



Did participation in Religion in Victorian Britain decline? Why or why not?

Before analysing the decline or otherwise of Religion in Victorian Britain it is useful first to qualify the interpretation of Religion. There are two interesting interpretations that will be used as a foundation of this analysis and these are "*belief in, worship of, or obedience to a supernatural power or powers considered to be divine or to have control of human destiny*", with a second of "*something of overwhelming importance to a person*". Both of these interpretations are certainly impacted by the more archaic understanding of Religion that was dominated by the practice of sacred ritual observances, rites and ceremonies. Without doubt throughout Victorian Britain participation in Religion underwent change as the population sociologically matured and embraced new forms of expression of such beliefs. There was a swing away from religiosity of the more extremely pious, sanctimonious approach to a form that was more appropriate to, or in accordance with, the principles of the time. Whether this should be qualified as a decline is debatable if one uses an interpretation that is able to combine "belief in something of overwhelming importance to a person" and that controls "human destiny" as a definition of religion.

This analysis starts at the beginning of the 19th century when life in Britain had commenced its journey from being a predominantly rural, agriculturally focused economy to a more urbanised manufacturing economy. Social and community existence within the both villages and towns was dominated by more than the secular activities of the established Church of England. Urbanisation had brought about the collapse of the early social structure of peerage, the wealthy and the labouring poor and had developed new social hierarchies of middle-class, the lower middle and upper working classes, the labouring poor and the destitute. Thus the previous pattern of parishes dominated by peer patronage, that had led to the gross disparities in clerical appointments and pluralism, began to crumble under the weight of Executive intervention following the repeal of the Test and Corporation Act in 1828 and rise in Nonconformism and the changes of the Reform Act of 1832. The fragmentation of the Anglican Protestant church into the High, Broad and Low church sects, the advance of the Nonconformists, the emancipation of the Roman Catholics and the unrelenting zeal of the evangelical movement exploded upon the unsuspecting populous. Yet, despite being no longer subservient to a landlord that ensured his tenants participated in church activities, the majority of the population were still beholden to the established church for the rites of baptism, marriage and death. New opportunities developed in the competition for the hearts and minds of the labouring poor who continued to look to the Churches for their extensive charitable support schemes. How therefore could an ever-increasing population, particularly of labouring poor, fail to be anything other than fuel for the ever-increasing variety of Victorian religious followings?

As early as 1824 the activity of the church was encroaching upon the life of ordinary people far beyond the simple acts of worship. For example T. R. Malthus¹ was advocating population control through the enforcement of Poor Law relief. His theory was that the dependent poor would do much to avoid the stigma associated with parochial relief, even to the extent of abstinence from marriage, but that in order to avoid the potential consequences of vice and misery, each individual had the power, through the light of revealed Religion, of avoiding evil consequences to themselves and society. Without Religion, Malthus believed that the natural tendency of the labouring classes would be to increase their numbers beyond a level that could be adequately supported. This was more than secular expression of beliefs it was direct intervention to control an individual's destiny.

So, some 14 years before the start of the Victorian era in 1838, there were attempts at intervention, through Religion, into the physical and spiritual philosophies adopted by the population. The Establishment was driven by a need to harness and control the working and labouring classes that almost led to Civil War in 1831 with the rebellion in rural areas of agricultural labourers. Yet it was also clear that the degree of church intervention was greater further down the social scale. The 1833 Factory Act that took children out of the textile industry and provided the first education grant of £20,000 for elementary education, placed the nation's children within the control of Anglican clerics who were, in the main, appointed to oversee the elementary school boards that now had a responsibility for the education of urban children up to the age of thirteen. In Ireland, the predominantly Catholic Irish resented the enforced payment of tithes to support the Protestant church, creating a "din of political contention"² and resorting to violence. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 provided Workhouses for the destitute, removing the administration away from the more local parish authorities and giving it to remote elected boards that were in turn strongly influenced by the church. By 1836 state intervention became further entrenched with the Tithe Commutation Act that enforced the payment of cash, rather than kind, to the Anglican clergy, though some relief was promised with the proposal for civil registration for births marriages and deaths. The people power, so clearly seen in the Swing Riots of 1831, grew in sophistication with the creation of the Working Men's Association in London that launched the Chartist Movement supported by missionary speakers who toured the country addressing huge public meetings. The promised civil registration of births, marriages and deaths arrived in July 1837 being preceded one month earlier with the succession of Queen Victoria and the start of the Victorian era, a period of radical change for both the people and Religion within Great Britain.

The Anglican Church was in fact less secure than it looked with an organisation that was largely medieval in format and not designed for change. Whilst the Methodist and Nonconformist rivals

moved ahead the Anglican Church became embroiled in internal disruption with both politics and social life riven by clashes between the Churches and creeds that in turn were fuelled by changes in the wider society and deepening class divisions. The spiritual discord had commenced as early as 1833 with the development of the Tractarian Oxford Movement and the notoriety of Newman's "Tracts for The Times" with its provocative display of catholic sympathies and opposition of church subordination to the state. During the 1840s internal rivalry grew within the established church between the High, or Anglo Catholics, the Broad and the Low Church followers. Eventually from within Anglicanism there emerged a small but significant stream of converts to Roman Catholicism with Newman and Manning, as examples of the better known, hoping for nothing less than the reconversion of England to Rome.

Much of this early controversy within the Anglican Protestant church was mirrored north of the border in Scotland in the conflict between the Moderates, who supported the choice of the Minister by the landlord, and the Evangelicals who insisted that the congregation appoint the Minister. The Disruption of 1843³ saw the Evangelicals leaving the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church with some 40% of the ministers and congregation. As in England the middle-class Evangelicals dominated the urban conurbations whilst Moderates were stronger in the land owning classes, but with long memories of the Clearances, Highlanders continued with the distrust of landlords and the Free Church gained overwhelming support. Rivalry was maintained between the two followings with the Free Church pursuing the right to be recognised as the true national establishment for Scotland, building in the process an alternative set of Kirks and Schools. Ultimately thwarted in its claim in the 1870s the Free Church rejected the principle of establishment and moved closer to Nonconformity.

An outcome of the Great Famine of Ireland (1845 to 1851) was the significant increase of Irish immigrants into England and Scotland. No longer exposed to rural forms of Irish Roman Catholicism these immigrants began to lose all contact with their church; their priests, anxious to halt this haemorrhage of devotion, adopted the fervour of revivalists. They adopted a missionary zeal amongst the Irish poor, particularly the northwest of England, creating new chapels focused on Ultramontane piety combined with social support schemes. Within the inner-city parishes Catholic priests were seen by their parishioners as guardians of the church law, promoting faith, sacraments and temperance plus, more importantly unlike Protestant clerics, acknowledging to the congregation that it was no disgrace to be poor and to stay poor. Thus to the underprivileged, Roman Catholicism became a viable alternative to the "hell and damnation" offered by the Protestant Evangelicals. The priests' objectives were to shield their congregations in self-imposed communities, secure from Protestant influence, where the church was the focus of an individual's identity and future. In this the Roman Catholic Church was extremely successful, more so than

any other Christian following, but unfortunately the development of such catholic communities created an anti-catholic, anti-Irish response from a predominantly Protestant country and the public pronouncements by Cardinal Wiseman in 1850 triggered anti-Catholic prejudice throughout every social class. This anti-Catholic prejudice was to dominate Irish matters for years to come fuelling debates such as the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869 and calls for home rule that proceeded beyond the Victorian era.

Within pre-Victorian England, Nonconformity as well as Anglicanism had always been an option. What is known is that the arrival of the Victorian era saw a new development where church attendance was essential to a family's respectability, social standing and professional progression. Lower middle and upper working classes formed the bedrock of Methodist and Nonconformist converts and swelled their congregations.

Though large numbers of young people received an Anglican education few remained with the church. Many turned to Methodism in their late teens and early twenties, possibly as a result of their attendance at the so-called non-denominational Sunday Schools, often run by Evangelicals and middle-class philanthropists, and where there were ample opportunities to socialise with the opposite gender. These also attracted large numbers of working-class children who were taught to read the Bible, and sometimes to write. The effects of the evangelical movement were ambiguous: while in its Anglican version it reinforced patriarchal authority within the Family, it also opened up philanthropic and other activities for women outside the home, particularly in Methodism and Nonconformity. Evangelicals were alarmed at the perceived failure within the established church, the perception of semi paganism within the labouring poor and a perceived laxity toward Christianity within elements of the middle and upper classes. The remedy, they proclaimed, was to reduce the intervention of the state within church government and reduce the reliance upon ritual and sacrament within worship. The Bible was the word of God, salvation of the sinner lay through faith and the expression of faith was to experience conversion. Thus the very heart of Evangelicalism was to be a born again Christian, intensely moral, pursuing the right, rather than the wrong path in every action. Consequently Evangelicals became tireless do-gooders, organising and campaigning for a bewildering array of moral causes. Their obsession with self-discipline, hard work and moral rectitude, combined with their condemnation of idleness and vice, secured positive responses in the middle classes who saw this as a means of restoring social order and calming social unrest. The effect on the working myriads was entirely the opposite!

The majority of working-class people however continued to regard Churches as places where they were not welcome. Perceived by the working-class as the environment of a middle-class

who could afford the outward trappings of wealth, attendance at church could bring unwelcome attention to working-class people from the peer group. It can be concluded therefore that social pressure did much to deter church going from the lower "protestant" social classes.

It is possible to see the demonstrable impact of this when Sunday attendance at church was measured in the religious census of 1851 when over 5 million of the population had not attended church. Mann suggested in his report⁴ that this was a regular occurrence and that probably it was not the same 5 million every Sunday! The conclusion therefore was that some number considerably over 5 million were regularly absent from a church service. Mann went on to conclude that the key cause of the absenteeism was the maintenance of the class structure and that "religion had become a purely middle-class proprietary or luxury". However, most controversial at the time, was that the census had revealed that the Church of England had lost its majority position, and that Nonconformist, Catholics and other sects accounted for over half of all attendances. Of particular importance was the revelation that Protestant attendance was poorest in many parts of the Northern industrial towns, despite the popularity in that area of Nonconformism. Another outcome was that the urban working-class, now perceived as the majority of the population, in rarely attending the church had become spiritually destitute, though this conclusion was opposed by Binns (1862)⁵ in his own analysis that "Thoughtful mechanics in railway works and elsewhere follow Secretaries and General Managers to listen to an episcopal Saturday afternoon sermon" rather than listen to preachers who treated them "as if they were ploughboys".

In an attempt to increase congregations all Victorian Churches invested in the provision of urban churches, chapels and missions recognising that an opening into a worker's home possibly lay in the conversion of the wife or mother. Efforts were made to establish educational, philanthropic self-help, and recreational facilities for the urban working classes led by the activities of middle-class women of the evangelical persuasion. Whilst these were warmly received, albeit with some degree of caution, by the deserving poor, the male dominated church hierarchy offered scant recognition to the authority of the women within their numbers; declaring the inferiority of women and that woman's purpose was to be a "help-meet" to her husband. No doubt equally irritating were the revelations of the leading women of the time, such as C. M. Yonge⁶, that they supported such beliefs. Not perhaps the most satisfying recognition for the "daughters of the church"!

However, the majority of the regular working-class nonattenders would not be total strangers within the church. Most people were still married in a church and most mothers had their babies christened. Sunday Schools were still populated with working-class children and Sunday School anniversaries were regarded as major festivals. Working-class people still regarded the church as

a source of charity with most urban churches having extensive welfare schemes providing nourishment, clothing, shelter and sometimes money plus, of course, an obligatory copy of the Bible. The working poor no doubt "played the system" to their advantage, taking what was most important to them at the time and ignoring the rest. They would pick and choose between differing doctrines and moral teachings according to their needs, seeing Christianity as a kindness, a demonstration of "doing the right thing" and of taking life as it came. Most believed in God and probably in afterlife, and most often felt sinned against rather than committing sin in their social observances. The same could also be said for the non-Christian faiths such as Judaism where "the poor, though not debarred from worship were given few inducements to attend"⁷.

It is in fact to Judaism that we look to see the rigorous implementation of social class structure where the price of seats within the synagogue restricted membership to the privileged classes. Data from the 1851 religious census indicated that a mere 16% of the Anglo Jews population attended a service on the holy day. Loosely based upon the English established church structure, the Anglo Jewish hierarchy was as foreign to the Jewish immigrants as the Jewish faith was to Christians. Unlike the Roman Catholics who sought to embrace Irish catholic immigrants, Anglo Judaism sought to distance themselves from the Eastern European, more orthodox, Jewish immigrants creating, in the process, concentrations of poor Jewish immigrants in geographical areas within East London, Leeds and Manchester. Such was the conflict between the native and the immigrant that the drive to become anglicised assumed the utmost importance swelling the strata of middle-income followers of the Jewish faith. For those of the immigrant poor who could not make this transition the choice was relatively simple, they could abandon the Jewish faith, inter-marry and seek anglicisation, or retrench to maintain their own brand of religion. In the event although many Jews abandoned the faith toward the end of the 19th century, Anglo Judaism in both its liberal and orthodox formats continued to coexist, albeit with some dissatisfaction, with the Jewish communes that continued in the poorer areas of the great cities.

As the British society stabilised and matured the manufacturing industries continued to grow, sucking in huge numbers of the population to satisfy the demand for workers. Independent artisans who had formed the backbone of the Nonconformist chapels in the past became fewer and competition from both Catholic and Anglican missionaries resulted in the reduction in Nonconformist adult conversions. The core of the membership was still drawn for the lower middle and upper working classes with little headway being made with factory workers. This can be exemplified when one examines the key persons who supported the main denominations such as, W H Lever (Congregationalists) Thomas Cook (Baptist), George Cadbury (Quaker), and Samuel Courtauld (Unitarians). Within the realms of Nonconformism was the development of a

particular social network and identity that sought mutual support in business, public authority and inter family marriage. When one examines the lack of popularity of Nonconformism with the working-class we again return to social divisions and the gulf between the "Nonconformist conscience", their zeal to impose moral reform on society, and the working-class indifference to their call for repentance. No doubt a major stumbling block was the expectation that all new converts were expected to sign the pledge, to become total abstainers and to campaign for outright prohibition. Despite all this nonconformity prospered as its wealthy patrons continued to provide financial support and ultimately the followings developed a mutual dignity in which the austerity of prior years was replaced by comfort and the God of hell fire and damnation replaced by a kind and forgiving spirit. Nonconformism had matured beyond church into a dominant political force when Gladstone acquiesced to their pressure and his first government abolished compulsory [Anglican] church rates (1868) opened Oxford and Cambridge University's to Nonconformist students (1871) and in 1880 the Burials Act allowed Nonconformist ministers to perform their own funeral service in parish church yards. Nonconformist continued to be a political force, primarily supporting the Liberal party, for the remainder of the Victorian era and did not fall from grace until after 1906.

Throughout the development of Britain in the 19th century the key element was the growth in urban population and corresponding rise in the working and labouring classes, yet, it has been demonstrated that, with the exception of Irish Catholic immigrants, the social class with the greatest population growth continued to avoid regular participation in the worship of all the denominations discussed. The very engines introduced within urban parishes to attract the labouring poor, such as social clubs and sports events, failed as they were commercialised. As such it is argued that the labouring and working classes had little or no impact on Congregational size during the early and mid-Victorian period, and that the new sociological middle class strata in fact drove the ecclesiastical "Golden Age". It was the middle-class, and to some extent upper working-class, that fuelled the meteoric rise in Nonconformism during the mid-Victorian period. However by the mid-1870s the membership was failing to keep pace with the population overall and there is evidence to support that strict Sunday observance was no longer being followed. It can be argued therefore that any subsequent negative change in church attendance must come from the social strata that led to its very growth.

Darwin's "The Origin of Species" published in 1859 had laid the foundation of questioning Christian belief amongst the more educated classes. Amongst the more interested parties within the higher echelons disputes sallied back and forth between a "who's who" of scientists and clerics that included Newman, Chapman, George Elliot and no less a person as the Archbishop of Canterbury. As time progressed the early criticism of Max Müller (1873)⁸ gave way to open

debate of the type espoused by Benjamin Kidd⁹ with his discussion paper in 1894. Confrontation between scientists and clerics diminished and the educated congregations explored the ramifications of religions without supernatural deities. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was also being seen in more practical terms in the running of businesses where an individual's qualifications and ability proved to be more important to their material existence than demonstrating social standing through church attendance. Social pressures were once more changing. National religious days ceased to be observed and the "Bank Holidays" created in 1871 severed all links with Christianity. The early austere church devoid of music had taken the lead demonstrated by dissenters in introducing musical accompaniment, through organised choirs to the external events, such as those led by Moody and Sankey or the Salvation Army, to full orchestrated entertainment in theatres. The change from eternal punishment by a seemingly cruel deity to a more forgiving father figure removed the necessity of seeking salvation and it seemed but a short step from no longer seeking salvation to no longer attending a church.

Thus it is argued that the very openness toward religious variety within Great Britain also led to its eventual fragmentation. Almost perpetual infighting amongst the sects for Christian supremacy within the country eventually tired the middle class congregations who gradually reduced their commitment to church attendance. Yet it is argued that the decline in church (or synagogue) attendance did not mean the decline in religion as a belief. The majority of the British populous maintained a belief in their God even though the visible trappings were minimally observed, except at such social occasions of births marriages and deaths. People still had their belief in a deity that controlled human destiny, that something of overwhelming importance to a person, but they subscribed to the belief that solutions to their needs did not necessarily exist within four walls of a church. Participation in religion during the Victorian period did not fall; it achieved radical growth and then changed direction. At the end of the Victorian period in 1901 the population, though still primarily Christian, were followers of a new religion, the high ethical ideals of the British Empire, there being much evidence of this as late as 1914 when thousands of the nation's manhood strode off to war to fight for God, the Empire and the British sense of "the right thing to do".

¹ T.R. Malthus on the principle of population, 1824 in RVB111 p.389

² W.E. Gladstone on the State in its relations to the Church, 1838, in RVB111 p.118

³ The Disruption in the Church of Scotland, 1843 in RVB111 pp. 137-146.

⁴ H Mann on the religious census, 1853, inRVB111 p.313.

⁵ W. Binns on the religious heresies of the working classes, 1862, in RVB111 p.371.

⁶ C.M. Yonge on woman and the Church, 1876, in RVB111 p.95.

⁷ Englander, D. Anglicized Not Anglican: Jews and Judaism in Victorian Britain, in RVB 1, p. 255

⁸ Max Müller on Christian Missions, 1873 in RVB111 pp. 506-511.

⁹ B Kidd on the Function of Religious Beliefs in the Evolution of Society, 1894 pp.512-519.