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Abstract

Emma Martin and the manhandled womb in early Victorian England

Emma Martin (née Bullock) was born in 1811 and died in 1851. She was a socialist and freethinker. As a child she was strongly religious and at the age of seventeen joined the Particular Baptists – a Calvinist grouping. She remained a believer for a further twelve years. In 1831 she married the Baptist Isaac Luther Martin and they had three daughters. She was very unhappy in the marriage and started to deliver lectures on the role of women. In 1839 she attended her first Owenite social meeting – she was powerfully ambivalent toward the radical views she heard there and she attacked their anti-religious ideas despite their endorsement of her pro women feelings. At the end of that year Isaac moved the family to London and she left him and became a lecturer for the Owenites at a small stipend.

This paper begins by examining a remarkable text, published in 1844, which rejected a phallogocentric view of religion. Her tract *Baptism: a Pagan Rite* is inspired by a tradition of comparative religion which had been developed and popularised by anti-clerical comparisons of Catholicism with pagan worship made around the time of the French Revolution. However, other works in this genre, such as Payne Knight's *Priapus* (1786) frame their vision of ancient religion around the primacy of phallicism as the central expression of primitive fertility cults and thence as underlying modern Catholic practice. Emma Martin's work, by contrast, reframed the discussion in two important ways. Firstly, she focussed upon her own experience as a former Baptist so as to sustain a sexualised reading of that denomination. Secondly, her reading centred on the baptismal pool as a womb in which the sinner was reborn. Contemporary accounts critical of baptism indicate that the occasion was feared to be an opportunity for sexual impropriety. Martin appears to have seen the act of baptism as an often co-erced fertility ritual.

Her other pamphlets, of which several survive, are not directly on gendered themes, but are strongly against religion. Her most active period of writing and speaking lasted until

1845 after which she left the movement to become a midwife. She spent her last years lecturing on gynaecology before dying of tuberculosis in 1851. She thus demonstrated the importance of the womb and its order and disorder as a core element in her practice and sense of duty. By thinking with the womb, she was able to place the female generative process – and its abuses at the hands of men – at the centre of her view of the operation of contemporary society. In this she is strikingly different to other writers of the time on comparative religion who either downplayed the womb as compared with the phallus, or who seem to have regarded the womb as somehow abject.

Emma Martin and the manhandled womb in early Victorian England

Introduction

Emma Martin (1801-51) was a radical who had the courage not only to take the male sex by the balls but to declare them of only peripheral importance. She dedicated the final years of her life, not simply to women, but to their wombs. By doing so she was connecting with what for her was the original and essential core of human religion, the adoration of fertility. Her pamphlets, of which several survive, are not directly on gender themes, but are strongly against Christianity. Her most active period of writing and speaking lasted from when she left the Baptists in 1839 until 1845 when she stepped down from active participation in the utopian socialist Owenite movement to become a freelance midwife and lecturer on gynaecology. Her focus on the symbolic centrality of the womb in human religion and culture is explored in one of her most remarkable discourses: *Baptism: a Pagan Rite*. This text was inspired by a tradition of comparative religion that had been developed and popularised by anti-clerical comparisons of Catholicism with pagan worship made up to and during the time of the French Revolution. The origins of religion, for Martin, lay in fertility cults:

‘those who supposed the influence of the male was greatest, instituted the worship of the Linga, of which the round towers of Ireland, the Phallus of India, Egypt and Greece, the Cross and the Lord’s Supper are varieties; while those who held the contrary opinion, viz. that the female had the greatest share in the production of the new being, established the worship of the Yoni, - from which the cavern worship of India, the Pyramids of Egypt, and the rite of Baptism by water proceeded’.¹

These were not the sentiments that might have been expected from a woman with Martin’s strongly religious background! I want to explore the way in which Martin came to criticise her original Baptist beliefs thought a process not simply of thinking about the body, but *with* the body.

¹ Martin (1844), p. 8.

Esther Pasztory's approach to *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art* provides suggestive insight into the ways in which art historical, material culture and anthropological approaches can be combined to investigate the ways in which textual discourse can focus upon a material and bodily interpretation of culture. Surveying a wide range of recent work on the body in history, Kathleen Canning, has talked of 'a veritable flood' of works on the body in history, which mostly 'invoke the body or allow "body" to serve as a more fashionable surrogate for sexuality, reproduction, or gender without referring to anything specifically identifiable as body, bodily or embodied.'² It is my contention that Martin's approach to improving the lot of women was based on decentring male obsessions with phallic investigation, intervention and penetration, and that, in their place, she advocated a focus on women's lived experience of the fundamental act of creation in childbirth.

Owenites and Baptists

Emma Martin was a person of passionate beliefs. At the age of seventeen she joined the Particular Baptists.³ The first such Calvinistic Baptist group had formed in 1633 in east London. They held that Christ had died only for the elect (i.e. for those of their number who had been baptised) rather than, as the General Baptists believed, for all people. During the nineteenth century a group of Strict and Particulars emerged from amongst the Particular. The split concerned, amongst other things, whether the unbaptised could take communion. Martin, therefore, can have been under no doubt of the importance of the correction interpretation of baptism. There were sharp tensions between the ideals of evangelisation, and those of separation of the spiritual elite. Harmony amongst communities of the faithful contrasted with enmity to those with different opinions. Although there were no priests in a sacerdotal sense (priesthood for Baptists was something awful pertaining to Hindus and Catholics), the leadership of the communities remained very much in the hands of men.⁴ Nonconformist women (a term in general use by mid-century) were stereotyped and restricted in their roles, but there was some space

² Canning (1999), p. 499.

³ Dix (2001) and Breed (2003).

⁴ Anon, 'Native royal patronage' (1841), p. 52.

for them to speak out.⁵ Yet the opportunities may have seemed meagre in the face of the fact that two-thirds of members of Baptist churches were women at this time.⁶ Moreover, in terms of the general attitudes of society at the time, whilst disseminating the creative efforts of men through tract distribution was a highly respectable act for women, preaching (or semi-legitimate 'ranting') was not.⁷ The woman with a cause was a recognised, and a stereotyped, figure in early Victorian England. Such a role was hard to reconcile with middle class notions of domestic propriety, but it such a mission was easier to uphold when personal outrage went hand in hand with religious faith.⁸ Emma Martin was, however, to lose not her sense of mission, but her faith and her respectability.

She remained a member of the Particular Baptists for twelve years. From the age of eighteen she ran a school and was active in distributing tracts. In 1831 she married the Baptist Isaac Luther Martin and they had three daughters. She was very unhappy in the marriage and started to deliver lectures on the subjection of women. In 1839 she attended her first radical meetings, about which she felt powerfully ambivalent. Initially she attacked the anti-religious ideas she heard despite the accompanying endorsement of an enhanced role for women in the public sphere. At the end of that year Isaac moved the family to London. Barbara Taylor has written perhaps the most detailed account of this period.⁹ According to her the key event took place in February of that year when Martin was 'transfixed' by hearing one of the Utopian socialist Robert Owen's (1771-1858) leading followers Alexander Campbell (1796-1870) lecture.¹⁰ In his third lecture he denied the divine origins of Scripture on internal evidences. Inconsistencies in the Bible were to be one of the most powerful tools for radicals even before the arrival, in translation, of such controversial German scholarship as Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*.¹¹ Most radicals were more anti-clerical than anti-Biblical. In the ensuing period of her life Martin was to take the Baptist prejudice against sacerdotalism, fortify it with radical irreligion mixed with Biblical exegesis and send it back against the sect to which she had previously been devoted. She split with her husband, and became a lecturer for the Owenites.

⁵ Wilson (1998), p. 156.

⁶ Field (1993), p. 66, table 2.

⁷ Anderson (1969), p. 468.

⁸ Rickard (2002).

⁹ Taylor (1983), pp. 130-55.

¹⁰ Taylor (1983), p. 133.

¹¹ Taylor (1983), p. 144.

Her transition was perhaps eased by the air of revivalist earnestness that clung to Robert Owen's movement. The Owenites were socialists, but not of the same hue as the Chartists. And although Owenites met in Halls of Science and justified their arguments by recourse to reason and the laws of nature, Robert Owen was regarded by some of his followers as 'the leader of a religious sect'.¹² Indeed, meetings were modelled after services and there were handbooks and catechisms and a creed. Owen is also noted for having Christened a child.¹³ Martin had not, therefore, stepped from a wholly religious to a wholly atheist environment. Owen's dream was of a moral and beautiful England in which the twin monsters of industrialisation and rampant capitalism had been tamed (something about which many others, for example the Roman Catholic convert Pugin, were dreaming at this time). In 1842, Owen declared that Britain should become agricultural again and that people should learn to live as a 'community in a garden'.¹⁴ This romantic idea of utopian communities cultivating the arts of fertility, in which each person laboured for the good of all, involved an attack on the family unit. Families, it was argued, divided people from one another and led to the tyrannisation of women. For Owen, his communities were not, as accusers argued, places of immorality, but of genuine love bonds between men and women who lived together but did not marry. He was keen to attack priests for their role in creating unloving households, which for him was akin to prostitution.¹⁵ All of this would have provided a powerful stimulus for Martin to think about the connections between love, sex and religion.

Moreover, not only was she now a member of a movement that was widely suspected of infidelity and immorality, but she would have become sharply aware of how problematic an issue baptism was becoming. Most Christian denominations were threatened at this time not only by radicals from without, but by dissent from within. Almost every aspect of liturgical and ritual practice was being questioned and the nature and correct form of baptism was no exception. Was baptism the entry point to salvation, as Baptists believed, or simply into the communion of the faithful? And was it a sacerdotal rite, or of merely symbolic significance? How should it be achieved; by immersion in water, or simply by sprinkling? And should it be administered to children, thus saving them from the danger of dying unbaptised, or should it only be given to

¹² Royal (2000), p. 7.

¹³ Harrison (1969), p. 136.

¹⁴ Harrison (1969), p. 56-59.

¹⁵ Taylor (1983), p. 139.

adults who were ready for its spiritual demands and implications?¹⁶ Above all – and this debate is still not settled – what precisely were the practices of the early Church?¹⁷

The chief recent case on baptism in the Church of England had been precipitated by Goreham. He had been presented to a living in the diocese of Exeter by the Crown, but was refused institution by Henry Phillpotts, bishop of Exeter, for denying baptismal regeneration as a sacrament and accepting it only as a symbol. Goreham appealed to the Privy Council, which had acted as appellate court in ecclesiastical cases since 1832. It effectively decided in his favour.¹⁸ The court refused to judge on such a question of faith, but said that there was room for divergence of opinion within the Church. Phillpotts then refused to appoint Goreham and even threatened to excommunicate him, the archbishop of Canterbury and anyone else who got in the way.¹⁹ The greatest outrage from the High Church viewpoint was that a secular court should be judging such matters at all. The Tractarian ritualist William Bennett wrote on relations between Church and State on this occasion that ‘it is an awful thing to see the men of Caesar – as of Caesar – plunge so recklessly, with such utter confusion, into the things of God’.²⁰ For the Anglo-Catholics baptism was, of course, important, but frequent confession and penance were needed to ensure one remained in a state of purity.²¹ For other Christians, above all the Baptists, it was the central ritual of their faith.

Those who thought it essential that the participant understand and consent to what was taking place were able to compare ‘infant sprinkling’ (‘paedobaptism’) to ‘heathen lustration’ as being a physical diversion rather than a spiritual act that engaged the heart.²² On the other hand, adult baptism was regarded by its opponents with a similar sense of horror at what they perceived as unnecessary bodily obsessions. Typical is an account of an anonymous writer, a convert to sprinkling, who was a bystander at a series of immersion baptisms and who recounts hearing

‘the shrill scream of a woman as she felt herself going under the water. Another rose with the struggling of the young person, who succeeded in wrenching herself from the minister’s grasp, and fell with a loud splash into the baptistery.

¹⁶ Scott (1840).

¹⁷ For example, Wedderburn (1987).

¹⁸ Lentin (1988), p. 96.

¹⁹ Phillpotts (1857), p. 74.

²⁰ Bennett (1850), p. 17.

²¹ Rawlinson (1861), p. 101.

²² Orchard (1838).

More than once I recall that people fainted in the water: I distinctly retain the image of the ghastly and death-like countenance of a woman, as her head hung back, wet and motionless, over the arm of the person who dragged her into the vestry'.²³

A further woman passed from fever, to delirium and death after baptism in cold water.²⁴ The implications here are of mortal danger. Why should people who feared water because they could not swim be confronted with it? Moreover, were there not dangers of accidents and of sickness from catching chill? Yet there was more to it than that. On another occasion, the anonymous saw young women 'decked out in decorated caps, and white vestments, far more tastefully arranged than simple convenience required, and marked the manner by which they were severally plunged by the minister, and then, as my eye followed each of them, drenched and dripping (a spectacle anything but impressive)' saw them led away.²⁵ He then walked off into the countryside and read the Bible amid flowers and fresh air, having escaped from such an infamy of soaked chemises.

It is no accident that his eye was following the dripping figures of women rather than of men. Others had been doing the same for centuries. Baptism by full dipping had been taking place from the seventeenth century.²⁶ The association of immorality arose almost immediately as can be seen in *The Dipper Dipt; or the Ababaptist Duck't and Plunged Over Head and Ears, at a Disputation in Southwark*. The debate took place in 1642 between the Baptist William Kiffin and one Dr. Featley. Its details were published by the latter and were illustrated with a nude 'virgin or Zion' being dipped.²⁷ In the early nineteenth century, outdoor baptisms in streams and rivers were sometimes seen by thousands of people.²⁸ The problem was not only the manhandling of the women, but also the fact that this took place in front of mixed crowds. Would men, it was asked, not blush to have their wives and daughters baptised in such circumstances by other males?²⁹ And, in a reference to the extensive Baptist missions in India, it was asked

²³ Anon, *Confessions of a Convert* (1845).

²⁴ Anon, *Confessions of a Convert* (1845), p. 18.

²⁵ Anon, *Confessions of a Convert* (1845), p. 45.

²⁶ Himbury (1962), p. 36.

²⁷ Himbury (1962), p. 40.

²⁸ Martin (1998), p. 313.

²⁹ Anon., *Immersion* (c.1851), p. 4.

whether it was not due to such shamefulness that the heathen were prevented from converting in the east?³⁰

It was much disputed whether baptism in antiquity was carried out naked. Alexander Carson (1776-1844) pastor at Tobomore, one of the leading baptists in Ireland, denied it and suggested that this anti-Baptist slur should be suggested to the Puseyites who will 'likely return to the old edifying practice'!³¹The Baptist response to the twin dangers of impropriety and chills was to swaddle the women. Even this did not silence the critics, who argued that people were wrapped in so many clothes and the immersion was so rapid that it had become ridiculous: clothes, face and hands were dipped, but not the body – 'the apostles if they did dip at all would have been astounded to have seen persons come to the ordinance accoutred as is the custom of modern times'. This led to the allegation that the 'Baptists, properly speaking, wash or baptize the garment and not the man'.³² At least in sprinklings the water was targeted on the skin of the face. Moreover, extensive garments were no guarantee of modesty. One work of the time argued that such a 'profuse exhibition of the person' was but an opportunity for cloth to fall enticingly away from the neck and bust.³³ Immersion was, in short, dangerous to the health of the elderly; 'a distressing rite to womanly weakness and modesty, and opposed to manly self-respect'; sometimes ridiculous, reduced people round about to smiling; was dangerous to the man who 'has preached until he is covered with perspiration' and so has to depute the task to another; attracted gawkers and led to drownings. Are not those to be dipped 'in a state of terror, of both body and mind? Have they not, while being plunged, sometimes convulsively sobbed, and even screamed aloud?'³⁴ Do not, it was alleged, ministers wear waders under their gowns and postpone baptism of the sick: 'surely then, danger is sometimes anticipated, even by persons who loudly dilate on the safety and pleasure of being popped under water in a baptistery!'³⁵

Such claims were, of course, vigorously contested. It was replied that such injuries were figments of the imagination and that immersions were witnessed by people with 'the most solemn and tender impressions generally and commonly manifested'.³⁶ It was not immodest, since there were female attendants who went with the devotees to

³⁰ Anon., *Immersion* (c.1851), p. 4.

³¹ Owen (1839), p. 19, Anon., 'John Bull' (1835), p. 10 and Carson (1844), p. 380.

³² Pirie (1786), p. 71.

³³ Anon, *Can Women Regenerate* (1844), pp. 59-60.

³⁴ Mills (1849), pp. 145-6.

³⁵ Thorn (1832), p. 24.

³⁶ Coxhead (1832), p. 108.

change their clothes and to ensure that they were dressed 'most abundantly and carefully'.³⁷ However, the feeling was occasionally expressed that the event should be in some sense an arduous trial. It was compared as a lesser type of the shame in the eyes of the worldly to that which was of Christ upon the cross.³⁸ Being baptised was seen as spiritually rich and physically abject. As one Baptist hymn asked,

'Hast thou for me the cross endured,
And all the shame despised?
And shall I be ashamed, O Lord,
With thee to be baptised?'³⁹

This provides an interesting parallel to Catholic thought on penance which was similarly widely derided as representing displays of perverse and sexualised asceticism. At the time when Martin was writing a campaign was in progress against holy wells and lakes in Ireland, which focussed on the ritual centre of St. Patrick's purgatory on an island in Lough Dearg, Donegal. This was denounced as pagan superstition, perpetuated by Catholic bishops for profit.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, at the holy wells of Struel, near Downpatrick, naked men and women bathed 'promiscuously' in the waters, after which they were plied with drink deep into the night and told that they would remain clean of sin.⁴¹ Meanwhile, at Holy Island, Scariff Bay, females tucked up their clothes to go on their knees across the floor to kiss a stone and by so doing 'expose their persons in the most indelicate manner. Men of the most dissolute morals go to witness this part of the exhibition'.⁴² Baptist practice was not a sexualised form of penance, but it might have looked similar to hostile onlookers.

Baptists were also notably similar to Catholics in their enthusiasm for seeking out ancient authorities in order to prove the veracity of their practices. Immersion was held to be the original form of baptism, and the Baptist community the original form of Church, both in the Holy Land and in England.⁴³ According to one writer, to tell the origins of paedobaptism (child sprinkling) would be to 'present the filthiest account ever issued

³⁷ Coxhead (1832), p. 112.

³⁸ Coxhead (1832), p. 110.

³⁹ Anon., *Pouring and Sprinkling* (no date), p. 8.

⁴⁰ Hardy (1836), p. 54 and Baggaly (1845).

⁴¹ Hardy (1836), pp. 37-8.

⁴² Hardy (1836), p. 30.

⁴³ Orchard (1841) and Wallace (1856), pp. 7 and 42.

from the press', since it derived in its modern form from the development in the twelfth century of special instruments to baptise the baby in the womb.⁴⁴ Its ultimate origins lay, however, in 'heathen lustration'.⁴⁵ This was a providential history in which the Reformation was unimportant, or was even counterproductive, for that was when it was alleged that sprinkling became widespread. Rather, there had been Baptists in every age since Christ, as in the index of one survey from 1838, which had entries for each century from the first to nineteenth and in which most of the entries relate to the period up to the thirteenth century.⁴⁶ Evangelicals who defended sprinkling and attacked dipping could be tarred with the accusation of Puseyism by Baptists.⁴⁷ Moreover, in no sense did Baptists want to bear comparison with Catholics. The greatest obscenity according to one pastor occurred at a Christening in the baptistery of Sienna, 'which of all filthy and ridiculous sights is one of the worst. The priest repeatedly spits on his thumb, and dabs it on different parts of the child's face and person'.⁴⁸

Deists and atheists joined in with further aspersions that implied that all forms of baptism were pretended purifications, which were absurd when they were not disgusting. The sometime Anglican priest turned atheist showman Robert Taylor (1784-1844), noted that Protestants ridiculed Catholic sprinklings of animals, but this was simply no more and no less pagan than the sprinkling of humans.⁴⁹ In response to such jibes a Catholic wrote that baptising bells to 'make sacred is not ridiculous, since Protestants consecrate Churches, and also baptise children who do not know what is going on'.⁵⁰ The very language of the Bible was hotly disputed.⁵¹ Baptists asserted that 'baptizo' meant to immerse, but opponents argued that the term was highly 'indefinite' as could be seen by translations of scripture: it could mean 'to bathe, daub, drink, dye, besmear, colour, cover, drown, wash, wet, smear, stain, infect, imbue, bury, plunge, immerse, entomb, dip, pour, purify'.⁵² The word itself might, therefore, be found to have negative connotations, as could the key passage in Scripture on which the supposed power of immersion was based, Romans 6:3-5:

⁴⁴ Orchard (1838), p. 144.

⁴⁵ Orchard (1838), p. 106, fn. 2.

⁴⁶ Orchard (1838), p. 366.

⁴⁷ Anon, Review of 'Dipping not Baptising' (1844).

⁴⁸ Quoted in Orchard (1838), p. 5.

⁴⁹ Taylor (1829), p. 233.

⁵⁰ Anon., 'A Member of the Universal Church' (1826), p. 3.

⁵¹ Munro (1842).

⁵² Anon., 'John Bull' (1835), p. 187.

"6:3 Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection,"

This makes a strong comparison between our baptism and Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. On the surface, one could conclude from these verses that baptism is a key part of salvation. Thus being born again with Jesus meant dieing with him too. As one Baptist hymn put it:

'Immersed beneath the closing wave,
We're into death baptized;
And enter thus our Saviour's grave,
Buried with him that died'.⁵³

This invitation to death was described by a piece in *John Bull*, a newspaper suspicious of exotic religious enthusiasm, as an 'obscure metaphor'.⁵⁴ Another opponent argued that one does not plunge a body in the earth but sprinkle earth on it.⁵⁵ Being born again, from an evangelical Anglican view, could be seen as important, but this was not to be done by baptism alone.⁵⁶ Nor was the Gothic spectre of death to be invoked to such a purpose. Not just Jesus but also vampires were noted for having risen from the grave. The allegedly primitive world of Pagan and Catholic ritual was not one with which Baptists would have desired a comparison. Yet some of their ideas and their self-justificatory antiquarian research allowed them to be seen as implicated in past worlds of arcane secrets.

Antiquarians and Doctors

⁵³ Hymn by George Rawson (1857), quoted in Briggs (1994), p. 55.

⁵⁴ Anon., 'John Bull' (1835), p. 35.

⁵⁵ Ballingall (1848), p. 14.

⁵⁶ Gipps (1825), pp. 55-75.

By the end of the nineteenth century medieval holy wells start to appear in popular English books on folklore in the form of interesting, if ultimately pagan, folk customs.⁵⁷ When Emma Martin was writing, however, assertions of links between pagan and Christian customs were the subject of great concern and were being widely used to attack supposed immorality in the modern churches. Martin, in her tract *Baptism, a Pagan Rite*, went much further in that she understood sexualised readings of the modern ceremony as being expressions of its original ritual purpose. In this work she identified that the first places of worship were caves: 'the cave was no inapt symbol of the womb', because genesis was the first mystery.⁵⁸ Entrance to such caves was controlled; for instance there was one in India whose entrance was 'narrow and difficult of access' called the Devil's Yoni. The name was chosen because the 'corpulent' or those with 'lack of adroitness' could not enter.⁵⁹ In the second stage of religious evolution there took place a struggle between the phallus/lingam as a focus for devotion (as seen in the last supper and cross), and the womb-vagina/yonis (as in the pyramids of Egypt, baptism and the caves in India).⁶⁰ Christ's worship was taken over by phallogocentric devotees of the cross, but the original reality was different. He was born in a cave, then baptised in a river, then buried in a cave, before he rose again.⁶¹ She regarded rivers as ritual substitutes for caves. Where nature did not provide any rock structures, streams provided for a 'temporary burial', hence baptism. Water was the source of creation: 'the solids of all organised bodies are depositions of circulating fluids and their general waste is restored from the same source; so that *structure* is always born of moisture'.⁶² Water, she asserted, which 'washes away the defilements of the body, may aptly represent the purification of the mind'.⁶³

The origins of this 'genitalisation' of the landscape lay in the male world of eighteenth century erotica in which sexualised readings were applied to a range of political, religious, commercial and domestic contexts in ways which displayed distinctive gender stereotypes. In these forms of text 'representations homed in on points where gender and geography merged, situating eroticised female bodies in sexualised locations that were appropriately dark and deep – caves, grottoes, groves, and shut

⁵⁷ For instance, Hope (1893) and Quiller-Couch and Quiller-Couch (1894).

⁵⁸ Martin (1844), p. 9.

⁵⁹ Martin (1844), p. 12.

⁶⁰ Martin (1844), pp. 8 and 12.

⁶¹ Martin (1844), p. 13.

⁶² Martin (1844), p. 14.

⁶³ Martin (1844), p. 15.

rooms, all metaphors for female bodies and parts'.⁶⁴ However, Martin's text stems directly from an area of proto-anthropological comparative religion which emerged amongst male connoisseurs at the end of the eighteenth century.

William Hamilton (1731-1803), diplomat and collector, heard of a surviving 'phallic cult' north of Naples in which wax images were offered at a local church by women in the hope of ensuring their fertility. He was interested in the cult because it 'offers a fresh proof of the similitude of the Popish and Pagan religion'.⁶⁵ In May 1785 he travelled to the location and examples of the ex-votos were sent to British Museum.⁶⁶ Hamilton described the cult to Payne Knight who published on the subject. Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824) was the eldest son of the Rector of Bewdley. From 1780-1806 he was a Member of Parliament, sponsored by Charles James Fox. In 1781 he was elected a member of the Society of Dilettanti which in 1786 issued his publication, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus*.⁶⁷ A trustee of the British Museum from 1814, he left his huge collections to the Museum.⁶⁸ Others associated with these men were Hugues, the self-created Baron d'Hancarville (1719-1805), scholar and publisher of erotic prints, who addressed the Society of Dilettanti in 1781 and the connoisseur and collector Charles Townley (1737-1805), the first European known to have acquired an erotic Indian sculpture group.⁶⁹ It has been commented of Payne Knight's book that 'lurking on almost every page is some form of scepticism about Christianity' and this implicitly, if not explicitly, was not just about abusing Catholicism.⁷⁰

It is, however, interesting that Martin does not concentrate on a phallic interpretation of worship. She concludes her account by quoting one of the main writers who elaborated comparative religion in Britain but who was unusual in stressing the importance of both the male and female principles, one who talked, for instance, of the Indian custom of baptising the lingam and the yoni with water, stressing the mystic union of the two.⁷¹ Godfrey Higgins (1773-1833) was an antiquarian who succeeded to the security of an estate on death of his father in 1794. His ancestral home was Skellow Grange near Doncaster and he had a town house just off Russell Square, close to the

⁶⁴ Griffiths (2006), p. 662.

⁶⁵ Stone (1927), 1, p. 95.

⁶⁶ Carabelli (1994) and (1996)

⁶⁷ Knight (1865), reprint edition.

⁶⁸ Stumpf-Condry and Skedd (2004).

⁶⁹ Mitter (1977), p. 85 and Haskell (1984), p. 190.

⁷⁰ Rousseau (1987), p. 102.

⁷¹ Higgins (1836) 1, pp. 38 and 343.

British Museum. He was in the army for a number of years, resigning in 1813. From that date he devoted himself to studying the history of religion. He saw himself as a Christian, but was clearly a somewhat unorthodox one. For instance, he regarded Christ as a monastic figure. He was a freemason, a Fellow of the Society of Arts and of the Royal Asiatic Society. His vast collected musings on comparative religion, the *Anacalypsis*, were published in two volumes, the second edited posthumously by George Smallfield at the expense of Higgins' son, who then donated the two volumes to the British Museum. Higgins method is based on 'discovering' nomenclatural similarities (Christ and Krishna, for example) and identifying objects shaped like genitalia. For instance he noted 'clefts' in rocks in India, adding that amongst the Celts 'the early Christians called these things *Cunni Diaboli*, and from the former of these words came the vulgar appellation for the membrum foemineum in England'.⁷² He also asserted, and may well have been Martin's source for the concept that 'as the Jewish or *male* principle prevailed, the other declined'.⁷³ The section of Higgin's work quoted by Martin is one emphasising the equality and unity of the male and female principles. According to him, fire was the first element, but water was his 'assistant', 'the agent by which everything was born again, or regenerated' – without water the sun could not produce life.⁷⁴

Higgins was an eccentric, perhaps something of a bookish libertine, but not a radical in public politics at least. In this he was not untypical of men interested in phallic cults in the nineteenth century. Higgins was untypical in that he evoked notions of gender equality, but Emma Martin went further. For her, the female principle was the core, even though union with the male principle was essential. What Martin had done was to reignite the radical potential of such material by her focus on gender imbalance and the sense that the men had perverted the initial practices. It is not that Martin, at this point, believed in the resurrection of ancient religion. She stated that 'there is no creative intelligence that requires of any man prayer'. One might as well use 'one of those [rituals] by which the Hindoo worshipper honours the Goddess Kale, as mentioned in the *Missionary Quarterly Papers*'.⁷⁵ She simply wanted to spell out what she regarded as core cultural truths.

In this she touched on the radicalism that inspired Volney, a deputy of the French National Assembly in 1789, who argued that religion began with the worship of

⁷² Higgins (1836) 1, p. 346.

⁷³ Higgins (1836) 1, p. 404.

⁷⁴ Higgins (1836) 1, p. 529.

⁷⁵ Martin, quoted in Gaylor (1997), pp. 99-100.

natural forces, then of the stars, then of idols in the forms of animals derived from constellations: 'pontiffs and prelates! Your mitre, your crosier, your mantle, are the emblems of Osiris; and that crucifix of which you boast the mystery, without comprehending it, is the cross of Serapis!'⁷⁶ Then, through various systems, the world came to Christianity via a form of sun worship. His viewpoint emphasised all conventional religion as being the result of primitive thought, but he did not focus on fertility. Emma Martin united traditions of erotic social parody with radical anthropological science to critique the sexual obsessions of Baptist preachers and male antiquarians alike.

It is also instructive to compare her analyses with those of Robert Taylor, who I have already mentioned as a sometime Anglican priest who put on remarkable and blasphemous shows at 3 Blackfriars Road and 8 Theobalds Street which were burlesque parodies of religion.⁷⁷ He made fun, not just of the easiest target, the Roman Catholics, but also Baptists:

'The Baptae or Baptists were an effeminate and debauched order of Pagan priests, belonging to the goddess Cotytto, the *unchaste* Venus, in opposition and contradistinction to the celestial deity of that name, who was ever attended with the Graces, and whose worship tended to elevate and exalt the moral character, and to sanctify the commerce of generation with all that is delicate in sentiment and tender in affection. No worshipper of Venus could endure the thought of impropriety. Neglect of the holiness which the rites enjoined was ever punished with degradation of mind and loss of beauty and health. The Baptists are satirised by Juvenal. They taken their name from their stated dippings and washings, by way of purification, though it seems they were dipped in warm water, and were to be made clean and pure, that they might wallow and defile themselves the more, as their nocturnal rites consisted chiefly of lascivious dances and other abominations. The Baptists, or Anabaptists, as they are called, continue as an order of religionists among Christians, under precisely the same name. The licentious character of the religionists from which they are descended, has received its correction from the improved intelligence, and consequently, improved morality of the times. But the most unquestionable evidence confirms

⁷⁶ Volney (1796), p. 245.

⁷⁷ Mccalman (1992).

the fact, that the Christian Baptists of Germany, in the fourteenth century, and sometime before and after, came short of no impurities that could have characterized the Antinomian priests of Cotytto'.⁷⁸

This text provided a pedigree of infamy for use in modern denunciation of the immoralities of Baptists. Such ideas were abroad in Owenite circles. For instance, an article on the 'antiquity of Christianity' appeared in the key Owenite periodical, *New Moral World* in 1841, as did a discussion of Christians as being the spiritual descendents from the Hindus.⁷⁹ One of the reasons that all of this should have been very much on Emma Martin's mind was that one of the most intense of early nineteenth-century Baptist causes was the mission to the heathen.⁸⁰ It was asserted in *New Moral World* that 'the people of England, who have been sending out their Bibles and their missionaries, in such abundance, to convert the [North American] Indians, would be greatly benefited, would they follow the simple virtues of this kind, comparatively happy, but much injured race'.⁸¹ Meanwhile, we find Martin lecturing in Hull in 1844, the year of the publication of *Baptism, a Pagan Rite*, on 'the crimes and follies of Christian missions'.⁸²

However, unlike Taylor, Martin was not interested in turning her radical critique into popular entertainment. Had she wished to do so a focus on the womb would not have helped matters. It appears that there was much great reluctance to engage with the womb in respectable discourse. Apart from doctors (and pornographers) interest was highest amongst a number of Christian groups. Catholics were concerned with one, very special womb, as when we find Wiseman extolling that blessed 'womb that bore Jesus made man, and the breasts that gave him suck'.⁸³ Those dissenters who believed in being born again were, symbolically at least, implicated in thinking with the womb, if not about it. One Mrs Barbauld, a Boston Unitarian, wrote about being born again that when 'in the womb he [the believer] lives a vegetative life, after the natural birth an animal life, after the new birth a spiritual life'.⁸⁴ An important source for the idea that the baptismal font was a womb was the above-mentioned prominent Irish Baptist, Carson, whose book of 1831 was re-issued in 1844 with a long series of rejoinders to those of

⁷⁸ Taylor (1829), pp. 208-9. Compare Taylor (1828).

⁷⁹ Anon., 'A Friend to Truth' (1841) and Anon., 'On the Antiquity of Christianity' (1841), p. 141.

⁸⁰ Potts (1967).

⁸¹ Anon., 'Horrible effects' (1839), p. 374.

⁸² Taylor (1983), p. 151.

⁸³ Wiseman (1840), p. 9.

⁸⁴ Barbauld (1830), p. 11.

anti-Baptist views.⁸⁵ Several writers respond to this work, which was, according to one of his supporters, an 'unanswerable book'.⁸⁶ Carson focussed on John 3: 5, 'except that man be born of water and the Spirit', saying that 'to emerge out of water is like a birth'. It is not immaterial that the very next section answers accusations of immorality by saying that, when one is baptised by another, 'if it were a real humiliation, it is to Christ that we stoop'. And moreover, he asks 'is there more dignity and delicacy in pouring water into a person's turned up face, out of the hand, so that some of the water must be swallowed?'⁸⁷ For him the penetration of the body by liquid is much more disturbing than the penetration of water by the body. In both cases, however, it is the penetrative act that is the focus on male concern. The uncomfortable associations of baptism and fertility meant that most Baptists were less than keen to explore this line of thinking (as Emma Martin knew very well). In this they had much in common with most other Christian preachers. Indeed, it is notable that nineteenth century Biblical dictionaries do not tend to mention the womb, though it occurs in the text more times than for instance, circumcision, which was itself a highly controversial topic.⁸⁸

If discussion of the phallus was the risqué occupation of radicals, connoisseurs and dilettantes, talking about the womb was regarded as being far more indelicate. Perhaps it was a practice that demanded the discipline of scientific practice and discourse. In 1845 Martin left off from preaching the Owenite gospel to devote herself to women and their bodies.⁸⁹ It appears that she was ill and tired. She was able to train as a midwife at the Royal Adelaide Lying-in Hospital. Since the Royal Maternity Charity required prayer at the bedside she practised freelance.⁹⁰ She also lectured on gynaecology in Covent Garden. Roy Porter has commented of the later eighteenth century that 'unblemished morals and religious orthodoxy [neither of which Martin enjoyed] rather than medical skill were the criteria of fitness to attend births, because midwives so easily fell under suspicion of colluding in illegitimacy, abortion and infanticide',⁹¹ Donnison has commented of the period when Martin was practising that 'despite repeated proposals for the rehabilitation and regulation of midwives, none of these had come to fruition, and now the stigma attaching to the occupation was such

⁸⁵ Mills (1849), p. 118.

⁸⁶ Munro (1842), p. iii.

⁸⁷ Carson (1844), pp. 164-5.

⁸⁸ Carpenter (2003).

⁸⁹ Gaylor (1997), pp. 93-101.

⁹⁰ Taylor (1983), p. 155.

⁹¹ Porter (2001), p. 225.

that educated entrants to it were rare indeed'.⁹² This assumes, of course, that education must inherently be superior to personal experience in a context in which medical training was dominated by male physicians. The status of female midwives had been adversely affected by the fact that 'by the turn of the nineteenth century, men-midwives and other men of science had established a cultural authority over sex and birth.'⁹³ Yet even men-midwives, claim as they might their qualities of both science and sensibility, were the subject of moral panic such that 'sexual innuendoes and accusations thus turned medicine into a scandalous travesty at the crossroads between fear and farce, and a subset of the newly emergent genre of the pornographic'.⁹⁴ The process of pregnancy and childbirth had an aura of abjection, in Kristeva's sense of being a horror that must be ignored in order that ordinary life may be pursued.⁹⁵ Malthusianism had cast a pall over the value of reproduction. Medical reform of training after the arrival of the man-midwife, was slow in coming. The first English Hospital for Women opened in Red Lion Square, Holborn in 1842, close to Emma Martin's practice. It struggled to avoid the accusation that it was providing solace rather than morals for fallen women.⁹⁶

The supposed horrors of the abject female interior were to be increasingly expressed in male scientific discourse as the century wore on. Nineteenth-century obstetric and gynaecological discourses by men defined 'woman as the pliant captive of her inner spaces'.⁹⁷ The supposed physiological weakness of woman was assumed to be a proof and justification of her subordinate status: that 'the man naturally governs, the woman obeys'.⁹⁸ (Male) medical authority regarded menstruation, for instance, as a problem and the cause of much disease. One medical treatise of the time argued that its onset was associated with one's 'temperature': a factor that was 'independent of climatorial influences, for our Arctic travellers have convinced us, that, in the midst of ice that never thaws, many of the Esquimaux tribes live in a state of licentiousness which cannot be surpassed by that of the sunburnt natives of India'.⁹⁹ A sensual mode of life, this doctor wrote, has far more effect than climate in diseases of menstruation: 'the organs of reproduction are over-excited by the prurient incitements of passion-stirring

⁹² Donnison (1988), p. 70.

⁹³ Cody (2005), p. 269. See also Harley (1981).

⁹⁴ Porter (2001), p. 227 and Jordanova (1999), pp. 23-4.

⁹⁵ Kristeva (1982).

⁹⁶ Moscucci (1990), pp. 75-6 and 86.

⁹⁷ Fessenden (2000), p. 470.

⁹⁸ Walker (1840), p. 22.

⁹⁹ Tilt (1850), p. xxiv.

pictures, statues, music, novels and theatres'.¹⁰⁰ Thinking perhaps of the angel in the ward, he mused that there are a most useful number of happy workers, like those bees called 'labourers, nurses, and improperly, neuters, who are indispensable': these are 'that large proportion of women whose organs of reproduction always remain passive'.¹⁰¹ A sense of self-hate can be seen from the use by female patients of euphemisms about menstruation such as 'the courses, the terms, the flowers, the change, &c. &c. More commonly, however, females during the period call themselves *unwell* or *out of order*'.¹⁰² Recent scholarship has begun to suggest that that alleged 'faultiness' of the female state was used to legitimate not simply the social, but also the sexual domination of women, as in Lansbury's later nineteenth century comparison between male doctors examining female patients and contemporary pornographic images of splayed and bound women.¹⁰³ Male science's dismissal of the lived experience of women and the attempted monopoly of public discourse on female reproduction were both challenged by Martin's practice in the last years of her life.

Conclusions.

Barbara Taylor has commented that, in her tract on baptism, Martin gave the practice a 'strangely Freudian twist'.¹⁰⁴ Freud was not writing until fifty years later. Moreover, Freudian is sometimes a code word employed when referring to a writer's apparently peculiar obsession with sexual symbolism. But this was not Emma Martin's concern. What she did attempt was to wrench debates on religion away from the arcane preoccupations of denominational difference and radical, yet still phallogentric social politics, and insist on the importance of women's bodies. In the tract that I have been discussing she employed comparative religion, which was itself rooted in assumptions of phallic supremacy, to assert that a primitive celebration of female fertility had, in the baptismal pool, been turned into a farce of symbolic impregnation and immediate rebirth, in which the woman, like the pool itself, was relegated to being a vessel to be

¹⁰⁰ Tilt (1850), p. xxvi.

¹⁰¹ Tilt (1850), p. xxvii.

¹⁰² Waller (1840), p. 14

¹⁰³ Lansbury (1985).

¹⁰⁴ Taylor (1983), p. 145.

manipulated through the plunging efforts of the male preacher. Such views of the passivity of women were, as we have seen, underlined in medical discourse which expressed female fertility as a problem and a danger which needed 'expert' male management. The vagina and womb were the source and route of new life into the world, and yet they were tabooed subjects in everyday discourse. How, Martin might have asked, could the centre of life-giving have become so controlled and misused by men, be they preachers or doctors?

Gynaecology, at the time, was seen as the study of the 'whole woman; it thus fused the physical, psychological and the moral aspects of femininity'.¹⁰⁵ It was such a fusion that Emma Martin preached through her writings and her labours albeit with the aim of asserting physical, psychological and moral self-respect. She did so at the time that the figure of the prophetess was emerging in literature. This has been associated with French social utopianism, for instance that of Pere Enfantin, who thought the free woman was to 'act as the figure-head for a new commercial society based on co-operative, rather than competitive, endeavour'.¹⁰⁶ But Martin was not to become such a prophetess. Perhaps this was because of her death in 1851. Her tract and thought on baptism faded into obscurity. The idea of matriarchal religious origins was noted by a few of those writers who led a revival of interest in phallic worship towards the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁷ This literary field remained off-limits to women, save that in 1897 one Eliza Birt asserted that Protestantism represented the highest form of the attempt to eradicate the female divine since it was 'the most intensely masculine of all religious schemes'.¹⁰⁸ Birt argued that the degradation of women did not come from the worship of fertility per se but from the suppression of the female and the idolisation of the male principle.¹⁰⁹ Birt and Martin are isolated figures, yet the assertion of combined female physicality and spirituality was, of course, to play a major role in the development of modern feminism. Those who embraced the worship of the Earth Mother in the 1960s and 1970s had, if not a fellow believer, at least a kindred spirit, toiling in the apparently uncompromising moral and social landscape of early Victorian England. One who did not want to separate material realities from verbal discourse, who wished, like Canning to

¹⁰⁵ Moscucci (1990), p. 103.

¹⁰⁶ Basham (1992), p. 42.

¹⁰⁷ Wake (1888), p. 231.

¹⁰⁸ Gamble (1927), 1, pp. 144, 150, 180 and 244.

¹⁰⁹ Gamble (1927), 1, p. 216.

bring embodiment to the fore.¹¹⁰ Martin was saying that a male obsession with desire and disgust was obscuring an essential bodily truth: that the essence of regeneration lay not in an act of priapic exuberance that was the end result of a fetishistic exploration of body parts, but came about through the wondrous emergence of a newborn world.

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¹¹⁰ Canning (1999), p. 499.

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