

Inclusivity in *A Glass of Blessings*

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Paper presented at the 2022 Virtual North American Conference of the Barbara Pym Society

To ease into my talk on inclusivity in *A Glass of Blessings*, I first want to draw your attention to familiar passages from the book. The first is when Wilmet describes her entrance to the church function where Father Ransome is being introduced. Wilmet stresses the categories into which people can be placed. Or, one might say, she takes note of how people sort themselves:

I noticed that the lay people had arranged themselves in little groups, each clearly distinguishable from the others. As a kind of centrepiece there was old Mrs Beamish, large and black, at the same time brooding and quietly triumphant, presumably because Father Ransome was to live under her roof. She was surrounded by various elderly ladies in yellowish-brown fur coats, one of whom I recognized as Miss Prideaux. ... Near this group I saw Mrs Greenhill, the clergy's late housekeeper, in close conversation with her friend and crony Mrs Spooner the little verger in her familiar peacock blue hat which had a large paste replica of the bird pinned to the front of it. ... I also noticed two well-dressed middle-aged women with a young girl ... All three were chinless, with large aristocratic noses. Near them stood a thin woman with purple hair and a surprised expression, as if she had not expected that it would turn out to be quite that colour. ... She was rather surprisingly in conversation with a group of nuns from the convent in the parish. ... There seemed to be a kind of segregation of the sexes, though various young girls and boys moved about freely between all groups. The largest male group was dominated by Mr Coleman, the good-looking fair-haired master of ceremonies, with his cronies, some of whom I recognized as fellow servers ... The two churchwardens and the secretary and treasurer of the parochial church council were together in a corner, looking rather important. In the middle of the room stood the three clergy. Father Thames and Father Bode were evidently leading Father Ransome round and introducing him to the various groups of people.

Wilmet's surprise at seeing the purple-haired woman talking with nuns suggests that perhaps these groups are not as settled as she imagines them to be. Indeed, in a slightly earlier passage she suggests that groups need not be mutually exclusive:

It occurred to me that one could perhaps classify different groups or circles of people according to drink. I myself seemed to belong to two clearly defined circles – the Martini drinkers and the tea drinkers though I was only just beginning to be initiated into the latter.

Thus Pym sets out, very early on, her interest in the breaking down of seemingly exclusive groups. Wilmet's journey to join the circle of tea drinkers will involve her in the process of erasing such clear distinctions. She comes to see the Anglican Church as a place where all can be included and that she might even participate in this increased inclusivity.

For those of us familiar with Pym, her close connection to the Anglican Church in both her fiction and her life is very much a given. Her interest in the Church began early. As her journals reveal, while at Oxford, Pym regularly attended service at St. Mary's, even noting down her reactions to the sermons she heard and looked to for guidance.¹ During wartime, while a member of the WRNS, she persisted in finding congenial church services to attend. Jane Williams, author of a recent essay on Pym, concludes that "Pym's novels display the Anglican parish understanding of ... the importance of a place or community where people of all kinds are accepted as they are and can be a gift to each other in all their imperfections."² But my emphasis today will be on Pym's interest in how the Church could participate in changes that result in increased inclusivity. As a settled church-goer, Pym herself participated in the changing demographic of the Anglican Church. In the 1960s, St. Laurence's, where she was a member, underwent an infusion of congregants from Nigeria, and Pym served as "godmother" to one of the young women, seeing her through the process of baptism.³ When membership declined precipitously and the church closed in 1971, she wrote to Philip Larkin that "*There's* something I should like to write about."⁴ After retirement to Finstock, Pym, an active member of Holy Trinity Church, participated as well in the upkeep of nearby St. Peter's in Wilcote, where she occasionally did some "tidying up of the graves" or could be found "grubbing away at ... the left-hand side of the porch."⁵ In the last years of her life, Pym habitually visited Oxfordshire churches. She was fascinated by the additions and restorations made over the centuries – those physical signs

of historical processes and an obvious analogue to the Church's change over time.⁶ Focusing on Pym's hard-won attitude towards change in the church, David Cockerell reminds us that "Religion which is creative and alive is always about change, and the dangers of idealising ideas and practices from the past, particularly a supposed 'golden age', were certainly already present in Biblical times."⁷ Thus, in Pym's later novels, Cockerell finds her recognition that the challenge posed to the church by a changed world must be met: "If the values and ideals of the Christian church are to survive, they now have to do so in a world which is far more challenging, and perhaps more painful, than that earlier comfort and security of lunchtime Masses."⁸

A Glass of Blessings, titled after the poem by seventeenth-century Anglican priest George Herbert, obviously rests on firm Anglican ground. Nevertheless, in it Pym makes an assertion, delivered in her characteristically quiet way, that the church should welcome, participate in, and even instigate social change. Paradoxically then, the firm ground must necessarily shift. In the course of the novel, Pym alludes to two seemingly very different contemporary controversies and suggests that the church should respond, in both instances, by fostering increased inclusion. Most explicitly, at a time when homosexuality was being very publicly identified as a moral threat to society, Wilmet posits in so many words the acceptance of male homosexuals into the church. Less explicitly, by means of the novel's events, Pym answers "yes" to a question being debated by the Anglican Church: should the Church become "in communion" with the Church of South India? In her portrayal of these two analogous examples of inclusion – social and ecclesiastical – the principle of spiritual dynamism, of the kind Cockerell alludes to, can be seen at work.

To supplement the logic of this intertwined social and ecclesiastical dynamism, Pym provides us with a narrator whose character develops analogously. Wilmet's actions, although purposefully taken, lead her, in an unforeseen way, to a more inclusive perspective and a broadened sense of her own identity. To arrive at this altered view, Wilmet travels a path representative of one that not only the Anglican Church but that Britain more generally might follow – a path that, by crossing seemingly impermeable but false boundaries that separate groups of people, leads towards an understanding that membership in such groups needs not be exclusive. Thus Pym portrays, in varying degrees of detail, three analogous examples of movement towards increased inclusion, all bearing out lines from a favorite hymn: "God moves in a mysterious way, / His wonders to perform."⁹

With Wilmet's discovery that Piers Longridge has a male domestic partner, Pym brings into her fiction an interest in homosexual men and couples that had personal resonance, both long-standing and current. Her association with gay men began as far back as the early 1930s, during her time as an Oxford student, in the person of Robert Liddell, her friend and unflagging supporter throughout her life. The male partnerships that Pym brought directly from her life into the pages of *A Glass of Blessings* caught her interest while she lived in the London suburb of Barnes. From the window, Pym watched the comings and goings of young men and their various friends who lived in a nearby flat, those whom she nicknamed "Little Clive," "Squirrel," and "Blondie" among them.¹⁰ For *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym turned one of these men into the minor character Bill Coleman, master of ceremonies at Wilmet's church, and another became the physical and sartorial model for Piers's male companion, Keith, who is referred to as "Squirrel" in Pym's draft material.¹¹ Another male partnership that came to intrigue Pym during the year just previous to writing *A Glass of Blessings* was that of author Denton Welch (1915-1948) and his companion Eric Oliver. Pym placed Welch's journals and novels on a list of "Most enjoyed books of 1954," and recorded the sixth anniversary of his death on December 6th of that year.¹² "She was intrigued," Hazel Holt explains, "by his moody, difficult personality, and fascinated (as she always had been by such relationships) by his life with Eric Oliver."¹³ Perhaps Welch influenced Pym's creation of the mercurial and occasionally harsh Piers, who, like Welch, chose to live with a partner from a lower social rank.

The years 1955-58, during which Pym wrote and Cape published *A Glass of Blessings*, were not at all propitious for same-sex relationships. Just previous, British authorities were especially hostile to male homosexuality.¹⁴ An anti-homosexual diatribe appeared in the *Sunday Express* (1953), declaring that this "widespread disease" has "penetrated every phase of life," including "politics, literature, the stage, the Church, and the youth movements." The columnist called for rousing the "social conscience of the nation" to ostracize these "social lepers."¹⁵ None other than Julian Amery, Pym's

friend from her younger days, now a Tory politician, pronounced the need for “a moral revival in England” that would combat any tolerance of homosexual practice.¹⁶ The position promulgated by the Church of England Moral Welfare Society was that homosexual acts were sinful but not necessarily punishable by the state as criminal, a stance that, by 1954, some Tory lawmakers were coming to hold.¹⁷ Following similar logic, the committee established in 1954 to look into the question recommended in 1957 that private homosexual activity between consenting adults be decriminalized; even so, the recommendation was not made the basis of law until 1967.¹⁸

The concurrence of these public events with Pym’s writing of *A Glass of Blessings*, together with her simultaneous reading of Denton Welch and the attention given to her young neighbors, makes it all the more likely that she was quietly making a political statement as to the direction British society should move.¹⁹ Upper middle-class Wilmet’s embracing of Piers and Keith, as a couple, is Pym’s nudge to her audience that Britain should loosen its strictures against homosexuality. Moreover, Pym points to the place of the church in leading the way to a more expansive social outlook. By the novel’s end, Wilmet has envisioned the Anglo-Catholic church as an institution that should welcome her new friends, and she goes so far as to wish that she “had the courage” to invite them to the Corpus Christi service. This desire results from Piers’s accusation, at the emotional height of the novel and its turning point, that Wilmet is incapable of loving everyone, particularly those outside her select circle. If Wilmet is taken to be a representative of British society generally, Piers’s comment about her inability to love has the broadly religious meaning of universal love or charity towards all, of whatever class or sexual orientation. When Wilmet imagines welcoming both Piers and Keith as part of the Anglo-Catholic Church, Pym suggests that the Church should rightly extend its umbrella to include all humanity, according to the principle of charitable love.

Pym’s reference to the contemporary theological controversy over the proper relation between the Anglican Church and the Church of South India might easily be overlooked; she doesn’t overtly set out the terms of the issue. Yet again, Pym quietly enters a debate that had personal resonance for her. In 1955, while the drafting of *A Glass of Blessings* was underway, the precise nature of the relation of the Anglican Church to the Church of South India was a matter of controversy in which Pym was very much engaged. She records in her notebook that she came close to quarrelling with her friend, Robert Smith, over this very debate.²⁰ The Church of South India had been formed in 1947 by an alliance of Anglican and other Protestant churches (Congregationalist, Methodist, and Presbyterian) in South India. The issue of inclusion lay at the heart of the debate. Would the Anglican Church consider itself “in communication” with the Church of South India (and so, given the makeup of the CSI, accept communication with other Protestant churches)? To put it more broadly, the Anglican Church was considering a move towards increased inclusivity by joining with other Protestant denominations. Rev. C. S. Milford, entering into the dispute in 1954, took the affirmative side of the question. He reminds his readers that the very concept of alteration, as opposed to a continued rigid conformity to a set dogma, is a long-standing Christian tradition – one that is rooted in an understanding of the Holy Spirit as a dynamic rather than static force. Milford argued for recognition of the “dynamic movement” at work in South India, and he concluded with the warning that opposition to this movement would “fetter the Holy Spirit at our peril.”²¹ He also framed the actions of the Church of South India as a show of “charity towards their nonepiscopal parents” and urged a response in kind – a response “to the work of the Spirit as we have seen it in them.”²² His argument very explicitly applauds this show of charity that he sees in the inclusionary effort made by the Church of South India: “Through the readiness of the Anglicans in South India to recognize the orders of the other uniting Churches, half a million people have already been brought within an episcopal Church who were previously outside.”²³ Pym addresses this controversy in her portrayal of the clerical figure of Marius Ransome when he comes momentarily under the influence his colleague, Edwin Sainsbury, who opposes the movement towards communion. Although Sainsbury never makes an appearance in the narrative, we are told he resigns his position “because he considered that the attitude of the Anglican Church towards the Church of South India no longer entitled it to be regarded as a part of the Catholic Church”. As Joy Grant explains, “Father Sainsbury had joined the exodus of 1955 in protest against the Anglican attitude to the Church of South India, some of whose clergy were not episcopally ordained.”²⁴ Ransome, however, ultimately rejects his colleague’s view. By concluding the novel with Ransome’s induction as vicar

of an Anglo-Catholic church, Pym implicitly approves the inclusionary effort and the spiritual dynamism represented by the Anglican Church's decision to accept an "in-communion" relationship with the Church of South India.

Reverend Milford argues that the movement of the Holy Spirit, while ongoing, cannot be known immediately but will unfold over time. This movement is embodied in Wilmet, who undergoes a dynamic and mysterious process of change at the individual level. Wilmet's sense of her own identity expands, while she simultaneously comes to embrace the inclusivity of the Church in principle if not in direct action quite yet. As Wilmet expands her view of herself, she comes to represent the view of the Anglican Church as a force for social unification and inclusive acceptance. So although Pym has Wilmet set for herself a purposeful agenda for her life, following it will have quite unforeseen consequences. On the day of her thirty-third birthday, Wilmet very consciously resolves to undertake a program of action. After a very ritualized birthday dinner, she decides that "My autumn plans to take more part in the life of St Luke's, to try to befriend Piers Longridge and perhaps even go to his classes, ought to keep me fully occupied." Wilmet's plan yokes together, incongruously as it turns out, the intriguing Piers and the Anglo-Catholic Church; the latter element – the Church – will be represented in the person of Mary Beamish, one of Pym's trademark "excellent" women who unselfishly serves others. The novel's trajectory traces the interwoven process of Wilmet's halting and vexed relationship with both characters, leading to a conclusion that, in an unexpected manner, broadens the narrow track of this cosseted woman.

Wilmet's first impulse in following her agenda is to recover the excitement of bygone days, and she deludes herself that in doing so she will be performing "good deeds." During reminiscences shared with Rowena, the nostalgic coloring of the women's remembered past casts their present life in a rather dull shade. We learn of their history as beautiful young women who met and found husbands when they joined the WRNS during the war, a time both women look back on with erotically tinged pleasure that Wilmet longs to recover. Rowena puts Wilmet's feeling into words: "Oh this weather ... It makes one so unsettled. One ought to be in *Venice* with a *lover!*" But Rowena, the voice of practicality, then renders a verdict Wilmet does not want to hear – that the staid quality of their lives is not going to change: "Neither of us has had a lover, or is ever likely to. The idea has got translated into something remote, even comfortable, now. Like morning coffee with a woman friend in a country town." Wilmet resists this restrictive conclusion: "I suddenly felt that I wanted to break out of the mould of respectability into which Rowena had cast me and say, "Speak for yourself!" Wilmet's effort to seek out a relation with Piers constitutes her somewhat desperate and ultimately wrong-headed attempt to deny what Rowena says and to regain some of that romantic excitement and disruptive sense of possibility she felt in her Naples days. Rowena's husband Harry flatters her, making it clear that he too would like to revive the erotic excitement of times now past. The pull to revive a past full of romantic possibility is too strong to resist; "there could be no harm," Wilmet tells herself, "in having lunch with Harry or walking with Piers in the park."

Wilmet falsely construes this quasi-romantic adventuring in religious terms, as the performance of good deeds. She disingenuously imagines herself as a kind of excellent woman performing useful tasks in a manner consistent with her attractiveness to men: "I could show Harry what a good wife Rowena was; and as for Piers, drifting and rootless, perhaps often drunk, it might be that my friendship could be beneficial to him." Although their long lunch together, complete with a romantic walk and late tea, hardly conforms to her plan to exert a curative force on Piers, she consoles herself with the idea that "Perhaps I had helped to make him a little happier by my company and that might be something." However often Wilmet assures herself that her attentions are doing Piers good, clearly their relationship is self-serving – important for her because their meetings revivify the emotions from those giddy days in Naples for which she longs.

Pym sets up the novel's turning point so as to reveal the false promise underlying Wilmet's pursuit of a relationship with Piers. After the fateful tea, during which Keith has made up an unexpected third, Piers gives his condescending approval to the distraught Wilmet's choice to take a taxi rather than a bus: "Dear Wilmet, so deliciously in character! Don't ever try to make yourself any different." Piers sees her as a woman who travels through life in a protected and privileged fashion, choosing not to acknowledge people outside her ken, and he insists, oddly, that she should remain so. In this post-tea conversation with Piers, Pym conflates the issues of sexuality and of class.²⁵ Wilmet's objection focuses not on the fact that Keith is a man, but that he is not of Piers's class, or of her own for that matter: "But Piers, why did you

choose him of all people? I shouldn't have thought you had anything in common." In choosing Keith, as Piers goes on to explain, he has expanded his world. He finds the notion of spending all his time with people like himself entirely unappealing; he had much rather "come home to some different remarks from the ones one's been hearing all day." As the discussion reveals, Wilmet's fundamental objection to Keith is that he is not a member of the group of people "one actually *knows*." Piers's admonishment gets to the heart of the issue: "but there *are* others in the world – in fact quite a few million people outside the narrow select little circle that makes up Wilmet's world." His harshly expressed estimation of Wilmet is couched in terms of charitable love, categorizing her as one of those people "less capable of loving their fellow human beings," with the faintly ameliorating qualification that "it isn't necessarily their fault."

Piers sees Wilmet as an affluent and conventional housewife privileged to live within a confined world, oblivious to those outside it. Growing out of this version of a narrow life, then, will require an alteration to the categories into which she herself places people. Unexpectedly, it is Wilmet's discovery of Keith, Piers's partner, that allows her to take more definite steps towards a broader point of view and sense of her own capabilities. Studying a picture of Keith modeling a sweater in a knitting magazine, Wilmet finds his beauty capable of inspiring devotion, a word that has application to her own life: "This thought led me to consider the religious and secular meanings of the word devotion, and how 'devout' did not mean the same as 'devoted'. I was not sure why this was but it seemed suitable that my life should have this confusion in it." Wilmet's discovery of Keith has led her to recognize the confusion that, in her efforts to revitalize herself, she has confused the categories of the romantic and the religious, substituted erotic for charitable love. But rather than sort out the confusion in meaning, she sets aside her thoughts of Piers and refocuses her attention on her new friend in the ecclesiastical realm: thinking about Mary Beamish, the dowdy young church worker and excellent woman who has requested help to buy a summer wardrobe, gives Wilmet a "comfortable feeling." In turning to Mary, she will have a chance to provide help to one who has asked for it and so exercise the practice of charitable love.

While Wilmet eagerly seeks out an attachment with Piers, she initially resists friendship with Mary Beamish, a person who is much more alien to her sense of herself. But it is this relationship that will prompt Wilmet to move forward into unfamiliar territory. Wilmet's quest to be useful at St. Luke's proves difficult because Mary represents for Wilmet the essence of the useful life so antithetical to her own: "the kind of person who always made me feel particularly useless – she was so very much immersed in good works, so *splendid*, everyone said." The pattern of helpfulness that this excellent woman provides is far from congenial to Wilmet, the elegant woman who cannot but see Mary as hopelessly dowdy and, although it is difficult to say which is worse in her eyes, rather too good to be true. Pym presents Mary as an embodiment of good deeds: she quite literally gives her blood to others. Although Wilmet admits that Mary's most recent donation to a blood drive "seemed to me in my nastiness the last straw," she proves surprisingly amendable to the excellent woman's encouragement to do the same. In this episode Pym shows Wilmet, with the help of Mary, stretching her boundaries a bit, finding herself among the unwonted company "of the burden-bearing type, middle-aged and tired-looking, the sort of people who would take on yet another load in addition to all the others they already bore." No one would mistake Wilmet for one of these burden-bearers, yet the progress of the novel works, in its halting way, to break down the categories into which both women are placed and place themselves.

Mary's story is the obverse of Wilmet's, and each woman wishes, in a very tentative way, to become more like the other. And yet Wilmet balks at the merging of her world with Mary's. The women travel from the blood bank (Mary's territory) to the fashionable women's clothing store, where helping Mary buy a new dress falls well within Wilmet's area of expertise. She unerringly steers the unfashionable woman towards the choice of a black dress – a daring new color for Mary yet also inarguably suitable for any clerical occasion – and even pushes her to buy a string of pink pearls to give her a glow that, she assures the doubtful Mary, "Surely all women want." But coming closer to Mary also prompts Wilmet to resist this crossing of boundaries and to draw a thick line separating herself from the excellent woman. When Mary confesses to a love of poetry and even quotes some lines, Wilmet draws back reflexively: "I could not bear to think that she might have read my own favourite poems, and my one idea now was to escape from her as quickly as I could." She cannot abide the idea that she and Mary might belong to the same world:

I looked at her dispassionately and saw almost with dislike her shining eager face, her friendship offered to me. What was I doing sitting here with somebody who was so very much not my kind of person? It was my own fault for getting involved with St Luke's, I told myself unreasonably.

After they part, Wilmet takes special care to assert what she sees as her very distinctive identity, making a frivolous purchase of truffles, even "thinking rather defiantly of Mary as I did so." She returns home relieved to be back in a comfortable position: to entertain a handsome man, Marius Ransome, with a glass of high-quality sherry and to hear him characterize Mary Beamish as "a fine person." Wilmet would not like to hear herself so characterized, but she need not worry because "it was inconceivable that anyone should describe me in this way."

The narrative eventually culminates in a reversal of field, leading Wilmet away from her fancied relationship with Piers and breaking down the barriers between herself and Mary. At the same time that Wilmet's understanding of her relation to Piers shifts in a humiliating and self-revealing way, her relation with Mary strengthens. She had imagined, in a deluded manner, that she could be of help to Piers; now she finds herself sincerely wanting to be helpful to Mary. Upon hearing of old Mrs. Beamish's turn for the worse, Wilmet is annoyed that Marius Ransome dismisses her desire to help in any way other than to offer sympathy: "I felt rather chilled, for I had not meant anything so indefinite as that. I suppose I had imagined myself busy in a practical way – cooking meals or running errands, even being what people call a tower of strength." When news of the death comes, Wilmet responds immediately: "Do you think we should go to her? Would there be anything one could do?" Again this impulse is thwarted, and Wilmet can only send flowers and write a note. But these frustrations bring about her resolve "to be as helpful as I could to her in the future."

The day of the funeral, during which Wilmet acts on her resolution, occasions a turning point in the women's relationship. Wilmet helps Mary serve tea afterwards, stays until all the visitors have left, and listens as Mary reveals her plan to test her religious vocation by living with the nuns at St. Hildelith's. This act of intimacy unites the women, but at the same time, the conversation leads Wilmet to keep Mary in a category far different from herself: "for although I had learned to accept the idea of the religious life for a few people it seemed terrible to contemplate when applied to oneself or anybody one knew at all well." Wilmet's formulation of people one does or doesn't know at all well recalls her view of Keith as belonging quite outside her circle of acquaintances. Pym brings the women close again with Wilmet's visit to Mary at the convent. When Mary inquires after a change in Wilmet's demeanor, Wilmet discloses, "sometimes you discover that you aren't as nice as you thought you were – that you're in fact rather a horrid person, and that's humiliating somehow." But Mary assures her, "I suppose a person would be even nicer if they could make a discovery like that and admit the truth of it." Unlike Piers, Mary implicitly encourages Wilmet to view herself as able to change for the better.

Unexpectedly as well, it is through her connection with Mary rather than with Piers that Wilmet finds liveliness restored to her – liveliness of a kind that does not involve backtracking to her youthful days but going forward in a way that extends her sense of herself. Pym portrays this vividly at the Corpus Christi evening service. For Wilmet the church has a special beauty, which she has played a part in creating:

The church was looking very beautiful, and Mary and I had helped with the decorating of it in the morning. Her presence had made it easy for me to enter the charmed circle of decorators, and I had even been allowed to help to lay down the carpet of leaves and flowers which covered the nave and looked almost as striking as the altar with its many candles embowered in green leaves, lilies and carnations.

Owing to her friendship with Mary, Wilmet is now thoroughly integrated into the following tea service, no longer moving self-consciously from one group to another, as she had very early in the novel, but helping to serve, and exchanging knowing bits of conversation and asides with a full cast of characters, including Mary, Mr. Bason, and Mr. Coleman. In contradiction to Piers's former assessment of her as living a very narrow existence, here at the church Wilmet has a growing sense of her place amidst different sorts of people:

It was both exciting and frightening to think how many different worlds I knew--or perhaps 'had knowledge of' would be a more accurate way of putting it. I could not say that I really knew the worlds of Piers and Keith, or even of Mr Coleman and his Husky if it came to that. It seemed as if the Church should

be the place where all worlds could meet, and looking around me I saw that in a sense this was so. If people remained outside it was our--even my--duty to try to bring them in.

In the midst of it all, she thinks, "If only I had had the courage to ask Piers, and perhaps even Keith, to come this evening.... And what a beautiful acolyte Keith would make! And yet his world was probably too far removed from that of the church to make it feasible."

In this regard, Keith seems to be rather a lost cause, as Wilmet finds out when she invites him to take tea at her house. He lets her know in no uncertain terms that he never goes to church: "You see, Wilmet, I don't believe in God." But their conversation also makes clear that Keith can easily be incorporated into Wilmet's world as now constituted. After all, Wilmet has lived closely with her mother-in-law, Sybil, who openly professes herself an atheist, but who also does good work for charitable causes. Listening to Keith go on about his own history, Wilmet realizes, "seemed to bring Piers's world nearer to my own, where people seldom looked like Keith but were often as boring." In view of these collapsing categories, the separate worlds of which Wilmet now has knowledge are perhaps, she is able to realize, not so very different. The matching scene to the gathering at the Corpus Christi service, where different worlds meet, is set in the coffee bar, the Cenerentola, where Keith works and where Rodney and Wilmet drop in at his invitation. Surprisingly, and to emphasize the uncertain nature of categories by which groups are defined, Wilmet's friend from St. Luke's, Mr. Bason, makes an appearance at the coffee bar, where he is known by Keith as a regular, who "keeps house for a lot of clergymen." This information leads Wilmet to reflect on the permeability of so-called distinct "worlds": "how odd it was that all the time I had been wondering about Piers's domestic life such an unlikely person as Mr Bason could probably have told me all about it."

In a striking use of analogies, Pym collapses the distinction between the religious and secular realms, and also casts a very wide historical net, harking back to religion's ancient roots and suggesting a continuum, a dynamic movement, connecting those earliest days to the present. When, at the coffee shop, Mr. Bason makes ready to report gossip from the clergy house, Wilmet thinks of the Cenerentola in religious terms: with "its hissing coffee machine tended by two handsome young men who seemed as devout as any acolytes, it would not be inappropriate to speak of church and clergy house matters" (237). Wilmet next makes an imaginative connection between Keith's coffee bar and the garden of the retreat house where Wilmet had visited Mary -- two very different-seeming settings:

It was, one might say, a far cry from the garden of the retreat house ... to the Cenerentola coffee bar, where Piers's friend Keith worked in the evenings. And yet, in a way, it was not such a very far cry. For the Cenerentola, with its dim lighting and luxuriant greenery, reminded me of that part of the garden where the compost heap stood in the mysterious green twilight under the apple trees, and where the bees had swarmed.

Catching a glimpse of Keith at his work, she sees "his dark eyes peering, as in my imagination, through a screen of leaves." Here Wilmet is referring to the vision she had of Keith's face in the back garden of the religious retreat house, a secluded and fecund place that conjures up images of fertility:

I imagined all this richness decaying in the earth and new life springing out of it. ... There seemed to be a pagan air about this part of the garden, as if Pan -- I imagined him with Keith's face -- might at any moment come peering through the leaves.

Placing Wilmet at the outer reaches of the retreat house, at the very foot of its garden, Pym widens the space of the Anglo-Catholic institution to include its most primitive and fundamental roots in pagan fertility rites, with the Greek god Pan imagined as Keith. The beautiful young man, who does not attend church or believe in God, becomes, in Wilmet's vision, the face of the most inclusive of all divine representations, an embodiment of the vital force of nature.

In the same way, the beehives in the garden of the retreat house prompt in Wilmet reflections that bring together religious practices both ancient and current: "I remembered the old saying about telling things to bees. It seemed that they might be regarded as a kind of primitive confessional." At the chapter's end, Wilmet reiterates this connection, seeing the natural world as the source of current religious understandings. After the bees swarm, she sees a priest taking notes and is pleased "to think that here in this pagan part of the garden he might have found an idea for a sermon." In this thematically

fitting image, the swarming bees, which move to a new location with their queen, represent an image of expansive change. The colony enlarges itself in this manner, leaving part behind to remain on the original site. The image, drawn from the natural world, is clearly applicable to the relation of the Anglican Church and the Church of South India, and to the view that the church should expand in an increasingly inclusive way, as Wilmet suggests.

In the narrative conclusion too, the relocation of Rodney and Wilmet, when they move from Sybil's house to find one of their own, represents a similar continuous movement. When Sybil and Professor Root surprise the couple by announcing their engagement, with the additional news that Rodney and Wilmet must move out of the house they have been sharing with Sybil, they find themselves in the role of a newly married couple, searching together for a place to live. In this way, Wilmet recaptures within her present married life the excitement of her youthful days, with the addition of her new-found friend Keith, of whom she has "really grown quite fond," as a constant companion in choosing the furniture for her renewed life and as one of the blessings that fills her glass.

Emily Stockard has presented papers at both the North American and Oxford conferences of the Barbara Pym Society. She has had the good fortune to work in the Pym archives at the Bodleian, and results of this research appear in her book The Making of Barbara Pym: Oxford, the War Years, and Post-war Austerity (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

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Endnotes

- ¹ Catalogue of the papers of Barbara Mary Crampton Pym (1913-1980), Bodleian Library, Oxford. See scattered entries in MSS Pym 101 and 102.
- ² Jane Williams, 122.
- ³ Pym, *Private Eye*, 221. Early versions of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the novel rejected by Cape, include characters from West India who attend the parish church. See MSS Pym 19 and 21.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.
- ⁵ MS Pym 76, 5v, 7r. (“v” indicates the reverse side of the page; “r” indicates the right side of the page)
- ⁶ See scattered entries in MSS Pym 70, 71, 74, 75, 76, 80, 81.
- ⁷ Cockerell, 3.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁹ See *So Very Secret in Civil to Strangers and Other Writings*, ed. Hazel Holt (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), 322; *Crampton Hodnet* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985), 214; *Some Tame Gazelle* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), 72, 239.
- ¹⁰ Beginning in her notebook/diary that covered the months September 1955-April 1956, Pym reserved a section to record their movements on foot and by car (MS Pym 47, 16r and following). After the publication of *A Glass of Blessings*, the Pym sisters became friends with two men connected to this household group, and they began attending the church where one of the men was the organist. See *A Lot to Ask* for Holt’s explanation of Pym’s developing relationship with these neighbors and their incorporation into her fiction (177-78).
- ¹¹ MS Pym 17, 34v, 45v.
- ¹² MS Pym 45, 23r, 23v.
- ¹³ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 173.
- ¹⁴ David Kynaston (332) identifies the years 1953-1954 as those that “mark a peak of prosecutions” for homosexual activity, led by the Home Secretary and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, among others in key positions.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 333.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 334.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 373, 370.
- ¹⁸ The Sexual Offenses Act 1967 put into law the 1957 recommendation of the Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offenses and Prostitution (referred to as the Wolfenden report after chairman Sir John Wolfenden).
- ¹⁹ So subtle, apparently, was Pym’s dealing with the homosexual theme that only one of her reviewers, Peter Green of the *Daily Telegraph*, noticed (or saw fit to mention) that Piers is “an obvious homosexual” (Cocking, 143).
- ²⁰ Pym, *Private Eye*, 195.
- ²¹ Rev. C. S. Milford, 204.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *No Soft Incense*, 33.
- ²⁵ Draft material suggests that Pym considered emphasizing Piers’s sexuality. Piers says more pointedly to Wilmet, “You thought I had no love in my life, did you, and that you would supply it. I suppose that was the idea?” (MS Pym 17, 45v).