

ESSEX HALL LECTURE

DISSENT
&
THE COMMUNITY

BY

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Manchester College, Oxford

LINDSEY



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NOTE

The Essex Hall Lecture was founded by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association in 1892, with the object of providing an annual opportunity for the free utterance of selected speakers on religious themes of general interest. The delivery of the lecture continues under the auspices of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, as a leading event during the course of the Annual Meetings of the Assembly. A list of the published lectures, including those still obtainable, will be found at the end of this lecture.

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DISSENT AND THE COMMUNITY

WHEN we tell the story of our religion over the last three hundred years, it is usually in terms of 'civil and religious liberty'. We remember with pride the men whose courage and sufferings won for us our political freedom, our intellectual freedom, and our religious freedom. It is right that we should do this, for liberty is very precious. So this year we look back with gratitude to the men of the Great Ejection of 1662, who for the sake of principle defied authority and 'went out, not knowing whither they went'. We know that from their steadfastness has come our liberty.

I do not want now to retell their story, which will be the theme of many sermons and commemorative addresses this year. Instead I want to look at our history of the last three hundred years from another angle. We and our churches today are facing a time of severe testing. In order to come through it successfully we must understand our situation as clearly as we can.

It is possible that in thinking of our history mainly in terms of liberty we overlook certain other factors. We think chiefly of those things which separate us from our fellow-men. We use words like 'protestant', 'nonconformist', 'dissenter', which indicate quite correctly our repudiation of authority, our determination to live our own lives, think our own thoughts, and worship God according to our own conscience. This is essential, but it is not everything.

Even the most determined nonconformist does not leave the social order of which he is a part, and go to live on a desert island. He still has something to contribute to the community from which he dissents. For example, nonconformity in religion was a foundation of political democracy; but this was because the nonconformist did not retire into a corner, to live to himself, but stayed in the middle of the stage and played a positive part in the political conflicts of his day. In the same way, heresy in religion has been a foundation of intellectual freedom; but this is because the heretic, instead of turning away from the world and lapsing into silence, continued as a contributor to the public debate. No one can safely cut himself off from his world, to live in a little private world of his own. The dissenter continues to make his contribution.

I want to ask what that contribution has been, over the last three hundred years. What is the status of our 'rational dissent' within the social order and in the general world of thought? What is its public function? We value it for what it means to ourselves; but what does it do for the world?

The Act of Uniformity of 1662 was an attempt to knock the puritans completely out of the ring. There was no intention of leaving them with some alternative or subordinate status. They were to be humiliated and destroyed, leaving England with only one church and one political allegiance. Only two years before they had helped to restore King Charles II to the throne. He had promised 'liberty for tender consciences'. It was understood that a new church settlement would be made, by agreement and consultation. But the episcopal party, led by Hyde and Sheldon, seized power step by step. The puritan clergy were

kept quiet by vague promises and futile conferences. Then, when the time was ripe, the axe fell. The Act of Uniformity permitted the puritan clergy to stay within the church only at the cost of a humiliating denial of their own principles. But to leave the church was not to take up a useful life outside of it; there was to be no alternative but poverty and disgrace.

According to the Act, the puritan clergy, if they wished to stay, must swear a declaration repudiating the principles of religion and politics on which they had based their lives. They must declare that it was unlawful to take up arms against the king or any government acting in his name; they must repudiate the Solemn League and Covenant, the basis of their former resistance, as an unlawful oath; they must not merely accept again the bishops and prayer book, which they had spent their lives in contesting, but must promise never again 'to endeavour any change or alteration either in church or state'. As Baxter said, any puritan parish minister who made that declaration would be disgraced and humiliated before the people to whom he had preached. It was to make them eat dirt. But a bishop is reported to have said that 'if we had known how many would conform, we would have made the terms harder.'

But what would happen to those who would not make that declaration? If we include those also who were ejected in 1660, as well as the men of 1662, there were about 1800 of them, possibly a fifth of the parish clergy of England. They were given three months to get out—but where to? Remember that they were ordained clergymen, 'clerks in holy orders'. In their own eyes, and in the eyes of the law, this was their indelible status and function, which they could not lay aside; there is nothing in the Act of Uniformity to say

that on being thrust out of their parishes they became laymen. On ejection they became merely unemployed and disgraced clergy, with no work and no provision for their maintenance. They were forbidden to exercise their ministerial function, on penalty of one hundred pounds for each offence, of which one quarter was to go to the informer. They could not work as schoolmasters or as tutors in private families; for these had to make the same declaration. Those who held university appointments could not retain them by merely keeping quiet; for every three months they had to show openly their obedience to the new régime. The ejected clergy were deprived of all status and function in society, and thrown into a no man's land without place or work.

How then did they survive? A few, in spite of the law, became schoolmasters or private chaplains; others qualified as physicians. These learned professions, traditionally permitted to ordained clergy, met the needs of perhaps two hundred of the ejected. Nine took to trade, and ten to farming; but, said Calamy, 'ministers are ill farmers, especially when they have no money to stock their land.' About a hundred had private means, and retired quietly to their estates. A few planned to emigrate, but little came of this. For most of the ejected clergy there were only two resources: to accept charity, and to preach in defiance of the law.

Fortunately for their distressed families, charity was forthcoming. The puritan laity, who had helped to bring in Charles II, had not suffered as the puritan clergy had done. Some indeed received rewards and honours from the king. They kept the lands they had bought during the Commonwealth, unless belonging to the king or the church. They passively accepted the new church-settlement, and were not required to make

any humiliating declarations repudiating their past. According to the Corporation Act of 1661, they had to take the sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England if they wished to be magistrates or to hold public office. This at first drove many puritan laymen from their appropriate public rank and work; but they found ways of getting back. The laity were therefore in a position to be charitable to the ejected clergy, and many made gifts and bequests to keep the ministers and their families from starving. Even the king gave £1000. But a recipient of charity is at the very bottom of the social order.

The other resource was to preach in defiance of the law. In so doing they would fulfil their ordained function; and if they could find a body of hearers they would recover a status in the community. It sounds easy to us, but for them it was a difficult decision. However badly they had been treated, had they any right, they asked themselves, to break up the unity of society, and to make schism in the church? Should they preach to private assemblies only at times when service was not being held in the parish church? Should they attend their parish churches, to hear the sermon only, to join in the prayer-book service, or even to take the sacrament, at least if the new parish minister was tolerable? Should they defy the law openly, and after preaching two or three sermons find themselves in jail?

The government moved quickly against them. Its object was to put completely out of action any ejected minister who dared to preach or gather a congregation. The Conventicle Act of 1664 forbade more than four persons over the age of sixteen, in addition to members of the family, to meet 'under colour or pretence of any exercise of religion,' under penalty of five pounds

for the first offence, ten for the second, and seven years' imprisonment for the third. There were rewards for informers, and penalties for justices and constables who were lax in their duty. The Act was renewed in stronger terms in 1670, and was vigorously enforced, especially by the bishops. If it had been successful, nonconformity would never have established itself in England.

The ejected ministers themselves were attacked in the Five Mile Act of 1665. As they had refused to make the humiliating declaration required by the Act of Uniformity, a new declaration, in equally humiliating terms, was now demanded of them. If they would not take it, they must not come within five miles of any city or corporate town or borough represented in parliament, or any place where they had formerly ministered, 'unless only in passing upon the road,' upon penalty of forty pounds; and any who dared to teach a school should also be fined forty pounds, with six months' imprisonment.

Of course efforts were made to end the deadlock. From the beginning there were people on both sides who tried hard to find terms of reconciliation and comprehension which would bring the ejected clergy back into the church; but they all failed. Many also gave way individually. Of the 1800 ejected ministers, at least a tenth, possibly as many as a fifth, sooner or later swallowed their scruples and went back. Others did not themselves go back, but saw their sons conform. Many a good High-churchman of the 18th century, including John Wesley, looked back to a grandfather who was one of the ejected clergy of 1662. Many of the puritan laity, on social or patriotic grounds, conformed to the state church. Many even of the conforming clergy, though obedient to bishops and faith-

fully using the prayer-book, retained the old puritan and reforming temper; notably John Hall, later bishop of Bristol, who might have become archbishop of Canterbury under William III.

But others, ministers and laymen, stood firm in spite of persecution. No doubt they still hoped that some day there would be a new religious settlement of the national church on 'healing terms'. It was not obvious to them, as it is to us today, that the religious life of England had become fragmented into separate sects, some willingly so, like the Independents, Baptists, and Quakers, others, like the majority of the ejected ministers, unwillingly deprived of useful work and a place in the community.

It was not one factor, but several, which restored them to a recognised status and function in the social order, and gradually they learnt to accept a new status and function, different from that which they had enjoyed before.

In the first place they became legally recognised as nonconformists. It was not what they wanted, but they had to make the best of it. From the first King Charles II recognised that the ejected ministers had had a raw deal. They had been outwitted and outmanoeuvred by the episcopal party. The king tried to tack on to the Act of Uniformity itself some mitigating clauses, which would enable him to soften the rigours of the law in favour of some at least of the ejected clergy; but the bishops and parliament tied his hands. Then in 1672 he issued a Declaration of Indulgence, permitting ministers and meeting-places for worship to be registered, apart from the Church of England. More than 1500 ministers were licensed, including a great number of the ejected clergy of 1662. For the first time they had a legal status; and since

most of them were licensed to particular congregations, they had a social function also. Organised nonconformity dates from 1672, rather than from 1662. But they enjoyed this condition only for a year. The bishops and parliament compelled Charles to withdraw his Indulgence. His brother, King James II, tried to renew it in 1687, and again in 1688; but it was not made a permanent feature of our English life until the Toleration Act of 1689.

But this alone would not have given nonconformists a positive stake in the community. In the later part of Charles II's reign two distinct political parties, the Whigs and the Tories, began to emerge; and political democracy grew out of the battle for power between them. Each had its own philosophy: the Tories were all for Church and King, the Whigs for Liberty and the Constitution. It was not a simple class-war, for there was wealth and landed power on both sides; but on the whole the Tories were the party of the gentry, and the Whigs were the party of trade. Because they were equally matched, there was a plurality in England at the very heart of political power, just as there was now a plurality in religion. This gave to the nonconformists in religion a status they could never have got for religious reasons alone. They were supporters and clients of the Whigs, and with this powerful backing they survived.

Another factor which must be taken into consideration was the growth of trade. The Corporation Act of 1661, and the Test Act of 1673, tried to knock the puritans out of public office in towns and cities, but it could not be done. In one way or another they got round the law, and got back into local government; this meant that they also elected many members of parliament, usually Whigs. Charles and James tried to

remodel the town and city corporations, to ensure the election of Tories; but they failed, and consolidated the Whig and nonconformist hold over many centres of trade. In this way also the nonconformists achieved a status in the community. They were no longer a defeated scattering of unemployed and disgraced clergy; they were a power in the land.

Remember that every established institution tends to be conservative, even institutions of the left wing. This is what happened to the nonconformists in the generation between 1662 and 1689. It was only the poorer nonconformists who joined in Monmouth's rebellion in 1685, and died on Sedgemoor, and in the Bloody Assize of Judge Jeffreys, and in penal servitude in the West Indies. The richer nonconformists waited to join in the invitation to William of Orange, three years later, and were rewarded with the Toleration Act. It is true that another effort was made at comprehension, to bring the majority of the nonconformist ministers back into the Church of England. But they did not want that now. As Macaulay says, the best ministers among them were 'very agreeably settled in the capital and in other large cities,' with congregations whose wealthy members were 'aldermen and deputies, West Indian merchants and Turkey merchants, wardens of the Company of Fishmongers and wardens of the Company of Goldsmiths.' They made good marriages with the widows and daughters of opulent merchants. Comprehension would destroy all this; it was toleration which gave them what they wanted.

As far as the law was concerned the nonconformists were, of course, only second-class citizens. The Test Act of 1673 forbade public office to all who did not take the sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England. But occasional conformity was only one of

the ways round this limitation. Efforts were made under Queen Anne to block this road; and some eminent nonconformist laymen gave up the public practice of their religion rather than disqualify themselves for public office. But to many nonconformist laymen the Test Act was an annoyance rather than a barrier; they owed their social position, not to the law, but to their wealth and power.

This explains the curious story of the half-hearted efforts made in the 1730's to get the Test Act repealed. Nonconformists in the country agitated for repeal; for the Act was a humiliation, and from time to time it could be a weapon in the hands of their enemies. A Whig government was in power, and surely would be sympathetic to nonconformists. But the London committee of dissenting laymen, led by Samuel Holden, allowed itself to be fobbed off by the Prime Minister, and seemed to make no real effort for repeal. But we must realise that Holden and his fellow committee-men were directors of the Bank of England, of the Russia Company and of the East India Company, and present or prospective Whig members of parliament. They were men of substance, who owed their social position to trade and politics, and could readily carry a minor religious disability (as it appeared to them). So the repeal of the Test Act had to wait until 1828, not because it was not a grievance, and not because some nonconformists did not suffer from it, but because other nonconformists achieved power and status by other means, notably by trade and politics. According to the Evans MS, in 1715 the Dissenters of Bristol, not including the Quakers, were collectively worth more than three-quarters of a million pounds; the writer adds, 'very few of them poor'.

But there was still another method whereby some

nonconformists achieved for themselves a status and function in the world; and this will perhaps help to explain the rise of our own kind of 'rational dissent'.

In the second half of the 17th century there rose to a climax the Scientific Revolution, which, far more truly than the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, is the real beginning of the modern world. The key-figures are Descartes, Locke, and Newton. Man's outlook on the world was decisively changed. There was a new temper in men's minds. Its chief feature was a common-sense rationalism, derived largely from Locke. Descartes made men introspective, turning in on themselves for answers to the problem of knowledge. But when they looked out on the world, Newton told them it was a mathematical regularity. There were other prophets. Pierre Bayle in Holland urged a universal doubt. Gottfried Arnold in Germany said the first good word on behalf of heretics, who were likely (he said) to have more spiritual vitality than the orthodox, and to proclaim truths which the orthodox had neglected.

It was an intellectual revolution, and it made many of the theological battles of the previous 150 years seem irrelevant. Locke and Newton and the other English scientists were outwardly members of the Church of England. They had conformed to the church settlement of the Restoration. But their background was, almost without exception, puritan. Locke became a founder of the Whig party. Newton, outwardly conforming to the Church of England, was Unitarian in theology. The new scientific world-picture took possession of men's minds. But those members of the Church of England who dared to try to re-think their theology on the principles of Locke and Newton were silenced. William Whiston, Newton's successor

at Cambridge, was deprived of his professorial chair in 1710. Samuel Clarke, an eminent Newtonian philosopher, was silenced by Convocation in 1714.

After that interest passes to the nonconformists. Two of William Whiston's friends, James Peirce and Joseph Hallett, were nonconformist ministers in Exeter and tutors in the academy there. They were ejected from their pulpits in 1719. The Exeter controversy, and the debate between the London ministers at Salters Hall which arose out of it, is usually recounted as a conflict between subscription and non-subscription, that is, as a battle for intellectual liberty. The Subscribers demanded that the Exeter ministers and their London advisers should declare their belief in the Trinity as defined in the Thirty-nine Articles or the Westminster Confession; the Non-subscribers, whilst protesting their orthodoxy, said that this was to impose a creed of human invention, and that no man should be required to state his faith in any but the words of Scripture. But underneath, whether the protagonists on either side understood it or not, the battle was waged about a different issue: whether it was possible to restate Christian faith in terms of the new scientific world-view. That included free enquiry, and refusal to be bound by ancient formulas. But more important was the Newtonian picture of the universe, bound together by natural laws of mathematical regularity, under one divine Creator, author also of the moral law.

Most of the terms used in the Bible—for example, in the Psalms or the Gospels—could readily be transposed into the language of Locke and Newton. Joseph Addison did it, when he translated Psalm 19 as 'the spacious firmament on high'; and another hymn-writer of the period sang of 'laws which never can be

broken' which God had made for the guidance of the universe. Nowadays we speak of 'demythologisation', when the basic elements of faith are rescued from the decay of one world-view and given a new setting in another world-view which has superseded it. The men of the 18th century were trying to do this, by going behind the creeds to the biblical fundamentals. The creeds and historic confessions of faith were earlier efforts at demythologisation, translating the Biblical elements into terms appropriate to the neo-Platonists of the fourth century, or Aquinas, or Calvin; and now a new effort must be made, to fit a new world of thought.

That is why so many of the non-subscribers at Salters Hall did not merely assert intellectual freedom, but went on to what their opponents called Arianism. This was no mere revival of an ancient heresy; it was Newtonian Christianity. For if the universe is one mathematical order, it can have only one divine principle at its head; any other divinity within the scheme must be subordinate. Christ can be as exalted as devotion demands, but he is still not equal to the Father. So what Samuel Clarke called 'the scripture doctrine of the Trinity' cannot be a mystery of three-in-one, but must exhibit an orderly structure with one divine head.

The step from the Arian scheme to the Unitarian also was Newtonian. The universe according to Newton can admit of no intermediaries between God and the World; God's power is exercised directly on his creation, and everywhere alike. Newton would not even allow God to be thought of as the soul of the world, everywhere diffused; it is by his power—for example, by the power of gravitation—that God rules all. Locke, too, swept away a whole hierarchy of intermediate beings between God and the world, leaving only a

common-sense picture. Push this to its logical conclusion, and Christ cannot be an intermediate divine being, but must be a man signally chosen by God for a unique work, marked out by his miracles and his resurrection—for God who made the laws of nature can, when need arises, break them. This may not be our thought-world, but it was the mental climate into which some of the liveliest minds of the 18th century were developing. This is another way in which our ancestors, grandchildren of the ejected ministers of 1662, were winning some status and function in the social order: they were making a bridge—so they believed—between Christian faith and the new scientific world-view. They believed themselves to be men of reason and enlightenment, and the 18th century was the age of reason and enlightenment.

But within twenty years of Salters Hall a new religious impulse swept over England: Wesley and Whitefield in this country, and Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards in America, proclaimed the evangelical revival. Except that Jonathan Edwards linked the universality of natural law with predestination, this had nothing to do with the new scientific world-view. It stressed man's abject sinfulness and his need of salvation through the atoning death of Christ. America's 'great awakening' under Edwards began in 1734; in England Whitefield began to preach in 1737; John and Charles Wesley were converted in 1738. By the middle of the century religious men in England and America were having either to go along with the evangelical revival or to resist it.

Our own ancestors chose to resist it, and in protest against the emotionalism of the revival called themselves 'rational dissenters'. They continued their efforts to reconcile Christian faith and the new scienti-

fic outlook. Warrington Academy, founded in 1757, was a token of their ideal. Its curriculum was deliberately slanted towards the needs of the modern world, training young men for the professions, especially medicine, and for 'civil and commercial life'. History, science, and modern languages were studied, as well as theology and the classics, and all with a practical aim. It was the first step towards the modern provincial university. We should be proud that our ancestors saw their public duty in this way. They believed themselves to be in the forefront of enlightenment and modernity. They had an educational job to do for humanity, not limited to any sect. Dr John F. Fulton, the American medical historian (who died not long ago), wrote that though Warrington Academy 'existed only twenty-six years, its influence has continued without interruption to the present time'; and he gave a graphic account of the great medical pioneers who were educated there.

But this was achieved at a cost. The social climate was growing more unfavourable to them, in several ways. The great wealth of the nonconformists at the beginning of the 18th century was made chiefly from trade, especially with the East. In the second half of the century it was made from industry, in what we call 'the industrial revolution', and not by the same people. The average wealth of nonconformists greatly diminished; because of Methodism their numbers grew, but it was among the poor. Many wealthy families went back into the Church of England, especially after the outbreak of the French Revolution. The religious climate also was unfavourable; the success of the evangelical revival not only meant the founding of a great new denomination called Methodist, but a powerful increase of evangelicalism, and

therefore of theological conservatism, in other churches, anglican and nonconformist alike.

But the biggest change was in the political climate. Nonconformity had become established when the Whigs were in power, in the first half of the 18th century. The cry was all for 'civil and religious liberty'. The climax of Whig power came in the Seven Years War, from 1756 to 1763, when the foundations of the British Empire were laid, in defeat of the French and the annexation of India and Canada. Then the tide began to turn. The Whigs had reigned too long, and—in a sense—were too successful. The revolt of the American colonies in 1775, which led to the founding of the United States of America, was a triumph of Whig principles, and was so regarded by the rational dissenters in England. They rejoiced when King George III's troops were defeated by the Americans. But when Whig principles led to an English defeat, and the loss of English colonies, they became less popular in England. Then came the fall of the Bastille, in 1789, and the beginning of the French Revolution—also a triumph of Whig principles and joyfully welcomed by the rational dissenters in England. But soon there was war between England and France, and the French Revolution turned to terror (and after a time to the dictatorship of Napoleon); and Whig principles became even less popular in England. There came now a long period of Tory rule, and the rational dissenters were out in the cold. A patriotic mob wrecked Priestley's house and chapel in Birmingham, and drove him to exile in America. Several of his friends, agitating for parliamentary reform against the government, found themselves in prison or transported to Australia. Is it any wonder that they diminished in numbers, or that they became shrill

and radical and extremist, and eventually sank into despondency?

The great representative figure of the period is Dr. Joseph Priestley. He went as a tutor to Warrington Academy in 1761, at the age of twenty-eight, and was largely responsible for modernising its curriculum and giving it such a dynamic spirit. He inherited to the full the intellectual tradition of which I have spoken. He was so Newtonian that he was a determinist and a materialist. He applied Locke's common-sense so radically that in theology he was a hard and sceptical rationalist. In politics he was a vehement Whig, known to the Tory cartoonists as 'gunpowder Joe', and a friend of all the Whig notables. He was a scientist, a Fellow of the Royal Society, and an LL.D. of Edinburgh University—all the rational dissenters wanted to be scientists and to win a Scottish doctorate, and a surprising number achieved this ambition. He welcomed the revolt of the American colonies and the outbreak of the Revolution.

The important thing about him, it seems to me, is not that he stood out against his age, but that he was so completely representative of a most vital aspect of it. It is true that he was a great fighter with his pen. He loved candour, and insisted on sharp distinctions and unequivocal names in controversy; that is why he emphasised the word 'Unitarian'. But he was the spear-head of a great cause in the 18th century—of science in England, beginning with Newton, of philosophic rationalism in France, typified by Voltaire and Diderot, and of political independence in America, led by Franklin and Jefferson. He was not just the leader of a small religious minority; he was in the centre of the world's stage. We tend to picture him as a denominational hero, with all the world against him; but it was

only the temporary dominance of Tory politics and evangelical piety which threw him on to the defensive. In the long view of history he was right.

Similarly with his friend Theophilus Lindsey, who seceded from the Church of England in 1773, on a matter of principle, and founded a Unitarian chapel in Essex Street, London. We tend to think of him as a lonely figure, retiring from the public stage to cultivate a private denominational piety. We forget that he was in fact one of a considerable party of Cambridge men, including the chancellor of the university himself, who were struggling hard to modernise the teaching and administration of the university, including the abolition of religious tests; and they almost succeeded. Lindsey was a Fellow of St. John's College. His secession was not a withdrawal from the battle; it was a public gesture of protest, a sign that the struggle would go on. The defeat was only temporary. The reforms he and his friends advocated were in time carried out, though it took a hundred years to abolish religious tests at Oxford and Cambridge.

We see the same thing in lesser men of the time. David Eaton, a Baptist bookseller of York, and a group of other working men, became Unitarian at the end of the 18th century. But do not think that this means only that they passed from one religious denomination to another. If you read his account of the matter you see that what he and they had been converted to was not just a set of new theological beliefs, but the whole political and scientific outlook of Priestley. They were keeping abreast of the age.

But the war with France, which lasted for more than thirty years, and the long Tory rule in England which accompanied it, wore down the spirits of the rational dissenters. Their political ideals were frustrated,

stamped out by harsh government oppression. They seemed to be swimming against the tide. Again there was a danger, as in 1662, that they would be pushed out of the life of the community. Their leaders were despondent. They became narrowly sectarian. Men of imagination, like Coleridge and Hazlitt, left them for a wider field. Their social outlook was a narrow utilitarian 'political economy', which shrivelled up any generous sympathies. These were the people of whom Jane Welsh Carlyle unkindly wrote, somewhat later, 'the company present were mostly Unitarians, the men with face like meat-axes, and the women most definitely without bustles—a more unlovable set of human beings I never looked on.'

But a quite different temper was beginning to make itself felt. The rational dissenters found a new way of belonging to the social order and making a characteristic contribution. One cannot read the story of William Roscoe of Liverpool without a lifting of the heart. He was a social idealist, a lover of nature and of art. Or of the two William Rathbones, father and son, also of Liverpool, who are remembered for their great services to education and philanthropy. The repeal of the Test Act in 1828, and the passing of the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835, which at last allowed non-conformists to take part in local affairs on equal terms, gave them a new status and function in the community. It was of course a very middle-class activity; the great Reform Bill of 1832, which put power into the hands of the middle class, destroyed the hopes of the workers. Chartism was a working-class effort to get political power; it got a little help from the Unitarians, but not much. Nor did the Unitarians do much for the campaign to reduce by law the hours or improve the conditions of labour in factories. We are rightly proud of

John Fielden, M.P., the Methodist Unitarian of Todmorden, who introduced the Ten Hours Bill into parliament; but we should remember also that most leading Unitarians opposed him, and that his allies were Anglicans and Tories.

The social idealism of the Unitarians was mostly of a different type, not so much radical in politics as concerned with civic welfare. A key figure is Lant Carpenter, minister of Lewins Mead Meeting, Bristol, from 1817 to 1839, and before that at Exeter. Repeatedly in his biography we are told of public causes in which he took a leading part, in co-operation with other denominations. He joined with the Anglican clergy in founding the library and the savings bank, and with Methodists in the conduct of the Stranger's Friend Society. On one occasion, when a philanthropic society was to be founded and a list of committee-members was being drawn up, 'a clergyman rose and said that he must consider any list incomplete which did not contain the respected name of Dr. Carpenter.' He took part in theological controversy, but with such mildness and fair dealing that his aim appeared to be reconciliation rather than victory. Among the rational dissenters themselves, he prevented the dogmatic Unitarians from driving out the more conservative Arians. If Belsham and his friends (of the party of Joseph Priestley) had had their way, the constitution of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, founded in 1825, would have been dogmatic and exclusive; it was Lant Carpenter who persuaded the founders to make it broadly comprehensive.

His attitude to the needs of the community, and his idea of the social function of liberal religion, was continued by his children. His daughter, Mary Carpenter, was deeply concerned in efforts to cure juvenile crime,

and in furthering the education of women, in England and in India. His son, Philip Pearsall Carpenter, minister at Stand and at Warrington, gave devoted service to the unemployed. This became part of the pattern of the liberal ministry in the 19th century. Rational dissenters were finding a new status and function in the social order.

Dr. Carpenter was one of the English friends of Joseph Tuckerman, who visited England in 1833. 'Domestic missions', which Tuckerman had founded in America, were started in England. This was a new attempt at usefulness to the community. It was not an attempt to gather Unitarian congregations; indeed at first no religious services whatever were held in connection with the Domestic Missions, to avoid all suggestion of proselytisation. The domestic missionary was to apply his faith rather than to preach it. He was to serve the poor, by friendly contact and by providing opportunities of self-help, such as penny-banks, clothing clubs, Sunday-schools, and the like. Before long, however, simple evening services were usually added, chiefly because the people served seemed to want them.

On the theory that a poor man is likely to be able to speak to the poor in their own language, most of the early missionaries were of working-class origin. John Ashworth, a former weaver, became domestic missionary in Manchester; R. K. Philp, formerly a Methodist of humble birth, was missionary in London. But efforts also were made to cross the class-barriers, which were very strong in Victorian England. Men and women from comfortable homes gave devoted service in the domestic missions. Ministers were told that they now had a double task: to preach on Sunday to the respectable, and to spend the week in service to the poor.

In Liverpool the missionary himself, John Johns, came from the middle class, and was paid a higher salary than most ministers of the time. But before long, in addition to the usual pattern of domestic missionary activity, he was agitating for civic improvements, urgently necessary if poverty was to be cured; he wanted better lighting and policing of the streets, better houses, better town-drainage, more allotments and reading-rooms at the public expense. He was able to appeal to that fund of civic idealism which was characteristic of the Unitarian merchants of Liverpool.

The institutional church had been born, with its thriving Sunday-school and its many week-night activities, which is so typical of 19th-century church-life. Here was something the churches could do for the community, not merely to increase their numerical strength, but to serve the world. It is again a search for status and function in the social order. It was not won without heavy labour. Here is Rev. John Wright describing the institutional work of his congregation at Macclesfield in 1850:

Adult classes in a separate room from the other scholars. School library, which is nearly doubled since the last report. Chapel library, open to the teachers. Savings bank for the scholars. Visitor, whose duty it is to visit the home of every scholar admitted, and to repeat his calls whenever they seem acceptable and useful; all absentees are visited in addition by persons appointed for this purpose. Teachers' meetings monthly, and quarterly a teachers' tea meeting. Mutual religious improvement society, 85 members. Total abstinence society, to which nearly all the elder scholars and many of the teachers belong. Evening classes: Sunday, re-

ligious; Monday, girls, for sewing, geography, etc.; Tuesday, girls, for reading and grammar; Wednesday, general improvement and recreation class; Thursday, arithmetic classes; Friday, boys, for grammar, etc. Tract distribution, carried on by teachers and elder scholars. School gardens society. Home mission, including visiting society, sewing and clothing society, and small loan society.

As the annual report of the Manchester Sunday School Association says, there is here 'much matter for reflection'. How did they find time and strength for it? John Wright's own conclusion was that efforts should be made 'to increase and improve secular education in day-schools, so that Sunday-schools may be left to their proper task of teaching religion.' In the meantime, ministers and congregations spent themselves in running such busy Sunday-schools, and in founding 'undenominational' day-schools, now mostly closed or absorbed into the state system. No doubt it was in some respects aristocratic and paternal, but this was the form of Victorian social idealism.

The rational dissenters found a place in the community for themselves in other ways. Not many of their ministers and laymen, however learned, could now become Fellows of the Royal Society. But they eagerly joined the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Individuals became prominent in particular branches of science. H. W. Crosskey, minister at the Church of the Messiah, Birmingham, was a leading geologist. P. P. Carpenter, already mentioned, was a distinguished authority on sea-shells, and went to America to arrange a famous collection there. His brother, W. B. Carpenter, became a medical professor in London, and was one of the greatest scientists of

his day in zoology, botany and physiology. These are only a few of many who maintained the scientific tradition of rational dissent. James Martineau was widely honoured as a philosopher, and associated with the leading thinkers of the day in the Metaphysical Society. Unitarians had a confident place in the intellectual life of England.

Consequently they did not feel it necessary to join the other nonconformist bodies in trying to disestablish the Church of England. Their friends were the Anglican Broad-churchmen, and they still hoped for a more comprehensive state-church, in which they could find a place. Among their friends were Canon Barnett, the founder of university settlements in the slums, A. P. Stanley, the liberal dean of Westminster, Bishop Colenso, the Biblical critic, F. W. Robertson, the most popular Anglican preacher of the day, and many other liberal Anglicans; so that Martineau, supported by a large number of Unitarian ministers, could hope (though in vain) for a great federation of 'free Christians', drawn from several denominations.

In politics too they played a prominent part. Mostly in the second half of the 19th century they were Gladstonian liberals; and they powerfully proclaimed the Liberal ideals in their sermons. This was not, in their view, party-politics; it was the enunciation of fundamental public morality. And the public flocked to hear them. R. A. Armstrong was so successful at Nottingham that a great new church, seating a thousand, was erected for him in 1879, and he filled it. His biographer says:

In a thousand ways he raised the tone and methods of the (Liberal) party and of public life; of the administration of the Town Council, the Poor Law

Guardians, and the School Board; and of the parliamentary representation. . . . He was always in accord with what I may call 'Gladstonian Radicalism'—an intense moral indignation against oppression in any form, a great respect for the rights of the weak and helpless, a high standard of righteousness in public affairs and international relations, a reverence for the old and historic and all that is worth conserving, but at the same time fearless in not fearing revolutionary changes, if the higher objects in view required them. This made him strenuous on behalf of the subject-races of Turkey during the late seventies, for justice to Ireland during the early eighties, and for the social and political emancipation of women.

Dr. H. W. Crosskey, minister of the Church of the Messiah, Birmingham, from 1869 to 1893, was a vigorous exponent of what he called 'Christian citizenship'. He believed, he said, that 'the greatness of a nation depends on the greatness of its town life.' He campaigned with passion for a municipal water-supply, better drainage, free education, municipal ownership of the supply of gas, and public parks and recreation grounds. It was done through party-politics directed to municipal affairs. He became a member of the Liberal Association of Birmingham immediately on going to live in the city; its policy, he said, was 'a policy of civilisation; it meant the enjoyment by the great mass of people of the blessing of a beautiful and civilised life.' He urged the laymen of his congregation to take part in municipal government; it was he who inspired Joseph Chamberlain to become the famous reforming mayor of Birmingham.

Such municipal idealism, to which we owe so many of the institutions of our towns and cities, became part

of the pattern of life for Unitarian ministers and congregations in the latter half of the 19th century. The preachers had an assured function in the community, and they drew crowds. Of course it was conditioned by the historical developments of the time. They were on the crest of a wave, which soon began to fall again. R. A. Armstrong moved to Liverpool in 1884, and was equally full of zeal for public righteousness; but he did not win the same success as in Nottingham. H. W. Crosskey in 1886 saw the Liberal party broken, when Chamberlain took the 'Liberal Unionists' over to alliance with the Conservatives, in opposition to Gladstone's policy of home-rule for Ireland. Crosskey said he found himself 'out in the cold', and decided in future to confine himself to educational reform. But the pattern of civic leadership persisted, and we have seen notable service, within our own day, given by Unitarian ministers and laity to the towns in which they have lived. The humiliations of 1662 were amply avenged.

A by-product of this new status was a new friendship between Unitarians and other nonconformists. In the first half of the 19th century there was a great deal of bitterness between them, on both sides. Orthodox nonconformists, led chiefly by Congregationalists, carried out a long campaign to deprive the Unitarians of the old Presbyterian endowments, which nearly succeeded. If we resent this, we should remember also the harsh language used by some Unitarians, like George Harris, against the orthodox. But by the end of the century Dr. H. W. Crosskey's great friend and ally in Birmingham was Dr. R. W. Dale, the leading Congregationalist, who publicly regretted the former quarrel and was glad that the Dissenters' Chapels Act had been passed. The theory of evolution, and the conclusions

of biblical criticism, were accepted by Congregationalists, at the end of the 19th century, almost as quickly as by Unitarians. A liberal religious temper was spreading, and Manchester College went to Oxford with wide goodwill. The Hibbert Lectures aroused general sympathy and interest, bringing liberal scholars before the public. Liberal Christianity, or rational dissent, was filling a worthy place in the world.

Then, alas, the tide began to turn, though at first so slowly that few people noticed. Religious liberalism went under a cloud—condemned in the Catholic Church in 1907, collapsing in orthodox nonconformity in England, with the fall of the New Theology movement and R. J. Campbell's entry into the Church of England in 1915. Among Unitarians the Free Catholic movement, whilst containing aspects which were cranky and unco-operative, tried to maintain some of the old ideals: comprehensiveness, after the model of Baxter, civic idealism, now with a socialist tinge, and traditionalism in worship. It had perhaps too much of the flavour of Merrie England, but it was a sincere attempt to turn religion outwards, towards a public function and a place in historical development. Other ministers and lay-people, who did not join the Free Catholic movement, did their best to uphold the same ideals; they gave service in municipal affairs, they worked for co-operation between the churches, they tried to keep abreast of science.

But we have to confess that for some years now it has been a losing battle. We have very little place in the most prominent religious campaign of our day, the ecumenical movement, whose leaders seem determined to stamp out religious liberalism. Pinpricks like the Liverpool controversy of 1934, and the recent little-minded refusal to allow Unitarians to join in the

tercentenary celebrations for 1662, show how quickly the barricades can be run up. There is a great danger that we shall find ourselves isolated from the life of our times.

Great causes do not die because of opposition; usually, as in 1662, opposition is a stimulus. Nor do they die because of internal differences; often these arouse debate and emulation. They are more likely to collapse because of inner weariness and a loss of contact with the main stream of life in the community. A church must not only preach to its already converted members a doctrine which they consider true; it must have an effective place in the wider world. It must have some contemporary relevance, some function in the social order, some contribution to make to the intellectual life of the time. Liberty is not permission to withdraw from the world's battles; we are not mere quietists. I have tried to show how our ancestors in 1662 refused to be knocked out of the ring, and how, in each period since then, their children have claimed some social task, which justified their existence. Their liberal Christianity, or rational dissent, involved some intellectual, or philanthropic, or political, or economic function within the common life of the nation. We cannot escape the same test.

We all know how greatly the social context of our church-life has changed in the last two or three generations. However hard we tried, we could not bring back the political and philanthropic activities of the 1870's. Our grandfathers were on the crest of a wave, which has since ebbed. Life now flows in other channels. The welfare state, which would seem the fulfilment of their dreams, provides a very different social background to men's lives today. What is the relation of churches towards the welfare state? What is

the function of any voluntary organisation in the modern omni-competent state? Do we now retire into ourselves, and cultivate our own garden, grateful for the freedom which allows us to mind our own business? This is a question I put to myself, as well as to you. I am only afraid that a religious society which has no distinct social status and function is in danger of inner decay.

The same thing applies to our link with the intellectual life of our day. A church cannot live merely by consuming its own ideas. Willingly or not, it must join in the general debate. Our ancestors in the 18th century made an effort to bridge the gap between Christian faith and the new scientific world-view. They did not succeed, for they were crippled and struck down by a short-sighted orthodoxy. Science and its child, technology, now rule the world, and Christian orthodoxy, in spite of ecumenical enthusiasm, is a minority and an irrelevance. But where do *we* stand? It is not enough to say that we believe in freedom of enquiry, and that this is enough to put us on the side of science. Is religion of any kind, whether liberal or orthodox, relevant in our secular world? What do we contribute to the great debate of our time? I put the question to myself, as well as to you, and try to feel my way towards an answer.

Science itself seems to have changed its ground. In the last fifty years a new scientific world-view, not based upon the Newtonian scheme, has been establishing itself. Some of the older attempts to reconcile science and religion no longer seem to work—such as equating the laws of nature with the will of God, and the course of evolution or human history with the divine purpose. Because of psycho-analysis, we now have a changed knowledge of ourselves and our motives and

symbols. The philosophical climate, in the form of logical empiricism, is very different from only a couple of generations ago. Our literature is presenting us with an attitude to life which is more tragic, more fragmented, more driven back on the primary emotions (both kind and cruel), than ever before. Asia and Europe seem unable to find common ground; Russia and the West do not talk the same language. There is a great need for a religious faith which will try to cope with this new situation. As in the 18th century, and at other times in human history, we need a new demythologisation, which will lift the elemental things of heart and mind out of a world-view which is in decay, and put them into the new setting. We should be among the people who are doing this—not just for our own comfort and guidance, but for the whole community. This is a public debate, and we must make our contribution, to teach and also to learn.

The story of nonconformity in England can be told in several different ways, and what I have tried to do is only one of them. We need also, for example, a connected story of the inner faith and devotional life of the ejected ministers and their descendants over three hundred years, shown in the heart-felt prayers of Baxter, Priestley, Martineau and many more. They were men of faith, as well as of thought and action. I have suggested that the inner vitality of a church is related to the function of that church in the larger community. It lives by giving—if not in one way, then in another. If it is driven out of the public arena, it may shrivel away. We know what our forefathers did in this direction; what is our public function today?

LIST OF ESSEX HALL LECTURES

1893. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY AS ILLUSTRATED IN ENGLISH POETRY, by Stopford A. Brooke, M.A., LL.D. (Out of print.)
1894. UNITARIANS AND THE FUTURE, by Mrs. Humphrey Ward. (Out of print.)
1895. THE RELATION OF JESUS TO HIS AGE AND OUR OWN, by J. Estlin Carpenter, M.A., D.D., D.Lit. (Out of print.)
1897. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEACHING OF JESUS, by R. A. Armstrong, B.A. (Out of print.)
1899. THE RELIGION OF TIME AND THE RELIGION OF ETERNITY, by Philip H. Wicksteed, M.A., Litt.D. (Reprinted.)
1902. SOME THOUGHTS ON CHRISTOLOGY, by James Drummond, M.A., LL.D., D.Litt. (Out of print.)
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