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Holiness in Victorian and Edwardian England: Some ecclesial patterns and theological requisitions

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This essay begins by offering some observations about how holiness was comprehended and expressed in Victorian and Edwardian England. In addition to the 'sensibility' and 'sentiment' that characterised society, notions of holiness were shaped by, and developed in reaction to, dominant philosophical movements; notably, the Enlightenment and Romanticism. It then considers how these notions found varying religious expression in four Protestant traditions – the Oxford Movement, Calvinism, Wesleyanism, and the Early Keswick movement. In juxtaposition to what was most often considered to be a negative expression of holiness associated primarily with anthropocentric and anthroposocial behaviour as evidenced in these traditions, the essay concludes by examining one – namely, P.T. Forsyth – whose voice called from within the ecclesial community for a radical requisition of holiness language as a fundamentally positive reality describing the divine life and divine activity. The relevance of a study of the Church's understanding of holiness and how it sought to develop its doctrine while engaging with larger social and philosophical shifts endure with us still.

An age 'wandering between two worlds …'

It is commonplace to observe that the patterns of sensibility and sentimentality that characterised Victorian and Edwardian[1] society consciously sought to transcend doubt. Informed by attitudes inherited from former generations, such patterns sought re-expression in a busy new age of expanding population, spreading industrialisation, and an increase in urbanisation, mobility, unemployment, and middle-class wealth. Common enough too are descriptions of the period as 'a second great, and perhaps final, crisis for the Western conscience' (Davis 2002:102) after the Reformation, and as an age of anguish, of agnostics and 'honest doubters symptomatically torn between "yes" and "no" – suspended, like the age itself … between belief and disbelief' (Davis 2002:100; cf. Chadwick 1970:112–150; Helmstadter & Lightman 1990; Symondson 1970). It was, in Matthew Arnold's words, an age 'Wandering between two worlds, one dead | The other powerless to be born' (Arnold 1994:71). Similarly, Bertrand Russell (1918) described the mood as:

> all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces … concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears. (p. 57)

Not only were the Church, Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis and Mill's liberal utilitarianism responsible, to varying degrees, for the current state of society, but they also continued to shape the response. Although censuses of the period indicate that less than half the population (and less than 10% of the urban poor) regularly attended church services, Victorian Britain still possessed a deeply religious consciousness.[2] The concern of this essay is to map in abbreviated form how one particular aspect of that consciousness – namely, the religious notion of holiness – was comprehended and expressed in a variety of ways.

Over a third of the books published between 1836 and 1863 were religious, and religious newspapers and tracts flourished. Not only did middle-class Evangelical preachers talk about 'duty' and 'earnestness' but so too did agnostics and working-class radicals. While church leaders sought to keep these words grounded in a religious milieu, the mounting influence of utilitarianism equated to a loss of their association with transcendence and a redefining of their meaning along more Benthamesque lines that carefully delineated between particular and public spaces. Oddly enough, utilitarianism and the Church shared at least three common assumptions: (1) the primacy of the individual, (2) the possibility, and duty, of improving the human condition, and (3) the need

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1. Because Victorianism so dominated the Edwardian period, for our purposes here I shall coalesce Victorian and Edwardian periods (1830 to 1914) under the name 'Victorian' (see Caine 2006; Kern 2006).

2. Although still on the decrease, especially among the working classes and the poor, the figures were higher in Scotland, particularly in the Western Isles and in the Highlands.

for forms of individual asceticism. These shared assumptions also bore similar fruit: for Utilitarians, in social reform; for the Church, in philanthropic activity. One historian described this sense of vocation as 'the most marked character in Victorian religion' (Chadwick 1970:466). Another, with the charge that late Victorians reduced theology to sociology (Schieder 1965), a move that, coupled with an increased confidence in self-redemption, led to a radical downplaying of the enduring realities of sin.

The 19th century also witnessed a gradual modifying of Enlightenment thinking with the invigorating cultural atmosphere of Romanticism.[3] The dominance of Reason began to lose its grip to an emphasis on emotion and spirit as poetic and sublime as nature itself, a loosening often escorted by an embrace of pantheism of various sorts. It was the poets, it seems, who became the new priests (see Horne 1903:421; Shelley 1994:605).

The three common assumptions mentioned above betray a shared moral idealism that gave shape to Victorian life, an idealism nurtured by the largely Evangelical belief in the sanctity of the home and its associated sentiments. The practice of daily private and family prayer, for example, supplemented by spiritual reading and weekly sermons helped to define a holy home and generated a strong bond between Victorian parents and their children for whom holiness conventionally meant tidy hair and a tidy bedroom (see Mathers 2001:298). By 1845, the tract 'The Sinner's Friend' (1821) had sold 800 000 copies, and by 1867 more than 1.5 million copies. *Pilgrim's Progress*, too, was a favourite for 'the kitchen, the servant's hall and cottage' (Chadwick 1970:467), although its theology was largely detested by Tractarians. Also prominent in the literature of this period, both secular and religious, were the themes of sexual promiscuity and alcohol – an emphasis made partly in reaction against the debauchery so noticeable in Victorian cities, particularly among the poor. Victorian reticence, therefore, became a phase in the:

> history of the battle for refinement and civilization, and above all the better protection of women, against promiscuity, animalism, brutality and grossness which had been common even in the eighteenth century. (Clark 1962:126)

Thinking concerning holiness, when it happened at all, was largely identified with piety. This found its voice in predominantly negative form not only in matters related to sex and alcohol but also in censorship of literature and of the arts, and in a loss of a sense of play that affected such things as dress, conversation, intellectual speculation, religious liturgy, and games. Sabbatarianism, which forbade not only drink and games but even secular reading on Sundays, was also growing in popularity.

Two recurring terms that reflected this mode of Victorian social conformity were 'gentleman' and 'respectability'. Reference was even made to Jesus as 'a perfect gentlemen'

(Johnson 1987:143–146). Generally, a 'gentlemen' defined one who was educated and had independent income, which meant that he was either of the middle class or higher. But it meant more than that. It referred to one who reflected a brand of moral training and sensitivity made possible by wealth and education. Thus, the Unitarian minister and educator James Martineau described Thomas Arnold, a school headmaster, historian, and Anglican churchman with Erastian sympathies as a man 'respectable in scholarship, insensible to art, undistinguished in philosophy' (Martineau 1852:80); and when novelist William Makepeace Thackeray asked himself 'What is it to be a gentleman?', his response was that it meant:

> to have lofty aims, to lead a pure life, to keep your honour virgin; to have the esteem of your fellow-citizens, and the love of your fireside; to bear good fortune meekly; to suffer evil with constancy; and through evil or good to maintain truth always. (Thackeray 1869:132)

The notion of 'respectability' suggested bodily cleanliness and neatness, and it was particularly, though not always, applied to the lower classes. If one could not be a 'gentleman', at least one could aspire to be 'respectable'; that is, one who:

> need not shrink or hide or keep his door barred against visitors … who lives in the eye of his neighbours and can count on the approval of the great and the obedience of the humble. (Young 1953:25)

John Ruskin, among others, pointed out the inconsistency between these modes of social conformity and the Christian faith. How could Christian Victorians love their neighbour while adopting utilitarian economic principles that affirmed that humanity's deepest instinct was to defraud that neighbour? A Victorian way of concealing this contradiction was, as I have already intimated, to retreat into a Kipling-like sentimentality and a revised romanticism that found its voice in, among other places, the arts. Thus, a century later, Charles Dickens, for example, was accused of handling a subject as elegiac as the death of children 'as if it were some savoury dainty which could not be too fully appreciated' (Stang 1959:62; cf. Bradley 1997:112; Wheeler 1994:28–67; Wilson 2002:539–547).

That said, the link between Religion and Romanticism, like that between Renaissance and Reformation, is not an easy one to define: 'Theology like literature moved from reason to feeling. But theology did not move because literature moved. They marched hand in hand because the human spirit yearned for new depth' (Chadwick 1966:174), deploring common sense as shallow and reaching after a poetic beauty and truth not accessible in prose. Where it did not largely seek that new depth, however, was in a *positive* recovery of holiness itself. This neglect may provide a keyhole into the psyche of morality that prescribed Victorian life. Though fascinated by holiness, Victorians were also hostile to it, a hostility that fruited in doubt and anxiety rather than in wonder and awe. This contradiction *vis-à-vis* the 'holy' had its roots, on the one hand, in Victorianism's own Enlightenment spirit which insisted that as 'autonomous'

peoples and societies we ought to regulate not only our own existence but that of the world, and, on the other hand, in the prevalent romanticism that longed for intimations of the sublime beyond 'mechanical materialism' (Davis 2002:101).

While ideas of holiness were certainly shaped by and reflected in the surrounding culture, Christians in the 19th century sought to give expression to the reality of holiness in their own ecclesial contexts. This essay will consider four broad expressions – the Oxford Movement, the Calvinists, the Wesleyans, and the Early Keswick tradition – before turning to consider the voice of one theologian, P.T. Forsyth (1848–1921), who trumpeted, as it were, against the prevailing anthropocentric and anthroposocial wind by calling for the primacy of a thoroughly *theo*-logical re-centring of holiness.

The Oxford Movement

Reacting against the Enlightenment temper and the political liberalism of the day, and nurtured in the Romanticism of the Lake Poets and Walter Scott, the 1830s' Oxford Movement (known also as the Tractarian Movement) sought to 'rouse the Church from its lethargy, and to strengthen and purify religion, by making it deeper and more real' (Church 2004:74). Bernard Reardon notes: 'The Church's doctrine filled them with awe, for soundness of creed was the road to personal holiness' (Reardon 1971:107). Finding its location between 1833 and 1845, Tractarianism was, according to Horton Davies, 'the most important factor in the deepening of the religion of the English Church' (Davies 1961:243) in the 19th century, comparable to the Evangelical Revival in the previous one. Emphasising its apostolic catholicity rather than its Protestant Reformation roots, leading Tractarians such as John Keble, John Henry Newman and Edward Bouverie Pusey considered themselves 'missionaries within the church to bring the implicit catholicity of the church into full light' (Munson 1975:384). They desired to re-affirm the primacy of 'the spiritual' and to develop an 'autonomous institution at once more ancient, more holy, and more revered' (Arnstein 1992:300). This restoration of 'other-worldly temper' was, according to Evelyn Underhill (1937), their most significant contribution:

> The spiritual world to which they looked, and which they believed to be revealed in sacramental experience, was a world charged with mystery and awfulness; and made an unmitigated demand upon the soul. (pp. 330–331)

We might note in passing that one unfortunate fruit of how this temper was sought was that laypersons were increasingly excluded from participation in the liturgy, the primary responsibility becoming 'an affair of the experts' (Davies 1961:282).

Tractarianism was, in short, the religious embodiment of Romanticism. In Newman's (1835) words:

> What is Christian high-mindedness, generous self-denial, contempt of wealth, endurance of suffering, and earnest striving after perfection, but an improvement and transformation, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, of that natural character of mind which we call romantic? (p. 59)

Thus did Tractarians attempt to accentuate the supernatural over against the mechanistic materialism and monism of the 17th and 18th centuries. Also, reacting against the stench of logic and the sheer wordiness that characterised much Evangelicalism, the Tractarians pronounced the sensuality of faith judging that spiritual 'contact with the world unseen' comes primarily through intuition and imagination rather than through 'words' (Manning 1848:181).

Thus High Church faith found expression in the exaltation of the symbol – church architecture (see Hall 2000; Jordan 1966:19), priestly vestments, the liturgy, and the Sacraments – especially the Eucharist, giving it a much higher place than Evangelical Anglicans, for example, had done. Robert Wilberforce (William's son), for instance, encouraged daily reception and that at a time in London when only between 6% (in 1858) and rising to 54% (in 1882) of churches held weekly communion services. Holiness had moved from heaven and found incarnation in ecclesial aesthetics and rituals. To grow in holiness, therefore, meant to show fidelity to the church and its 'means of grace'. This encouraged Tractarians to approach worship with an augmented reverence and awe typified in the ideal of silence (or at most whispering), and in the beautification of worship spaces with, for example, fresh flowers, practices denounced by Evangelicals, and even, it ought be noted, by some Tractarians themselves, as a return to dead ritualism (see Cowling 2001:69–70, 258; Herring 1984; Yates 1999:150–212). Ironically, it was Newman's, Pusey's and other's *preaching* that created most interest in Tractarianism, rather than the tracts themselves (which gave rise to their name, and which were published between 1833 and 1841), or the liturgy.

Public worship was not the only domain for recognising holiness, however. Tractarians' moral severity, what one critic called 'an undercurrent of pessimism and gloom' (Newsome 1961:180), issued from a conviction that one's habits, both public and private, ought to be congruent with striving after holiness. Through a rediscovery of the writings of the Patristic Fathers, the Caroline divines, and Bishop Butler and others, Tractarians called the faithful to a 'holiness of life' not through overly-demonstrative expressions of faith such as evangelism or engaging in the work of public apologia, but through asceticism, prayer, the reading of manuals for private devotion, and through fidelity to the Church and its symbols – all offered for God's sake and in service of the authentication of the faith of the believer (see Bouyer 1958:184; Chandler 1995:100–101; Faught 2004:46–50).

This identification of holiness with the authentication of faith finds voice in the first of Newman's published sermons from 1835 – 'Holiness necessary for Future Blessedness', preached in August 1826. In this sermon, Newman asserts that the person who is 'contented with his own proficiency in Christian holiness, is at best in a dark state, or rather in great peril'. To be 'really imbued with the grace of holiness', he avers, is to 'abhor sin as something base, irrational and polluting' (Newman 1837:15). A year earlier, in June 1825, he had declared that 'the whole history of redemption … attests

the necessity of holiness in order to attain salvation' (cited in Reardon 1971:107). Just as the cross is the heart of Christian faith, and just as the heart is hidden, so too, Newman argued, we ought not so much 'talk' the cross as 'live' upon it and 'adore' it privately (Newman 1878:98–99; Pusey 1859:44). A renewed sense of asceticism and monastic-like spiritual discipline therefore was, for Newman, what holiness of life principally entailed. In order to nurture such piety, Newman's colleague Keble, for example, penned *The Christian Year* (1827) to complement *The Book of Common Prayer*, and their associate Pusey and others produced scores of tracts with a view to nourishing Oxford undergraduates in their Christian walk and witness.

The Tractarians' heightening of traditional doctrines and religious sensibilities was grounded on a shared conviction regarding the law of conscience and the importance of obedience to it (the alternative, in their judgement, was the 'spirit of lawlessness' and of liberalism associated with the Reformation, as Newman had argued in 1841 [Ker 1989:231]). Sanctification meant continuing advance in holiness conceived in the mysteries of grace and nurtured in the unambiguous actions of the faithful: 'we are justified by grace, given through the Sacraments, impetrated by faith, manifested in works' (Newman 1838:348). Here was not merely forensic exchange, but 'newness of life, holiness and obedience' (Newman 1838:177). Grace is given 'not that we may know more, but that we may do better. It is given to influence, guide, and strengthen us in performing our duty towards God and man' (Newman 1835:234). Grace is given that we may grow in sanctification. In this, conscience is the prime and necessary guide, and obedience to conscience more vital than knowledge. It is through purity of heart that we see God, not vice versa. So Newman's disciple, W.G. Ward:

> He who learns the truth from argument or mere trust in men may lose it again by argument or by trust in men; but he who learns it by obedience can lose it only by disobedience, 'he that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself'. (cited in Ward 1889:420)

The mind must never replace the conscience as the adjudicator of truth. Fidelity to this fact was one's primary duty and the path to sanctification. As Ward (1844) would have it:

> To do what is right because it is right, and from a motive of duty, is the highest and noblest of all habits … far nobler than the doing of what is right out of gratitude for free pardon. (p. 301)

One could be forgiven for thinking that these words come from Kant's pen.

The Calvinists

It is enough of a truism to say that whereas High Churchmen were attracted to symbol, Evangelicals shared a preoccupation with the word – irrespective of whether spoken, sung, or written. Basic to this preoccupation was the Bible itself. For Victorian Calvinists, Sunday sermons tended to be deliberate, and long-winded, expositions of Scripture, and morning and evening devotional Bible reading was an expected daily discipline. Fifty-seven per cent of Congregationalists and 33% of Baptists practiced their faith is this way (Bebbington 2000:39). Thus was holiness cultivated: 'It is the Word of God which sanctifies the soul' (Spurgeon n.d.:94), said that mammoth Victorian preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. As with the Tractarians, Calvinist preachers also readily produced reading guides and devotional material to accompany Bible readings; Spurgeon's *Morning & Evening: Daily Readings* being just one example. 'All was designed to stimulate the mind', David Bebbington notes, 'for this was a cerebral form of religion' (Bebbington 2000:42). Here, Tractarian Romanticism found its contrast in Evangelical Rationalism, so much so that a great number of Presbyterians, including many of those in Scotland, eventually became Unitarians. As the century grew older, however, the spirit of Romanticism so prevalent in Victorian culture was increasingly shaping Calvinists. Only those so destined otherwise could resist its tempestuous conditions.

Calvinists and other Evangelicals provided Victorians with a foundation for a markedly energetic cognisance of individual conscience and moral attentiveness which 'arose directly', Davis argues, 'from a lingering belief in the perils of the Fall' (Davis 2002:104). Consequently, whether in their established or dissenting forms, Evangelicalism created some different expressions of holiness from that of the Oxford Movement. For most Evangelicals, the world was divided into two groups – the 'saved' and the 'unsaved'. To be 'saved' carried with it the presumption not only that one had changed in the eyes of God, but that such would continue to be evidenced in external forms. Indeed, holiness of life was the only true evidence of a saving faith. Here was strictness beyond that anticipated or expected in Tractarianism. While Calvinists insisted that moral perfection was unattainable on this side of the grave and that there remained what John Newton called 'the inseparable remnants of a fallen nature' (Hindmarsh 1996:256), apart from evidence of progress in sanctification, of the 'Onward and Upward' of which Spurgeon spoke, one could well question the actuality of one's justification. As John Clayton, a Congregationalist minister in London, declared in early 1813, 'Sanctification is the fruit of justification … It never exists without justification' (Pratt 1978:520).

Like salvation itself, the reality of this fruit does not come by chance. Utilising military language characteristic of mediaeval piety and steeped in Bunyanesque imagery, they described – in sermon, tract, and song – the Christian journey towards sanctification as a perpetual conflict, as *pugna spiritualis*. So Bishop Ryle (1979) described the Christian life in 1879 as:

> a holy violence, a conflict, a warfare, a fight, a soldier's life, a wrestling … In justification the word to be addressed to man is 'Believe', only believe; in sanctification the word must be: 'Watch, pray, and fight'. (p. xxvi)

That this expression of 'masculine' Christianity struggled to endear itself to softer 'feminine' Victorians (Osgood 1854:231;

Warner 1881:346) was, in part, why the more romantically-infused Keswick Movement took such a deep hold, particularly among Calvinists. Citing the 19th-century historian James Anthony Froude, Davis (2002) reports that Calvinism:

> belonged to a tougher world than nineteenth-century people would allow their own to be: 'For hard times hard men are needed'. The nineteenth century was increasingly … a softer time; an age when inside and outside the churches, people were becoming less truly afraid of what would come to those who did not believe in Christ. (p. 108)

What was appropriate to Victorianism's childhood was not appropriate when it came of age. No longer was God to be feared or thought of as omnipotent, even as justice itself. The Victorian God was wisdom and mercy itself, and only desired the creatures' love. The Victorian God was, like the Victorian Jesus, gentlemanly and respectable.

Rooted in the Puritan spirituality of the 17th century and emboldened by the experience of the Evangelical Revival of the 18th century, the faith of Victorian Calvinists reflected a pattern of Puritan piety while largely lacking the Puritans' grand vision for things being on earth as they are in heaven. This pattern of piety – largely palatable to British Victorians – continued to be pressed into shape by the quest for soteriological assurance implied in the doctrine of election. Such was the weight given to these questions that instead of encouraging pastoral assurance, as Calvin had employed the doctrine, election instead created widespread anxiety among Calvinists (see Boulger 1980:26–33; Finley 1992:47–48; Hogg 2002:xxix–xc, 125–127; Kim 2006:41–44). This anxiety expressed itself in at least two ways. In the first instance, in an introspective form of devotion that gave rise, for example, to a shrinking back from Holy Communion as one waited to 'feel worthy'. Habituated by Enlightenment prophets such as John Locke, Isaac Newton, and others, that the quest for greater certainty entailed undertaking experiments, 'proofs' of one's election through experimental means became, for not a few, a matter of vital concern. Consider the story of Elizabeth Bowden, the 17-year-old daughter of the Independent minister at Tooting who was seriously ill and fearing death. 'I want more comfort in my soul', she told her father. 'I want to *know* my interest in the *covenant*' (Bebbington 2000:35). Such anxiety was not unique to Victorian, or British, Calvinism (see, e.g. Winthrop 1853:281–282; 1996:229–230, 391–392).

The other way in which Calvinism's anxiety expressed itself was in the seeking of evidence of sanctification through ceaseless activity. This manifested in two main ways: worldly success and missions. Davis argues that Evangelicalism became the victim of its own success as its spiritual dynamic was increasingly absorbed into 'those worldly practices of frugal economy, paternalistic discipline, and industrious self-help', which became known as the puritan work ethic and which inspirited countless sermons on Christian virtues associated with 'duty' (Davis 2002:105). The sad irony, however, is that 'for all their powerful sense of election to a

divine purpose, [*people*] had less assurance of faith, and more of an Arminian sense of working out their salvation' (Chadwick 1970:466). In addition to such 'worldly' pursuits, late 18th century and 19th century Calvinism also birthed numerous missionary societies – at home and abroad – as part of its interpretation of Christian 'duty' of caring for the temporal welfare of others and of 'saving souls'.

The Wesleyans

Much of what has just been noted about Victorian Calvinism is equally true for Wesleyanism (Methodism). Both shared a profound conviction about the authority of Scripture for Christian discipleship. Both harnessed that Victorian pragmatism that saw faith being worked out in action. Both were moulded (not uncritically) by the Enlightenment. While motivated by some different anxieties, both considered constant watchfulness to be a feature of spiritual duty. Both invested heavily in overseas missionary enterprises through the formation of various societies: for Methodists, these were far fewer in number, but included organisations such as the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, the Primitive Methodist Society Missionary Committee, the Wesleyan Missionary Society Ladies' Committee, The Missionary Committees of the United Methodist Free Churches, and The Methodist Conference. It also included the publication of magazines such as 'At Home and Abroad', 'Foreign Field of the Wesleyan Methodist Church', 'Herald of the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society', 'Missionary Echo', 'Woman's Work on the Mission Field', 'The Lamp', and 'Harvest Field'.

One point of significant divergence between Calvinist and Wesleyan Evangelicals, however, lay in their teaching concerning sanctification. While both confessed that sanctification was, to varying degrees, the result of divine and human synergy, and while both described the journey towards sanctification as a process involving *pugna spiritualis*, Wesleyans maintained that entire sanctification was theoretically possible this side of the grave. This 'perfect love', as John Wesley called it, meant not only that one had ceased to sin, but that the desire itself to sin – what Wesley called 'inward sin' (Wesley 1988:319; cf. Wesley 1839:500–501) – had disappeared. In 1875, the Methodist theologian and linguist William Pope referred to this as the 'extinction of sin' (Pope 1880:44–61). Wesley's denial that there could be 'any *absolute perfection* on earth' (Wesley 1839:489; cf. Wesley 1915:83–84), however, was a concession that made the goal of sanctification not only a more pressing one than Calvinists seemed prepared to concede but also one that seemed attainable to confident Victorian Christians.

While Wesleyans certainly propagated ideas that did not always reflect the writings of Wesley himself on this subject, they did share with their founder the view that sanctification is finally a gift from God available to 'whosoever' desires it. Attainment of this perfect sanctification, what critics coined 'the second blessing', usually came after much soul-searching confession by its seeker and typically involved some sort of crisis or dramatic experience, and needed to be made manifest

through what Wesley called 'a total death to sin, and an entire renewal in the love and image of God' (Wesley 1988:334). Here was no slow change. After much tarrying and prayer, sanctification arrived in an instant. But like justification and indeed salvation itself, sanctification could be forfeited through deliberate sin.

For Wesleyans, in other words, sanctification was sustained by the believer's faith, faith that expressed itself in an eschewing of worldliness (sport, novels, drink, gambling, theatre, smoking, dancing, and the opera were frequently forbidden) and the striving for godly living and morality in the home and workplace. To be sure, this was not unique to Methodism. In 1775, the Evangelical Anglican Hannah More, for example, wrote: 'Going to the opera, like getting drunk, is a sin that carries its own punishment with it, and that a very severe one' (Roberts 1835:56). More 'respectable' sections of Wesleyanism taught that sanctification would come to those who did not resist the Spirit, who prayed earnestly, who read their Bibles, who attended church services, who confessed their sins to one another, and who followed the prescribed Methodist 'ways of holiness' of love to God and neighbour.

Bebbington notes a shift in late 19th century Methodism on its distinctive teaching on sanctification: 'Individual society members were regarded as "saints," and referred to as such in their obituaries, without any crisis of personal sanctification' (Bebbington 2000:67). Professions of perfection were increasingly out of place in suburban society, growing 'respectability' dictating that the discourse about immediate holiness be either modified or abandoned. Sadly, after considerable growth during the late 1840s and 1850s, by the end of the century, English Wesleyanism was practically a spent movement (see Gilbert 1976:191–193).

The early Keswick tradition

Something of the Evangelical spirit was prodigiously evidenced in the aforementioned Hannah More (1745–1833), described as 'the mother' of the Victorian Evangelical movement and as 'the nearest a Protestant culture could come to a holy woman, endowed with particular insights and a privileged access to the deity' (Stott 2003:304). Her friend Robert Walpole referred to her as 'Holy Hannah' and 'Saint Hannah', probably because of her integrity in sexual matters. At a time when domesticity was still largely regarded as a woman's chief virtue, although attitudes were changing, more carved out a public and influential career as a playwright, educationalist, anti-slavery campaigner, political writer, and novelist. After a bruising aftermath of one of many tense Keswick teaching meetings – religious controversy being practically a staple of Victorian life – More expressed in her diary a desire for tolerance and inclusivity among all Christians:

> My very soul is sick of religious controversy. How I hate the little narrowing names of Arminian and Calvinist! Christianity is a broad basis. *Bible* Christianity is what I love; that does not insist on opinions indifferent in themselves; – a Christianity practical and pure, which teaches holiness, humility, repentance, and faith

in Christ; and which after summing up all the evangelical graces, declares that the greatest of these is charity. (Roberts 1834:196)

It was precisely such an accommodating rather than reactionary spirit in the evangelical consciousness that enabled the Keswick Movement to take root so quickly and pervasively, deeply influencing the Evangelical landscape from the 1870s onwards (see Bebbington 2005:151–180; Dieter 1980; Pollock 1964; Price & Randall 2000:11–258; Randall 1999b). The movement which began in England's picturesque Lake District[4] – Wordsworth, Southey, Lamb, and Coleridge country – was fundamentally a romanticising of the Calvinist and Wesleyan traditions, the coalescence of two Evangelical allies offering late 19th century believers a spirituality for life in changing times and tasteful to the Victorian palate. The early Keswick message was a call to a 'higher life' as articulated in publications such as William E. Boardman's *The Higher Christian Life* (1858) and Hannah Whitall Smith's *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (1873), and exemplified primarily as a call to a shared but private and 'practical holiness' as a mark of the Spirit's working and as a fruit of the sanctification secured in Christ. This message was delivered mainly to Anglican Calvinists through the annual conference, its semi-official periodical *The Life of Faith*, and its romantic hymns and poetry.[5] Like the Wesleyan tradition, early Keswick taught that sanctification was originally received in an instant – a crisis of faith – only to be worked out subsequently in experience. Handley Moule (the Bishop of Durham between 1901 and 1920), who gave theological acceptability and coherence to Keswick, called this a 'crisis with a view to a process' (Lees 1907:180; cf. Coutts 1957:34, 38–39; 1983:6–7). No convention was complete until the speaker called upon the up to 6000 mostly young, cultured in outlook, and comfortably circumstanced (in other words, the only ones who could afford a week off!) to receive 'entire' sanctification. (Later Conventions also called upon the gathered, especially the young, to commit to 'Christian service' and to 'mission'.) This was a reflection of Keswick's understanding of three categories of Christian: the nominal 'unsaved Christian', the 'carnal Christian' who had not fully submitted to Christ's 'lordship' (see Randall 2000:79), and those who were living the 'normal Christian life' under God's full authority and with God's power (see *The Keswick Week* 1924:219).

Keswick's immediate object, not unlike that of the Tractarian Movement, was not mission to 'the lost' but rather the reviving of 'the saved' and the concern for their 'continual triumph'.[6] It was, fundamentally, a 'holiness movement'. At the centre of this movement in its early days was a raging controversy about whether sanctification was a 'now

experience' received by faith in an instant, or a 'life process' experienced progressively by faith. The only condition placed upon one for initially receiving sanctification was faith – 'holiness by faith' was the message (*The Keswick Week* 1918:20). Holiness was as freely given by God as was salvation. But in order to maintain that sanctification, continued faith, 'the rest of faith' – resulting in the continuing defeat and perpetual counteracting of sin – had to be exercised.[7]

In its early days, this form of Keswick quietism offered a contrast to the evangelical activism of other movements. However, by the end of the 19th century, this mood was becoming more prevalent as holiness was increasingly becoming democratised and the so-called 'normal' Christian life identified with a more restful form of faith. Apart from some sporadic examples (e.g., F. B. Meyer) of holiness demanding wider social application beyond the individual believer's own piety, Keswick's anti-intellectualism and inward-looking spirituality meant that socio-political implications of its teaching were largely ignored. In 1919, when Bishop Moule was challenged concerning the social implications of the gospel, he unequivocally restated Keswick's focus on *individual* experience (see *The Life of Faith* 1919:840). This appears to be indicative of a widespread trend among Baptists and Congregationalists also, with those entering the ministry after 1900 being far less interested or engaged in the political implications of the gospel than their predecessors had been, a fact which was soon to be exploited in a darkening Europe.

Keswick called for a moment-by-moment form of dependence upon God wherein sin was not eliminated so much as repressed. Evan Hopkins, one of Keswick's leading theological exponents, considered the flesh to be 'effectively counteracted by … the Holy Ghost within us, so that we can walk in the paths of continuous deliverance from it' (Hopkins 1894:63; cf. Hopkins 1952), a position trumpeted in Keswick's slogan – 'victory', and a mood characterised by 'a typical dynamic concept deriving from a Romantic frame of mind' (Bebbington 2000:83; cf. Randall 1999a:17–18). Earlier in the century, More (1843) wrote:

> The holiness of God indeed is confined by no limitation; ours is bounded, finite, imperfect. Yet let us be sedulous to extend our little sphere. Let our desires be large, though our capacities are contracted. Let our aims be lofty, though our attainments are low. Let us be solicitous that no day pass without some augmentation to our holiness, some added height to our aspirations, some wider expansion in the compass of our virtues. Let us strive every day for some superiority to the preceding day; something that shall distinctly mark the passing scene with progress; something that shall inspire an [sic] humble hope that we are rather less unfit for heaven to-day than we were yesterday. (p. 450)

Despite many Calvinists accusing Keswickers of championing a renewed Methodism, Keswickers disclaimed that they

were sinless perfectionists and insisted that sin remains a part of the believer's experience this side of death; this disclaimer cost them popularity among some Wesleyans. However, it was this blend of Wesley's striving after personal holiness coupled with a Calvinist realism that captured and remoulded mainstream Evangelicalism in 19th century England and heavily informed conservative Evangelical piety for most of the 20th century.

P.T. Forsyth and the requisition of holiness as a theo-logical reality

Before concluding this aperçu of Victorian notions of holiness, I wish to consider the voice of one who swam, as it were, against the tide and who saw past the nonsense so many others accepted uncritically. The Scottish Congregationalist theologian Peter Taylor Forsyth, who spent most of his life in England, was such a swimmer. Forsyth, no more or less than others, was a product of his context. However, it was in transcending that context that he made many of his foremost theological contributions. Nowhere did he do this more overtly than in his thinking on holiness. Thus far, I have tried to draw attention to two important and related trends: firstly, that Victorian notions of holiness were mostly associated with the negative; holiness was largely reduced to one's conduct, particularly to what one did *not do*. Secondly, holiness vocabulary was chiefly utilised to apply to *human* activity, rather than to that of the divine. Forsyth sought to reverse both these trends. For Forsyth, holiness was a fundamentally positive notion applying not primarily to one's personal conduct but to God and to God's burning self-imprinting on all reality. As early as his 1891 Chairman's Address before a meeting of the Leicestershire and Rutland Congregational Union (Forsyth 1891), Forsyth reclaimed holiness vocabulary as a distinctly *theo*logical reality that required rediscovery as the key ingredient of a fitting response to romanticised speech about God. While in 1902 he confessed to perceiving in Newman and the Oxford Revival, along with Wesley and the Evangelical Revival, 'God's answer' to the 'Deism outside, and drought within' the English Church (Forsyth 1902:314–315), his 1905 account of contemporary Christianity clearly highlighted what he judged to be the poisonous fruit of Victorian romanticism:

> One reads somnambulant sermons about coming into tune with the infinite, about cultivating the presence of God, about pausing in life to hear the melodies of the everlasting chime, and all the rest of the romance of piety breathed beneath the moon in the green and pleasant glades of devotion – all without a hint of the classic redemption, or even of the Christ, whereby alone we have access to any of the rich quietives of faith. The preacher has glimpses of the paradise, but no sense of the purgatorio. He has the language but not the accent of that far heavenly country. Oh! but we want men who have been there and been naturalized there. We want more than romantic and temperamental piety. We want the accent of the Holy Ghost, learned with a new life at its classic capital – the cross. We want something more than a lovely Gospel with the fine austerity of a cloistered ethic. (Forsyth 1962:101–102)

In response, Forsyth spoke tirelessly of God, and of God's love, as 'Holy Love'. Here he was not entirely alone. In 1833, his compatriot Thomas Chalmers commenced his *Bridgewater Treatise* castigating those merely 'poetical' believers who practiced a 'mild and easy religion' and who:

> in the mere force of their own wishfulness, would resolve the whole character of the Deity into but one attribute – that of a placid undistinguishing tenderness; and, in virtue of this tasteful or sentimental but withal meager imagination, would they despoil Him of all sovereignty and of all sacredness – holding Him forth as but the indulgent father, and not also as the righteous Governor of men. (Bridgewater 1836:166)

Seventy-two years later, in 1905, Forsyth concluded that the situation had changed little and that it had perhaps grown graver. By despoiling and excorticating love of its holiness, by repudiating the moral note and the Scriptures' own stress on God's holiness, his and earlier generations had, he believed, dwarfed sin and distorted the majesty of God's love. What Forsyth (and Chalmers) bore witness to was not a self-absorbed obsession with personal holiness, but to a love of God's and an awareness that therein lay creation's true hope, for apart from holy love there is no restraint to human wickedness, nor hope that the Holy One may conquer all. Forsyth, therefore, called on preachers to 'saturate … people in the years that are to come as thoroughly with the idea of God's *holiness* as they have been saturated with the idea of God's love' (Forsyth 1910b:78–79). The theme was taken up in Forsyth's 1897 sermon 'The Holy Father' (Forsyth 1897) and continued throughout his ministry. In part, it was his response, certainly from 1916 onwards, to what he judged to be the shock brought to popular Christianity because of World War One (WWI), among other factors, to 'the loss of the sense of the holy God amid the fair humanities of new religion' (Forsyth 1916b:109). This loss, in his judgement, also manifested itself ecclesiologically in the form of irreverent worship, sentimental piety, ethical laxness, and a replacing of the biblical idea of God's wrath for 'the slack God of the period' (Forsyth 1910a:38). Forsyth sought nothing less than that God's own holiness and the primacy of the moral – not the war, or economics, or debates about biblical criticism or liturgy or the relationship between science and faith, or social questions – be restored as the 'ruling interest' (Forsyth 1910a:38; 1912:268; 1957:77) and centre of the Church's life, worship, polity, engagement with the state, mission, and theology. 'In front of all our prayer or work stands "Hallowed be Thy name"' (Forsyth 1910a:39; cf. Goroncy 2013).

Although Forsyth stresses that the focus of the Church's thinking should not be shaped by the concerns of the War, he does hope that the horrors of WWI – the 'revelation of the evil power, the man of sin' (Forsyth 1947:37) – might serve as a wake-up call about the centrality of holiness not as a 'bourgeois' notion concerned with respectability but as the moral reality undergirding all life: 'If such a war as this do not make us face reality, what will?', he asked in 1918 (Forsyth 1918:615). Here again he is not alone. This hope was expressed also in Rudyard Kipling's *Recessional*, John Ruskin's warrior ethics, William James' *The Moral Equivalent of War*, Charles

Kingsley's exegesis of the Crimean War (see Kendall 1947:86), and in W. Graham Scroggie's comments at the 1916 Keswick Convention (see Sloan 1935:74). Forsyth welcomed such voices while lamenting that such had indeed been absent for many generations, one consequence of which was, in his estimation, the lowering of 'the whole temperature and authority of religion'. The war's service as a revelation of human evil, among other things, is that it ends 'the comfortable, kindly, bourgeois, casual Victorian age, so credulous in its humanism' (Forsyth 1947:37; cf. Forsyth 1916a:21).

By way of conclusion

Three brief observations:

Firstly, as can be deduced from this compendious disquisition, notions of holiness played a not insignificant part in shaping secular and religious thought and life in Victorian and Edwardian England.

Secondly, both 'secular' and 'religious' notions of holiness, among other ideas and practices, were informed and shaped by broader philosophical currents. For the Victorians, the influence of both the Enlightenment (with its confidence in progress) and Romanticism (with its fascination for the sublime and for a reality more substantial than secular materialism promises) profoundly informed thinking regarding holiness. This serves as a reminder that no theological idea can be entirely uprooted from the soil in which it grows, and that ideas do take on the flavour and smell of the soil where they exist, generating new ways of thinking that can enrich the idea's tradition and value. However, it also raises a contemporary challenge. Many have observed that much 19th and 20th-century Christian thought is beholden to the framework and programme set by the Enlightenment, in which Christian faith is reduced to a package to rescue people from the evil world, ensuring forgiveness in the present and heaven hereafter. The Enlightenment-soaked wider world has then too uncritically received this evaluation of Christian faith, one consequence of which has meant that it has largely been unable to engage in meaningful ways with the moral realities of evil. So Wright (2006):

> How, after all, does a hymn like 'There Is a Green Hill Far Away' have anything at all to say to a world dumbstruck in horror at World War I, at Auschwitz, at Hiroshima, at September 11, 2001? (pp. 77–78)

Here, the enduring significance of Forsyth's message comes to the fore.

Finally, many of the patterns of Christian spirituality that Victorians developed and nurtured continue to have a significant impact on the ecclesiastical and devotional life of Christians, not only in England but wherever the footprints of English-speaking missionaries lie. If Christians are to better locate their voice, better articulate such in a humility and register that communicates beyond their own ecclesial

precincts, and better nurture practices that bear witness to their defining and reconstituting spring, then they can scarcely do so without knowledge of their own history. And because modern Church life has been so deeply affected by patterns of Victorian religion, it behoves us to try to understand them – what shaped them and their responses – and to take encouragement as well as warning from their example.

Acknowledgements

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