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THE PRE-VICTORIAN ERA: THE CONDITION OF RELIGION

At the opening of the century the state of religion in England seemed parlous. There was a widespread neglect of Christian duties and much indifference to Christian doctrine—so Bishop Horsley of Rochester complained in 1800. The "vicious ignorance" of the poor was balanced by the "presumptuous apostasy" of the wealthy; whilst among the growing class of industrial workers the writings of Tom Paine were finding an attentive audience. Even the Methodist Revival had brought little remedy, and in some places the Church services were at times not held for lack of any congregation. Sunday was little observed especially among the fashionable, for whom it was a favourite day for concerts and assemblies.[1] The undoubted spread of revolutionary ideas, both political and religious, among the masses shewed that the Church's hold upon them was not so firm as had been supposed; though during the war national and patriotic sentiment had rallied them to the Church as one centre of national solidarity. But such adhesion was too superficial to affect life or character.

FOUNDATION OF RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES

The occupation of the thoughts and energies of the nation with the carrying on of the war naturally told against religious activity; but in spite of it the period saw a sudden development in the direction of the formation of a number of voluntary societies for encouraging various religious and philanthropic objects.[2] Chief among them were those founded for work overseas. In fostering these associations religion, in the words of Mr. Warre Cornish, "left the closet and entered the com-

[1] The protest of Bishop Porteus against this profanation was made "at the risk of unpopularity and loss of court favour": F. Warre Cornish, *History of the English Church in the Nineteenth Century*, I, p. 101.

[2] The formation of such associations really goes back to the efforts of Wilberforce and his friends to abolish the Slave Trade.

mittee room."[1] Leaving aside for the time an account of the great Missionary Societies,[2] a short account may now be given of the foundation of some of the other outstanding organizations which date back to this period.

The oldest of these organizations is the Religious Tract Society. It owed much to the example of the Rev. George Burder of Coventry who had begun to print tracts on his own account as early as 1781. On May 8, 1799, a meeting of those interested in such a method was held and the society founded. Among its first supporters were Zachary Macaulay, Edward Bickersteth, and Legh Richmond, to name leading Evangelicals. The first secretary was Joseph Hughes, a Baptist minister of Battersea, who was later to be the first Nonconformist Secretary of the British and Foreign Bible Society. The Society was undenominational with its management shared equally between Churchmen and Nonconformists. From printing tracts it widened its activities to the production of magazines and other literature.

The British and Foreign Bible Society was in some sense the daughter of the Religious Tract Society, for it was in the Committee Room of the latter that it had its birth. This was in 1804. The circumstances which led to its formation are interesting. There had been in existence for the greater part of a century the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. But by this time, like its venerable sister, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, it had lost energy and vision, and when there was a sudden demand for Bibles in Wales, it failed to meet it. The famous story of Mary Jones of Tynoddol, a small Welsh girl who walked long distances to the nearest Bible in order to learn texts, and then had to tramp thirty miles when she had money enough to pay for a copy of her own, aroused much feeling. At the meeting which founded the new Society Granville Sharpe was in the chair; but the first president was Lord Teignmouth, a member of the Clapham Sect. The committee included Churchmen and Nonconformists as well as representatives of foreign Churches in England. Although it won the support of Bishop Porteus many Church-

[1] *Op. cit.*, I, p. 3.

[2] These will be considered in Chapter 20 below.

men looked upon it with suspicion, as "an evil and revolutionary institution, opposed alike to Church and State."[1] This came out when an attempt was made to form an auxiliary society at Cambridge. There was a violent dispute in which Isaac Milner, Dean of Carlisle and President of Queens', supported the Bible Society, Herbert Marsh, later to be Bishop of Peterborough, opposed it. Marsh's objections were that the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge was capable of supplying the need of Bibles and that the Bible ought not to be circulated apart from the Prayer Book. The Dean had an additional grievance against the future Bishop for he was one of the very few Englishmen, at that time, who had studied in Germany, and his orthodoxy in Church matters was compromised by a willingness to speculate on Gospel origins. This last fact gave the controversy an interest which it might otherwise have lacked; but as a whole it was profitless to both sides and led to misunderstandings and divisions—the almost inevitable result of religious strife.

But strife on a wider scale was to follow the development of the Society's work and to lead to secessions and the formation of other agencies. The decision in 1811 to omit the Apocrypha, for example, caused the Bible Societies on the continent to cut themselves off. Twenty years later there was bitter controversy over the question of allowing Unitarians to co-operate in the work of the Society. Rowland Hill very sensibly put the case for their continued connexion by declaring that he would encourage even a Mohammedan who wished to help in the circulation of the Scriptures. But such an argument did not satisfy all, and when the society decided to make no alteration in its constitution a number of its supporters left it to found the Trinitarian Bible Society.

In 1809 was founded the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. This like the London Missionary Society and the Bible Society was undenominational in its start. The first committee consisted of two clergymen, two Nonconformist ministers, and fifteen laymen. Its earliest efforts were "on impracticable lines," but its earnest efforts succeeded in bringing the whole question of the position of the Jew

[1] Hodder, *Life of Lord Shaftesbury*, I, pp. 43 f.

before Christian people.[1] Later practical difficulties arose over the dual basis of the Society and in March 1815 it became exclusively a Church of England Society. During the rest of the century, and up to the present day, this Society has continued its difficult work both in England and on the continent, and its labours have not gone without their reward.

In February 1836 the Church Pastoral Aid Society was founded at a meeting held in the Committee Room of the Church Missionary Society. It owed a good deal to the efforts of godly laymen, prominent among whom were Robert Seeley, the publisher, and Frederic Sandoz of Islington. Its objects were, as the title suggests, to provide helpers for work at home and at first its members were drawn from all sections of the Church of England. W. E. Gladstone was a Vice-president and Dr. Pusey a subscriber. But the High Churchmen disapproved of the employment of lay-agents as they regarded them as likely to work under the direction of the Society rather than under ecclesiastical discipline, and in the end they withdrew to form their own Society now known as the Additional Curates Society.

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

From this brief consideration of Christian activity, as seen in the formation of various religious associations, we must now turn to examine the state of the denominations which co-operated in their formation. Naturally we begin with the Church of England itself as the oldest and largest.

At the beginning of the century the Church was quite unprepared to face the testing times which were coming upon it. The peace and security of the previous century had left it "soft." One of its gravest weaknesses was the prevalence of a low idea of the ministry and its responsibilities. The country clergy who formed the vast majority—we have a not unkindly picture of them in *The Vicar of Wakefield* and the novels of Jane Austen—were not vicious or corrupt, far from it. They were kind-hearted, careful of the bodily needs of their parishioners, but with an inadequate concern for their spiritual welfare. Some of them were scholars and in most cases they

[1] See Gidney, *History of the London Society*, etc., p. 39.

raised the tone of the life around them, especially as setting a high standard of family life, and formed valuable centres of culture and manners; but they differed but little from other country gentlemen. They were too much at home in the world, too much at ease in Zion.

There were, it must be confessed, many definite abuses. These were more dangerous as the prevailing spirit of the times, with its fear of all revolutionary ideas, disliked any change, even if it came as a means of reformation. So inveterate had many of these abuses become that they were taken as a matter of course. Perhaps the most common and most damaging abuses were the joint evils of plurality and non-residence—by which a parson held a variety of benefices at the same time and handed over the care of most, if not all, of them to poorly paid curates. Even a good man like Bishop Van Mildert held the Rectory of St. Mary-le-bow with that of Farningham, near Sevenoaks; while Copleston was Dean of St. Paul's and Bishop of Llandaff at the same time. Others less virtuous piled up livings and took little interest in them beyond anxiety to draw their stipends.

When the war ended life became more normal and interest turned once again to home affairs. The Church, with fresh support available, entered upon a stage of real advance, though it was some time before its effects became widespread. There had been, even during the first quarter of the century, a growing feeling of dissatisfaction in many hearts. There were ardent souls who could not away with the prevalent "slackness"; to them stagnation seemed to promise nothing but speedy decease. Such was Thomas Arnold, the famous Headmaster of Rugby and preceptor of liberal minds; such was John Keble, whose *Christian Year* first appeared in 1827;[1] such was John Henry Newman whose sermons at St. Mary's, Oxford, were calling men to a stricter and more holy life, to a deeper reality and moral earnestness. To this awakening there is abundant testimony; the Church was stirring at last and beginning to realize that it had duties and responsibilities

[1] Many of the poems had been written during a number of previous years. The volume was published anonymously and Hurrell Froude was afraid that people might take the writer for a Methodist: *Remains*, I, p. 184.

as well as emoluments and privileges. Southey observed in 1817 that both knowledge and zeal were reviving on all hands and seemed to recall the first fervour of the Reformation.[1] But the Church had yet to reap the harvest of the years of neglect and reliance on privilege. It is one of the ironies of history that an institution is often thus beset when making a genuine effort at reformation; perhaps because a common revival has given life both to the reformers and to the outside critics. Many chose to regard it as an obstacle to the progress of religion itself, as well as generally injurious. Joseph Hume took it upon himself to warn young men that if they chose to be ordained they must not expect to receive compensation at the coming disestablishment of the Church, they would enter it with their eyes open "when its charter (!) is on the eve of being cancelled by the authority which gave it, when it is admitted on all hands to be not useless only, but absolutely detrimental."[2] In the so-called *Black Book* of 1820 and the *Extraordinary Black Book* of 1831 the Church, together with the aristocracy, the Bank of England, the East India Company, and other established societies, was exposed in all the shame of its many abuses; for as such those responsible for the attacks regarded them. Some of the opposition was no doubt inspired by political feeling; owing to the attitude taken up by the Bishops in the House of Lords on the question of Reform. In the riots which followed the rejection of the Bill in 1831 they were offered not only insult, but personal violence. During the disturbances at Bristol in October of that year the Palace of the Bishop was burnt down. Among the spectators was Charles Kingsley, then a schoolboy at Clifton. It was his "first lesson in what is now called 'social science' "—Dean Church was also a schoolboy at Bristol at this time.[3] Such attacks were probably due to mere unthinking violence and cannot safely be taken as evidence of a wide and deep feeling against the Church. The noisy agitators of the towns were more than outweighed by the solid loyalty of the country districts.

[1] *Life and Corr. of Robert Southey*, III, p. 285. But about the same time Shelley denounced the prevailing religion as "Christless, Godless, a book sealed."

[2] Quoted in *The Christian Remembrancer* (1841), pp. 422 f.

[3] *Life of R. W. Church*, p. 10.