

THE GOSPEL AND THE MAN IN THE STREET (1)

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So far as I know 'the man in the street' is a uniquely English expression, which has no real equivalent in other languages, and which is not even much used in the United States. It is essentially a U-phrase, and is used above all by members of the 'establishment' and other un-representative groups as a tacit recognition that they are in one way or another separate from the majority of their fellow citizens. Owing to differences in social structure it is far more an English than a Scottish, Irish or Welsh expression, and we shall confine ourselves to England in our study.

It has become fashionable to deplore the existence and influence of social classes in England and to suggest means for removing them. This marked class structure is the direct outcome of English history from the Norman conquest on, and it is questionable whether it could be removed without a major social upheaval more damaging than the ills it was meant to cure. For us it is important to note that these social distinctions have left a deep mark on the religion, or lack of it, of the masses.

Since this is no detailed historical-sociological study, only a few facts can be mentioned. The Christianizing of England was delayed by the Scandinavian inroads which led to the creation of the Danelaw, nominally Christian though it was, and then to its brief incorporation under Canute in a united kingdom of Denmark, Norway, England and the Hebrides. With the Norman conquest virtually every position of influence and wealth in the Church went to foreigners. Though they were in practice largely inoperative, the Acts of Provisors (1351) and Praemunire (1353, 1365, 1393), all aimed at Papal interference in England, are evidence of the deeply felt hostility of the laity to what was to them a foreign church. The very considerable success of the Lollards supports the contention that the heart of the ordinary Englishman was not in official religion.

The great weakness of the Reformation in England was that perhaps more than anywhere else it was a political movement. The steadfastness of the Protestant martyrs, both men and women of rank, and others of no social standing, finally turned popular dislike of Rome into deep hatred, a hatred that is probably more widespread today than many realise. But the Reformers produced no one of the calibre of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli or Knox, who would both preach fearlessly to those in power, rebuking them for both individual and social sins, and also capture the imagination of the masses. This failure to stir the people is reflected in the almost complete lack of Reformation hymnody in England. The position was made worse by the main beneficiaries of the dissolution of the monasteries

being a newly risen set of landowners, who were even more disliked than the remnants of the feudal nobility.

The result was that while over most of the country there was this deep and abiding hatred of Romanism, yet it is questionable whether there was ever much positive enthusiasm for the Church of England. Even when it was at its most popular at the trial of the seven bishops (1688), the motives were clearly anti-Roman and political. What popular sympathy there may have been was largely destroyed by Laud and his fellow Carolines, the non-jurors and the later anglo-catholics. It should not be forgotten that the parliament that impeached Laud by a unanimous vote included good royalists and Anglicans.

The whole-hearted Reformation, personified in the Puritans inside and outside the Church of England, though finding adherents in all ranks of society, was based mainly on the new middle class emerging in the big cities and on the richer yeomen and small country gentlemen in the more prosperous country districts like East Anglia. History books make much of the fact that when "the saints" ruled they prohibited bear-baiting and Christmas puddings, but it was not such follies or their faults in government that led to their complete repudiation by the country once Oliver Cromwell had died. The nobility despised them as upstarts and the masses saw no reason why they should rule over them. From that time Dissent has been linked in the popular mind with social class, and to a very great extent it has conformed to the popular estimate of it. This has meant that traditional Dissent has tended to perpetuate itself in relatively limited circles. It was only the Quakers in the days of the Commonwealth and Restoration that had a widespread influence on the masses, but they too very quickly became respectable. With respectability their outreach died.

So far as I can judge the only religious movement that has really stirred the masses in England has been the Methodist. This is probably partly due to John Wesley's semi-Arminian theology, which is much more congenial to the English temperament than Calvinism. Far more important was his institution of local preachers and class meetings. For the first time since the Reformation, except among the more despised Commonwealth sects like the Fifth Monarchy Men and the Levellers, the effective control of the churches was in the hands of common people. It is to be noted that the first major split in the Methodist Connection grew out of a protest against the growing influence of the ordained ministry in it. It will hardly be questioned that the increasing intellectual qualifications of the local preachers and the replacement of the class meetings by Wesley Societies have kept step with the steadily diminishing influence of the Connection on the poorer classes in England, though this has been to some extent countered by the witness of the Central Halls. John Wesley foresaw this himself, to some extent at least, and was seriously concerned by the increasing prosperity and rise in social standards in Methodism

produced by godliness. It is worth mentioning that the two movements which more than others touch the poorer and less educated today, the Pentecostals and the Salvation Army, both took their rise from Methodism.

The Evangelicals in the Church of England figure more largely in social histories of England than the Methodists. How far this is really fair is open to discussion. It may well be doubted whether the Evangelicals would have accomplished anything comparable with what they did had the Methodists not first influenced wide areas among the masses.

The Evangelicals made a major impact on the desperate material conditions of the poor both by Parliamentary action and by the founding of an almost incredible number of charitable societies. But except in rare cases it is wholehearted charity we see and not a descending to the level of those being served. Therefore we have few examples of really flourishing Evangelical churches in working-class districts. Some apparent exceptions were, like Spurgeon's Tabernacle at the Elephant and Castle for the Baptists, preaching centres that influenced the immediate surroundings but little. In fact, the Methodists through their influence on many early trades union leaders and workers, not a few of whom were devout Christians, probably had a further reaching influence than the Evangelicals on a changing society.

Though the Brethren were from the first a predominantly middle-class movement, in limited districts, especially in the early days, a marked impact was made on the masses. I do not doubt that the reason was that leadership was based on spiritual rather than intellectual or financial qualifications, and that active participation in worship and witness was open to all - all men at any rate. The objection to active participation by women is the reason why they have never been very successful in areas where Methodism is or has been strong. So far as I know this impact has remained restricted to the original areas, for the controversy that practically wrecked the movement was a typically middle-class one and rivetted middle-class fetters on the assemblies, which only a very few have been able to shake off.

If this reading of English history is at all correct, it means that since the Reformation, and probably before it, the typical 'man in the street' had little zeal for Christianity and indeed was all too little Christianized. There was strong anti-Papal zeal, but little that was positive. If there was for a time some sympathy with the Puritans, the best of it probably chose the egalitarian Quakers. For the rest sympathy evaporated, when "the saints" claimed the right to rule. Men went to church fairly regularly under the threat of a fine or later of social penalties. After all, if one's livelihood depended on the squire, to say nothing of some welcome charity at Christmas, church attendance was a small price to pay. Bishop Ryle of Liverpool told with apparent approval how Fletcher of Madeley used during the long hymn before the

sermon to make a round of the ale-houses, whipping those there into the church.

The industrial revolution, which removed the masses from under the direct observation of the squire and the respectable merchant, led to a catastrophic fall in church going. This was aggravated at the first by the absence of church buildings in the new working-class areas that were springing up, especially in the industrial North and Midlands. We have statistics of about a century ago from London, where the lack of churches was never so serious, and what lack there was had largely been made good, which suggest that the percentage attending church was very little better than today. Indeed it may have been worse, when motive is considered, for at the time social prestige still demanded that certain strata of society had to make an appearance at least on Sunday morning.

The position might have been much worse but for the work of the Sunday Schools, which began in 1780 and were enthusiastically developed first by the Evangelicals and then by the Nonconformists. It is, of course, impossible to estimate what proportion of the poorer children maintained contact with the church once they had grown up. Probably only few did, but their childhood experience prevented complete estrangement in the majority. In addition former Sunday School scholars will have supplied the vast majority of the working-class converts in the great evangelistic campaigns of the second half of the nineteenth century - actually in England the majority professing conversion will have been middle-class. On the other hand much of the work of the Sunday Schools was undone by the outcome of the denominational controversy over the 1870 Education Act and its solution by the Cowper-Temple clause. This meant that many children received no religious education at all in day school, and many more were taught by teachers with neither interest nor belief in the Bible. To this period we owe at least two generations of agnostic or even anti-religious teachers in the State schools.

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It is not easy to know what the man in the street thinks about class distinctions, for he is seldom very articulate about such matters, and tends to act on feelings rather than principles. The probability is that he is not particularly interested in egalitarianism and that he is prepared to accept the present class structure so long as it is based on character and intellectual ability and not on the mere possession of money. He buys the large circulation national newspapers for their sports' news (and on Sunday for their pornography) but pays no attention to the political views of the wealthy press lords. On the other hand it is improbable that a single vote would be won at the polls on a programme of abolishing the House of Lords. He does, however know, sketchy though his knowledge of Christianity may be, that there is no place for class distinctions in the religion of the Carpenter of Nazareth.

It is surprising how many true Christians there are who would protest that the attitude of the man in the street is quite unreasonable, for whatever may be the position elsewhere, there is no class distinction in the church of their choice. True enough our unhappy divisions, which so often follow social lines, tend to hide from us how much the average congregation is infected with this disease. In addition in many of our new housing estates and towns social variations hardly exist to the great detriment of life in general.

If we visit a local church with unbiassed eyes, we are fairly certain to see the rich singled out. Thus may be by dress, it is often by the seats they occupy, and it is rare for the wealthy not to be over-represented on the parochial church council, deacons' board, oversight or whatever it may be called. It is rare for the affluent looking stranger, who has arrived in a luxury car, not to be given a warmer welcome than the tired looking man in a baggy Montague Burton suit. It is not easy for the woman with a little strip of coney round her coat collar to feel at ease in a congregation where the other women are dressed in mink and other luxury furs.

The exaltation of intellect, real or imaginary, and of education is even more obvious. The minister or preacher normally has his degrees stressed and may very well wear his academic hood - where else are we likely to find this? Music, the language of worship and the style and content of preaching are expected to appeal to the better educated present. There is a growing tendency for hymn tunes to be beyond the abilities of the musically uneducated. The attitude of so many towards the RSV and especially the NEB is typical. When they are told that they are a blessing to the many who cannot understand the language of the AV, they maintain that they could understand it, if they would, or that with some patience and effort they could learn to. The strange jargon of many a prayer and address in the assemblies is only another example of this intellectual snobbery; those responsible for it are indifferent whether the simple understand them or not.

A local church should be a cross-section of local society. Particular interests may well meet separately for their special concerns, but in the worship of the church all elements should be able to understand and join in. The true test of scholarship is its ability to make the complex and difficult simple enough even for the childlike mind to grasp. If a theological truth cannot be made simple, it is either unimportant or not a truth. The great musician shows his gift best when all enjoy his music. The man who prays or speaks in theological jargon only betrays that he has been too lazy to think through what they mean.

Our Lord said: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." James reinforced it: "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He has promised

to those who love Him." Is it not scandalous then, if by our ostentation or behaviour we make the poor man conscious of his poverty and uncomfortable in the church of Him who for our sakes became poor? However revolutionary it may seem, it is clear that the New Testament implies that where priority is to be shown in the Church it should be to the poor.

There is a tremendous propaganda today for more places in grammar schools and universities. The fact is that we have probably more places in both than can be profitably filled. (This does not mean that there are not very many who would profit from a wider and longer technical or semi-technical education, whether given at a university or elsewhere). The proportion in our society capable of real abstract thought is limited. Yet so much of the language of our preaching and worship is abstract. The Gospel is essentially that God has done something and that its effects are available today. A man's acceptance of God's acts for him is always more important than his understanding of them.

The man in the street is inclined to ask first "Does it work?", not "Is it true?" Then will come "What do I get out of it?" and finally "Is it worth it?" These are the questions he puts to our theology and code of practice. Puritanism, understood as the avoidance of various common and often pleasurable practices on principle, has never attracted the man in the street, though he may be prepared to discuss the individual case on its merits. In other words he is interested in morals not ethics, in what he should do in a given circumstance, not in general principles, in practical guidance and not in legalism.

I am not suggesting that the intellectual and the theologian have no place; but that place is not in lifting others to their rarified intellectual and abstract level. The great purpose of Biblical exposition is taking God's dealings and revelation in another age and clime and translating them into the concrete realities of the 20th century. How are we to live out the Sermon on the Mount today? What should be the relationship of employee to employer or even great limited company and to his fellow-workers organised in some great trades union? The New Testament speaks after all mainly of slave-owner and slave. How is a man to look on the state now that he lives in a democracy and not under an autocratic emperor? Is the demand that we should obey the powers that be modified by some of the great evils they have perpetrated in our days? How are we to express the relationship of man and wife now that they stand equal in the eyes of the state? How are we to meet the growing pains of the teenager so strangely unmentioned in the Bible?

It is not enough to treat the man in the street as my equal and to speak to him of the problems he is interested in in the way he understands and thinks. I must also go to him and not expect him to come to me. I have met so many who have complained that although they have provided a warm and comfortable church or hall, the adults will not come to

the Gospel meeting nor the children to the Sunday School. But why should they come? For that matter why should I think that I have any prescriptive right to call on them uninvited or to preach outside their windows? Why should I expect that my open-air meeting will be treated with more respect than that of the atheists, the Mormons or the communists? Thank God, the last vestiges of privilege and compulsion are vanishing. If I want to win the man in the street, I must become a man in the street myself; I must walk where he walks and sit where he sits. When I have attracted and interested him, I must be able to introduce him to a local church that is prepared to adapt itself to him rather than insisting that he adapts himself to it.

We live in a period in which much is said of "the indigenous church" in the mission field, and very little is done about it. This is not due to hypocrisy but to a failure to understand what an indigenous church is. It is normally understood to mean that native leaders are given full freedom to function along lines laid down by the missionaries and the denominations to which they belong. In fact an indigenous church is one which has full freedom to develop under the guidance of the Spirit using the Word, whether the missionaries and "home" denominations like the Spirit's guidance or not.

We shall never really influence the masses until we allow an indigenous church to grow up among them. John Wesley saw this in measure, but the strict constitution he laid down for the Connexion prevented its further development, led to splits and finally to an increasing separation from those it sought to evangelise. The same holds true of the only real mass movement within the Mediaeval Church, viz: that started by Francis of Assisi. Here again the movement rapidly lost its spiritual power and its contact with those it was founded to serve, when it was contained within strict rule and diverted from those elements which the richer and more powerful felt were dangerous to them.

If the rich of this present age, rich through money, intellectual gifts, education, worldly position, feel that such an attitude is unreasonable and more than can possibly be asked from them, let them listen to the words of their Lord: "Among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the willing slave of all."

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