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PROPHECY AND ANTI-POPERY IN VICTORIAN LONDON: JOHN CUMMING RECONSIDERED

By Robert H. Ellison and Carol Marie Engelhardt

I.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to understand Victorian culture without understanding the role of religion in shaping, consolidating, and challenging that culture. In countless ways, religion was integral to Victorian culture: Britain and Ireland had established churches; political and religious questions were often intertwined, as with the Maynooth Controversy and the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland; religious questions were regularly enacted in public, as when the reestablishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy (1850) inspired riots and the hangings in effigy of the pope and the newly-created Cardinal, Nicholas Wiseman. Victorians regularly sought religious meanings in cataclysmic events; the response to the Sepoy Rebellion (1857) was framed in religious terms, as Britons from the queen on down sought a divine explanation for the uprising. As that response shows, religion – specifically, Protestant Christianity – was an important component of national identity, as Linda Colley has argued in *Britons: Forging the Nation*.

Thus clergymen were exceptionally influential, both as individuals and as a group, in the largely Christian culture of Victorian England. The popularity of “sermon-tasting” meant that prominent clergymen counted as celebrities, especially in London. “There is no city in the world which offers such a large choice of good preachers,” rejoiced a contributor to *Temple Bar* in 1884; “It is one of the greatest boons of residence in London, that a man who scans the list of preachers in Saturday’s papers can always provide for himself some of the richest intellectual pleasure, if not instruction, for the following day” (“Preachers” 294). Those who did not hear them preach could read their sermons in periodicals such as the *Pulpit* or the *Penny Pulpit* or in pamphlet form, attend their public lectures, or read the fiction and essays they published. The Victorian reading public’s “seemingly insatiable appetite for reading, particularly devotional works” (Bradley 57) ensured that more sermons and other religious works were published than were other titles, including novels (Webb 6: 199). The centrality of religion in nineteenth-century Britain means, as John Tosh has noted, that “placing religion on the sidelines . . . is simply not an option open to the Victorian historian” (Tosh 324) – or, we would add, to anyone who studies the Victorian period.

Victorian religion was as complex as it was important, yet its practitioners are generally reduced to one of two types. The first, and most familiar, is the kindly, loveable figure, the

man (or less frequently, the woman) whose humanity and intelligence appeal to us. John Henry Newman is the preeminent exemplar of this type: his ideas are still debated and his works read, while the story of his conversion and its aftermath renders him sympathetic even if his reasons for leaving the Church of England for the Roman Catholic Church are largely unappreciated now. The other type is the ridiculous figure, such as Samuel Wilberforce, who can be made to stand for everything negative Victorian religion seems to be: he is described as being so ambitious that he was nicknamed “Soapy Sam,” so narrow-minded he missed the truth about evolution, and so foolish that he publicly debated T. H. Huxley. If Newman makes us feel good about our common humanity, Wilberforce makes us feel superior.

Instead, Victorian morality has replaced religion as a more familiar topic, with the ironic result that the novelist George Eliot is one of the most recognizable voices of Victorian morality in our culture, thanks to her novels’ articulation of a respectable middle-class Victorian morality: play fair, widen your intellectual horizons, do charitable works. Her religious journey from youthful Evangelicalism to enduring skepticism means that her novels are not especially sympathetic towards organized religion. The clergyman in *Middlemarch* prefers card-playing to soul-saving; in *Romola*, the main characters are the proud representatives of the classical intellectual tradition, while the peasants and faceless urban masses are the unthinking Christians. Duty is the main virtue of Eliot’s secular religion, even when she compares her heroines like Dorothea Brooke and Romola to Christian saints.

Eliot’s discomfort with organized Christianity was made manifest in her well-known and frequently anthologized essay, “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming.” After disparaging Evangelical preachers in general as mediocre, bigoted, and making up in ambition what they lacked in true religiosity, Eliot sets her sights on Cumming, whose ideas she condemns as “profoundly mistaken and pernicious” (40). She accuses him of being only superficially religious, mean-spirited in his condemnations of sinners and doubters, and “ignorant of the relation which his own religious creed bears to the criticism and philosophy of the nineteenth century” (41, 58, 52). Damning Cumming as merely “a voluble retail talker” (42), Eliot despairs of “the *perverted moral judgement* that everywhere reigns” in his writings (62). She asserts that a “conspicuous characteristic of Dr. Cumming’s teaching” is “the *absence of genuine charity*” and concludes that “Dr. Cumming’s religion may demand a tribute of love, but it gives a charter to hatred; it may enjoin charity, but it fosters all uncharitableness” (58).

Although John Cumming (1807–81; Figure 4) is largely forgotten now, he was one of the most popular preachers in Victorian London during his long tenure as minister of the Crown Court Church of Scotland (1832–79). This “[t]all and well-formed” Presbyterian minister, whose intelligent face was complemented by “a pair of dark, piercing eyes” (*Half-Hours* 36) and surmounted by salt-and-pepper hair, dramatically increased the membership at his Covent Garden church from eighty to about nine hundred, with five hundred to six hundred attending every Sunday (*Half-Hours* 36). Mary Heimann’s argument, in *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England*, that Roman Catholics were more united by religion than divided by class can be extended to other types of Christians, if Cumming’s congregation was representative. The aristocracy, drawn by either his riveting preaching or his opposition to the Free Church, joined ordinary Londoners in flocking to Covent Garden, as a contemporary noted



DR. CUMMING.

From a Photograph by Messrs. Elliott & Fry, 55, Baker St., Portman Sq.

Figure 4. "Dr. Cumming." Illustration, from "Clerical Celebrities," *St James* ns 4 (1869): 713.

with approval:

The communion-table in Dr. Cumming's Church has remarkable contrasts. The Duchess of Wellington, the Countess of Ducie, the Countess of Listowel, Lord Keane, and Lord Alfred Paget, &c., are mixed up with poor widows and Christians of humble birth, but holy hearts. . . . The spectacle is literally that of "the rich and poor meeting together." (*Half-Hours* 42)

Cumming even addressed the pinnacle of Victorian society when he preached before the queen at both Balmoral and Dunrobin. His presence at court is another reminder of the complexity of British religion: the Church of Scotland was Presbyterian, making the monarch Defender of the Faith as represented by two Christian denominations.

Although Cumming became famous on the strength of his preaching, his influence reached beyond the pews at Covent Garden. He was a prominent member of the Evangelical Alliance, and his literary output was prolific: he wrote, edited, or translated approximately one hundred eighty works, many of which went through several editions and/or sold several thousand copies. George Eliot herself acknowledged his “immense popularity,” conceding that, “of the numerous publications in which he perpetuates his pulpit labours, all circulate widely, and some, according their title-page, have reached the sixteenth thousand” (“Evangelical” 40). Like his better-remembered peers, he could claim a trans-Atlantic audience, thanks to the Philadelphia firm of Lindsay and Blakiston, which published a uniform edition of his books in the 1850s. Nor could he feel unappreciated by his contemporaries: “In an age of controversy, Cumming had a high repute as a protestant champion and as early as 1851 a public meeting was held at which he was presented with one thousand guineas and a silver salver valued at three hundred guineas” (Knox 78). Although his popularity declined during his last years, two hundred mourners attended his funeral (“The Late Dr. Cumming” 9).

Very little has been written about Cumming since Eliot published “Evangelical Teaching,”¹ and we believe the time has come to reconsider his ideas and his place in the study of Victorian religion. This essay examines his ideas on the two topics that most preoccupied him – end times prophecies and anti-Roman Catholicism – as well as the contemporary reception of them in order to put Eliot’s judgment of Cumming in its historical context. We hope also that retrieving the words of a once-famous preacher will add to our understanding of the texture of Victorian religion. Finally, the essay itself is meant to bridge the gap that now exists, and which would have astounded Victorian readers, between religious scholars and literary scholars.

II.

THE END OF THE WORLD was a favorite topic for many Victorian preachers. John O. Waller has calculated that “nearly one thousand English clergymen, including some hundred Anglicans, were preaching on the prophecies” in the 1830s (476). Eschatological interest continued throughout the century, capturing the attention of Anglicans and Nonconformists of all classes. Cumming, who was a leading proponent of end-times studies and whom D. N. Hempton has characterized as “an extreme embodiment of views that were current in evangelicalism” (Hempton 179), belonged to the “Historicist” school of prophetic interpretation, which held that Revelation “is a continuous prospective history of Christendom” (*School* 5). According to this view, history was the record of “prophecies fulfilled”: all the major events had been revealed to John on Patmos and the great figures of history – kings, statesmen, military heroes, and the like – simply “fill up the outline that God has chalked out upwards of two thousand years ago” (Cumming, *Destiny of Nations* v; *Signs* 107). Conversely, believers also understood prophecy as “histories to be fulfilled” (Cumming, *Destiny of Nations* v); that throughout scripture, and especially in Daniel and Revelation, God revealed the events that would take place as the end drew near (Cumming, *When Shall These Things Be?* 130). Christians were expected to study these historical/prophetic passages and proclaim the signs of Christ’s coming to the world (Cumming, *Apocalyptic Sketches, Second Series* 262).² At precisely the moment that history was developing as a distinct profession and area of study in Europe, nineteenth-century interpreters of end-times prophecies offered believers an alternate way of understanding the past. The popularity of these prophecies

offers a counterweight to the relentless practicality that we more often think of as a dominant characteristic of Victorian culture.

Cumming's proclamations were contained in over thirty books and pamphlets published between the 1840s and the 1870s. Some of these books were concerned with prophecies Cumming believed had been fulfilled long before the modern period: that the first five seals of Revelation had been opened between AD 96 and AD 304; that the first four trumpets had sounded between 396 and 453; and that the 150-year judgment of Western Christendom foretold in Revelation 9 began in 612, when Mohammed began his work, and ended in 762, when Islamic "progress" and "conquest" ceased (Cumming, *Expository Readings* 201; *Apocalyptic Sketches, First Series* 76–79; *Signs* 94).

In other books, Cumming focused on prophecies he believed to have been fulfilled during his own lifetime. For example, he believed that the vision of the "little horn" of Daniel 8.9 and the sixth vial of judgment in Revelation 16 foretold the fall of what he, like his contemporaries, pejoratively called "Mahometanism": the little horn represented the Medo-Persian Empire, which would fall from power after reigning for "2,300 evenings and mornings" (Daniel 8.14), and John's vision of the drying up of the river Euphrates represented the beginning of the end of Ottoman rule (Cumming, *The Sixth Vial* 4). (Cumming's disparaging view of Islam was not as typical of Victorian Christians as we might expect. While it is true that some clergymen and scholars manifested what Clinton Bennett has termed a "confrontational" attitude towards Islam, others adopted a conciliatory approach, which stressed that the two faiths shared a queen as well as a God.) Cumming dated this decline by applying the "year-day" theory, which held that a prophetic day represented a literal year. According to his chronology, Islamic rule began in 480 B.C., the peak year of the Persian Empire, and ended in 1820 AD, when the "Greek insurrection" against the Turks sent Muslim supremacy in the Middle East into a precipitous decline (Cumming, *Signs* 20).

Cumming also interpreted cataclysmic events of his own time as the result of the seventh vial's being poured out. When this vial was poured out, the earth would be beset by a multitude of woes – a "great earthquake," a "plague" of hail, and the division of the "great city" of Babylon into three parts (Rev. 16.17–21). Cumming believed that the "earthquake" was the French revolution of 1848, adopting the word used by many journalists to describe the event, while he had a variety of plagues from which to choose, including the Irish potato famine of the 1840s, the English cholera epidemics of 1849 and 1853, and the "cattle plague of 1866" (Cumming, *Signs* 59, 61–62; *When Shall These Things Be?* 170). The breakup of Babylon, he believed, would be fulfilled in the imminent division of Europe into French, Russian, and German regimes (Cumming, *Signs* 59, 61–62; *When Shall These Things Be?* 170; *The Last Warning Cry* 167–68).

Cumming's interpretations will likely seem commonplace to those who have studied other prophetic interpretations. Eliot correctly, although acerbically, noted that "His writings have . . . no originality or force of thought" (40). Cumming himself admitted that he "shall produce little that is original" (*Apocalyptic Sketches, First Series* 13), and the names of those to whom he is indebted appeared throughout his work. These included Sir Isaac Newton, whose authorship of works such as *Observations on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John* (1733) testified to the range of his interests beyond mathematics and science; Thomas Newton, Bishop of Bristol and author of *Dissertations on the Prophecies* (1758), whom Cumming declared to be one of "the best commentators on prophecy" (*Signs* 85); and Joseph Mede, the seventeenth-century scholar and author of the extremely influential *Clavis*

Apocalyptic (1627). Cumming relied most upon *Horae Apocalypticæ* (1844), a four-volume commentary by Bishop Edward Elliott.

Cumming was less derivative when he interpreted his own observations and the reports of the British and Continental press as evidence for the present-day fulfillment of nearly every major end-times prophecy. Just as Cumming acknowledged his debt to Elliott in interpreting the past, he is quick to take the credit for his insights into the present. Early in *When Shall These Things Be?*, he asserts that it is “neither hasty nor irrelevant” to compare “ancient prophecy” with daily press reports and states that “this use of the modern newspaper is all the originality I claim” (3). For example, he was convinced that advances in transportation and scientific knowledge fulfilled Daniel’s prediction that in “the time of the end, many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased” (12.4). Widespread preaching and missionary activity evoked Christ’s declaration that the gospel “shall be preached in all the world . . . and then shall the end come” (Matthew 24.14), while European warfare and British “*sensual infidelity*” illustrated the warning that “as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man” (Luke 17.26; Cumming, *Great Tribulation, Second Series* 56–67; *Signs* 40–41; *The Great Tribulation, First Series* 113; *When Shall These Things Be?* 23; *Sixth Vial* 19). He even somewhat disingenuously held his opponents’ attacks to be “living fulfillments” of prophecy, pointing to Peter’s prediction that “there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming?” (*Destiny of Nations* 23). Besides fitting neatly into his prophetic scheme, this interpretation invested Cumming with greater authority: claiming that Peter had predicted his situation in the Bible, he could deflect the criticism of his opponents by dismissing them as lustful scoffers. He might also have hoped that his audience would remember Jesus’ beatitude, “blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5.10).

At times Cumming, like other interpreters of prophecy, was quite creative in his attempts to make contemporary events fit his interpretations of Biblical statements. He claimed, for example, that Daniel’s prediction “and knowledge shall be increased” could also be translated “and knowledge shall be flashed along,” making it an anticipation of the telegraph, the “mysterious whispering wire” that could transmit a message to “the most distant capital of Europe” in less than an hour’s time (*Last Warning Cry* 324–25). Even more inventive was his interpretation of the prophecy he perceived in Isaiah 18.1–2: “Woe to the land . . . beyond the rivers of Ethiopia: That sendeth ambassadors by the sea, even in vessels of bulrushes upon the waters.” He asserted that the phrase “vessels of bulrushes” was literally “vessels of that which drinks water,” a phrase that might have perplexed the translators working in 1611 but which could, in 1868, be recognized as a reference to the steam-ship, a “vessel whose . . . motive force from beginning to end, is water” (*When Shall These Things Be?* 354–55).

In spite of the amount of time Cumming spent on interpreting Biblical prophecies, he often claimed to be neither a prophet nor a dogmatic interpreter of prophecy. He declared, for example, in the second series of *Apocalyptic Sketches*, that John’s closing warning against adding anything to Revelation prohibited “all pretensions to prophecy, all predictions of events that are future” (349). Yet he was guilty of the very thing that he condemned: the second series of *The Great Tribulation* (1861) was replete with suggestions that 1867, which many members of Cumming’s interpretive school anticipated would be a major turning point in Christian history, would be a landmark year “in the fulfillment of prophecy, and

in the experience of mankind” (10). While Cumming disagreed with those who saw this year as either the culmination of Catholicism’s 1,260-year reign or the end of the 2,300-year Islamic dominance of the Middle East, he did expect that 1867 would be the last year of “this present Christian dispensation,” the year that the Jews would be restored to Jerusalem and the “millennial dawn and sunshine” would begin (*Great Tribulation, Second Series*, 12, 18, 106). Of course, these events did not come to pass: 1867 is remembered primarily by historians for the passage of the second Reform Act, which contributed to the gradual widening of the electoral franchise. Gertrude Himmelfarb has declared this to be the most important of the three nineteenth-century Reform Acts (Himmelfarb 97), but her language is hardly apocalyptic. His inconsistency was exacerbated by an escape clause he had written into *The Great Preparation*: “If 1867 shall pass away in quiet to its grave,” he cautioned, “I shall not deserve to be called a false prophet, because I never attempted to prophesy” (193). Certainly he must have had some inkling that 1867 would “pass away in quiet to its grave,” to be followed by many successive years, for “at the very time he was predicting the imminent end of the era he was negotiating the purchase of a house and complaining that he could not get a twenty-year lease” (Knox 83). He was apparently not disheartened by the quiet passing of 1867, for he continued to publish studies of prophecy after 1867; his later works include *When Shall These Things Be?* (1868), *The Seventh Vial* (1870), and *Watchman, What of the Night?* (1876). In these books, he insists that there is nothing “presented in previous works that demands reversal or recasting,” and he continues to invoke scriptural chronologies and current events to support his insistence that the “last days . . . are already come upon the earth” (*Seventh Vial* ix; *Watchman* 47).

His disclaimers such as “I do not venture to dogmatise” or “I speak with hesitation and reserve” (*Great Tribulation, Second Series* 21; *Great Preparation, First Series* 176) notwithstanding, Cumming was quite dogmatic when interpreting prophecies he believed had already been fulfilled. He denied that he could err, for he declared that “every student of prophecy” interpreted the sixth vial as the decline of the Moslem empire, that “there are too abundant proofs” of the “unclean spirits” of Revelation 16 at work in Victorian Britain, and that “there is no doubt” that current events are harbingers of the end times (*Signs* 13, 21; *Sixth Vial* 17). In short, the overall tone of his work was not “my interpretation may be wrong; my inference may not be logical and right,” but rather “I have thus given extracts to prove” and “I have never yet been answered by facts or proofs or any tangible sort of argument” (*Apocalyptic Sketches, First Series* 299; *Tracts on the End* 12–13; *Destiny of Nations* 23). Cumming demonstrated a very Victorian conviction that he was right.

Cumming’s end-times preaching must have been popular with his large congregations, for they received a steady diet of it, and their numbers do not appear to have dwindled until the last decade of his ministry, when the combination of the absence of any cataclysmic event in 1867 and Cumming’s failing health caused his popularity to decline sharply (Cameron 144–45). He, of course, insisted that his views were positively received. In the preface to the tenth edition of *Apocalyptic Sketches*, he claimed that previous editions had received only two negative reviews – one in the *Free Church Magazine* and another in the Tractarian *Woolmer’s Exeter Gazette* (*Apocalyptic Sketches, First Series* 7–8). Publishers’ advertisements, which we would expect to be positive, suggested that other works were also well received, hailing them as not only “eloquent,” “practical,” and “doctrinal,” but also as “among the most important of recent contributions to the literature of the Prophecies” (*Tracts on the End* 26–28; *Great Tribulation, Second Series* ads).

Yet when we look beyond the necessarily rosy view offered by publishers' advertisements, we find negative comments coming from a great variety of sources. Surprisingly, George Eliot refrained from attacking this most vulnerable aspect of Cumming's ideas: she disclaimed any "intention to consider the grounds of Dr. Cumming's dogmatic system, to examine the principles of his prophetic exegesis, or to question his opinion concerning the little horn, the river Euphrates, or the seven vials" (43). She was, she said, "less [concerned] with what he holds to be Christian truth than with his manner of enforcing that truth" (43). Her silence was most likely the result of her realization that she could critique these prophecies only if she accepted that the world would end or that the Bible was God's word, neither of which she did. Furthermore, had she pitted her agnosticism against his Christianity, she would probably have lost much of her audience.

Instead, Cumming's harshest critics were fellow Evangelicals. Some of them belonged to different interpretive schools: Philip Charles Soulbieu Desprez, for example, the clerical author of several works on the Apocalypse, was a member of the "Praeterist School," which held that all the prophecies in Daniel and Revelation had been fulfilled early in the Christian era (Carpenter and Landow 307). In *The Apocalypse Fulfilled in the Consummation of the Mosaic Economy and the Coming of the Son of Man: An Answer to the "Apocalyptic Sketches" and "The End," by Dr. Cumming*, Desprez dismissed Cumming's historicist views as "mere assumption, and entirely destitute of argument," arguing that Revelation was intelligible only if the interpreter accepted his guiding "principle" of "*Christ already come*" (iii, 52). Cumming's views were also attacked by at least one member of the "Futurist" school, which held that nothing in John's visions would materialize until the Jews were restored to Israel and the world entered "the last season of Antichristian abomination" (Carpenter and Landow 307; Newton 10). Benjamin Wills Newton (1807–99) ended his *First Series of Aids to Prophetic Inquiry* (1850) with a critique of Elliott's and Cumming's views, rejecting as "mere fancies" the "year-day" theory, the interpretation of the sixth vial, and other staples of Cumming's interpretive schemes (140, 147, 193). Both Desprez and Newton found fault with the prophetic timeline and interpretation of current events: they disagreed with his "minute condescensions on dates," mocked his interpretation of Daniel's "many shall run to and fro" as a reference to "railway raveling," and rejected his claims that earthquakes and famines reached unparalleled frequency in the 1800s ("Rev. Dr. Cumming" 398; "Dr. Cumming's 'Great Tribulation'" 657; "Dr. Cumming on the Great Tribulation" 418).

Other critics who had no such obvious inclinations to disagree with Cumming nonetheless took issue with several aspects of his work. The anonymous critic who reviewed *Great Tribulation* for *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* believed studying prophecy to be a "perfectly legitimate" enterprise but faulted Cumming for errors ranging from undue emphasis upon chronologies to invalid claims about the frequency of earthquakes to improper dating of the Irish potato famine ("Dr. Cumming's 'Great Tribulation'" 655, 657). Others took issue with Cumming's obsession with the end times. Despite his assertion that a preacher should not give "disproportionate attention" to any one part of the Bible (*Prophetic Studies* 224), Cumming preached and published more on Daniel and Revelation than any other books, leaving himself open to charges of homiletic "tunnel vision." Charles Maurice Davies, a novelist and self-described "ex-Puseyite,"³ complained that "millenarianism forms the staple food of Dr Cumming's flock to an extent of which one dreads to think," while the reviewer of *The Great Tribulation* noted that "he has so long accustomed himself to look out for signs and wonders, that now he is able to discover nothing else" (Davies 203; "Dr. Cumming on the Great

Tribulation” 409). Finally, Cumming’s contemporaries criticized his “ignorant assurance,” “confident announcements” and “precise definitions;” these critics noted his failure to treat his subject with “reverent care” and observed that “though he often informs us that he is no prophet, on the other hand he emphatically assures us that not one of his predictions has yet failed” (“Rev. Dr. Cumming” 399; “Dr. Cumming on the Great Tribulation” 409).

III.

IN ADDITION to receiving a steady stream of Historicist interpretation, those who heard Cumming’s sermons and read his books were also treated to heavy doses of anti-Roman Catholic rhetoric. Whatever the passage under discussion – the dream of the beast in Daniel 7, the warning against “false prophets” in Matthew 24, the judgment of Babylon in Revelation 17 – Cumming’s treatment was sure to include a strident condemnation of Catholicism as “monstrous,” “apostate,” and even satanic (*Last Warning Cry* 213; *Destiny of Nations* 258; *Apocalyptic Sketches, First Series* 112). One of the highlights of Cumming’s prophetic timeline was 1792, which he believed marked the fulfillment of two visions: Daniel’s dream of a king who would “speak great words against the most High” for “a time, times and half a time” and John’s vision of a beast who would speak “great things and blasphemies” for “forty and two months” (Daniel 7.25, Rev. 13.5). According to Cumming, both prophets foresaw the same event: the “king” and the “beast” were symbols of the Roman Catholic Church, and they would reign for the same period of time: three and a half years, or 1,260 “prophetic days.” As he did with Daniel’s vision of the “little horn,” Cumming applied the “year-day” theory, so that the 1,260-year period began in 532, when the Emperor Justinian endowed the Pope with “supreme authority,” and ended in 1792, when the French Revolution “commenced so overwhelming an onslaught on the Papal Power” (*Expository Readings* 363; *Great Tribulation, Second Series* 13). Cumming also went out of his way to take aim at Roman Catholic beliefs and practices: he worked a condemnation of the confessional into his remarks on the prayer in Daniel 9, used a discussion of the holiness of heaven to reject “the unscriptural dogma of Baptismal Regeneration,” and even found a way to attack the doctrine of transubstantiation in his analysis of the seven stars and candlesticks in Revelation 1 (*Prophetic Studies* 306; *Voices of the Night* 375; *Apocalyptic Sketches, Third Series* 52).

Cumming’s ideas were no more unique here than they were elsewhere: identification of Babylon with Rome and the Beast with the Papacy had been a staple of some schools of Protestant eschatology since Luther’s day. Cumming, however, brought an unusual zeal – what a contemporary called a “certain spice of bigotry” (“Clerical Celebrities” 717) – to his denunciations of the Roman Catholic “curse” (*Apocalyptic Sketches, Third Series* 319). Eliot recognized this, tartly noting that “Roman Catholics fare worse with him even than infidels. Infidels are the small vermin – the mice to be bagged *en passant*. The main object of his chase – the rats which are to be nailed up as trophies – are the Roman Catholics” (57). Cumming concurred, confessing that his hatred of Roman Catholicism was so strong that he would “almost rather be a Mahometan than a Romanist,” for he believed that at least Muslims were not guilty of idolatry or the other sins of Rome (*Signs* 263).

Cumming’s anti-Roman Catholicism was in part a reaction to the rise in numbers and status of Roman Catholics in England, which he witnessed during his long tenure at the Crown Court Church. In 1829, three years before he took up his position at Covent Garden, Catholic Emancipation allowed Roman Catholic males who met the requisite property qualifications

to enter Parliament. In the following decade, prominent Anglican families began to lose their sons and daughters to Rome, a trend that increased dramatically in the 1840s and 1850s, when the Church of England was rocked by the conversions of John Henry Newman, Frederick W. Faber, Henry Edward Manning, several of William Wilberforce's children, and other prominent and not-so-prominent Anglicans. These defections, combined with the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England in 1850, generated fierce protests from the majority of English Protestants who believed that Roman Catholics threatened their identity as a Protestant nation. Cumming's anti-Roman Catholic pronouncements, then, were more congruent with his culture than were his end-times prophecies.

Never one to avoid publicity, Cumming challenged the most prominent English Roman Catholics. In early November 1850, he delivered a well-received *Lecture on the Papal Aggression* at the Hanover Square Rooms attacking Nicholas Wiseman, the newly appointed Roman Catholic cardinal of Westminster, for his alleged attempt to introduce Roman Catholic corruptions, including the worship of the Virgin Mary, to England. Several years later, he repeated these charges against Wiseman in a letter to the *Times* ("Our Lady of Salette" 593). In 1851 he traveled to Birmingham, where John Henry Newman had recently founded the Oratory where he would spend most of the rest of his life, in order to respond to Newman's 1851 lectures, published as *On the Present Position of Catholics in England*, with a lecture of his own, *Romish Miracles*. Cumming begged his audience to understand that he did not personally oppose Newman, "but I do have a quarrel, a solemn quarrel, with that church of which I believe him to be the unhappy victim" (*Romish Miracles* 1). He searched for a personal connection when making his attacks: in condemning devotion to the saints, he made sure to mention St Philip Neri, patron saint of the Oratorians, the order both Newman and Faber joined after entering the Roman Catholic Church in 1845 ("Our Lady of Salette" 39–52).

Although the author of "Pen Pictures" lauded him as "the most dangerous enemy which Cardinal Wiseman has in these realms" (*Half-Hours* 41), Cumming seems to have been more of a pest than a dragon. Neither Newman nor Wiseman seems ever to have replied directly to him, and his request – or demand – to attend Vatican I (1870–71) received a "chilling" response from Pope Pius IX (Knox 77). His most direct confrontation with the Roman Catholic Church, over the oath he believed Wiseman took on becoming a cardinal, seems to have been largely a non-event. In November and December 1850, in a series of lectures and letters to the *Times*, Cumming charged that Wiseman had sworn that "all heretics (that is, Protestants,) schismatics (that is, members of the Greek Church that separated, as they say, from Rome,) and rebels against our Lord, or foresaid successors, I will persecute and attack to the utmost of my power" (*Romish Oath* 4–6). Wiseman never responded directly to Cumming's charge, leaving it to his subordinates to inform the minister that no British bishop would recite that particular part of the oath and that cardinals did not take oaths. Cumming refused to be convinced, even after he went to Wiseman's Golden Square residence and saw that the offending sentence had been crossed out of the bishop's oath. Cumming insinuated that the sentence had only recently been expunged, for neither initials nor a date verified by whom and when it had been eliminated. The complete account reads like a farce, with Cumming determined and failing to find treasonous behavior on Wiseman's part.

Cumming's objections to Roman Catholic practices were standard fare in nineteenth-century England. He, like many of his compatriots, objected to devotion to the saints on the grounds that it was non-scriptural and that it interfered with the worship of Christ: he warned

ominously that “peril of momentous extent is near when even a saint is placed between Christ and the sinner, or when the one is located in the stead or in the room of the other” (Cumming and French 23, 227, 284). Cumming was convinced that popular Roman Catholic stories, including those of the eyes in paintings of saints moving, the preserved blood of saints becoming liquefied at certain times in the year, or the Virgin Mary’s house being miraculously moved to Loretto, exemplified the corrupt nature of the Roman Catholic Church (*Romish Miracles* 97–100). Although other Victorian opponents of Roman Catholicism accused priests of being cunning and sly, Cumming claimed that they were only ignorant.

Many of the Romish miracles need not be attributed to fraud, they were many of them facts which seemed supernatural to ignorant monks and fanatics, but which, in the progress of education and under the influence of pure religion, are easily explicable phenomena. We may thus, in the exercise of Christian charity, attribute many of the Romish miracles to guiltless delusion, ignorance, or mistake. (*Romish Miracles* 16–17)

Cumming’s ostensible and ostentatious “Christian charity” allowed him to have his cake and eat it, too, for he had to raise charges of intentional fraud before he could dismiss them. He then proceeded to describe Roman Catholics as uneducated and unacquainted with the “pure religion” that he preached. His apparent absolution was therefore a condemnation, for it allowed him to reiterate his Christianity, in opposition to the supposed superstition of the Roman Catholic Church.

Another strategic device Cumming employed against Roman Catholicism was ridicule, thereby implying that it was not even worthy of serious consideration and that any true English Christian would not be enticed by it, but would only pity its (mostly foreign) adherents. His audiences appreciated this tactic: for example, in his 1839 public controversies with the barrister and Roman Catholic apologist Daniel French, appreciative laughter greeted Cumming’s “call[ing] your attention to the fact of Don Carlos having appointed the Virgin Mary *Generalissimo* (!) of his army, and [having] placed it under her protection” (Cumming and French 234). Cumming particularly objected to what he saw as the Roman Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary. In Roman Catholic prayer books, he claimed, “Mary is represented as more powerful, more sympathizing, more merciful than Christ!” (Cumming and French 235). He also objected to the various titles with which the Virgin Mary was addressed, including “Mother most pure,” “Virgin most renowned,” “Virgin most powerful,” “Virgin most faithful,” and “Comforter of the afflicted” (Cumming and French 284). Finally, he enlisted the Virgin herself as an ally: “if the now glorified and happy Virgin could come down to earth, she would call on you to silence for ever the idolatrous accents *Ave Maria*, and teach you to breathe in language, heartfelt and believing – *Abba – Father!*” (Cumming and French 252).

Cumming especially despised Alphonse Liguori’s *The Glories of Mary*, an eighteenth-century devotional work that remained popular on the Continent but was much less so in England. In an 1853 letter to the *Times*, Cumming repeated some of the legends included in *The Glories of Mary* of sinners who deserved to go to hell but were saved if they had maintained a devotion to the Virgin Mary, even if they had ignored God. For example, the decapitated head of a robber was allowed to say his last confession simply because he had “fast[ed] once a week in honour of the Blessed Virgin,” while a girl resting after a ball was saved from being abducted by the devil merely by calling out “Hail Mary!” (“Our Lady

of Salette” 593). Cumming’s sharing this work with a Protestant audience allowed him to describe Roman Catholicism as a pagan, superstitious religion for the credulous and foolish. Further proof against the Roman Catholic Church, according to Cumming, was the seal of approval a recent English edition of *The Glories of Mary* had received from Cardinal Wiseman: “If a person of his [Wiseman’s] learning and information gives currency to such fables and follies as these, your correspondent need not wonder that his followers give them implicit credit” (“Our Lady of Salette” 593). A contemporary commented that both the examples Cumming cited and Wiseman’s approval of the work “are enough to make the hair stand on end on the head of every one who is not willingly and blindly an idolator” (“Cardinal Wiseman on the Worship of the Virgin” 596).

Notwithstanding his position as honorable secretary for Scotland for the Protestant Society for Promoting the Religious Principles of the Reformation, and for Special Missions to Roman Catholics in Great Britain (“31st Annual Report”), Cumming, like many of his contemporaries, showed little desire to convert Roman Catholics to Protestant Christianity.⁴ He made some isolated appeals for his readers to help rescue “victims” of the “Romish system,” but for the most part he admonished them to avoid all association with it, to, in the words of Revelation 18.4, “Come out of her . . . that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not her plagues” (*Expository Readings* 291; *Apocalyptic Sketches, Second Series* 490–91). Taking his cue from the angels in Revelation 18, who “rejoice” over the fall of Babylon, Cumming exulted to think that “the Pope is on his last legs” and that the Roman Catholic Church would soon be “utterly and signally destroyed, and its body given to the devouring flame” (*Great Tribulation, Second Series* 13; *Expository Readings* 290; *Prophetic Studies* 238).

Some good and even great minds participated in the energetic religious debates of the nineteenth century, including John Henry Newman, E. B. Pusey, and Charles Kingsley. Cumming, although he had undergone further theological study following his graduation from Aberdeen University, was not in the same intellectual league as these men. He deliberately misunderstood Roman Catholicism, and his public lectures often consisted of mocking Roman Catholic prayer books that were popular on the Continent. It is worth returning to Eliot’s earlier observation in full here, that Cumming’s “writings have no high merit: they have no originality or force of thought.” However, while Eliot’s assessment was correct, Cumming’s arguments were very popular. For example, his 1839 debates with Daniel French were both crowded and well received. Cumming seems to have bested French, at least in the crowd’s opinion, even allowing for the note taker’s evident predisposition to side with the Presbyterian minister. Cumming’s 1850 Hanover Square lecture attacking Cardinal Wiseman was full to overflowing, leading the speaker ostentatiously to “express my deep regret that so many are inconvenienced by the pressure, on the one hand; but, on the other, to express my gratitude to God that the popularity, or rather invasion of Dr. Wiseman, has brought together so large a number to protest against his new and daring assumption of power, pre-eminence, and spiritual jurisdiction of this land” (“Cardinal Wiseman on the Worship of the Virgin” 5).

Cumming’s charges against Roman Catholics were in no way original, either in the nineteenth century or since the Reformation. Accusations that Roman Catholics believed that one could be saved merely by maintaining a devotion to the Virgin Mary were found in other Victorian works, most especially in accounts of travels to Italy, and Liguori was often cited as exemplifying the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. Thomas Hartwell

Horne, an Evangelical Anglican clergyman and Biblical scholar, charged that Liguori's Marian devotions exhibited "idolatry" (75), while the Anglican lay controversialist Charles Hastings Collette condemned them as "gross and glaring blasphemies" (15). William Palmer, a traditional High Churchman and therefore more likely to express publicly his anti-Roman Catholic sentiments, accused Liguori of "declar[ing] that the Virgin is a Goddess" (23), a sentiment echoed over a decade later when the *Church and State Gazette* praised Cumming for alerting its readers to the "profanity" and "blasphemy" found in *The Glories of Mary* ("Cardinal Wiseman on the Worship of the Virgin" 596). Although sharing neither Cumming's approach nor his preoccupations, the Tractarian leader E. B. Pusey warned potential converts that they should not "join it [the Roman Catholic Church], unless [they] could receive the practical system, as taught by Liguori" (letter to J.H. Newman, Nov. 6, 1865). However, Liguori's baroque devotional style was not typical of English Roman Catholicism; Mary Heimann has convincingly argued that "it was an invigorated English recusant tradition, not a Roman one, which was most successful in capturing the imagination of Catholics living in England from the middle of the nineteenth century to the early years of the twentieth" (137). Yet Cumming and his contemporaries found that Liguori provided an easy target for them to define Roman Catholicism as a foreign, pagan religion.

Given the anti-Roman Catholic climate of Victorian England, it is not surprising that Cumming's anti-Roman Catholicism had far fewer critics than did his end-times prophecies. Those who were critical tended to quibble over minor points of interpretation, rather than with his overall thesis. For example, although the Evangelical clergyman Robert Govett insisted that he had no desire to "defend Rome in her sinfulness," he nevertheless declared that there was neither Scriptural nor historical evidence to support Cumming's claim that "the Pope is Antichrist" or that the Papacy was apostate and the Pope was the "man of Sin" prophesied in 2 Thessalonians 2 (Govett 317, 324). Here again, George Eliot stood apart. She roundly denounced Cumming's readiness to "strain the letter of the Scriptures . . . when his object is to prove a point against Romanism" (60) and his assumption that Christianity was synonymous with "Calvinistic Protestantism" (43–44). She condemned him for his refusal to acknowledge the common humanity of Roman Catholics, whom he saw as merely "the puppets of which the devil holds the strings" (57), and said that the sum of his teachings against Roman Catholicism encouraged his audience to hate their fellow Christians (58). Ultimately, she said, Cumming was no better than those he despised:

Dr. Cumming is fond of showing up the teaching of Romanism, and accusing it of undermining true morality: it is time he should be told that there is a large body, both of thinkers and practical men, who hold precisely the same opinion of his own teaching – with this difference, that they do not regard it as the inspiration of Satan, but as the natural crop of a human mind where the soil is chiefly made up of egoistic passions and dogmatic beliefs. (64)

IV.

HOW, THEN, are we to assess Cumming's significance for twenty-first-century Victorian studies? To some degree, we can understand why scholars have neglected him: his strident anti-Roman Catholicism was beginning to be out of temper even with his own times by the time he died, and the failures of his end-times prophecies can make him seem a ridiculous figure, especially as the recent end of the millennium has brought fresh (and sometimes

horrifying) examples of the consequences of such predictions. But it is useful for us to revisit the subject of Eliot's essay. To some extent we can see that she, too, despite her obvious greater closeness to a twenty-first century vision, is manifesting a point of view that can itself be put in perspective. Eliot of course felt strongly her own rejection of her Evangelical past, and she is defensive when she strongly condemns unbelievers. Similarly, she seems to have needed to avoid contact with Cumming's personal style and appeal, qualities that are so interesting to us as an indication of the celebrity of such preachers in their day. In this way, she does not fully bear witness to the appeal and contributions of Evangelicalism to Victorian life.

Another reason for revisiting Eliot's essay is that some of her criticisms are one-sided. She charges Cumming with superficial religiosity, which is not entirely fair. Knox notes that Cumming "proclaimed the reality of God who was the Creator of the world" and "had also a profound sacramental doctrine" (Knox 71, 73), characteristics that are revealed in works such as *The Baptismal Font: or, A Short Exposition of the Nature and Obligations of Christian Baptism, with an Appendix*. In addition, had Eliot investigated Cumming's actions as well as his words, she would have realized that he was a philanthropist as well as a controversialist; like many Evangelicals, he demonstrated his living faith by good works. Knox notes that

[aristocratic] patronage helped him to build and maintain three schools, one for boys, one for girls and one for infants, where 600 could be given a rudimentary education and during the 30 years from 1849 to the end of his active ministry it was estimated that over 16,000 had passed through his schools. (60)

Cumming's social conscience was also manifested in his ministering to Scots who fell ill in the 1866 cholera epidemic and in his successfully appealing for funds to help support Lancashire cotton workers during the American Civil War (Knox 67).

We may not sympathize with some of Cumming's ideas, but we must nevertheless retrieve him from Eliot's almost too-effective caricature. If we merely mimic Eliot's contemptuous dismissal of him, we will not fully understand the larger landscape in which justifiably more famous figures like Newman, Salisbury, and Gladstone lived, worked, and prayed. His impassioned preaching and speaking allow us to glimpse the vitality of Victorian Protestantism in practice, as it was lived and debated outside the confines of Oxbridge common rooms or Lambeth Palace. He therefore reminds us that Christianity was often a messy and tumultuous, but always a vital, force in Victorian culture.

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NOTES

We would like to thank the members of the Scots Circle, Crown Court Church of Scotland, especially the Rev Stanley Hood and Colin Moffat, for their help in providing biographical information about John Cumming.

1. See, for example, Lewis, Toon, Cocksworth. Cumming merits only brief mentions in scholarly works on nineteenth-century religion, and his ideas and their significance in Victorian culture are not explored in depth. See Dargan 2: 528–29; Webber 1: 541; Sandeen 82–83; Fromm 3: 712–16; Paz 186; Binfield

- 54; Knox, "Dr. John Cumming" 57–84; and Cameron, chap. 10. We are grateful to the members of the Scotch Circle, Crown Court Church, for alerting us to the existence of these last two works.
2. Writers who are not avowedly religious also participate, albeit unwittingly, in this proclamation. Cumming sees Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as "one of the best commentators undesignedly and unconsciously upon the Apocalypse" and present-day journalists as "amanuenses in providence, recording what God has predicted in His inspired word" (*Destiny of Nations* 99; *Signs* 81).
 3. Davies used this pseudonym when he published *Philip Paternoster: A Tractarian Love Story* (1858).
 4. For a rare exception, see Cumming, *The Church: A Sermon, preached in St. George's Church, Edinburgh, June 4, 1856, in [sic] behalf of the Society for Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics* (Edinburgh, 1856). In *Popular anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England*, Paz notes that while groups such as the London City Mission sought converts among the Catholics, many Victorians were more militant than missionary, attacking their Roman adversaries through periodical articles, public lectures, and petition drives and other forms of political activism (26, 33, 113).

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