

**THE PARABLE AND THE MANTLEPIECE:
RELIGION AND MATERIAL CULTURE IN
THE REV. SAMUEL BARNETT'S ST. JUDE'S WHITECHAPEL VICARAGE**

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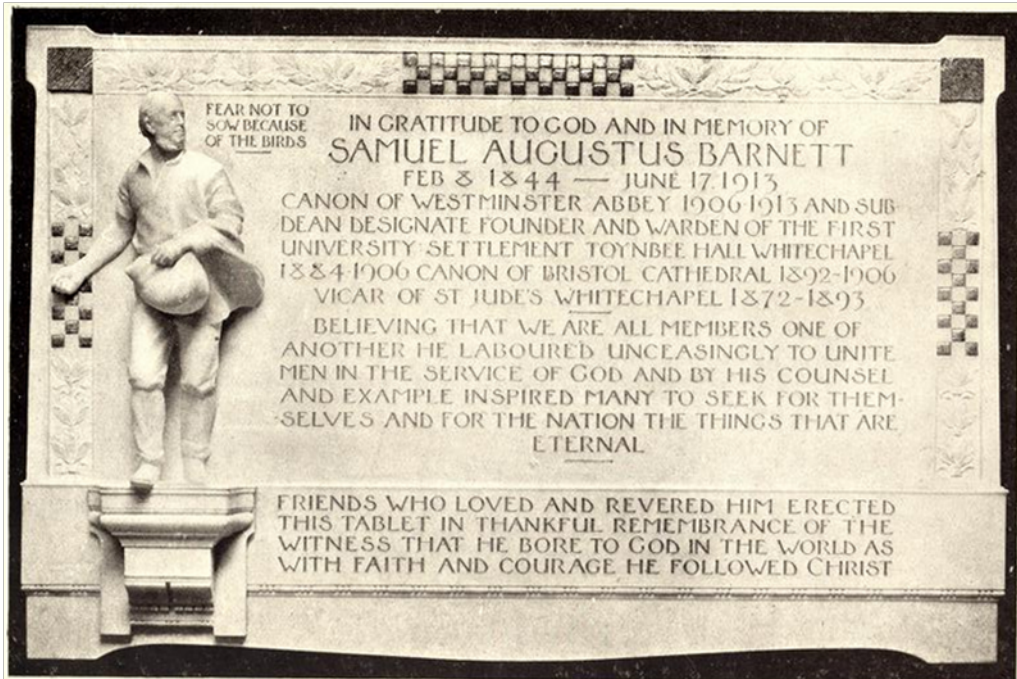


Figure One: This memorial stone can still be found on the north wall of the south aisle of the choir of Westminster Abbey from Henrietta Barnett, *Canon Barnett: His Life, Work and Friends* (London; 1921), p.782.

When Canon Samuel Barnett passed away his 'Friends who loved and revered him' erected a tablet designed and executed by the sculptor Sir George Frampton. These friends were members of the House of Lords and Commons; the wording of the tablet was directed by close friends John A. Spender and the Rev. Vicars Armstrong Boyle. What is striking about this tablet is that Frampton should have chosen to depict Barnett as a sower throwing seeds with his right hand into the south aisle of the choir of Westminster Abbey. This is flanked by Barnett's catch phrase 'Fear not to sow because of the birds'. Barnett was not- as this memorial stone might imply- an agricultural worker. He was an East London clergyman who, between 1872 and 1893, had held the living of St. Jude's parish in Whitechapel. In 1892 he became canon of Bristol Cathedral, a post he would keep until 1906 when he became canon and sub-dean of Westminster Abbey. Barnett is perhaps most famous, however, for founding the university settlement movement and being Head of one of the first settlement houses: Toynbee Hall, a position he would keep for over twenty years (1884-1906). The imaginary of the sower played an important role in Barnett's urban ministry. The 'Fear not to sow because of the birds' motto donned Barnett's own study fireplace.

In this position paper I will explore the significance of this phrase by exploring the material manifestations of religious belief in Barnett's work. I will examine how Barnett, together with his wife Henrietta, invested their philanthropic work with sacred meaning through their use and understanding of material culture. My research draws on existing scholarly work concerned with Barnett's philanthropic endeavours, but in contrast to these writings argues that historians need to consider more fully the Christian dimensions of the university settlement movement and associated activities. Scholars have largely overlooked the importance of religion in Barnett's work and have instead preferred to emphasise the secular and non-sectarian dimensions of his involvement with institutions like Toynbee Hall.¹ However, this position paper will argue that to fully understand Barnett's philanthropy we need to explore the material dimensions of his belief and how space was understood and decorated to emphasise the religious dimensions of settlement work. In order to do this, I will turn from the settlement house to the vicarage to illustrate the relationship between material religion and philanthropy.



Figure Two: A photograph of St Jude's Vicarage drawing room from Henrietta Barnett, *Canon Barnett: His Life, Work and Friends* (London; 1921), p.782.

St Jude's vicarage was packed with objects. As Figure two illustrates, the drawing-room alone was crammed with chairs, paintings, ornaments and books. Why did Barnett and his wife decorate their drawing room with so many objects? In many ways, the Barnetts were following the

¹ See, for instance, Emily Abel, 'Middle-Class Culture for the Urban Poor: The Educational Thought of Samuel Barnett', *Social Service Review*, 2 (1978), pp.596-620, Emily Abel, 'Toynbee Hall 1884-1914', *Social Service Review* 53 (1979), pp.606-632 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) Exceptions have been L. E. Nettleship, 'William Fremantle, Samuel Barnett and the Board Church Origins of Toynbee Hall', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 33 (1982), pp.564-579, Seth Koven, *Culture and Poverty: The London Settlement House Movement, 1870 to 1914* (Harvard University PhD Thesis, 1987) and his more recent monograph *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

stylistic schemes of the middle classes who had, since the eighteenth century, participated in a consumer revolution that had brought a number of goods into the home. At the same time, homes are, as Deborah Cohen argues, stages for personalities and possessions. It was in their drawing rooms that Victorians like Samuel and Henrietta Barnett 'displayed their personality', character and individuality to the world and to themselves.² The Barnetts loved objects for their aesthetic quality. Yet their attraction was not necessarily about emulation or a straightforward example of the power of their purse strings but rather the belief that specific types of objects held moral and spiritual potential. Material decorations arguably play an important role in the lives of Christians. To use the words of Collen McDannell, 'religious artefacts act as context windows onto a particular religious world'. Religious objects are not just marks of faith to the outside world. They are personal artefacts that enable people to have a sensory connection with God in every-day settings and transform supposedly secular spaces into sacred ones.

The Barnetts' commitment to 'missionary aestheticism' led them to suppose that 'pictures, pianos and parties' would help rectify slum life and recover their parishioners spiritual lives.³ The founding of the Whitechapel Art Exhibitions and Toynbee Hall are both examples of how the Barnetts sought to bring beauty to the people.⁴ However, it was in their home that the Barnetts first illustrated their religious beliefs through material culture. If we turn from the drawing room to the study we see how Samuel Barnett articulated and expressed his religiosity. It was here that visitors found his motto 'Fear not to sow because of the birds' inscribed over the fireplace. Sadly no photographs or detailed records exist to tell us about the decorative design of the motto. Was it painted on to the wall or carved into the fireplace? Who designed it and what did it look like? It is perhaps not surprising that Barnett should have chosen to adapt a biblical reference to adorn his study wall. As an Anglican clergyman, his study was not only an important workspace, but also a space for him to express his own personal religious beliefs. According to John Tosh 'The 'study'...was not so much sited *within* the house, as carved from the home. Reserved for the husband's exclusive use and often out of bounds to the rest of the family, it conformed to the principles of separate spheres by removing his work from the domestic atmosphere.'⁵ It was here that Barnett buried himself in his work by writing his Sunday sermons, wrote letters to friends and conducted his weekly chats with Toynbee Hall settlers. His motto became a personal declaration, a prefix to his life that

² Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Processions* (Yale; Yale University Press, 2009).

³ The notion of 'missionary aestheticism' is discussed in Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (London: Palgrave, 2006), pp.1-4. The phrase 'pictures, pianos and parties' comes from Henrietta Barnett, 'The Hopes of Hosts' in Samuel and Henrietta Barnett (eds.), *Practicable Socialism: New Series* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), p.70.

⁴ See Lucinda Matthews-Jones, Lessons in Seeing: Art, Religion and Class in the East End of London, 1881-1898', *Journal of Victorian Culture* (2011) 16, pp.385-403.

⁵ John Tosh, *A man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* London: Yale University Press, 1999), p.60.

would later be used by Henrietta Barnett on the title page of his biography, *Canon Barnett: His Life, Work and Friends* (1918) [Figure three].

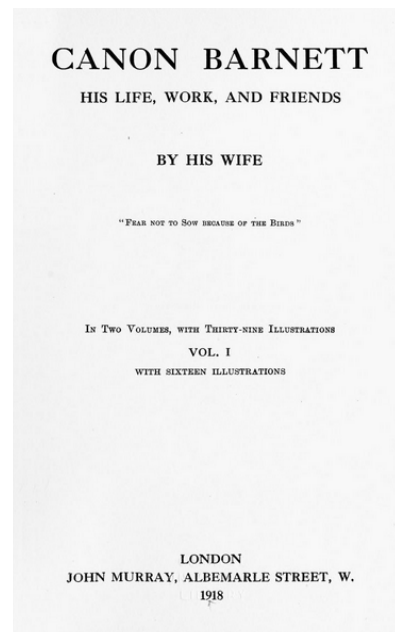


Figure three: Frontpiece of Henrietta Barnett, *Canon Barnett: His Life, Work and Friends* (London; 1918), volume one.

Why then did Barnett have the phrase ‘Fear not to sow because of the birds’ decorated on to his fireplace? The phrase was adapted by Barnett from the Parable of the sower in Matthew 13:18-21.⁶ The figure of the sower was in the nineteenth century understood to be representative of an evangelising preacher who was attempting to spread the Gospel to a hostile/ indifferent group.⁷ For Barnett, this hostile group would have been his parishioners, who both Henrietta and Samuel liked to imagine as coming from the criminal and outcast classes. The image of the birds was symbolic of an evil one who snatches away what has been shown in the hearts of the people. In Barnett’s case it is likely that the birds referred not only to Satan and sin but also to a modernity that had made people unable to care about or feel religion. Barnett’s faith was not only articulated in his parish church but also reaffirmed in his study. By choosing to personalise his fireplace with this motto he was, firstly, anchoring his faith and, secondly, providing emotional support for his clerical and philanthropic work. For Barnett, then, the motto was not simply a decorative expression of faith. It provided him with the emotional support needed at those times when he struggled to get support for his plans and schemes.

⁶ It should be noted that I have not been able to find this phrase used by anyone else. In order to locate this phrase I have searched Google as Paul O’Leary did in his article ‘Google the Victorians’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10:1 (2005), pp.72-86. OA copy available here: <http://victorianresearch.org/googling.pdf>

⁷ See Mark L. Bailey ‘The Parable of the Sower and Soils’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998), pp.172-88.

This was further heightened by the positioning of the motto. The fireplace and hearth had deep emotional resonances in the nineteenth century. John Ruskin, for instance, contended that the Victorian home was 'a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods'.⁸ In Barnett's study, the sacredness of home and the fireplace were reinforced by this religiously inspired scripture. At the same time the fireplace was an intimate space. As Rohan McWilliams has argued 'the mantelpiece was the place for the celebration of beauty and a repository of memory: vases, mementos of loved ones and rites of passage. We need to take seriously the mental and emotional world of the mantelpiece – a space for memory and pleasure.'⁹ It was also a space for people to articulate and fashion a sense of self. While we will never know how the furniture was arranged or how bodies moved about in Barnett's study we can surmise that it was a focal point for Barnett; a place to look at and contemplate. The motto would have propped him up when he was worried, distressed or concerned, or reminded him of God's words and work.

Rather than simply understand Barnett's study to be a closed, personal space, I would like to suggest that it was also an intimate revelatory space.¹⁰ Every week Barnett, as head of Toynbee Hall, would meet with Toynbee Hall settlers 'for half an hour's "talk"...in which ideals were conceived and schemes born.' As J. A. Spender, Toynbee Hall settler and journalist, noted in an article for *The Westminster Gazette* these talks were 'often mystical and sometimes nebulous; he believed that the need was to "spiritualise life" and "spiritualise things"'. It would be during these talks that Spender's eyes 'strayed to the legend which was written over the fireplace- 'Fear not to sow because of the birds'!' For Spender the catchphrase was a material depiction of Barnett. The phrase both explained and described Barnett. 'I can see it [the motto] now', wrote Spender, '...and Barnett in his characteristic attitude, leaning forward and clasping his knee. He was the valiant sower, and scattered his seed with a fine sweep over a wide stretch of country.'¹¹ With such a strong impression, it is not surprising that with Spender as one of the tablet's advisors, the sitting Barnett should have become a sower in Westminster Abbey for the rest of the world to see.

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⁸ John Ruskin, *Sesames and Lilies* first published 1864. A digital copy can be here <http://ruskin.classicauthors.net/SesameAndLilies/SesameAndLilies5.html>

⁹ Rohan McWilliams, 'The Theatricality of the Staffordshire Figurine', *Journal of Victorian Culture* (2005) 10, p.109.

¹⁰ See Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) for a discussion of intimacy in the middle-class home.

¹¹ J. A. Spender quoted in Henrietta Barnett, *Canon Barnett: His Life, Work and Friends* (London; 1921), p.316.