The Church as a Social Factor.

Reflections after the reading of "English Social History" by G. M. Trevelyan.

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No recent book has received such widespread testimony as the masterly volume on "English Social History" by the greatest of living English historians, George Macaulay Trevelyan. First published in America in 1942, it was not produced in this country until the autumn of last year on account of the paper shortage. Even now, nearly a year later, there are many still waiting to possess or even to read a copy. Such a literary phenomenon is a significant sign of the mental climate of the last few years. Before the war interest in the history and institutions of this country or of the Empire was mainly confined to teachers and students of history. The prevailing mood ran to a low estimate of the value of such interests. Many of the keener minds were more conscious of the defects in our past or present history and of the need for social reform, than of the richness and variety of the heritage which they had received. The grievous perils to which we were exposed in 1940 and 1941 brought a new realization of how much we should lose if the enemy at the gate were permitted to bring destruction upon us. With all its shortcomings, and they have been not a few, the British Commonwealth of Nations has made and is still making an invaluable contribution to the welfare and stability of the world. By such a road many who had no professional concern in such matters have been brought to a new appreciation of the importance of our history. The discussions on educational method and principles which filled these years up to the passing of the Act of 1944 have made many people aware that ignorance of their own past is a mark of deficient education. To be ignorant of how and why we have become what we are as a people, is to be uneducated. "Merely to define history and literature," says Sir Richard Livingstone, "is to prove that they are essential parts of every man's education."

The history of Europe and especially of Britain derives from two sources, Greece and Palestine, and of these two, Palestine has been incomparably the more important and creative. At no point can our history or institutions be understood without taking into account the existence of the Christian community. Whatever explanations may be offered of the rise and expansion of Christianity, its existence and pervasive influence are undeniable facts of history which need to be understood by anyone who should undertake the task of explaining to himself how he comes to fit into the particular pattern of life which is his. To be indifferent to this need of self-understanding is to be content with an existence which is less than fully human. For this reason a country like our own, in which at the present time only ten per cent. of the people possess effective membership in any Christian community, can yet insist that instruction in the facts and history of Christianity must be an essential part of any true education.

The historian sees the Church as a voluntary institution in the world
for the maintenance of certain distinctive beliefs and habits of life. This institution enters into relationship with the State and with other coherent social groups. Like any other historical institution, it not only exercises a considerable influence on the course of history, but is itself moulded by the developing process of history. In this action and reaction, continuing now for nearly two thousand years, the historian discerns the historical significance of Christianity. He will not claim that this is the total significance of Christianity, for as historian he is not required to determine the truth or error of its claims or of its philosophy of life. Indeed a historian quite lacking in Christian faith would yet be obliged to assess highly the contribution made by the Christian movement to modern civilization.

The purpose which Trevelyan set before himself in his latest volume can best be described in his own words. “Its scope (social history) may be defined as the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages: this includes the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and leisure, the attitude of man to nature, the culture of each age as it arose out of those general conditions of life, and took ever changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought . . . our effort is not only to get what few glimpses we can of his intimate personality, but to reconstruct the whole fabric of each passing age, and see how it affected him.”

The religious habits, thoughts and hopes of men at each succeeding epoch will form an essential part of this task. The intricate structure of the Church will appear as an important social institution, exercising continual, if frequently unconscious, influence on the behaviour of men. We shall be shown how men looked upon the institution and manipulated it, what they really thought about Christian belief, what appearance Christianity had in the world at different moments of history. This book by Trevelyan deals with the social history of England from the time of Chaucer when the English people first clearly appear as a racial and cultural unit, to the death of Queen Victoria, a period of nearly six centuries during which organized Christianity in varying circumstances played a part of central importance, in the social as well as in the religious history of the people.

In the latter part of the fourteenth century the Church in England was an integral part of the Western (Latin) Church and shared its theology and institutions. At least half of human life and its relationships was covered by ecclesiastical affairs. Within the walls of the parish church, where the parish priest celebrated Mass attended by the greater part of the village, was to be found the heart of medieval religion and the source of its influence in the common life of ordinary people. The peasant could not read and there were no Bibles available in his mother tongue since the language of religion was Latin, understood only by religious professionals and not even by all of them. Nevertheless the ordinary man was not ignorant of the main outlines of the Bible story for wall-paintings, coloured windows and carvings in his church had impressed it visibly upon him from his earliest days. This was the framework within which his life was set and which provided a common link with his counterpart in every European land.
As an institution the Church entered into his life as the divinely appointed body to lead him through the dangers of this life and discipline him for the eternal world. Compulsory confession, recurring holy days and festivals and financial demands made him continually aware of that august authority which beset his life before and behind. He was not entirely ignorant of the new thoughts and plans fermenting in the great world, since there were innumerable travellers, 'religious roundsmen' who covered the country, carrying with them as their gospel the latest ideas. Wandering friars, often feared and hated by the parish priest, invaded the village as confessors and preachers.

Many scholars such as Coulton and Manning, who have studied carefully the literature and institutions of the later Middle Ages have had occasion to point out that Puritanism, usually associated with the Reformation, has in fact a much longer ancestry dating from the Medieval Church, where opposition to ecclesiastical authority found an outlet in popular preaching and vigorous attacks on the Bishops and wealthy clergy, with a renewed call to practical asceticism. No sixteenth century Protestant could exceed the power of invective employed by fourteenth century friars in their attacks on contemporary abuses. Many and far-reaching changes were taking place in the economic and social structure of society at the time of Chaucer. Modern institutions were being developed, servitude was disappearing in favour of free labour on the manor, and new middle classes were rising to positions of importance on the land and in trade. Consequently there was much criticism emanating from lay sources of the corruption of the clergy. Definite measures of administrative and legislative reform were needed and demanded, but firmly resisted. The principal cause of this refusal of reform, which in the sixteenth century was to be achieved by a repudiation of Papal leadership, was, on the part of the Pope an ever-increasing need of money to maintain his position in Europe and on the part of the English episcopate, a preoccupation with civil affairs. In fact the King paid his ministers and other public servants out of episcopal revenues. In the ten years between 1376 and 1386, of twenty-five bishops, thirteen held high secular office under the crown and several others played an important part in politics. Nevertheless, although many of their religious duties were neglected in this way, the Bishops were ready to defend Church privileges and endowments against all attacks.

Criticism of the leading churchmen became more and more vocal as the century wore on until it received explicit formulation at the hands of John Wiclif about 1375. He was supported, not only by greedy laymen who declared that one third of the wealth of England was in the hands of the church, but also by many churchmen who believed that the possession of wealth was the prime source of the ineffectiveness of the church. But the support was divided when to his moral criticism of monks and bishops, Wiclif added theological criticism and the bishops were able to turn the edge of his attack by an accusation of heresy. Nothing was done to meet the insistent demand for reform and in default of action by the Pope or the Bishops, reformers began to turn to the royal power, declaring it to be the duty of the king to reform the church and compel ecclesiastics to do their duty. Meanwhile the decline in religious zeal was evidenced
by the increasing tendency of the pious to apply their wealth to the
foundation of colleges and schools, although well-to-do merchants and
industrialists were still prepared to build and adorn magnificent
churches in the wool growing districts of the Cotswolds or East Anglia.

II.

Despite the failure on the Continent of the Conciliar movement for
reform and the steady growth of a critical Renaissance outlook on the
part of the educated classes, the demand for reform abated somewhat
in the fifteenth century. Chantries and guilds received endowments
from the wealthy in place of the monasteries. In the early sixteenth
century, in face of the presence of much in the national life which pro­
claimed the advent of a new era, the Church went on just as before,
the greatest social institution in the land, touching life, public and
private, at innumerable places. For fifteen years, from 1514 to 1529
the career of Cardinal Wolsey, Archbishop and Prime Minister "displayed on a colossal scale the pride and power of the medieval
Church". But other significant factors were at work in the land.
The old anti-clericalism which had served Wiclif so well, was fanned
into a new blaze by the arrogance and pomp of Wolsey himself and
the Church was exposed to renewed unpopularity and denunciation.
Its power in matrimonial and probate causes and its unceasing financial
demands were more deeply resented than ever. While Wolsey still
kept a household of nearly a thousand persons and marched in state
with silver pillars and pole-axes borne before him, a small company
of men was preparing the way for a social and religious revolution.
The new classical scholarship was used by Grocyn and Linacre, Colet,
More and Erasmus to bring a fresh knowledge of the Greek Testament.
William Tyndale, in obedience to the overmastering vision of every
ploughboy having these words of life on his lips, gave himself in
penury and danger to translating into the language of the ploughboy
that Word of God so long kept in safe custody by ecclesiastical
authority.

Thus was the ground prepared for the task of pulling down and of
rebuilding which was to follow upon the fall of Wolsey. Dr. Trevelyan
gives to his chapter which describes that quarter century of national
life which ran from the first dissolution of monasteries to the settlement
of Queen Elizabeth, the title of "England during the Anti-clerical
Revolution". It is this revolution of which he says "more than
any other single event, it may be held to mark the end of medieval
society in England." The social consequences of this legal rupture
with the Papacy have given to English life many of its outstanding
characteristics in the subsequent centuries. Within five years the
monastic system which covered the land with a network of religious
houses, each with their local social significance, was swept away by
"a demolition order to resolve at one stroke a social problem that had
been maturing for two centuries past". It is almost impossible to
generalize about the results of this demolition, but they were felt in
spheres as far apart as academic learning and the proper place of
spinsters. The citizens of towns like St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds
were released at last from the stranglehold of monastic lordship,
against which they had so often waged unsuccessful war in the past.
The destruction of popular centres of pilgrimage not only put an end
to a feature of medieval life mirrored in Chaucer's Tales, but also
struck a blow at the position and importance of some towns which had
benefited economically by the presence of pilgrims. The disappearance
of monks and friars gave an enlarged importance to the parish clergy
until new rivals appeared in the persons of dissenting ministers
who frequently engaged in the religious peregrinations which had
formerly been characteristic of the friars. The secularized wealth of
the monasteries went far towards establishing the fortunes of some of
the great families of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
It is important to remember that the king sold the greater part of the
lands and tithes, though the money he received was less than the
subsequent real value of the estates. In this way, more on account
of financial necessity than through deliberate policy, the king erected
a formidable barrier against the restoration of the "militia of the
Pope". The new owners, like the monks, varied in their care for the
poor so that it is doubtful whether the poor lost anything positively
by the dissolution. The disappearance of the dole at the abbey gate
which had often been very harmful in its social effects, obliged the later
Tudors to establish a proper system of Poor Relief, thereby recognising
this task as a duty incumbent not merely on Christian charity but on
society as a whole.

These more obvious social results of the new religious policy must
not be allowed to obscure the genuine desire for reformation both
of doctrine and manners amongst clergy and laity, especially in
that part of England, East Anglia and the South East, lying next to
the Continent and most open to the influence of foreign movements of
thought. In this way the doctrines of Luther and Calvin, despite the
watchfulness of bishops, found an entry into the country and some
years before the death of Wolsey a group of reformers, including men
who were in after years to be so influential as Cranmer, Latimer,
Tyndale and Coverdale, was meeting quietly in Cambridge for common
counsel and study. The later repudiation of papal authority, the
abolition of the monastic life and finally the permission to marry
granted to the clergy under Edward VI and Elizabeth kept them close
to the thought and outlook of the laymen and prevented the growth
of a professional caste, characteristic of the Roman Catholic priesthood.
This change was fraught with tremendous consequences for the future of
English history, since it not only produced a new type of clerical home,
but enriched our annals with the names of many distinguished men.
A reference to the Dictionary of National Biography will show how
many of our greatest men have been sons of the vicarage, although
curiously enough not one of these has held the office of Prime
Minister. The reigns of Edward VI and Mary provided the source of
a new kind of personal religion, the one, through the work of Cranmer
in producing the Prayer Book to stand beside the English Bible and
the other by providing the Reformed religion with its martyrs. Thus
the settlement of 1559 was no mere piece of political astuteness but
an order based on a firm spiritual and intellectual foundation. Re-
ligious zeal which formerly had found an outlet in the ascetic life of
monastery or hermitage was now to win fresh triumphs in the homes
of the people. "The religion of the home and of the Bible became a
social custom common to all English Protestants." If it was usually
found in the homes of squires, and the middle-classes it was also widely extended among the homes of the poor. The centre of devotion was no longer the parish church, where the priest celebrated a worship too complicated and mysterious for the laity to do more than watch, but the homes of the people where the head of the household exercised the priestly functions. As George Macleod has recently put it, describing the Scottish situation in the Reformation era—"the Church in its daily worship, in intention, was transferred to the people's houses. Religious exercises and the whole technique of how to pray found a quite new form in the home." This was a change of as much importance to the social historian as to the theologian, since it marked the emergence of new middle classes able to take responsibility.

III.

The hope, long but vainly entertained by Elizabeth that all her subjects would accept "one religion" established by authority, expounded and defended with eloquence and learning by Hooker, was doomed to failure. Already before her death there was Romanist plotting to replace the queen by another ruler of her own sex. The uncovering of Jesuit intrigue formed a dominant motif in the work of William Cecil for nearly thirty years. On the other hand, while loyal to the political settlement and resolutely opposed to the power of Spain and the Counter Reformation, a small but growing and influential minority of Puritans showed themselves dissatisfied with the religious settlement as a half-way house. In the new century, marked by the accession of a new dynasty, England was sufficiently strong and the foreign danger sufficiently small, to allow of a struggle for the mastery between Puritan and Episcopalian within one Church which all agreed was Protestant; a struggle which was to lead to years of strife, division and bloodshed but to issue ultimately in some of our most prized civil liberties and the unquestioned authority of Parliament. Here is another illustration on the grand scale of the fact that social problems and political questions are fundamentally involved in theological issues. Out of this struggle was born also that passion for freedom of worship and preaching which led to the first successful English experiments in colonisation. The whole future history of the British Commonwealth of nations and of the United States of America with their democratic ideals and insistence on personal freedom hung upon the issue of this struggle. While there was much to deplore, by our modern standards, in the methods employed by both sides in this fierce controversy, it is difficult to deny that the controversy itself has enriched beyond measure not only the social life of our country but also the history of the whole world.

The old anti-clericalism, which had slumbered during the reign of Elizabeth when most of the clergy were of poor calibre, was provoked into vigorous activity again under Charles I, when bishops and clergy thrust their way into important places in political and social life and even occupied great offices of State. The anti-clericalism of great nobles and of the London mob allied itself to the anti-episcopal Puritanism, which was a dominant force in the Long Parliament, in a successful endeavour to break the Laudian Church. Behind this struggle can be seen the existence of a powerful bourgeoisie, gentry and yeomanry, long liberated from ecclesiastical and feudal control
and accustomed to share in the work of government. The success of the revolt against the divine right of kings led to the attempt to impose by public law a Scriptural righteousness. It was a period of religious and social ferment, when projects of social levelling were preached as the gospel of salvation and the rule of the saints translated from an apocalyptic dream into historic actuality. This attempt to discipline a freedom-loving people was doomed to failure and in due course not only brought the name of Puritan into contempt but also produced an exaggerated reaction in the reign of Charles II. Yet the Puritan left his mark in many ways on the social and religious life of the country. The serious use of Sunday and habits of integrity in business have contributed much to the quality of our history. The best personal religious experience nourished in Puritan circles was enshrined in the "Pilgrim's Progress", a religious classic which comes next to the Bible in its widespread circulation. "The lonely figure, with the Bible and the burden of sin, is not only John Bunyan himself. It is the representative Puritan of the English Puritan epoch." Nor was this earnestness confined to Puritans or Dissenters. It was to be found in many Anglican households and found eloquent expression in the community established by Nicholas Ferrar in his "Protestant nunnery" at Little Gidding.

IV.

The Prayer Book, the Bishops and the medieval structure of the Anglican church were restored in 1660 on a wave of reaction against the rule of the saints. As an inevitable consequence, religious non-conformity on both sides of the Border suffered persecution which, if intermittent, was frequently severe. The majority of the victims were merchants, tradesmen and artisans while Anglicanism appeared distinctively the religion of a gentleman with its greatest stronghold among the country gentry. That paternalism which marked the relationship of the squire to his tenants found expression also in his attitude to the parish church, its vicar and its worshippers. It has been exactly delineated by Addison in his portrait of Sir Roger de Coverley. Thus dissent, formally inaugurated by the forced exodus on St. Bartholomew's day 1662 of about 2000 ministers from their parishes, was mainly confined to cities and industrial districts until Methodism in the next century forced a way into the Anglican rural preserve. After 1689 the Dissenter, while still subject to various civil disabilities, which among other things obliged him to set up his own Academies in lieu of entrance into the Universities, enjoyed religious and personal liberty. The persecution while it lasted and the disabilities were hardly ecclesiastical in spirit. "The hard-drinking fox hunters of the manor-house hated the Presbyterians of the neighbouring town, not because they held the doctrines of Calvin, but because they talked through their noses, quoted scripture instead of swearing honest oaths and voted Whig instead of Tory." A new type of prelate was coming to occupy the important offices in the Established church particularly after the Revolution of 1689. Sprat, the Bishop of Rochester, like all the early members of the Royal Society, was a man of genuine religious feeling which moved him to a devout interest in the created universe. A liberal and philosophic
spirit was cultivated and spread abroad by a remarkable group of Cambridge clergymen (of whom, curiously enough, Dr. Trevelyan makes no mention) known as the Cambridge Platonists, led by Benjamin Whichcote and Henry More. Preaching, which was of a high order, laid more and more emphasis on the ethical content of Christianity and consequently less than the earlier ages on its dogmatic content.

Tillotson, the preacher of the gospel of moral rectitude, and Gilbert Burnet the historian are good examples of this kind of bishop, but the stigma implied by the adjective "latitudinarian" often applied to them, is hardly just. Burnet, besides being a considerable scholar and the first to undertake a serious documented historical defence of the English Reformation, was anxious to find an accord with Dissenters and was one of the first bishops to take in hand the question of the recruitment and training of the clergy. The end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth was a fruitful period for Anglican scholarship represented by names like Wharton, Rymer, Wake, Gibson and Wilkins. The growth of toleration, slow though it was, was a genuine factor in the eighteenth century, and it enabled the Quakers, who had left behind the queer revivalism of their first decades, to settle down as a respectable, exclusive sect which based itself on an acknowledged priority of Christian qualities before Christian dogmas.

V.

Two characteristics of social importance mark the life of the eighteenth century Church. The great rise in the economic and social status of the clergy occurred during this century. Whereas formerly the wives of the clergy came mostly from humble homes, it now became quite common for daughters of the gentry or even of the nobility to ally themselves in marriage to the clergy. By the end of the century, in the novels of Jane Austen and still more in the mid-nineteenth century atmosphere of Trollope, squires and parsons formed one social group. Another noticeable feature was the increasing tendency to look upon the church as providing an invaluable moral cement and the bulwark of social stability, teaching the lesser ranks of society "the grand law of subordination". Enthusiasm in religion was regarded in the same light as a lack of the social graces in society at large. The excellence of the Establishment was praised in the same way as the British Constitution was declared incomparable, while the foreigner was pitied for his lack of these privileges. Side by side with the highly polished civilization of the age of Walpole and Dr. Johnson, there existed, among the new proletariat forming in the industrial centres and in the foetid slums of the older cities, a squalor of life and an active denial of the Christian way, quite beyond the power of settled religious agencies to affect. The authorities in Church and State did not seem to consider the moral and physical welfare of these unhappy people as their responsibility. Nor did they look with favour on anyone who should presume to regard such a task as a Divine calling. Yet a great part of the secret of the amazing success of the Methodists lay in the fact that Wesley and his followers went and ministered to these social outcasts with whom nobody else would bother. In the social aspect of his mission, Wesley fell heir to a number of societies formed at the end of the seventeenth century
and in the reign of Anne for the spread of the Gospel (S.P.G. and S.P.C.K.) and for the reformation of manners. But with him organisation was dominated by a powerful evangelistic impulse which brought to untold thousands an assurance of the love of God and a new self-respect which ultimately, both in the religious government of their societies and in the formation of Trade Unions, were to have lasting results in the national life. This evangelistic endeavour found expression and a means of popularising the message, in a series of some of the noblest hymns in the whole long history of Christendom. Hated and despised by a majority of churchmen, the Methodists for long regarded themselves merely as a society within the Establishment until practical considerations made a formal rupture inevitable in 1795. Even in the early nineteenth century the masses of unregarded humanity in the factories were uncared for by Church or State who feared and disliked this new phenomenon. "No one but the Non-conformist minister (usually Methodist) was their friend."

And often this interest in Evangelical religion was combined with Radical politics and agitation. But the political conservatism of original Methodism was still strongly represented and acted as a restraining force.

The Established Church was not entirely uninfluenced by this great revival and a small but influential body of clergy with a larger body of laymen confessed themselves Evangelicals and achieved great and lasting results in many parishes. The revival which was a fresh experience and preaching of the Grace of God led to a remarkable outburst of social activity. Within half a century this small but enthusiastic body of men had not only convinced the Church of England of the vital importance of Foreign Missions, but also initiated and led to a successful conclusion the agitation against the slave trade and slavery, inaugurated Factory legislation and begun humanitarian reform. The main work was done by a body of consecrated business men known as the Clapham Sect.

VI.

The first beginnings of a national system of education, like the growth of toleration at an earlier period, were promoted by the rivalry between the Church of England and Dissent. To modern eyes this may appear a sordid origin, yet it is hard to see what else but a Christian concern for religious knowledge would have pushed the state into taking up its proper responsibilities in the matter. The Evangelical influence not only achieved results which left an enduring effect on the statute book but also in the religious habits of the people. "The English of all classes formed in the Nineteenth century a strongly Protestant nation: most of them were religious and most of them (including the Utilitarians and Agnostics) were 'serious', with that strong pre-occupation about morality which is the merit and danger of the Puritan character." Dr. Trevelyan goes on to point out that the popular heroes of the later nineteenth century were first and foremost religious men: Livingstone, explorer and missionary; General Gordon, soldier-philanthropist, Lord Shaftesbury and Mr. Gladstone.

Other factors were also at work in the nineteenth century. The great impulse to reform provided by the Reform Act of 1832 could not have left untouched the antiquated and inequitable arrangements of the
Church of England. Endowments were re-arranged, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners brought into existence and the leisured, wealthy clerical existence described in "Barchester Towers", made a thing of the past. It was fortunate for the Church of England that reforming Parliaments had dealt thus with its machinery, for by the middle of the century it was faced by a Dissent which had been re-invigorated through the religious revival and contained in its ranks many able leaders determined to reduce the last strongholds of established privilege and to make civil liberty a reality. One by one, the grievances associated with Tithe, Marriage, Burial and exclusion from the Universities were done away by act of Parliament. Although this legislative activity undoubtedly saved the Church from a frontal assault when its own leaders were neither capable nor willing to tackle the job of reform, it provoked vehement protest from a body of clergy who had come to hold exalted notions of the authority of the ministry and the inviolability of the Church. This protest was the immediate origin of the Oxford Movement which sought during the remaining years of the century to emphasize the "Catholic" inheritance of the Church of England. As perhaps was only to be expected it has steadily gained adherents among the clergy but made little impression on a population fundamentally Protestant. Like the Evangelicals, later generations of the Oxford Movement have applied themselves to the task of social criticism. On the whole their criticism has been more radical (though not constructive) than that of the Evangelicals but less concerned with action aimed at particular ends.

There, at the threshold of the twentieth century when the Great Queen died, Dr. Trevelyan brings the long fascinating story to an end. With great skill of arrangement, felicity of phrase and power of description he has depicted on a succession of canvasses, the English scene at different moments of her historical development. In every picture organized Christianity appears both in the institution and in the ordinary social life of the people, and indeed it cannot be omitted without grievously distorting the picture. It is good for us to look, through the eyes of a detached observer, at the Church as a social factor and to note carefully his estimation of its significance in national life.

2 Trevelyan pp.vii.-x.
The Medieval Village: G. G. Coulton pp.509, 559-60.
4 Trevelyan p. 100.
7 We Shall Rebuild: G. F. Macleod p. 40.
8 Vide the comment by Trevelyan on the Nineteenth century: "The genuine honesty of most British merchants as men of business had been one of the causes of our great commercial prosperity"; op. cit. p. 563.
12 See C. H. Smyth "Evangelicalism in Retrospect" in Cambridge Historical Review Vol VII. No. 3.
13 Trevelyan p. 493.