

Zitierhinweis

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The publication of the late Michael Watts' *The Dissenters, Volume I, From the Reformation to the French Revolution* in 1978 marked a new phase in the historiography of Protestant Dissent in England and Wales. The first substantial assessment of the topic since H. W. Clark's two volume *History of English Nonconformity* in 1911 and 1913, it provided a clear narrative and balanced analysis of the genesis of Dissent with the 16th-century Anabaptists and Separatists, its development during the tumultuous decades of the Civil Wars and Interregnum, persecution and then toleration during and after the Restoration, its progress as the so-called 'Older Dissent' during the early 18th century, and the initial impact of the Evangelical Revival on the movement up to 1791. What characterized the study was not only its synthetic quality and breadth of analysis, but its endeavour to contextualize specifically religious concerns within a particular social, economic and even psychological milieu.

Although this had become a commonplace in mainstream history, it had not been previously attempted by denominational historians in any sustained or systematic way. All this was accompanied by an abundance of statistical evidence which not only allowed the author to justify his own conclusions but presented readers with the wherewithal to provide their own analysis of the material if they so preferred.

The volume's vast and somewhat unwieldy successor, *The Dissenters, Volume II, The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity*, which appeared in 1995, took the story up to 1859, the year of widespread religious revivals in Ireland and Wales and the decade of the 1851 religious census which had shown how English and Welsh Dissent had expanded so remarkably in comparison with the established church. Though justly lauded by reviewers, it was more a *magnum opus* than a *tour de force*, its narrative quality being obscured somewhat by the immense detail contained in its 934 pages replete with numerous maps and exhaustive statistical tables. Like its predecessor, however, it remains an indispensable guide to the luxurious complexity of non-Anglican Protestantism during the first half of the 19th century, while its astounding range of source material as well as its wealth of secondary authorities has augmented its permanent significance and worth. The thesis, already apparent in volume one, that the potency of the Evangelical Revival was most readily explained by the preaching of hellfire and damnation, had by volume two become a settled conviction if not something of an *idée fixe* (it was reiterated in the author's spirited 1995 Friends of Dr Williams Library Lecture *Why Did the English Stop Going to Church?*), and would be used as a means of interpreting not only Dissent's initial rise but, due to the eclipse of the doctrine of eternal punishment by the later Victorian period, also the movement's subsequent decline.

With Michael Watts' death in 2011 – he had retired from his full-time post as Reader in Modern History at Nottingham University in 1998 – many thought that we would never see the third volume of the series in which he had intended to narrate the story of Dissent from its mid-century successes to the Liberal landslide in the 1906 general election which seemed set to seal the movement's 20th-century triumph. Consequently it is deeply gratifying to have this book, edited lightly by the author's colleague Professor Chris Wrigley, and accompanied by a short but very helpful introduction in which Professor David Bebbington assesses more recent scholarship, especially since the millennium, on matters to which Watts' narrative refers. We are not told when the actual typescript was completed or given any detail concerning the editorial process, but there is no doubt that volume three, subtitled *The Crisis and Conscience of Dissent*, is every whit as worthy as its predecessors. The volume's final sentence, quoting the Baptist leader John Clifford: 'We have entered a new world; we are at the dawn of a new day', suggests that a fourth instalment charting the fate of Dissent during the 20th century was to follow. On the basis of this book and Watts' previous analyses, we can imagine clearly what the outline of that evaluation would have been. It is excellent, nevertheless, to have this wide ranging, sophisticated and wholly admirable study of the English and Welsh Dissenters' late Victorian high-noon.

Following the earlier pattern, the volume contains three principal thematic sections divided into between ten and a dozen chapters, each headed with an apposite quotation, and

contributing towards the overall analysis. The first section is entitled ‘“The very foundations of the Christian faith”: the crisis of Dissent’; the second is called ‘“The hub and fount of social life”: the liberalization of Dissent’; and the third, ‘“What is morally wrong can never be politically right”: the conscience of Dissent’, which treats the so-called ‘Nonconformist Conscience’. Along with the chronicle and account which extends over 360 pages, it also contains the now familiar wealth of appendices, 101 in all, tabulating membership statistics, the gender balance within the chapels and the different denominations, the occupations of worshippers and many other things besides.

For Watts, ‘the crisis of Dissent’ in the opening section was sharply theological. Due to the expansion of knowledge and, more seriously, the encroachment of popular scientific ideas within the public arena, even within the chapels’ traditional ideas concerning God’s nature and his relationship with the world were being questioned if not openly challenged. Similarly, the nature of humankind, flawed and corrupted by sin though still created in the divine image, was being viewed in new and unfamiliar ways. If the theory of evolution was in fact correct, the defenders of theism were obliged to relocate God from the realm of the transcendent and place him within creation, as the immanent source of all life and existence. Similarly, older views of human sinfulness were being replaced by a much more optimistic creed in which men and women, as the children of God, cooperated with his benevolent design. The biblical scholars for their part, were led to reinterpret Scripture, especially the creation narratives in Genesis, in a much more naturalistic, symbolic and non-miraculous way. It was not only evangelical Dissent which found this process threatening. The Unitarians, traditionally the most rationalistic of all the Dissenters, who had long dispensed with notions of the deity of Christ, atonement and original sin, were similarly disorientated and perplexed by the latest intellectual fashions, especially the wave of Romanticism which they saw as engulfing the citadel of faith. It seemed that everything was being challenged and cherished truths were everywhere being undermined.

There is little that is new in this assessment. The names listed: William Hale White (‘Mark Rutherford’), James Baldwin Brown, James Martineau, Samuel Davidson, Robert F. Horton, R. W. Dale and John Clifford, with his fellow London Baptist C. H. Spurgeon as the doughty if ultimately forlorn defender of the old ways, are familiar to students of the period. The debates replicated those which occurred concurrently within the Church of England when F. D. Maurice forged a less drastic interpretation of the doctrine of hell and eternal punishment than had flourished earlier, and Charles Gore championed an organic rather than mechanical concept of scriptural inspiration and a kenotic, or evolution friendly, idea of Christ’s deity. The value of this section rather lies in its breadth of analysis, the wide range of sources which are utilized embracing liberal Quakers and Unitarians on the left, Primitive Methodists and conservative Baptists on the right and all sorts in between, and the verve in which it is all expressed.

Again the lynchpin of the assessment has to do with the truth and effectiveness, or otherwise, of the preaching of hellfire and damnation:

‘The belief that those who were not the elect of God, in the Calvinistic scheme, or who had not responded to God’s offer of salvation, in the Arminian scheme, would spend eternity in torment in the fires of hell, lay at the very heart of Evangelical Dissent’ (p. 48).

But the fact was that ‘[b]y the 1860s the nonconformist revolt against the doctrine of eternal punishment was growing apace’ (p. 47). For Watts, everything which constituted the crisis of Dissent stemmed from this: the eclipse of Calvinism as a viable doctrinal system; the ‘Downgrade Controversy’ within the Baptist Union in the 1880s; the general shift from the doctrine of the atonement to the doctrine of the incarnation among the theologians and the preachers; the increasing acceptance of the Higher Criticism in the understanding of

scripture; the replacing of an exclusive gospel with an inclusive message in which Christ was seen as fulfilling partial religious truth; the move to 'naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine' (p. 6); an emphasis on morality rather than creed or orthodoxy; the Kingdom of God as a this-worldly enterprise rather than an other-worldly reality and much else beside. The one who saw this clearer than most was Spurgeon, whose 'power lay in his utter conviction that those men and women who did not share his own conversion experience were destined to burn forever in the fires of hell' (p. 62). Yet he became an isolated figure even among those who shared his views, as by the 1880s the appetite for heresy hunting had all but expired within evangelical Dissent. For the author, the future of Dissent depended upon the acceptance of this truth: 'When men and women no longer feared eternal torment, the Evangelical message lost its compulsive power' (p. 81).

Whereas few would doubt that the waning of the concept of eternal punishment constituted one aspect of the contemporary situation, not only among Dissenters but among Anglicans as well, it is questionable whether this was the only, or even the major, reason for its 'crisis' if, in fact, the movement was in crisis at the time. The dilemma which Dissent, like all brands of Christianity had to face during the Victorian era, had to do with a whole range of intellectual challenges, the interpretation of the concept of divine retribution being only one. The recent researches of Timothy Larsen on the use and reception of the Bible illustrate how sturdy Nonconformists' faith in the authority of scripture remained, notwithstanding changes of emphasis which the historical process had made inevitable, while Mark Hopkins has shown that Romanticism, in the hands of such superb theologians as R. W. Dale and others, was not necessarily inimical to traditional faith. As David Bebbington states in his introduction: 'Evidence from such sources suggests that Nonconformity weathered the intellectual storms of the period with a fair degree of success' (p. xvi). The wealth of material unearthed by Watts demonstrates the complexity of the circumstances and that alternative interpretations could equally well be applied to the predicament of Protestant Dissent at the time.

Following on from the downgrading of hell came the wholesale 'liberalization of Dissent', the theme of section two. Here Watts comes into his own addressing social change within the congregations, the tendency for the ascendant middle classes to desert the chapels for the Anglican Church, the loss of the poor (if, indeed, the poor rather than the lower-skilled working classes had even been found in profusion within the fellowship of the Dissenting churches), the relaxation of discipline, the blurring of the distinction between the saved and the lost, and the establishment and proliferation of the 'Institutional Church' in which Nonconformists aspired to provide alternative attractions to what they saw as unwholesome or morally corrupting secular entertainment which was available in 'the world'. C. D.

Cashdollar's excellent *A Spiritual Home: Life in British and American Reformed Congregations, 1830–1915* (1) confirms many of the author's discoveries and insights in this area, and compares what was happening in England and Wales with the situation in Scotland and the United States. Along with an exhaustive statistical study, the section also includes an assessment of the place of education within Victorian Nonconformity, the rich cultural life (despite everything) which characterized the chapels, schoolrooms and chapel vestries, and the status of the ministry, along with a concluding chapter assessing the remarkable Welsh Revival of 1904–5.

Here again the problems of Dissent are well to the fore, including the failure to transmit to the upcoming generation the certainties born of a conversionist faith, indeed the increasing downplaying of the idea of conversion altogether: 'As Dissenters became socially more respectable and theologically more liberal, so they came to regard the emotional bearing of one's soul in public, associated with conversion, with increasing distaste' (p. 96). There was also what Watts calls 'the problem of pleasure', the quandary of the churches being well expressed thus:

'To liberals, anxious to make the Christian religion appear relevant to men's earthly

concerns, church-sponsored entertainment was a legitimate way to display that concern. To conservatives, primarily concerned with the saving of men's souls, secular entertainment was a distraction which, by blurring the distinction between the church and the world, blunted the cutting edge of the Christian message and put those souls at risk' (p. 179).

Yet there could be no gainsaying the fact that the churches were pulsating with life during these decades, and that the multifarious activities connected with the chapels contributed mightily to the vitality of working- and middle-class culture at the time. Matthew Arnold's supercilious critique of alleged Dissenting philistinism in his notorious *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) is, quite justly, given short shrift:

'With their Bible classes, Mutual Improvement Societies, evening classes, public lectures, literary societies, debating societies, adult schools, libraries, orchestras, brass bands, choirs, singing festivals and eisteddfodau, Nonconformist chapels and Quaker meetings provided a wide range of educational and cultural activities for millions of men and women denied the opportunities open to the son of a headmaster of Rugby' (p. 189).

Indeed, '[m]any Nonconformist homes far from being bastions of philistinism as imagined by Matthew Arnold, were havens of culture in which grateful children were brought up to appreciate books and music' (*ibid*). More could have been made of the unsavoury class bias which was only too discernible in Arnold's views, while any comparative study of Anglican and Nonconformist response to the challenges of Victorianism will have to take this blatant social prejudice into account. Nevertheless, Watts acquits himself admirably in this chapter. The final section, 'the conscience of Dissent', charts the development of the way in which Nonconformists found their political voice through the Liberal Party following the widening of the franchise to embrace freeholders, skilled workers and the expanding middle class after 1868. The somewhat breathless rollercoaster ride described in this section includes William Forster's Act of 1870 which introduced compulsory elementary education for all children between five and 13; the highly contentious matter of Irish Home Rule; the championing of Nonconformist rights, somewhat incongruously, by the eminent High Church Anglican William Gladstone; the precarious balancing of workers' privileges through trades unions, and employers' prerogatives; as well as the inevitable tension between individual regeneration and social amelioration, or 'making men moral by acts of parliament'. The aphorism 'What is morally wrong can never be politically right', variously attributed to Abraham Lincoln and William Gladstone and repeated by the Methodist social reformer Hugh Price Hughes following the Parnell-O'Shea scandal of 1890 which brought the Liberal regime into disrepute, gave rise to the phrase 'the Nonconformist Conscience', the intricacies of which Watts handles commendably in chapter six. Its ambiguities were glaring and its ultimate failure was inevitable:

'Since Dissenters were in a minority, sometimes persecuted and often discriminated against, for most of their history they contended for the liberty of the individual against what they perceived as an oppressive state. But on the rare occasions when they found themselves near the centre of political power (their Puritan forefathers during the Interregnum, Congregationalists in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, late nineteenth-century Britain), they found the temptation to impose their will on their fellow citizens irresistible' (p. 292).

Yet for all its idealism and impracticality, its prurience and censoriousness, not least in matters pertaining to sex and alcohol, 'the Nonconformist Conscience' demonstrated a genuine attempt to enshrine Christian values within what was nominally and constitutionally

a Christian realm. The same idealism manifested itself in the missionary movement which Watts treats in a fair and enlightened manner, emphasising the fact that the missionaries were more likely to challenge imperial preconceptions and values than to contribute to unjust cultural oppression. On balance the conscience of Dissent was a creditable affair.

In his preface, Michael Watts writes that the story conveyed in this volume is ‘enthalling’. As well as being an exercise in academic history, it has something to say to his readers as they live their lives in a world vastly different from that of late Victorianism, to say nothing of the contrast with the periods covered in his earlier volumes. The prime thesis expressed in his trilogy is that the struggle against state regulation over the individual religious conscience bore out in the end:

‘Nonconformists refused to bow before a persecuting state church and so guaranteed that Englishmen [and Welshmen] would develop, centuries earlier than other major European nations, a pluralist society in which men would learn to live at peace with those whom they disagreed, without resort to the scaffold or the firing squad’.

It is a fitting epitaph to a life-long academic venture, the reading of which will be indispensable for those who wish to know about the ‘enthalling’ story of English and Welsh Dissent.

Notes

1. C. D. Cashdollar, *A Spiritual Home: Life in British and American Reformed Congregations, 1830–1915* (University Park, PA, 2000).