

THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

JOURNAL OF

THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME XXXIII

JANUARY 1990

No. 5

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DISSENTERS STILL?

Celebrations of the tercentenary of the passing of the Act of Toleration have rightly posed questions about the nature of dissent. Are dissent and nonconformity essentially negative concepts dependent upon the nature of the Establishment against which dissent is lodged? To what extent is dissent compatible with an ecumenical commitment? Even if we turn to the language of the 1890s and after and speak of the Free Churches, have we sufficiently developed an understanding which develops the dimension of 'free for' as over against 'free from'? To what extent do we see Establishment as an ongoing impediment to Christian mission - or how far are its parish-wide concerns a desirable corrective to at least a potential ghettoism within our own tradition? What part should the historian play in the understanding of such themes?

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Some few years ago I ended an essay on Victorian Nonconformity with these words: 'For its part dissent without disabilities seemed to many working-class leaders to have become part of the Establishment and open to the same objections. Indeed, it is to be wondered whether the aggressive Dissenters of the mid-century with their strategies for assaulting the fortress of Establishment would have owned as children the prosperous, complacent and even smug Nonconformists of the end of the century caricatured by Arnold Bennett: perhaps they were only step-children, for somehow, conveniently, the old prophetic voice had been muted'.¹ More cuttingly, Adrian Hastings speaks of dissent at this time as 'unhesitatingly intolerant in its insistence upon conformity to the norms of Nonconformity'.²

Of course it is quite clear that many individuals took a personal decision on this issue and conformed to the established church very often as their social and economic status improved. One of the reasons for establishing nonconformist societies in the ancient universities was to try and check what were sometimes represented as large losses amongst the ablest young dissenters to either the established church or more seriously to complete loss of faith. There is a significant letter from T. H. Green to Dale which argues that 'the opening of the national universities to Nonconformists has been in my judgment an injury rather than a help to Nonconformity'.³ This judgment was supported by Trevelyan who put a slightly different gloss on it when he suggested that it was 'only since Oxford and Cambridge have been thrown open to all creeds, that men who would formerly have been the leaders of militant Nonconformity have been absorbed in the general stream of national life', adding, 'this change has contributed with other causes to the diminution of the Dissenting Bodies both in self-consciousness and power'.⁴ Dr Mark Johnson in his recent study of *The Dissolution of Dissent* (reviewed elsewhere in this volume) contentiously argues that that process of dissolution was at least in part self-perpetuated - suicide not execution - and that 'Ecumenism was the final phase in the dissolution of Dissent' (pp.299-300).

Certainly the changed nature of the Establishment should not be neglected. A. D. Gilbert has argued that the Church of England came to occupy an increasingly untenable position as the unitary culture underlying its existence fragmented. Thus, he argues, whilst the sectarianism of nonconformity moderated or accommodated itself towards a denominational position which, whilst still advocating its own special doctrines and emphases in church polity, accepted other groups as valid representatives of the universal church, the established church was 'forced inexorably towards *de facto* denominational status'. This meant not the establishment of one church but, notwithstanding the trappings of Establishment retained by the Church of England, a 'pluralistic legitimacy exercised jointly by the several branches of mainstream Christianity living together as a loosely related federation of denominations'.⁵ All this, of course, is the context of the process of secularisation, for 'The growth of the new Paganism', in Trevelyan's words, 'has made Christians kinder to one another'.⁶

From a Baptist perspective, the growth of Anglican Evangelicalism and its consequent recovery of confidence within the last thirty years has created an increasingly attractive alternative for those uncertain of their dissenting heritage. At

1 John Briggs and Ian Sellers, *Victorian Nonconformity*, 1973, pp.8-9.

2 A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, 1986, p.106.

3 Cited in D. A. Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent*, 1988, p.186.

4 G. M. Trevelyan, *British History in the Nineteenth Century and After*, new edn. 1937, p.284.

5 A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England*, 1976, pp.140-1.

6 Trevelyan, *op.cit.*, p.429.

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the same time changes in hymnody and liturgy, coupled with the availability of a wide range of translations of the Bible, have reduced the differentials in worship between dissent and the established church.

But there is also a sense in which dissent is no longer confined to nonconformity, for a much wider body of Christian opinion would want to distance itself from the dominant political culture and the government it has produced: 'We are all dissenters now', it might be said. It can now no longer be affirmed that the Church of England is the Tory Party at Prayer. Rather the churches together, often led by the leadership of the Church of England, have become the most consistent and persistent of government critics, seen particularly in the refusal of the Archbishop of Canterbury to engage in a triumphalistic celebration of victory in the Falkland Islands War, and the tough analysis of urban deprivation contained within the *Faith in the City* Report.

Walter Schwartz extends the scope of dissent even further in his tract: *The New Dissenters: The Nonconformist Conscience in the Age of Thatcher*⁷. Whilst Colin Marchant and a number of other Baptists feature in a chapter entitled 'Dissent from Below', Schwartz finds many of the new dissenters far beyond the boundaries of a nonconformity turned bourgeois. Some are located in the established church, and some within the Roman Catholic Church, whilst others, 'secular militants who base their protest on moral criteria', (p.5) are to be found way outside the churches. Unlike old nonconformity which was rooted in a theological objection to coercion in the sanctuary and, because of that, challenged 'The Crown Rights of the Redeemer' within the life of the state, the New Dissenters are essentially in protest against the Mammonism of the modern culture and the government it has elected. They do not necessarily invoke theological reason for protest, though undoubtedly for many theology-scripture remains the root cause of their attack on what they regard as the moral conspiracy of contemporary government policy. The argument is challenging and would have been more so if the argument and the evidence had been presented in a more disciplined fashion, for Schwartz's historical analysis is regrettably shaky, particularly in confusing nonconformity with evangelicalism at crucial points of the argument, whilst phrases like 'Methodists such as Wilberforce, Shaftesbury, Bright and Cobden' hardly create confidence, when three were Anglican and one a Quaker, a crudity which impairs an important analysis.

BOOKS

M. Magdalen, CSMIV, *Transformed By Love*, Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1989. 81 pp., £3.95.

Margaret Evening was a B.M.S. missionary in Zaire before becoming a member of the Anglican Community of St Mary the Virgin, and continuing her work in other parts of Africa, as well as undertaking the leadership of retreats in this country. She here adds to her earlier books, *The Choice*, and *Jesus, Man of Prayer*, with a study of the vital role to be played by transformed passion within the Christian life. Jean Vanier's Foreword is no mean testimony to the value of this volume.

Island Harvest (see last issue) is obtainable from D. E. Meek, Dept of Celtic Studies, The University, David Home Tower, George St, Edinburgh EH8 9JX, price £2.

7 Bedford Square Press, 1989, £3.95).