The Secularisation of Sin in the Nineteenth Century

by DOMINIC ERDOZAIN
King’s College, London
E-mail: dominic.erdozain@kcl.ac.uk

This article argues that the post-secularisation historiography of the past twenty years has erred in neglecting theological categories of analysis. Committed to challenging the explanatory power of the secularisation thesis, it has established a new paradigm of ‘survival’ and ‘redefinition’, interpreting the sub-Christian morality of the twentieth century as a robust continuation of the pervasive Christianity of the nineteenth. A more theological approach, however, demonstrates that much of the ‘success’ of Victorian religion was achieved at the cost of the soteriology that had fired the religious boom. Tracing a shift from an ‘internal’ concept of sin to an ‘external’ notion of vice, it is argued that Evangelicalism created its own mechanism of secularisation, distilled in the shift from Evangelicalism to temperance agitation.

Christianity lives or dies by its doctrine of sin. Temper it, reconceive it or merely soften its features, and you jeopardise the entire Christian faith. Sin is what made Christianity necessary. So argued H. P. Liddon in Some elements of religion, delivered in 1870 at a time of intense theological uncertainty. Liddon, an Anglo-Catholic preacher of unrivalled eloquence, did not dwell on the subject with the intensity of someone like Charles Spurgeon, but he knew as well as any Evangelical that Christianity was nothing if not a divine solution to a problem beyond human recourse. If sin were minimised into something that did not require supernatural treatment, the Christian ‘cure’ would be redundant and the Christian religion would be living on borrowed time. The issue, for Liddon, was not whether people believed as such, but whether they came to depend on God. Creedal assent and vital trust were very different things, and vital trust required a deep apprehension of sin. ‘In the spiritual world, too’, Liddon contended, ‘there is such a thing as supply and demand; and if a religion

I am grateful to Professor Arthur Burns for encouraging comments on some of the material presented here, and to the anonymous reviewer for this Journal for some very constructive criticism.
pre-supposes wants which do not exist, and brings remedies for diseases of which nobody is conscious, it has already signed its death-warrant. Yet the process had already begun. The tendency to see sin as but ‘the action of our sensuous nature’, or mere ‘weakness’ and ‘failure’, rather than the soul’s positive and permanent desire to rid itself of God, was the heart of the problem. Such faint estimates of sin, Liddon believed, ‘put us all on very good terms with ourselves’, turning Christianity into a dispensary of fixes and antidotes, and obscuring its central message. No religion could survive on such terms:

I repeat the statement with which I began, that if a religion is to be a real life-controlling power, it must practically recognise the fact of sin. For, since sin provokes God’s necessary displeasure on the one hand, and destroys man’s power and even his wish to seek God on the other, its direct effect is to break up that bond between God and man in which religion essentially consists. Religion, therefore, must deal with sin, not as if it were making a supererogatory exertion, but as a condition of its own existence.

He finished with a volley aimed at the naivety of ‘undogmatic religion’: ‘Its endeavours to deal with the great heart-sores of humanity remind us of some great physician who, at the bedside of a patient, writhing in protracted agony, should airily discuss his own last excursion in the Alps, or the last debate in Parliament, or at best the most recent resolution arrived at by the Metropolitan Board of Health.’ ‘Christianity’, he challenged, ‘is broadly at issue with not a few of the religious proposals which aspire to take its place in the present day.’

Liddon was perhaps thinking of the fresh-air romanticism of the muscular Christians, or some of the more utopian aspirations of Christian socialism – clear fruits of theological liberalisation. But there was a broader and, perhaps more devastating example of the recasting and transvaluation of sin: Evangelicalism. Evangelicals shared many of Liddon’s anxieties over doctrine. William Robertson Nicoll, editor of the *British Weekly*, speculated in 1887 that ‘Broad Churchism, ignoring the Atonement, will go down before High Churchism. People will follow the preachers – Salvation Army or High Church – who preach redemption.’ Four years later he lambasted the conventional Evangelical prejudice that the ‘High Church’ was ‘popular for satisfying a low craving for sensuous worship’. No, he asserted, it was popular ‘for insisting on the great elementary facts of Christianity’. Even as Evangelicals attacked the ‘popery’ of confessional and surplice they fought with the bitterness of suppressed kinship. At the very least it can be said that Evangelicals and ‘ritualists’ fought because doctrine mattered to them. Each could see that to remove the sharper points of the system was to risk the

3 Ibid. 5 Feb. 1891, 238.
whole edifice of faith. Liberalism was increasingly horizontal in orientation, speaking much of ‘brotherhood’ with both God and mankind; Evangelicals and Catholics maintained the contrasting, if correlative, conviction that fatherhood – the vertical relation – had to come first. Sever the cords of supernatural rescue, and all was lost.

Yet, even as they denounced the period’s ‘dissolvent’ literature, Evangelicals presided over an equally radical dissolution of their core theology, the process occurring not at the explicit level of doctrine but at the implicit level of practical, operational ministry. Changing conceptions of sin were the key. Liddon was right to perceive that Christian survival would not hinge on the flat issue of belief but on an ability to inspire ‘life-controlling’ commitment. He anticipated whole schools of post-secularisation scholarship with the observation that ‘A nation of pure Atheists is yet to be discovered.’

Yet the condition he feared – a generalised, God-eschewing complacency – did not come about because handfuls of theologians wantonly rewrote the terms of the Christian encounter. It arguably emerged because thousands of technically orthodox Christians allowed their theology to be rewritten by their work. When sin was unambiguously identified with ‘vice’, salvation was similarly reconceived as a set of tangible ‘virtues’ – virtues that stood increasingly independent of divine reference. By the end of the nineteenth century, the message was that if you could hold firm against the temptations of the flesh, you were not far from the Kingdom. As P. T. Forsyth argued, ‘redemption’ gave way to ‘sympathy’, and a religion of salvation became a religion of safety.

Historians have marvelled at the creativity of the late Victorian Churches but they have rarely interpreted it in the light of the Churches’ professed goals. ‘Work’ and activism have been regarded uncritically as evidence of the Churches’ ‘relevance’, while, in the least convincing aspect of the historiography, theological dissent has been dismissed as ‘clerical worry’. There is little room for P. T. Forsyth’s statement of 1905 that, ‘to say that the Church … is primarily a working society is to secularise it’. In ‘many cases’, Forsyth feared, ‘the agencies have become of more interest than the Communion. The work may represent an itch of activity rather than Christian energy. And it burns itself out’.

In the face of a particular kind of reductionism, arrogant enough to declare religious life ‘recessive’ even as it was palpably expansive, historical revisionism has been powerful and effective. Rescuing nineteenth-century Christians from the odium of ‘social control’, the ‘chiliasm of despair’ and...
(in Thompson’s case) much worse, self-styled ‘optimists’ such as Callum Brown transformed understanding of Christianity and modernity. Local history has never been respectful of grand narratives, and it was a series of luminous case studies that slowly defused the smart bomb of secularisation theory. Following Jeffrey Cox’s celebrated account of Lambeth between 1880 and 1930, studies on Croydon, Oldham and Saddleworth, West Yorkshire and Southwark punctured and, ultimately, disabled the nomothetic hubris of ‘the secularisation thesis’. Much of the material is compelling. Victorian religion can be studied without that feeling that it is good and necessary to know about things that have been lost forever; Victorian history is not a quaint anteroom to a secular present. Yet the cost of the revolution is a moralised historiography in which theology is dismissed as ‘part of the problem’ and even moderate notions of secularisation are tabooed as ‘teleology’. Demonising the older literature as ‘pessimism’, revisionism has erected a new paradigm of survival, redefinition and, often, reinvention. Jeffrey Cox’s notion of ‘diffusive Christianity’ has given way to Callum Brown’s more nebulous concept of ‘discursive Christianity’, carrying the religious boom far into the age of Kennedy and Khrushchev. Just when it seems that the post-secularisation narrative has reached its limit, Brown is criticised, not for improbably stretching the Evangelical revival beyond its golden age of mobilisation and ‘conversionism’, but for exaggerating the ruptures of the sixties. ‘Discursive Christianity’, the authors of Redefining Christian Britain (2006) insist, is a concept that ‘can as usefully be applied to the 40 years after his arbitrary cut-off point of 1963’ as before. Among the evidence is the observation that ‘when the British were asked in the 2001 census “what is your religion?”, over 70 per cent identified themselves as Christians’. Optimism indeed.

A field of scholarship premised on the authenticity of ‘nuance’, the dissidence of particularity, has drifted into a new paradigm of perpetual affirmation. ‘Christian Britain’ is conjured out of language and symbolism. The target is secularisation theory; the real casualty is any coherent notion of Christianity as a religion and a way of life. Sarah Williams dispenses with ‘supernatural’ criteria of religiosity and declares the secularisation question

---

9 Brown, ‘Did urbanization secularize Britain?’, 4.
15 Ibid. 187.
17 Ibid. 1.
closed; Simon Green condemns theological accounts of religious change as an ‘all too obvious’ liberation ‘from the necessity to be socially relevant’, poring over the mechanics of the ‘associational ideal’ to the exclusion of matters of belief; while Hugh McLeod, who is comfortable with the notion of secularisation, rules out the one qualitative dimension that the debate now demands. As he writes in the introduction to his *Secularisation in western Europe, 1848–1914* (2000)

There is one way of understanding secularisation which I shall not be using. An allegedly ‘traditional’ form of Christianity or Judaism has sometimes been presented as ‘the real thing’ and any change therefrom as a form of secularisation – in complete disregard of the fact that these religions have been in continuous evolution, and that there has been constant interaction between Christianity or Judaism and their social and intellectual environment [for centuries]. The attempt by some historians to dismiss the liberal and radical strategies as ‘a form of secularisation’ is as unjust and unenlightening as the attempt by other scholars to dismiss the conservative strategies as merely ‘reactionary’.

In certain, confessional, contexts, such a warning might be necessary; in the current climate, it is anything but. Historians are aware that religions evolve and constantly interact with their environments, but, unless they are out-and-out historicists, they acknowledge distinctions between the religious tradition and the social context. The relativities of time and context ought to heighten our awareness of the commonalities of belief and practice – the things that enable a religion to cohere across centuries and continents – rather than undermine them. It is not to impose an invidious specificity to say that Christianity contains certain core beliefs and that traditions which gradually attenuate them, substituting human for supernatural categories, experience secularisation. This is not a matter of arcane nuances, or polemical distinctions between a man-centred Arminianism and a God-centred Calvinism, but the emergence of a religious outlook that challenged the individual to be virtuous on his or her own terms, often parading an anti-spirituality of action. When a celebrated First World War chaplain ridiculed a young soldier for ‘whining out prayers for protection’ before battle he expressed nothing less than a secularised religiosity.

The historical instinct, however, has been to gather the fragments of desiccated Victorianism and term it ‘religion’. The bluster of manliness, the panicked heterodoxy of the trenches, the despairing syncretisms of the urban poor: all are thrown into the argument against secularisation when really

---

they substantiate it. Rites of passage are presented as bulwarks of popular religiosity when their casual, perfunctory and largely instrumental use would suggest otherwise. The one sacrament that would indicate an engagement with the worshipping centre of the churches, Communion, is absent from the revisionist inventory. Yet historians continue to write of the need ‘to historicize the concept of secularisation’ as a social myth born of crashing sociological simplicity.

That the real trend has been to historicise religion, not secularisation, is confirmed by Callum Brown’s *Death of Christian Britain* (2001), the culmination of the notion that neither institutional decline nor clerical demoralisation need trouble the paradigm of survival (at least up to the 1960s). Again, the method is to reject the theological concepts that made religion meaningful for the historical subjects, rendering the crisis of those concepts a matter of irrelevance. Theology is an alibi for gender. Its ‘tests’ of authenticity are unmasked as the negotiating ploys of a more basic discourse of gender construction. Even the paramount ‘test’ of conversion is historicised as the individual’s decision ‘to absorb and adapt gendered religious identities to himself and herself’. Hence, Brown suggests, ‘If you understand the origin and non-universal nature of those tests, you undermine the foundations of secularisation theory.’

Secularisation theory judges the people of the past (and of the present) by social-scientific measures derived from nineteenth-century discourses on what it meant to be religious (such as to be teetotal, thrifty, churchgoing, respectable, ‘saved’ or a believer in God) and what it meant to be irreligious (drunk, spendthrift, unchurched, ‘rough’, unconverted or a non-believer). These discourses were, and are, laced with a medley of prejudices about poverty and prosperity, social class and ethnicity, religious bigotry, and the nature of belief or unbelief. ‘Religious decline’ is at its root a moral judgement, whether brandished by Christians, atheists, social scientists or philosophers.

‘Teetotalism’ and ‘thrift’ may be counted among the conceits of the Victorian rage for order but ‘churchgoing’ and ‘belief in God’ cannot be so easily dismissed. Brown’s argument is that such artificial criteria were imposed by the statistic-hungry Evangelicalism of Thomas Chalmers, circulated *ad nauseam* in the clerical literature, and, finally, reproduced by the epistemological innocence of modern scholarship. Historians followed Chalmers in regarding belief as a vital indicator of religiosity when really they should have identified it as part of a ‘medley of prejudices’ constructed under the ‘episteme’ of modernity. The nineteenth-century city was not an environment hostile to Christian faith, the ‘salvation industry’ was founded

---

22 I am grateful to Jeremy Morris for this observation.
25 Ibid. 31.
26 Ibid. 33.
on a ‘myth’, and its institutional decline – along with its ‘conversionism and anxiety’ – did not affect the ‘nation’s core religious and moral identity’. The cause of revival was ‘the discursive symbolism of evangelical religion’ and this outlived that ‘panoply of techniques to spread symbols and signs of evangelical discourses in everyday life’ which Brown terms the ‘salvation industry’. ‘Far from being privatised or dimmed, Christianity lay at the heart of the contented and woman-centred family life into which British society by the eve of World War II funnelled Victorian moral values.’ ‘It was only when that discursive power waned that secularisation could take place.’

This is an extreme, but highly influential, case. It demonstrates how one historicism (based on class) can give way to even cruder forms (based on gender and its signifiers) when historians treat theological concepts as historical pawns rather than genuine players. The old ‘God of the sociological gaps’ makes way for a new God of the epistemic unconscious. As Brown makes clear, you did not have to believe in God to feel the tug of discursive Christianity. Brown may be unique in his deference to cultural theory but his rejection of theological categories as historical agents reflects what can only be described as a new paradigm. Nor is he alone in the assumption that Christian ethics stand as unambiguous evidence of Christian vitality rather than its potential nemesis. Religion and morality are confused, while the quibbling scholar, like the dogmatic twentieth-century preacher, is ‘damned with the charge of theology’. If the old ‘pessimism’ were somehow in thrall to nineteenth-century theology, would it be unreasonable to speculate that historical ‘optimism’ has succumbed to its own ‘gnosis’ – an almost pantheistic imperative of affirmation that ultimately dissolves the distinctions that made religion a conscious reality for its adherents?

Revisionism has done vital work against a bullying positivism but Jeffrey Cox, one of its finest exponents, is right to identify its ambivalence: the ‘collective achievement is smaller than the sum of its parts’, he says. We have ‘a collection of dissenting monographs’. There remains an unresolved dilemma, which is, ‘How does one intellectually deal with decline and vitality when they exist side by side?’ We know that modernity did not herald any Feuerbachian moment of disillusionment; that the industrial cities were not religious wastelands; we also know that the religious juggernaut did not roll on without complications in the twentieth century. Part of the answer may be

---

27 Ibid. 1.  
28 Ibid. 39.  
29 Ibid. 9, 144, 175.  
33 This statement is from an unpublished version of Cox’s article, ‘Provincializing Christendom’, kindly sent to me by the author.
found in a more theological interpretation of the late Victorian era. The juggernaut may have continued to rattle the cultural undergrowth but its soteriological pistons had largely ceased to fire. Secularisation is not the moment the vehicle stopped moving; it is the moment when it called on no resource beyond its own, earthbound velocity. Cox, Green and others wrote persuasively of Christian vitality in the areas of philanthropy, education and recreation before losing out to secular competition in the 1920s and ’30s. My argument is that the crucial shift occurred within religious organisations, rather than outside them, and that it was this internal, nineteenth-century mutation that rendered subsequent challenges so damaging. Historians have alluded to the naivety of the Churches in trying to meet every social need in this period; the suggestion here is that the problem was strategic rather than merely tactical, and that the period’s strategies were largely determined by the potency of the new discourse on sin. Once sin was socialised and ethicised as ‘vice’, so too was salvation.

Early Evangelicals were concerned about ethics and the visible fruits of faith, but they regarded them as secondary to the conversion process, in sequence and importance. They positively condemned that moral excellence which could be attained apart from conversion. That sin had its home in the pride of moral autonomy was one of the integrating ideas of the revival. In 1738 the sole requirement for people wishing to join Methodist societies was a desire ‘to flee the wrath to come’. Certainly, the rules came in time and Wesley’s fear of ethical meltdown soon established what David Hempton has termed the ‘interior dialectic’ of the movement between faith and discipline, ‘spiritual freedom and order’. Some would argue that Wesley’s self-starting Arminianism and the perfectionist holiness teaching contained the seeds of an anthropocentric moralism from the outset. But scholars such as David Bebbington and John Walsh have argued that Wesley’s personal conversion from the ‘faith of a servant’ to the ‘faith of a son’ was normative for a movement that succeeded by providing an escape from both the dry moralism of rational religion and the burdens of seventeenth-century ‘holiness’. As Walsh put it, ‘A revulsion from deism and reductionist latitudinarianism drove many seekers along the track towards conversion. There were many who could have said with John Newton, “I was weary of cold contemplative truths which cannot warm nor amend the heart.”’ Similarly, the more exacting ‘holy living’ tradition of High Churchmen such as William Law ‘could arouse aspirations that it did not satisfy. There was a certain joylessness in the call to a regime of unrelenting worship, closet devotion, introspection and asceticism; it conveyed an anxiety-inducing severity. It is not surprising that some High Churchmen were beginning to

buckle under the psychic strain’. Hence the power of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, preached with arresting immediacy. James Hutton, reared in a strict nonjuring family, described its effects: ‘It was not to be described with what joy and wonder we then grasped the doctrines of the Saviour, His merits and suffering and justification by faith in Him, and thereby freedom from the power and guilt of sin. This was to us all something so new, unexpected, joyful, penetrating: for the most of us had sorely striven and fought against sin without profit or result.’ As Walsh summarised, ‘The reintroduction of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone, not merely as a creedal proposition but as an experiential reality, set the revival in motion.’

For Bebbington, it was ‘the motor of evangelical expansion’.

The motor, however, required fuel – or a reason to be started. I suggest it was the profundity of the Evangelical account of sin that enabled the shift from a bootstraps theology of virtuous striving and nervous pulse checking to the ‘assurance’ of Evangelical faith. In George Whitefield it found an able advocate. Beneath his mesmeric oratory was a quiet insistence that true religion required a much deeper account of sin than contemporary Christianity would allow. In ‘Christ the only rest for the weary and heavy-laden’ (1741) he set out a broad notion of sin as alienation from God, the ‘disquiet’ and ‘uneasiness’ that accompanies it, and the powerlessness of ‘religious duties’ to assuage it. The skill was to link the poetic language of a well-known verse to a distinct state of mind, a disabling anxiety that, Whitefield contended, marked any true estimate of the gulf between human and divine holiness. Sin was a fact of existence not an accident of circumstances, which was why anxious souls, ‘flying to [their] works’ found no relief. This deep ‘weariness’ was, he argued, the only authentic prelude to the complete surrender to Christ that true religion demanded. The shame of contemporary religion was that the Churches were producing ‘moral, polite creatures’, proudly establishing their ‘own righteousness’ and quietly disqualifying themselves from this pre-condition of faith. Moral striving could trigger a sense of unworthiness before God, but moral excellence would produce the opposite: a self-satisfaction that provided the surest barrier against the divine encounter, which was ‘to accept Him on His own terms’. Whitefield was prepared to identify one other group as self-immured from a true sense of sin, ‘those who delight themselves in the polite entertainments of the age’, but there was no attempt to identify sin with pleasure. Like Wesley, who condemned the ‘idle diversions’ that ‘benumb

and stupefy the soul’.  

Whitefield saw them as masking agents rather than the essential poison of the soul: the folly of hedonism was nothing to the pride of moralism as a stumbling block to faith. The early Evangelical account of sin was, then, ‘supra-ethical’: it transcended mere infractions of moral law; it was spiritual. This is why Whitefield was critical of attempts to effect moral reformation before that ‘inward’ realignment of the soul in conversion, insisting that only the latter would be ‘lasting’. One of Whitefield’s clerical admirers acknowledged the distinction: ‘We have seen the inefficacy of mere moral doctrines for several years. What have they done? What have they brought forth, comparatively to the despised labours of a poor, travelling evangelist?’ Faith had to breathe before it could act.

As Evangelicalism traded open-air revivalism for the refined importunities of the late-Georgian drawing room, sin retained its strategic position in the salvation economy. Boyd Hilton has argued that it was the ‘lapsarian’ quality of the Evangelical outlook that commended it to this troubled age. To extend and deepen prevailing perceptions of sin was a task that Hannah More made her own, creating a whole genre of literature around the principle that sin dwelt less in the open vice of ‘profligate characters’ than in the delusions of the ‘great’. She found the ‘insinuating warmth’ of the ‘good sort of people’ more troubling than ‘the company of the profligate’ since the illusion of spiritual health was so powerful.

More’s writing was an extended response to the question posed by the Eclectic Society in 1807: ‘How shall we convince amiable characters of their natural depravity?’ Henry Venn spelled out the implications of ‘the Fall’ to his son in his last year at school. ‘Dear Jacky’, he wrote to the future rector of Clapham, ‘I desire to be very thankful to the Lord for his great goodness in bringing you to feel with an afflicted mind, that you are a very wicked and sinful creature.’ This, Henry assured his son, was the first sign of regeneration. For just ‘as a sick patient deplorably wounded prizes the medicine, and the giver of it, which are working his cure, so every man must be sick of sin, and sorely wounded by it, in order to prize the admirable Physician, who is given for the healing of the nations’.

Such sentiments would alarm a modern psychologist but they were strangely consonant with the ‘common-sense’ psychology of the early nineteenth century. Indeed sin moved to the centre of a new ‘natural

---

38 John Wesley, ‘Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the mount’, sermon 21, in Sermons on several occasions, London 1872, 190.
41 Hannah More, Practical piety, or, the influence of the religion of the heart on the conduct of the life, 1, London 1811, 225, 233.
43 Hilton, Age of atonement, 13.
44 Quoted in Michael Hennell, John Venn and the Clapham Sect, London 1958, 30–1.
theology’ – based on disharmony rather than harmony; the stricken conscience rather than the ordered cosmos.

The shift of contemporary philosophy from Lockean optimism to the darker musings of the Scottish ‘common-sense’ school was grist to the Evangelical mill. Far from any innocent *tabula rasa*, urged Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, the human mind possessed its own architecture – a ‘moral sense’ that sounded awfully like the Christian ‘conscience’. Humans were not sophisticated animals, responding to pleasure and pain by association and experience: they possessed moral powers which were innate and immutable. As a Christian apologetic, this was the most inviting of open goals. Some had feared a new cult of autonomous reason but Evangelicals had a more basic kind of common sense on their side when they observed that, much as the moral law treads the chambers of the soul, people are not inclined to obey it. Thomas Chalmers, who described his own conversion as a journey ‘from the felt experience of a judge within the breast to the inference of a Judge above and over us, who planted it there’ was the key player.  

Hilton has challenged the view that since Evangelicals ‘started from the facts of man’s depravity and need for redemption, evangelicals possessed a faith which was essentially mysterious and emotional’. He refers in particular to the ‘emphasis on sin which may strike the modern mind as irrational, but was not in fact’. It was both internally consistent and more credible than ‘the eighteenth-century anodyne’ of natural harmonies and cosmic optimism. As a correspondent of Chalmers argued, the fashionable theology that ‘solves all the attributes of God into pure benevolence’, and ‘denominates sin [merely] “moral evil”’ was powerless to explain earthly suffering and disorder. It was also powerless to explain the significance of ‘the cross’. As Chalmers summarised the Evangelical position, ‘Christianity in its very essence is the religion of sinners, and the sinfulness of all men is the very basis on which the remedial system of the gospel is proposed for the acceptance of the world.’

William Wilberforce said the same in 1803, and it was here that he parted company with the period’s most influential theologian:

Christianity appears to me to consider the world as in a state of alienation from God, as lost in depravity and guilt; pointing out at the same time ‘how we may escape from the wrath to come’ … It ought to be the grand object of every moral writer … to produce in us that true and just sense of the intensity and malignity of sin … and of the real magnitude of our danger, which would be likely to dispose us to exert ourselves to the utmost to obtain deliverance from the condemnation and emancipation from the power of sin. Now, here, Dr. Paley appears to me to fail.

46 Ibid. 20–1.  
47 Ibid. 5.  
48 Ibid. 184–5, 179, 187.  
49 Quoted ibid. 4.
Wilberforce devoted almost two-thirds of the *Practical view* (1798) to addressing ‘inadequate conceptions of the corruption of human nature’. The temptation to see sin in terms of ‘petty transgressions, of occasional failings, of sudden surprisals’ served, he argued, ‘to keep out of view the true source of the evil’. It produced a religion that administered ‘consolation to the pride of human nature’ but failed to approach its vitiated core.\(^{50}\) It was not just that a detailed inventory of vice obscured the basic human problem: it skewed the whole economy of redemption. Religion that was essentially moral or social in its outlook had a tendency to estimate ‘the guilt of actions … not by the proportion in which, according to Scripture, they are offensive to God, but by that in which they are injurious to society’. The consequence was that ‘Religion is suffered to dwindle away into a mere matter of police’, concerned with such obvious crimes as ‘murder’ and ‘theft’ but useless to address the intangibles of ‘idolatry’, ‘general irreligion’ or ‘pride’. Such a religion of ‘statutes’ cut at the root of the ‘internal principle’ by which ‘real Christianity’ was known and experienced.\(^{51}\)

These are striking and perhaps strange sentiments from the leading spirit behind the ‘Vice Society’. Wilberforce was devoted to the ‘Reformation of Manners’ with the same intensity with which he campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade – some have said more strongly.\(^{52}\) Yet he did not confuse his moral campaigning with his soteriology. The tone of his activism may have contradicted the spirit of the *Practical view* but there was no doubt that theology preceded ethics for Wilberforce and his contemporaries. The potency of their campaigning rested on the clarity of their spiritual outlook. Roger Anstey has demonstrated that the force of the abolition movement came from a sudden perception of the intrinsic sinfulness of the slave trade and its analogy to their own experiences of ‘bondage’ to sin. It was this theological perception that catalysed a series of familiar Enlightenment tropes into a crusade. As Anstey summarises the Evangelical contribution,

Their ability to transpose, to supercharge, these values stemmed from a desolating conviction of their own sin, the assurance that that sin was forgiven and could be overcome by the grace of God, and the consequential assurance that they could overcome the sin of and in other men by that same grace. Anterior to this was a greater sense of the horror of evil just because they had come to see its enormity in themselves.

It took the ferocious antinomies of Evangelicalism to turn an accepted institution on its head. ‘For [the Evangelical]’, Anstey continues, ‘there was a necessary externalisation of the polar opposites of his own religious

---

50 William Wilberforce, *A practical view of the prevailing religious system of professed Christians, in the higher and middle classes in this country, contrasted with real Christianity*, London 1888 edn, 12 (emphasis original).
51 Ibid. 150–1, 230–1, 98, 237.
52 Brown, *Fathers*, 76.
experience at the deepest level, and that externalisation could only give to his anti-slavery zeal a drive which few men, concerned as humanitarians but lacking the tension and the analogues which the Evangelical knew so well, could generate.\textsuperscript{53} A spiritual vision drove the movement; British activists did not experience that loss of theological clarity in the intoxication of the cause that enabled American abolition to become one of ‘the occasions of heterodoxy, if not secularization’.\textsuperscript{54}

Yet the ‘externalisation’ of religious ideas into cultural phenomena could be very subversive when the moral issue was less clear-cut. To cast slavery as sin is hardly to realise Wilberforce’s fears of measuring humanity’s rebellion from God in the small change of ‘petty transgressions’. The problem was when smaller and more ambiguous matters were essentialised as the spiritual enemy; when ‘matters of indifference’ became matters of spiritual life and death. Once sin was upgraded to such a level of urgency, it became difficult to conceive of it apart from the matter in question. A process that started as theology capturing culture ended in the domestication of theology. This is what happened during Evangelicalism’s age of dominance. Pleasure was the Achilles heel.

Several historians have noted a hardening of Evangelical ethics in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Wilberforce had been stumped in 1787 when someone asked him whether a parent’s exhortation to attend the theatre should be obeyed; forty years later he was in no doubt that ‘in this instance disobedience was a duty’.\textsuperscript{55} The shift from anxious denial to automatic rejection was crucial. As Hennell demonstrated in relation to the Venns, the agonised choices of Clapham gave way to the default severity of the mid-century generation. Soul-searching over matters like dancing and novel reading, noted Hennell, ‘just did not arise’ in the time of Henry Venn (1796–1873), secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1841 to 1872. The pained intuitions of one age became the flat injunctions of the next. As Leslie Stephen, another scion of Clapham, characterised the mid-century regimen, ‘A theatre was as remote from us as an elephant.’\textsuperscript{56} Where Wilberforce, More and Charles Simeon had felt the tug of ‘society’ and learned to navigate its snares and temptations, people like Francis Close, a protégé of Simeon and a dominant figure in the next wave of Evangelical influence, seemed to work from a predetermined itinerary, their cultural map already marked by areas of legitimacy and danger. Such was their certainty that various temptations stood as enemies of Christian progress; attacking, not merely avoiding, them became a duty. The London City Mission, founded in 1836, made ‘suppressing vice’ second only to ‘Scripture

\textsuperscript{54} Charles Taylor, \textit{Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity}, Cambridge 1989, 400.
\textsuperscript{55} Doreen Rosman, \textit{Evangelicals and culture}, London 1984, 76.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. 75.
distribution’ in its priorities.\(^{57}\) The juxtaposition of Evangelicalism and ‘preventing iniquity’ heralded a new phase of unapologetic aggression.

Francis Close’s campaigns against the theatre and the races in Cheltenham between 1824 and 1856 exemplified this closer connection between sin and vice. Cheltenham turned into a kind of Evangelical Weimar during Close’s long incumbency; Simeon described it as ‘a heaven upon earth’\(^{58}\). It echoed George Eliot’s description of the Evangelical transformation of Milby in Janet’s repentance (1857): a ‘palpable’, permeating and dominating influence. It also reflected the darker side of Milby, as Eliot described it: ‘Religious ideas have the fate of melodies, which, once set afloat in the world, are taken up by all sorts of instruments, some of them woefully coarse, feeble, or out of tune, until people are in danger of crying out that the melody itself is detestable.’\(^{59}\) This was part of the reason for growing disenchantment: the dullness of familiarity. Yet Close represented more than a coarsening of the Evangelical melody: he rewrote the tune. It was not just that his ‘seventy or so’ tracts and pamphlets ‘against horse-racing, the theatre, drink, smoking, and breaking the Sabbath’\(^{60}\) represented a peculiarly negative phase of a movement that could afford, by this stage, to return the world’s smile. His published material demonstrates a vital shift in Evangelical theology. Whereas Whitefield criticised ‘fashionable diversions’ as delusive palliatives, beclouding the true condition of the soul,\(^{61}\) Close implied that worldly pleasures were the active sources of corruption. He spoke of Cheltenham as a place essentially pure until the annual ‘torrent of vice’ witnessed in race week. As he thundered in 1825, ‘every kind of profligacy is diffused through our population by means of that annual season of revelry which is now approaching’. And ‘all who in any measure promote, or participate in such things, are partakers of their guilt, and subject to their plagues’.\(^{62}\) Where Whitefield appealed to ‘drunkards’ and ‘swearers’ as the natural target of the Gospel, Close regarded them as self-evident enemies of Christianity. Their behaviour did not so much reflect rebellion from God’s ways as constitute it. Hence the force of his assault: ‘It is notorious that on this occasion numbers of the most worthless members of society flock in from every part of the country to partake in the unholy revelry, and to increase the amount of crime and guilt which is chargeable upon us. And it is scarcely

---


\(^{60}\) M. Hennell, Sons of the prophets: Evangelical leaders of the Victorian Church, London 1979, 104.

\(^{61}\) Whitefield, Sermons, 207.

\(^{62}\) Francis Close, On the evil consequences of attending the race course exposed in a sermon, London 1827, 6–7.
possible to turn our steps in any direction without hearing the voice of the blasphemer, or meeting the reeling drunkard, or witnessing scenes of the lowest profligacy.' The burden of guilt was migrating from self to social context:

Many a diligent and affectionate wife weeps in secret over this season of guilty revelry, and curses the day when it was first established. I could tell of many young people, servants and apprentices of both sexes, ruined in body and soul by this destructive amusement. And I verily believe, that in the Day of Judgment, thousands of that vast multitude who have served the world, the flesh, and the devil, will trace up all the guilt and misery which has fallen upon them either TO THE RACE COURSE OR TO THE THEATRE! It was in one or other of these that youthful modesty was first polluted, it was in scenes of this nature that the early bloom of virtue was rudely violated, and every subsequent step which they have taken in the downward road to perdition must be traced to this first aberration from the path of rectitude. Such vices, and such like, more terrible in degree, and numerous as they are terrible, are the consequences of the race week.63

Guilt, ruin, judgement, flesh, devil, fall, pollution, perdition: all linked to a single sporting event. This was too much for the local press. Francis Close had suggested that all who ‘participate’ in the races were in some way responsible for the crimes committed in their aftermath. The editor of the Gloucester and Cheltenham Herald pointed out that, since Close’s list included ‘murder’, such a contention was absurd. But the writer cut closer to the bone with the observation that Close’s fury seemed to be directed against the public offensiveness of the revelry. Close, he noted, complained that the races allowed vices like prostitution to ‘forsake the lurking-place to which the better feelings of society drive them at ordinary seasons’. Were they ‘to infer that sin itself might be spared, if the veil of decency were drawn before it’? This was the ‘creed of the modern Pharisee’.64

Another writer argued that Close’s position imperilled the freedoms won by ‘our great Reformers’ – doctrines of Christian liberty that were now suffocating under a blanket of legalism.65 Close’s supporters rushed to his defence, challenging the view that to oppose racing was to uproot the Church’s principles. Readers were urged to read the Articles of the Church of England ‘and point out as a theologian in what respects the doctrines preached by Mr. Close are contrary to them’.66 But the point was not that Close had formally abandoned the principle of justification by faith: it was that his obsession with stamping out vice in the here-and-now, and his

63 Ibid. 10.
64 A letter to the Rev. Francis Close ... in reply to his recent sermon against the races: by the editor of the Gloucester and Cheltenham Herald, Cheltenham 1827, 12.
65 Anon., Falsehood exposed, or the retровер reproved: letter to the Rev. Francis Close in defence of the races, by a peasant, Cheltenham 1827, 11.
66 The races condemned, as contrary to Christianity, in a reply to Vindex: By Scrutator, 11–12.
erection of fixed standards of spirituality, effectively nullified the doctrine. This was certainly Chalmers’s view, though he refused to name names.

Thomas Chalmers did not live to experience the white heat of Sabbatarianism in the 1850s, or the institutionalised indignation of the ‘Nonconformist conscience’, but he could sense the shift from moral fervour to moral fever as early as 1818. He regarded it as potentially fatal to the Evangelical mission. His sermon ‘On the expulsive power of a new affection’ argued that only the positive force of faith in God (a new affection) could dislodge or ‘expel’ a person’s addiction to worldly affections – be they power, money or pleasure. This, he contended, was the biblical pattern of conversion: a person encounters Christ and chooses to renounce their pleasures in the light of that encounter, not before. Chalmers feared that moral zeal had inverted the process, so that the ethical ‘demand’ now preceded the spiritual ‘doctrine’ of reconciliation. People were being asked to be holy before they knew how or why. As Chalmers warned, ‘Separate the demand from the doctrine; and you have either a system of righteousness that is impracticable, or a barren orthodoxy.’ The attempt to impose Christian morality on a spiritually naive population was to leave the people ‘like the children of Israel in the land of Egypt, when required to make bricks without straw’. Active rebellion or cold alienation would follow. For, he argued, to ‘impair the freeness’ of the Gospel was also ‘to chase away’ the ‘love’ of it. Edward Irving made a similar point in 1825 when he excoriated the Evangelical propensity for ‘violent philippics against the sports and amusements of the field, the proscription of that free and easy discourse which our fathers entertained, the formation of a religious world different from the other world, and the getting up of certain outward visible tests of a religious character’. All this, he contended, was ‘bondage, miserable bondage’; proof of ‘carnality’ not spirituality.

Chalmers was too subtle, and Irving too polemical, for the message to register. And as Owen Chadwick wrote of the Sabbatarian belligerence of the 1840s and ’50s, it was ‘easier to blow bugles’ than ask questions. It was left to newspaper editors and the followers of F. D. Maurice to expose the fetishism of the war on vice. John Stuart Mill clearly had Evangelicalism in his sights when he condemned the ‘despotism’ of contemporary ‘Sabbatarianism’ and the more recent urge to prohibit ‘the sale of liquor’.

Evangelical critics were rare, not least because few could disentangle belief from the cultural norms with which it had meshed. R. W. Dale, who described the ‘negative morality’ of his youth as ‘a blighting and paralysing influence’, attributed its resilience to an almost chemical fusion

with doctrine. As he recalled the Congregationalist world of ‘Thirty, twenty, years ago’ in an important, stock-taking sermon of 1880, ‘To play at cards, or to dance, or to go to the theatre, or to get into an omnibus or a cab on Sunday, was as great a revolt against an unwritten but authoritative opinion as to reject the Calvinistic theory of original sin or the doctrine of eternal suffering.’ To question one was to jeopardise the whole redemptive scheme – or so it seemed.

Yet, as Dale also observed, the cultural mores that had become the touchstones of orthodoxy were both unstable and theologically subversive. In the 1860s drink replaced Sabbath-desecration as the unforgivable sin; the sabbatarian quest for ‘passivity’ gave way to a more active zeal to ‘redeem the time’ that otherwise lent itself to drinking. The 1851 census seemed to confirm the shift of emphasis: irreligion was shown to be social rather than intellectual in origin, an ‘unconscious’ rather than a dogmatic ‘secularism’. As Thain Davidson, a Presbyterian and pioneer of young men’s ministry, expressed the new thinking, ‘For every doubt that assails the mind a hundred snares allure the flesh’. Chief among them was alcohol. This is where the Christian mission assumed a Gospel-occluding specificity.

Drink is interesting because earlier generation saw the danger coming. Even as the Vice Society locked horns with the pastimes of ‘merrie England’, alcohol remained to some extent off limits. If gin remained a social curse, even after the ‘worst excesses’ of the ‘age of Gin Lane’ had been curbed, the problem was seldom spiritualised. And the fact that beer was still regarded as ‘the temperance drink’, as in Beer Street (1751), Hogarth’s life-affirming alternative to Gin Lane, indicates how far early nineteenth-century Christians were from objectifying alcohol as a spiritual evil. Evangelicals supported the lowering of duties on beer in 1830 and brewers could be found in both the Clapham Sect and several missionary societies. The fear, at this point, was of the fanaticism of teetotalism not the profanity of drinking. As Brian Harrison explained, ‘Teetotalism in the 1830s was opposed by many religious bodies. Many religious leaders feared that teetotalism was substituting a purely secular and ethical crusade for the reliance on divine grace.’

They regarded the first wave of teetotallers as a ‘band of secular friars’ creating a new Methodism of self-control and self-reliance. They sniffed heresy in both the meliorism and the vaguely cultic claims of the new movement. The Congregationalist John Angell James observed how even Christian teetotallers disregarded the Bible when it seemed to question their panacea; the young Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon said that he would ‘lay the axe at the root of the tree’ rather than preach a sermon in favour of

teetotalism. Meanwhile, ‘So strong was official Wesleyan opposition to teetotalism’, notes Doreen Rosman, that ‘in the middle of the century ministerial students who espoused it were reprimanded or even expelled.’ Evangelical internalism looked askance at this new, ‘physical puritanism’, and for good reason. Events would justify the suspicion.

If formal theology winced at the extravagance of the teetotal agenda, an emerging social theology quietly nodded in agreement. Drink and drunkenness were facts; and the facts suggested that an inebriated populace was unreachable. Churches came to see pubs, their most visible rivals on a largely undifferentiated industrial landscape, as housing their own ‘congregations’. The competition was social in essence but spiritual in effect. Historians are rightly sceptical of ‘urbanisation’, with its attendant concepts of ‘anomie’ and ‘alienation’, as a catch-all explanation for secularisation. But, as Mark Smith wryly observes, Christians in places like the industrial north-west faced ‘an even greater challenge than … that of ministering to a population suffering from anomie’. ‘New conditions’ did not create a Durkheimian vacuum of rootlessness so much as a thoroughly English culture of alcohol-fuelled conviviality. Industrial take-off entailed ‘an increasing tension between the Church and the alehouse – the traditional resort of working-class non-attenders’. Some blamed ‘industrialization itself’ for the problems of ‘indifference’ and ‘absenteeism’; most blamed the compensatory world of leisure. A binary opposition developed – entirely rational since, as Hugh McLeod writes, ‘regular night-in night-out pub-going seems to have excluded regular church-going to a greater degree than anything else’. The important thing ‘seems to have been the degree to which the pub-goer was fully integrated into a pub-based sub-culture’.

The feeling that, in this instance, the children of the world had been shrewder in their interpretation of the times triggered a Herculean counter-attack. And from the urgency of pragmatism came a new demonology. Here was a problem that could be exposed by the strong glare of facts, and the numbers suggested that brewers and landlords were not innocent traders: they were the disseminators of a national idolatry. Like modern Christians suddenly apprised of the evil of the coffee trade, or the sins of carbon emission, mid-Victorian Evangelicals came to a jolting apprehension that drink was no longer a prerogative of ‘Christian liberty’. Under the strained conditions of industrialism, it was their pre-eminent rival and, as such, sin. Industrialisation provides the context, but it was the binary structures of the Evangelical mind, with its ‘profound apprehension of the contrary states: of

---

76 Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians*, 184.
77 Ibid. 175.
Nature and of Grace’, and the ability to subject quotidian ambiguity to ‘the eternal microscope’ that drove the connection. Here, quite as much as in the ‘betrayals’ of an absconding liberalism, secularisation put down its roots.

First, Nonconformists started to swell the ranks of the British and Foreign Temperance Society; then it was the turn of Anglicans to take the initiative. A Church of England Temperance Society surfaced in the wake of the Anglican ‘Teetotal Manifesto’ of 1859, a largely Evangelical initiative. Francis Close was chief among the signatories and he published a pamphlet, *Why I have taken the pledge* (1860), to explain the volte-face. He needn’t have. Opinion was changing, and fast. As Harrison observed, by the end of the 1860s ‘it was becoming uncommon for religious leaders publicly to oppose temperance effort’. The editor of the *Baptist Magazine* was still aware in 1874 that he would be criticised for discussing the temperance question in a religious journal, Bebbington notes, but even in the most conservative of Evangelical bodies teetotalism was slowly conquering prejudice. By the beginning of the twentieth century more than 90 per cent of Baptist theological students were teetotal and the new standard had pervaded the laity. It became an almost literal badge of orthodoxy. As Bebbington has more recently observed, ‘Nearly all the immigrants disembarking from a ship arriving in Queensland in 1886 were sporting the blue ribbons [of the Blue Ribbon Gospel Union] to show that they had chosen to be Christian teetotallers.’

Even Spurgeon took the pledge (for the sake of the ‘weaker brother’), though he never attempted to integrate it with evangelism. His Methodist counterpart, Hugh Price Hughes, and fellow-Baptist, John Clifford, certainly did. They were far more representative of an Evangelical revolution that was symbolically complete in 1881 when the Evangelical Alliance, so suspicious of the temperance movement in the 1840s, passed a resolution urging the importance of uniting Christians behind the attack on intemperance. A taboo had become a shibboleth.

How, then, can secularisation be inferred from such an unimpeachably Christian cause? ‘The aim of putting away drink became, for many evangelicals, a cause second only to that of preaching the gospel itself’, Bebbington writes, suggesting that second it remained. The political and social acrobatics of the late Victorian chapels, he argues, should not be taken as a departure from ‘the Evangelicalism that still gave them their reason for existence, their message, their energy. Conversions from sin was their aim’.

---

The question was, what was now meant by sin? Bebbington is right to downplay the effects of theological liberalisation. Formally, Hughes and his milieu held to a robust Evangelical orthodoxy. Drawn to the fashionable incarnationalism of Westcott, Hughes nevertheless went out of his way to criticise *Lux mundi* (1890) for failing to take full account of human depravity. He repeatedly emphasised that his ‘task was to discover a social theology founded on evangelical truths’. The new emphasis on the incarnation as the central Christian doctrine, widespread, as Hilton has shown, in the period after 1850, did not act like a veto on atonement theology. For every Baldwin Brown, a Congregationalist admirer of F. D. Maurice who departed from Evangelical soteriology, there was a Dale, who saw it as his task to combine sensitivity to immanence with classical understandings of the cross. Dale wavered on eternal punishment but he demonstrates that intellectual fashions did not dictate, so much as condition, core theology. There was a process of negotiation in which the social rendering of a doctrine was as important, or more so, than its biblical or theological exegesis.

Baldwin Brown in fact illustrates the general argument that theological change was social as much as intellectual. For him, as for Maurice and many of the Broad Church leaders, theological adjustment owed much to the abuses of Evangelical sabbatarianism. Maurice had little interest in German biblical criticism; he was, however, driven to distraction by the capacity of Evangelical literalism to distort the social teaching of the Bible. Much of his thought flowed from this. Even if Christian ‘environmentalism’ is located in the wider intellectual drift from the ‘negative’ liberalism of J. S. Mill to the ‘positive’ liberalism of T. H. Green and the socialism of the Webbs, there are few moments of arresting disenchantment, operating above and beyond the social. Beatrice Webb made much of the scientific ‘time-spirit’ but she also spoke of an unbroken Christian ontology, manifesting itself as ‘the transference of the emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man’. Even when dealing with the so-called ‘intelligentsia’, drawing straight lines between intellectual discovery and theological belief is problematic. Unbelief, as George Eliot’s writing demonstrates, owed much to the religious culture from which it emerged.

That secular intellectuals continued to evince theological modes of reasoning does not mean that Christians, who articulated them explicitly, did not experience a similar phenomenon in reverse. If Webb’s ‘consciousness of sin’ and Toynbean ‘guilt’, drew some of the venom of class aggression out of British socialism, enshrining principles of collaboration over

---

93 Ibid. i. 206.
combativity in the Labour movement, Hughes’s socialising of sin was similarly corrosive of the spurring dialectics of Christian theology. Just as the purity of Marxism could not be maintained when the bourgeoisie was leading the charge on oppression, urging cooperation all the while, notions of sin as existential curse could not be preserved when the Christian mission was recalibrated as a battle against ‘the liquor traffic’, described by Hughes in 1890 as ‘the supreme curse of the country’. The issue was not the technical orthodoxy that could quibble with Lux mundi but the practical force of the new theology. It was quite impossible to maintain a theory of sin as an ontological barrier to a vertical ‘God-relationship’ when it was consistently portrayed along the horizontal axis of (eminently manageable) vice. Slowly but surely religion is also defined by horizontal endeavour, rather than spiritual succour, and divine blessing becomes a logical inference instead of an actively pursued goal: God hates evil, therefore our mission is a Christian one. Ethicised sin produces ethicised religion. As Gertrude Himmelfarb has argued, the fact that ‘morality’ was still defined religiously did not prevent it becoming, in some cases, a ‘surrogate for God’. And if, as Charles Taylor suggests, secularisation occurs when moral frameworks ‘mutate’ beyond their ‘theistic origins’, there is a strong argument that the late-Victorian quest to achieve Christian goals with a minimum of navel-gazing spirituality constituted a form of it. The ‘Christian manliness’ of figures like Thain Davidson, Frederick Atkins and, at times, John Clifford could be reasonably summarised as a challenge to be godly without overly troubling God: take care of the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves. The whole idiom of Angell James’s The anxious enquirer (1834), with its humiliating language of ‘yielding’ to ‘the divine guest’, was becoming obsolete. Evangelicals who demurred at the profanity of ‘muscular Christianity’ equally evoked the principle of ‘I act therefore I am.’

Clearly, ethical rigour did not always come with an ‘anthropocentric’ sting. The question was how far crusades against vice sidelined classical imperatives. The difference between Charles Spurgeon’s instrumental and Hughes’s absolute commitment to temperance, for example, was critical. It was like the question of horse-racing: Spurgeon had strong views on such ‘amusements’ but he willingly preached at Epsom racecourse, as he had done at both the Surrey Gardens Music Hall and that ‘temple of Belial’, the

94 See Alastair Reid, United we stand: a history of Britain’s trade unions, London 2004.
96 Gertrude Himmelfarb, The spirit of the age, New Haven, CN 2007, 17.
97 Taylor, Sources, 316–17.
Crystal Palace, sensing an opportunity rather than sizing up an enemy. ‘So run that ye may obtain’ was his text. Hughes and his Methodist Times campaigned vitriolic ally against racing as a ‘vast engine of national demoralisation’. Reports of one campaign indicated that conversionism was not dead, but it was in second place: ‘We took many pledges, and there were some conversions.’ This was claimed as progress, but what if the intense pressure to take the pledge was a barrier, rather than a prelude, to conversion? Spurgeon was aware of this danger, advising open-air preachers not to berate ‘holiday-makers’ and ‘Sabbath-breakers’, reminding them that ‘Religion never was designed to make their pleasures less’; Hughes, for whom unregenerate pleasure was sin, could not afford such leniency. He allowed drink, in particular, to become an ultimate concern, conditioning his approach to evangelism, social work, politics and even foreign policy. He even justified his support for the Boer War on the grounds that, among other things, Kruger’s government in the Transvaal ‘favoured the drink traffic’. Drinking culture had moved, in Evangelical perception, from the church-of-first-resort of the unbeliever to a demonic significance that cast all else into the shade. Including evangelism.

This is confirmed by a remarkable exchange at a ‘Mass meeting for men’ at the Albert Hall in 1893, organised by the YMCA. Hughes chided the organisation for perpetuating its reputation for being ‘namby-pamby’ by refusing to take part in a recent rally in Hyde Park for the Direct Veto Bill, a piece of legislation to facilitate prohibition by local authorities. He was angrily heckled by one individual who insisted that the YMCA is ‘not political’. Hughes retorted that ‘if the YMCA was not political in that sense, then it did not represent Jesus Christ’. He went on to criticise the narrowness of ‘their fathers’, starting and finishing with the salvation of the soul, predicting that the Christianity of the twentieth century would be of the active, aggressive variety: ‘This was an age of practical Christianity.’ They must ‘prove their loyalty to Jesus Christ by helping to stamp out the evils of our day’. There were other issues besides drink – ‘Gambling, which stood to stealing in the same relation that duelling stood to murder’, ‘the cause of purity in India’ – yet the same point applies: sin is reified to the point that the remedy passes into human hands. The problems of the times were manageable, and on human terms. ‘It was useless to pray, if we did not work’, Hughes urged, oblivious of the anthropocentrism of the statement. He closed to a ‘torrent of applause’. The man who had been so publicly rebuked

99 As one of Edmund Gosse’s neighbours described it: E. Gosse, Father and son, London 1989, 205.
101 Methodist Times, 7 July 1892, 659.
102 Ibid. 6 June 1889, 541.
103 The Young Man, July 1887, 74.
104 McLeod, Religion and society, 138.
by Hughes rose to defend his position. Hughes, however, had departed, and it was considered wrong to criticise a man in his absence.\textsuperscript{105} It is hard to avoid the conclusion that a ‘guilt’ culture was transforming into a ‘shame’ culture.

In a similar, if less dramatic style, John Clifford used a tour of the colonies to shame his countrymen into greater urgency on the drink traffic, describing it as ‘as a social scourge … more desolating than war, pestilence and famine’.

‘It is the greatest enemy the Commonwealth has.’ Clifford produced his own, inverted version of St Paul’s ‘hymn to love’, personifying ‘drink’ as the root of all evil: ‘Drink clouds the intellect, blunts the moral sense, disturbs the peace of the soul.’\textsuperscript{106} It is often argued that the Victorians demonised men while they canonised women, treating them as if they were born with a ‘double dose of original sin’.\textsuperscript{107} This may have been true when it was the male appetite for vice that was seen as the problem; now it was the drink itself and the drink traffic that bore the burden of the fall. Human nature, in effect, was exonerated. The whole Christian mission shifted accordingly. Churches became places of refuges from vice rather than conversion from sin. This was the meaning of that model of late Victorian ecclesiology, ‘the institutional church’. In his bold template for \textit{The institutional Church} (1906), the Congregationalist Charles Silvester Horne predicted that, in the twentieth century, ‘The public-houses [would] be compelled to recognise in the Free Church their greatest rival and counter-attraction’, considering this a self-evidently virtuous ambition. Again, however, the clarity of the Christian mission is blurred by a preoccupation with vice; Horne’s ‘scientific study of temptation’ was little more than an aggregation of licensing statistics.\textsuperscript{108}

Numbering Babylon was one of the most characteristic occupations of late Victorian Christianity: objectifying the moral crisis and rendering it in comfortingly tabular form. There was horror in the scale but hope in the familiarity of the suspects, lined up for condemnation. W. T. Stead’s \textit{If Christ came to Chicago} (1894) provided a colour-coded guide to the city’s brothels, gaming houses and saloons; the \textit{British Weekly’s} \textit{Tempted London} (1887) provided the same, minus the maps. Vice was physicalised. ‘If you go into Soho you may get your head broken’, the authors warned, ‘in other [gambling areas] you are as safe physically as in your own dwelling. But in all the atmosphere is unhealthy and vitiated; the myriad microbes of moral diseases abound in the very air.’\textsuperscript{109} The message was simple: resist drink, stay busy after work, and the dark underworld of metropolitan vice would be avoided. ‘If parents could bring up their sons total abstainers’, the authors advised, ‘and if the young men vigorously adhered to the pledge, there would

\textsuperscript{107} The Young Man (June 1888), 61.
\textsuperscript{109} British Weekly, \textit{Tempted London}, London 1887, 120.
be, comparatively speaking, little danger.' The authors wrote of ‘danger’ and ‘the first lapse of morality’ in a way that implied a basic purity prior to temptation. Salvation now consisted in an almost physical separation from temptation. As one of the later chapters put it, ‘We said in one of the earliest of these chapters that if drink could be avoided absolutely by young men they would, comparatively speaking, be safe.’

Evangelical ministries shifted decisively in the 1880s. The specificity of sin and its channels of access signalled a neo-pelagianism of ‘contact’, activity and time management. Tempted London criticised YMCAs for closing before their surrounding music halls. The evening was ‘the Devil’s harvest time; [when] he opens his numberless doorways of temptation’, a YMCA journal asserted in 1885. A contributor to a British Weekly series on ‘The redemption of the evening’ wrote that ‘The great problem of modern life is the evening. More and more it becomes the part of the day in which the battle is lost and won … They best serve the nation who seek to fortify the young against the temptations of the evening, and to make it a time of innocent and noble pleasure to be joyfully anticipated through all the hard day.’

Thus recreation assumed a centrality in the salvation economy that none would have predicted twenty years earlier. A Hand-book on young people’s guilds (1889) described the ‘Guild Gymnasium’ as a ‘means of physical grace’. Physical recreation was described in another guild text as a force that would ‘keep [young people] from falling’. As it advised, ‘many over whom we all sorrowfully grieve as belonging to the “lapsed masses” might never have lapsed at all if they had not been compelled to get their recreations in the world, where they were exposed to influences that were fatal to them’. These were Congregationalist texts but the thinking was ‘environmentalist’ rather than Evangelical: sin was now linked to the social context rather than the human agent.

The YMCA tended to be conservative in theology yet it was also drawn into a holistic meliorism that cut the nerve of its conversionism. This was no straightforward ‘yielding to the flesh’, as critics alleged, for the philosophy was deadly serious. It was the earnestness of the new soteriology of the body that allowed it to sideline the old with so little complaint. A YMCA secretary asserted in 1885 that ‘Argument is unnecessary to convince thinking minds that young men “go wrong” more frequently in what may be called the social side of their being than any other; therefore it is of vital importance that associations … should do all in their power to save men socially.’

110 Ibid. 14–15. 111 Ibid. 244. 112 The YMCA Bee-Hive (Mar. 1885), 25.
113 British Weekly, 15 Apr. 1887, 1.
The language of sin and salvation was grafted onto a new narrative of temptation and rescue, with the gymnasium cast as mediator. The Manchester YMCA magazine published an article on ‘Temptations and safeguards’ by the bishop of Manchester in 1883. It quoted a letter sent to the bishop from one who had been ‘saved’ by the Manchester association: ‘he tells in this letter the story of his repentance, in the fullest sense of that word – his sorrow for his wasted years; for his broken health; for his missed or abused opportunities; of his thankfulness to God for saving him out of the fire as it were; his recollection of the benefits he enjoyed while he was a member of this Association’. If there were any suspicion that Christ had been usurped from the redemptive scheme it was confirmed by the use of the phrase ‘the expulsive power of a new affection’ in the advice on ‘safeguards’. The bishop was not quoting Thomas Chalmers, nor commending a diet of prayer, but extolling the power of play:

if you have to contend with the devil of impurity in your soul, do not fight directly against it, but try to get hold of some other object that is pure and worthy … If you can get your minds and bodies possessed with worthy aims and healthy exercise, I think you will have a very great safeguard to keep you pure, even in the midst of evil.117

Schiller would have applauded the statement; Chalmers would have despaired!

The bishop was not himself an Evangelical but W. H. Newett, the Manchester secretary, was and his endorsement of such sentiments reflects the new model of undogmatic practicality. The battle with vice, or ‘temptation’ as it was increasingly termed, united Christians of all persuasions and added presence and visibility to the Christian cause. Parades, rallies and ‘indignation meetings’ kept the issues before the public. Teetotalism was, for one observer, ‘the common ethical ground of all the sects, from that of General Booth to that of Cardinal Manning’. In 1903 Charles Booth observed that ‘there are few churches or missions which do not interest themselves in work of this kind’.118 Yet he also detected a subversive quality in the new ecumenism of toil. In the summary volume he described temperance as ‘almost a religion in itself’.119 He noted that the really ‘virile’ churches, such as the Baptist D. H. Moore’s congregation in Clerkenwell, prospered on a much leaner diet. Even though Moore identified his ‘typical member’ as a reformed drunkard he was contemptuous of ‘unspiritual’ methods such as pleasant Sunday afternoons. Booth noted with some surprise that ‘of temperance societies there are none’.120 The point was that here was an alternative to the new Christian meliorism and it was more

117 The YMCA Bee-Hive (Apr. 1883), 28.
118 Harrison, Drink and the Victorians, 184.
120 Ibid. ii. 150.
effective in combatting temptation than specialist ministries. Moore even ran a ‘Christian Cycling Association’ – again, on the premise that this was not the instrument of conversion.\textsuperscript{121} Provided that new ministries did not interfere with what a Methodist writer termed ‘the mediatorial economy’,\textsuperscript{122} they could be positive influences. The problem was that, without formally challenging it, the new religious culture had largely superseded the salvation economy. The ‘old theology’, one Congregationalist lamented, ‘did not perish under the assault of a rival system. It did not quail before a logic more rigorous than its own. … It expired because an atmosphere had been created in which it could not breathe’.\textsuperscript{123} The ‘indignation meeting’ and the ‘institutional church’ created that atmosphere.

Booth’s breezy judgements alienated a number of people. The suggestion that, in many parts of London, congregational life ‘is more social than religious’ was regarded as crudely judgemental, as was the notion that ‘The bulk of those who come [to the Methodist St. James’ Hall] find in the service an agreeable Sunday pastime.’\textsuperscript{124} Yet Booth was not alone in his suspicions. Twenty years earlier, R. W. Dale worried over an Evangelical world that defined its task with such mechanical certainty, elevating human agency accordingly: ‘we are so impressed with the importance of organisation and active effort that we seem likely to place every one of the Ten Commandments under the protection of a separate Committee, with its Treasurer, Secretary, and deputations, and to organise a League for the promotion of every separate grace’. But he went further: he warned of the possibility of creating ‘religious sentiment of a kind which makes God unnecessary’.\textsuperscript{125} It was common in the 1890s to decry diminished attendance at prayer meetings; the shrewder observation was that such meetings faced competition not from ‘the world’ but from the churches’ own agencies.

In 1887 the Congregationalist Guinness Rogers ‘referred to the small attendance at week-night services, and contended that there were reasons for it in the habits of modern society, and in the engrossment of many members of the church in religious work’.\textsuperscript{126} The following year the Wesleyan Methodists discussed the same problem in a paper on ‘The spiritual difficulty engineered by ecclesiastical machinery’;\textsuperscript{127} ‘Martha has it all her own way now’ was the Baptist Alexander Maclaren’s lament in 1901.\textsuperscript{128} Activism had triumphed

\textsuperscript{121} Hugh McLeod, \textit{Class and religion in the late Victorian City}, London 1974, 70.
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{The Methodist Quarterly Review} (Apr. 1855), 268.
\textsuperscript{124} ‘Mr. Booth’s Pseudo-Scientific Study’, \textit{British Weekly}, 2 Apr. 1903, 637.
\textsuperscript{125} Dale, \textit{Evangelical revival}, 15, 163.
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{British Weekly}, 2 Dec. 1887, 82.
\textsuperscript{127} Report of the proceedings of the committee on church-membership: to which is added the report of the committee presented to the conference of 1888, London 1888, 16.
over spirituality, on a national scale. The very fact of such criticism indicates that the triumph was not universal. However such perspectives were neither fashionable nor widely heeded. Far more typical was Hughes’s assertion that ‘It was useless to pray, if we did not work.’ A Methodist committee on church membership reported in 1888 that Wesleyan ‘agencies’ were outstripping ‘Methodist Societies’ at a rate that would see the former double in twenty-five years and the latter in 120. Increasing numbers of people were passing through their doors at various times in the week, but fewer attended the class meetings which remained the only official route to full membership. Membership policy was thus relaxed. No longer, traditionalists like W. Arthur complained, did Methodist affiliation represent a statement of personal faith or ‘a desire to flee from the wrath to come’.129 This was not quite the slide into ‘a permanent Sunday School Anniversary’ as suggested by Robert Currie – ‘a cheerful, happy, unambitious’ religiosity.130 But it was not far off, and it indicates that, while there is encouragement to think optimistically of ‘believing without belonging’ in the twentieth century, the sharper reality was ‘belonging without believing’ in the nineteenth.

Robert Currie’s notion of religion as ‘entertainment’ tells part of the story. What he misses is the sheer ambition and seriousness of social Christianity. When a well-known journalist who often appeared in pulpits (probably Stead) expressed his ‘astonishment’ that preachers would waste their time discussing such subjects as ‘Melchizedek’, he articulated the religious philosophy of the age: ‘You have round you drunkenness, lust, oppression; Melchizedek may wait till you have got rid of these.’131 Theology was yesterday’s luxury. The chairman of the Congregationalist Union spoke in 1890 of ‘the danger of hiding Jesus Christ’ under even laudable and necessary operations. The new mentality had ‘this effect – that actually, though perhaps not logically, it remits theology, including doctrinal teaching, to a subordinate place, and often to entire extinction’. ‘Not one of us supposes that sin can be bowled out in our cricket fields’, he observed, but their ecclesiology often implied that they did. And however noble the ambition, the effect was often rather more mundane: ‘The Church is coming to be regarded as a friendly club’, he feared, ‘fulfilling its functions with considerable success if it occupies plenty of evenings with entertainments, and makes everybody comfortable. The conception that its members form a spiritual body, of which the life is Christ, vanishes away.’132

Such ethicised Christianity, part crusade and part soirée, was a shadow of its former self. And it had a dark side. Ronald Walker, born into a Methodist family in Harrogate in 1902, remembered the religion of his youth as lots of

tea parties ‘and little lectures on the evils of drink’. ‘I was taken by the scruff of the neck very early in life and told to “sign here”, where I pledged total abstinence for the rest of my life, and I satisfied my conscience when I grew up that that was got under duress and I’m afraid I’m not a teetotaller and I’m not ashamed of the fact that I was made to sign something that I did not quite understand at the time.’ Teetotalism was, as far as he could see, Christianity, and he could live without it. However this equation could arouse something more damaging than bitter resentment, something no religion can survive, which is gentle disdain. The literary critic O. F. Christie recalled that his father had been a regular churchgoer in the 1880s but had drifted into golf and tennis on Sundays after the turn of the century. He hadn’t stopped believing as such, nor had he become a sports fanatic, but he objected to the Church of England turning itself into ‘a gigantic Teetotal Society’. This captures the insouciance, the unstricken conscience, of the British disengagement from Christianity as well as any.

If this would seem to over-interpret the drink question, examples from the ‘holiness’ tradition – theoretically a great escape from middle-of-the-road moralism – suggest similar reactions. That the Salvation Army and other ‘holiness’ groups combined teetotalism with a robust conversionism indicates that the drink preoccupation was no automatic solvent of soteriology. Yet Salvationist rigour had its costs. Just as the Churches proper could become clubs for the respectable, revivalism often limited itself to people struggling with a distinct constellation of temptations. Revivalists such as Catherine Booth and Phoebe Palmer did not secularise salvation in the same way as certain YMCA leaders did, but they arguably narrowed its scope and appeal. Some flocked to the certainties of Christian ‘perfection’; others were repelled. Palmer blamed the failure of an evangelistic campaign in Banbury in 1860 on the fact that one man, having ‘found his Saviour’, refused to renounce ‘the intoxicating cup’. Warning the man that ‘his right-hand sin would probably sink his spirit into deathless burnings’, she publicly doubted the authenticity of his conversion. Having failed to persuade the local Wesleyan society to expel a member who was also a brewer, she declared the mission’s failure a judgement of God on their unrepented sin. Even within the hyper-spirituality of the holiness tradition, then, the specificity of sin could dampen the Christian message. This was not the ‘barren moralism’ feared by Chalmers, but it was perhaps the crucial extra ‘demand’ that pushed Christianity into the realm of unreasonableness.

Notwithstanding such diversity of mentality and approach, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Evangelicalism had produced something akin to the moralism that provoked its birth. It took an ex-Evangelical such as John

133 Quoted in Brown, Death of Christian Britain, 120–1.
Henry Newman to point out where a self-referring moralism would end up. Disdaining the temperance agitations of his fellow Catholic convert, Henry Manning, he complained as early as 1878 that prohibitionism was one of several contemporary movements withdrawing morality from Christian faith as such: ‘we are having a wedge thrust into us which tends to the destruction of religion altogether’, he warned. Harrison has commended the almost prophetic power of the judgement – a rebuke to his unthinking peers.\(^{136}\) The point is that, far from any accident of circumstances, the slide into non-transcendent ethics started with a distinct theology of sin. It is not that nineteenth-century Christians did not think about their social policies: arguably, they thought too much, allowing the scale and complexity of the social problem to cloud the simplicity of their Gospel. Their mentality recalls Blake’s image of Newton (1795): head down, measurements to hand; all vexed precision and shrouded imagination.

There were, then, ecclesiastical foundations for that undogmatic religiosity of the twentieth century, described in 1947 by Mass Observation as ‘religion with God relegated to the background, the stress on everyday actions … belief in standards of behaviour … a philosophy rather than a theology, a coherent way of life rather than a faith’.\(^{137}\) ‘The chief temptation of the Church [is] the reformation of society by every benevolent means except the evangelical’, argued P. T. Forsyth in 1909, and by then the temptation was all but an addiction.\(^{138}\) Robertson Nicoll felt that he was articulating the strength of his era when he urged, in 1880, that ‘There is no public sin of which a Christian man can lawfully say, “What is that to me?”’.\(^{139}\) Really this was its weakness. By the early twentieth century, people were weary of the institutionalised war on vice. The fictional character, Augustus Carp, an ‘unflinching opponent’ of ‘theatre-goers and drinkers’, became a symbol of neo-Puritan absurdity;\(^{140}\) angry crusading gave way to quiet moralism: the former prepared the ground for the latter. The danger of pinning Christian hopes on tangible ethical demands was two-fold: either the demands would be rejected as unreasonable and cultic or, worse, they would be fulfilled without supernatural assistance. This was the English way. Nietzsche called it ‘the English consistency’, the weakness of ‘moralistic females’ like George Eliot, who wanted ethics without spirituality.\(^{141}\) It was also the weakness of the Churches.


\(^{139}\) Quoted in Bebbington, Dominance, 226.

\(^{140}\) Henry Bashford, Augustus Carp, Esq. by himself, being the autobiography of a really good man, London 1924.

\(^{141}\) F. Nietzsche, The twilight of the idols (1888), quoted in Himmelfarb, Spirit of the age, 17.
In contrast, when revival fires rekindled in Wales in 1904 there was a remarkable absence of both the old censoriousness and the new managerialism. The leader, Evan Roberts, was determined to avoid the ‘machine-made Christianity’ of the American revivalists, with their ‘anxious seats’ and obnoxious strictures. His advice to co-workers was a condensed version of Chalmers’s ‘Expulsive power’: ‘You need not say anything about the theatre and the public-house. You preach of the love of Christ to them, and if His love will not constrain people to lead a better life nothing else will.’ The result was a revival that fired Welsh Nonconformity for decades to come. Even the passions of rugby football briefly made way, but so too did the temperance societies, as ‘meetings were abandoned, the members instead holding prayer meetings.’ Was there a lesson for the English?

---

142 *Western Mail*, 20 Dec. 1904.

The nineteenth century, say you, is the age par excellence of secularization. You are imagining a religious society before the nineteenth century which never existed. Look how respectable in French upper-class society was atheism before the end of the reign of Louis XIV. Look at the statistics of illegitimate births in Toulouse: 1668-75: 1/59; 1676-99: 1/3 6; 1700-19: 1/ 1 7; 1720-31: 1/10.6; 1732-43: 1/8.4; 1751: 1/7-2; 1788: 1/4. This subject, though not quite in this form, was invented by students of the European mind in the eighteenth century. Here, in the years between 1650 and 1750, the age of Sir Isaac Newton and Leibniz, of Fontenelle and Spinoza, of John Locke and David Hume, and finally of Diderot and Voltaire, were the seminal years of modern intellectual history. By the end of the nineteenth century, secularization was being widely used in conjunction with the terms secularists and secularism to refer to various state measures that weakened the Church and religion, including the disestablishment of dominant churches, the protection of religious and atheist minorities, and increased lay control of formerly religious spheres. By extension, secularization was used as well to describe. Enter the social scientists: only in the early twentieth century did secularization become a scholarly category, usually traced to the sociologists Weber, Tonnies, and Troeltsch, although similar concepts can be found in earlier thinkers. In common usage today, secularization refers to the presentation of the nineteenth century as the age par excellence of secularization is unsustainable as it assumes a pre-existing religious society which did not exist. French upper-class society before the end of the reign of Louis XIV was full of atheists many of whom were formal Catholics having a remote connection with the gospel. Bauer thought secularizing the State would throttle religion, Marx advocated reconstituting society without religion which he rejected as socially undesirable.