

# Mr. Gladstone

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CAN a man in high political office make his statesmanship consciously and pre-eminently Christian, and succeed in his aim? An important study of this question, which is less easy to answer than might at first appear, is provided by Sir Philip Magnus' great new biography of Gladstone.<sup>1</sup> It is a book to be read by anyone interested in the interaction of faith and politics, and of faith and vocation, or indeed by anyone seeking an absorbing book for their leisure hours.

Neither Morley nor the countless little books which followed him reveal the real Gladstone. Sir Philip Magnus has achieved a masterly compression, and because he has sought throughout to show Gladstone the man he enables the present day reader to see him at last in a clear perspective. It thus becomes possible to go somewhat nearer an understanding of this enigmatic, volcanic personality, the tractarian who was revered and adored by nonconformists, the "rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories" who became the liberal leader, the intense believer who so encouraged freedom of thought in Britain.

Gladstone sprang from an evangelical home. At Eton his influence was strong for good, and at Oxford his avowed intention was to be ordained. When circumstances and his father's wishes put him in the House of Commons he considered that his true vocation was unchanged. "I have been long ago pledged to the service of the Church," he wrote to Manning in 1839, "and I should be a renegade indeed if the outward form of my present life were to hide from me that which I wish to be the pole star of my existence" (p. 35). By then he had moved from his early evangelicalism, which was fervent in form but evidently second hand in experience and strangely ill-digested intellectually, and had identified himself with the developing ideas of the Tractarians. Like others of his generation he never denied his early evangelicalism but considered that his later beliefs were the natural development of a mature mind, a view which no thoughtful evangelical can accept. It is unfortunate that Sir Philip does not describe in more detail Gladstone's religious development at this period, for it is fundamental to a later understanding of his character. Sir Philip also swallows that old-fashioned idea of the immaturity of evangelicalism itself (as opposed to the immaturity of Gladstone's or another's version of it) and he clearly misunderstands the nature of the evangelical position, assuming, for instance, that in the Gorham controversy the Bishop's view "naturally and properly" was right: "Gorham employed the evangelical argument which Gladstone had outgrown before he went up to Oxford, that if baptism is a means of regeneration, how can infants be worthy to receive it?" (p. 95). On the other hand, Sir Philip unhesitatingly and warmly demonstrates the reality of the faith to which Gladstone humbly subscribed, and he is therefore a worthy biographer, which the rationalist Morley was not.

<sup>1</sup> *Gladstone: a Biography*, by Philip Magnus. John Murray. pp. 482. 28/-.

In his Introduction Sir Philip sums up Gladstone's career: "He sought to mould himself, his country, and the world to the pattern suggested by his personal religion in which he believed with the pure faith of a child". All through the half-century of his political life this purpose was dominant. It is humbling to read of Gladstone's intensity, his prayerfulness, his sense of the awfulness of sin, his extreme conscientiousness, convinced as he was that he must one day account to a holy God for every action of every hour. As G. W. E. Russell, once his secretary, wrote, in a small book which Sir Philip does not quote, "amid all the turmoils and distractions of the most secular and most exciting occupation, his inner life was lived unbrokenly with God". Nor was his religion confined to politics and literature. There is no more moving facet of his activity than the work he did for prostitutes, which he refused to abandon despite the inevitable gossip and dangers for a man in his position.

No one can doubt Gladstone's sincerity. But did he succeed in his purpose? Was he, in effect as well as in intention, a Christian statesman, whose political work brought unsullied honour and glory to the God he worshipped? Inevitably there was a moral fervour in Gladstone's work which was of benefit to the development of British political principles, though it must not be forgotten that active Christians were as common in the parliament of his hey-day as they were rare in the period of Melbourne or the young Palmerston. Gladstone cannot, therefore, by any means take all the credit for the growth of righteousness and incorruptibility in political life. And there is another side of the picture. "He prayed constantly for guidance," writes Sir Philip Magnus (p. 175), "and believed that he received answers to his prayers. In those circumstances he was apt to confound with moral obliquity, any arguments or convictions which ran counter to his own".

Gladstone, in other words, fell into the pit laid for all Christian politicians of any age or race, and beside the fervour of his attack on the unspeakable Turk, which did much to make his generation think of international affairs in moral terms, must be set his intense personal hatred of Disraeli, whom he almost confounded with the Devil. What is worse, as he grew old he was able at times "to persuade himself that an expedient course was a right one". In that connection the reader wanting a corrective to Sir Philip's attractive persuasiveness might well turn to chapters xi and xii of Lord Elton's *General Gordon*. Sir Philip naturally does not hide or excuse Gladstone's failure over Khartoum, but Lord Elton brings out in more detail the unsavoury dishonesties—for they cannot be called less—of Gladstone's policy.

If Gladstone was the sole example it would seem that Christianity and politics do not mix to the mutual benefit of both, and that no man can lead a great political party and maintain intact "an exalted conception of politics as an aspect of moral and religious truth". But what precisely was Gladstone's religion? It is probable that despite his vast intellect he did not himself really know what he believed. The evangelical foundation, the tractarian superstructure, with its insatiable appetite for services ("to-day was a good preparation, with a beautiful and absorbing service of three-and-a-half hours in church") the

strangely naïve confidence in the essential goodness of human nature, the extraordinary oddities of his attempts to prove Homer a divinely inspired preparation for Holy Writ, all this forms an intellectual and spiritual muddle which does not detract from the essential spirituality of his life but adversely affected his actions. Gladstone had the ability to veil his ideas in a mass of words and "nice qualifications and distinctions", of which his remark at Leeds in 1881 is a good example in the political sphere: "And so, gentlemen, I say that while we are opposed to imperialism we are devoted to the Empire". To understand, therefore, what he believed is difficult.

One point, however, emerges. Had Gladstone grown *in* his evangelicalism instead of "growing out" of it, the results for his own life and therefore for the Church and nation would have been incalculable. The evangelical movement was going through a difficult phase in the eighteen-thirties and forties. Had Gladstone seen the reality behind the façade, and appreciated the freedom and power of the evangelical gospel, "Who can say," as Wilberforce wrote of Pitt, "what would have been the effect?"

The circumstances of the time, and his own character may have made this impossible, humanly speaking. Each reader must judge for himself. But as the portrait of Gladstone unfolds in Sir Philip Magnus' pages, innumerable fascinating questions are raised, and every one interested in the Anglican Church and in the growth of Christian character will find himself set absorbing problems. The canvas is large; politics and statesmanship, economics, personal relationships—Gladstone and the Queen, Gladstone and Disraeli, Gladstone wooing and losing Caroline Farquhar, Gladstone's idyllic marriage with Catherine Glynne—it is all here, set against the background of the great days of British politics. This book provides good reading for parson and layman alike. It will enlarge his horizons. It will challenge him with the failure of the evangelicalism of a hundred years ago to hold one of the greatest of its sons. And it will set him to pray that a Gladstone shall arise again from the evangelical ranks, to take his stand for Christian statesmanship, and not fail.

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