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Introduction

Sociologists seem to have neglected the persistent presence of Methodism, whereas historians have argued about it for as long as historians have attempted to give an account of the development of the social and political institutions of modern Britain. Lecky and Buckle, for example, were among the first who tried to take stock of the radical transformation of British society and construct an account of what had actually happened. What kind of society had been created, and by what processes? Both accepted the common nineteenth-century belief that modern society was marked by the advance of reason and the decline of religion, that the ancient superstition was being replaced by science and the culture of democracy, and would continue to be so replaced.

Buckle argued that the progress of mankind depended on the development of the spirit of free enquiry and the dissemination of knowledge. 'Intellectual' truth had to take precedence over 'moral' truth. The main hindrance to these processes was the protective attitude of church and state which did not allow men to think for themselves and develop intellectually.[1]

Lecky in his *Rationalism in Europe* selected beliefs in witchcraft, miracles and future punishment as particular examples of the whole range of religious beliefs that had been a brake upon the development of civilisation. The power of such beliefs had been very great, but it was being overcome by the rational spirit of modern, scientific man. Lecky nonetheless finished his work on rationalism with a curious note of regret at the passing of the spirit of self-sacrifice for the sake of absolute beliefs and its replacement by the idea of utility.[2]

Thus for both Buckle and Lecky religion was a feature of a past age and it embodied a spirit that was antipathetic to the spirit of modern times. Yet both had to face the awkward fact that religion had made some kind of *positive* contribution to the development of modern society. Lecky saw this contribution as being made in the religious revival at the beginning of the eighteenth century, as we shall see.

Sociologists have perhaps too readily accepted the view that religion

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was a feature of a past age. While they accepted that religion had made some sort of contribution to modern culture and given ritual acknowledgement to the Protestant Ethic thesis, they nonetheless believed that religion was declining.

In France, Elie Halévy, naturally perhaps, asked slightly different questions about the rise of modern Britain. For him, the question was not merely one of describing the institutions and processes, but of explaining how Britain became a modern, bourgeois society without a bloody revolution. By a process of elimination he arrived at the conclusion that religion, religious institutions and traditions, played a significant part in preventing revolution. Halévy, we should note, needed (as a Frenchman) to understand why the bourgeoisie had not revolted in Britain, as much as to explain why the proletariat failed to rebel. As we shall see, these were closely related questions for Halévy.

In Germany Max Weber also applied himself to the question of how rational capitalism, and a rational secular culture, had developed out of pre-existing structures and traditions. He believed the modern proletariat to be relatively indifferent to religion, but nonetheless recognised the importance of religion, at the cultural and motivational levels, in the rise of capitalist society and the bourgeois entrepreneur. Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* alone among his extensive works on religion provides a clear indication of the importance he attached to religion in the development of the modern world.

These four scholars were, in their own ways, liberals. None of them was a full-time historian and only Weber was – from time to time – a full-time academic. A later generation of professional historians, of Left-wing persuasion, adopted a rather different perspective on the problem of Methodism. The Webbs, the Hammonds, Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson started from the knowledge that we had become an industrial society, and that something was known about the social reorganisation that made up that process of becoming. They showed not a little nostalgia for a (possibly mythical) golden age of pre-industrial proletarian community life, they underlined the violence and the exploitation of the transition from traditional to modern, and they seemed to be asking questions relating to the problem of how to change capitalist society rather than how it came about.

We would be mistaken if we assumed that there was unanimity among historians on the Left in their attitude to the past and to one another. The Webbs, for example, were not concerned (like Marx) with the withering away of the state but with the creation of a state which embodied 'the nobler aspect of the medieval manor'.[3] This implied paternalism seen in the context of the social background of the Fabians earned the contempt of Eric Hobsbawm. Hobsbawm was interested

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in industrial proletarian groups such as gas-workers, and in his *Primitive Rebels* turned to consider the peasants and the *lumpen proletariat.* Edward Thompson, however, found his labour heroes among the skilled craftsmen of an earlier pre-industrial, industrial order. He seems to mourn the passing of the community of the stockinger and weaver, the traditional artisan and craftsman. The mystery of the craft was swept away by capitalism and it is this, rather than the creation of an urban industrial proletariat and their associations, that interests Thompson.

None of these authors is personally very sympathetic to religion, yet all had to face the incontrovertible fact that Protestant sects were training grounds for working-class leaders. Beyond recognising this they sought to emphasise the social control functions of religion and to use its persistence to explain the lack of class consciousness and sustained revolutionary fervour among the workers in the industrial revolution. Like the early historians and later sociologists they seem to share the rationalist's hope of the withering away of religion. Our main criticism of all the historians is that there has been more debate than the research findings can sustain on the problem of religion.[4]

Methodist historians of Methodism originally seem to have relied upon the conclusions of earlier historians. Indeed the 'Halévy thesis' seems to be more cited than consulted and Lecky is seldom given a footnote when named in defence of the anti-revolutionary thesis on Methodism.[5] Modern Methodist historians seem to have been writing a defence of Methodism against the modern labour historians; they have attempted to show that Methodism had a positive and 'good' role in the development of modern working-class movements.

Arnold Toynbee seems to provide a link between the rationalist, Socialist and Methodist historians. In his *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution* Toynbee, like Lecky, stressed the importance of the historical method.[6] The study of history was necessary in order to understand the present. Toynbee noted the decline of traditional society and the emergence of the cash nexus: 'Political Economy, it was said, destroyed the moral and political relations of men, and dissolved the social union.'[7] But, according to Toynbee, the use of the historical method would enable one to show that the so-called laws of political economy were not immutable, but relevant to a certain stage of civilisation only. In relativising the 'laws' of political economy, Toynbee also tried to show that intervention in the 'struggle for existence' was a major element of the whole of human history.[8]

Thus Toynbee was able to reject the necessity of 'free competition of unequal industrial units' and advocate intervention in the economy – for the good of all – in, for example, housing programmes.[9] This modest

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Fabianism, derived from historical study, provides us with a direct connexion with the work of the Webbs, and through them, the Fabians.

Toynbee, a disciple of T. H. Green, was not a Socialist. He defined Socialism, very explicitly, in the same way that Wearmouth was to define it, implicitly, later: Socialism is an extension of Liberalism.[10] In this context trade unions can be viewed favourably by Liberals as well as by Fabians; 'Employers are beginning to recognise the necessity of them, and the advantages of being able to treat with a whole body of workmen through their most intelligent members.'[11] This view of the trade unions is one that will be echoed by Liberal entrepreneurs and trade-union leaders, in the earlier chapters.

If traditional social relations had broken down in the industrial revolution then they were to be replaced by voluntary associations (including the trade unions) and the development of self-help. These efforts to restore the 'social union' for the common good could be aided by the state. The state was to ensure steady and adequate wages and regulate the conditions of labour. Here, in Toynbee, we see a variety of themes including those typical of diverse traditions including Samuel Smiles, the Utilitarians and the Fabians. Toynbee's themes have set the tone of modern historical discussion on the problem of the disruption caused by the industrial revolution (a term given currency in the English language by Toynbee[12]) and the nature of the new social order that was to emerge. Such themes were also central to the origins of sociology.

Methodism has been a stubborn fact for historians, a problem for the Left and something to be defended by Methodists. It has been largely ignored by sociologists. Sociologists of religion have, of course, written on aspects of Methodism; but sociologists interested in the problems that taxed the historians mentioned above, problems of development and modernisation in Britain, problems of stratification, class consciousness and political sociology, have just not paid attention to religion. Recently, however, Crouch and Martin have raised the question of religion in the context of social stratification in trying to explain the peculiar stability of British society.[13] In seeking the basis of this stability they incorporate ideas advanced by MacIntyre and by Halévy, which will be examined below. Intelligible answers can be advanced in partly religious terms because of the nature of British dissent and the compromises surrounding the survival of the dissenting tradition and their apparent embodiment into the political style of working-class movements. Sociologists have perhaps hitherto accepted the views of historians too readily in this field. Even if sociologists see religion as marginal and a declining influence in history, they might at least have

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asked questions about the past role of religion in shaping present institutions and beliefs, and the implications of this for their current and future development.

HISTORICAL TREATMENT OF METHODISM

In the second volume of his *History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, Lecky discussed the loosening of traditional social ties brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation, to the point at which the cash nexus was the strongest bond. This was especially the case in the relationships between employers and employed. The beginning of the eighteenth century was, for Lecky, a time at which class differences were obvious and widening and when class warfare was imminent. But instead of this war there was a religious revival which 'opened a new spring of moral and religious energy among the poor, and at the same time gave a powerful impulse to the philanthropy of the rich'.[14] On the basis of 'testimonies as to the healthful and becalming tendencies'[15] of Methodism from Lecky and others, Townsend was able to assert in his *New History of Methodism* that Methodism had 'saved the country from such a cataclysm as happened in France'.[16]

Halévy, like other French historians (including his teacher, Taine, named by Townsend in *New History*), asked 'why did England not have a revolution?' He concluded that one could not find the answer in economic or political institutions alone. The religious revival of the early eighteenth century was a vital factor.[17] The 'Halévy thesis' has been central to subsequent discussion of the political effects of Methodism.

Two sets of sociological assumptions underlying the Halévy thesis have remained relatively unexamined.[18] Firstly, Halévy believed that the English nation was (and still is) a nation of puritans and that the English character was serious, reserved and melancholic as compared to the gay, extroverted and irreligious French temperament. Thus the revival of 1739 was a revival, a reawakening, of aspects of traditional English culture: 'la vieille inspiration puritaine, qui avait triomphé un siècle plus tôt, aux temps de la République de Cromwell'.[19] Thus Halévy has a theory about English character which seems to beg some of the questions he set out to answer by suggesting that the English already had characteristics which the revival is otherwise thought to have produced.

The more substantial assumption made by Halévy concerns the way in which Methodism operated upon the English population, for in this part of the argument Halévy advances a theory about the working class and its relations to other classes. According to Halévy: 'Le

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prolétariat des manufactures et des usines, aggloméré autour des centres industriels, est accessible à la contagion rapide de toutes les émotions violentes. Mais c'est une foule ignorante, incapable de prévoir et de décider elle-même en quel sens se portera son enthousiasme.'[20] The working class thus failed to revolt because it lacked the necessary middle-class leadership. This pattern was to be repeated when the working class was deprived of leaders at the time of Chartism a century later, and 'the populace fell back into a state of incoherence, demoralisation and at last apathy'.[21]

Halévy seems to assume that the working class is a bovine mass without its own leadership and ideas. Secondly, he assumes that the working class are dependent on the middle classes for ideological leadership. These are assumptions that cannot be accepted without more adequate evidence to support them.

In *A History of the English People in 1815*, published in 1924, Halévy's position is slightly different, for he distinguishes between the bourgeoisie and a working-class élite:

> a system of economic production that was in fact totally without organisation of any kind would have plunged the kingdom into violent revolution had the working classes found in the middle class leaders to provide it with a definite ideal, a creed, a practical programme. But the elite of the working class, the hard-working and capable bourgeois, had been imbued by the Evangelical movement with a spirit from which the established order had nothing to fear.[22]
>
> (trans. Watkins and Barker, vol. 1, p. 371)

It is not altogether clear who now leads the working class, the middle class or a working-class élite. There can be no objection to the suggestion that both were influenced in the way suggested. But if Halévy means that, the working-class élite notwithstanding, the working class were a bovine mob led by the bourgeoisie, then there is still considerable objection to his thesis on these grounds. If, on the other hand, Halévy means that Methodism influenced the working class through the élite of the working class then we might proceed to test a reasonable and unobjectionable theory.

Halévy's thesis is more complex than his critics have suggested precisely because he was saying that the 1739 revival was a revival of something already existing in the English character: 'Le réveil évangélique de 1739 ne fut donc pas un commencement absolu, une création *ex nihilo*: il consiste dans une combinaison nouvelle d'éléments préexistants et parfaitement définis.'[23] These elements were the reserve and melancholy mentioned above. But what this analysis means is that Methodism heightened and refocused features of English culture

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rather than creating new ones. Thus for the upper classes the revival was 'la réaction religieuse et morale' against venality and scepticism in church and state. The old puritanism was reformulated, and religious certainty was reasserted. Hannah More and William Wilberforce, among others, sought to reform not only the working classes but the outlook and behaviour of the upper and middle classes, and not without effect, for according to Gillispie the revival 'restrained the plutocrats who had newly arisen from the masses from vulgar ostentation and debauchery'.[24]

According to Charles Gillispie, 'For Halévy the main thing about evangelicalism was not that it was true religion but that it led to individual self-restraint.'[25] This self-restraint was born (or reborn) of the dissenting tradition. This tradition was typified, for Halévy, in the rights of free association. Dissenting groups could only survive if they disciplined their own members in order to avoid confrontations with the state. Thus free associations voluntarily restricted the liberty of their individual members in order to survive, and this, according to Halévy, was as important in the eighteenth century as in the earlier part of the seventeenth century. The spirit of self-discipline and mutual restraint was thus revived with the revival of religion and morality in the eighteenth (and nineteenth) century.

In reforming the morals of both the masses and their superiors the revived puritanism provided a new basis for the lower and upper classes to collaborate. Thus even though in the nineteenth century men may have pursued goals antipathetic to one another they pursued them on the basis of a set of shared assumptions. Restraint, tolerance, a 'live and let live' attitude were available as a basis for relationships between the classes when other ties had been dissolved. 'A pragmatic approach to problems, co-operativeness, tolerance, a gift for compromise . . .', these are what Alasdair MacIntyre calls the secondary virtues.[26] They are secondary because they relate not to the ends that men pursue but to how they pursue them, and to the manner in which they handle conflicts of goals. If then the 'Halévy thesis' is that religion provided a basis for cooperation in a situation of potential or actual conflict, through the development of these secondary virtues, then his thesis forms part of the argument of this book which deals with Methodism at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

We have dwelt upon Halévy because he is usually represented in an over-simple version and defended or attacked by assertion rather than detailed argument. Himmelfarb has put the situation well:

> A distinguished sociologist, [Lipset] aware of the dissatisfaction with the Halévy thesis, has described it as an 'area of considerable scholarly controversy' – on the assumption, presumably, that he

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had been afforded a glimpse of only the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately there is little beneath the tip. The whole of this 'area of considerable scholarly controversy' consists of a ten-page essay, several pages of a large volume, some paragraphs in a biographical article, portions of book reviews, and isolated, undocumented, but increasingly common statements to the effect that the thesis is no longer tenable.[27]

The most damaging criticism that can be made of Halévy is that he does not ask seriously whether religion can have any meaning for the individual proletarian believer, or indeed for a working-class élite. John and Barbara Hammond and Edward Thompson suggested that religion might have a personal meaning for the believer whatever his social position. The Hammonds believed that the worker needed beliefs to lift him into a significant world of meanings which transcended everyday life. The miner and the weaver wanted 'a religion that recognised that the world did not explain itself'.[28] Religion in fact gave the oppressed 'an assurance that their obscure lives had some significance and moment'. These 'functions' of religion we can acknowledge as universal functions of religion in all ages. But 'The Methodist taught that men were not so helpless as they seemed for religion could make them independent of the conditions of their lives.'[29] Such notions might have been the basis for a radical political response to social conditions. But this radical potential was reduced by Methodists accepting deprivation as a trial of faith rather than a political challenge.

The Hammonds also underlined the paradoxes of Methodism. As long as religion was part of the civil constitution of society, religious questioning was a questioning of that constitution, and thus Methodism was associated with sedition. It could be, we should note in passing, that the Weslyan propaganda denying this suggestion of sedition may have been at the root of the anti-revolutionary literature.[30] Edward Thompson noted the paradoxes also; Methodism was a religion of despair and rebellion, producing submission and political leadership among working men who lived earnest and disciplined lives while engaging in spiritual orgies.

Before moving to a more detailed discussion of Thompson we should take note of Eric Hobsbawm's 'ten page essay' in *Labouring Men*.[31] Hobsbawm remarked that Methodism and radicalism advanced together and that in modern times pious men of various faiths have led, or been active in, revolutionary movements. Thus other creeds may have been as important as Methodism. Had 'other factors' been ripe, Hobsbawm concludes, Methodism could not have averted revolution. The fact was that down to 1840 there was a good deal of revolutionary

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feeling latent in England, but the upper classes never lost control of the situation. What Hobsbawm does not examine are the reasons for the other factors not being ripe; it may have been that there were cultural factors, to some degree derived from religious sources, which enabled the upper classes to keep control. This could have been deduced from Halévy's argument, yet Hobsbawm rejects Halévy.[32]

Thompson[33] in common with the Hammonds, saw two sides to Methodism. Firstly it served the interests of the bourgeoisie because it 'weakened the poor from within, by adding to them the active ingredient of submission; and they [the leaders of Methodism] fostered within the Methodist church those elements most suited to make up the psychic component of the work-discipline of which the manufacturers stood in most need'.[34] Thus Methodism helped provide the motivations for the new work discipline needed in industrial society. It did this in a negative sense by overcoming 'the older, half-pagan popular culture, with its fairs, its sports, its drink and its picaresque hedonism'.[35] In the positive sense noted by Thompson above, it contributed to the rationalisation of work through self-discipline whereby, ideally, 'the labourer must be turned "into his own slave-driver"'.[36] Methodism did not become a vehicle for a radical political response to the destruction of the old order and the rigours of the new because it 'brought to a point of hysterical intensity the desire for personal salvation'.[37] The Methodist sought self-mastery and self-perfection rather than striving to change the world.

Thompson makes the Weberian point that discipline was maintained mutually by sect members, and backsliding meant expulsion from the only community men knew in the industrial wilderness. The dedication required to maintain personal membership and to sustain the activities of the chapel carried over into the organisation of trade unions. Thus Methodism also served the working class by producing working-class leaders with a 'capacity for sustained organisational dedication and (at its best) a high degree of personal responsibility'.[38] The Methodist was able to carry into political activity (given that Methodism may not have actually encouraged that activity) a sense of earnestness, of dedication and of a 'calling' that was to be important for the organisations so led.

Thompson's analysis is somewhat unbalanced by his transparent dislike of Methodism. Because of this he stresses those features of Methodism which he believes inhibited the rise of working-class consciousness, and in doing this he can make easy psychological targets of selected Methodist hymns and revivalist practices. But one obvious question arising from this kind of analysis is why were 'so many working people. . .willing to submit to this form of psychic exploitation?'[39]

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Thompson's answers to this question complicate the rest of the argument. He suggests that the evidence of Sunday school primers and the dogmas of such men as Jabez Bunting do not necessarily tell us what happened in the local community: 'What the orthodox Methodist minister intended is one thing; what actually happened in many communities may be another.'[40] But almost the whole of Thompson's argument rests upon the evidence of orthodox writers and especially upon the words of Methodist hymns. Either this is valid evidence which tells us about local Methodism, or it is not. If it is valid evidence then the question, 'Why submit?' remains; if not, then Thompson's thesis must fall because he has not produced the relevant evidence to support it. This latter situation introduces an argument that is quite unacceptable, for Thompson would be arguing that official Methodism was a form of religious terrorism, so why did men endure it? It could only be because they believed in something other than the terrorist formulation.

This problem in Thompson's argument arises from the lack of material on local Methodism and our real uncertainty about the form in which orthodox (or 'official') Methodism was expressed at the local level. In his 1968 'Postscript' to *The Making of the English Working Class* Thompson answers Himmelfarb's contention that he and Hobsbawm have avoided a confrontation by saying that the evidence is inconclusive. What he does not say is that we need not *more* evidence, but evidence of a *different kind* to validate his thesis. For a scholar who recognises the inconclusiveness of the evidence Thompson seems to argue with a remarkable degree of confidence.

A second problem arises from Thompson's idea that dogma was modified in the local community. He argues, for example, that: 'As a dogma Methodism appears as a pitiless ideology of work. In practice this dogma was in varying degrees softened, humanized, or modified by the needs, values, and patterns of social relationship of the community within which it was placed.[41] He develops this later to say that the more closely knit the community in which Methodism took root, the more the local people made Methodism 'their own'.[42]

Earlier, however, Thompson suggested that the Methodist brotherhood was the only community group which members knew in the industrial wilderness. The confusion here needs to be sorted out; it seems that Methodism can be found in two situations: firstly, in a situation of social dislocation Methodism provides a primary community to replace the institutions and relations lost in the process of change. Secondly, Methodism may be the religion of established working-class communities, which already have an elaborate work and leisure culture pre-dating the arrival of Methodism. It seems that Thompson confuses

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