly sees right faith as leading to right work in the world. I discuss the early hymns, the midcareer dramatic lyrics, the verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*, and the later poem “A Curse for a Nation.”

Anglo-Catholicism, as with all forms of Anglicanism, used *The Book of Common Prayer* as its liturgical guide. *The Book of Common Prayer* outlines what became the most important worship service for Anglo-Catholics, the Communion service. Historically, this service emphasized worship as an encounter with God. In the nineteenth century, the sense that God mainly manifests himself in sacrament and through heightened ecclesiology overcame in many Anglican churches the earlier, more balanced sense that God reveals himself through manifestation and proclamation. At the same time, a heightened liturgical ritual in many churches tied (so it was imagined) the present church to its ancient heritage and underscored the communion of saints. This Anglo-Catholic double focus on communion—with Christ and with fellow believers across the ages—nevertheless arose from a historic Anglican liturgy to
which Rossetti criticism has been less attentive than to its nineteenth-century offshoots. But Anglican worship was a devotional style that even non-Anglicans noticed. However much Dissenters rejected the Anglican Church, at least some of them were conceding at midcentury that while “the preaching of the Established Church is, on the whole, inferior to that of educated Nonconformists, the impression is prevalent that the former excels the latter in the devotional spirit which seems to characterise its public services.” These public services, I suggest, cultivate a religious imaginary that privileges encounter and symbol over narrative and exposition, that attends to community and communion, and that calls for discipleship.

Rossetti’s twice-weekly participation in Anglican and, increasingly, Anglo-Catholic church services was perhaps her most frequently repeated, lifelong intellectual, bodily, emotional, and spiritual act. With its emphasis on encounter and discipleship, the historic Anglican liturgy opens the way for a religious poetry with an ontological focus: how ought one to be vis-à-vis Christ and others? Because, for Rossetti, religious poetry examines the spiritual condition more than anything else, it relies primarily on short but intense poetic forms that encourage introspection or contemplation. Further—and especially under the formative effects of the ecclesiological and ritualist movements—religious poetry derives its power mainly from its attunement to a sacramental aesthetic, where sacrament means both enactment of the gospel and conveyance of grace through symbol. With its appeal to the sense as well as the mind and spirit, Anglo-Catholicism encouraged a religious poetry that also gave attention to structure, arrangement, and material appearance to underscore the importance of religious formation. But such poetry does not withdraw from communal issues; it quietly offers whatever vision might be required to restore fractured communities to wholeness. It does this primarily by examining modes of being and relationship rather than by persuasive exposition or narration.

Turning to my third poet, I theorize liturgy again as the ground from which Adelaide Procter developed her religious poetics, this time two quite different liturgies within nineteenth-century English Roman Catholicism. Procter attended St. James’s Church in Spanish Place, where the Tridentine Mass reflected the sober patterns of historic Catholicism as laid out in the traditional Roman Missal; this liturgy privileged the canon of the Latin Mass, with its solemnity, mystery, and cultivation of private, parallel devotions alongside the church’s liturgical activity. Procter also attended the London Oratory, where additional worship services followed a revivalist mode
expressed in newly written prayer and song books, and sermons drew more attention than celebrations of Mass; revivalist Catholicism preferred expressive, even flamboyant services that drew public notice, encouraged religious-social activity, and encouraged submission to the pope. These two liturgies, I suggest, allow for a versatile religious imaginary from which Procter generated diverse kinds of religious poetry.

Though well received in its own time, Procter’s poetry, especially the religious verse, has not generally been highly valued since. Actually, even critical Victorian readers such as Barrett Browning saw it as having “little force & originality,” as being high in “moral tone” but lacking in “vigour & artistic development.”

I include Procter in the present work not to dispute this assessment but to examine how the most popular Roman Catholic poet of the period also created her verse out of a particular church experience, much as her (potentially more gifted) peers did. Religious poetry for Procter attended not primarily to exegetical work or aesthetic intricacy but, on the one hand, to a tradition of reserve about religious mystery, a tradition that nevertheless encouraged (experimental) private devotion, and, on the other hand, to devotional expressiveness and affect. Some of Procter’s poems build on particular moments and phrases drawn from the Mass, offering themselves as alternatives to vernacular texts provided by clergy for use during Latin Mass. Others adopt effusive language to convey a religious ardor that properly avoids undue scrutiny of form, expression, or text. In many poems, a moral-didactic voice takes precedence over genuine dialogue, social and emotional fervor over theological precision. Yet these strategies, though sometimes problematic, are also sometimes deliberate, arising from a revivalist conviction that affect can do powerful work. Surveying Procter’s poetry widely enables the reader to see how different modes of worship within one faith commitment can lead to an equally versatile religious poetics.

Some Victorian writers, men and women, gave up their commitments to traditional Christianity under the pressures of the age. Others maintained their ties to the Christian faith but expressed their anxieties or rebellions against it in their writings. Still others—such as the women poets examined here—cultivated their religious imaginaries through their church lives and so created distinctive religious-poetic voices for themselves. In the process, they engaged liturgical, poetic, and broader cultural questions in both creative and critical ways, and so perhaps prompt a rethinking of our own cultural assumptions about the value of religious practice.
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