

Routledge Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts

**HOLMAN HUNT AND
THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD
IN OXFORD**

Edited by Markus Bockmuehl



Holman Hunt and *The Light of the World* in Oxford

This book provides an up-to-date introduction to the religious and artistic story behind *The Light of the World* by William Holman Hunt. Created in the mid-nineteenth century, it is often said to be the most widely exhibited work of art in history and remains one of the most widely known Christian paintings to this day. The subject matter provides a rich wealth of resources, touching on the extraordinary artistic renewal associated with the Oxford Movement, its religious and intellectual revolution in recovering early Christian tropes and motives of scriptural interpretation. The book also considers the painting's impact on the religious and cultural life of the British Empire as its tour served not just spiritual edification but also the promotion of imperial values. The contributions reflect on concerns of decolonisation while illustrating religious art's ability to engage relevantly with contemporary concerns. Enabling a fresh encounter with the painting, this book will be of interest to theologians, biblical scholars, and historians.

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Routledge Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts

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What have imagination and the arts to do with theology? For much of the modern era, the answer has been ‘not much’. It is precisely this deficit that this series seeks to redress. For, whatever role they have or have not been granted in the theological disciplines, imagination and the arts are undeniably bound up with how we as human beings think, learn and communicate, engage with and respond to our physical and social environments and, in particular, our awareness and experience of that which transcends our own creatureliness. The arts are playing an increasingly significant role in the way people come to terms with the world; at the same time, artists of many disciplines are showing a willingness to engage with religious or theological themes. A spate of publications and courses in many educational institutions has already established this field as one of fast-growing concern.

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Foreword

Sir Jonathan Phillips

Revolutionary may not be the immediate thought to enter the mind of a twenty-first century observer seeing *The Light of the World* for the first time. But that is how Holman Hunt and his associates in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood conceived their work: setting a new direction for the art of painting with an emphasis on serious subjects and on freedom from fixed rules of design. These qualities, combined with an emphasis on symbolism and attention to minute detail, characterised much of their output. *The Light of the World*, the first iteration of which now hangs in the chapel of Keble College, Oxford, satisfies those intentions.

The same modern observer might also be a little puzzled by the prominent position it gained as, perhaps, one of the greatest and most widely known artistic expressions of Christian evangelism. The first critical reactions in the 1850s did not point in the direction of that long-term outcome. Even the impressive numbers turning out some fifty years later at several of the stops on the imperial grand tour of the third iteration of the painting, which was subsequently displayed in St Paul's Cathedral, did not guarantee its long-lasting influence. Indeed, it is striking that even as interest in the Pre-Raphaelite movement began to revive in the later part of the twentieth century, some judgements about Hunt's work, and *The Light of the World* in particular, remained quite hostile. One writer of that period asked rhetorically: "over how many school and convent corridors has it spread its tenebrous influence" (Hilton 1970, 89).

However, as the essays in this book reveal, there is a great deal more to be said about the work than that. Quite apart from illuminating the historical context in which *The Light of the World* was created and received, they contain a wealth of material which shows how the painting stimulated, and has continued to inspire, wide-ranging, imaginative responses, theologically and artistically, from the sophisticated and profound to the more common-place.

I was conscious of that potential when I first saw the actual painting at Keble in 2010, having recently been elected the College's Warden. I did not draw directly on Ruskin's explanation of the painting's imagery, immensely significant though that is, as I found myself reflecting on the commentary it

might offer on the concept of reconciliation, which had been an ultimate goal of my earlier involvement in the peace process in Northern Ireland.

One interpretation of the painting encapsulates Christ's offering of reconciliation. The words of the inscription, taken from the Book of Revelation, could hardly be clearer in that regard: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me." One is bound to note the closed door, the entrance to the human heart, long un-opened. The rusty nails and hinges and the abundantly overgrowing ivy offer no invitation to enter. Jesus himself cannot open the door because there is no visible handle. It is the personal responsibility of the individual inside, representing also a wider humanity, having heard the call, to take that step, however challenging it may be. The need is to find the courage and the humility to seek forgiveness. That message is reinforced by the fact that the symbolism is not sectarian. While profoundly Christian, *The Light of the World* does not convey a denominational expression of faith.

Although attitudes to his painting would ebb and flow over the succeeding century, by the time of his death in 1910, at the age of eighty-three, William Holman Hunt was an establishment figure. In 1905, King Edward VII had awarded him the recently created Order of Merit, and in the same year he also received a Doctorate in Civil Law from the University of Oxford.

As regards *The Light of the World*, it seems clear that he was not reconciled to Keble's treatment of it: the original refusal to hang it in the chapel, the potentially harmful conditions in which it was initially displayed in the library and so on. But the inspiration for the conference in 2022, which gave rise to this book, could be said to have had an element of reconciliation as one of its guiding principles. It is certainly the case that the College now regards the painting as one of its most treasured artefacts.

Sir Jonathan Phillips
Warden, Keble College (2010–2022)

Work Cited

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1 Introduction

Markus Bockmuehl

Encountering *The Light of the World*

Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* is among the most popularly influential religious works of art in existence – and on certain accounts the single most widely exhibited painting in history. Hunt first completed it in the turbulent mid-19th century and eventually produced two further versions.

The original was housed somewhat obscurely, and at first controversially, in what was then a brand-new Oxford College, and yet it grew before long to global fame and reach (Figure 1.1 below). This was helped along by Hunt's production of a second version (Figure 1.2, now at Manchester Art Gallery) and eventually a third, installed at St Paul's Cathedral (Figure 1.3), which in 1905–1907 was sent on a global tour that attracted seven million people to see it in person. This global breadth of exhibition remains unmatched by any other painting, and had a lasting effect on Christian culture and imagination around the world. Even today, this image is to many of the world's 2.5 billion Christians almost instinctively recognizable and familiar. Despite undeniably controversial elements of its heritage, it seems to exercise an abiding hold on Christian imagination and experience: the visual power of *The Light of the World* continues to shape the faith of millions who may know nothing about the original work of art itself.

Hunt's painting combines an arresting aesthetic with a direct spiritual appeal, at once immediate and yet mysterious. Its motif is the absorbing visual exposition of a single verse of Scripture engraved on its original frame: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me' (Revelation 3:20 KJV).

The strikingly luminous focus on the central figure appears to invite the viewer to an encounter with the risen Christ, simultaneously a powerful presence and humble supplicant, regal and yet intimate, and intensely personal. He comes as a heavenly and exalted figure, and yet bears on his hands the scars of the crucifixion. He wears a crown that is at once a gem-studded symbol of majesty and yet has woven into it his crown of thorns. The encounter with this Christ is set within a radiant appreciation of the natural world (or what we might today call the Environment), addressing its sustaining fertile



Figure 1.1 William Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World* (1853–1854). Oil on canvas. 125 cm × 60 cm. Keble College. Photo: By kind permission of the Warden, Fellows, and Scholars of Keble College, Oxford.



Figure 1.2 William Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World* (Manchester version) (1851–1856). Oil on canvas, 49.8 cm × 26.1 cm. Manchester Art Gallery. Photo: Public domain.



Figure 1.3 William Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World* (St Paul's Cathedral version) (1900–1904). Oil on canvas, 304.8 cm × 193 cm. St Paul's Cathedral. Photo: Public domain.

lushness alongside its autumnal decay – and its sometimes parasitic or menacing recalcitrance.

This book celebrates a Victorian painting whose artistic and religious idiom remains an old familiar friend to many, but which has also become newly strange, culturally alienating, and yet somehow freshly relevant to the very different cultural, religious, and political world of the present century.

The following chapters explore the painting's theology and engagement with Scripture, surveying the artist's life and work alongside the history of the painting's own life as it became to countless viewers an icon, indeed a kind of sacrament, of the welcoming and inviting presence of Christ. Its celebrity, however, was never entirely free from controversy, and succeeding chapters show this to be the case in relation not only to its global tour of British colonies, but also to its biblical and theological subject matter – as well as in the challenge it poses to postcolonial ways of seeing Christian art. Three closing studies set the painting in the wider contexts of the idiom of ancient and contemporary iconography, and of its catalytic potential in the experience of conversion.

The project had its origin in oral presentations at a 2022 Oxford conference to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the painting's donation to Keble College. They are here reinforced with several newly commissioned studies on questions including its art historical context, its place in the dynamic of conversion, and the relevance of its religious and naturalistic idiom for contemporary artistic expression. As is perhaps almost inevitable for shared ventures of this nature, difficult personal challenges including illness and bereavement took their toll on several authors. Some chapters could not be completed as intended.

Despite this, the book is here offered in gratitude for the labours of all who contributed their energies at any stage of the project. This includes the Warden, Fellows, Librarian and Archivist of Keble College, not only for the grants that made possible the 2022 conference and the publisher's colour print subvention, but also for expert support of a successful and enjoyable conference. Jeremy Begbie generously facilitated this project's consideration for the series *Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts*. I am grateful for constructive comments and suggestions received from the anonymous peer reviewers, and would like in particular to thank Katherine Ong and her team at Routledge for seeing the book through to publication. My colleagues at the University of Oxford's Faculty of Theology and Religion kindly supported the nine-month sabbatical leave that facilitated most of the editorial work for this book. I am grateful too to my doctoral student J. Tyler Brown for his energetic editorial assistance. Most importantly, I thank my wife Celia for generous encouragement to persist with an intensive period of research leave abroad just when she was unexpectedly called upon to take on a senior leadership role.

William Holman Hunt's Religious and Historical Context

Frances Knight critically examines William Holman Hunt's shifting relationship with Christianity and his artistic transformation from a radical avant-garde artist to a prominent creator of mainstream Christian imagery. Traversing Hunt's life across the drastic changes in religious landscapes from his birth in 1827 to his death in 1910, she explores his early religious influences, particularly his disillusionment with Anglican and Nonconformist worship, and his eventual alignment with Anglicanism.

Hunt's early exposure to illustrated family Bibles, notably Charles Knight's Pictorial Bible, profoundly influenced his artistic vision. These Bibles, visually rich and interpretative, aimed to bridge the cultural and historical gap between biblical times and Victorian England. This exposure shaped Hunt's perception of biblical scenes and characters, as evident in his artworks.

Religious controversies of the 1850s were marked by significant shifts in the British Protestant identity, catalysed by the Oxford Movement and the establishment of a Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales. This period saw Hunt embark on *The Light of the World*, a work that became a symbol of Protestant piety and was widely reproduced in various Christian denominations.

Knight sketches Hunt's meticulous approach in developing the painting's technical, symbolic, and thematic elements, painting by moonlight to capture the nocturnal setting. The symbolism deployed, deeply entwined with biblical references and Hunt's personal interpretations, catered to a broad Christian audience and played a pivotal role in its widespread acceptance.

Hunt's later years witnessed a cautious rapprochement with the Anglican Church. His works came to be received and promoted within Protestant circles by influential figures like P.T. Forsyth and F.W. Farrar, and his art was used in social and religious movements including the Whitechapel Picture Exhibition.

Frances Knight offers an apt and timely reminder about the cultural particularity not just of Holman Hunt the painter, but also of today's viewers and critics. Reflecting on the decline and subsequent revival of interest in Hunt's art, she notes how 'contemporizing' recent interpretations of his work diverge significantly from Hunt's original intentions, highlighting the evolving nature of art interpretation as well as the enduring complexity of Hunt's legacy.

Pre-Raphaelite Light: Hunt's Vision of Salvation

We turn next to Ayla Lepine's consideration of William Holman Hunt's Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece in its art historical context and profound impact on culture and theology. The painting, created in three versions over Hunt's career, foregrounds Jesus Christ as the 'Light of the World,' an interpretation that draws both on the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation. Hunt's unique approach intertwines scriptural references with contemporary

art, nature, and culture, exemplifying his dedication to integrating spiritual ideals with everyday life.

Lepine examines the evolution of Hunt's work from its inception in 1851 through its various iterations, emphasizing the painting's significant role in reflecting and influencing Victorian religious and artistic sensibilities. *The Light of the World* transcended traditional art forms, becoming a Protestant icon and sparking debates over its theological implications amidst the rise of Anglo-Catholicism. Although its reception certainly varied, with figures like George Bernard Shaw critiquing its perceived naïveté, nevertheless its popularity persisted and grew, influencing a wide array of media.

Hunt's broader impact on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) also involved his innovative blending of biblical themes with the realities of contemporary life. At the same time, Lepine highlights the paradoxes within Hunt's artistic practice and the diverse interpretations of his work over time, from theological readings to its role in Victorian visual culture. *The Light of the World* represented a symbol of Christ's eternal presence, transcending theological boundaries and continually resonating with audiences.

Christina Rossetti's Christology

The role of Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) within the PRB transcends that of muse and model, including as a model for the Christ of *The Light of the World*. She was in fact a pivotal theological voice, particularly in shaping the movement's Christology. Rebekah Lamb's detailed study explores this aspect, diverging from the traditional focus on Rossetti's relationship with Tractarianism, and emphasizing her influence on Pre-Raphaelite theology.

The vivid colours, medieval symbology and meticulous attention to detail that characterized early Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics contrast sharply with the more familiar later phase, popularly caricatured as featuring melancholic, distant female faces. Christina Rossetti's involvement in this artistic movement was profound, engaging actively in the creation of Pre-Raphaelite art and influencing its theological and artistic perspectives. In his portrayal of her discerning gaze, her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) captured her critical importance for the Brotherhood.

Rossetti's theological contributions, particularly in Christology, are revealed in her poetry and prose. Although not systematic, her engagement with biblical themes, particularly the nature and person of Christ, came to be deeply embedded in her literary work. Her poems, often serving as implicit commentaries on Pre-Raphaelite paintings, carry a focus on Christ as the illuminator of human reason and imagination.

Rossetti's nuanced Christocentric approach stresses the humility and patience of Christ. Her writings often contemplate the hidden aspects of Christ's life, finding spiritual significance in everyday experiences and offering a distinctive interpretation of Christ's relationship to nature – a perspective that