

John Clifford, Edward Burne-Jones and the Service of Art to Religion

Christine E. Joynes

To cite this article: Christine E. Joynes (2023) John Clifford, Edward Burne-Jones and the Service of Art to Religion, Baptist Quarterly, 54:4, 231-244, DOI: [10.1080/0005576X.2023.2248804](https://doi.org/10.1080/0005576X.2023.2248804)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0005576X.2023.2248804>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Sep 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 136



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

John Clifford, Edward Burne-Jones and the Service of Art to Religion

Christine E. Joynes

Regent's Park College, Oxford

ABSTRACT

This article analyses John Clifford's essay on the Victorian artist Edward Burne-Jones found in his 1898 monograph *Typical Christian Leaders*. It demonstrates that the ideas in this essay, which has been overlooked by scholars, are closely connected to those expressed in Clifford's other work such as his *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (1892). Clifford's essay makes an important contribution both to the question of what constitutes 'Christian Art' and to an understanding of Clifford himself. It therefore deserves more attention than it has received to date.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 July 2023

Accepted 14 August 2023

KEYWORDS

John Clifford; Edward Burne-Jones; art and religion; John Ruskin; myth; Christian art

It is, perhaps, surprising to discover in John Clifford's 1898 monograph, *Typical Christian Leaders*, an essay on Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98).¹ Engagement with art does not feature prominently in Clifford's other publications, hence this aspect of his work has been completely ignored by scholars.² Yet the themes addressed in Clifford's analysis of Edward Burne-Jones³ are closely linked to those found in his other publications, notably *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, first published six years earlier in 1892. Clifford's prior analysis of scriptural inspiration affects the way he presents Burne-Jones to his audience. His essay on Burne-Jones also offers important insights into Clifford's deep-rooted hermeneutical commitments, especially the appeal of myth for communicating religious truth. This article therefore proposes that the contents of the

CONTACT Christine E. Joynes  christine.joyes@regents.ox.ac.uk  Regent's Park College, Oxford

¹I am grateful to Karen Smith for drawing the essay to my attention.

²There is no mention of Burne-Jones in Matthew Brandt's 1999 Oxford DPhil thesis (*Baptist Social Christianity in Victorian England: The individual and society in the theology of Dr. John Clifford*) for example. However, Ruskin does feature elsewhere in Clifford's work, such as in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1892), 1.

³Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898) was a British painter and is widely regarded as the last of the Pre-Raphaelites. Influenced initially by the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, he developed an interest in narrative art. His art frequently depicts classical heroes, Arthurian knights and biblical subjects through a variety of media (painting, stained glass, embroidery and jewellery). He drew acclaim at the 1878 Exposition Universelle in Paris and following his contribution to the 1897 Antwerp Exposition he was made a baronet by Queen Victoria.

book *Typical Christian Leaders* are more significant for an understanding of Clifford than has previously been acknowledged.

The volume *Typical Christian Leaders* is described by a reviewer in *The Expository Times* as a collection of funeral sermons.⁴ There is something rather dismissive about the way this is received by the reviewer who assesses it thus:

The modern minister plays many parts. Among the rest he has sometimes to preach 'funeral sermons'. Dr Clifford takes to it kindly. It is his way to preach a funeral sermon not only for his own flock, but also for all who depart out of this world if they are great and good. And he does it well, as one might say he would.

This gives a flavour of the way in which, at least in some quarters, the volume was received.

The book's dedication section reads as follows:

Dedicated to the memory of the friends of forty years, friends of my mind and of my heart, whose character and works are remembered with admiration and thankfulness though they have passed into the presence of Him who they loved and served on earth.⁵

It then opens with a preface in which Clifford notes his practice of remembering, "'those who have exercised rule" and leadership over our lives'.⁶ He suggests that studying their 'moral ideals', tracing their 'influence' and imitating their 'faith and courage, insight and devotion' in turn manifests God. Clifford is clear that his interest centres on defining the spiritual significance of their lives; or as he puts it 'sifting the moral values of their service and catching and handing on the real inspirations of their ministries'.⁷ This approach is substantiated through Clifford's citation of Hebrews 13.7-8 ('Remember them that had the rule over you, which spake unto you the word of God; and considering the issue of the life, imitate their faith'). As part of the preface Clifford observes, 'The Bible is the book of God's models: and in it Bezaleel,⁸ the inspired artist, has a place by the side of Moses, the builder of the State.'

Clifford divides his volume into five different areas: Politics; Church; Literature; Science; and Art. In the section on Politics he devotes three essays to William Ewart Gladstone, former British Prime Minister who died in 1898; and one to James Arthur Garfield, the US President assassinated in 1881. His section on the Church explores the contributions of Charles Haddon Spurgeon (d.1892), Canon Henry Parry Liddon (d.1890), Dr Robert William Dale (d.1895) and Dean Stanley (d.1881). On literature Clifford addresses Thomas Carlyle and Robert Browning (d.1889). On science his focus falls on Charles Darwin (d.1882) and Henry Drummond (d.1897). The final section, on Art, engages only with Edward Burne-Jones (d.1898).

⁴*The Expository Times*, 1898, 135.

⁵John Clifford, *Typical Christian Leaders*, 1898.

⁶*Typical Christian Leaders*, 1898, vii.

⁷*Ibid.*, viii.

⁸Ex 31.2-4.

Whilst the all-male line-up of *Typical Christian Leaders* might at first glance suggest little interest in women as leaders, Clifford's preface suggests otherwise, since he explicitly references sermons he had given on women *that did not make it into the volume* such as on the poet Christina Rossetti, American suffragist Frances Willard and American author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe. Indeed Clifford expresses the intention of finding time to publish on these figures in due course, something which – to my knowledge – he never accomplished, despite producing a significant number of works after 1898. It is also worth noting that Clifford does not restrict his funeral sermons only to distinguished figures in Britain.

The Service of Art to Religion

Clifford gives his chapter on Burne-Jones the heading 'Burne-Jones and the Service of Art to Religion' and here he has much to offer to a wider conversation about what constitutes Christian Art.⁹ After listing the technical prowess of Burne-Jones as an artist, including his 'wizard-like skill in the use of colour'¹⁰ he goes on to commend him for his intense devotion to art 'not merely for the sake of Art, but for the sake of the service Art may render to the highest interests of the human race'.¹¹ As an aside it is worth noting that 'Art for art's sake' was a nineteenth-century French slogan, suggesting that 'true art' is independent of social values and moral purpose. Clifford rejects this idea.

Clifford is clearly influenced in his approach by John Ruskin.¹² Indeed he explicitly acknowledges the impact that Ruskin's 1883 lectures entitled *The Art of England* had on him. Further investigation reveals that the second of these lectures Ruskin devoted to Edward Burne-Jones. In that lecture, and specifically in the context of discussing religious art, Ruskin notes:¹³

The more you can admire them [he is referring here to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Edward Burne-Jones and George Frederic Watts] and the longer you read, the more your minds and hearts will be filled with the best knowledge accessible in history and the loftiest associations conveyable by the passionate and reverent skill, of which I have told you in the 'Laws of Fesole,' that "All great Art is Praise".

Clifford goes further than Ruskin, however, in his assessment of religious art. For he observes:

Every year a greater number of persons realize that Art has a message for the soul, an inspiration for the love of beauty, a real religious significance; that it is essentially a

⁹On this see Christine E. Joynes, 'Visual Art: Christian Visual Art' in the *Oxford Religion Encyclopedia* 2022.

¹⁰*Typical Christian Leaders*, 1898, 257.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 258.

¹²John Ruskin (1819–1900) was a writer, artist, art critic and collector. He was one of the most influential figures in the nineteenth-century art world and a supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites.

¹³John Ruskin, *The Art of England*.

spiritual product, and that it is fatal to any spiritual ministry to exist for itself first and only.¹⁴

He proceeds to speak of great art in terms of a 'spiritual quickening' and a 'divine call' which stirs human sympathies and strikingly at this point Clifford turns his analysis to the plight of the poor. He suggests, 'Art may, and must, brighten the lot of the poor, aid in the removal of social burdens, and give a real uplift to the souls of men through the imagination.'¹⁵ He argues that through figures such as William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, 'Art has been taking its place ... in the distribution of the "social idea" and furthering social regeneration.' Given Clifford's commitment to socialism one might expect him to develop this connection more fully, but it is only a fleeting comment in the overall context of the essay.

Burne-Jones and the Genre of Mythic Painting

There are many reasons why Clifford may have alighted on the artist Edward Burne-Jones as a key figure to memorialise, not only because of the recent death of this artist in 1898, the year when Clifford wrote *Typical Christian Leaders*.¹⁶ Perhaps the primary appeal of Burne-Jones to Clifford was because he represented what Ruskin describes as 'the mythic school of painting' (this is in fact the title Ruskin gives to his lecture on Burne-Jones mentioned above).

The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible

At this point it is helpful to turn briefly to consider the impact and influence of Clifford's earlier monograph, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (1892), since this had a significant bearing on the mythical emphasis Clifford extols in Burne-Jones's work.

John Briggs notes that by the time of the publication of the second edition of *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* in 1895, ten thousand copies had sold in three years.¹⁷ The following passage is indicative of Clifford's position:¹⁸

Therefore we assert the Reformation doctrine that the seat of authority in Christian ethics and teaching is not the letter of the Scriptures alone but is Christ Jesus, dwelling and ruling in the conscience and reason of the Christian man by and through the Scriptures. We cannot suffer the Redeemer to be deposed from His throne in favour of the late and post-Reformation dogma which lifts the letter of the Scripture into the position of inerrancy claimed for the Pope.

The furore caused by Clifford's acceptance of the findings of 'higher criticism' in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* is best captured in the words of the

¹⁴*Typical Christian Leaders*, 1898, 258.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Clifford references 'the illustrious painter who has just been taken away from us'.

¹⁷John Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 195.

¹⁸John Clifford, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. 2nd ed. (London: James Clarke & Co, 1895), 137.

reviewer in *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* for April 1896. After opening words of commendation, in which the reviewer notes Clifford's accessible writing style and the urgency of the topic under consideration, he then proceeds to dismiss the volume in the harshest terms. He describes the book as 'on the whole mischievous and misleading'.¹⁹ But this is not the pinnacle of the criticisms levelled against Clifford who is also described as 'mistaken', 'grossly unfair', 'recklessly confused', 'unjustifiable', 'making unwarranted and unwarrantable assumptions', and indeed even 'absurd'. The reviewer goes on to assert, 'The logical nexus between Dr Clifford's premisses and his conclusions will be sought for in vain. In its place he leaves a yawning chasm, over which he has cast a gossamer filament of poetic, eloquent and meaningless words.'

This number of derogatory statements in the space of a relatively short book review gives a sense of the opposition Clifford faced due to his acceptance of 'higher criticism' in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* volume. Indeed the two unwarranted and unwarrantable assumptions in Clifford's volume that the reviewer identifies are as follows:²⁰

First, that those who are not prepared to accept the findings of the "higher criticism" hold the "inerrancy" and verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, believe that Satan's speeches in the book of Job are divinely inspired truth, and that the morality of the Old Testament is intrinsically the highest, the Christian; second, that when he has disproved these, he has proved that the findings of the "higher criticism" must be accepted incontinently.

So both of the reviewer's objections concern Clifford's acceptance of the findings of 'higher criticism'.

On a more positive note, John Briggs suggests that Clifford's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* volume played a pivotal role in advancing the acceptance of higher criticism.²¹ He notes, 'Until Clifford's bold endorsement of the critical method, many ministers exercised discretion in relating their critical understanding to their preaching.'

Clifford's attraction to the mythological focus in Burne-Jones's paintings needs to be set against this backdrop of his sympathy for 'higher criticism' expressed in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* book. Also of note is the wider context in which David Friedrich Strauss's²² *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* had been published.²³ Strauss challenged the historicity of the biblical texts and advocated for the use of myth to interpret the biblical narratives.²⁴

¹⁹*The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, April 1896, 320.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, 198.

²²David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) was a German theologian who gained notoriety as a result of his publication *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* in which he argued for a mythical interpretation of the Bible.

²³The German editions appeared in 1835. The English translation by George Eliot, entitled *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, was printed in 1846.

²⁴See further Hans Frei, "David Strauss," in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, eds. Ninian Smart, John Clayton, Steven Katz, and Patrick Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 215–260.

His work provoked public outrage and he lost his teaching position as a result.²⁵ Clifford's positive appreciation for 'myth' is particularly striking given the backlash against Strauss.

In reflecting on the 'thoroughly religious spirit' with which Burne-Jones pursued his art, Clifford makes the important observation that this *does not mean that he chose religious themes*. He dismisses the suggestion that Burne-Jones 'expounded texts of the Bible with his brush', stating 'he did little of that'.²⁶ Clifford here understates the significance of biblically-themed art amongst Burne-Jones's work. The exception he does draw to his readers' attention is *The Morning of the Resurrection* which he says 'surpasses in suggestiveness and in inspiration anything I have met in print, or heard from human lips'. But Clifford is nevertheless minded to conclude 'a man's religion is *not* evinced by the themes he elects to treat' (ibid.). He elaborates upon this point by highlighting that one can engage with biblical texts in an irreligious manner or 'choose a subject outside the realm of Christian ideas and facts and yet treat it so as to make it a vehicle of religious truth and the source of religious emotions.'

Although Clifford does not engage with that Clifford does not engage with the biblically-themed art produced by Burne-Jones, this is by no means absent in the artist's work. So for example, Burne-Jones created multiple paintings of the Annunciation; he produced Old Testament scenes, such as the *Finding of Moses*, *Ezekiel and the boiling pot* and *Ruth and Boaz* (Figure 1); there are Nativity paintings and images of Gospel stories such as the *Wise and Foolish Virgins* or *St Luke*. None of these are referenced in Clifford's essay.

Whilst Clifford will have certainly known about these biblically-based paintings, he did not engage with them because they did not suit his purpose, which was instead to focus on the theme of myth in relation to the artist.

The Characteristics of Burne-Jones's Art

It is striking that Clifford describes Burne-Jones as 'in the soul of him a prophet'.²⁷ He underlines particularly the opposition the artist faced when pursuing his vocation. Thus he comments, 'The rewards for his toil in Art were in the dim distance; mordant ridicule and fierce persecution were at the doors: but he clung to his choice like a man of conviction, and wrought at his task with the heroism of faith'. One senses here an affinity between Clifford and the artist in the description of the mockery he encountered. He applauds Burne-Jones's individuality and references the artist's resignation from the Royal Academy

²⁵See Erik Linstrum, "Strauss's *Life of Jesus*: Publication and the Politics of the German Public Sphere," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71 (2010): 593–616.

²⁶*Typical Christian Leaders*, 1898, 259.

²⁷Ibid., 260.



Figure 1. *Ruth and Boaz*, Cartoons for a Window at the Church of All Hallows, Allerton, Liverpool. Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833–1898). 1879. Photo: © Tate.

as a moment when he became ‘a “Dissenter” in Art, that he might save his soul.’ Clifford interprets this commitment through the biblical lens of Hebrews 11.27 (‘he endured as seeing Him who is invisible’).

In true Baptist style, Clifford draws attention to three features of Burne-Jones’ life that are worthy of note. The first of these is ‘supreme loyalty, manifested through long years, in the face of many difficulties, to his spiritual conception of Art’. Hence it is not so much the art but rather the artist’s *pursuit of art* in a spiritual and religious mode ‘that has added to the forces making for the final triumph of truth and goodness and beauty in the world.’ He asserts that

'neither fame nor money could tempt Burne-Jones from his allegiance to his idea or make him surrender his individuality.'

The second characteristic Clifford draws to his readers' attention is 'the emancipation of Christianity ... from the hard and fettering literalism in which he saw it; and in securing freedom, enlargement, and religious progress'.²⁸ It is this feature that is given the most lengthy consideration. In this context Clifford cites Ruskin on Burne-Jones and the notion of myth at length. In his *The Art of England* lecture on Burne-Jones, Ruskin describes the artist as follows: 'He becomes a painter, neither of Divine History, nor of Divine Natural History, but of Mythology, accepted as such and understood by its symbolic figures to represent only general truths or abstract ideas'.²⁹

Clifford cites Ruskin extensively in developing this idea, commenting:

Remove all associations of *falsehood* from the word romance, so also to clear them out of your faith, when you begin the study of mythology. Never confuse a Myth with a lie, – nay, you must even be cautious how far you even permit it to be called a fable.

Clifford questions Burne-Jones's choice of mythological subjects and cites approvingly Ruskin's explanation that 'the thoughts of all the greatest and wisest men hitherto, since the world was made, have been expressed through mythology'.³⁰ But Clifford then builds on Ruskin's comments to discuss at length the significance of Burne-Jones's focus on mythology. He remarks:

Burne-Jones and his fellow-artists felt that they could move with greater freedom in the realm of Grecian and Scandinavian mythology than was possible within the covers of "the idolized Bible" and thereby could more effectively serve their age. Those old myths and tales throb with the deep religion of humanity, a religion more akin to the heart of Christianity than that which was dominating the Churches of England in the middle of our nineteenth century.

Clifford therefore concludes that Greek and Norse heroes were better vehicles to meet 'the hunger of man to know himself, to have his experiences interpreted to himself, better than the *timid conventionalisms* which were being preached in the pulpits or voiced in the greater part of the literature of the time'.³¹ Here again Clifford is outspoken in his criticism of nineteenth-century religion. He goes on to illustrate his point by asking rhetorically why Burne-Jones uses the Greek story of maidens circling the golden apple tree in *The Garden of Hesperides* instead of the Genesis account of the Fall. Clifford's attitude towards the women in the painting, whom he equates with 'English-women of today', is particularly interesting:

Grecian women are not so weary and heavy-laden as these Englishwomen of today, emerging into their larger than life, accumulating knowledge, claiming rights their

²⁸Ibid., 261.

²⁹John Ruskin, *The Art of England*, 1883, 49.

³⁰*Typical Christian Leaders*, 1898, 262.

³¹Ibid., 263. My italics.

grandmothers never dreamt of, incapable of content with the narrow and cramped life of the past, facing spiritual problems and quivering with sensibility to the perils of the new.

He draws out of Burne-Jones's *The Garden of Hesperides* painting (Figure 2) a warning about 'the expanding tree of knowledge ... [with] a serpent coiled in its branches ... [which] will not be enough for a heart that is made to find its most abiding satisfaction in fellowship with the Eternal God'.³² But most revealingly Clifford observes:

All that, and more, is taught; and taught at once without raising one critical question, or stirring a single religious prejudice through this old myth; whereas if Burne-Jones had taken his materials from the book of Genesis, men would have missed the eternal soul of the narrative, in petty questions about "verbal" inspiration, allegory and fable, poetry and history.

Clifford expands further on the use of myth by Burne-Jones (and more widely the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), suggesting that another motivating factor could be a sense of more complete understanding of the myths. He refers to the Christian genius that found spiritual treasures in the mythology of Greece and Rome and of the northern nations 'and made their wealth available in our modern life as no Greek or Roman or Norseman ever could.' Clifford suggests, 'Our moderns have found the Ariadne clue and have set forth the meaning of the "unconscious prophecies of heathendom" in the clear light of the problems and passions of our own day.'

To illustrate this point Clifford engages with Burne-Jones's *Pygmalion* series. Burne-Jones based this series of four paintings on the story of Pygmalion, the King of Cyprus who finds no living woman beautiful enough for him to love. So Pygmalion sculpts an ivory statue of an ideal woman and falls in love with it. Then he prays to Aphrodite to breathe life into it. The first painting in the series is 'The Heart Desires'; this is followed by 'The Hand Refrains' and 'The Godhead fires'; and the series concludes with 'The Soul Attains'.³³ Particularly noteworthy in his analysis of the series of paintings are Clifford's comments on the theme of love:³⁴

Hammer and chisel, be they never so active are not enough! Love is more than skill. Cleverness is only half; it is not even that, for cleverness is hard and mechanical, cold as marble and lifeless as stone. It is love that is alive. And so by love "The soul attains" its goal. Desire is satisfied. It is as Browning has taught in so many ways, 'Love is all and in all' for art and for life: intellect alone fails, desire alone fails, it is only when the whole man is fused by the heat of the heart that is divine that the ideal is reached.

Clifford goes on to comment: 'Is not that the religious teaching needed by our age? Could it be expressed with greater force and beauty than in Burne-Jones's parable of Pygmalion?'. At this point, Clifford offers a further reflection on the service of art

³²Ibid., 264–5.

³³The paintings are reproduced at <https://victorianweb.org/painting/bj/paintings/hikim7.html> (accessed July 20, 2023).

³⁴*Typical Christian Leaders*, 1898.



Figure 2. *Der Garten der Hesperiden (The Garden of Hesperides)*. Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833–1898). 1869–73. Hamburger Kunsthalle. Photo: © bpk / Elke Walford.

to religion, asserting that any adequate assessment of the artist needs to set him in his historical context and relate him to the 'evolution of our religious life'. Thus he emphasises the importance of examining Burne-Jones in relation to the forces operating in his day. Here Clifford briefly sets Burne-Jones in the context of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to which he belonged and details the particular characteristics of this movement. Clifford notes especially the 'demand for a return to nature, to life and to fact' made by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He suggests that their insistence on the true, the beautiful and the good is part of the 'awakening of the nation to a higher and fuller life'. Truth is understood in relation to fact and interpretation; beauty in relation to nature and life; and 'the

good' as a 'heightening conception of ethical obligation, a keener sense of justice and a deeper and broader Charity.' For Clifford, this offers optimism for the future and consequently he argues that,

Sir Edward Burne-Jones has wrought so effectively as to entitle him to the admiration and gratitude of all who seek the triumph of a religion, deeper than that of any one organisation and as wide as the interests of the human race.³⁵

This is the only time in the essay where Burne-Jones's baronet title ('Sir') is used.

The third 'service to religion' to be discerned through Burne-Jones's work according to Clifford is the way in which 'he has insisted on Truth in Art'.³⁶ Again Clifford defers to Ruskin's emphasis here. He writes:

Ruskin says "Truth is the vital power of the whole school, – Truth its armour, – Truth its war-word; and the grotesque and wild forms of imagination which, at first sight, seem to be the reaction of a desperate fancy, and a terrified faith, against the incisive scepticism of recent science, so far from being so, are a part of that science itself; they are the results of infinitely more accurate scholarship ... than was possible to any artist during the two preceding centuries."

Clifford elaborates further:

It is not Art for Art's sake, nor for Pleasure's sake, but for Truth's sake – that is for the sake of Conduct and Character ... Art for Truth's sake is Art for the sake of being, of manhood, of service, of humanity, of righteousness, of the best in time and in eternity. Put conduct first and you may use your Art safely; this work Burne-Jones did, and so has brought the best nutriment to lofty aims, unselfish service and harmoniously developed character.³⁷

He takes as his example here Burne-Jones's work *Love amongst the Ruins* (1873; cf. oil painting 1894),³⁸ referring to 'its vivid and moving interpretation of the break up of old faiths and the shattering of old hopes, and its one beautiful prophecy of a love that conquers and rebuilds all'.³⁹ Here again Clifford interprets love to include 'pity for human misery, charity, self-surrender'. There is a certain irony in Clifford's interpretation here, since the painting is widely thought to represent the end of Burne-Jones's relationship with model Maria Zambaco.⁴⁰

The final word of the essay Clifford devotes to Burne-Jones's view of women, as demonstrated in *The Golden Stairs* (Figure 3), which Clifford claims 'has penetrated closest to the chief revolutionary change of our time.'

He writes:

More than most he [Burne-Jones] sees what has happened to woman, and knows what it means. She is no longer a mere madonna. Motherhood is not her all. She is finding herself, claiming the education that is due to her as a person, and preparing herself for

³⁵Ibid., 269.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Typical Christian Leaders, 1898, 271.

³⁸See <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1288953>.

³⁹Typical Christian Leaders, 1898, 272.

⁴⁰Their elopement had failed and Zambaco had tried to commit suicide.



Figure 3. *The Golden Stairs*. Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833–1898). 1880. Photo: © Tate.

emancipation from the tyranny that has so long crushed the energies of her soul. It is a struggle; and she is weary. The old peace has given way to discord and strife. She is entering into the turmoil of the world and needs another strength than her own to preserve her in uprightness, to heal her wounds, and to carry her to her true goal.

Once more he returns to the concept of myth, noting its distinctively modern message, suggesting that ultimately this points to the bigger picture that ‘women and men alike ... need God, God and His redeeming love, as our daily light and peace, strength and joy.’ He concludes the sermon by citing James 1.16-18:

Be not deceived, My beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect boon is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by his turning. Of His own will He brought us forth. He mothered us by *the word of truth* that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures.

Clifford’s translation of the text here, referring to God ‘mothering us by the word of truth’, is distinctive and not one paralleled elsewhere.⁴¹

Conclusion

In their catalogue, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, Stephen Wildman and John Christian assert that Edward Burne-Jones should be admired as ‘the greatest British artist of the nineteenth century, after Turner and perhaps John Constable.’⁴² Clifford certainly holds him in the highest esteem. There is much of value in Clifford’s analysis of Burne-Jones’s work which can contribute both to a wider discussion of the service of art to religion and to a better understanding of John Clifford. The following aspects are especially noteworthy:

First, Burne-Jones’s use of mythology to communicate Christian truth which Clifford valued for challenging the dogmatism of religion that he experienced in many quarters. One consequence of this approach is that Clifford’s own interest in myth leads him to overlook the biblical art in Burne-Jones’s work.

A further important theme to emerge from Clifford’s essay is his observation that Christian art *does not necessarily need to deal with Christian subjects*. This is a helpful insight for wider discussion of what constitutes Christian art. Thirdly, Clifford’s emphasis on the relevance of historical context for interpreting an artist’s work is a perspective perhaps shaped by the insights he had found earlier in his study of ‘higher criticism’.

Clifford’s obituary in *Memoirs of Ministers* refers to him as an ‘ardent and convinced Evangelical with his mind open to all the light of science and criticism’. The obituarist notes that Clifford, mindful of the ethical applications of the Gospel was drawn into ‘far-reaching public activities, and in all these, *despite frequent controversy* he bore himself worthily of his high calling as a minister of Jesus Christ.’ This might be a clue indicating that in addition to the intellectual

⁴¹ Clifford’s translation here is especially striking, compared with the KJV (Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures). Cf. NRSV ‘he gave us birth’.

⁴² Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), vii.

sympathies shared between Clifford and Burne-Jones, perhaps Clifford sensed an affinity with the artist in their shared resistance to obstacles encountered during their careers.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).