Journal of Historical Geography 51 (2016) 1–17

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Narthex reclaimed: Reinventing disciplinary space in the Anglican mission field, 1847–1903

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 8 September 2014
Received in revised form
7 October 2015
Accepted 11 October 2015

Keywords:
Narthex
Anglican
Missionary
Church architecture
Discipline
Imperial networks

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the reinvention of the narthex in Anglian missionary circles during the second half of the nineteenth century. This was a spatial device used in ancient Christian architecture to hold catechumens, 'inquirers', and those who were seen as violating ecclesiastical discipline. As the Church of England continued to extend its missionary activity throughout the world during this period, an appropriate solution was sought (especially among High Church missionaries) to maintain order and discipline during divine worship, particularly in areas where missionaries encountered large numbers of indigenous non-Christians, namely Asia and Africa. The narthex was seen as an ecclesiologically 'correct' method of achieving this, providing a space at the front of a church where non-Christians could 'inquire', and where catechumens could reside before baptism and thus make a symbolic entry into the church of Christ. Although never systematically implemented in the Anglican mission field, the reinvention of this ancient spatial device opens a window onto the practical, scholarly and imaginative capacity of Victorian Anglicanism in its efforts to evangelise the 'heathen' world while remaining within what it saw as a continuous, living tradition dating back to the early Church. Thus, the reinvention of the narthex emerges as a piece of spatial machinery that was at once functional and romantic, modern and historical, inclusive and discriminatory; a space that was clearly used for the purposes of control but one that also encouraged the participation and potential conversion of non-Christians.

> There was an Arab gentleman, Abdullah bin Mohammed by name, who had been taught by Bishop Steere, and as long as he was only an inquirer he might stand at the end of the Slave Market Church, and no notice was taken. But one day he uncovered his head, and knelt down among the Christians. The next day, the enlightened Seyid Barghash [Sultan] sent him to prison; and there for three and a half weary years he remained, scorning all offers of freedom at the cost of his religion ….
>
> — A. E. M. Anderson-Morshead (1909)[1]

This passage from Mary Anderson-Morshead's account of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa is revealing. It hints at a regime concerning the liturgical arrangement of space that was once present in various parts of the Anglican confession worldwide. Its implementation was not just the product of competing ideologies (local and foreign) but also of new and unfamiliar environs. These 'new' environments were deemed peculiarly demanding in terms of ecclesiastical organisation and discipline, often requiring flexible yet decisive action by those *in situ* if church services were not to be interrupted or descend into chaos.[2] This was especially the case in parts of the world where Anglican missionaries found themselves labouring in the midst of one or more ancient and dominant religious traditions, such as those in Africa and Asia.

But Anderson-Morshead's account is revealing in at least one other respect. It refers to the conversion of an individual from one Abrahamic faith to another – in this case, from Islam to Christianity. As the Great Sepoy Revolt (Indian Mutiny) of 1857 had demonstrated twenty-five years earlier, apostasy of this kind was

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[1] A.E.M. Anderson-Morshead, *The History of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa*, London, 1909, 241. Abdullah bin Mohammed was left to die in prison before being baptised around c.1880.

[2] The term 'discipline' here does not carry any overt punitive or Foucauldian connotations that we would tend to associate with it in a modern sense, although it does have something to do with order and regularity. Rather, as an historical concept and contemporary term, it referred specifically to the strict maintenance of religious ordinance, both in the face of potential disruption and as an essential characteristic of Anglican liturgical practice.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2015.10.013
0305-7488/

potentially dangerous, even fatal, not just to individuals (as in the case of Abdullah bin Mohammed) but to entire civilisations. But these were the circumstances in which the Universities' Mission found itself in the 1870s, and the risk was apparently considered worthwhile, especially if it might mean abolishing the East African slave trade once and for all.[3]

In such a context it was not just the obligation to convert non-Christians that mattered but the process behind it. This process was itself a disciplinary one. Here ideas of space and conversion were irrevocably entwined with those of method through the concept of transition – that is, progression from one spiritual state to another in a correct and orderly manner. This process of moving from one state to another – both spatially and spiritually – is akin to what the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep described as '*rites de passage*', and also involves what he identified as the magico-religious aspect of 'territorial passage', of crossing frontiers.[4]

For those outside the Anglican confession this process of conversion was both mysterious and protracted (even bizarre), with each stage along the way to full communion marked by rites of catechism, baptism and confirmation. Again, as Anderson-Morshead's account of Abdullah bin Mohammed makes clear, in certain parts of the world this process extended to include the strict demarcation of space. That is, the configuration of church interiors to reflect the status accorded each stage in this spiritual rite of passage, which was itself a deliberate 'disciplinary' configuration. Although it could be argued that the liturgical arrangement of space was *sine qua non* with respect to nineteenth-century Anglican ecclesiology, in the case of missionary churches it was generally more pronounced, even exaggerated.

As an 'inquirer', Abdullah was identified as a 'heathen' and therefore prohibited from entering the precincts of the church proper. In fact, such was the strict and palpable division of ecclesiastical space in the cathedral at Zanzibar that Abdullah bin Mohammed would have been in no doubt as to which part of the church he could stand in upon entering. In other words, he would have recognised the arcade screen dividing this 'end' space from the church proper as a distinct threshold or 'portal' demarcating two spatial zones. As a Muslim, such architectural boundary indicators would have been familiar to him from local Stone Town mosques.

So what exactly was this space – this 'end' of the Slave Market church – that Abdullah bin Mohammed was allowed to occupy? Essentially, it was a transitory space – what van Gennep would describe as an extended threshold which, in acquiring its enlarged spatial quality, becomes a distinct 'zone'. Thus, neither fully inside the church nor out, it may be understood as an 'in-between' space, both physically and metaphorically. It was a space set aside for regulated, and therefore controlled, access to the mysteries of divine worship; a space in which the heathen – or, in this case, 'Mohammedan' – could see and be seen without interrupting or defiling the holy sacrament.[5] Again, following van Gennep, whoever should pass from the 'outside' into such a zone, as did Abdullah bin Mohammed, 'finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds'.[6] In this sense, the 'end' of the Slave Market church was very much a liminal space in the way that the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner might describe it, a zone that was at once marginal and migratory, fixed yet permeable.[7]

This space, deliberately planned, was derived from a device found in primitive Christian and medieval church architecture known as a *pronaos* or narthex (*υάρθηξ*) – a space of indeterminate size that was literally, as the name suggests, an extension to the west end of a church's nave. The ultimate function of this device in early Christian churches varied, but its primary function was to contain and control catechumens and penitents during divine worship. To the historically minded architect or clergyman, it therefore presented itself as a model space for the maintenance of ecclesiastical discipline and the enabling of *rites de passage*.

Thus, it was through the granting of access to such spaces that the likes of Abdullah bin Mohammed were understood to be taking their first step, as it were, into the living church of Christ. Here, again, the process of conversion was paramount: to move between these 'zones' (spatially and spiritually) was to unite oneself with new worlds. Thus, just as Bentham's Panopticon was the 'architectural figure' of his peculiar reforming regime, so too the narthex in the Slave Market church was an architectural device through which spiritual salvation proceeded and was attained.[8]

This liminal quality is important in comprehending how such a space was understood to perform the *rites de passage* associated with Christian communion, and is one that we shall see rehearsed (both rhetorically and actually) time and again through the instances of missionary architecture described below. Although not concerned with the ritual specificity of that process, what follows will examine the quality of such space(s), how we might interpret them as architectural, and suggest ways in which their reinvention, meaning and use were bound up in larger imaginary constructs relating to missionary Tractarianism. This involves considering a number of examples of narthex space from across the Anglican world, both built and unbuilt, ranging from makeshift ecclesiastical structures to more substantial parish churches and cathedrals. It will explore where the idea originated, how it gained currency and the different ways in which it was both understood and implemented. The narthex will be presented as a kind of connecting space, or one of intersecting spatial fields, that positioned it between sanctified micro-spaces on the one hand, and much more geographically expansive fields of missionary endeavour on the other. Apart from the various physical manifestations of this phenomenon, the essay will attempt to demonstrate how the reinvention of the narthex idea relates to the transmission of specialist knowledge through what might be described as informal clerical networks, especially the reach and influence of the Ecclesiological Society in London, thus evoking notions of imperial networking.

1. Reinventing the narthex

Whatever else the event described above by Anderson-Morshead may signify, it highlights the increased frequency with which liminal spaces such as nartheces could be found in Anglican missionary architecture by the late nineteenth century. Although it cannot be said that such spaces were ever required in the Anglican mission field, they certainly became more numerous as doctrinal attitudes continued to change in the Anglican Church, and the particular 'problems' that missionaries faced multiplied. While there was never any diktat from Church authorities regarding their

[3] See Oxford and Cambridge Mission to Central Africa: Meeting at Cambridge, Tuesday, Nov. 1, 1859 (supplement to the *Colonial Church Chronicle* 13 (1859) 17); *Colonial Church Chronicle* 17 (Jan. 1863) 5.

[4] A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee, London, 1960 (first published 1909), 15.

[5] Citing H. Clay Trumbull, van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 19, explicitly identifies such extended threshold spaces with the *pronaos*, the narthex and the vestibule.

[6] Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 18.

[7] Betwixt and between: the liminal period in *Rites de Passage*, in: V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, 1967, 93–111.

[8] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth, 1991, 200.