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H. G. Wood

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

1850 AND 1950: A CONTRAST

I SHALL not attempt in the chapters that follow to give a history of religious thought or even of Christian theology in Britain during the last hundred years. I have neither the time nor the ability to handle such a theme. Moreover, the book of Vernon Storr, *Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century up to 1860*, with its sequel, *Later Nineteenth Century English Theology*, by Dr L. E. Elliott Binns, taken along with C. C. J. Webb's masterly study of *Religious Thought in England since 1850* and the late J. K. Mozley's *Some Tendencies in British Theology, from the publication of Lux Mundi to the Present Day* makes it superfluous for me to try to do over again indifferently what has already been done so well.

What I am proposing to do is somewhat different. I shall start by throwing into relief some contrasts between the religious life and thought of Britain round about 1850 and the religious life and thought of Britain today. I shall next examine the changes in culture and in the climate of opinion which account for the contrasts. We must then consider whether we are witnessing the final dissolution of the Christian faith as some suppose, or whether the changes, social and intellectual, by which we are all affected, are leading to a more adequate understanding of the Christian faith and to a deeper appreciation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We shall thus be faced with the question: What does it mean to decide for Christ today?

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Let us begin, then, with the contrasts. A hundred years ago, organized Christianity, including in the term both the Established Church and the Free Churches, played a greater part in the life and thought of Britain than it does today. Attendance at public worship was the normal practice of a large proportion of all classes, if not of a majority of the people. Today, if the late Seebohm Rowntree's statistics of church attendance in York may be regarded as typical of the country as a whole, not more than 10 per cent of the nation join in public worship. The adequacy of Seebohm Rowntree's data and the cogency of his inference may be questioned, but the general decline in attendance at public worship is undeniable, though its exact measure is uncertain. So far at least as the change in the practice of the members of the upper classes and of country-folk is concerned, the testimony of Lady Tweedsmuir may suffice by way of illustration.

At Moor Park [the home of the Eburys in the Victorian era], the question asked on Sundays was, 'Where will you go to church?', not 'Will you, or won't you, go?' One nearby church to Moor Park was High and the other was Low, and you attended whichever service suited your preference.

The church and its hierarchy was discussed keenly and held an important place in people's thought and conversations. Nowadays, when you stay in a house for a week-end, people often do not attend church at all, and the subject is never mentioned. Sunday is treated exactly like a week-day, even in houses where the host and hostess are people of proved integrity. The church was far more powerful in those days than it is now, and religion held a more central place in the minds of men and women. . . . The church-going habit I knew in my

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youth has completely lapsed. Men and women will go to church if they wish, but not otherwise.¹

In this connexion, we may note that, if we have not entirely given up the idea of the Sunday as a day of rest, the old style strict Sabbatarianism which prevailed a century ago, no longer holds its ground, even in Scotland. The Lord's Day Observance Association seems to be fighting a losing battle.

If the churchgoing habit has lapsed, so also has the practice of family prayers. Probably family worship, as described, for example, in Lady Tweedsmuir's book or in H. W. Nevinson's *Changes and Chances*, has lapsed more completely than the habit of attendance at public worship. The private devotional reading of the Bible may not have been abandoned in such a wholesale manner. That there was a decline in this form of religious practice is certainly the case, but it has to some extent been arrested by the Bible Reading Fellowship and similar movements.

In the upshot, there has been a marked decline in popular knowledge both of the Bible, and of the elements of the Christian faith. H. W. Nevinson, in an article on the Bible's influence, which he contributed to the *Rationalist Annual* in 1940, lamented the fact that such knowledge of the Scriptures as formerly belonged to those who had an Evangelical upbringing, is rapidly passing away, or has indeed passed. He relates, by way of example, that the Poet Laureate, when opening the new building of the City Literary Institute in Drury Lane (14 May 1939) told how a woman had said to her friend: 'I have heard this quotation,

¹ Lady Tweedsmuir, *The Lilac and the Rose*, p. 85.

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“Blessed are the pure in heart” and it struck me as being rather beautiful. Can you tell me where I can find it?’¹ This might be paralleled from *The House that Hitler Built*, where the author, a university professor, complimented Pastor Niemöller on his invention of the admirable slogan: ‘We must obey God rather than man.’ Biblical allusions in public speeches are risky nowadays. They are so seldom appreciated. Would the present House of Commons understand John Bright’s allusion to the Cave of Adullam if it were made today?² Indeed, a distinguished French historian, in recording the incident, misinterprets it in a footnote which says, ‘Allusion Biblique; Adullam a voulu tuer David.’

H. W. Nevinson sums it up thus: ‘For good or evil, it is evident that such knowledge of the Bible as was our possession when I was young is fast fading away. If, when speaking from a public platform, I make some passing allusion to the Bible, I see from the blank faces of the audience that they do not understand what on earth I am talking about.’ He adds that F. L. Lucas, in his journal, says much the same thing. The passage runs: ‘Clearly the Old Testament is wilting in the fierce chaos of the hydro-electric age. Morality may not lose much, but I fear literature will. For the Hebrew sacred books, especially in their Jacobean English, have a grandeur missing in most modern work.’³

¹ H. W. Nevinson, *Visions and Memories*, p. 112.

² I Sam. xxii. 1, 2. ‘So David escaped to the Cave of Adullam. There were also drawn together to him everyone that was in distress and everyone who was in debt and everyone who was embittered, and he became their leader.’

³ F. L. Lucas, *Journal Under the Terror*, p. 115.

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With regard to the elements of the Christian faith, the authors of the report on religion in the army during the First World War were startled to find widespread ignorance of the meaning even of Christmas and Easter, let alone other features of the Christian year. This is but symptomatic of a change in the relation of the Christian Church to the world, of which we are increasingly conscious. In preparation for the World Missionary Conference held at Tambaram in the Madras Presidency, India, at the close of 1938, Dr Kraemer wrote his remarkable study of the Christian message in a non-Christian world. Formerly we thought of Europe and the Americas as Christian, and of Asia and Africa as constituting the non-Christian world. This was the unquestioned assumption of the Victorians. But Kraemer showed clearly that 'the Christian Church, religiously speaking, in the West as well as in the East, is standing in a pagan, non-Christian world, and has again to consider the whole world as its mission-field, not in the rhetorical but in the literal sense of the word'. It is true that, as T. S. Eliot contends, in Britain we have not as a people definitely adopted an alternative creed, but we are much less positively Christian than we were; we are becoming a puzzled people. In France, it is said, 'the Catholic Church is now organizing missions to the French people on the assumption that many of them are as totally ignorant of Christianity as the heathen to whom missions used to be sent'. In England, as in other great Christian countries, there are masses of folk who have never heard of Christ within the context of religious experience. In the survey of youth in Birmingham entitled *80,000 Adolescents*, the authors invited 'the churches to

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consider that our survey has revealed that three-quarters of the youth population of our city is completely out of touch with any form of organized religion. We are convinced that few people in the churches appreciate just how far away from them in thought and outlook these young people are' (p. 187).

The influence of organized Christianity on public life, particularly on politics, has certainly diminished. In the later nineteenth century, the Nonconformist conscience was a powerful factor in politics. It hardly counts today. One Free-Church writer says:

The Free churches are hesitant because we are banished to the wilderness and the desert, seemingly without anything to give which our contemporaries will accept; hesitant also because 'one world is dying, and the other is powerless to be born'. Yet in secular society expectancy lifts its head again. Men, though they are without God are not without hope, for they look to science and education to inspire new progress and create new liberties.¹

Not so long ago, the Secretary of the Labour Party asserted truly and courageously that the Labour movement in this country owes more to Methodism than to Marxism. This was true in the first half of the century under survey, but can we confidently assume that Methodism or Christian Socialism outweighs the influence of Marxism in the British Labour movement today?

A hundred years ago, the Puritan tradition, with its sharp division between the Christian way of life and the life of the world, with its distrust of what we should now

¹ R. D. Walton, *The Gathered Community*, p. 175.

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regard as innocent pleasures, with its emphasis on self-discipline and self-control, powerfully influenced all classes and all churches. If it was most influential among Evangelical Low Churchmen and Nonconformists, it was also accepted with some modifications by High Churchmen, and if it was at its strongest in the middle classes, it also affected both the aristocracy and the artisans. In Evangelical circles, the theatre, the dancing-floor and the card-table, were all suspect as worldly and dangerous to moral and spiritual welfare. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, the movement for total abstinence gathered strength, particularly among Evangelicals, but in this country the ban on tobacco, which is widely observed in the U.S.A., has never been accepted, partly perhaps because some leading preachers were wedded to the pipe as inseparably as Sir Winston Churchill to the cigar. Perhaps the most remarkable of the limitations imposed by the Puritan tradition was the ban on fiction, on romances and dramatic literature. Even Shakespeare was suspect. Did not Dora Greenwell inscribe on the first page of her copy of his plays: 'All this is not of the Father, but is of the world'? H. W. Nevinson tells us, 'in my early teens I bought a Shakespeare in one volume, but my mother was so full of horror at finding it, that I hid it away. "It is a great immoral book", she said to me in one of her rare outbursts of feeling: "I know some people put it next the Bible, but that is mere wickedness."' ¹ It is not surprising

¹ H. W. Nevinson, *Changes and Chances*, p. 2. Cf. W. Robertson Nicoll, *Life and Letters*, p. 37: 'The first time I ever preached in Edinburgh [in 1878] when I was little more than a boy, I introduced a quotation from Shakespeare. The minister of the Church, an exceedingly kind and

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that Matthew Arnold charged Dissenters and Evangelicals with Philistinism. Such doubts about the stage, about fiction and the drama, were not the most valuable part of the Puritan tradition, but the tradition as a whole has weakened, and the very conception of worldliness is at a discount. We may have to consider later whether the anti-Puritan reaction has not gone too far, and whether we are not now in danger of overlooking the importance of ‘drying the lawn somewhere’, if I may recall an intriguing Spoonerism.

Allied with the Puritan interpretation of what it means to keep oneself unspotted from the world, was the idea of the world as a vale of tears, and of the Christian as a pilgrim, journeying to a better land. Bunyan was popular with the Victorians. Is *Pilgrim's Progress* still read today? Hymns about Jerusalem the Golden, in use a hundred years ago, have given place to Blake's Jerusalem, to be built in England's green and pleasant land. Instead of Watts' great hymn, ‘There is a land of pure delight’, we now sing J. A. Symonds' ‘These things shall be: a nobler race.’ The possibilities of the here and now claim attention almost to the exclusion of the hopes of another world and of life everlasting. The shift of emphasis is undeniable.

Passing from attitudes and practices to beliefs, we may note that theological doctrines were more clearly defined and better understood a hundred years ago than they are now. Common to all schools of thought was the belief in the Bible as the Word of God, and the assumption that this

friendly man, wrote to me afterwards that using Shakespeare's name in the pulpit had given great offence, and he counselled me never to do it again but to make quotations without naming the author.’

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must mean that the Scriptures are free from error and discrepancy. As the record of the revelation of God's will and purpose for mankind, the Bible was treated as a manual of theology—a theology which could be presented in a defensible, rational and harmonious system. The claim of orthodox Calvinism to be the essential Biblical theology was accepted almost without reserve, in Scotland and among many Dissenters, such as the Particular Baptists.¹ The main features of Calvinism were familiar to all, though this feature or that was being called in question. The absolute sovereignty of God and the total depravity of man were among the fundamentals of Calvin's theology. Predestination meant that, by an eternal decree, God, in his inscrutable wisdom, elected some to salvation and reprobated others to eternal torment. The elect were not chosen for their virtues or their merit. They were justified by faith alone, i.e. by recognizing that they deserved eternal punishment like the rest of Adam's apostate race, and that they were pardoned because God's Son had borne the punishment of their sins in their stead. The plan of salvation turned on Christ's vicarious sacrifice. The substitutionary view of the Atonement, involving the penal satisfaction of God's justice, was held to be the correct understanding of the Cross. And this Atonement was effective only for the elect. In the 1850's this outline of the plan of salvation was regarded in many quarters as the truth of the gospel. Of course, even among strict Calvinists, the Calvinism of the seventeenth century had undergone some modification. Probably no Calvinist in 1850 believed any longer in

¹ The General Baptists were and are Arminian: the Particular Baptists were Calvinist until the close of the Victorian era.

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witchcraft or in applying the sentence ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’ to those unfortunates who were still suspected of trafficking with Satan. But the influence of the Arminianism of John and Charles Wesley had shaken the hold of Calvinism among Evangelicals. The Calvinist view of election and reprobation was consciously repudiated by the Wesleyan Methodists. Human depravity and the need of a new birth in a sudden conversion, the pains of hell and eternal punishment, the substitutionary view of the Atonement—all these elements of Biblical theology as interpreted by Calvin, the Evangelicals retained and fervently believed. But what Charles Wesley called ‘the hateful, horrible decree’ they rejected. They had no doubt that Christ died for all, not just for the elect, and they held that the offer of salvation through faith in Christ and his atoning sacrifice was made to all. The hymns for the people called Methodists are variations on the theme of Christ’s *all*-atoning and *all*-redeeming love. Verses 1 and 2, 5 and 6, of Hymn No. 2 may suffice by way of illustration:

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast:
 Let every soul be Jesu’s guest:
 Ye need not *one* be left behind,
 For God hath bidden *all* mankind.
 Sent by my Lord, on you I call:
 The invitation is to *all*:
 Come all the world; Come, sinner, thou:
 All things in Christ are ready now. . . .
 Ye vagrant souls, on you I call:
 (O that my voice could reach you *all*!)
 Ye *all* may now be justified:
 Ye *all* may live, for Christ hath died.