

Karen Dieleman. *Religious Imaginaries: The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0821420171. Price: US\$59.95/£40.00.

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Dieleman's argument begins from the premise "that sustained practices 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" (177). This simple premise has important consequences, Dieleman demonstrates, for how we understand the writings of three nineteenth-century women poets whose liturgical practices shaped their minds and bodies through the repetition of words and actions and the organization of space and time. Such practices produce a "worldsense" (7) with a particular orientation toward the divine, others, and one's environment. Dieleman calls this a "religious imaginary," a concept she derives from Charles Taylor's social imaginary, Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, and James K. A. Smith's examination of the liturgies of both religious and secular formative practices. Religious poetry emerges out of this religious imaginary in a way that distinctively reflects the poet's liturgical practices; thus, Dieleman convincingly demonstrates, one cannot understand these women's religious poetry without understanding the contours of their worship experiences.

Dieleman's work is a significant contribution to the recent vibrant conversation about the intersection of religion and literature in Victorian Britain, which also includes monographs by Kirstie Blair and Charles LaPorte. Anyone with a general familiarity with the religious landscape of the nineteenth century knows that it was vigorously, and sometimes viciously, partisan.

Dieleman's contribution to our understanding of the subject is her careful and compelling account not of the religious periodical wars, but of how these denominational differences were experienced in liturgical practice. Dieleman demonstrates that denominationally-determined liturgical practices gave rise to denominationally-inflected religious imaginaries, so that we can speak of a Congregational religious imaginary (Elizabeth Barrett Browning), or an Anglo-Catholic (Christina Rossetti) or a Catholic revivalist (Adelaide Procter) imaginary.

Dieleman offers a new approach to women's religious poetry in her contention that denominational differences matter—to the poets and to readers—just as much as and sometimes more than gender. Rather than defining women's religious poetry as a whole or “seeking for signs of protest and revision” (4) of religion in a poet's work, Dieleman gives a more nuanced and accurate account of how these women's “religious poetics ... both carry and criticize the community's worldsense” (19) in issues relating to, for example, the treatment of the poor, as well as gender. Dieleman's focus on denominational difference allows her to ask what proves to be a very fruitful question: how might religious practices produce a religious imaginary out of which a distinct poetry emerges? Framing the question this way enables her to give a compelling account of, for example, why Barrett Browning tends toward longer narrative poems, and Rossetti toward compressed lyrics—an important question for any reader of Victorian poetry. Dieleman's intriguing answer is that the Congregationalist liturgy in which Barrett Browning participated valued proclamation whereas Anglo-Catholic liturgical practice valued manifestation.

The book is organized according to Dieleman's paradigm that liturgical practices shape poetic practices. There are two chapters on each poet: the first details the denominational contours of each poet's worship experience; the second then explores how the poet's work

reflects the unique religious imaginary produced by these practices. Dieleman's accounts of what was entailed when one attended a nineteenth-century Dissenting chapel, Anglo-Catholic church, or English Catholic mass are illuminating and highly accessible for the non-expert and expert alike. She provides crisp, compelling, and balanced explanations of denominational differences that highlight what is at stake in, for example, calling the Eucharist *the Lord's Supper* versus *communion* (the former emphasizing "a narrative of creation to consummation," the latter "the communal nature of the sacrament" [18]), or how the idea of going to hear a sermon is alive within a Congregational but not an Anglo-Catholic imaginary.

These accounts are fascinating and help to invigorate what might seem insignificant liturgical differences to most of today's readers. In her chapter on Barrett Browning's poetry, Dieleman focuses on the paradox that despite the fact that hymns were distinct to her liturgical practice, Barrett Browning's early experiments in the hymn were short-lived and mostly unsuccessful. Since the Congregationalist religious imaginary, with its emphasis on verbal proclamation, valued exposition rather than meditation, Barrett Browning's "poetry gravitates more and more toward expansive forms that feature multiple voices" (20). In discussing the poet's mid-career dramatic lyrics and lyrical dramas, Dieleman highlights the role of the *sermocinatio*, or imaginary dialogue used by church fathers (whom Barrett Browning read) and by contemporary preachers. In closing her discussion of Barrett Browning's poetry, she calls into question the standard reading of *Aurora Leigh* (1856) as poet-prophet discourse and argues that it is instead the figure of the poet-preacher that animates Barrett Browning's narrative and stylistic choices in this verse-novel.

While Barrett Browning's poetry privileges "language conveying truth" (20), narrative, and speakers who progress from confusion toward knowledge, Rossetti's Anglo-Catholic

imaginary generates poetry that “works instead by glancing off connections, building harmonies, advancing and retreating, seeking similarity-in-difference, weaving its own fabric or veil behind which God might be now hiding, now disclosing himself” (118). Dieleman draws on David Tracy’s concept of the analogical imagination to enrich the usual Rossetti reference points of Tractarian Analogy and Reserve. She demonstrates, contra many treatments of Rossetti’s work, that her religious poetry “takes mystery and uncertainty as a gift, not a problem” (101). Rossetti’s often terse and spare verse proceeds by “examining modes of being and relationship rather than by persuasive exposition or narration” (21). To this end, Rossetti uses “*saints* rather than *church* to mean the people of God, whether on earth or in heaven ... to reinforce the imagined link between the earthly and heavenly worshipping communities” (164). This proves particularly important for Rossetti because, on the one hand, she “carr[ies]” (19) her Anglo-Catholic community’s emphasis on the concept of the Communion of Saints, which was imagined as reinforced by heightened liturgical ritual that connected worshippers ancient and modern. On the other hand, it also became an area for Rossetti to “criticize” (19) when this theory diverged from practice. Dieleman tracks the importance of Rossetti’s use of saints and saintly choirs in her final, and understudied, poetic volume *Verses* (1893), as instances of imagining the egalitarian community and worship experience that were compromised by the introduction of surpliced choirs.

Procter presents an interesting case because the two liturgies she regularly engaged in were quite different: the “sober” Tridentine Mass that “privileged the canon of the Latin Mass, with its solemnity, mystery, and cultivation of private, parallel devotions alongside the church’s liturgical activity,” and the revivalist services at the London Oratory, which were “expressive, even flamboyant services that drew public notice, encouraged religious-social activity, and

encouraged submission to the pope” (21-22). These diverse liturgical experiences, Dieleman argues, “allow for a versatile religious imaginary from which Procter generated diverse kinds of religious poetry” that are marked by mystery and reserve on the one hand and “devotional expressiveness and affect” on the other (22). Thus Procter’s oeuvre includes works such as “The Inner Chamber” (1858) in which the speaker ruefully cautions “Do not ask of that hidden thing” (217) and poems like “The Names of our Lady” (1858) in which “emotion prevails over logic” and “[c]ompilation displaces concentration”—though Dieleman maintains that “[i]ts gush does quite knowing work” (233-35).

The reader will appreciate throughout the book Dieleman’s gracious handling of critics with whom she disagrees as well as denominations that disagreed with each other. A central benefit of Dieleman’s approach to denominational difference is that her analysis of liturgical practices can be used to think about men’s poetry as well. In fact, one wishes the book had done a bit more of this (beyond the brief cross-references to George Herbert, John Keble, Frederick Faber, and John Henry Newman). Dieleman’s book gains much from its tight-knit comparative approach to these three poets, but it might have benefited from a greater sense of what other poets, especially ones who were not known primarily as religious poets, were doing at the time. Her argument that Barrett Browning’s dramatic lyrics emerged from a distinctly Congregationalist religious imaginary has the potential to destabilize the dominant narratives about the nineteenth-century rise and appeal of the dramatic monologue, and it seems particularly valuable for thinking about Robert Browning’s lifelong preoccupation with the form. And while Dieleman’s account of denominational difference is illuminated throughout by her ability to closely read religious terms like *saints*, *church*, *Lord’s Supper*, *communion*, and *altar*, one sometimes wishes for equally textured accounts of the poetry. Especially given the recent

attention to the importance of meter in nineteenth-century British poetry, the book could have more fully considered how the somatic experience of liturgical participation might shape a poet's use of meter. Finally, Dieleman's thesis "that distinctive religious-poetic voices can arise from religious imaginaries formed by and in response to liturgical practice" (2) is powerful and convincing, but one wonders if Dieleman would permit a reverse flow of influence. Can religious poetry shape one's religious sensibility or experience of religious practice? Can poetry shape the imaginary? However, these are larger questions emerging from her carefully organized and compelling analysis that do credit to the book rather than take away from it.

Biographical Notice:

Erin Nerstad is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Chicago. Her dissertation examines the relationship between poetic innovation and religion in the long nineteenth century in Britain. She has published on Robert Browning, representations of the *tragédienne* in visual art, and the nineteenth-century Etching Revival.