

## The origins of Christian voluntary service

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### Introduction

I want to give an overview of the way in which the massive investment in voluntary service in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that we still share, has its roots in a Christian movement of renewed spirituality which occurred outside of the religious establishment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### England before the Great Awakening – the period between 1700 and 1800 AD

The Church of England was spiritually useless. The bishops were corrupt, rich and venal, and without worth pastorally. They voted against all reforms for about 100 years because they were part of a corrupt establishment. They had been captured by the 'age of reason'; all theology and spiritual curiosity had been reduced to nothing more than rationality and intellectual moralising. In their sermons and writing there was no supernatural depth, no prayer, no listening to God, nothing for the poor person to help them – it was religion as a means of social control.

### Slave trading

By 1713, the United Kingdom was the dominant force in the slavery market. In 1750, 46,000 Africans were kidnapped from all over Africa and sold to plantation owners in the West Indies and United Kingdom. Between 1783 and 1796 about 814,000 men, women and children were enslaved.

Respect for human life and liberty became minimal even in the United Kingdom. It was an age of kidnappings; children and girls were commonly picked off the streets and sold overseas, press gangs provided sailors for the Navy.

### Commerce

In 1711, a huge scam which nearly bankrupted the nation was launched; we know it as the South Sea Bubble. People were promised huge, fabulous returns on investment. £100 stock stood

at £890 at the end of the first year. Two million shares were then launched at £300 each. There was massive national excitement. The paper value of the stocks eventually stood at £500 million. This was twice the total value of all land and property in the United Kingdom. By 1720, it was exposed as a scam; all the stock was worthless. Thousands of people were bankrupted and government nearly fell. It exposed England as a nation so greedy for easy profit that all common sense went out of the window

## **Criminality**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were 160 capital offences. Charles Wesley reported preaching to 160 people waiting in jail to be hanged, one a child of 10. The Old Bailey, in 1732, sentenced 70 people to death. There was a ferocious penal code to protect the property rights of the wealthy. Every six weeks there was a hanging show at Tyburn in London. From Newgate to Tyburn took about 45 minutes in carts through jeering crowds. In 1783, to great opposition, the public hangings were stopped. Punishment also included branding, whipping, public humiliation and the stocks. Daniel Defoe, Thomas Fielding, Samuel Johnson all wrote against the corrupt judges of the time.

## **Prisons**

Jailors were not paid, so prisons were hell on earth, where famous prisoners were on view, women prisoners were on sale for sex, and where there was open sale of gin. Bribery and extortion were commonplace. Wesley wrote, in 1759 that he went to see some French prisoners at Knowle in Bristol.

'About 1100 were confined in a little place, without anything to lie on but dirty straw or anything to cover them but a few foul, thin rags, either by day or night, so they died like rotten sheep.'

He collected 24 pounds immediately to have them clothed and shamed the Bristol Corporation into sending blankets and beds.

## **Children**

Three out of four children died before their fifth birthday. Generally infant mortality stood at 74.5 per cent. Queen Anne had 17 children and only one survived until he was 11. Children were

treated like commodities by those given the care of them. In the poor house of St Luke in London, in 1754, there were 54 children received into care – all were dead within the year. At St Andrew above Bar the poor house received 284 children and 222 died within the year; 57 were discharged to their mothers and 5 remained alive within the institution. Street children were organized into vicious gangs by criminals, the real Fagins. Parishes did good trade in rearing illegitimate children, most of whom died in care. (see Nicholas Nickleby and Bleak House).

## **Gin**

Gin was described as 'the master curse of English life' (see Hogarth's terrible etchings and sketches). In 1660s, records show that 5 million people consumed 12.5 million barrels of beer with a little brandy on the side. But then brandy was banned and cheap gin became the national drink. By 1751 it was sold at a 1p a pint and 11 millions gallons were sold to approximately 5 million people. In Holborn, 506 out of 2000 shops were gin palaces. Drunkenness was common in every class. 'Drunk as a lord... but not as a bishop' is a phrase from the time which denotes the contempt with which the bench of bishops was regarded. London was terrorized by 'Mohawks' – gangs of affluent, drunken young men who went about in gangs to rape, murder and thieve. Between 1720-50 most crime and social deprivation was put down to drunkenness.

## **Cruel sports**

Severe cruelty to animals was commonplace;

- animal baiting took place in most towns and villages
- cock fighting had become the national sport
- bare knuckle boxing was common.

## **Gambling**

It was the age of great gambling; lotteries were regularly held. Almacks and Whites were the big gambling clubs in London. The Duke of Bedford lost 32,000 pounds in a night's gambling. Charles James Fox owed 100,000 pounds in gambling debts. Society was described as vast casino.

## **Sexual promiscuity**

Promiscuity was commonplace but women were always the losers (see Jane Austen's Mansfield Park). Fashions for women favoured light, transparent dresses. When farmers were short of money it was known that their women might be sold in public auction in the country.

The core issue was not poverty, because wages were higher than on the continent for working people and prices were cheaper. Converts to the Christian faith swiftly achieved economic independence from debt, squalor and disease and found upward mobility once they stopped drinking gin and gambling.

### **What happened?**

In a word, John Wesley

*"No single figure influenced so many lives  
No single voice touched so many hearts  
No other man did such a life's work for England." A Birrel*

Historians cannot explain the 19<sup>th</sup> century until they explain Wesley.

In the early 1700s there were stirrings of a new spirituality arising. It centered on a definite and clear experience of the personal love of God for each person. Daniel Rowlands and Howell Harris were leaders of this movement in Wales. Jonathan Edwards experienced and preached a God of deeply personal love in USA. Zizendorf led new Christians into experimental community living in Germany, later called the Moravians.

Wesley was born in 1703 and in 1738 when he was 35 had an astonishing experience which rearranged his mental furniture about what being a Christian meant. It was centered on a personal experience of love, grace, faith and peace; the phrase he uses was 'My heart was strangely warmed'. It was completely life changing because it changed his consciousness.

*"My chains fell off, my hear was free,  
I rose went forth and followed Thee..."*

*I know Thee Saviour, who Thou art,  
Jesus, the feeble sinners friend,  
Who will not with the night depart  
But stay and love me to the end.  
Thy mercies never shall remove  
THY NATURE AND THY NAME IS LOVE"*

(Charles Wesley)

It was both ethical in its effects and practical in its out working. Where France collapsed into violent revolution amid cries of liberty, equality and fraternity, England had a slow internal revolution in which these qualities were worked out in small groups exploring spirituality away from the religious establishment.

It was a new way of being Christian. The bishops mounted a huge campaign against Wesley because he separated the practice of religion from spirituality. He was banned from preaching in churches so he went out of doors. He died when he was 88 having spent 50 years preaching, teaching, setting up free pharmacies, free schools, protesting about many social evils and teaching tolerance. He preached 42,000 sermons. He left 150,000 followers organized into small groups who met weekly outside of the control of clergy to support each other and talk of their experience of the love of God. This was England's real revolution. All over England other preachers started to lead people to this experience, for example, George Whitfield, his brother Charles, and countless others. And they taught the Christians to sing their faith.

## **What were the social fruits of the spiritual revolution?**

### **Abolition of slavery**

In 1834, the slaves were emancipated. This means that only 171 years ago slave owning was the economic foundation of the empire.

*'It was only just in time. If slavery had not been abolished before the great commercial exploitation of the tropics, had begun, Africa would have been turned by the world's capitalists into a slave farm so enormous that it must have eventually corrupted and destroyed Europe herself as surely as world conquest under slavery destroyed the Roman Empire.'*

The government paid, in 1834, 20 million pounds to the slave holders to buy back the slaves' freedom. What changed from 1713 when England won the rights to dominate the trade? Wesley in 1772, read a Quaker book by John Woolman, denouncing slavery as anti-Christian and in 1774 began to campaign actively against it. There was a new solidarity in spiritual experience which made the idea of owning another human being detestable. Quakers and the new Methodists all believed we each have 'that of God within us'. A group of influential clergy and MPs called the Clapham sect came

together to fight the establishment; it took many decades but in the end they won.

## **Education for all**

Education was only for the rich, since most people were illiterate. In 1780, Robert Raikes opened a Sunday school for the poor children in Gloucester. At first, the teachers were paid and then they were voluntary. Wherever the new spirituality spread, schools for the poor sprang up. In 1803 the Sunday School Union was formed to bring the concept of Sabbath Schools together; children were taught faith, numeracy and literacy. By 1831 1.5 million children attended 5.5 million Sunday schools all staffed by voluntary teachers. By 1880, voluntary teachers exceeded 1 million. In 1831, there were 13,000 national day schools. In 1833, Lord Shaftesbury, the Christian reformer, forced through the great Factory Act by which no child of under 13 was permitted to spend more than 9 hours a day or 48 hours a week working. During these working hours owners of factories were forced to provide at least 2 hours schooling a day. In 1870 The Board School Act tried to fill up all the gaps so education was available for all children but the education system was seen as an essentially voluntary system in which the faith of the volunteer was the core value.

## **Prisons**

John Howard the High Sheriff of Bedford was a Christian whose name we still remember for his pioneering work – the Howard League for Penal Reform. He found 'a wilderness of cruelty, immorality and graft'. During his 17 years work he visited every prison in England 4 times. He spent 30 thousand pounds of his own money providing better accommodation. Elizabeth Fry the Quaker took up his work in 1813; her focus was that prisons should become places of 'humanizing, dignity and change'.

## **Emancipation of the working classes**

Lord Shaftesbury led an effective opposition to the factory owner's exploitation of the poor through a compassionate legislative programme supported by a vigorous Christian opinion.

The 10 hour Act shut factories during the night. In 1842 The Mines and Collieries Act freed women and children from working underground. The Agricultural Gangs Act freed children from

working in dangerous condition in the countryside. He developed better conditions for the insane, he created a National Board of Health, and he fought for decent housing for all.

He became President of the World YMCA. At his memorial service in 1885 over 2000 charities were represented whose work he had championed. All his fellow reformers were fervent Christians of this new spirituality. Perhaps more than anyone, Shaftesbury exemplified how this movement converted and renewed public opinion.

## **Trade Unions**

Trade unionism begins really with the deportation to Australia of six agricultural workers from Tolpuddle in Dorset who became known as the Tolpuddle martyrs. Farmers had entered an agreement to force down wages and these men formed an Agricultural Trade Union to protest. Lawyers for the farmers argued they had broken an arcane law and the judge had them transported for seven years in 1834. The shocking thing was that three of these men Methodist local preachers and regarded highly as honest and decent people. In protest at their sentence 100,000 people marched through the streets of London. It was the first Trade Union demonstration. It awoke a search for social justice which gave birth to the Labour Party. All the early founders grew up in Christian homes. The early banners read 'The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man'. Keir Hardie became a Christian when he was 22 and one of his first pamphlets was entitled 'Can a man be a Christian on a one pound a week'. He also he became the first independent Labour MP.

## **Social Welfare**

Here too there was a tide of reform, protest and social change which arose out of this new consciousness. Wesley started the nation's first free medical dispensary for the poor. In 1824, the RSPCA was founded by a clergyman incensed by cruelty to animals. The London City Mission was founded to care for the poor in the darkest places. In 1844, George Williams was converted in Bridgewater where he was a shop assistant. He moved to London. Shop assistants led miserable lives – long, long hours and poor pay. When he moved to London he found only one person a Christian out of a staff of 140. He started a prayer meeting and a group to encourage people into a sense of God's love and within a few years the managers had to come to faith. He was encouraged to start an association to support other young men which had the working title

of 'The Draper's Evangelical Association' and was persuaded that the YMCA might be a more inclusive title. And the rest, as they say is history.

In 1862, Barnardo came to faith when he was 17 and when studying medicine in London was challenged by a waif that many children slept rough in the capital. In a brief search he was horrified to find 11 street children, orphaned and homeless. He went to see Lord Shaftesbury who was incredulous but laid down his knife and fork and said to his dinner party, 'Let us see whether this is true'. That night the dinner party found 73 children sleeping in London streets and so Barnardo's was started.

Time is too short to tell of all the rest: the Salvation Army, the NSPCC in 1882, the Children Protection Society 1882, the work to rescue children from prostitution, the work to protect women and to care for the vast army of prostituted women in Victorian England. All these energies came from a Christian vision not evident in the nation at all in 1700.

What I have aimed to demonstrate to you is the way in which England was socially transformed over a period of 200 years. The life of England in 1700 was degraded, addicted and callous. By 1900 it was not perfect but most of the social structures which we take for granted were in place because of the moral indignation of a large, vocal and energetic Christian community. These are the roots of the YMCA. In this period, are the roots of an social indignation which finds its deepest roots in a re-reading of scripture and in a personal experience of the love of God so disturbing that it undermined the frozen structures of class, education and wealth.

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