

# Dancing the Magnificat

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From the time he became Bishop of London in 1868 until his death seventeen years later, John Jackson was beset by unruly clergy. In parishes across the diocese, especially in the poverty-stricken East End, Anglo-Catholic ritualists were busy reviving the ceremonial practices and Marian devotions of the pre-Reformation Church despite the opposition of their bishop, Parliament, and even their own riotous parishioners. There were demonstrations, criminal prosecutions for violation of the Public Worship Regulation Act, and occasional imprisonments: all bewildering to the moderate Evangelical who presided over this unseemly tumult.

But no rebellious clergyman caused Bishop Jackson more grief than Stewart Duckworth Headlam (1847-1924). While yet a deacon, and before he developed his ritualist and Marian sympathies, Headlam had been forced from his first cure for preaching the doctrine of universal salvation. Jackson had then reluctantly ordained him to the priesthood only to find the young man embroiled in controversy yet again. As curate of St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green, Headlam filled his sermons with fiery denunciations of class privilege. He consorted openly with notorious atheists, he encouraged the parish youth to frequent theatres and music halls. And as if to add insult to injury, he began to justify his radicalism by appealing to the Catholic faith. Not surprisingly, within a few years Headlam was once again expelled by his incumbent and excoriated by his bishop.

Eventually he secured a position in the humble East End parish of St. Thomas, Charterhouse. But Jackson remained suspicious and peppered the vicar, John Rodgers, with questions about Headlam's conduct and orthodoxy. Once, in a moment of particular frustration, Jackson asked if Headlam believed in the divinity of our Lord. To which Rodgers replied playfully, "Of course he does, and I think he believes in the divinity of Our Lady also." <sup>1</sup> Needless to say, this answer did not please the bishop. Nor could Jackson have been reassured by Headlam's bold proclamation that "to this generation . . . is entrusted the glorious task of restoring to the English Church a real reverence for the Blessed Virgin Mary." <sup>2</sup>

But what seems to have most troubled Jackson was the suspicion that Headlam's conception of divinity, Christ's as well as Mary's, was different from everybody else's. And in this the bishop was probably right.

Headlam had come to Catholic Christianity not by way of the Tractarians, but through the ardently incarnational theology of Frederick Denison Maurice. From Maurice, Headlam had learned to revere the Church and her sacraments as much as any child of the Oxford Movement. But Maurice also taught that the Incarnation has established an indissoluble union between God and the whole human race, binding us together and raising all our faculties and aspirations into the mystery of the Godhead. This vision of common redemption and mutual joy, Maurice came to believe, demands the reformation of

society. In language which startled his contemporaries, he demanded that we put aside our selfish individualism and class pride, and embrace instead what he called Christian Socialism.

#### Social Revolution, Beauty and Joy

Maurice's politics were not as revolutionary as they may first appear; all he wanted is for rich and poor to cooperate so that Christ's love, poured out to all, might be made manifest by all to all. But when Headlam began to labour in the London slums he discovered that the wretchedness of the poor and the indifference of the rich made this genteel mutuality impossible. England, he became convinced, needed a social revolution. It would be peaceful, to be sure, ushered in by the ballot box, not the bullet. But it would be a revolution nonetheless, putting an end to the class system once and for all.

If Headlam's radicalism had topped here, his devotion to Mary would have been little more than a charming eccentricity. Headlam, however, was a remarkable man and this was only the beginning. Politics, he understood, cannot forge the bonds of authentic community. Our fellowship with one another is a gift from God who has knit us together in Christ. And just as politics are not the ground of our fellowship, neither can just laws be its ultimate goal. Terrible as poverty and ignorance are, far worse is the spiritual desolation of the bored and the hopeless. Some have said the people perish for lack of knowledge, Headlam observed; "it would be truer to say, the people perish for lack of beauty, joy, and pleasure."<sup>3</sup>

And where are these to be found? It was while living among the poor that Headlam discovered the answer, or rather two answers which no one before had ever joined together. All around him were ritualist parishes whose Anglo-Catholic priests, castigated by their bishop and denounced by the press, served the very people he was struggling to liberate. Their zeal and the beauty of their worship convinced

Headlam that Catholic ceremonial embodies the bright vision of fellowship he had learned from Maurice. More important still, he believed that the Mass reveals the character of the beautiful God whose promise is that we shall have life and have it more abundantly.

But Catholic Christianity is only the first answer Headlam discovered: the second is the music hall. It seems an incongruous juxtaposition to us. To Bishop Jackson and just about all of Headlam's fellow clergy it seemed downright blasphemous. At a time when even the legitimate stage was regarded as morally suspect, the music hall was beyond the pale. Critics ecclesiastical and otherwise complained that the halls merely catered to their patrons' lust for alcohol, which was sold in great quantity, and for illicit sex, encouraged by the ballerinas' flesh-coloured tights and then sated by the prostitutes who plied their wares in the halls' ornate lobbies. Headlam admitted that there was some truth in these charges. But he insisted that whatever the faults of the hall might be, they were overshadowed by the laughter, songs, and dance which they brought to his over-worked parishioners. As for the flesh-coloured tights, Headlam's response was simple and direct: the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and "the poetry of [its] motion is the expression of unseen spiritual grace."<sup>4</sup>

### Devotion to Mary

This, Headlam argued, is the grace, the divinity if you will, which was poured out upon the Blessed Virgin Mary. And herein lies the reason that Headlam's devotion to our Lady is so startlingly sensuous and political. Unlike more traditional and more lugubrious Catholic pietists, he was not interested in the Virgin Birth. To be sure, he believed the doctrine. Indeed, in the light of Christ's character he thought it most natural. But he did not preach about it nor did he insist that others accept it. One reason is that he was distressed by the way some Christians used the Virgin Birth to etherialise grace and so denigrate sexual passion. The ascetic life is sacred, he wrote, but it is "not so high as the life of piping and dancing."

More is at stake than our right to pleasure. The more we make a cult of Mary's virginity, the likelier we are to sunder the ties between Christ's humanity and our own. It is no coincidence, Headlam argued, that the same Puritans who turn their backs on earthly delights counsel the poor to accept their suffering as the price to be paid for their otherworldly reward awaiting them beyond the grave. To vindicate the dignity of both sexuality and society, Headlam embraced a daring strategy. Instead of proclaiming Mary's status as the virgin mother of God, he reminds us that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. At first this emphasis on divine initiative may seem to only deepen the chasm between Christ and ourselves. But this, Headlam would argue, is only because we confuse the spiritual with the immaterial. Contrary to what pietists teach, it is precisely this divine conception which we creatures of flesh and blood share with Jesus, for every human being is both begotten sexually and conceived by the Holy Ghost who, the Nicene Creed reminds us, is the Lord and giver of Life.<sup>6</sup>

But if we do not revere Mary on account of her virginity, what is the basis of our devotion to her? Why, for example, should we say the Hail Mary regularly, as Headlam urged we do? The most obvious answer is that Mary brings us to Jesus. Contemplating our Lord's human mother, we more fully understand his divine humanity and the mystery of our own sanctification by grace. But this maternal transparency does not exhaust Mary's role as Christ bearer.

Her entire life reveals his character and his purpose. And nowhere is this clearer than in her glorious *Magnificat*, the song which Headlam, using the words of his friend and colleague, Thomas Hancock, called "the hymn of the universal social revolution" and the Marseillaise of humanity."<sup>7</sup>

"Every nation has what is called its national hymn," Hancock observed, "but the *Magnificat* is the hymn of all peoples. It is the hymn of humanity, the hymn of all parishes." Proper church people refuse to believe this. They have conspired to spiritualize Mary's song. "Indeed," complained Hancock in words which have not lost their sting, "it is impossible to imagine anything more contrary to the sort of hymn which would proceed from the Virgin of Lourdes, or the Virgin of La Salette . . . or any other of those local Virgins to whose statues sound Conservatives and reactionists . . . are now going on pilgrimage. A Pope has declared that the Blessed Virgin is the great foe of Socialism. If the *Magnificat* be her song, it would be far more reasonable to call her the Mother of it."<sup>8</sup>

But if Mary speaks for the whole of oppressed humanity, Headlam would have us remember that she represents one section of that suffering multitude in particular: women like herself. Reverence for Mary should encourage reverence for all women. Headlam does not mean that we should offer sentimental obeisance to submissive wives and nurturing mothers, as many of his fellow Victorians did. If you want to understand

Christian womanhood, he tells us, read the Gospel of Luke. Learn how women accompanied Jesus during his public ministry. Ponder the fact that it is Dorcas, the working woman, who is raised from the dead rather than Saint Stephen or Saint James the Apostle. It is no coincidence, Headlam believed, that the Church of England was awakening to Mary's importance at the very time when women were demanding the right to work, the right to an equal education with men, and the abolition of laws treating them as chattel.<sup>9</sup> To put it in the ideologically bloated language of our own day, you cannot serve Mary and patriarchy.

Our Lady bears Christ to us, then, in her womb, in her prophetic longing for justice, and in the simplicity of her womanhood. But there is yet another way in which Mary brings us to Jesus, and that is in bringing us joy. For Headlam, you will recall, beauty, laughter, and dance are no mere luxuries. They are sacraments: tangible signs of divine grace which reveal the loving heart of God. How desperately England needs to know this truth, Headlam cried. Not only are working men and women being deprived of the pleasure God intends for them, but they have been taught that God himself hates earthly joy. Is it any wonder, Headlam asks, that ordinary folk reject the Church?

#### Mary's Revelation of God

But Mary may yet turn the hearts of the Church and of the people back to the God of love. "The dark Calvinism which . . . has cast its slime over the English religion of the last three centuries," Headlam declared one Good Friday, "is directly due to men having . . . refused to let the Mother of God hold any appreciable place in their life and imagination," for Mary reveals God as "the source of joy and beauty, [and] the sanctifier of human affection."

To make this clear, Headlam offers us an image and a story. The image is that of a mother and her son. In their mutual affection and innocent joy there is a power strong enough to dispel the gloomy darkness of our popular Manicheanism. The story is the tale of Christ's first miracle at Cana in Galilee. It is Mary, Headlam points out, the woman who bore the Son of God and rejoiced that the mighty would be torn down from their thrones, who asked Jesus to turn water into merry-making wine. What greater honour can those who love Mary bestow upon her, therefore, than to "teach the children of the workers to dance on Sunday"? And that dance will be their Magnificat and our own.

Headlam was sure of this, although it scandalized respectable church folk, and probably still does. Self-styled progressives may be challenged as well, for too often they embrace justice and fear delight. But in the heart of God, Headlam reminds us, righteousness and joy are inseparable. After a lecture in which he defended the music hall, Headlam summarized his faith with both passion and humour. Asked by an angry gentleman if he thought Saint Paul would have gone to a music hall, Headlam replied: "I do not know what Saint Paul would have done. But I know our Lord would have gone, and taken his blessed mother with him."

<sup>1</sup> Frederick G. Bettany, *Stewart Headlam: A Biography*. London, John Murray, 1926. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Stewart D. Headlam, *The Service of Humanity*. London, John Hodges, 1882. 55-56.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *The Laws of Eternal Life*. London, F. Verinder, 1888. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Church Reformer*, 1 June 1886, 140-141.

<sup>6</sup> Headlam, *Laws*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> See Idem, *The Socialist's Church*. London, George Allen, 1907. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Hancock's sermon, "The Hymn of the Universal Social Revolution," can be found in the *Church Reformer*, 1 November 1886, 244-246.

<sup>9</sup> See R. Blackwell to John Jackson, 7 July 1879. Fulham Papers, Lambeth Palace Library.