

Evangelicals and the Social Order

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I understand my brief for this conference to be to offer a survey of evangelical engagements with the social order in the early nineteenth century. While I shall not be specifically discussing the particular circumstances of missionaries in the field, I do intend to range widely over the English-speaking world to establish the context in which they were operating. I want in particular to explore two influential hypotheses about the social and cultural impact of the evangelicalism in this period – first, that it played a central role in promoting an ideal of domesticity that confined women to the home; second it achieved an overall degree of cultural dominance such that the early nineteenth century can be termed ‘the age of atonement’. I shall devote most of my time to looking at evangelical attitudes to gender and the family, a topic that has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in the last twenty years or so. Both nineteenth-century evangelicals and contemporary feminists would agree in seeing the issues raised here as fundamental to the organization of society. However, in the final third of the lecture I shall move outwards, as it were, to consider wider social and political interactions setting the scene for the more specific discussion of religious and philanthropic movements that Ted Royle will be providing in his paper. My field of view covers the wider evangelical movement of which Methodism was a central strand but I shall also be referring to Anglican Evangelicals, Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians.

The domestic image of womanhood was always in tension with other currents in evangelicalism. Verses entitled ‘The Female Preacher’s Plea’ first appeared in the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* in 1821, written by Catherine O’Bryan, wife of the founder of the Bible Christians,

By sweet experience now I know,
That those who knock shall enter in;
God doth his gifts and grace bestow,
On Women too, as well as men. ...

While men with eloquence and fame,
The silver trumpet manly blow,
A plainer trump we humbly claim,
The saving power of God to show.

O'Bryan thus affirmed the spiritual equality of men and women, and her conviction that God gave spiritual gifts, including a divine call to preach, to both sexes. She acknowledged though that men's and women's roles in differed in practice. Eloquent and famous preaching seemed to her an attribute of manliness, and she, in common with other early nineteenth-century women preachers on both sides of the Atlantic, accepted continuing male monopoly of the ordained ministry. Nevertheless she firmly asserted women's capacity to fulfil the essential evangelical and evangelistic task of proclaiming the 'saving power of God'.

Only a small minority of evangelical women preached in public, and as the period went on even these were progressively marginalized and eventually excluded. Numerous other women though shared their sense of vocation, even if they did not apply it literally. The eighteen-year-old Harriet Beecher wrote to her brother:

You see ... that I was made for a preacher – indeed I can scarcely keep my letters from turning into sermons, but my 'dear hearer' in consideration that you are the only one you must excuse me if I am somewhat lengthy. Indeed in a certain sense it is as much my vocation to preach on paper as it is that of my brothers to preach viva voce.

Harriet was to become the first major – and arguably the greatest – American woman novelist. Her life and writing should be seen in parallel with her English contemporaries, Charlotte (1816-54), Emily (1818-48), and Anne (1820-49) Brontë and George Eliot (Marian Evans 1819-80), all of whom also had strong early connections with evangelicalism. Moreover these enduringly famous mid-nineteenth century women novelists should be seen not only as successors in the standard literary canon to Jane Austen (1775-1817), but as following in a tradition of writing by evangelical women. These included notably Hannah More (1745-1833), and, in the next generation, Mary Martha Sherwood (1775-1851), Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846), and the poet and hymnwriter Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871). Such authors are relatively little read

nowadays, but were enormously popular and influential in their time: they are therefore significant not only as examples of female achievement, but as articulators of models of evangelical womanhood.

Writers like preachers were, however, exceptional. For the large majority of evangelical women in this period, as for their unconverted sisters, life was limited by domestic and family demands, and by successive pregnancies throughout young adulthood. Repeated childbearing carried with it the danger not only of immediate sudden death but of the creeping exhaustion and semi-invalidism that afflicted many women from early middle age onwards. In the United States in 1846 ‘the number of those whose health is crushed before the first few years of married life are passed, would seem incredible to one who has not investigated the subject.’

Nevertheless the history of the family of course also essentially and intimately involves men. Indeed the question of whether home and family should be viewed as a predominantly female domain or rather as one in which both sexes were fully, if not equally, active goes straight to the heart of an ongoing historiographical debate, as to the extent to which it is valid to think in this period of the reinforcement of ‘separate spheres’ of women’s activity in the home and men’s activity in the workplace and the wider world. Influential books in inspiring this debate were Nancy F Cott’s *The Bonds of Womanhood*, published in 1977 in relation to the US, and Leonore Davidoff’s and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortunes*, published in 1987, and concerned with the UK. The role of women in society is also seen as centrally related to the development of a middle-class identity grounded in a ‘domestic ideology’, elevating the home as the key symbol of respectability, presided over by the female ‘angel in the house’. The trend in recent years has been for a questioning of the ‘separate spheres’ model, which was at its most influential in the 1980s. Domestic ideology was a product of other religious and secular forces as well as evangelicalism; a rounded understanding of the development of class and social structure needs to consider economic and sociological factors as well as religious and ideological ones. Nevertheless evangelicalism has been generally acknowledged as a central strand in these developments. In approaching them primarily from the perspective of evangelicalism rather than of the history of women three key points are worthy of emphasis.

First, the support of women was vital to the success and expansion of evangelicalism. Indeed it can be argued, especially in relation to the United States, that there was a 'feminization' of the churches during this period. In England too women were in the majority in evangelical churches. They made up 57.2% of a sample of Wesleyans for the period 1751-1825, and a sample of Baptists and Congregationalists shows a rising trend, from 54.8% in 1776-1800, to 60.7% in 1801-25 and 65.2% in 1826-50. As Richard Johnson, the first Anglican clergyman in Australia, struggled to establish Christian worship in the convict colony of New South Wales, he noted that it was 'especially the women' who attended his services. Moreover women's influence as mother was crucial in drawing the next generation into churches, when their husbands did not necessarily share their commitment

Second, though, in significant respects evangelicalism operated, both ideologically and practically, to modify rather to reinforce acceptance of 'separate spheres'. There was an underlying conviction of spiritual equality, as affirmed in sentiments attributed to the leading Anglican writer Hannah More:

Women ... make up one half of the human race: equally with men redeemed by the blood of Christ. In this their true dignity consists; here their best pretensions rest, here their highest claims are allowed.

At a more practical level, it has been argued that

The rising tide of religious Evangelicalism did not efface the woman in public, rather it reorientated the public life of the more serious-minded away from worldly entertainment towards good works.

In work on the United States it has been argued that evangelical conversion gave men a new consciousness of family and social connections, while giving women increased confidence and self-worth. Writers such as Hannah More and Catharine Beecher had a paradoxical impact because, while accepting and indeed advocating the exclusion of women from perceived male activities, nevertheless argued powerfully that women should be thoroughly well educated. In 1829 Beecher even introduced a course in moral philosophy at her school for girls in Hartford. By such means, women would be equipped to exercise strong social, religious, and even indirect political influence through the channels that were open to them.

Third, in the eyes of evangelicals, domestic and family responsibilities actively involved men as well as women. It is true that such a commitment initially seemed ambivalent in respect of early Methodist itinerant preachers, often young single men who were perceived as subversive of family life, whether because they were seen as celibate misfits, or, worse, because they were believed in reality to be secret seducers of their female converts. Married itinerants often seemed neglectful of their own wives and families, in the face of the overriding imperative to preach the gospel. In America the tone and standard was set by Bishop Francis Asbury who remained single from the conviction that

I could hardly expect to find a woman with grace enough to enable her to live but one week out of the fifty-two with her husband: besides, what right has any man to take advantage of the affections of a woman, make her his wife, and by a voluntary absence subvert the whole order and economy of the marriage state, by separating those whom neither God, nature, nor the requirements of the civil society permit long to be put asunder?

Thus even in rejecting marriage for himself, Asbury upheld his sense of the responsibilities it imposed on other men. Indeed as Methodism developed, countervailing tendencies for the assertion and celebration of domestic ties asserted themselves, and the family circle came to be perceived as an essential means for the upholding and spread of the gospel.

Evangelical concepts of manliness were a challenge to contemporary secular male values, whether among those of the British gentry, farmers in the American south, or convicts forcibly resettled in Australia. Emphasis on ‘honour’, machismo and lineage was confronted by stress on ‘calling’, moral virtue, and the family as a spiritual community of mutual affection rather than merely an expression of patriarchal sovereignty. Richard Johnson’s address in 1792 to the predominantly male and non-churchgoing inhabitants of New South Wales and Norfolk Island can indeed be read as a particularly stark expression of that cultural clash, both in its negative condemnation of profanity, dishonesty, and sexual license, and its positive affirmation of prayer, Bible-reading, churchgoing, and family life. Exhortations and guidance to men dwelt particularly on the development of character and of public duties and responsibilities and encouragement to

uphold family responsibilities was by contrast relatively infrequent. Nevertheless when such issues were discussed they were given considerable weight. Thus although Thomas Gisborne, who was associated with William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, spent the greater part of his *Enquiry into the Duties of Men* (1794) discussing different roles and professions, he concluded with a chapter on the duties of private gentlemen, which he urged all his readers to consider ‘as particularly addressed to himself’. Gisborne affirmed that Scripture taught the subordination of women in marriage, but reminded his male readers that it also taught that men should love and honour their wives.

Domestic virtue was also upheld by the negative strategy of urging young men to resist sexual temptation. The American Sylvester Graham published a sustained diatribe against masturbation, ‘illicit commerce with the other sex’, and even over-indulgence within marriage, in the belief ‘that the Bible doctrine of marriage and sexual continence and purity, is founded on the physiological principles established in the constitutional nature of man.’ Graham’s quasi-medical approach was complemented by preachers such as Henry Ward Beecher in Indianapolis and John Angell James in Birmingham who were also forthright in urging men to resist sexual temptation, whether in disastrously corrupting an innocent girl or succumbing to the wiles of a prostitute. Such evangelical preachers might presume a sexual double standard in respect of knowledge – being frank with men, while perpetuating women’s ignorance – but in respect of actions they clearly affirmed the gravity of sexual sin for men as well as for women.

Although evidence is inevitably patchy and circumstantial it seems that such standards were not infrequently honoured in the breach as well as in the observance, as shown by church discipline records. Some of the most interesting evidence comes from Upper Canada. More women than men were admonished or excommunicated for sexual lapses, and pleas that they had been raped or seduced were seldom taken seriously. There were obvious practical reasons why a woman was more likely to be disciplined: pregnancy ‘proved’ her guilt, but there could be no such conclusive evidence against the man, who was also statistically less likely to be a church member, and would find it easier quietly to leave a community to avoid retribution. Nevertheless she was not necessarily seen as more sinful than him and indeed evangelical churches were less subject to a sexual double standard than the surrounding society. There was also a

genuine readiness in due course to forgive the genuinely penitent: in 1844 an Edinburgh Free Church of Scotland Kirk Session minute concerned the case of Barbara Fechnie, who confessed that ‘five years ago she had brought forth a child in fornication’. Now, however, she expressed her ‘deep sorrow and remorse’ and it was accordingly agreed that she ‘should be rebuked and absolved’. For some evangelical males sexual temptation had to be resisted at all costs: the American itinerant preacher Jeremiah Minter who had himself castrated was probably a unique case, but other Methodist ministers startled eligible women by their studied indifference to their charms. The indications of sexual frustration prior to marriage of leading British evangelicals such as Henry Thornton and Lord Ashley is evidence that they were consistent to their professions of chastity.

The evangelical ideal of marriage was one of genuine partnership and spiritual equality, albeit one in which roles were different and the wife’s fulfilment was to be found not in autonomous achievements but in raising a family and supporting her husband’s endeavours. The prominent Anglican Edward Bickersteth, in a series of letters to his fiancée, Sarah Bignold, written in the months before their marriage in 1812, spelt out his hopes for their future together. He looked forward to their ‘fire-side evenings’ as a time when ‘we shall often be brought near to God, ... while we enjoy communion with one another’. He explained his views on money, in which, without inviting her comments, he was ‘persuaded we shall agree’ and expected her also to concur in his wish to ‘use hospitality without grudging’. He was though in all things ready ‘to bow to the authority of Scripture, and anxiously desirous of promoting your ease, comfort and happiness.’ He hoped they would have complete confidence in each other, never have interests or wishes that differed and enjoy a ‘perpetual friendship’ that would continue even beyond death. Subsequently, looking back on the thirty-eight years of marriage that followed, Bickersteth’s son-in-law and biographer believed that ‘these hopes were not disappointed’. Such sentiments were shared by John Dow, a Methodist minister in New Jersey, who in his obituary for his wife Anne, who died in December 1822, conveyed a vivid sense of a marriage of genuine companionship and friendship.

It is less easy to find evidence of the wife’s perspective, as even when they did feature in obituaries these were often written by men. However in letters from Eliza Marsden, wife of Samuel Marsden, the second chaplain in New South Wales, one senses

a genuine sense of sharing in the spiritual as well as the material trials of her husband's ministry. Similarly, there was no doubting the intense mutual devotion in Barbara Wilberforce's marriage to William, in which, while he readily forgave her notorious deficiencies in conventional homemaking skills, they rejoiced in their emotional and spiritual companionship. Moreover, although the wife's situation was normally the supportive one, it is still possible to find instances of evangelical marriages where public roles were reversed, or at least shared. Examples include, in England Zachariah Taft's affirmation of the right of his wife Mary and of other women to preach; in America, the readiness of the husband of Abigail Roberts to escort her on her preaching engagements; and of the writer Charlotte Elizabeth's happy second marriage to Lewis Hippolytus Tonna, in which he devoted himself to encouraging and promoting her work. Such relationships though depended on both partners being believers, as was apparent in the disastrous failure of Charlotte Elizabeth's first marriage to Captain Phelan. An address in 1839 to the Norfolk Association of Baptist Churches strongly affirmed this principle, while recognizing that it was widely breached in practice, a compromise that would in effect have been forced on many women given the gender imbalance in most churches.

The experience of evangelical children, like that of evangelical women, has been vulnerable to stereotyping by historians, who have often concurred in a view that the growing cultural ascendancy of evangelicalism during the early nineteenth century was associated with an ethos of harsh discipline and spiritual manipulation. Evangelical ideas and approaches, founded on a belief in original sin, are adversely contrasted with secular ones, seen as rooted in a perception of childhood innocence. It is certainly true that some evangelical parents, anxious for their children's eternal salvation and concerned to check any tendencies to moral corruption, could appear austere and heavy-handed. When, however, closer attention is paid to the actual dynamics of family life, a more nuanced and varied picture emerges. Children are seen as genuinely internalizing evangelical beliefs, rather than being terrorized into conversion. They were attracted to heaven more than they feared hell. They were often willing participants in family religious observances, which they perceived as natural parts of their routine. Sunday was a day for decorous relaxation as well as for church attendance and spiritual pursuits. Above all, parents and others blended affection with discipline.

The world of early nineteenth-century evangelical children was also shaped through the increasing body of literature that was written for them. This can be read as encapsulating a rigid and rather frightening moral and spiritual discipline. Certainly this was a world in which sinfulness towards God and disobedience to parents was likely to bring harsh retribution. For example in one of Charlotte Elizabeth's stories for children, young Henry, who disobeys his father's instructions not to eat berries in his uncle's garden, is taken horribly ill during a church service, fears that he is going to die and go to hell, and heartily repents of his sin. To twenty-first century readers, the recurrent presence of death and serious illness in such literature is disconcerting, but in this respect it reflected the reality of many children's experience and arguably helped to prepare them for real-life suffering and bereavement. To authors, moreover, it served an essential purpose in enabling them to turn children's thoughts to spiritual matters. Nevertheless, at its best such literature was by no means narrowly didactic. Mary Sherwood, the most successful and influential evangelical writer for children in the early nineteenth century, was widely published on both sides of the Atlantic. She was able to construct tales that while suffused with a strong sense of morality and spiritual priorities, had a vividness and capacity for understanding the child's perspective that ensured them an extensive influence. In her *History of the Fairchild Family*, first published in 1818, the parents are strict and sanctimonious, but they also provide a secure and loving home. The evocations of childhood naughtiness are entertaining and true to life. Underlying Mrs Sherwood's stories was a consistent sense of the family as a fundamentally valuable institution, not just as the domestic idyll of the more secular nineteenth century thought, but as an essential channel for the spread of the Christian faith. Even when the family is dysfunctional or shattered by bereavement, it can still serve that purpose. Thus in 'The Little Woodman', young William, after the death of his parents, is abandoned in the forest by his brothers, but providentially finds his long-lost grandmother, who gives him a home and a Christian upbringing. After her death he marries, establishes his own Christian family, forgives and supports his estranged brothers, and has the pleasure of seeing his 'children's children growing up in the fear of God.'

For British Evangelicals, regular family prayers were a key means, as Edward Bickersteth put it, 'of propagating piety to posterity'. 'Children', he reminded the readers

of his widely-read *Treatise on Prayer* 'are creatures of imitation' who 'love to copy all that they see in others.' The custom was already well-established in evangelical families by the end of the eighteenth century, and it persisted through much of the nineteenth century. Statements such as 'Every head of a family should consider himself as the minister or priest of his own family' convey an impression of patriarchy, but in reality such prayers were often conducted by women. Bickersteth argued that such prayers would promote domestic harmony, and bring the presence and blessing of God into the family circle. He advised beginning with a Bible reading, singing a psalm or hymn when time and ability allowed, and then concluding with prayer for particular family circumstances, sins, wants, friends and mercies. He recommended extempore prayer as giving scope for response to personal circumstances, but he nonetheless also published a manual of set prayers for family devotions. Similarly Robert Inglis posthumously published the family prayers used by Henry Thornton in the heyday of the Clapham Sect.

The very earnestness of the evangelical commitment to the family reflected their awareness that it was a fragile institution, although unlike its twenty-first century counterpart more likely to be broken up by death than by divorce. The models advocated were moreover hard to detach from British middle-class life-styles, insofar as they tended to presuppose significant living space and privacy, the presence of servants, and mothers who did not need to work outside the home. The custom of family prayers was sometimes urged upon the lower classes, but it is uncertain how extensively it was adopted. Bickersteth, in his *Family Prayers*, provided a short section of short 'Cottager's family prayers', but the book as a whole was evidently designed for educated users with time on their hands. Much of the intensity of Charlotte Elizabeth's attack on women's work in *The Wrongs of Women* derived from her perception that it undermined family life, but, as she so graphically illustrated, many working class women had no economic option other than to take paid employment. In the United States there were evangelical enthusiasts for family prayers, notably among the Methodists, but the custom does not appear to have been as widespread as in Britain.

An individual's recollections of his or her childhood have a timeless quality that can betray the historian into perceiving evangelical family life as static rather than constantly changing. Such change was inevitable in the context of any particular family

as children grew up, developed their own perspectives on their formative influences, and became parents themselves. There was also a wider trend, as the evangelical movement expanded, from early-nineteenth-century families suddenly confronted by the zeal of newly converted members, to mid-century ones in which long-standing shared evangelical commitment was the professed bedrock of relationships. The latter context though could have its limitations as well as strengths in spreading evangelicalism to the rising generation, because the naïvely penetrating gaze of children ruthlessly exposed hypocrisy and legalism. An American Methodist writer observed in 1827:

How frequently have we heard the complaint made, that a majority of children composing the families of professors of religion, are worse than those of irreligious parents. And why, we ask, is this so? May not a satisfactory answer, in most cases, be found in the circumstance, that parents are not always as careful as they should be, to back and support, by the irresistible argument of holy living, the precepts they give their children?

Moreover, even when parents maintained lifestyles of unimpeachable integrity, there was no guarantee that they could transmit their full framework of belief to their children.

Certainly some notable children of evangelical homes – such as Edward Henry Bickersteth, son of Edward, Catherine Marsh, daughter of William, and Henry Venn, son of John – continued straightforwardly to identify with their parental faith. Many others, however, did not. For all the evangelical zeal and parental devotion that characterized their early years, the later lives of both the children of the American Congregational leader Lyman Beecher and those of William Wilberforce came to exemplify the adaptation and rejection of early nineteenth-century evangelicalism rather than in its perpetuation.

The impact of the expansion of evangelicalism on gender relations and family life was in many respects a history of unintended and sometimes paradoxical consequences, as the central spiritual imperative to proclaim the gospel and transmit Christianity to the rising generation interacted with other powerful social and cultural forces. The affirmation of the spiritual equality of men and women was sincere, giving striking confidence to some women and laying an important seedbed for later Christian feminism. However the concurrent insistence that the two sexes had different – if overlapping –

roles and responsibilities in human society worked in practice to limit women's current fields of activity. In upholding the family as a crucial mechanism for spreading and sustaining the faith, evangelicals were swimming with the rising tide of nineteenth-century middle-class domesticity, but ultimately for them as for their more secular contemporaries the family tended to become an end in itself.

Just as, in the last thirty years, the historiography of evangelicalism has become very much intertwined with that of gender and the family, the influence of evangelicalism has for a long time been recognized as an important factor in other fields of cultural and social history. In 1936 G. M. Young wrote of England in the 1830s:

Evangelicalism had imposed on society, even on classes which were indifferent to its religious basis and unaffected by its economic appeal, its code of Sabbath observance, responsibility, and philanthropy; of discipline in the home, regularity in affairs; it had created a most effective technique of agitation of private persuasion and social persecution. On one of its sides, Victorian history is the story of English mind employing the energy imparted by Evangelical conviction to rid itself of the restraints which Evangelicalism had laid on the sense and the intellect; on amusement, enjoyment, art; on curiosity, on criticism and science.

If Young's tribute to evangelicalism might seem a somewhat backhanded one, the inter-war period also saw the more unreservedly enthusiastic appraisals by John Wesley Bready, in his *Lord Shaftesbury and Socio-Economic Progress* (1926) and *England Before and after Wesley* (1939).

More recent historians have also given considerable weight to the influence of evangelicalism. Some such as Clifford Hill in his *Wilberforce Connection*, published earlier this year, had been unabashed apologists for the movement; others such as Herbert Schlossberg in *The Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England* (2000) have been more subtle ones. Throwing modesty to the winds, I would recommend my own edited collection *Evangelical Faith and Public Zeal*, published by SPCK in 1995, as providing an accessible overview in a similar tradition of sympathetic but not uncritical evaluation. In many ways though the most impressive study of the social and cultural impact of evangelicalism published in the last twenty years is Boyd Hilton's *The Age of Atonement*, which appeared in 1988. Hilton argues that during the period which he

characterizes as the 'age of Atonement', from 1785 to 1865, the influence of evangelicalism was pervasive in shaping attitudes to a wide range of social and economic matters. His argument carries greater weight precisely because he is not an 'insider' apologist for evangelicalism, but rather an impartial historian whose perception of the importance of evangelical influence has arisen from his objective evaluation of the evidence.

In present company it should be acknowledged at once that a significant weakness in *The Age of Atonement* is that Hilton has very little to say explicitly about Methodism, or indeed about Nonconformity in general. His approach is an elitist one, drawing his material from a relatively limited circle of Anglican and Church of Scotland writers. Nevertheless, the book would still repay attention from contributors to this project. It is of course impossible adequately to summarize four hundred closely written pages in a few minutes, but I would like to highlight a few of Hilton's key insights.

First, he draws a distinction between 'moderate' and 'extreme' evangelicals, in respect both of theology and of attitudes to society. His moderates were optimistic postmillennialists, his extremists radical premillennialists, who believed that ultimately only dramatic divine intervention would save humankind from catastrophe. The exact terms in which Hilton makes this distinction have been much debated, but its importance lies in stimulating a move away from a perception that equates evangelicalism as a whole with certain patterns of belief and behaviour.

Second, Hilton's moderates are seen as key ideological supporters of *laissez-faire* economics, equating the workings of the market with the operations of divine providence. He sees the leading Scottish churchman Thomas Chalmers, as having a seminal influence in confirming that connection. For Chalmers the value of the free market was that it provided an environment of moral and spiritual trial. Indeed in moderate evangelical hands, this outlook gave a further dimension to the ethic of sexual restraint I have already noted when discussing marriage and the family: reckless procreation was perceived as a moral failure which would bring its own judgement in consequent poverty. Only in relation to slavery did the moderates campaign to change the legislative framework, but that was because they believed slavery itself was an immoral restriction on the free

agency of individuals. The poor at home, whose chains were economic and moral rather than legal, merited no such action.

Third, on the other hand, Hilton's extremists were interventionist. They believed that men should emulate the Almighty by acting to remove manifest injustice and suffering, and above all to provide openings for the gospel. Hence, for example, Lord Ashley, an extremist in Hilton's terms, campaigned for the Factory Acts, although, it is important to note, as much because he was concerned about education, moral and spiritual needs as about working conditions as such. Indeed even moderates could have their non-interventionism shaken by special circumstances: I have already noted the case of slavery, and the disaster of the Irish potato Famine in 1846-7 stirred further recognition that the market could not be left completely unregulated.

Fourth, Hilton traces the diverse intellectual and cultural affinities of evangelicalism. Insistence on integrity and absolute standards of truth is related to Britain's doctrinaire adherence to the Gold Standard, a dislike of speculation, and a view of bankruptcy as moral failure as well as financial disaster. Cholera epidemics were perceived as visitations of providence; the bleeding of sick people was another expression of ideas of retribution and atonement.

Finally, Hilton traces the breakdown of the 'age of atonement' in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. He argues that ideas of retribution and judgement then became much less culturally acceptable, and theologically that emphasis on the incarnation replaced that on atonement. Evangelicals did not necessarily change their own views, but the wider appeal of their beliefs rapidly fell away.

Hilton's argument is compelling and richly documented, and often on its own terms seems unanswerable. Nevertheless aspects of it are open to question: there is for instance a rather different reading of Thomas Chalmers in Stewart Brown's authoritative biography, as not so much an apostle of the free market, as a paternalist in an older Scottish tradition of the godly commonwealth. The main limitations of the book lie though in what it does not cover. I would like to make two main points.

First, Hilton's view is very much one from academic ivory towers and rectory study windows. His account thus tends, in a parallel fashion to some of the analysis of domesticity and family values that we looked at earlier, implicitly to presuppose the

identification of evangelicalism with the middle class. That seems a particularly serious deficiency in relation to Methodism, whose social and educational constituency was a very different one. It can fairly be argued that the ideas and attitudes Hilton describes diffused across the social scale, but such assimilation would have been gradual and patchy. It is therefore necessary to read his analysis in conjunction with that of historians who have done more to explore the outlook of working-class Methodism, notably Edward Thompson's *Making of the English Working-Class*, which more than forty years after its publication still repays serious attention. Thompson, one might note in passing, was himself the son of a Methodist missionary. One of Thompson's central arguments, that Methodism played a key role in acculturating the poor to the work discipline of the early industrial factory, is indeed broadly consistent with Hilton's argument about the role of evangelicalism in legitimizing the sometimes oppressive operation of the free market. However, Thompson and others have also drawn attention to another dimension of Methodism, socially radical, and ready to use Scripture to challenge both the established social order, and the newer structures brought by the industrial revolution.

Second, Hilton is much better at elucidating ideas than in exploring the mechanisms by which they spread. Early nineteenth-century evangelicalism was not merely a framework of beliefs, but a vast and complex institutional network. Alongside denominational structures were the numerous organizations that supported a wide variety of missionary, moral and philanthropic causes. As Sir James Stephen put it in 1844, with gentle irony:

Ours is the age of societies. For the redress of every oppression that is done under the sun, there is a public meeting. For the cure of every sorrow by which our land or our race can be visited, there are patrons, vice-presidents and secretaries. For the diffusion of every blessing of which mankind can partake in common, there is a committee.

Moreover such activity was readily replicated in microcosm on the mission field. Joshua Hill, endeavouring to bring about moral and spiritual reform on Pitcairn Island, was a formidable activist in his small and remote sphere. He arrived on 28 October 1832, and on 25 March 1833 reported to the Church Missionary Society that he had already established a Temperance Society to combat drunkenness, a 'Maundy Thursday Society',

monthly prayer meetings, a juvenile society with about a dozen youths and a Peace Society. He was holding regular church services and had established a school of twenty to thirty children aged between four and seventeen. No one, surely, would dispute his claim that 'I am doing all I can'. But Stephen's implicit scepticism as to whether the mere institutional energy of such organizations actually led to the fulfilment of their objectives poses a central question for historians both of missions and of the metropolitan evangelical scene.

There are important threads here that Ted Royle will pick up in his lecture. In concluding mine, however, I should like to highlight why I think it is important for historians of mission to engage with the kind of material I have been discussing.

First, there are currently a noticeable historiographical trend towards the greater integration of the histories of empire and metropole, evident for example in Catherine Hall's more recent work. Missionary history is central to that agenda, even among secular historians, because it provides such rich sources, and if historians of mission do not take full account of it themselves they risk producing work that is increasingly dated.

Second, the history of a great missionary society such as the MMS is not merely the history of those who served in the field, but also the history of the individuals and organization that supported it at home. Thus missionary societies need to be studied in the framework suggested by the proliferation of evangelical societies for the furtherance of other causes. We also need to understand the social, cultural and religious environment in which missionary supporters operated.

Third, in understanding the metropolitan context of missions, we also understand the values that missionaries, as products of that environment, took with them into the field. As I have tried to show though, it is important to resist simplistic stereotypes of what evangelical values were, whether in respect of gender relations, family life, or the wider operation of society and the economy. It is important to explore the balance between the 'Christianizing' and the 'civilizing' roles of missions, but it should not be assumed that this relationship was itself a fixed or unproblematic one.

Finally, mission history can itself contribute to understanding changes in the social order in the domestic as well as the missionary context. The mission field arguably perforce gave a greater degree of practical equality to women than was the case at home.

The resort of some departing missionaries to what were in effect arranged marriages with women who shared their commitment to the cause might seem disconcerting from a romantic point of view, but when such marriages worked well they provided a genuine basis for spiritual and evangelistic partnership. It is also worth reflecting on how the constraints of life on the mission field influenced child-rearing and education in missionary families. As missionaries – or their children – wrote letters, and eventually returned home, their experience and patterns of behaviour filtered through into the metropolitan evangelical scene

These are some of the reasons why, although working primarily as an historian of evangelicalism in Britain I take a great interest in this project, and look forward to its outcomes. My hope is that this lecture will have provided some initial orientation and stimulus to further enquiry.

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