The home as sacred space: The Clapham Sect's legacy for lockdown

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The unprecedented closure of churches during the COVID-19 pandemic, for a period that even included Easter, has provoked much questioning as to where it is appropriate to do church. Whilst the Catholic Church has allowed its priests to celebrate and livestream the Mass from empty churches, the Anglican Archbishops instructed clergy not to pray or worship in church, in order to 'take a lead in showing our communities how we must behave in order to slow down the spread of the coronavirus.'[1] Clergy are encouraged to livestream services from their homes instead. This has led to anxieties about how to pray 'when I don't have a Victorian building around me', as one clergy colleague put it; more deeply, it begs the question of how to preserve a sense of the sacred when conducting church services from home. 'Sacred' means both 'reserved for a particular purpose' and 'set apart and holy'. These terms suit church buildings that have been constructed and consecrated for the purpose of worship, but less so the home, a space constructed for the messy and seemingly unhallowed functions of sleeping, bathing, cleaning, cooking, and the procreation and raising of children. Viral images from around the world of dogs, children and phone-calls interrupting live-streamed services add to the impression that home is not a place for serious worship.[2]

These questions have challenged me personally. As a priest working full-time as a university professor, I am used to a prayer-life lived mainly outside of the church building, but I was concerned about how, or indeed whether, to celebrate communion at home without a church building, a congregation, vestments or a communion set. And I was mindful of how some people feel cut off from the sacred by not being able to attend church.

As the church looks to continue to worship through lockdown and beyond, people are seeking historical precedents for worshipping at home. Some have seen the early church as a precedent for our current situation, for they met secretly in houses due to persecution; something that has remained the case for Christians at different times and places to this very day.[3] Yet today's worshippers are even more dispersed, for it is impossible to congregate in one home. So, how can small households or individuals praying in their own homes retain an access to the sacred? As I aim to show here, important contributions to the understanding of the home as a sacred space were made during the long nineteenth century by members of the Clapham Sect and their descendants. The Clapham Sect was a group of middle-class families, including the Venns, Wilberforces and Stephens, who generated religious revivals within England and missionary movements abroad, and whose philanthropic successes included the abolition of slavery.

The origins of Clapham go back to the eighteenth century, at a time when the Church of England was losing ground to more vigorous nonconformist movements, not least because of its reputation for laxity and abuses such as clergy receiving stipends to oversee obsolete parishes. In response, Rev Henry Venn, Vicar of Clapham, issued a wake-up call in *The Complete Duty of Man* (1763), in which he reaffirmed Christian doctrines and presented a practical guide to family life.[4] He stressed the importance of love and affection, but also social order, within the family. He deemed parenthood to be a holy calling, with parents being responsible for raising their children in the faith. Venn's book included a calendar of homilies and prayers to be read out by the father within the home. Although Venn remained active as a vicar (as did his son and grandson), the home became central to religious practice: in other words, home not church became the sacred space. Family prayers were an established practice until the late nineteenth century and Venn's book was followed by other popular prayer-books by Henry Thornton and William Cowper and others.

With the spread of industrialization, the home came to represent safety and security from the immoral world of business. This can be seen in the many conduct-manuals on domestic practice that were successors to Venn. Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England* (c.1843), exhorted wives, mothers and sisters, to minister to their menfolk by creating a safe space in which they could be purified from worldly values. John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1864) described the house as 'a place of Peace … a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple with the hearth watched over by Household Gods'.[5] The sacred nature of the home was preserved – and in turn preserved – the concept of the separate spheres: men could venture out into this world, whilst women had to stay at home to ensure their own purity as well as that of their home.

Further levels of demarcation were made within the home to ensure purity: the messy business of household management was confined to spaces like the scullery, kitchen and nursery: areas maintained by servants supervised by the women of the family. The bedroom was the place in which sex and childbirth, illness and death were hidden behind closed doors (the latter three likewise overseen by women). The drawing-room was the space presided over by women: a space at which the menfolk of the family were welcomed home and nourished, whereas the man's space was the study: a room where he was free to read, pray and reflect unhindered by domestic concerns.

That said, the divisions were not as firmly fixed as they may appear. Many Victorian fathers worked from home (in their studies) and emerged to spend time with their children. The division between public and private was also permeable. So, although the bedroom was a place of concealment and confinement, the popular ideal of the good death meant that the last words and moments of a believer were written up for public edification. The drawing-room was a place of homecoming for family members, but it was also a space for receiving visitors. And the study was both a place of retreat and a space from which the Victorian middle-class

man communicated with the world by receiving and answering correspondence – the Clapham Sect were copious letter-writers – as well as writing books and waging political campaigns, the abolition of slavery being a notable example.

Furthermore, the gendered occupation of space began to be less defined, even before the end of the nineteenth century. Single women of Clapham such as Caroline Emelia Stephen and Sarah Stephen experimented with ways of organizing their home life to give themselves independence and space for prayer. Sarah Stephen in *Passages from a Life of a Daughter at Home* (1846) has her protagonist try to claim a room in her house in which to pray. Caroline Emelia Stephen in *The Service of the Poor* (1871) studied sisterhoods including the Catholic Sisters of Charity in France and the Protestant Deaconesses in Germany, but concluded that the poor were best served by women who were socially aware and had a personal prayer-life at home, rather than by women who had withdrawn into a religious order. And so, in 1890s she set up home in The Porch in Cambridge, named as a symbol of a portal to heaven: a place for prayer and reflection (she became a devout Quaker), but also for scholarship and social action, as she campaigned for social reform, founding a society for improving the lot of female servants with Sarah Stephen and working with Octavia Hill to provide social housing.

The baton for championing the home as a sacred space passed to Caroline Emelia's niece, Virginia Woolf, who famously championed the idea of a room of one's own in an essay of that name in 1928: this room was a space akin to the Victorian man's study providing peace to read and write. Although Woolf was not a believer (indeed her parents were Agnostics) she nonetheless regarded the home as a place that was set apart and purified. In her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) the protagonist (who has survived the Flu Pandemic of 1918, albeit with a damaged heart), pauses on returning home from shopping, feeling 'blessed and purified', like a 'nun who has left the world.'[6] Woolf described her country home, Monk's House in Rodmell, Surrey in markedly religious terms:

> Often down here I have entered into a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat; of great agony once; & always some terror: so afraid one is of loneliness: of seeing to the bottom of the vessel. That is one of the experiences I have had here in some Augusts; & got then to a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest & continue to exist. Reality I call it. [7]

Woolf liked to retreat from the world at Monk's House, cutting down her social contact, albeit at the expense of isolation and loneliness as this quotation shows. Her home was not confined to four walls, however, for it looked out onto the natural world through her wild garden and its orchard, and further out to the Sussex Downs. It was also the space from which she re-engaged with the public world through the books and articles she wrote in her little writing-lodge in the garden.

In tracing the history of the place of home in the life of the Clapham Sect and its descendants, we see a conception of the home as sacred in both its senses. First, the home was set apart from the world and distanced from worldly values, but second, the persistence of religious language for describing the home – even after the loss of faith – suggests a continuing understanding of the home as a place that was sacred in terms of holy. Additionally, however, throughout this history, home is a base for philanthropy and engaging with public life through writing, correspondence and campaigning.

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The story of Clapham has surprising resonances for the spring and summer of COVID-19. The early Claphamites saw home as a worthier place for prayer than the church, and 2020 has seen a reversal of our notions of purity and infection: churches are now seen as unclean spaces, ridden with dangers inherent in human contact through handshakes, passing the

peace, blessing, and the laying-on of hands, and in touching objects such as the communion cup, holy water, crosses and icons, and even pews and hymnbooks. (As church buildings lie empty, further dangers will arise from vermin and structural deterioration.) Home, by contrast, is now seen as set apart, safe and clean: we are encouraged to #StayAtHome in order to #SaveLives, even to purify ourselves from the world by washing our hands on returning home.

Lockdown has seen a resurgence in guidance on running a home and family – another echo of Clapham – and a renewed emphasis on the importance of family life, parenting and home education. Families, and those living alone are encouraged to cook, read, be creative, do gardening and observe nature. Guidance on home-working emphasizes ordering and demarcation of space: even if there is no study as such, it is important to have a space that is designated for work (or, in the case of clergy, to set aside a place to pray).

Philanthropy has also achieved a new importance during lockdown, with concerned individuals trying to reach and help others, even from isolation, as has evangelism, as clergy work creatively to engage existing and virtual congregations by broadcasting services from their homes. The Clapham Sect were evangelists and missionaries, but today churches of all denominations and theological persuasions have become evangelical, sometimes by default, in sharing their services online. Online worship recorded in one home to be received in another has the potential for new mode of intimacy and candour, through which everyday spaces and objects can be sacred, consecrated to a new purpose.

During lockdown, I have developed a ministry from home by reaching out to parishioners and students by phone and email, but also by developing sacred spaces within my home and sharing images on Twitter. One of these spaces is my kitchen table, which has become a focal point of the household now that all meals are made and eaten at home, and my study,

where I work and pray. I tweeted an image of the kitchen table with a cross given to me by a parishioner and a candle given by a student, saying that I was praying for both communities.[8] One of my colleagues responded to a tweet with the comment that 'St Paul spent many years remote ministering; this is very much in keeping with that tradition.' On Maundy Thursday, I set up a table in my study for the Watch service with cherry-blossom from my garden taking the place of the traditional lilies.[9] I tweeted a line from each of the traditional readings at intervals: noting some 'likes' appearing synchronously, I realised that I had a virtual congregation. It was a natural step for the same table to become the altar for Easter Sunday Communion, as I consecrated the homely fare of bread on a saucer and wine in a glass in the domestic sacred space of my study.

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[1] The Church of England, 'Church of England to close all church buildings to help prevent spread of coronavirus,' https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/church-england-close-all-church-buildings-help-prevent-spread-coronavirus, 23 March 2020. For a reaction against these instructions, see Edward Dowler, 'Let the clergy pray in their churches' *Church Times*, 31 March 2020 https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/3-april/comment/opinion/let-the-clergy-pray-in-their-churches; and further debate in *Thinking Anglicans,* https://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/problems-with-the-guidance-on-closing-churches/.

[2] A review of 'The Best of Streamed Worship' on the Radio 4 programme *Sunday* complained of clergy 'inflicting upon us the dubious aesthetics of vicarage interiors' (26 April 2020).

[3] See for example The Scottish Episcopal Church, 'College of Bishops reflection on worship during lockdown', 27 March 2020, https://www.scotland.anglican.org/coronavirus-updates/college-of-bishops-reflection-on-worship-during-lockdown/.

[4] Henry Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, London: Newbery, 1763.

[5] Sarah Stickney-Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1843?) Extract in Josephine M. Guy (ed.) *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents,* London and New York: Routledge, 1998, Pp. 495-504. John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1864; London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 72.

[6] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Claire Tomalin (Oxford: World's Classics, 1992), p. 37.

[7] Virginia Woolf, *Diary* vol. 3, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, asst. ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Penguin, 1982) p. 196.

[8] https://twitter.com/Woolf2016Leeds/status/1244182695799918593/photo/1

[9] https://twitter.com/Woolf2016Leeds/status/1248325875784916993/photo/1