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The Evangelicalism of Bishop Anthony Wilson Thorold (1825–1895)

Jill Durey

Evangelical clergymen of the Victorian Church of England are usually associated with strongly doctrinaire views on the major social, religious and political issues of the mid- to late-nineteenth century: on, among others, the moral and physical condition of the working classes; elementary education; and the worrying advance, from one quarter, of High Church ritualism or Anglo-Catholicism and, from another, of scepticism and biblical criticism. Broadly speaking, they were subject to accusations of narrowness of vision, intolerance of alternative views within the Church—reflected in their eagerness to engage in litigation—and a rigid adherence to biblical authority. Despite these apparent weaknesses, Church Evangelicalism reached its apogee of influence and authority during Lord Palmerston's premiership (1855–65), although by the end of Queen Victoria's reign it 'appeared to be a spent force, ...set to stagnate within a fundamentalist fortress'.¹ Why this should have been so remains unclear, for as Englander has noted, 'Our ignorance of Victorian Evangelicalism is profound.'² A failure to offer relevant solutions to the major current problems facing the laity might be expected partly to explain this decline in influence and popularity, but Evangelical clergymen were as prominent as most others in leading the great Victorian drive to bring religion and better living conditions to the masses. Perhaps their famed 'narrowness'—an accusation commonly thrown up by their theological opponents—was the cause of their eclipse? Yet, as this article seeks to demonstrate by a consideration of the life and career of a prominent evangelical bishop, Anthony Wilson Thorold (1825–1895), Evangelicalism perhaps ought not to be universally tarred with the brush of irretrievable narrow-mindedness, stagnation, bigotry and unresponsiveness to change. Thorold was to remain an Evangelical throughout his ministry, but at the same time he demonstrated a strong social conscience, a growing toleration of varying religious practices within the Church and a willingness to embrace incremental change.

Hylson-Smith's description of Anthony Wilson Thorold as 'rather narrowly

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Evangelical, and intolerant of ritualism' requires considerable qualification.³ In reality, he was a man of contrasts, even of paradox. Certainly he was an Evangelical clergyman, but not a narrow one. His politics were Conservative and he received both his episcopal appointments from Conservative Prime Ministers, with Queen Victoria's whole-hearted support. Thorold was the only Evangelical Disraeli appointed to a bishopric (that of Rochester in 1877) and Lord Salisbury translated him to the more prestigious bishopric of Winchester in 1891.⁴ Thorold's initial episcopal appointment was strongly supported by the leaders of the Church and the nation for the express purpose of curbing ritualism. Tait, Archbishop of Canterbury, was determined that Queen Victoria's fears of England returning to Roman Catholicism should be assuaged by Thorold's firm, but steady, control of the Romanising Ritual which had taken hold of many a parish in the Rochester diocese. Thorold served these leaders well, but his private position was much more complex.

Thorold worked for most of his life among the very poor in the slums of London, yet he himself was a very rich man, and left a considerable fortune. His family has been described as one of the oldest and most respected in England.⁵ He did not attend a public school, being privately tutored on account of his health, but matriculated at Queen's College, Oxford. Although the Simeon Trust in the 1830s had encouraged aristocratic interest in Evangelicalism, most Evangelicals came from modest backgrounds and many did not attend university, training instead at the new theological colleges. Extensive travel widened Thorold's horizons. He visited America on several occasions, often spent time in Europe and travelled to Australia in an effort to cure his chronic asthma. As a bishop, Thorold even delivered a sermon at the town of Thorold in Canada, named in 1775 after his ancestor Sir John.⁶ Socially, he mixed with and entertained some of the most eminent people of his country, including members of the royal family. But the few months Thorold was to spend as vicar of Mayfair in 1868 were unsatisfying and he confessed in a letter to Tait that he was uncomfortable ministering to the wealthy.⁷ He preferred to challenge the glamour of high church ceremony in the slums, where ritualism supplied a fascinating glitter normally lacking in the inhabitants' daily lives.⁸ Thorold often made an incongruous figure. Dressed in the finest clothes, dapper and immaculate, he frequently walked through the notoriously dangerous streets of the Seven Dials in London, among people whose outer garments could only be termed rags. So great was the respect he

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commanded that his pin-neat appearance and supposed vanity never disturbed his parishioners, as it often did his peers. Bishop Thorold was thus by no means a 'narrow evangelical'; he was far too worldly.

Thorold's choice of the Evangelical school was in fact accidental. Had a succession of mainly tragic events not occurred in his life, he might have found himself firmly within the broad school of Anglicanism, to which his friend and mentor Archbishop Tait himself belonged. Sudden, unexpected and inexplicable death was ubiquitous in Victorian England, but Evangelicalism, with its curious ability to turn tragedy and grief into an engine of productive exertion, offered its own, still Calvinist, consolations for those seeking meaning in God's inscrutable ways. If anyone might profit from these doctrines it was Thorold, whose life was punctuated by a series of melancholy catastrophes. The death of his father, when Thorold was only nine years old and away at a small private school, affected him deeply. His letters to his sister reveal his misery and his solace in religion.⁹ His sister was to die soon after he took his degree. Both of his wives were to die suddenly and prematurely, as did the three children of his first marriage, two in infancy and one at the age of nineteen. Thorold's insistence on remaining within the Evangelical wing of the Church throughout his life and his sudden bursts of energy after bereavement can perhaps best be explained by reference to the consolations offered by evangelical doctrine for people of his psychology.

At Oxford, however, his path remained unclear. Initially he was intellectually attracted by broad school theology. He hoped in vain to become acquainted with Arthur Stanley, one of its leading exponents, yet, towards the end of his three years, he was interviewed by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce at Cuddesdon College, the high church stronghold, with a view to a curacy in Oxford. Later, imbued with the evangelical virtue of the need for unremitting hard work as a sign of God's grace, he regretted his graduation with a dubious fourth class honours in mathematics, and for having stretched neither his mental capacities nor his physical endurance in any form of study. After graduation, his renewed friendship with Charles Carus-Wilson, a devout Evangelical; their trip to Palestine and Egypt, during the course of which Thorold narrowly escaped drowning in the Nile; and the death of his sister Fanny, all combined to persuade him to espouse Evangelicalism. He accepted a living from the Rev. Carus-Wilson in Lancashire. Thorold's worldliness did not disappear, though,

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for he soon became engaged to a local MP's daughter, Henrietta Greene, and they were married by the Bishop of London in 1850 at the fashionable St. Margaret's, Westminster, the church of the House of Commons. After the birth of two children, one of whom soon died, Thorold began his long ministry in London in 1854, as curate of Holy Trinity, Marylebone.

His desire for promotion was fulfilled three years later, when he was made rector of St Giles's-in-the-Fields. Many clergymen may have seen this as a dubious prize, for the parish contained the terrifying Seven Dials, which had so many criminals that policemen always had to do duty in pairs. The parish was regarded as a kind of underworld, a thieves' kitchen, yet Thorold loved his work and spent nine years ministering to the inhabitants of its sordid slums.¹⁰ He used to tell the story of how a sceptical old man said to a little girl in the parish: "If you want to be sure there is no God you have only to look around you in St Giles's".¹¹ Amazingly, amidst this squalor Thorold organised successful cottage lectures.

In 1859, following the deaths of his wife and daughter, Thorold sought refuge in work, compensating for his mental inertia at Oxford and his lack of scholarly pretensions by reading, every day, sermons written by renowned theologians. His skills as an organiser, not only of effective parish structures, but also of financial management, also began to flower. He corresponded regularly with Tait, then Bishop of London, describing his ideas for new developments and his attempts to resolve interpersonal and structural problems.¹² Above all, these letters illustrate his deep commitment to his calling, his steadfastness of purpose and his ability to conciliate when necessary. Tait must have been impressed by the clergyman's strength of character in combining his private life of widowed father with his uphill struggle to inspire religious feeling in the souls of inhabitants of arguably the most wretched conditions in England.

Evangelicals have been criticised by both contemporary and modern commentators for being stimulated more by emotion than by reason and for lacking interest in education.¹³ Thorold, in contrast, was keen for every child in England, regardless of circumstances, to receive an education. In St. Giles's, he created a huge school for nine hundred children, the first of many. His active development of schools for the children of London's poor resulted in his

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membership of the Schools Enquiry Commission in 1864. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge also asked him to write commentaries for them. His wide interest in education and broad theological inquiries distinguished him, therefore, from the archetypal Evangelical who preferred the spoken word to written public rationalising.

These duties were in addition to his heavy parish load. His health, never robust, broke down again and he went to Syria to dry out his lungs, but was struck down by fever. The Archbishop of York, William Thomson, for whom he had worked as examining chaplain for a few years, failed to persuade him to become a vicar in Yorkshire to escape the punishing workload of a London parish. In order to gain some relief, Thorold renewed his friendship with the Labouchère family, who had actively befriended him and his wife when they had first moved to London. This new intimacy caused him to contemplate marriage for a second time and in 1865 he married Emily Labouchère, the daughter of his friends. The next year brought more changes, both in his private and public life. His son Algar was born and he resigned from St. Giles's.¹⁴ But Thorold's health was clearly a cause for concern, and he went on a three-month voyage to Buenos Aires in search of dry air, leaving his wife and baby son with relatives in the country, and his older son from his first marriage at school in Winchester.

On return, he was appointed to Curzon Chapel, Mayfair, but as mentioned earlier, he felt uncomfortable working only among wealthy parishioners and was relieved to accept the position of vicar of St. Pancras, another poor area.¹⁵ Its huge congregation satisfied his desire for hard work. It also coincided with his appointment to the first London school board, on which he became very friendly with W. E. Forster, who was preparing the Education Act of 1870. A year later, Thorold was stunned by the death of his son Hayford at the age of nineteen. Once more, private despair prompted him to engage in almost frenetic public duty and he organised a mission to convert personally to God every worshipper in St. Pancras.

Over the next couple of years, happier private events ensured a return to domestic calm. His two daughters, Dorothy and Sybil, were born two years apart, and his busy parish work was relieved by the knowledge that the three children of his second marriage seemed to be thriving. A spell of three months

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in York as residentiary canon provided him with respite from his relentless work schedule. His Sunday schools, a feature of Evangelicalism that tended to favour education of the spirit over education of the intellect, were the largest in London. His second mission, also integral to Evangelicalism, became known as the London mission, even though he himself admitted that there had been a slight falling off in religious enthusiasm. His sermons had nonetheless become very popular, perhaps because of their brevity. They never exceeded thirty minutes, unlike many Evangelical sermons, which some commentators claimed to be long and plodding.

In 1875, at a time when Evangelical opposition to ritualism was at its height—the case against A. H. Mackonochie, the ritualist vicar of St. Alban's, Holborn, was still rumbling through the courts and the Public Worship Regulation Act had brought ritualism again to public notice—Thorold expounded his theological ideas in an address to the Islington Clerical Meeting. He came out in favour of a firm but moderate Evangelicalism, a doctrine which was not only genuinely held but was also politically astute. He spoke of the 'obnoxious novelties' of ritualism as well as the danger of it being pushed to extremes, but also drew attention to the fact that, thanks to its practitioners, 'the entire level of Divine worship throughout the Kingdom has been appreciably and beneficially raised'.¹⁶ As mentioned earlier, Evangelicalism was noted for its preference for emotion over reason, but Thorold disparaged this kind of 'heat', noting that 'the rolling organ, the strains of lofty song that crack the wicked roof with their melody...the rousing eloquence of some gifted orator may easily produce sensations, with which the spirit of God has had nothing whatever to do and stir a sensibility that will last till the doors open and then evaporate with the ramble home'.¹⁷ Instead, he called for 'dignity, solemnity, exactness and simplicity' and a 'good sense' that is 'tolerant of diversity and mindful of the just claims of liberty'.¹⁸

Thorold's moderate Evangelicalism—reflected in his capacity to find something positive in all schools of Anglican thought, while promoting the values of his own tradition—was doubtless a major factor in Disraeli's decision in 1877 to ask him if he would accept nomination for the vacant see of Rochester, where ritualism was strong. Although ritualistic parishes had existed since the 1840s in London, they had significantly increased in recent years.¹⁹ The leaders of Church and nation were quietly panicking that Roman

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Catholicism might resume its supremacy in England. For Tait, of the Broad Church, Thorold was thus a perfect choice. As Bishop of London, he had for many years observed Thorold's qualities and was confident that, if anyone could control the ritualists without antagonising them, Thorold could. For Queen Victoria, too, Thorold was ideal. Coming from an old family and having private means, he was comfortable among the Upper Ten Thousand. The fact that he was also comfortable among England's poorest was a bonus. For Disraeli, Thorold was a sound choice. He had a reputation for working extremely hard and was not known for extreme views, a quality which also appealed to the Queen.

As anticipated, the issue of ritualism played a significant part in Thorold's duties as soon as he had been consecrated on 25 July, 1877. Ritualists, by this time, were distinguished by their observation of the 'six points', defined by the English Church Union in 1875. These referred to the use of the eastward position during the eucharist by the celebrant, the wearing of full eucharistic vestments, the use of lighted candles on the altar, the use of unleavened wafer bread, the use of incense and the mixing of water and wine in the chalice. Other ritualistic practices involved coloured altar frontals, altar crosses, crucifixes, holy water, the elevation of the elements, statues and credence tables.²⁰ All of these were prevalent, to a greater or lesser extent, in the ritualistic parishes of Rochester. Practices were deemed legal if they had been in use in the second year of King Edward VI's reign. But, as Bernard Palmer notes, it all depended on the interpretation of the 'so-called Ornaments Rubric in the Book of Common Prayer'; this 'had been a vexed question since its original framing in the sixteenth century'.²¹

Thorold's first year as Bishop, during which his second wife unexpectedly died, was a baptism of fire. Rising above his personal grief, with the help of Tait, whose own wife died in the same year, Thorold confronted the ritualistic parish of St. James', Hatcham, made infamous by Arthur Tooth's adamant approach to his love of aestheticism. A lengthy correspondence between the Bishop and a parishioner, William Grant, on the subject of Protestantism and provoked by the former's attempt to quell ritualistic ardour at Hatcham, was embarrassingly sent by Grant to the papers.²² But Tait calmly supported Thorold in their private correspondence.²³ Nonetheless, Thorold was compelled to conduct several interviews with bristly clergymen, during which

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he persuaded Tooth to resign in November and installed a slightly lesser ritualist, Malcolm McColl, in his place.²⁴ Thorold compromised on ritualistic practices by sanctioning McColl's intention to use the Eastward position, provided that he broke the bread before the people.²⁵ Thorold, then, within a few months, had successfully gained Tooth's resignation, but had replaced him with someone who would not deprive the congregation of some of the ritualism to which they had grown accustomed. Tooth always claimed that these troubles had affected his health, although he was to die at the age of ninety-one in 1931, far outliving both Thorold and Tait.

It was on a trip to America with his son soon after his wife's death that Thorold wrote the pastoral letter in which he developed his maturing views on ritualism. Its publication on All Saints' Day brought him immediate celebrity. Nearly every newspaper quoted it and The Times allocated a leading article to it. Its success was due to its dual focus, for it outlined the organisation of his diocese and discussed the issue of ritualism. In it Thorold stressed that he 'must never press his personal convictions as if they were articles of faith, or enforce his individual preferences in ritual and ceremony as if they had the weight of law'.²⁶ He claimed that he had 'neither the intention nor the desire to interfere' with 'the full liberty of my clergy' and that, as regards ritualism, 'it is not generally understood that the initiative of proceeding does not rest with the Bishop'.²⁷ Nonetheless, he pointed out that 'for me to decline to administer the law, when such administration was on sufficient grounds proposed to me, would be to incur the risk, in the eyes of my countrymen, of being a lawbreaker myself'. Consequently, he had decided that he was 'compelled to decline either to confirm, or preach, or perform any official act in churches adopting an illegal Ritual'.²⁸

Not surprisingly, given the problems Thorold faced in Rochester, his Pastoral had a mixed reception from his own diocesan clergy. An anonymous clergyman published *A Dutiful Remonstrance*, in which he expressed his admiration of Thorold for his organisation of the diocese, but strongly criticised his approach to ritualism.²⁹ In particular, he was most unhappy with Thorold's insistence on the need for clergymen to obey the courts of the realm and the monitions of their bishop. The clergyman claimed that he, as ordained minister, had nothing to do with modern, secular courts. The third and fourth paragraphs of the Royal Declaration to the Thirty-Nine Articles asserted that clergymen had the

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right, if any difference arose 'about external policy', to settle these differences by first obtaining 'leave under our Broad Seal' to do so.³⁰ As far as the bishop's monitions were concerned, the clergyman declared that his ordination vow of obedience to the "Ordinary, and other chief Ministers" was 'carefully limited to "their godly admonitions and judgment"'.³¹ The detailed response of this anonymous clergyman in no way overshadowed the wide acclaim met by Thorold's pastoral. In just over a year as bishop of what was known as the Cinderella of dioceses, he had achieved national renown.³²

In the following years several developments led Thorold towards an increasing tolerance of ritualistic practices within his diocese. The first was the death of his mentor, Tait, in 1882. Freed from the need to defend his friend's position on ritualism, Thorold now felt less constrained to hide his own, more liberal views. Certainly, he was now more inclined to reveal publicly how valuable he believed ritualists were to his grand design to evangelise the people of London. Fund-raising was one of Thorold's great strengths as an Evangelical bishop. In 1878, for instance, under his prompting, his Diocesan Society had raised nearly £7,700, a huge sum for a poor diocese. But he relied heavily on the goodwill and efforts of his ritualist clergy to achieve his diocesan ends. In 1882 he launched the Ten Churches' Fund through his Diocesan Society, acknowledging in his private diary that, however difficult this scheme would be, the majority of support would most probably come from the ritualistic clergy, who were often the mainstay of his development plans.³³ In just over a year he was able to announce the completion or commencement of eleven churches as a result of this fund and publicly declared his intention to begin the complete restoration of St. Saviour's, Southwark. He was also delighted to acknowledge his debt to the ritualist-practising Clewer Sisters, who in 1883 had encouraged and helped him persuade the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to improve rundown church property sufficiently to provide habitable housing for working people at little or no profit for the church. His respect for the dedication of the Clewer Sisters was openly expressed.³⁴

Of equal importance for understanding Thorold's shift on ritualism was the impact of what at first was seen by him to be a personal disaster. In 1884 his son Algar went up to Oxford and within a month had become a Roman Catholic, 'largely to annoy his family'.³⁵ His father, who, with the active support of Benson, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, had spent much of the

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summer dampening down a young man's attempt to cause trouble for a priest who had been conducting masses for many years, was stunned. It was as if his tolerance was being mocked and pushed to its outermost limits. Having, with the Archbishop's full sanction, ignored the clergyman's masses and having informed the young agitator that, since he was not a resident in the ritualistic parish, he had no right to complain, Thorold felt he could say nothing to his own son.³⁶ Thorold had long been worried by Algar's inclination to high church ritual. He was now so embarrassed that he offered to resign his see. According to Michael Hanbury, Benson is said to have replied: "If your son has made a fool of himself it is no reason why his father should do the same!"³⁷ Benson's youngest son was also to adopt Roman Catholicism many years later. But silence and inaction for Thorold were costly for, even three months later, he remained depressed and ill with asthma over what he considered Algar's act of rebellion.

Within a year, however, Thorold began to see his son's actions in a clearer perspective. In his Charge for October 1885 Thorold wrote that ritualistic practices were not that important in the scheme of things: 'A black gown or a white, a cross over the Holy Table or no cross, turning to the East at the Creed or not turning, surpliced choirs or unsurpliced' were of no consequence for Christ himself.³⁸ He urged clergymen not to be afraid to move with the times, in order to accommodate and encourage the enthusiasms of the young, and to 'beware of petrified theology'. No doubt Algar was much in his thoughts. He informed his clergy that '[t]he way to help the young is greatly to love them, and to be much in their company, and to listen kindly to their often inspiring, if wild, speculations, and always to remember that youth is the ozone of the world'.³⁹

A public demonstration of his acceptance of ritualistic practices followed a few months later, in May, 1886, when he conducted a confirmation at St. John's, Kennington, a ritualistic church. His 'conversion' was complete when, in a report to Convocation in 1889 detailing the continuing difficulties in evangelising the people of London, he urged the establishment of Anglican brotherhoods, living together in celibacy and 'receiving nothing beyond their board and lodging, pledged to render their services'.⁴⁰ This was a remarkable suggestion to come from an Evangelical bishop. But Thorold's own son Algar had, in the previous year, presented himself as a postulant at the Grande Chartreuse monastery for the second time.⁴¹ Algar in fact left the monastery

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after six months to lead a rather bohemian life in Europe for three or four years, but his father had presumably learnt through his son of the valuable work achieved by the order. Simpkinson's biography, in its citing of Thorold's charge, tends to suggest that the bishop's changed opinion was a result of the Lambeth judgement on Bishop King.⁴² Yet this was surely what Thorold preferred the world to think, through loyalty to Tait's memory and through his embarrassment over Algar.

Thorold's path, taken step by step, towards an acceptance of ritualistic practices within the Church coincided with, and most probably influenced, the decline of opposition among Evangelicals in general. Nevertheless, the issue of ritualism would not go away. In 1889 the long trial of Edward King, Bishop of Lincoln, for ritualistic practices began. Benson, faced with the need to form a subcommittee of assessors, immediately thought of Thorold, who he was confident would not only publicly represent the Evangelical interest but would be privately sympathetic to King's plight. Thorold did not favour dragging clergymen before the courts and, moreover, he had family connections with King. The Thorold and King families had owned land almost abutting each other in Lincolnshire for centuries.⁴³ Thorold, for his part, was delighted to discover during the trial (and to observe in his private notebook) that, with the one exception of crossing oneself, all of King's ritualistic practices had been integral to Anglican worship during the second year of Edward VI's reign, after reformation.⁴⁴ Thus, the charge of ritualism as a return to Roman Catholicism was, in this case, fallacious. The long trial ended and Bishop King was acquitted.

While King's trial was still in progress, Thorold was elevated to the see of Winchester. His promotion, he joked, made him feel 'rather like a young lady who is going to be married', for he was to change his name from A. W. Roffen to A. W. Winton.⁴⁵ If the diocese of Winchester did not have the same social problems as Rochester's, the spectre of ritualism followed him as he moved westward. But Thorold was now confident enough, through Benson's support, changed public opinion and his own personal convictions, to preach tolerance of ritualism publicly. The well-known Father Dolling, for example, carried out his masses for the dead without fear of Thorold interfering. As with the ritualists in London, Thorold was far more impressed with Dolling's evangelism and interest in the poor than concerned about the heterodoxies of his church practices.⁴⁶ In fact, by now practices previously considered

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ritualistic were beginning to be accepted as orthodox, although Dolling found that Thorold's successor, Randall Davidson, was not to be as tolerant. Nevertheless ritualism, both publicly and privately, ceased to disturb Thorold.

Thorold did not have the opportunity to leave much of a mark on his new diocese, for in 1895 he died, quite suddenly, from the effects of a summer chill, caught while convalescing in his garden. His funeral was huge, the clergy of Rochester almost outnumbering their Winchester counterparts. His legacy to the Church was considerable: he bequeathed the recently, and extravagantly, refurbished Farnham Castle and his library to Winchester; and he left much of his fortune for the full restoration of St. Saviour's, Southwark (the latest restoration relies heavily on Lottery money). More importantly, however, he left the legacy of a moderate Evangelicalism, strongly committed to traditional Evangelical values but open to the breezes of incremental change. But at his death the Anglican Church was in decline. In recent years some historians have sought to revise our understanding of the link between increasing industrialisation and urbanisation and a decline in organised religion. Rather than accepting that the crisis for organised Christianity began in the early nineteenth century, as is traditionally believed, they have argued that the move to the cities and to industrial production initially stimulated greater religiosity among the working classes.⁴⁷ Only later did the 'sea change for British urban religion' come, when the cities 'matured at the end of the nineteenth century'.⁴⁸ If this is indeed the case, it happened despite the strenuous efforts of Thorold to place the Church at the centre of popular life.

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44. Lambeth Palace Library, MS. 1918 Red. Ratio: 15:1, Bishop Thorold's Notebook: *The Trial of Bishop King 1889-9*, pp. 88-9.
45. Simpkinson, *Life of Thorold*, p. 314.
46. Palmer, *Reverend Rebels*, p. 191.
47. David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland: From the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 142.
48. Callum Brown, "Religious Growth in Urban Societies," in Hugh McLeod (ed), *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830-1930* (London, 1994), pp. 258-59.