

“Have you nothing to do but save men’s souls?”

Methodism and Social Action before 1850

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The argument of this lecture is that social action has always been an outcome of Christian belief but the question is whether such action was anything more than a by-product of concern for the salvation of souls. What was the purpose of mission and what motivated the diversion – if it was a diversion – from Gospel preaching into social action? I begin with those forms of social action which can be seen as deriving from the seven acts of spiritual and seven acts of corporeal mercy, scripturally-based and traditional to the Church since the middle ages. I then move to other forms of social action that developed in the later-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which were, strictly speaking, not sanctioned by Scripture but with which Methodism became associated and which gained sanction from contemporary secular Western culture; and I end by asking – but not answering – the question, “What are the implications of this for our evaluation of missionary activity: whose souls did the missionaries set out to save and how did they – and can we – justify the forms of social action that they took with them?”

There was, and still is, a common view, held largely by opponents, that evangelical religion was concerned more with the next life than with this. Reference may be made to Matthew 16 v.26: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”. But while this text plays down the value of this world compared with eternity, it is a distortion of the text to use it to justify a neglect of this world in favour of a single-minded pursuit of the next – unless one shares the view of the early Church that the end of the world is nigh. There is an important distinction to be drawn between the priorities adopted by Christian individuals concerned about the state of their souls, and the actions resulting from that priority with reference to others. Charles Wesley may well have written: “A charge to keep I have: / A God to glorify; / A never-dying soul to save, / And fit it for the sky.” but he followed this up with “To serve the present age, / A calling to fulfill; – / O may it all my powers engage / To do my Master’s will.” Service in the world arose from an awareness of the ‘strict account’ to be given hereafter.

That sounds like justification by works, so I should rephrase my meaning. The evidence of justification by grace through faith lies in the fruits of the spirit. Though

John Wesley emphasised the *spiritual* nature of such fruits, he also recognised in word and in action that “The necessary fruit of this love of God is love of our neighbour ... a love whereby we love every man as ourselves, as we love our own souls.” (Sermon XIV). Thus the argument develops that, although the message preached to others must be concerned with the state of their souls above all else, for the sake of his own soul the preacher must do more than seek the salvation of other men’s souls. Wesley made this clear in his attitude to the poor. Unlike many of his contemporaries and most of his successors, he did not see the poor simply as objects of charity, created by God to enable the rich to exercise that charity whereby their souls were to be saved. Rather, he saw in the poor the embodiment, even re-incarnation, of Christ: to serve the poor was to serve Christ.

One can see the dangerous direction into which this argument might easily lead. It is one that leads Humanists to claim moral superiority over Christians, in that they are able to love their fellow beings as fellow men and women, and for no other reason, without the complicating motive of what it might mean for their own souls. As T. S. Eliot made Thomas à Becket exclaim when tempted by the glories of martyrdom: “The last temptation is the greatest treason, / To do the right thing for the wrong reason.” (*Murder in the Cathedral*). It is small wonder, therefore, that critics of the evangelicals thought them more concerned with themselves than with others and more concerned with the next world than with this. The missionary, domestic or foreign, descending Bible in hand upon on the poor, is a familiar figure in contemporary accounts, although not very attractive to us to-day, but before we dismiss this image of the missionary completely we need to appreciate its strengths: why was this other worldly approach so important to Christian mission and service in the nineteenth and earlier centuries – and, indeed in later centuries too?

Money isn’t everything – but it helps. We live in a materialistic age and we must be careful about imposing our own materialistic values on an earlier age. Lack of material comforts makes us value them more and so it is easy to assume that others in previous ages valued them as we do, but this has not always necessarily been so. Though death, along with taxes, remains one of the few certainties in life, in modern western culture we practise evasion and avoidance of the one as much as of the other. But for many people in less materially successful cultures death has always been the accepted major fact of life and this can result in different priorities. Medical care before the twentieth century was, with a few exceptions, restricted to prevention rather than cure. Visiting the sick was one of the obligations laid on a clergyman by canon law for the good reason that this too often meant helping the sick person

prepare for death. In such circumstances the Bible was more relevant than most of the concoctions in the doctor's bag. (In a recent visit to a medical museum it was pointed out that of all the drugs in the dispensing chemist's shop, only one is regarded as useful to-day – *Salix alba*, an anti-inflammatory drug derived from the white willow and known to us as aspirin. The other drugs were either ineffective or dangerous.) Sudden death, from disease or accident, was common. The injunction to be ready to face one's maker was immediate and its impact and importance should not be underestimated. In other matters also, the value systems of past ages were different. The idea of the social order was far more deeply entrenched and accepted. The poor might hope to escape pauperism but few would dream of becoming rich. Our modern sympathy with the occasional voice that spoke out against the existing social order should not deceive us into believing that most people saw things in that anachronistically modern way or expected their lives to be much different from what they were. When evangelical preachers brought a different message about the *spiritual* order, they were viewed with hostility as potential disturbers of the familiar security of the *social* order, but insofar as their message did not upset the material world, their disturbing Gospel could be heard as liberation into a spiritual world, revealed now but stretching away beyond the looming gateway of death to the joys of heaven beyond: "My chains fell off, my heart was free" is sometimes quoted by historians of slavery as referring literally to this world – but only by those unfamiliar with Charles Wesley's spiritual interpretation of a minor earthquake at Philippi when Paul and Silas were in prison there.

To understand eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century missionary motivation, whether at home or abroad, requires an imaginative effort on the part of the historian to reach back beyond the current ways of European thinking. These began to emerge in the eighteenth-century as part of an intellectual movement that we call the 'Enlightenment' and which only slowly began to influence the way the Gospel was interpreted. The idea that man can control nature, that human progress is possible – and desirable – slowly gained acceptance until by 1850 it was challenging older, static and pessimistic views of the condition of mankind. It is now a commonplace to acknowledge that the Enlightenment, far from being opposed to religious ideas as was once thought, actually ran alongside and in the same direction as the contemporary evangelical revival in religion which so shaped eighteenth and nineteenth century ideas of man and the world. So it is that during the period 1750–1850, we begin to find within the religious mind-set, with its emphasis on the spiritual life, a preparedness in some quarters to question existing assumptions and to see material improvement as not incompatible with spiritual development. The idea that the

millennium would see a thousand years of preparation for the coming of Christ embraced both religious and secular concepts of improvement. Indeed, as we examine the missionary movement across the world in the nineteenth century, it is hard to distinguish its Gospel core from the progressive, Enlightenment views of an increasingly confident and stridently secular Western culture.

The poor have always been good at exploiting the benevolent intentions of the rich and charitable, even though the latter have not always been ready to admit it. Undoubtedly there were many 'rice Christians' at home and abroad, especially if abroad there were already other religious systems in place to offer the spiritual satisfactions and consolations that the religious approach provided. But to claim that the missionary, with Bible in one hand and material aid in the other, has sometimes been accepted more for his rice than his Christianity, is not to say that the material aid was offered as a bribe to take the Bible, even if that was how it sometimes was received. Rather, so far as missionaries were concerned, it was rather the case that the Bible was seen to demand that material aid should accompany the spiritual message, without diminishing it. The seven spiritual works of mercy – conversion of the sinner, instruction of the ignorant, counselling of the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, the patient endurance of wrong, the forgiveness of injuries, and prayer for the living and the dead – have always sat alongside the seven corporeal acts of mercy – feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty to drink, sheltering the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the prisoner and burying the dead. Methodism in its origins in Oxford adopted this programme with systematic enthusiasm.

There was no doubt, therefore, that social action should accompany spiritual action. The problem arose not with the acts of corporeal mercy, which were soundly based in Scripture (notably Matthew 25, vv. 35–37), but with some of the spiritual works of mercy – especially the injunction to instruct the ignorant, which many in the eighteenth century interpreted no wider than to teach the Church Catechism; and to endure wrong patiently, a hard message to preach if wrongness in the affairs of men is seen to lie behind the hunger, thirst, homelessness and poverty which so called upon the spiritual ministrations of the Christian missionary at home and abroad. What we begin to see in Christian missions during the nineteenth century is a broadening understanding of the social implications of the Gospel under Enlightenment influences and a questioning of those traditional injunctions to uphold the social and political order. Mission moved away from its primary aim of preaching salvation; or, rather, mission began to broaden its concept of what constituted salvation.

The idea was not well-developed before the later nineteenth century that the organised power of society, expressed in the state, had a responsibility in such matters as hunger, homelessness and poverty. Indeed, the idea that the state should take away from the individual responsibility for the alleviation of such matters was seen as undermining Christian duty and morality; while to imply criticism of the secular powers established by God was a challenge too far for men of the conservative mind-cast of a John Wesley. Nevertheless, Wesley and his like were pragmatists – theirs was an experimental religion in an age of reason and science. When it was clear that the human organisation of affairs was at odds with what the Enlightenment called ‘benevolence’ or ‘philanthropy’, they found in their consciences reason for taking action to produce social change.

The first test case came with education. The Protestant religion assumed access to the Bible in the vernacular and, for many, such access was seen as personal as well as through the public offices of the Church. The ability to read the Scriptures in the vernacular was therefore a central concern for Protestants and the work of education and translation became an essential aspect of missionary work everywhere. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1699) was within a few years producing literature in Welsh, Irish, French, Greek and Armenian. The first Mohican Bible dates from the mid seventeenth-century and the College of William and Mary was later established in Virginia for the education of Indian children. However, reading opened up a world far beyond the spiritual enlightenment of the people and, by the later eighteenth century, there was much anxiety about such educational missionary work, whether among slaves in the West Indies or the poor of Britain, and the same motivation that had inspired societies for the Reformation of Manners in the 1690s led to the formation of the Proclamation Society (1787), to suppress ‘all loose and licentious prints, books and publications, dispensing poison to the minds of the young and unwary; and to punish the publishers and vendors thereof’ in response to a Royal Proclamation of that year. This society was subsequently joined by the ‘Society for the Suppression of Vice and the encouragement of Religion and Virtue, throughout the United Kingdom, to consist of members of the Established Church’ (1802) – commonly known as the Vice Society. William Wilberforce was prominent in both societies. So educational activity was seen to be double-edged and the educational activities of that impeccable Evangelical, Hannah More, were viewed with suspicion in some quarters as a disturber of good order. But by 1850 the question had decidedly become not *whether* but *how* the poor were to be educated. Indeed, a comparison of York diocese clergy visitation returns from the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries shows how an activity that had been just one among many in 1764 had

become central to parochial mission strategy by 1865 – much to the disgruntlement of Nonconformists.

At the heart of this new emphasis on education lay the Sunday School movement. Unlike the later Victorians, who saw Sunday schools as institutions for ensuring the incorporation of the next generation of members and adherents into the local church at a time of diminishing external recruitment, the early Sunday schools were aimed at those whose parents were not already attached to the local church or chapel. They were part of the Protestant missionary strategy, their primary aim being to rescue the children of the poor on the one day of the week when they were available to be rescued. But rescued from what? For the clergy, including John Wesley and, later, the Connexional Conference, Sunday schools were to be concerned with the saving of souls through bringing Scriptural knowledge to children. They were also, more crudely, concerned with morality, cleanliness and good behaviour. Wesley betrayed this view when he viewed the Bolton Sunday School in 1788:

About three I met between nine hundred and a thousand of the children belonging to our Sunday-schools, I never saw such a sight before. They were all exactly clean, as well as plain in their apparel. All were serious and well-behaved. Many, both boys and girls, had as beautiful faces as, I believe, England or Europe can afford. When they all sung together, and none of them out of tune, the melody was beyond that of any theatre; and, what is the best of all, many of them truly fear God, and some rejoice in his salvation. They are a pattern to all the town.

Sunday schools were not for teaching worldly advancement such as would be gained through learning writing. The frequency with which the Wesleyan Conference condemned this practice would suggest that official policy was widely ignored, especially in those parts of the country where factory child labour was prevalent. From this we might deduce that local motivation for running Sunday schools went beyond the saving of souls and the maintenance of morals to meeting the more worldly needs of the children of the poor. Pressure from below, no less than intellectual shifts from above, were enlarging the boundaries of Christian action.

One argument in favour of this was that children in other parts of the country, and of families who were slightly better-off, could obtain a rudimentary education in a day school. Charity schools had been provided, albeit patchily, since the late-seventeenth century, being a product of that same surge in philanthropy that produced the SPCK and the SPG. An accumulation of benevolent bequests throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meant that in many established parish communities schools were

available to teach reading and writing to boys and reading, needlework and – less frequently – writing to girls, alongside the provision of alms houses, and coals and bread for the poor – all normal objects of Christian charity, though often with strings attached such as attendance at the parish church.

The rapid growth in population that occurred in the later eighteenth century, together with the transformation in scale of many communities, especially in the industrial districts, meant that such parochial charity was becoming inadequate and literacy levels actually fell in the textile factory districts. Though the Sunday school movement can be seen as an immediate response to this, there was also a reinvigoration of day schools through the work of the SPCK and, increasingly, The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church throughout England and Wales (1811) and its lesser rival, the interdenominational British and Foreign Schools Society (1814) whose title echoed the earlier British and Foreign Bible Society (1804). Wesleyans and Catholics also set up day schools and by 1850 voluntary effort by the religious bodies had gone a long way towards establishing, with some state funding, the basis of a national education system.

Three points can be noted arising from the impact of educational developments between about 1780 and 1850. The first is to note how initial concern for rescuing souls rapidly expanded into a broader (though still limited) concern for instruction and training and the secular well-being of children. Secondly, this home missionary activity set the pattern for missions abroad – a point I wish to return to later in this lecture. Thirdly, the extension of educational activity into secular affairs was continued further, as schools served to introduce church people to the home conditions of the children who came to their attention in – and those who were conspicuously absent from – their Sunday or day-school classes. It is in this context that we should understand the development of the Ragged School movement in the 1840s, to reach out to those too poor to attend other schools. Ragged schools, on both weekdays and Sundays, often commenced the school day with breakfast, partly to attract their scholars but partly because the need was obvious.

Such work among the poor was not, of course, new, but the scale and organised nature of it was as it reached out beyond the known poor of settled communities to the unknown poor of the great towns and cities of industrialising and urbanising Britain. The Benevolent Society, started by the Methodists in 1785 ‘for the relief not of our society but the poor, sick and friendless strangers’, as Wesley put it, was an early

example of this response to the needs of the urban poor. This form of outreach had by the 1840s led to the creation of a number of Domestic and Town or City Missions, beginning with the Manchester Domestic Mission in 1833. These Domestic Missions, though, inaugurated by the Unitarians, were shunned by Evangelicals, whose own Town and City Missions quickly followed, with the interdenominational Manchester Town Mission and the London City Mission being founded in 1835. Though the missionaries sent by such organisations to visit the poor in their homes, bearing bibles, tracts and messages of hope and consolation, were primarily out to save souls, the notebooks that they kept and quoted from in their annual reports show that much else was going on. At first the Unitarians appeared more responsive than the Evangelicals to the secular needs of the poor, but soon clothing and food were being delivered by all such domestic visitation societies, of which by far the larger number were Evangelical. Women as well as men were being employed to relieve the poor, especially women, who bore the brunt of family poverty, and soup kitchens were being organised in times of crisis. As was later to happen with the Salvation Army, evangelical missions to rescue souls soon turned also to more mundane matters of bodily survival.

Parallel to the development of missions came medical work among the poor, especially the public dispensary movement. Wesley had opened a dispensary as early as 1747 but the fashion was set by the foundation of the General Dispensary in Aldersgate in 1770. By 1820 there were around 25 dispensaries in London and 35 in provincial towns, with many more established over the next half century, providing free medicine for the poor, financed by public subscription. It should be noted, however, that the reasons behind such provision were often mixed. The subscribers obtained tickets which they could distribute among the poor, thus extending their influence and patronage, securing a method for controlling and rewarding as well as relieving the poor.

The motivation for such developments might long be debated with little conclusive evidence on either side. The annual reports of the missionaries are long on the statistics of relief, giving due prominence to literature distributed, prostitutes rescued and drunkards reformed. This no doubt tells us a great deal about what it was necessary to report in order to satisfy subscribers and open their wallets to fund the coming year's activities. Lost souls in need of salvation fulfilled the same role then as do pictures of starving children to-day. Yet it would be a harsh cynic who did not also see the force of compassion and the fulfilment of the objects of Christian charity and the obligation to carry out works of mercy. Matthew 25, vv. 25–37 and the story of

Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16, vv. 19–25 are never far away and bring us back to the question of whose soul was it that the missionaries were really saving. In the appeals to subscribers, the missionaries were implicitly targeting the subscribers' own souls. So, although I would argue that the charge of evangelicals ignoring the need for social action in pursuit of 'higher' and more spiritual objectives is hard to sustain, the charge of self-interested benevolence is not so easy to dismiss.

Another charge to which evangelical missions were open was what Charles Dickens (in *Bleak House*) called 'telescopic philanthropy'. *Punch* in 1844 commented:

just as connoisseurs take a backward step to truly consider the beauties of a picture, so do many of these good folks require distance to see the miseries of human nature through an attractive medium. They have no taste for the destitution of the alley that abuts their dwelling-place, but how they glow – how they kindle at the misery somewhere in Africa.

There is no doubt something in this, reinforced by complaints about the nuisance caused by Methodists collecting for foreign missions among the poor at home. Yet it is also true to say that home and foreign missions were not in competition with each other and no clear line should be drawn between the two. The British and Foreign Bible Society was exactly that – British *and* Foreign – and, as a recent study of Sheffield by Dr Alison Twells has shown, the same people were often leaders in Sunday school work and domestic philanthropy, and in missionary work overseas (*The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class, 1792–1850: the 'Heathen' at Home and Overseas*: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Indeed the former could often provide a training ground for the latter and the model of activity – establishing a mission room, preaching the Gospel, setting up schools with a secular as well as religious purpose, opening dispensaries – was the same both at home and overseas.

Nevertheless, it is true that the foreign mission field could prove more appealing – more exotic, more adventurous, and more challenging than work nearer home. If Stephen Neil was right to define 'mission' as traditionally meaning 'the going forth of the Gospel into those areas where it has never previously penetrated at all – beyond the utmost frontiers of the Church into the wholly unknown' (*History of Christian Missions*), it took some time for the denominations in Britain, especially for the Church of England itself, to recognise this as a description equally applicable to the domestic scene. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did it become fashionable to apply the language of the overseas mission field – 'darkest' and the 'heathen' – to areas of Britain's towns and cities, especially to London, the capital of that Christian empire with which mission was inextricably associated. Then, the

multi-purpose mission centre, devised in the circumstances of the overseas field, could be brought back to concentrate missionary efforts in the cities of late-Victorian England.

An early example of the relationship between home and overseas, and of the realisation that the Gospel might demand more than a preaching mission, comes when we turn from those immediate pastoral concerns arising out of the drive for conversion and the seven spiritual and seven corporeal acts of mercy to what have been termed 'the politics of pietism'. The various branches of Methodism were not alone in initially shunning political engagement. Not only was politics seen as a corrupt and corrupting business that detracted from affairs of the soul; it was also divisive. Politics had reduced the Church of England to institutional impotence in the eighteenth century and Wesley was concerned to focus the minds of Methodists on higher and more worthwhile things. However, when a pressing moral concern could be shown to demand political action, then political activity could be legitimised. This was the case with the agitation against slavery.

When the 'Society for the Conversion and Religious Instruction and Education of the Negro Slaves in the British West India Islands' was formed in 1691, it was concerned less with their freedom than their salvation, but during the eighteenth century criticism of the institution of slavery became more insistent. In the 1760s, Granville Sharp, a millenarian member of the Church of England, took up the cause and obtained the celebrated Mansfield Judgment in the Somerset Case in 1772, which was believed (probably wrongly) to have outlawed slavery in England. In this context and under Quaker influence, John Wesley published his *Thoughts on Slavery* in 1774. The loss of the American colonies in 1783 further stimulated anti-Slavery activity in which Quakers and Evangelicals played an important role, stimulated in part by their faith and in part by the spread of those secular ideas of benevolence and philanthropy associated with the Enlightenment, and concern about man's inhumanity to man. It was this latter, secular impulse that directed the religious bodies towards the emancipation as well as the salvation of negroes. But to say the movement against slavery was stimulated by shifts in secular thinking is not to deny that the campaign conducted in Britain against the slave trade and slavery itself was indeed led and organised by religiously-inspired men and women and by institutions exploiting the newly-established missionary networks linking the West Indies and Britain. Missionary preachers were seen in the West Indies as agents of the Anti-slavery Society and were viewed with hostility by planters. They were not wrong, as missionaries channelled news of the abuses of slavery back to Britain to fuel a public

opinion which then found expression in petitions collected in church and chapel porches after service. Whatever might be said by historians about the economic and strategic reasons for the abolition of the slave trade 1807, the attempt to impose this ban on other countries in 1815 and then the abolition (gradual and with compensation) of slavery itself in British territories after 1834, much of the impetus for abolition came from the moral outrage of the man and woman in the pew, fed by missionary news from the plantations. The turning point is often seen as the death of John Smith, a London Missionary Society missionary in Demerara who was sentenced to be hung in 1824 on a charge of inciting slaves to rebel, and died of fever whilst in prison. His case was raised in the House of Commons and was the occasion of Wilberforce's last appeal for the abolition of slavery before ill health forced his retirement from public life. Another significant missionary was the Baptist, William Knibb, who had been in Jamaica since 1824 and whose furlough lecture tour of 1832 roused feelings against slavery at a key moment in the abolition campaign.

The abolition of slavery is the classic case of missionary zeal leading to social and indeed political action, and the re-organisation of society. But the step from pietism to politics was not an easy one to take and came rather late. Both George Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon owned slaves. The missionary societies often remained suspicious of their missionaries' activities and, following Smith's death, the WMMS urged its missionaries in the West Indies not to engage in social and political controversy. Even the outspoken William Shrewsbury (who was later transferred from Barbados to the Cape Colony where his imperialism got the better of his humanitarianism and he was dismissed), believed slavery had its benefits if it contributed to the slaves' 'spiritual liberty and everlasting happiness'. Missionaries, aware of actual conditions and the delicate circumstances in which they conducted their spiritual mission, could be a good deal more cautious than the folk back home where Smith's case and Knibb's lectures carried the day. Remarkably, in 1830 the Wesleyan Conference broke its own rules to advise Wesleyan voters to use their ballots in support of anti-slavery candidates in the 1830 General Election.

The Anti-Slavery movement at home also had its critics among those who charged it with 'telescopic philanthropy'. The sight of Wesleyans wringing their hands and pouring out their prayers against negro slavery enraged the son of Robert Oastler, Wesley's last host in Leeds and later leader of the New Connexion in Yorkshire. Richard Oastler was incensed at the sight of Wesleyan mill owners condemning slavery while at the same time employing small children for long hours and little pay in their own textile mills. At least slave owners had to feed their slaves; no such

benefits for the children of the Wesleyan worsted mills of Bradford. Oastler believed that this must be through ignorance, so he wrote a letter to the local newspaper, the *Leeds Mercury*, denouncing what he called 'Yorkshire Slavery'. He was wrong: the problem was not ignorance but hypocrisy, and so he followed up his initial letter with further, more extreme ones until the paper finally excluded him from its columns. Oastler's anger was shared by the son of another prominent Methodist, whose father had supported the action of the Manchester magistrates at the notorious 'Peterloo' massacre in 1819 – Joseph Rayner Stephens of Ashton under Lyne. The main object of his indignation was the amended Poor Law of 1834 which was seen as an assault on the right of the poor to support from the parish rates. Both men took the frontiers of the politics of moral indignation beyond what their churches and middle-class society regarded as proper, and both men spent time in prison; yet in their own eyes they were simply following their consciences and speaking out in defence of the poor in a nation that was hypocritically complacent and did not seem to care, unless the suffering were safely overseas and could be assuaged by a donation to missionary funds.

This is understandable but a little unfair. More in the mainstream was the wider effort to improve the legislative protection of children, young people and women in factories and workshops with which the tireless Anthony Ashley Cooper, later seventh earl of Shaftesbury, became associated, first with the campaign for the 1833 Factory Act and then his subsequent achievement in securing a Child Employment Commission in 1840 which led to the banning of all child and female labour underground in coal mines two years later. Though Lord Ashley was joined in his philanthropic efforts by people of all religious positions – and none – these can nevertheless be counted as part of that broader effort which his career symbolises and which thrust Evangelicals into a range of social and political activities that belied their supposed concern for the next world rather than this.

The early Victorian period also saw other developments in pressure group politics that were modelled on the success of the anti-slavery campaign. Some of these were overtly political and illustrate how fine the line became between politics and pietism. The Anti-Corn Law League campaigned for a reduction in the duties on imported corn and thus in the price of bread – a device, said their opponents with some truth, aimed at reducing the level of wages. But the principal organiser, Richard Cobden (who, one must in fairness add, did not accept this argument), ran the campaign as a moral/religious one: he wrote,

We have carried it on by those means by which the middle class usually carries on its movements. We have had our meetings of dissenting ministers; we have obtained the co-operation of the ladies; we have resorted to tea parties, and taken those pacific means for carrying our views, which mark us rather as a middle-class set of agitators.

This ability to dress a political agitation up as a moral crusade was not entirely insincere. For some participants, a tax on the bread of the poor was a moral issue, whether that was a corn duty imposed by parliament or a tithe duty imposed by the Church of England. Free trade would lead to economic interdependence and world peace. To a man like the Quaker Joseph Sturge of Birmingham, the abolition of the Corn Laws, the extension of the suffrage, the total and immediate abolition of slavery throughout the world, and international arbitration leading to world peace were all part of a single moral and Christian view of how human affairs should be organised.

Perhaps the best example of how religious belief could lead to social action comes with my final example, the Temperance movement. Despite the Gin Act of 1751 which brought to an end the excesses of London drinking in the age of Hogarth, gin palaces continued to thrive and in 1830 a relaxation in the licensing laws for beer houses led to a surge in their number also. Initially the Temperance movement was concerned with spirits consumption only, and in an age in which non-alcoholic drinks were often lethal, beer was seen as the temperance alternative. This was the position in Wesley's day but by 1830 a harder view was emerging, at first mainly among radical members of the lower classes who detected hypocrisy in the actions of the port-loving rich banning the drinking pleasures of the poor. This attack on the pleasures of the poor was motivated partly by the need to end the waste and wretchedness induced by alcohol, and partly by a wish to end competition with the Church. The rise of Sabbatarianism resulted in an Act of 1828 which closed public houses during the hours of divine service (one is reminded of Wesley's similar decision to close his chapels at such times!). In 1854 opening hours on Sundays were further restricted to between 12.30 and 2.30 in the afternoon, between the usual hours for morning and 'evening' church services and after dinner in the evening, between the hours of 6.00 and 10.00.

Unlike the above temperance measures, in which the religious hand of morally reforming evangelicals was prominent, Teetotalism had other roots and was not at first favoured by the churches. The Beer Act of 1830 was supposed to promote temperance by making beer more readily available; predictably it did not work. At the

same time the falling price of tea and the growing popularity of coffee houses for the poorer classes made non-alcoholic beverages realistically available. Not until 1861, though, did Cadbury develop the alternative drink of cocoa, only a year after alcoholism had been identified as a disease separate from drunkenness. Before then, drunkenness had been seen solely in terms of moral weakness, and the removal of temptation was seen as the solution to a moral problem that had serious economic and social consequences for the poor individually and for the economic and moral well-being of the country as a whole.

The decision of the Preston Anti-Spirits society to adopt total abstinence in 1832 is usually taken as marking the beginning of the new movement, and the propaganda of Joseph Livsey, with his famous *Malt Lecture*, first delivered in Preston in February 1833, is identified with Teetotalism. The Quakers were among the first religious group to take the new emphasis seriously, and among other denominations appealed most to supporters from the working class. As with Sunday schools, it was working people on the ground, especially in the industrial districts, who provided the motive power for the new movement. In Methodism, the Protestant Methodists were among the first to take up the cause; the Wesleyans were among the last, not considering the matter in Conference until 1873 and not sanctioning total abstinence societies until 1892. Though Conference had deplored intemperance in 1836, five years later it still affirmed the requirement that fermented wine be used at Communion, a position that led to a large secession of Cornish Wesleyans. In 1848 a declaration for abstinence was signed by 111 Primitive Methodist ministers and by 42 from the much smaller WMA, but by only 24 ministers from the majority Wesleyan body. Teetotalism was seen as a secular agitation, tainted by radicalism and lay support, and it was unscriptural, a rival suitor for energies that ought to be devoted to converting sinners. Teetotalism however, became popular among ordinary chapel members, and in Methodism received a great boost from the lecture tours in the mid 1840s of the American revivalist, James Caughey, whose activities were also held to have laid the foundations for the great Reform split of 1850.

So Teetotalism, with which Methodism has been identified until recently, illustrates the nature of and limits of social action in the period before 1850. It was popular with chapel congregations because it was seen as a response to a moral evil that caused poverty, sickness, cruelty (especially to women and children) and family break-up. It was an empirical reaction to the circumstances that Christians saw around them. In this it had much in common with dispensaries and soup kitchens, Sunday schools and Ragged Schools. Where these latter were distinct from Teetotalism was in their

obvious Scriptural basis; they fulfilled those obligations that were traditionally seen as works of mercy. Other matters, such as the attack on the consumption of alcoholic beverages, were apparently unscriptural and offered a non-scriptural route to salvation.

So where does this leave the abolition of slavery? Slavery was a fact of life in the ancient world and as such went unchallenged as an institution. It is an irony that Ham was cursed to servitude because he saw his father naked when drunk. That story, like the wedding at Cana in Galilee, was a millstone around the necks of reformers. In Galatians 3, St Paul treated slavery and freedom as naturally as he did gender differences: they were spiritually irrelevant but he did not condemn them as human institutions. This long remained the churches' position. For this reason I would conclude that the widening definition of what the Gospel demanded, producing a great extension of the churches' programme of social action, came not from within traditional biblical understandings of the world but as a result of changing concepts of humanity engendered by the Enlightenment; and that the campaign against the inhumanity of slavery marks a transformation in the development of evangelical Christianity from its concern with the souls of men and women to a concern also for their physical bodies, not merely as temples of the spirit but in their own right. Even so, this concern was often pushed furthest and soonest by ordinary lay men and women in their pews, less careful than their clerical leaders of the theological niceties of secular action or the Connexional politics that this involved.

This association of Gospel preaching with Enlightenment humanitarianism, though, whatever its benevolent and philanthropic outcomes, should not be regarded uncritically. When missionaries confronted the benighted poor of darkest England, or the heathen of some foreign mission field, they took with them a Gospel and outlook profoundly shaped by the culture of the European Enlightenment. It was an outlook that challenged and was often at odds with the values the missionaries met with on the mission field, both at home and abroad. The implications of this for class at home and cultural imperialism abroad were recognised only by a few at the time; but their consequences are a matter of continuing relevance and debate for us to-day.