

Report
on
The Influence
upon
Christianity
of
Expensive Church Architecture

by
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Report

on
The Influence
of

Ghostliness

of

Expository Church Architecture

in America

by George F. Johnson

The subject I have chosen for a report is not probably the most interesting that might have been selected. One embodying more of the facts and realities of history and life would awaken more attention. For it is with profound interest that we listen to the story of the hero the patriot the philanthropist or the religious devotee, whilst the discussion of those abstract principles which lie at the foundation of all right action and are as real as outward life itself is thought but of little moment and is scarcely sufficient to arouse attention. Though my subject is not purely an abstract one yet it is far from approaching to the romantic. It has no tearless and heroic departures from home and friends to distant lands. It labours long and hard on no shattered bark midst storms and tempest over the billows of the deep. It lands in no village of the rude and barbarous red man nor travels with great heart and motive through dark dense forests or over lakes hills or mountains. My subject is one of daily life. It is soaked with the dust of cities and whilst we think of it we hear the deafening din of crowds of every craft and find it neighbour to all that is old and common. Besides it has before been discussed pretty fully in this hall and little more can be added to what has already been said. It will not be surprising therefore if the

subject should fail in awakening that interest which under other circumstances might be expected. It is due probably to myself to say that in writing my report I have been thrown altogether upon my own resources having no documents of any kind whatever to which I could refer. And this I hope will be regarded as a sufficient apology if I should dwell upon principles more than upon facts. Indeed we are acquainted with the facts. For they are no unsubstantial things belonging only to the past and merely recorded by curious historians. They are the solid realities of the present day. They have the consistency of brick and stone and stand out in bold relief towering to heaven in the form of churches and cathedrals. These are the facts for our consideration this evening. They are the churches, ^{and especially} the magnificent ones of our land.

A church "it is said by one" is more than a work of art. It is a symbol of religion a visible sign and setting forth of the religious principle. Churches are the outward consecration of our cities, of our villages, of our country, of the world. They are the visible tokens of the invisible; they lead the thoughts to the unseen and the infinite. Their rising towers their pointed spires recognize a communication between earth and heaven. They are like the ladder which Jacob saw in vision on which the angels of God were ascending and descending; and he who pauses beneath them in the sacred hour to meditate and pray is led to exclaim with the ancient Patriarch "how dreadful is this place! this is none other than the house of God - this is the gate of

heaven. What would a city or village even in appearance ^{even} to the passing traveller without churches! a city of habitations and warehouses and houses of entertainment for the way-faring men and houses of pleasure for the gay, but without one structure to recognize the sense of devotion and of duty? Would not the very traveller hasten for his life from such a city as the city of destruction. And what a striking testimony is it to the universal sense of some ^{kind of} religion that one such city was never found in the world.

Let us then God then for the religious principle; and let us not forget its manifestations. Let us not forget the temples it has raised. We see them the world over, in the land of darkness as well as light amongst heathens Mahomedans Jews and Christians.

But what is the outward or general architectural character of these. It must be confessed that in some it is destitute of taste miserably deficient in every thing like neatness fitness proportion or beauty. Many churches are unworthy the great and glorious object for which they were built. They display less taste and character than the houses of the worshippers and they are better calculated by their appearance for hummeries or prisons than for temples of prayer and praise to the Almighty One. The effect of these is bad. But there are some which are on the other extreme. They are erected on the most magnificent and expensive scale. They combine Egyptian massiveness with Corinthian grace and

beauty. They display eastern gorgeousness not less than western botness. Nor are these temples without their worshippers. Nay there are some good and great men who enthusiastically admire them, and ~~use~~^{use} their influence to no little extent to strengthen the desire for them.

But let us consider the influence which building splendid churches has upon the motives of men.

Whatever those motives may have been in ages past when the superb and magnificent temples were erected which we have seen as well as read of we feel assured that at the present day they are not unalloyed with the spirit of show and rivalry. It is not improbable that the religious sentiment as well as the love of the grand, gave existence to the spacious, the lofty and the gorgeous temples of the east and the west. A misguided and unenlightened reverence has sought to express itself in such outward acts as would be gratifying to the vanity of its deity. Some it is true may have given magnitude & display to their temples for the sake of effects, whilst others may have consulted only the impression which the temple was calculated to make of the solemnity and grandeur of that religion which it represented. In a word we can easily ~~see~~ ^{conceive} from the circumstances in which they were placed that the motives of those who built the fanes of antiquity and the towering and massive cathedrals of the Continent were far purer, though mistaken than those of their modern imitators. The last no doubt are

no less fond of the lofty and grand than the former but they act under different circumstances and therefore under different influences. Whilst formerly there was a unity or oneness in the church though a difference in sentiment there is now not only a variety of opinion but a ^{multitude} ~~difference~~ of sects and each sect adopts every method possible to outstrip the others in numbers respectability and influence. The spirit of rivalry then we frankly acknowledge exists in churches no less than in individuals and independently too of any influences from without. But the erection of splendid churches strengthens that feeling. Enter our large cities when the spirit of church building is abroad and it will be found that rivalry tinctures it so strongly that it can be seen and felt. Each party is anxious to see its church with the most lofty towers, the most spacious ailes the most massive pillars the costliest adorning and the most magnificent architecture. Expense is no consideration. What is wanted is ornament. But for what is it wanted? Is it to benefit the individuals who pay for it? Is it to elevate the masses around them? Well would be were their motives so pure. But it springs from a spirit of pride and display and rivalry equalled alone by the weak and vain worshippers of show and flattery. The object is to attract attention to surpass a competitor and to gain the favour and support of the wealthy and worldly. The same spirit actuates them which influences the creature of mere show. The churches

they build are not the tangible expressions of the religious principle. They are not the manifestations of christian benevolence anxious for the accommodation and instruction and welfare of the poor. They are every thing but this. In many places they are the monuments of christian pride and display. They are the signs of sectarianism. And as every act has a reflex influence upon ourselves our rival church building spirit is strengthened by every added inch and ornament to the church of our sect as we see it rising beneath the hand of the builder. Nor is it confined to ourselves. Like a fever it is contagious. It affects others. Our spirit is imbibed. Our example is imitated. The poor are taxed. The rich pour out their treasures, the subscription list is circulated and soon the foundation and the corner stone of another church are laid to be loaded with ornaments more befitting the Pantheon of blind scepticism than the simple and spiritual worship of the Supreme One. Had we means for other purposes which are of infinitely greater importance and did not the present mode of church building in cities connect with itself other evil consequences than this we have dwelt upon them it would be well probably to make our houses of worship of all other structures the most costly and massive and magnificent. But as long as it awakens and strengthens the spirit of rivalry how long as they are the mere expressions of that spirit let our temples

be symbolical of the humility and yet beauty of the christian religion

But let us look the influence of expensive church architecture in another light.

As we stand not alone in the world our influence is not confined to ourselves. Whilst every action through the sentiment from which it springs it awakens similar feelings in others besides producing effects which were never contemplated. And strange as it may appear though churches are built to promote the cause of religion they have frequently the opposite effect. There is amongst men a common sense idea of religion which approaches far nearer to the truth than the mystified theological one which is constantly taught in books and churches. They look upon it, though they have never studied it, as pre-eminently a practical system not as a system of rigid arbitrary duties nor as a mere endless round of ceremonious observances, but as specially adapted to the wants of man kind as calculated to direct every thing in the most useful course, to develop our resources in the most efficient and beneficial manner and to make life active self denying and happy such is their idea of religion. Its spirit in their estimation is utilitarian. It sanctions no excess or extravagance. It demands self mortification self devotion and sacrifice. It aims at the highest good. In common with enlightened reason it demands the purest and highest interests of mankind. It sacrifices the less to the greater

ornament to use and mere gratification to lasting benefit.

But this extravagant and costly church architecture is seen to be diametrically opposed to the very spirit of christianity. Time and money are lavished on a temple of worship that might be employed a thousand times more profitably, if not for the spread of religion yet to feed and clothe and educate the famishing thousands of the neglected and miserable. And what is the effect? It is this; good is left undone that might be done; and positive evil is produced which nothing but reformation can remedy. The minds and hearts of many are alienated from religion as well as from those who profess it.

Scepticism assumes a louder tone of opposition to christianity and those already disaffected towards it are confirmed in their dislike and worldliness. It is pious they say. "It is all priestcraft and show and hypocrisy. Why all this expenditure and waste of money they ask if you are sincere, if you be what you profess to be the self-denying benefactors of mankind?"

Why these splendid temples if resources are wanted to save immortal souls? Is this they ^{enquire} ~~ask~~ the religion of Christ? Pointing to the massive and ornamented edifices of worship which have cost the public millions of pounds and then to the degraded and ignorant thousands around they triumphantly enquire where is the christianity of the church? Of what value is it in a lifeless temple in brick and stone and ornament? Give me they say

the religion of common sense. Give me the religion of
genuine humanity and away with your hollow hearted
hypocrisy which under the garb of sanctity baptizes
as religious the actions of pride and vanity and ruel-
-ry. Away with such hypocrisy and give me the
open hearted the open handed and sincere benefactor of
mankind be he Jew or Brahmin Infidel or Mahom-
-etan

Such is the effect which it has upon the minds of some
We might proceed further and show that it strengthens
the pride and love of display in others. But on this at
present we shall offer no remarks.

But proceed in the next place to notice the dif-
ficulties in which churches involve themselves by the
erection of expensive buildings

It is scarcely necessary we know to mention these for they are
not so uncommon as to be unknown. For who is not aware
of the fact that many churches by this love of display
have placed themselves in the most perplexing circumstances
They wish not to be surpassed by their neighbours. Forshonable
themselves they are anxious that their church should be like
them. Possessing highly refined tastes they despise this
vulgar plainness and simplicity which with some is the
theme of so much praise and are satisfied with nothing but
the exquisitely beautiful and transcendently superb and
magnificent. They build their church therefore to suit
their tastes, and effectually load themselves with a debt

which cripples their energies and imposes upon them a con-
stant and burdensome tax - a tax which calls for efforts to meet

demands that they are unable to sustain. Congregations
to my own knowledge have been thus situated. They
have built without counting the cost or have supposed
~~or have supposed~~ that the church itself would attract
wealth and respectability sufficient to meet expenses.
But their expectations have been disappointed. The
burden has soon fallen upon the shoulders of a few and
unable to bear it they have found relief only by closing
the doors of the church and offering it for sale. A case
of this kind recently occurred in Boston. The second con-
gregational church there razed the old building to the
ground. and ^{erected} ~~raised~~ another every way so costly that they
were unable to meet the expense. ~~The~~ ^{public} result was they were
obliged to abandon it and offer it for sale.

Had they built a less expensive church and been satisfied
with one more becoming the spirit of christianity all the
difficulty in which they became involved would have been
sared and now they could have worshipped God beneath the roof
of their own house of prayer. But their extravagance has closed
its doors. Their pride has offered it for sale and their love
of splendor and show has made them houseless. Nor is this
a case uncommon. It too frequently happens. And yet indi-
viduals advocate the erection of costly churches and by
this means strengthen that spirit of ~~extravagance~~ ^{extravagance} which
involves whole congregations no less than ^{private} individuals in
the most perplexing difficulties

We come now to speak of the resources it demands which might be more usefully employed.

It will be well probably to observe here that our resources are not our own, that we are only stewards, that we are entrusted with talents neither to neglect nor to bury but to improve to the best advantage. Our means then of doing good then are to be employed not as fancy caprice appetite passion or society may dictate but as reason our own necessities or the condition of mankind may demand. That which is most important from its being the highest and most lasting good first claims our attention. But it cannot be imagined that the erection of splendid churches and cathedrals is the highest good we can do either for ourselves or others. A much greater benefit might be rendered to ~~it~~ or to any other city than building in its centre a monument of architecture as a place of worship like St Pauls - York Minster or St Peters. I know that such works are not without their influence. Like a master poem they may produce the feeling of the beautiful and sublime. But they do not awaken correct ideas of life, of duty of Christ, of the human soul and of God. They do not free the enslaved, illumine the path of the poor the neglected the oppressed and the sorrowing. They do not elevate the human soul above degradation and drudgery and darkness and sin. Yet this is the greatest good that can be done. But it is to be

effected by other means than ^{by} architecture. We want something more than the speech of brick and chiselled stone and marble. We want something more than dead forms massive pillars and rising towers. We want language heart life and labour. We want the speech of books and men. We want the warmth and experience of living affections and life. We want the labour of such men as Howard Oberlin and Tuckerman. And the speech and life and labour of one of these would speak a thousand times more good than all the Grecian Doric or Corinthian architecture in the world. Let our money be used to employ one of these. Let us use it for the good of the outcast, the criminal, the poor the slave and the neglected. Let us use it to correct the views and habits of men, to elevate the employments and amusements of life, to spread around knowledge and science truth and love and we shall do well. But in our cities the resources of ~~men~~ the wealthy that might be thus employed are too frequently lavished on expensive churches. There are those in this country which have cost from fifty to five hundred dollars, and one which is some what larger than this Hall cost no less than seventy five thousand dollars. Were we to cross the ocean we should find still more expensive religious edifices. What the expense was of St Paul's of London and York Minster I am unable to say. But Isaac's church of Petersburg says the American Encyclopedia cost 26 500,000 thousand roubles that is more than 19 \$ 25,000 dollars. St Peter's which it required a century to build, was erected at the

enormous expense of 45 millions of Roman crowns, equal in value considering the difference in prices to 100 millions of dollars. Such are the sums of money which have been expended on some places of worship.

What might not have been done for the higher and better ^{well being} ~~interest~~ of mankind with such resources. The interests of one half of what one church has cost in this country would pay well twenty active missionaries, furnish them with a press and supply them with an abundance of tracts and books. We say nothing now of what might be done with the boundless resources which have been lavished on places of worship on the continent of Europe. Let us look at home. We hear complaints from our Associations and Conventions occasionally that they want money. They are applied to for assistance but they have no means to render any. They would assist poor churches establish missions, circulate books papers & periodicals but they are destitute of funds. Their large hearts would embrace and help forward every philanthropic undertaking. But they lack the means. And where shall we look for them. Not one place in their churches. In many of these we shall 20, 30, 40 or 50 thousand dollars sunk in little else than superfluous ornament. We have a church in this place which is as chaste as neat and as commodious as could be wished and yet the expense of it was no more than thirty two or three hundred dollars. Now suppose that the churches in our cities were

built on a scale no more costly and suppose that what is now expended in ornaments were devoted to usefulness what would be the result? Would churches be closed through poverty? Would societies be broken up for want of aid? Would papers be established and then again abandoned for want of subscribers and support? Would the poor and neglected and miserable in our cities be left in their ignorance and degradation for want of ministers at large? The answer no. There would be a supply sufficient to put in motion a moral machinery powerful enough to renovate the sinks of corruption in every city. There would be sufficient to support missionaries, to aid poor and dependent societies, and to sustain handsomely our publishing committees in their great and responsible work. Indeed there is nothing scarcely that we could not accomplish and is not such work preferable to expensive church architecture? Is it not better to adorn the immaterial and immortal than the material and perishable.

I know that it is contended that some will attend a splendid church when they would absent themselves from every other, and that towards the erection of such a one they would give liberally though they would withhold their hand from every other philanthropic ~~work~~ work. But such we know are few very few. And christianity is purely democratic. It respects

neither greatness, when fancy, wealth or fastidious
tastes. It is with this as with enlightened reason.
It lifts up its voice for the mass first and for the
few after, for the greatest good then for the best.

We are aware also that many contend for magnif-
icent churches because they conceive that they elevate
and improve the public taste - Architecture says
Dr Dewey is a language as truly as sculpture or
painting nay as truly as literature or poetry. The
front of a majestic and beautiful church is read
and known of all men. The stranger the gazer the
passer by though he reads nothing else reads that
And there are religious edifices in the world whose
effect in elevating the mind cannot be transcended
by any painting or statue, by any poem or eloquent
discourse. And suppose that such a poem or
discourse could be depicted as to be set up in an
enduring form and to make an instant and in-
extinguishable impression by the very way side where
multitudes and generations are walking. Would it
not be a goodly work to place it there? Would not
the very idea the bare possibility awaken the utmost
enthusiasm? But a magnificent piece of archi-
tecture is such a poem, is such a discourse. Inso-
much that I will venture to say (and I say it ad-
visedly and deliberately) says the author I am quo-
ting, that I should value as much in any city or
town the effect of York Minster in England as of

that great work of England's sublimest bard's the Paradise
Lost. He who gazes upon such a structure is melted
enraptured and overwhelmed with delight and ven-
eration; he feels as he does when he gazes up the
sublimest objects of nature, and to place a ma-
jestic cathedral in one of our cities (would that it
might yet be done here) would be as if you could place the
loftest mountain of the Alps in its neighbourhood
to bear up the thoughts of the inhabitants to sub-
limity and beauty and God.

The general ideas contained in this eloquent passage we
pretend not to dispute. We have felt their truth to some
extent as we have gazed upon such edifices or have
stood in silent thought beneath their lofty roofs.

But the thoughts of few are borne up to God, by majes-
tic temples. Few very few are improved reformed or
freed from sin by the presence and power of cathedrals
Few very few are elevated in their thoughts and feelings
and habits and actions by magnificent edifices. Few
are made good husbands Fathers teachers citizens
Christians Ministers or philanthropists by the speech
of architecture. A thousand superb structures are speak-
ing daily to millions of ignorant and degraded souls but
they speak in vain. Yes they speak in vain. They speak
not to the heart and life. Something plainer deeper
stronger is required. Give me a Plain said James by
the side of St Peter's said James of Birmingham with

Evangelical truth and I will empty it. Let and
with evangelical truth he would transform the mul-
titudes who now live with meaningless adora-
tion before the cross and beneath the dome of St Peter.
With this he would produce a deeper and more last-
ing effect upon the hearts and lives of men in a
day than the magnificence of St Peter's would in
a century. It is folly then to lavish money upon
such dumb and ineffective orators. It is demanded
more urgently else where. The poor, the blind,
the lame the deaf the dumb the widow the orphan
the ignorant and unbound demand it. They claim
it, and their claim is just and imperative. We have
other temples to build besides material ones. We live
in the spiritual world. We have temples not made
with hands to raise from which shall rise deep and
holy worship, temples in which God shall dwell in
which the spirit of Christ shall reign which no elements
shall destroy, the foundations of which shall be eternal
truth and love and their duration as lasting as the
unchangeable One. Give us temples like these. Give
us the sublimity of nature of forest and mountain
and cataract, of swelling main, of eternal snow
and ice, of heavens thunder and lightning. But
give us the spirit sublime - the stern virtues which
renew the world, the love as lasting as time and
as wide as the universe, the aspirations which reach

reach to heaven and the faith and purpose which
bid defiance to every obstacle. Give us the soul
of truth the lofty spirit the single aim the
stamp of heaven, the impress of God.