Mid-Victorian Evangelical Culture in the British City: the Y.M.C.A. Lectures, 1845 - 1865

by

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Between 1845 and 1865 the officers of the Young Men's Christian Association organised a series of lectures which were delivered in Exeter Hall in the Strand, the building which was the centre of so much Evangelical activity in London during the nineteenth century. There were by my calculation some two hundred and thirty lectures, between eight and twelve given each year. The majority of the lecturers were clergymen coming from the Low Church party in the Church of England and from most of the other Protestant denominations, but some were delivered by eminent laymen, politicians like Lord John Russell and scientists like Hugh Miller for example. The subjects of the lectures were varied. Naturally many were religious in content. But the lecturers did not believe they were restricted to this particular subject field, and therefore they spoke on all kinds of secular matters, on history, science, literature, contemporary affairs, the empire, especially the British in India, and above all, for this was their major purpose, on the moral improvement of young men. It was this wide variety of subject matter which made these lectures such a valuable source for understanding the assumptions, the attitudes, the values and above all the rhetoric which shaped the Evangelical way of life.

Before I consider them in more detail however, I would

first like to look at the more general background. When they started the Y.M.C.A. itself had only just been established the year before, in 1844. In his authoritative study of The Fathers of the Victorians, F.K. Brown has suggested that it was the last of the great Evangelical societies that did so much to fashion the nature of British Society in the nineteenth century.[1] This is perhaps a debateable judgment: considered in this context, I would argue that the Salvation Army would be better so described. It is of some significance that, despite the major differences between their memberships, both these societies have retained a sense of mission that preserves them as vital forces in the modern world, not merely in Britain but also internationally.

There has been some controversy about who actually took the initiative in organising the first meeting of the Y.M.C.A. - the best account of which is Clyde Binfield's, George Williams and the Y.M.C.A., a book to which I must acknowledge my indebtedness.[2] When, however, the first history of the Association was written by its secretary, W.O. Shipton, in 1857, he had no doubt about the great contribution made to it by George Williams in these crucial years of its early development.[3] Williams was certainly a representative figure of the men involved with the Y.M.C.A. and it is, therefore, worthwhile considering his background and character. He was born in 1821 the youngest son of a farming family in the south-west of England. Clearly there was little future for him on the family farm and at the age of fifteen he left home to work

as an apprentice in the shop of the leading draper in the nearby country town of Bridgewater. In 1841 he left for London in order to gain further experience in his chosen career. Here he became a member of the staff of eighty assistants working for the firm of Hitchcroft, Rogers, which was situated in St. Paul's Churchyard, London's most fashionable shopping district at this time. Williams had every intention of returning to Bridgewater in order to start his own business, but he made rapid progress in his new firm and by 1844 was in a position of considerable responsibility. He was to remain in London for the rest of his life.

Hitchcroft, who was the active partner in the firm, had the reputation of being one of the most progressive businessmen in London. He was for example supposed to have been the first shopkeeper to have installed plateglass windows in his shop front in order to make a more striking display of his goods to attract the passers-bye. At the same time working and living conditions for his assistants appear to have been little better than the average, which in drapers' shops were in particular notorious. This was the major problem which confronted the founders of the Y.M.C.A. It was not only the harshness of these conditions but even more the potential for immorality which so concerned them. This was the way Shipton described the situation:

> There were probably about 150,000 [young men] in London in the early part of 1844... by far the larger number lived in the houses of business in which they were employed. They commenced their labour from seven to

> nine in the morning, and closed it from nine to eleven in the evening in the more favourable seasons and neighbourhoods, while in some the toil of the day did not end till long after midnight, and the duties of the following day were resumed by six o'clock. The intervals allowed for meals seldom amounted to an hour during the whole day, and the food provided was often both course and scanty. The domestic arrangements were of the worst description. In very few houses was there any sitting-room for the young men but the place of refreshment, and that was not unfrequently the kitchen of the servants. The sleeping apartments were small, and badly ventilated. Several slept in the same room; and of the juniors, some occupied the same bed. Confined thus in arduous duties during the day, and having no suitable rooms for study, social intercourse, or recreation in their places of abode, the majority sought their enjoyment in the tavern, and found in the society of boon companions the only relief from the dull uniformity and routine of their daily existence. Debarred from all opportunities of visiting the homes of their families or friends, and thus deprived of those refining and softening influences by which the character and habits of young men are so largely impressed and benefited, their conviviality often reached the point of excess, and the moral degradation thus commenced ended, in too many cases, in a point of debasement ruinous to the individual and deeply pernicious to those around him. It can be conceived how terrible must have been the condition of young men who were compelled by their business engagements to live in the daily and hourly companionship of the guilty and depraved; and it will be obvious that the communication of evil habits and principles was fostered, and their unhappy results developed with increasing rapidity, from the fact that very often the good and the bad - the novice in life and the veteran in sin (alas! too often young in years), the 'old stager' in London and the youth fresh from the country - occupied one and the same bedroom.[4]

But of course the temptations to which these young men were exposed were not confined to their places of work, but

were to be found within the city as a whole. The awareness of this was shown clearly in a fascinating lecture delivered in 1857 by the Rev. William Landels entitled "The Lessons of the Street."[5] In what contemporaries were already calling 'an age of great cities', Landels was prepared to acknowledge thatlife in London could be a rewarding experience for its inhabitants, far more vital than it would be in the country. At the same time its dangers were just as great. The urban environment provided extensive opportunities for immorality, especially prostitution about which Landels spoke very frankly indeed. The major reason for this, he believed, was the breakdown of social order in London and the development of social exclusiveness and alienation between classes. He urged that it was now necessary to reassert what he and many of his fellow Evangelicals saw as the traditional system of social values which had always possessed an essentially religious basis.

It was in these circumstances that George Williams began his work with the Y.M.C.A. He was already a man of strong religious commitment. He had gone through a conversion experience in 1837 and had become an active member of the congregational church in Bridgewater. There is no doubt that it was his Evangelical faith which provided most of the motivation behind his future social work. What then did Evangelicalism stand for at this period of time?

It is certainly true that the Evangelicalism of the middle of the nineteenth century has earned a poor reputation for itself. It seemed to have lost that sense of purpose which

was so evident in its great days at the start of the century. It appeared to have also lost that unity of mind and will that it had possessed earlier. Even Lord Shaftesbury, 'the Evangelical of Evangelicals', who had succeeded William Wilberforce as its leading lay representatives, found himself more and more isolated. The most constructive religious force now appeared to be the Anglo-Catholics. The essential characteristic of Evangelicalism apparently was one of negative criticism and that its exponents were anti-intellectual, intolerant and cantankerous. It has been suggested that the surprising shift of public opinion against Palmerston which brought about his unexpected political defeat in 1858 was caused by the growing concern over the nature of his episcopal appointment, which under the influence of Shaftesbury, his son-in-law, had been mainly evangelical.

Despite all this, however, Evangelicalism was to remain a powerful force in British Society for the whole of the nineteenth century. Even though its more negative aspects might now have become more evident, it still possessed the vitality to permeate through the society which in many ways it itself had created. After all it was the Anglo-Catholics who continued to remain a comparatively small, highly élitest minority. Evangelicalism always possessed a far more extensive appeal than they did. It was a faith which attracted the common man because it stressed the importance of each individual's relationship with God and not the authoritarian structure of the Church. Anglican Evangelicals like Shaftesbury, it is true, might continue to

support church establishment, and in doing so cause some controversy with their nonconformist colleagues, but they did on grounds of expediency rather than principle. For them, as for all Evangelicals, the 'real' church was that whose members had entered it not by baptism, but by conversion - by the realisation of the true significance of the atonement of Christ as revealed in the New Testament and its guarantee of salvation for eternity. This was surely something that could be experienced by anyone, whatever social class he might come from.

And were the Evangelicals quite as anti-intellectual and intolerant as certainly some of their own writings might suggest? It is my hope that by taking a representative sample from these two hundred and thirty Y.M.C.A. lectures, it can be shown that mid-Victorian Evangelical culture was in fact broader and more positive than its detractors might imagine.

It would be best to begin our discussion of the lectures by considering some of those with a religious content. Most of them shared one major cause of concern, that Protestantism at this time was facing two challenges: first, from the Catholic Church and its pernicious British offshoot, the Tractarians, and secondly, from new scientific discoveries, especially in the field of geology. It is certainly true that it was the treatment of Roman Catholicism which produced the most virulent and harsh rhetoric of these lectures. Again and again there were violent denunciations of the whole Catholic system and of the

ecclesiastical domination which it had created. It was the complete subservience of the people to the priest which was so abhorrent in Protestant eyes because, so it seemed, it resulted inevitably in ignorance, economic stagnation and moral depravity - this last always being illustrated by the favourite example of the debauchery of young girls in the confessional. Lecturer after lecturer delighted to draw vivid contrasts between the despotism and povery of Catholic Europe and the freedom and prosperity of Protestant countries. This was especially true of Britain, the start of whose greatness could be traced back to the Reformation. It could be proved that this was so, not only in religious moral and intellectual matters, but also on the economic development of the country. The Rev. Samuel Coley, for example, was to maintain:

> The economical advantage of the Reformation to England is incalculable. It set us free from all manners of Romish mulets and charges. It unclenched the thievish grip with which so called "spiritual men" had managed to clutch nearly all the temporals of the kingdom. It dismissed the nuns to their proper places in the homes of the land. It dispersed the army of cowled caterpillars, and closed the monastic beggar and pauper manufactories. By restoring wealth to circulation, and by compelling drones to work, it gave an impetus to the industrial character and pursuits of our people that has issued in making England what she is to-day, the workshop and the bank of the world.[6]

The superiority of the Protestant faith was thus clearly evident. It was nevertheless necessary to remember that Roman Catholicism was by no means a defeated force and was still able to take the offensive. Fortunately - and I quote the Rev. Coley again - as

> a French wit once said, "English society is like a barrel of its own beer: the top is froth, the bottom dregs, the middle excellent." Mercifully, Popery has achieved no appreciable success in the middle class of the land: striding over it, it has planted one foot among the darkest of our populace, and the other amid the flimsiest of our aristocracy. The strong Protestant heart of the country is still healthy.[7]

If the Y.M.C.A. lecturers showed only too clearly their animosity towards Roman Catholicism, on the other hand their reaction to the new scientific discoveries was far less intolerant, and they accepted them in fact much more calmly than did their Anglo-Catholic contemporaries. They argued that a true understanding of science helped to make clear God's purpose for His creation for his presence was manifest throughout the entire universe and in all aspects of physical life. Their great difficulty was to reconcile the new advances in geological studies with the narrative of the creation of the world in the Bible. Taking into consideration the fundamental importance given by the Evangelicals to the place of the Bible in their faith, they thought it essential that nothing should weaken its credibility. As a result considerable ingenuity was devoted to this problem, usually with the purpose of proving that the Biblical narrative should not be read literally, but rather as a symbolic account.

If God was to be found in science, for the Evangelicals He was even more clearly present in history. This was obviously much more agreeable to their sympathies. It was one of their strongest characteristics to have an exceptional sense of history

behind their understanding of the society in which they lived. As a result there were numerous lectures on historical subjects, ranging from Alfred the Great, to Elizabeth, with naturally thorough studies of the Reformation, to contemporary history with memorial lectures on William Wilberforce, the Duke of Wellington and Lord Macaulay, and a vivid, first-hand description of the 1848 revolution in France. For the Evangelicals the theme of English history was a series of miraculous deliverances which showed that the English were in a very real sense a chosen people. That most militant of preachers, the Rev. Hugh McNeile, was to tell his audience at the climax of his lecture comparing the characteristics of Romanism and Protestantism that:

> We praise the God of England for the indignant recoil of the barons, and of the nation with them, from the intolerable tyranny of the Anglo-Norman Kings, leading to the successful demand for the Great Charter, and thus laying a foundation for the liberties of Englishmen, in our infancy as a nation, which other nations of Europe are endeavouring, and endeavouring in vain, to lay at this very hour.
> We praise the God of England for overruling the necessities ... of our first Edward - necessities which required supplies of money such as the nobles, then the only Parliament, refused to vote him, and induced him, in order to obtain the votes desired, to admit men of the middle classes of society into Parliament, thus commencing our House of Commons, that broad and massive fulcrum which has supported and still supports, in happy equilibrium, the splendour of our monarchy and the reality of our freedom - a base so broad in principle as to be able to make itself broader, and thus practically to adapt itself to the growing exigencies of the state of society: bringing an increasing amount of <u>regulated</u> popular influence to bear on the executive government, and therebye protecting

> that government against irregular outbreaks of that influence. Enlargements of our popular representation have been the safety-valves of our constitution. Doubtless it is possible to make them too wide, thereby dissipating our strength and impeding our progress. It was equally possible to have kept them too close, thereby increasing incalculably the risk of explosion. We give thanks to God, in whose hand are the hearts and minds of all men, for the mercy of moderation. Look to this, my young friends; be "sober minded," and avoid extreme politicians ...
> We praise the God of England for deliverance upon deliverance: deliverance from a Romanist conspiracy in its attempt to destroy our Protestant King; and deliverance from a Romanist King in his attempts to destroy our Protestant constitution; from the one, by the seasonable discovery of the gunpowder treason; from the other, by the seasonable arrival and happy successes of William Prince of Orange ...
> Our God works by means. And to christian men we look, as to his instruments: to you, my young friends we Look, and to such as you, the rising strength and intelligence of the middle classes of our society ... providentially ready for the crisis, in our approaching conflicts for the defence of our Protestantism.[8]

The Y.M.C.A. lecturers dealt with a variety of topics, of which I, with the available time at my disposal, have been able to discuss only a few. There was, however, one important series which cannot be ignored: these were concerned with the moral and ethical improvement of the young men to whom they were addressed. There was expressed some doubt whether this was indeed part of the responsibility of the lecturers, and it was maintained that their main concern should always be to strengthen the faith rather than to improve the character of their hearers. But to accept this premise, it was argued, would only strengthen the common belief that Protestants completely

rejected the doctrine of justification by works, an opinion which resulted from the great antagonism shown against all Catholic doctrine at the time of the Reformation. It was important to remember that a man's existence was an integrated whole, and that the way he acted during his lifetime was as important as his faith in God.

As a result there were a considerable number of lectures dealing with the moral life of young men living in London. Some dealt with what might be described as the negative aspect of the problem, being concerned with their exposure to well-recognised evils: drunkeness, gambling, prostitution, dancing, the theatre, even the reading of fiction. All these were traditional targets of Evangelical denounciation, but it is of interest to note that in some instances attitudes were in the process of change. This was especially so with regard to the reading of fiction. On the one hand there was the customary outright condemnation: "a habit of novel reading is a sort of mental sin-drinking," it was said, "fiction is the alcohol of the mind."[9] On the other, it was pointed out how much the character of the novels themselves was changing as a result of the growing religiosity of the times, a change which was most clearly seen in those written by Charlotte M. Yonge.

The lecturers, however, were concerned not merely to point out the evils and temptations of city life that must be avoided. They were anxious to achieve something more positive, to mould the characters of the young men themselves. Thus

they spoke on such topics as "Daniel: a Model for Young Men" and "Young Men for the Age." The last, by the Rev. William Brock, was a typical example of this kind.[10] Much of his advice was what could be expected: the need for careful discrimination, especially in the choice of a career and a wife; for integrity in maintaining ones principles, both religious and secular; for habitual godliness. Some of it, however, was rather more unexpected. In the section on 'individuality', for example, Brock made some critical comments on the spread of religious societies and the harm they were doing to the sense of individual responsibility, which were somewhat surprising to hear from an Evangelical. Again, in speaking about 'generosity', Brock maintained that while religion should not be used as a weapon against the principles of orthodox political economy, which I assume is a reference to Christian socialism, nevertheless employers should be as generous as possible to their workers, and he spoke with enthusiasm about one of his friends who appears to have instituted an early form of profit-sharing in his business.

I would like to conclude by considering the lecture, the longest in the whole series, which seems to me to represent best the spirit of the series as a whole. This was a biographical study of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton who died in 1844, the last survivor of the great generation of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect.[11] It was delivered in 1849 by the Rev. Thomas Binney, who subtitled it "A Study for Young Men." Binney was the minister of the King's Weigh House Congregational Church,

where he had attracted many young men into his congregation, including George Williams. In 1848 he had been chairman of the Congregational Union, taking the occasion of his address to make clear his belief that the special mission of Congregationalism was neither to the rich nor the poor, but to the middle classes, a point of view which immediately caused considerable controversy. In his lecture Binney showed that he was very conscious of the social background of his audience:

> You have much to struggle with. The isolation in which many of you are placed, residing by yourselves in large establishments like so many monastic institutions is not good for you: it may be unfavourable to happiness, to morals, to manners, to religion ... None of you may be Buxtons in the actual form of your outward course, but all of you may in your principles and character. By studying him as your model you may even come to surpass him; for your circumstances may be such as to make the difference all in your favour, suppose you should approach to anything like what he was.[12]

Buxton certainly had been born in more favourable circumstances that most of Binney's audience, being the eldest son of a country family. However, his father died when he was six, his mother lost much of the family money through unlucky speculations and for some unexplained reason he himself did not inherit the Irish estate of which he had every expectation. As a result when he married in 1809 his financial position was desperate. As he wrote, he would have given everything for a situation worth £100 a year, even if it meant working twelve hours a day for it.[13] At this point, his fortunes changed. He entered the firm of brewers owned by his uncles as a clerk. By

1811 he had become a partner which he was to remain for the rest of his life, building up a large fortune. In 1818 he was elected to the House of Commons, remaining a member until 1837. His major interest was the anti-slavery campaign of which he became the acknowledged leader after the death of Wilberforce. He thus had two successful careers, a very obvious model for young men.

Binney had two main themes to emphasise in his study of Buxton's life. The first was to explain how an idle, somewhat dissolute youth had been transformed into a successful businessman and a deeply spiritual one. He found the explanation in terms of two conversions, one which took place in Buxton's secular life, the other in his religious life. The first took place while Buxton was at Dublin University, and to illustrate what happened Binney quoted from a letter written by Buxton to his son:

> You are now at that period of life in which you must make a turn to the right or the left. You must now give proofs of principles, determination and strength of mind: or you must sink into idleness and acquire the habits of a desultory, ineffective young man: and if once you fall to that point you will find it no easy matter to rise again. I had been a boy fond of pleasure and idleness: I became speedily a youth of steady habits of application and strong resolution. I soon gained the ground I had lost, and I found those things which were difficult and almost impossible to my idleness, easy enough to my industry: and much of my happiness and all my prosperity in life have resulted from the change I made at your age.[14]

It was this sudden change in his life, Binney emphasised to his audience which made possible his future successful

business career.

Even more important was his religious conversion. Binney described how this took place, step by step: first, by Buxton starting to read the Bible on a steady if unorganised way; next by attending regularly from 1811 the ministry of the Rev. James Pratt, "a man of the Newtons and Simeons," and on this Binney commented:

> Mark the advantage of hearing the word as well as reading it, and the importance to be attached to a spiritual instructor and an Evangelical ministry

and finally by experiencing the fact of conversion during a serious illness.[15] Binney believed this to be of immense significance because it gave a new dimension to Buxton's life work. He maintained that there was a major difference between a truly virtuous and a truly religious man, between goodness as the offspring of natural disposition and goodness as including "a holy principle and being essentially a Divine result." In this connection Binney drew an interesting comparison between Buxton and his contemporary Sir Samuel Romilly. Both came from the same social background, both were businessmen in the City of London, both were members of Parliament deeply involved in social reform. For Binney, however, Romilly's achievements in comparison with those of Buxton, were seriously weakened by the fact that he never gave any indication that he believed he was acting for some Divine purpose.[16]

Binney emphasised to his audience, therefore, his belief

that the fullness of Buxton's life was the result of these two conversions in his secular and religious life. There was, however, another question which exercised him. Was it in fact really possible to combine a successful business career with a truly spiritual life? Binney was to return to this dilemma in 1853 when he published a lecture, which was not in this series, titled: "Is it Possible to make the Best of both Worlds?" Once again this caused a great deal of controversy and it had not been forgotten by the time of his death. The Anglo-Catholic newspaper, The Guardian made the harsh comment in its obituary notice:

> No one who can entertain the question and answer it as Dr. Binney did, whether it is possible to make the best of both worlds, can have a large measure of high spiritual power.[17]

Nevertheless Binney was convinced that Buxton's life did in fact prove that it was in fact possible. Of course he faced one major difficulty, the nature of Buxton's business, brewing. Although not a teetotaller himself, Binney could appreciate the concern about excessive drinking amongst the population of large cities, and he said that such conditions would not exist in a perfect world. Nevertheless he was still prepared to defend Buxton's choice of a career, even if on the somewhat weak grounds that he had done so before the teetotal movement had become a reality. Again Buxton's opponents made much of the fact that he continued to enjoy his favourite pastimes of hunting and shooting, maintaining that such cruel sports were incompatible with true religious feelings. According to Binney,

such criticism was hypocritical:

> Had he only happened to have been simply orthodox or a "high and dry" and on the right side, he might have passed as a "pillar" or a "buttress" of the good old sort if he had not had more religion in the whole of his great body than he really had in his little finger.[18]

Binney urged his audience, therefore, to remember that Buxton

> was an earnest, evangelical Christian: and one [who shows us] the possibility of a man combining a very laborious outward life - a life of business, trade, politics - with one of deep and eminent spirituality.[19]

It is this lesson, that it is possible to make the best of both worlds, which was the underlying theme of the Y.M.C.A. lectures.

FOOTNOTES

1. F.K. Brown, The Fathers of the Victorians: the Age of Wilberforce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) p. 326.

2. C. Binfield, George Williams and the Y.M.C.A.: a Study in Victorian Social Attitudes (London: Heinemann, 1973)

3. [W.O. Shipton], 'The History of the Young Men's Christian Association of London' in Young Men's Christian Association, Lectures delivered in Exeter Hall, 20 vol. (London: James Nisbet, 1869) (Hereafter Y.M.C.A., Lectures) I, pp. XXXVIII-XXIX.

4. Ibid., p. XXXVI

5. Rev. William Landels, 'The Lessons of the Street', in Y.M.C.A., Lectures, XIII, pp. 189-238.

6. Rev. Samuel Coley, 'The Church: Its Influence, Duties and Hopes in this Age', in Y.M.C.A., Lectures, XIII, p. 277.

7. Ibid., p. 306.

8. Rev. Hugh McNeile, 'The Characteristics of Romanism and of Protestantism as Developed in their Respective Teaching and Worship', in Y.M.C.A., Lectures, IV, pp. 30-32.

9. Coley, 'The Church', p. 301.

10. Rev. W. Brock, 'Young Men for the Age', in Y.M.C.A., Lectures, pp. 451-503.

11. Rev. Thomas Binney, 'Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Bart.: A Study for Young Men', in Y.M.C.A., Lectures, IV, pp. 355-451

12. Ibid., p. 448.

13. Ibid., p. 356.

14. Ibid., p. 384.

15. Ibid., pp. 417-418

16. Ibid., p. 410.

17. Binfield, George Williams, p. 26.

18. Binney, 'Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton', pp. 438-439.

19. Ibid., p. 414