



'The Basilica after the Primitive Christians': Liturgy, Architecture and Anglican Identity in the Building of the Fifty New Churches

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ABSTRACT

The London churches built by Nicholas Hawksmoor – the architect required by the Commission for the Fifty New Churches to provide a template for the new churches according to the principles laid down in 1712 – are often regarded as the idiosyncratic creations of the architect's individual genius. They were, however, as much the creation of the particular intellectual, theological and political context of the late Stuart period, an expression of a high church attempt to reconnect the Church of England with the early centuries of the Christian Church, particularly the great basilicas built under Constantine and Justinian. Conservative in intent, they were at the same time fed by the new spirit of intellectual enquiry led by the Royal Society and the expansion of global trade at the start of the eighteenth century. These express a new Anglican denominational identity as the inheritor of the 'purest' traditions of the 'primitive' church, ancient yet modern, orthodox and, at the same time, reformed: one that still influences discussion across the Communion today.

KEYWORDS: architecture, basilica, Fifty New Churches, Nicholas Hawksmoor, London

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Introduction

Nicholas Hawksmoor's London churches have, over the past decades, continued to grow in reputation as a wonderful efflorescence of English baroque church architecture. Half of them bomb damaged during the Second World War and regarded previously as eccentric, even sinister products of a wayward genius, they are only now getting the care and attention they deserve revealing their true glory, within and without. The first four, St Alfege's Greenwich, St Anne's Limehouse, St George-in-the-East Wapping and Christchurch Spitalfields were built to the east of the City of London very close to the river, in poorer districts which were changing as a result of the new wealth and activity brought about by expanding trade and empire, as well as an influx of immigrants from the countryside and abroad. They were followed by St George's Bloomsbury to the west of the City in a newly fashionable district and St Mary Woolnooth in the City itself, very close to the Royal Exchange.

These were all built within a relatively short space of time between 1712 and 1731 as the result of the Fifty New Churches Act of 1711. This Act occurred at a very particular political moment as anxiety grew about the succession towards the end of Queen Anne's reign. Memories were still strong of the 'Babylonian Captivity' of the Church of England during Cromwell's Protectorate. Many looked forward to a renewed age of Anglican conformity after the Restoration, but hopes had been upset by the Act of Toleration of 1689. In London there was a specific problem. There were only forty parishes serving the whole metropolis and many of the churches were small, inadequate and in bad repair. If people had chosen to come to their parish church there would not have been room to accommodate them. There were many more dissenting chapels, mostly licensed after the 1689 Act, than there were Anglican churches. Where there were immigrant communities there was also an abundance of pastors and preachers looking for posts. The first four of Hawksmoor's churches were built in areas with a high number of Huguenot refugee congregations, the French-speaking population having vastly expanded after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis XIV. The Huguenots had their own leading representatives including dispossessed aristocrats who had served in William of Orange's invasion force in 1688 and wealthy businessmen who were establishing themselves in these areas as leading citizens.² The churches were conceived by the Commissioners both as an expression of the

2. Cf. Randolph Vigne, 'In the purlieu of St Alfege's: Huguenot Families in 17th-19th Century Greenwich', *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society* 27 (1999).

need for retrenchment in the face of the growing power and influence of dissent, and of the need for reform to meet the pastoral challenges of the time. They were designed to be a grand and highly visible response to this new situation, and to draw attention to the renewed power of the Established Church at a time when this was seen as being under threat.

The Commission established by the Act of 1711 for which Hawksmoor designed these churches was set up at the zenith of the High Church Tory party's influence in Church and State. Francis Atterbury, later Bishop of Rochester and Dean of Westminster, eventually to leave for exile to France as a non-juror, was at the height of his influence. At the time, the lower house of Convocation, the house of clergy, and the 'country' party of Tory squires and clergy were in revolt against the 'court' party and an upper house dominated by Whig appointees to the episcopate. For a brief period between 1710 and 1714 they had their hands on the levers of power under Harley's administration and they made the most of it. The Act of Parliament came out of a petition from the Lower House of Convocation with Atterbury's active support and encouragement.³ The first body of commissioners appointed, which set up the architectural and theological brief to which the various architects would work, was mostly composed of high church Tories, many of whom had been educated together at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford. They included William Bromley, the speaker of the House of Commons, the Dean of Christ Church, George Smalridge, the Bishop of London, Henry Compton, and Atterbury himself, then Dean of Carlisle.

By the appointment of the third commission in December 1715, many of the original commissioners, including Bromley and Atterbury, had disappeared, Queen Anne had died, and the Whigs were once more in the ascendant under the first Hanoverian monarch, George I. But Smalridge remained the chairman of the committee charged with the actual provision of churches, and the principles to be followed had been laid down. A more lasting influence on Church architecture and furnishing survived the change from the English Baroque style as represented by Wren, Hawksmoor and Vanbrugh, and its replacement by a renewed Palladian classicism under Burlington's Whig placemen on the Commission. But the expression of a distinctive, sober but daring style of Anglican baroque architecture, based on continental catholic models and high church scholarly ideas of primitive church tradition, did not. The hope of many of the original Commission was that they

3. G.V. Bennett, *The Tory Crisis of Church and State 1688-1730: The Career of Francis Atterbury Bishop of Rochester* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 133-34.

would be able to turn the clock back to the close association between the Church and the monarchy under the Stuart monarchy before the English Civil War. But the constitutional, intellectual and religious upheavals which divided their time from that previous one meant that they had to find a new way of expressing a distinctively Anglican identity as a *via media* between the renewed Catholicism of the Counter Reformation and developing Protestant denominationalism. Hawksmoor's London churches are a unique expression of this new Anglican self-consciousness as a national church, drawing its inspiration from the purest traditions of what they termed 'primitive Christianity'.

Hawksmoor and the Commission

The early meetings of the Commission and its architectural sub-committee between 1711 and 1714 were frequent and creative, and laid down the principles to which these church designs adhered long after the influence of the high Tories had been halted by the new Whig ascendancy under King George I. The committee included theologians like Smalridge and Sherlock, influential laymen like Francis Annesley and Sir Richard Hoare, and a bevy of gentlemen architects like the Wrens, father and son, Thomas Archer and John Vanbrugh. William Dickinson and Hawksmoor himself, both pupils of Wren long associated with his work in rebuilding St Paul and the City churches and other projects as Surveyor-General of the King's Works, were appointed as surveyors to the committee, regularly reported to it, and took part in its discussions. In the early stages it met frequently, sometimes even weekly, and the principles influencing the siting and design of the churches were established.⁴ On 16 July 1712 these principles developed by the committee on 11 July were discussed and amended by the Commissioners and it was resolved 'That, one general design, or Form be agreed upon for all the fifty New intended Churches, where the Scites will admit thereof; The Steeples and Towers excepted.' It had already been resolved the month before 'That Mr Hawksmoor be invited to lay before the Commissioners a Plan of the Ground of the Old Church and Churchyard at Greenwich – together with an Upright Plan, or Draught of a Church to be there built'. Then on 29 July Hawksmoor was instructed to 'Sett out the Ground to be purchased of Mr Sclater at Hare Fields in Bethnal Green'. This site in the

4. Lambeth Public Library, MS 2690 (microfilm). See also Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London Churches*, Appendix 4 (pp. 143-44).

end was never bought, but it was in relation to its proposed purchase that Hawksmoor drew up his plan for 'The Basilica after the Primitive Christians'. St Alfege Church in Greenwich, whose petition to Parliament for rebuilding had been the original impetus for the Act of 1711, became the first opportunity Hawksmoor had to apply the principles the Commissioners had agreed and that he had already set forward in ground plan for the 'Basilica' in Bethnal Green. All the members of the Commission were highly educated men, sharing a wide interest in different fields of intellectual enquiry. Behind the principles of the Commission and the terse title of Hawksmoor's ground plan lies a wealth of fascinating learned discussion and debate. This was most clearly summed up in that phrase 'Primitive Christianity', pregnant with ideological content and meaning.

Du Prey sums up the general tenor of intellectual enquiry at the beginning of the eighteenth century in his study of Hawksmoor's churches. After the upheavals of the Reformation period, the Civil War and Interregnum, learned people were looking for a more solid basis for knowledge than simply dogmatic assertion, tradition or prophetic inspiration. Du Prey goes on:

Their work embodied the new methods of experimental scientific enquiry. They carefully set up their procedures of analysis, studied their observations, drew their logical conclusions, and propounded their theories. They compiled and sifted through ancient sources, Holy Scripture, and the Talmud, weighing each source against the other and hoping to reconcile apparent contradictions. They verified their data whenever possible with the firsthand observation of travellers. They applied to the history of religion and architecture the same careful scrutiny used to study science. They overlapped this quest for establishing first principles in science with their equally determined search for the pure, unadulterated origins of their faith.⁵

Knowledge had not yet been divided up into separate specialisms, so that the same general principles of reasonableness, use of multiple authorities and elegance of argument could be applied across the board. On this basis everyone had a right to an opinion. The Royal Society, set up in this period, is the perfect expression of this, but it had its precursors in groups like Hartlib's during the Commonwealth period.⁶ Though there was the same interest in symbolic correspondence and hidden meaning as there had been in Renaissance Platonism

5. du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London Churches*, pp. 47-48.

6. Cf. Adrian Tinniswood, *His Invention so Fertile: A Life of Christopher Wren* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 72.

and Baconian science, married to this was a new historicism and a much wider intellectual horizon, brought about by global trade and contact with other religions and civilizations. The Old Testament, especially in Protestant countries, was read not as allegory or for proof texts for dogma but literal history. So, for example, the accounts of the building of Solomon's Temple, or the Ark, or the Tower of Babel could be scanned for information in the same way as Vitruvius, or Pliny, or other classical sources, and the two would, if possible, be made to agree. Huge differences existed between the new rationalists like Toland, Whiston and Locke on one side and orthodox high churchmen like Mead, Beveridge and Cave on the other about the status of church doctrine and what could reasonably be construed from ancient sources, but their methodology was the same.

By 'Primitive Christianity' writers at the turn of the seventeenth century also meant 'pure' or 'original' Christianity, with the moral connotations those adjectives suggest. As a subtitle to his sketch for 'The Basilica after the Primitive Christians', Hawksmoor put 'manner of Building the Church – as it was in ye fourth Century in ye purest times of Christianity'. There was a general sense of moral crisis, and of a need to get back to the historical and sources of Christianity and for some kind of restatement of Anglican identity, though people disagreed about how this should be done. As Redwood and others have pointed out, this was not a two-way fight between 'high church' or 'altitudinarians' on one side, and 'latitudinarians' or 'Deists' on the other. It was a three-way fight, in which both those tendencies within the Church (and everything in between) tried to articulate a response to what they saw as a rising tide of secular criticism and immorality led by the 'scoffers' and 'wits' of the court and London coffee houses – a situation not unfamiliar to the relationship between the Church and media opinion formers today.⁷ As one of more latitudinarian commissioners, a lay man, Peter King put it in his book on the Primitive Church, published in 1691, calling for church unity against factionalism:

[I]ts Necessity is evidence from hence, that while we spend our Zeal and heat about these inconsiderable Matters, the very Foundations of Faith and Morals are attack'd and shaken, Atheism increases. Immorality prevails, and those damnable Heresies, which for many ages have been silenced and abandoned, are now revived by men of a corrupt Faith ... It is to be feared, that unless we hasten to compose our Differences about

7. John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England 1660–1750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

the Skirts and Fringes of Religion, the very Vitals and Essentials thereof will be corroded and devoured by Heresie and Profaness.⁸

He was writing two years after the disturbance to Church-State relations caused by the deposition of a lawfully crowned monarch, James II, and a year after the Act of Toleration of 1689. A bitterly opposed and subsequently watered down version of what had originally been proposed by both James II and his usurper, this Act was nevertheless a huge shock to the Church by law established. If others were to share in the protection of the law by licence, and there was to be liberty of conscience for all, then what would happen to the Church of England? The high church Tories, led by Atterbury, tried to turn back the clock in Queen Anne's reign, by reasserting the ancient privileges and rights of jurisdiction of the Church as the true heir and representative of the universal, apostolic Church to the nation, and asserting the duty of obedience over the liberty of individual private conscience. The more Whig and latitudinarian Anglicans, led by the bishops, tried to find a new accommodation with this shifting state of affairs, by making qualification for church membership as easy for the more tender consciences of former Dissenters as possible, and by emphasizing 'reasonableness', good sense, moral persuasion and argument. Both sides feared that the breakdown of the Church's legal jurisdiction and complete liberty of conscience would give those who chose to abandon religion and morality altogether the opportunity to do so, to the benefit of alehouses, brothels and the fashionable gatherings of scoffers and wits. What was actually in process was the gradual move towards a new identity for the Church as a voluntary body appealing to the individual conscience and religious sensibility of potential worshippers, albeit within a society still led largely by custom, social ties and hierarchy.⁹ Though the high church party based its appeal on ancient precedent, an apostolic constitution and the early church fathers, this did not mean that it thought that moral persuasion and intellectual argument for reform were irrelevant. All these factors were involved in the original impulse to set up the Commission for the Fifty New Churches and are evidenced in its discussions and documents.

8. Peter King, *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church* (London: G. Land & P. P. Sanford, 1691), p. 159.

9. Cf. Bennett, *The Tory Crisis of Church and State 1688-1730*, pp. 133-34. See also, John Walsh and Stephen Taylor, 'Introduction: The Church and Anglicanism in the "long" eighteenth century', in John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (eds.), *The Church of England c. 1689-c. 1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 1-64.

So, though the membership of the Commission shifted within four years from being largely Tory and high church to being increasingly Whig and latitudinarian, this did not change its basic character as a response to what was seen, in London especially, as a situation of extreme pastoral need and moral danger. One of the longest serving members on the Smalridge's committee was George Stanhope, Rector of Deptford, a friend of Atterbury but considered a moderate in politics. Du Prey writes of him:

The activities of Stanhope ... suggest that he agreed with the others on many of the key issues, regardless of high- or low-church persuasion. Perhaps too much has been surmised about the divisive effects of party politics and doctrinal disputes upon the commission. From every commissioner's point of view, the 50 new churches could only be regarded as a step forward. Instead of divisiveness, therefore, one finds a sense of unity of purpose.¹⁰

What has to be borne in mind in this period is that 'high church' and 'low church' did not define closed parties of clergymen or huge differences in worship which was virtually universally based on weekly Prayer Book Matins and ante-communion. The high church movement for reform introduced the Fifty New Churches Act as part of its general strategy to recapture the nation for the Church, but the pastoral argument was compelling in itself.

The Church and the Temple

So, if for Whig bishops and latitudinarians, the Primitive Church largely meant a sober and reasonable faith in the pure, moral teaching and revelation of God's laws revealed by Jesus Christ and the sinking of the differences between all people of 'good faith' (i.e., Protestants), what did it mean for the high churchmen of the original Commission and its subcommittee under Smalridge's chairmanship?

The short answer is a return to Nicene orthodoxy as established by the Emperor Constantine, not only in doctrine but in terms of church practice and architecture. This had a tremendous resonance with them, because they drew parallels between the position of the Church of England after the Restoration, and the restoration of the Church by a Christian Emperor after the Diocletian persecution. It provided an independent way through to a 'pure' Christian inheritance which

10. Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, 'Hawksmoor's "Basilica after the Primitive Christians": Architecture and Theology', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 48 (1989), p. 42.

side-stepped both the medieval Catholic past and the controversies of Reformation period that had led to the disorder and rebellion of the Civil War and Babylonian Captivity of the Commonwealth. It enabled them to assert a new identity for the Church of England, as an ancient church reasserting the partnership between a generous, law-giving monarch like Solomon, Constantine or Justinian, an independent, patriarchal church with its own hallowed liturgy and access to the pure stream of apostolic tradition and witness. It fitted also with England's growing confidence as the leading Protestant kingdom in Europe. Just as the apostolic Church could be seen as the true inheritor of the 'false' Israel, so the Church of England could be seen as the true inheritor of apostolic orthodoxy against the perversions of 'popish' practices and authority, on the one hand, and the heresies and enthusiasm of sectarians and schismatics on the other. Drawing on the inheritance in patristic and liturgical scholarship in the Laudian period of men like Lancelot Andrewes,¹¹ and combining it with the new interest in biblical history, and archaeology, Jewish, Roman and Byzantine, they constructed a 'Temple' theology of the Church, its worship and architecture, as a public manifestation of religion, as opposed to a sectarian vision of the church as a gathering of the elect, deliberately excluding the reprobate and not requiring public liturgical expression at all. This continuity in 'Temple' theology the high churchman William Beveridge expressed in his famous sermon at the rededication of St Peter's Cornhill in 1681:

For what the Altar and the Temple were unto Jews then, the same will our Church be unto us now. Did they offer up their Sacrifices unto God as Types of the Death of Christ? We shall here commemorate the same Death of Christ, tipfy'd by those Sacrifices. Did they come from all parts of Judea to worship God there? So shall we, I hope, come from all parts of this Parish to worship God here.¹²

In another high churchman's work, Charles Wheatley's *Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer* published in 1720, the frontispiece draws a perfect parallel between the ministry of Christ in the heavenly Temple and the priest ministering of the sacrament to those kneeling at the communion rails before an eighteenth century altar and reredos. The 'Temple' theology of Hebrews of Christ as the

11. Cf. Kenneth Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 156-66.

12. William Beveridge, 'The Excellence and Usefulness of the Common Prayer: Preached at the opening of the parish church of St Peter's, Cornhill, the 27th of November 1681', cited in du Prey, *Hawskmoor's London Churches*, pp. 32-33.

High Priest, offering once and for all his one perfect sacrifice, and of St Paul of Christ as the 'mercy seat' and the 'reasonable sacrifice' of praise and thanksgiving offered by those who 'draw near' in worship, became a new paradigm for Anglican Eucharistic theology. Following the interest begun by the previous generation of Anglican theologians in the liturgical language of offertory and epiclesis in ancient orthodox liturgies, summed up in the phrase 'the Unbloody Sacrifice', they developed a complete reinterpretation of the BCP rite which 'Cranmer would not have recognized'.¹³ One of the best-known works of the time was John Johnson's *Unbloody Sacrifice of the Altar, Unveiled and Supported, in which the nature of the Eucharist is explained according to the Sentiments of the Christian Church in the First Four Centuries*.¹⁴ Non-jurors and their sympathizers appreciated the ancient orthodox liturgies' unselfconscious variety of language in contrast to the deliberate and polemical development of the Catholic and Protestant liturgies of the West. They were, in that sense, looking for an ecumenical way forward. What could not be directly introduced into the text of the BCP service, unless one was an out-and-out non-juror, could nevertheless be implied in liturgical action, its architecture and setting. As George Wheler wrote in the preface to his book mentioned below: 'For by these things it is most manifest; That the Primitive Christians did endeavour to perform the Publick worship of God, with as great External Reverence and magnificence as possible; joined to the Internal Truth, Fervency of Spirit and Mind'.¹⁵

This was what the theology and public worship that commissioners wanted to provide the architectural expression for in their fifty churches, and also why, because of its deliberate harking back to the magnificence of the Temple in Jerusalem and early Christian basilicas like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Hagia Sofia, that only ten of them, in the end, were built.

The development of trade in the Levant meant that the Commission were able to draw on contemporary descriptions of the churches by travellers as well as scholarly sources. One such writer who was influential to the Commission was Sir George Wheler, mentioned above, who took orders in 1683. He was a friend of William Beveridge,

13. Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering*, pp. 1-9.

14. Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology (repr.; London: Parker, 1847).

15. George Wheler, *An Account of the Churches, or Places of Assembly, of the Primitive Christians from the Churches of Tyre, Jerusalem, and Constantinople Described by Eusebius: and Ocular Observations of Several Very Ancient Edifices of Churches Yet Extant in those Parts: with a Seasonable Application* (London, 1689).

also quoted earlier, and studied at Lincoln under George Hickeys, a non-juror. While still a layman he had travelled around Greece and the Mediterranean with Jacques Spon and published his version of their travel journals in 1682: *A Journey into Greece by George Wheeler Esq. in Company with Dr Spon of Lyon*. He brought out another book, with a dedication to George Hickeys, in 1689: *An Account of the Churches or Places of Assembly of the Primitive Christians*, based on Eusebius's Sermon on the dedication of the Church at Tyre and his own observations of contemporary and ancient orthodox churches in his travels, and which looked at the principles behind the design of these churches. Later still he built at his own expense a chapel of ease in Spitalfields, the area chosen for one of the fifty new churches.

His dedicatee, George Hickeys, is also important. He shows the close communication that continued between the majority of high churchmen who had conformed, some of them reluctantly, and their non-juror brethren, like Hickeys, who had not. Atterbury collected his writing, and Hickeys wrote a letter to the Commission giving his 'Observations on John Vanbrugh's Proposals about Building the Fifty New Churches'.¹⁶ This letter mentions Eusebius and 'Mr Bingham's Ecclesiastical Antiquities', and seems to have had a strong bearing on the principles they adopted on 16 July.

The Reverend Joseph Bingham was the writer who probably had the most direct bearing on Hawksmoor's template for the Commission, 'The Basilica after the Primitive Christians'. Another high churchman, his career had been cut short when he was forced to resign his fellowship at University College, Oxford, after preaching a controversial sermon at Christ Church in 1695. He became rector of Headbourne Worthy, near Winchester, where he made *Origines Ecclesiasticae; or Antiquities of the Christian Church* his life's work. It was published in 10 volumes between 1708 and 1722. The third volume on the architecture of the early church came out, providentially for Hawksmoor's purposes, in 1711.¹⁷ These volumes built on the interest in the eastern orthodox church of a previous generation of Laudian scholars like Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, and summarized exhaustively all the information that could be gleaned from ancient sources, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Syriac, as well as the theories and arguments of

16. George Hickeys, as cited in du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London Churches*, p. 139 (Appendix 3).

17. Joseph Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae; or Antiquities of the Christian Church: Book VIII: An account of the ancient churches, and their several parts, utensils, consecrations, immunities etc.* (repr.; London: Reeves and Turner, 1879).

contemporary commentators. The third volume contained four ground plans of ancient churches, including the interior of Hagia Sophia, drawn from other sources, and also a 'Plan of An Ancient Church with its Exedrae, as described by Eusebius and Other Writers'. Bingham was also alive to the contemporary issues affecting the Commission, arguing, for instance, in *The French Church's Apology for the Church of England* published in 1706 that the real affinities of the Huguenots were with the Church of England and not with English Dissent.

The Basilica after the Manner of the Primitive Christians

So what, precisely, arising out of all these influences, is distinctive about the design of these churches? First is the insistence on establishing a definite site, preferably walled, in which the church could stand like a temple, or even better *the* Temple, within its own enclosure. As the Commission put it 'That the Scituations of all the said Churches be Insular, where the Scites will admit thereof', or as Hawksmoor puts it 'Enclosure of ye Church, to keep off filth- Nastyness & Brutes'.¹⁸ He also wrote above this 'Septum', the Latin word for 'enclosed space'. Another scholar, Lightfoot, citing Josephus, had used this term in his book *The Temple Especially as It Stood in the Days of our Saviour* (London, 1650), to describe the outer wall of the Temple, pierced with gates and inscriptions warning the uncircumcised not to pass on pain of death. There is some suggestion that Hawksmoor may have been thinking of that when he placed the 'Roman altars' as bollards outside the East Portico of St Alfege's. Bingham and Wheler both use the Greek term *peribolon* quoting Eusebius's description of the church at Tyre to define an outward court in front of the main entrance and the wall surrounding it. It served a dual purpose according to these writers, in defining everything within the wall as sacred. As Bingham puts it:

Next, to consider the several parts of the ancient churches, we are to observe, that as in the temple of God at Jerusalem, not only the holy and most holy were reckoned parts of the temple, but also the outward courts, and even the court of the Gentiles, which is expressly called the house of God, and the house of prayer; so in Christian churches, which were built with some regard to the Jewish temple the whole ambitus or circumference about them was esteemed in a large sense as part of the church.¹⁹

18. Hawksmoor's drawing of the plan of 'The Basilica after the Primitive Christians', Lambeth Public Library, MS 2750/16.

19. Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae*, pp. 287-89.

But this defining of the boundary between the ordinary world and the sacred enclosure would also give a view of the building behind 'as might give a Prospect of the Front to all that passed by it',²⁰ warning people of the need for reverence in approaching the building, and, at the same time, its public nature. They were repeating the common pattern for all orthodox churches from the fourth century onwards, as well as the Ottoman mosques derived from them, as Wheler and other travellers had witnessed and verified.

Connected with this was the provision of grand entrances to the churches; in the words of the Commission 'That there be handsome Porticoes to each Church' even in the case where this conflicted with the requirement for an East–West axis. This latter requirement is not actually mentioned in the Commission's resolutions and Wren himself had ignored it in rebuilding the City churches, but it had already been stipulated by the Commission in its minutes of 21 November 1711, and Hickee is reiterating a well-understood point when he wrote in his letter to the Commission: 'And as the insular situation of churches is most convenient for the foresaid ends; so the situation of them East, and West according to the ancient manner of building churches ought to be observed.'²¹

This stipulation created difficulties for Hawksmoor. At St Alfege's it meant, for example, that the large portico with side entrances in place of a processional doorway was at the east end of the church, and could not in fact be its main entrance. At St George's Bloomsbury it meant an awkward right-hand turn from a high stepped portico and main entrance on the south side of the church towards the altar at the east end. But porticoes were a feature of temple and primitive church architecture, and so they had to be made part of the general plan.

Hickee's phrase 'for the foresaid ends' alerts us to other features and requirements stemming from their studies of the biblical Temple, the citation of ancient sources and first-hand observation of eastern churches, namely the provision of housing on the perimeter of the enclosure for 'the servants of the sanctuary', that is, the minister, the sexton and other staff, as well as vestries leading off from the main church. The resolution to build 'the Ministers Houses' within the enclosure was something, therefore, that could be justified from ancient practice as well as being a way of trying to reform the practice of non-residence

20. Wheler, *An Account of the Churches, or Places of Assembly, of the Primitive Christians*, pp. 20–38.

21. George Hickee, in du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London Churches*, p. 140 (Appendix 3).

and encouraging mission. Ancient precedent also demanded, in the Commissioners' view, that 'there be at the East end of each Church two small Roomes, One for the Vestments, another for the Vessells or other Consecrated things', and following that, 'That there be at the West end of each Church a convenient large Room for Parish Business'. In Bingham's ground plans these two small rooms within the chancel area are called the *prosthesis* and the *diaconium*: one for storing of sacred vessels, the other for books and vestments. These correspond to the spaces behind the side gates to the iconostasis in orthodox churches, again something readily observable by travellers as well as via citation from ancient authorities. At St Alfege they are in exactly the position specified in Hawksmoor's template for the Commission and still in use for the same purposes today.

More variation, and more controversy, surrounded the Commissioners' rule requiring the 'large Room for Parish Business'. In Bingham's plan 'as described by Eusebius and other writers' it is the '*diaconium magnum*', the great repository or greeting house' and is separate from the church. Hickes also recommends the same on the church perimeter 'for the minister, churchwardens, and parish officers to meet upon parish-affaires' and it is sited in the northwest corner in Hawksmoor's sketch. Very fine vestries, upstairs or at ground level, are a particular feature of Hawksmoor's London churches. But the Commission brought the greater vestry, sited in many ancient sources outside the church building, within it. Similarly they brought the baptistery, also an adjacent but separate building in most ancient sources, within the confines of the church building. However, they specified at the same time 'That, the fonts in each Church be so large as to be capable to have Baptism to be administered in them by dipping when desir'd'. Baptism by immersion was a favourite theme among high church clergy, both because it corresponded to the practice of the Primitive Church, and because they hoped it would encourage adult baptism. As Hickes put it colourfully in his letter to the Commission:

It being undoubtedly the intention of our church, ye Adult persons should be immersed at baptism, as well as infants; and it very frequently happening by the conversion of Jewes, blacks, Quakers, and the children of Antipaedobaptists etc. that the persons of riper years are to be baptised, I think also, that Baptisteries for that purpose, after the ancient manner ought to be built on the circumferential parts of those areas [around the church].

Hawksmoor brings it within the west end of the church as 'The place for the font for ye Converts which was in ye Porch- & to be immers'd'.

This provision demonstrates the close connection between harking back to 'purer' times and the need, as contemporaries saw it, for a more vigorous attempt for the Church of England to reform and recapture its position as church for the nation.

The interiors of the Commissioners' churches owed a lot to their study of sources on the Primitive Church, both in terms of their shape and the way the space is arranged with it. Nothing is said about them in the Commissioners' Resolutions, but galleries are a feature of Hawksmoor's churches as they are of Wren's church, St James, Piccadilly, which Wren himself had recommended as a model in a letter to the Commission.²² Capacious galleries were also a feature of some of the churches built by Justinian in Constantinople, for instance Hagia Sophia and Ss. Sergius and Bacchus. They are mentioned by Grelot in his travel account of Constantinople as women's galleries, using the correct architectural term for them, *gynaikeia*, and were copied in some of its great mosques. In Hawksmoor's 'Basilica' plan, towers to each side of the west façade contain 'Stairs to ye Womens Gallerys'. Dividing the sexes was a favourite high church theme.

Hickes spends a lot of time in his letter talking about pews and benches. What these high church reformers most wanted to avoid was the old arrangement of high-backed box pews which painfully reaffirmed differences in social status, the poor being left unseated or on benches at the back, while at the same time permitting all kinds of flirting, plotting, conversation and general inattention during services. Pews were necessary if you were going to listen to a Protestant length sermon as well as observe the liturgy, so they did not advocate their complete removal, but they did want them arranged so that everyone could face towards the chancel area on a roughly equal basis, and for this they could also find ancient precedent. Equally the space beneath the aisles could be utilized, like the porch and entrance area, the narthex, as a defined place where those who might be likened, in their eyes, to the ancient categories of excommunicates, penitents and catechumens could be accommodated separately. Bingham, Hickes and Wheler all spend a lot of time on this. It was the way they would like to have dealt with dissenters and occasional conformists whom they termed 'schismatics', those who might come to church to hear a sermon and maintain their access to different professions and public office, but who did not form part of the fully communicant membership of the church. The latter '*pistoi*' or fully faithful, would remain in the main

22. Cf. du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London Churches*, Appendix 2, p. 136.

body of the nave. Occasional conformity was a problem to devout Anglican clergy and laity, in the same way as 'doing the God-thing' to get a child into a church school is today, and a burning issue when the Commission was set up. Behind these antiquarian arguments about the ancient practices of baptism and different categories of worshipper was a great deal of contemporary feeling about the urgent need to re-establish the Church's position and enforce conformity to its rules.

The normal Sunday service in the eighteenth century was Matins followed by a sermon. People usually came to the church in any number only if there was a sermon, which would normally last between 30 minutes and an hour. The Commissioners were well aware that the churches were, most importantly, auditoria, hence the requirement that the pulpit was placed as centrally as possible, with a sound board above it so that the preacher could be heard and seen by most of the congregation. Wren spends the most time on this requirement in his letter to the Commission. Being a mathematician he made a 'calculation' that 'probably more than 400,000 grown persons ... should come to church for whom these fifty churches are to be provided'.²³ He did not think that it was possible to build a church in which people could see and hear for above 2000 people. He recommended his own church at St James, Piccadilly as an example for its breadth and its galleries resting on pillars with 'no walls of a second order ... I think it may be found beautiful and convenient, and as such, the cheapest of any form I could invent'. He further calculated that the length the average preacher's voice could carry and that, for this reason, 'the new church should be at least 60 feet broad and 90 feet long, besides a chancel at one end, and the belfry and portico at the other'. These dimensions also conformed to the classical proportions of a cube and a half and they are followed in virtually all the Commissioners' churches.

They also followed the dimensions of the ancient basilica ground plans familiar from Bingham and others. The rounded apse, the galleries, portico and narthex, were also a common feature of these churches and they are repeated in Hawksmoor's designs. The ancient churches of the Levant, especially Hagia Sophia, but also the ancient basilicas of Rome, like Santa Maria Maggiore and Saint Paul's-outside-the-walls, were all familiar to the Commissioners from travellers' tales and engravings. So for practical *and* antiquarian reasons this shape became standard. Wheeler, because he was so familiar with contemporary Greek churches and Ottoman mosques, as well as

23. Christopher Wren's letter printed in du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London Churches*, p. 136 (Appendix 2).

ancient ruins, became convinced that the ideal early church also had a central dome supported by half domes and subsidiaries at each corner. The Greek Cross design with a central dome had been Wren's first design for St Paul's, and Wren himself made a particular study of Hagia Sophia for this reason.²⁴ The Commissioners' churches had steeples rather than central domes. Steeples were too much a feature of English church architecture and they were designed by Wren and his circle of architects to identify the individual churches from a distance. But in the proportions of these churches as much attention is given to the cross axis, north to south, as to the one going west to east, and it is the width and height of their unsupported central ceilings which gives them their monumentality. In this sense they still recall the ancient interiors in the Levant in spite of their lack of a central dome.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Englishmen were much more impressed with Orthodoxy's past than its present state under the oppressive conditions of Ottoman rule. It was the ideal of 'primitive' Orthodoxy they were interested in and which they were trying to revive in their own version of a Constantinian Church. So they ignored the iconostasis (Wheler describes it as 'absolutely against the Practice and Precepts of the Primitive Church'), but they understood and established in their writings that a pierced screen dividing the altar in the 'holy of holies' from the nave was a feature of early church architecture from the beginning. They appreciated the similarity between Orthodoxy and Anglicanism in having but one altar and one celebration of Holy Communion a week, and for giving an equal place to the daily ceremonies of matins and vespers. They also understood the liturgical importance of the move from the nave to the chancel for the celebration of the sacred mysteries. High churchmen equated the orthodox celebration and communion behind the iconostasis with the Anglican transition from Matins to Ante Communion and the offering of the Prayers of Intercession at the altar, followed by the invitation to Holy Communion itself, introduced by the command to 'draw near, and take this holy sacrament to your comfort ... meekly kneeling upon your knees'. The move of worship from the nave and pulpit (which took the place and position of the reading desk, the *ambo*, in ancient church sources) to the choir, chancel and altar, the place of sacrifice metaphorically 'behind' or *through* 'the veil' was crucial in their understanding of the Eucharistic offering developed from Old Testament references to the Tent of Meeting and the Temple, and from

24. For two drawings of Hagia Sophia, see du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London Churches*, pp. 43, 45 (figs. 19, 20).

Hebrews, Revelation, and the study of ancient and Byzantine liturgical texts. So, in these churches for the first time generally since the English Reformation, the holy table, altar (or *bema*, in the language of their studies) became fixed in one place behind permanent communion rails in a raised chancel, with a canopy or reredos behind it.

This dramatically asserted the continuity between the worship of Solomon's Temple and that of the Christian Church. The chancel decorations and furnishings in these churches with their tablets of the law, the dove, cherubs, tetragrammaton and canopies are all associated with the accounts of the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies as derived from biblical and other ancient sources. These decorations were already common in churches which had been built or redecorated in Laudian times. They are also a feature of Wren's City churches. But it is the Commissioners who specify 'That the Chancels be raised three Steps above the Nave or body of the Churches'. High church divines loved to talk about '*cancelli*', the pierced screens of the 'Primitive Church'. Chancel screens had been introduced in London after the Restoration at All Hallows-the-Great, Thames Street, and St Peter's, Cornhill, at the insistence of their rectors.²⁵ They were the latest thing. What made these screens different from that of their Laudian predecessors, was their deliberate reference to temple theology of the 'Primitive Church' and the spatial divisions of Solomon's Temple itself, rather than to medieval Catholicism. In this way they managed to communicate a theology of approach towards mystery and divine transcendence, communicated through a series of ordered spaces of progressively greater sanctity from the outer enclosure, up the steps and through the church portico, through the narthex and baptistery, into the nave, past the pulpit and reading desk and up another set of steps into the chancel and altar area.

That nothing was to be allowed to interfere with this accounts for another recommendation of the Commissioners which does not appear in the resolutions of 16 July 1712, but much earlier on in their discussions, on 14 November 1711: 'That where Enclosure for the burial of the dead can conveniently be had, *at some distance from the Churches* they ought to be appointed' [my emphasis]. In other words, no graves or monuments were to be kept in the church itself, or its crypt (all the Commissioners churches were built on raised platforms which allowed for them) or the immediate enclosure around the church. This was one of the clearest ways they wanted a return to the ideals of the 'Primitive

25. Beveridge, 'The Excellence and Usefulness of the Common Prayer'.

Church'. Wren, Vanburgh and Hawksmoor were all in favour of this. Referring to Vanburgh, Hickeys writes:

It is worthily proposed by this famous Architect not to make churches burying places, but to purchase Coemetries in the skirts of town, about which I would not have built bare walls but large Cloysters.... [A]s for lofty and noble Mausoleums for Statues they are in my opinion to be condemned as contrary to Christian humility, and ancient custome & certainly all good dying Christians would despise and condemn them.²⁶

In his 'Basilica' plan, Hawksmoor places the 'Coemetry', spelt the same way as in Hickeys's letter, behind the church, with a semi-circular cloister at the back for inscriptions. Crypts were to be kept free for useful purposes such as charity schools. So the clearing of these crypts after the Second World War and their use as centres for the homeless, or local cultural activities, were entirely in the spirit of the original Commission and its supporters. Considering that the partial collapse of the old St Alfege's during a storm in November 1710 (the origin of the petition which set the whole ball rolling) had, so it was said, been due to the weakening of its structure by burials under the floor of the church, this was a very welcome, though novel, provision. It could be backed up, in the Commissioners' eyes, by ancient custom, according to which only in churches that were also martyr's shrines would a body be allowed to remain, under the altar or elsewhere in its own special place. Unfortunately ministers' fees and pressure from local worthies meant that these provisions were soon ignored. So, for example, within 35 years of being built, St Alfege's crypt was already filling up with family vaults, though the churchyard had already been extended beyond the old perimeter with the purchase of a field behind.

Conclusion

A scrutiny of the Commissioners' discussions, the rules they set down and the inspiration they found for them in 'primitive' church sources, show clearly the missionary and pastoral nature of their grand project to build fifty new churches. These churches were designed in a sense to be missionary compounds rather than local parish churches as they had been used and abused up to that time. They were meant to represent a renewed self-confident national Church rooted in the universal Church, as they imagined it would have been, in the first four centuries of Primitive Christianity (conveniently overlooking early monasticism).

26. George Hickeys in du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London Churches*, p. 140 (Appendix 3).

At the same time, standing midway between the extravagance of continental baroque churches as an expression of French and papal absolutism, and the plain meeting houses of various dissenting denominations, they are expressions of self-conscious Anglicanism. It is in this period that the term 'via media' becomes a term generally applied to the Church of England. These magnificent churches were meant to draw attention to themselves as beckoning enclosures dedicated to the sacred, in the midst of the most poverty stricken, profane and needy parts of London. The Fifty New Churches Act and setting up of the Commission were, in that sense, rather like the Faith in the City Report and the setting up of the Church Urban Fund thirty years ago.²⁷ Hawksmoor's churches, in particular, have their own unique style, usually plain and imposing on the outside, spacious and more richly decorated within, notably free of hidden corners, side chapels and monuments, all their spaces dedicated to public and parish use of one sort or another.

One final unique feature of his architecture should be noted, though a fuller discussion belongs elsewhere. Hawksmoor was very aware, through his study of the architecture of the 'Primitive Church', that the Church of Constantine and Justinian was very accustomed to 'bricolage', in other words, the re-using of columns, pillars, capitals and walls from more ancient buildings. Apart from practical necessity, it was also a way of proclaiming at one and the same time, the continuity of history and biblical revelation, and that paganism had been supplanted by 'a newer rite'. Hawksmoor was, in company with theologians of his time, very historical in his approach. We do not have much on record about Hawksmoor's own views on architecture except for his angry swipes at the 'Palladians' who supplanted him and his master, Christopher Wren, in public estimation, and there are many sources for his inspiration and unique style.²⁸ But it is more likely that the reason he blends classical, byzantine, Romanesque and gothic elements into one building is this renewed historicism and interest in 'Primitive Christianity' in the scholarly opinion of the time, rather than any hidden, arcane, even evil aspects of his own private philosophy. The references in his architecture to the roots of Primitive Christianity in the worship of the Jewish Temple, its rooting in England in Roman and Anglo-Saxon times, its association with and protection by

27. *Faith in the City Report*, Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission for Urban Priority Areas, Church of England Publications, 1985.

28. See Vaughan Hart, *Nicholas Hawksmoor: Rebuilding Ancient Wonders* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 3-4.

Christian monarchy, are more properly interpreted as a wonderfully imaginative statement of the public theology and new sense of Anglican identity shared by the Commission who employed him. We have lost sight of this for so long because the theology and context behind these buildings seems apparently so different from our own. But actually in the rapidity with which change was happening in society at the time and the way intellectual currents were throwing up fresh challenges to Christian orthodoxy, there are more similarities than we realize.