

# **William Wilberforce: His Impact on Nineteenth-Century Society**

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## **1. Introduction**

William Wilberforce is remembered today mainly for his long Parliamentary campaign for the abolition of the slave-trade. He took up the cause of Africa and the West Indian slaves in 1786, and the Act of Parliament for Abolition finally received the Royal Assent and became law on 25 March 1807.

Not that that was the end of the struggle. Wilberforce had always seen the abolition of trading in human beings as but the first step towards the ultimate goal of the outlawing of slavery itself.

This objective was not attained until 1833. By then Wilberforce had been retired from the politics of Westminster for eight years, and had handed on to others the baton of the anti-slavery campaign. It was his joy to live just long enough to hear of the final success in the House of Commons of the Bill for the Abolition of Slavery. He died two days later.

Although it is for this success in the fight against slavery that Wilberforce is chiefly remembered now, it is my intention not to focus in this paper upon that aspect of his work, but on Wilberforce's impact on nineteenth-century society. In my view, Wilberforce's greatest impact on nineteenth-century British society came not through his work on behalf of the slaves, but through the other great task to which he believed himself to be called of God.

On Sunday, 28 October 1787 Wilberforce wrote in his diary: 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners', by which he meant the reform of the morals of Britain.

His own personal impact on nineteenth-century society, I would suggest, was greater in his campaign for the reformation of manners.

In the battle against slavery Wilberforce was one of a team of people united in the cause. He was not the prime mover, nor the chief visionary; neither was he the greatest intellect in the anti-slavery lobby. The reason why it is the name of William Wilberforce which is remembered in this connection today, rather than those of Charles Middleton, James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, James Stephen, Thomas Wilson, William Smith, Zachary Macaulay, Henry Brougham, Henry Petty or Fowell Buxton, is that, of this tight-knit circle, Wilberforce was the man with the public voice and the contacts in places of power. He certainly did not carry on the fight alone. The victory of the abolitionists was the result of committed and effective team-work.

As regards his second objective, however, Wilberforce did bring about a change in the mood of the nation which, it is arguable, can be traced directly and solely to him. Certainly, others gathered round him as time went on, but the campaign for the reformation of manners began

as a single-handed effort of William Wilberforce, and he remained the leading figure in the campaign to the end. It is this aspect of Wilberforce's work that I want, therefore, to write about here.

It was in the early months of 1787, just after Wilberforce had embarked on his research into the question of slavery, that he first voiced his personal concern to reform the morals of England. His confidants were his colleague in the anti-slavery movement, Sir Charles Middleton, and the Bishop of Chester, Beilby Porteus.

The matter which gave rise to the concern to reform manners was the multitude of hangings which was taking place for serious crimes. Wilberforce believed that the prevalence of offences liable to the death penalty was due to the lack of enforcement of laws dealing with lesser offences. The resulting contempt for lesser laws put potential offenders on the downward track towards ever grosser criminality.

Wilberforce concluded that if laws against non-capital offences, such as drunkenness, lewdness, indecent publications, disorderly public houses and the profanation of the Lord's Day, were enforced, and breaches properly punished, then good manners and public decency would be enhanced, with the result that capital offences would become less frequent.

Wilberforce's interest in this area probably began in the summer of 1786, when he introduced in the House of Commons a Bill entitled 'For Regulating the Disposal after Execution of the Bodies of Criminals Executed for Certain Offences, and for Changing the Sentence pronounced upon Female Convicts in certain cases of High and Petty Treason'. In the end the Bill failed, partly because of its muddled nature: its two objectives were only loosely connected.

The first was designed to assist anatomical study. As the law stood, the bodies of executed murderers could be made available to surgeons for dissection and research. The relatively small number of these had resulted in a sort of black-market in corpses. The Bill proposed to extend the legitimate availability of the bodies of executed criminals to include those executed for rape, arson, burglary and robbery, in addition to murder.

The second objective of the Bill was to bring about a humanization of one form of capital punishment. At the time a woman convicted of treason was sentenced to be burnt. Wilberforce's proposal was to alter the sentence to the less prolonged death of hanging.

It was probably his preparation of this Bill which first alerted Wilberforce to the large number of executions which were taking place, and which set in train the thought-process which faced up to the national moral malaise, and which soon culminated in the concern for the reformation of manners.

Earlier that year, however, Wilberforce had experienced conversion to Evangelical Christianity. He saw this as his first discovery of Christianity in any genuine sense at all, describing it as 'the great change'. It was surely this experience which was the pre-eminent catalyst for both concerns.

## **2. Wilberforce's conversion**

In the autumn of 1784 and the summer of 1785 Wilberforce undertook in two stages a grand tour of Europe with his friend Isaac Milner. In the course of conversation Wilberforce was taken aback, when ridiculing the views of the Methodists', to hear his companion spring to their defence. Wilberforce was quite unaware that Milner had any 'Methodist' sympathies.

In 1784 the word 'Methodist' was not yet a denominational label. Rather, it described a spiritual movement as much inside as outside the Established Church. For the higher classes within the Anglican establishment, however, the word 'Methodist' was a term of disparagement: it was equated with what was then known as 'enthusiasm', for which the equivalent term in modern parlance would be 'fanaticism', and it was dismissed with a sneer.

Before 1785 Wilberforce was a typical upper class Anglican. To understand his conversion it is therefore necessary to understand the general condition of the eighteenth-century Church.

The religion of the time has been described as 'cold and decorous'. The Church of England was lifeless, and its clergy lacking in spiritual fervour. On the whole the Christianity of the day was lax and indifferent. It was said that the typical sermon contained as much Christianity as the writings of Cicero, and could be preached without causing offence in a synagogue or a mosque. Dr Samuel Johnson is reputed to have commented that he had never met a clergyman who was religious. The Wesleyan revival had had a great impact on the poorer classes, but had, generally speaking, left the higher strata of society untouched.

Late eighteenth-century Anglicanism is usually described as 'latitudinarian'. This denotes a religion with a minimal doctrinal content. The wisdom and benevolence of the Creator, whose sovereign rule was Fatherly, was the central theological emphasis of Latitudinarianism: this was held to imply the dignity and safety of humankind within a universe of order and beauty. The corollary of this theology was its ethical imperative: it was the duty of the human race to reflect the benevolence of their heavenly Father, as revealed in natural law. and so to reap the rewards that virtue would bring.

A serious Latitudinarian, such as Wilberforce, could therefore be a highly moral man. By the standards of the age that was not too difficult. Even amongst the cultured classes morality was at a low ebb, and manners were coarse. Wilberforce was religiously committed as a Latitudinarian, being a regular participant in the rituals of the Church. This too was unusual in an age when scepticism and religious apathy prevailed.

While on their continental tour. Wilberforce and Milner read and discussed the book, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, by Philip Doddridge, who is best known today as the author of the hymn, 'O happy day'. Milner was already acquainted with the work, and gave an enthusiastic endorsement when his friend asked whether it was worth reading. For Wilberforce the book was new, and its message was to prove novel.

Doddridge's concern is the neglect of religion, even in a professedly Christian and Protestant nation. He laments the avowed infidelity, the lax morality and the carelessness about spiritual things, which were so general.

A man of principled morality such as Wilberforce would heartily concur with such a lament. However, Doddridge soon goes on to maintain that even where there is:

a freedom from any gross and scandalous immoralities, an external decency of behaviour, and attendance on the outward forms of worship. . . yet amid all this, there is nothing which looks

like the genuine actings of the spiritual and divine life.

At this point we can imagine Wilberforce being startled: his own latitudinarian religious upbringing had led him to the view that external morality and outward form were the sum total of religion. Now he must read that amongst such religionists as he:

there is no cordial belief of the gospel of salvation: no eager solicitude to escape that condemnation which we have incurred by sin, no hearty concern to secure that eternal life, which Christ has purchased and secured for His people, and which He freely promises to all who will receive Him.

These would indeed have been novel ideas to Wilberforce: latitudinarian religion was not inclined to warn people of condemnation, having little concept of sin, and it implied that the moral man could purchase eternal life for himself by dint of his very morality.

Doddridge continues to underline the error of such religion. He speaks of the 'careless sinner', and then skilfully shows who it is to whom such a phrase refers:

I will not . . . imagine you to be a profane and abandoned profligate. I will not suppose that you allow yourself to blaspheme God, to dishonour His name by customary swearing, or grossly to violate His sabbath. or commonly to neglect the solemnities of His public worship. I will not imagine that you have injured your neighbours in their lives, their chastity, or their possessions, either by violence or by fraud; . . . In opposition to all this I will suppose that you believe the existence and providence of God, and the truth of Christianity, as a revelation from Him. . . . I will also suppose your conduct among men to be not only blameless, but amicable; and that they who know you most intimately, must acknowledge that you are just and sober, humane and courteous, compassionate and liberal.

The 'careless sinner' to whom Doddridge refers is, that is to say, a moral and religious man. 'Yet, with all this,' Doddridge continues, 'you may lack the one thing on which your eternal happiness depends'.

By now it would be very obvious to Wilberforce that Doddridge is speaking about him, that he is himself the person whom Doddridge is prepared to call 'a nominal Christian'.

Doddridge proceeds to re-emphasize the point that moral men are guilty before God, that if the present world is their sole pre-occupation they are neglecting vital religion, that true religion is an all-absorbing sense of God's presence and love, which has a profound impact upon the total direction of a person's life.

Having exposed the sinfulness of his generation and left the religious moralist of the eighteenth-century without any props intact, he then pro-claims the true Gospel: he tells of God's gracious determination:

to send His own Son into the world, . . . to be not merely a teacher of righteousness and a messenger of grace, but also a sacrifice for the sins of men; . . . Accordingly, the Lord Jesus Christ . . . voluntarily submitted Himself to death, even the death of the cross; and having been delivered for our offences, was raised again for our justification.

He elaborates upon this basic statement, clearly explaining the substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement, on the basis of which the sinner may be pardoned and accepted by God

as righteous.

By February 1785 Wilberforce had reached the point of intellectual assent to the biblical gospel which he had learned from reading Doddridge and discussing the subject with Isaac Milner. For some months, however, these doctrines remained mere opinions as Wilberforce returned to the hectic schedule of a new Parliamentary session.

The second stage of the tour with Milner gave Wilberforce the leisure to ponder more deeply the doctrines of true religion, and as his conviction of their truth grew more profound, so he entered upon a period of intense spiritual agony. He wrote:

Often while in the full enjoyment of all that this world could bestow, my conscience told me that in the true sense of the word I was not a Christian. . . . The thought would steal across me: 'What madness is all this, to continue easy in a state in which a sudden call out of the world would consign me to everlasting misery, and that, when eternal happiness is within my grasp.

Well, at length, in the early months of 1786, Wilberforce was able, by the grace of God, to make the grasp of faith, and enter into comfort of soul. Now there was to be a new motivation to his political career, and so it was that he embraced his two great causes, in addition to numerous other humanitarian and philanthropic concerns, to which he devoted smaller amounts of time.

### **3. The Campaign for the Reformation of Manners**

It is necessary now to turn our attention more closely to Wilberforce's campaign for the reformation of manners.

In this campaign there were two key moments. The first was the formation in 1787 of what became known as the 'Proclamation Society'; the second was the publication ten years later of a book written by Wilberforce. We shall look at each of these major events in turn.

#### **The 'Proclamation Society'**

Around the time when he was preparing his Bill concerning capital punishment, in 1786, Wilberforce read a book by Dr Joseph Woodward, entitled *The History of the Society for the Reformation of Manners in 1692*.

It was traditional for a new monarch to mark his accession to the throne by issuing a *Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue, and for the Preventing of Vice, Profaneness, and Immorality*.

Most of these Proclamations were an empty form of words, but, in reading Woodward's History, Wilberforce discovered that William III's Proclamation of 1692 had made a real impact. This, apparently, was due to the fact that local 'Societies for the Reformation of Manners' had been formed. Behind this initiative lay an approach to the queen by a bishop, on behalf of a number of Churchmen perturbed by the vice and corruption of the period. The Royal Proclamation had been issued, and sanction for the Societies granted.

The intended purpose of these Societies was to create a new moral tone in the land, and to stem the rising tide of unbelief. In practice the first part of this purpose was to be achieved by bringing to justice offenders in such areas as lewdness, swearing and drunkenness. The Societies acted as law-enforcement agencies, and sought to suppress public debauchery.

By all accounts this initiative was very effective. In London alone in the ten years up to 1702 the local Societies were responsible for twenty thousand convictions for swearing, cursing and profaning the Lord's day, and three thousand for lewdness and disorder.

In the course of his residing, Wilberforce conceived the idea of setting up a similar society to attempt to counteract the very similar problems which England still faced nearly a hundred years later.

At that time, corruption was rife at every rank of society. The well-to-do were notorious for their gambling, while, amongst the poorer classes, prostitution abounded. Drunkenness and foul talk were common to all social strata.

In devising his plan to form a new Society for the Reformation of Manners, Wilberforce believed, as we have already noted, that the way to begin was by making the strict combatting of crime an effective deterrent. The Society was designed to raise the moral tone of the nation by clamping down on offences such as the publication of indecent or blasphemous literature, and the desecration of the Lord's Day.

In targetting such offences in particular, Wilberforce was giving expression to his conviction that the looseness of the nation's morals arose from the religious apathy and scepticism which prevailed amongst all classes. His plan was that his Society for the Reformation of Manners should serve to restore England to its Protestant faith, by standing against those moral offences which militated against Christianity. As a by-product, Wilberforce believed, there would follow a general moral improvement.

Having voiced his proposal to Middleton and Porteus early in 1787, and discovered that they were favourable, he then sounded out the opinions of others, including leading Churchmen and senior politicians. On discovering wide general sympathy, Wilberforce, via the Archbishop of Canterbury, approached the King.

Now King George III was himself a morally upright and God-fearing man. In both these respects he was an atypical member of the royal family. He therefore warmed to Wilberforce's proposal and his agreement was secured to issue a Proclamation along the lines of that of 1692. Accordingly, on 1 June 1787, the Royal Proclamation was published in the national press, and posted on hoardings around the land.

In the Preamble the King articulated his 'inexpressible concern' at 'the rapid progress of impiety and licentiousness', and at the deluge of 'profaneness, immorality, and every kind of vice', which had broken in upon this nation. He declared his royal purpose 'to discountenance and punish all manner of vice, profaneness and immorality, in all persons, of whatsoever degree or quality, within this our realm.'

He went on to urge all persons of honour or authority to set a good example themselves and to help to reform 'persons of dissolute and debauched lives'. The playing of dice, cards or any other game on the Lord's Day was prohibited and all the King's subjects were to attend

the worship of God. Those guilty of drinking to excess, of blasphemy, of swearing, cursing, lewdness, and of profanation of the Lord's Day, were to be sought out and prosecuted. Judges and sheriffs were to suppress all public gaming, disorderly houses, unlicensed places of entertainment, and the publishers and vendors of loose and licentious prints and books were to be punished. The statutes preventing commerce on Sunday were to be enforced.

The release of the Proclamation had been deliberately low-key, and Wilberforce's part in it was not immediately known to most of the people who read it on its first publication. Meanwhile, however, Wilberforce had been busy laying the foundations for his Society for the Reformation of Manners. He had been rallying support from people in positions of influence, and by the end of July he had built up an impressive list of sympathizers. Because he was now linking his plan with the Royal Proclamation, the Society actually became known as 'The Proclamation Society'. Its committee met for the first time on 28 November. It consisted, in addition to Wilberforce himself, of Sir Charles Middleton, the Hon. Edward Eliot and three bishops.

The launch of the Society was without pomp and ceremony. Forty-eight selected men were circulated with the information, but Wilberforce was insistent that nothing was to be announced to the world, beyond the fact that certain gentlemen 'have felt the necessity of attending to his Majesty's call and have agreed to assist in carrying the Proclamation into effect'.

Already before that November meeting, Wilberforce had begun preparations for local associations, which should be able to enforce the provisions of the Proclamation at grass-roots level. In this he was again imitating the structure of the Society for the Reformation of Manners of the previous century. He believed, probably with justification, that it was this devolved arrangement which was the chief factor in that Society's success.

There is one element of incongruity in the fact that Wilberforce was consciously copying the work of the seventeenth-century Society for the Reformation of Manners. The men who were responsible for setting up the previous Society had mostly been Latitudinarians. The latitudinarian Archbishops of Canterbury, John Tillotson and his successor, Thomas Tenison, had been keen supporters. It was the very moralistic religion from which Wilberforce's conversion had delivered him, which had been the driving impetus of the earlier Society.

He himself did not restrict membership of the Proclamation Society to Evangelicals; some of his recruits were hardly even religious. He welcomed the support of any person of concern and goodwill: perhaps in this respect we can see something of Wilberforce, the shrewd politician. He was in no doubt that the underlying cause of England's moral malaise was religious. Scepticism abounded, and the Church was ill-equipped to meet the challenge of the hour because of its own departure from the fundamental truths of Evangelical Christianity. Nevertheless, he was prepared to couch his campaign first of all in merely moral terms in order to enhance its respectability in the eyes of the upper classes. The challenge to their religious outlook was to come later, when he wrote his book.

### **Wilberforce's Book**

It was in 1797 that Wilberforce's book was published. He had been working on it for four years. Its title was *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed*

*Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity.*

The influence of Doddridge on Wilberforce's thinking is very evident in the book. We have noted how Wilberforce would have been startled some twelve years earlier, on discovering that the latitudinarian brand of Christianity with which he had been brought up was regarded by Doddridge as 'nominal'. From Doddridge Wilberforce now borrowed the term 'nominal Christianity', as he set out to address those professing Christians with whom he once himself belonged, but whose religion he was now convinced was less than genuine biblical faith.

His purpose in writing was really twofold. First he wanted to explain to the world the 'great change' which had taken place in his own life as a result of being led into an understanding of the truth; Wilberforce was sharing his testimony in the book. Secondly, he wrote with evangelistic intent: his desire was to confront his contemporaries of his own class with the error in their supposed Christianity, and to call them too into vital faith. His ambition was to do for the higher strata of eighteenth-century society what the ministry of John Wesley had done for the lower.

What was only implicit in the founding of the Proclamation Society, Wilberforce now made explicit in the publication of his call to England's ruling classes to return to the faith of their fathers. The publication of *A Practical View* served to set the reformation of manners in its larger and proper context.

*A Practical View* begins by exposing the inadequacy of the Christianity of the day. People pay homage, Wilberforce admits, to 'religion', or perhaps to mere morality, thinking that this is the sum total of Christianity, because of their ignorance of its true fundamentals, and this unconcern with real Christianity can be traced to two maxims: 'One is that it signifies little what a man believes; look to his practice. The other (of the same family) is that sincerity is all in all.'

He writes:

The first of these maxims proceeds from the monstrous supposition that, although we are accountable creatures, we shall not be called upon to account before God for the exercise of our intellectual . . . powers. . . . The second . . . proceeds on this groundless supposition: The Supreme Being has not afforded us sufficient means of discriminating truth from falsehood or right from wrong.

This ignorance of Christian basics stems, Wilberforce argues, from inadequate conceptions of human nature. He acknowledges that his contemporaries deplore vice, but they fail to trace it to its true origin. They console the pride of human nature by talking 'of frailty and infirmity, of petty transgressions, of occasional failings, and of accidental incidents', but they assume that these are departures from the basic purity of human nature.

'Far different', says Wilberforce, 'is the humiliating language of true Christianity.' He proceeds to depict the universal depravity of man in his fallenness: his reason clouded, his affections perverted, his conscience stupefied.

Next Wilberforce shows how the failure to feel the burden of our sins leads to an inadequate assessment of the work of our Saviour, and to a tendency to find our hope of salvation in



ourselves. He declares:

We are loudly called upon to examine well our foundations. If anything is unsound and hollow here, the superstructure cannot be safe. That is why it is important to ask the nominal Christian about the means of a sinner's acceptance by God.

Wilberforce protests against the errors of relying for the future hope on one's own negative or positive merits, or on the idea that the demands of divine justice have been moderated with the coming of Christ. He admits that the nominal Christian may make frequent reference to Jesus Christ; often, however, his name is little different from a superstitious talisman. In evangelistic vein he continues:

Our dependence on our blessed Saviour, as alone the meritorious cause of our acceptance with God, . . . must be not merely formal and nominal, but real and substantial. . . . It is not an occasional invocation of His name, or a transient recognition of the authority, of Christ, that fills up the measure of the terms 'believing in Jesus'. . . . We must be deeply conscious of our guilt and misery, heartily repenting of our sins, and firmly resolving to forsake them: and thus penitently flying for refuge to the hope set before us, we must found altogether on the merits of our crucified Redeemer our hopes of escape from their deserved punishment, and of deliverance from their enslaving power. This must be our first, our last, our only plea.

The corollary of this view of salvation, Wilberforce goes on, is the recognition that real Christianity is a commitment which demands the totality of a person's life, doing everything to the glory of God. The contrast with 'the notion of religion entertained by many' is then made explicit:

They assign to religion a plot of land . . . in which it has merely a qualified jurisdiction. This done, they have a right to roam at will over the spacious remainder of territory. In other words, religion can claim only a stated pro- portion of their thoughts, their time, their money, and their influence. . . . The rest is theirs; they do with it what they please.

To such an attitude, Wilberforce immediately replies:

It is scarcely possible to state too strongly the mischief which results from this fundamental error. Its consequences are obvious, for it assumes that the greatest part of human actions are indifferent to religion.

The cumulative outcome of this is the gradual diminishing of the province of religion:

We no longer recognize the promotion of the glory of God . . . as the object of our . . . most strenuous endeavours. No longer does religion furnish us with a vigorous, habitual, and universal principle of action.

A life of what Wilberforce calls 'decent selfishness' is taken for genuine Christian commitment. The pomp and vanities of this world become regarded as the supreme happiness of life.

By contrast, in a true Christian the great truths concerning the unseen world are uppermost. Wilberforce faces the fact that the objects of the present world are given exaggerated magnification to our senses because of their immediacy, but the true Christian carefully preserves his future perspective.

In his final chapter Wilberforce proclaims explicitly that nominal Christianity is not Christianity, that the difference is not a trifling one, but that nominal Christianity lacks altogether the radical principle of Christianity, namely the remembrance that we are fallen creatures, born in sin and naturally depraved, and that we need to be born again to become Christians in a genuine sense. His final challenge is to realize that nominal Christianity in one generation will lead to absolute unbelief in the next.

When the printer was first approached he was dubious. There was not much of a market for religious literature. However, on being assured that Wilberforce was prepared to put his name to the book, he agreed that they might venture on five hundred copies. To his surprise, the first edition was a sell-out in a matter of days, and within six months a further five reprints had sold out.

It has been suggested that there was a timeliness about the book which partly accounts for its success. It appeared at a time of national emergency: Britain was at war with France, and the war was not going well. The French Revolution had seen the overthrow of familiar political principles, and had been accompanied by a rejection of established patterns of belief. The resulting alarm and uncertainty, the sense of being adrift from the national moorings, had bred a climate of spiritual hunger, which made people willing to read a book like *A Practical View*.

The reception which the book received was mixed. In evangelical circles, as was to be expected, it was much praised, but it received a warm reception from a wider audience also.

On the other hand, again quite predictably, the Anglican establishment dismissed the work as an example of 'enthusiasm'. As early as July 1797 *The Monthly Review* carried an article opposing Wilberforce's 'system'. The article was centred on the view that the essence of vital Christianity is 'the habitual practice of virtue': and that the belief of certain tenets is not essential to religion.

Nevertheless, the author has little hesitation in dismissing Wilberforce's tenets as untrue on the grounds that they do not appeal to reason. This review amounts merely to the assertion that reason should be the judge of doctrine, a view which Wilberforce had argued against in insisting on the normative function of Scripture.

In 1831 a more substantial reply to Wilberforce was published. Its title was *A Vindication of the Religious Opinions of the Higher Classes in this Country*, and the anonymous author styled himself 'one of the arraigned'. He works through *A Practical View* chapter by chapter. His intention appears to be to defend the Latitudinarians against Wilberforce's accusations, but in practice he succeeds in underlining the fact that Wilberforce is correct in his assessment that there is more than a trifling difference between nominalism and biblical Christianity. We shall note some of the points the author makes.

Responding to the charge that most nominal Christians are ignorant of the basic truths of the faith, he argues that there is no professing Christian who does not know at least this much:

That he was created by God, redeemed from death, the consequence of original sin, by the incarnation of the Son of God, who had commanded him to be grateful and pious towards God, just, merciful, and benevolent towards men; . . . and that, as he neglected or obeyed these commands, he was to expect punishment or reward in a future life.

This passage typifies the very distinction which Wilberforce had asserted. The writer sees redemption as being first of all from sin's consequence, death, and locates it primarily in the incarnation. There is no mention of the need to be redeemed from sin itself, and no reference to atonement. This represents just the trivializing of sin against which Wilberforce had protested. There is also a marked emphasis in the *Vindication*, on human self-effort, with its corollary of punishment or reward according to merit. The sense of the absolute necessity for the merit of Christ is absent, and there is little apparent awareness of human helplessness, nor of the need for regeneration.

Further evidence of the defendant's erroneous view of sin is found in the next chapter, where he protests against Wilberforce's pessimistic attitude to human nature: even in a cursed world, he argues, good fruit could be cultivated. As a reference to the inanimate creation, this is true enough, but to see it as a metaphor of human life itself is, as Wilberforce has shown, to teach an unbiblical view of man.

The doctrine of justification put toward in the *Vindication* is curious. The writer distinguishes between primary and ultimate justification. Primary justification is based on the promise of loyalty to God which, if sincerely made, will issue in the endeavour to amend one's life. Ultimate justification is final acceptance by God with such a degree of favour as one's zeal and sincerity shall be found to have merited, but God, being merciful, will be indulgent towards the imperfections of the endeavoured amendment.

Again we notice that there is no reference to the merit or the atonement of Christ, and Wilberforce's strictures against the idea that God is soft on sin seem relevant to this understanding of justification. The awareness that becoming a Christian involves an all-embracing change, within and with- out, is completely missing.

These observations suggest that Wilberforce's perception of the religious problem amongst the higher classes in England of his day was correct.

#### **4. The Impact of the Campaign**

It is time now to turn to the question of the impact of Wilberforce's crusade for the reformation of morals. I shall seek to answer this question in three stages, looking in turn at the immediate impact during Wilberforce's own lifetime, at the medium-term impact in the middle years of the nineteenth century, and then at the longer term impact upon the later Victorian era. It has to be said that, at each of these stages, the impact was ambiguous.

##### **The Immediate Impact**

It is often said that the Proclamation Society did not have a marked effect. In one sense this is true: some of the legislative changes which Wilberforce envisaged proved impossible to enact, and the Society was vulnerable to much contemporary criticism. As early as 1787 Earl Fitzwilliam had urged Wilberforce to abandon his plan, since it would merely encourage hypocrisy. This was a danger of which Wilberforce was well aware, but his view was that, although a Society for the reformation of manners could not change the human heart, it might make a helpful contribution by removing some of the sources of temptation. He argued that

while virtue could not be enforced, it was good to seek to encourage it.

In 1802 the name of the Proclamation Society was changed to the Society for the Suppression of Vice. Another contemporary, Sydney Smith, suggested bitterly that it ought to be called the 'Society for the Suppression of Vice among persons with less than £500 a year'. He had a point, for, in practice, the rich proved in the short-term to be impervious to Wilberforce's challenge, and their position made it safe for them to sin with impunity, while the vices of the poor were rigorously attacked.

Some people suggest, somewhat cynically, that it was fortunate that Wilberforce soon found in the anti-slavery campaign a worthier field for his enthusiasm. This is, however, a misplaced comment, in the light of Wilberforce's own understanding of the equal importance of his two great causes. Nevertheless, the immediate impact of the work of the Proclamation Society does seem to have been of dubious value.

With the publication of *A Practical View* it was otherwise. Its main immediate impact for good was that some who had previously been latitudinarian or irreligious were led to genuine faith through reading it.

### **The Medium-Term Impact**

Despite the legitimate criticism of the Proclamation Society by many of Wilberforce's contemporaries, it is impossible to deny the immense impact which his campaign to reform manners had upon the next generation. The historian G.M. Trevelyan has said: 'The life of William Wilberforce was a fact of importance in the general history of the world, and in the social history of our island.'

Wilberforce had set out to make goodness fashionable, and there is little doubt that he achieved his aim. It was not achieved immediately through legislation as he had anticipated, but gradually by means of a shift in public opinion. Being so widely read, *A Practical View* made a significant contribution to this end. In the book, Wilberforce had warned of a coming day when Christianity would be openly disavowed, and unbelief would be seen as a social necessity. John Pollock writes: 'That this could never be said of the Victorian age, but the reverse, was not a little due to Wilberforce.'

The early Victorian period is commonly agreed to have been an age of moral earnestness. Peter Marsh describes Victorian politics as having been injected with moral passion. An ethic was established which was acknowledged in common by all classes. At the core of this moral society was religion, and Evangelicalism was the dominant religious movement.

The mood of society was one of seriousness and discipline. Sunday observance was its focus; philanthropy, responsibility and duty were extolled, and social disapproval became a fearsome moral force. By the end of the 1830s the relics of Georgian extravagance and profligacy had been driven underground. It was in this period that English merchants gained the reputation of being the most honest in the world. The reason for this was that otherworldliness had become an everyday conviction; the sense of being accountable to God pervaded society at all levels. For all this Wilberforce must be given much of the credit.

How we evaluate these facts is another question. Left-wing historians see the moral emphasis

as a device for keeping the poor in subjection. This, however, seems to be an anachronistic criticism. In many ways the unintended outcome of the common moral code was to hasten the progress towards democracy.

The early Victorian concern with morality can be seen as an obsessive prudery, and no doubt there was much hypocrisy. Nevertheless, it is arguable that a society with a Bible-based morality, even allowing for the hypocritical element, is to be preferred to the decadent Britain of the eighteenth-century or of today. Wilberforce was not unaware of the problem of hypocrisy, but he believed that the risk was worth taking, given that an un-Christian and immoral society is ripe for divine judgment.

### **The Long-Term Impact**

It was in the medium term that Wilberforce's campaign to reform manners bore its greatest fruit. As we move on to consider the longer term results, we find that, from about 1870, the influence of evangelical religion and Christian morality began to wane, and became progressively less significant, and the impact of Wilberforce's work began to take the form of a reaction against its success.

The reaction involved the growth of a secularized world-view, which began to challenge the biblical consensus. Evolutionary Theory, Higher Criticism, Rationalism, Marxism and Atheistic Humanism developed. Initially they sought to retain the Christian ethic, but liberated from what they saw as the religious constraints. However, in the end, as Wilberforce would have foreseen, Christian morality was jettisoned also.

To some extent, a shift in the approach of Evangelicalism contributed to this reaction. In a study of the temperance movement, Brian Harrison notes how a subtle change took place as late Victorian religion began to concentrate on moral reform as of first importance. They argued that moral reform would precede conversion. This was to turn Wilberforce's approach on its head. His view was that morality must be rooted in religious commitment, and that the reverse was impossible.

It would hardly be fair to blame Wilberforce for this later development. However, a paper on his impact on nineteenth-century society would not be complete without noting this late Victorian reaction. It is perhaps a fact of history that movements tend in time to breed their own opposites. Certainly this is what happened in the last three decades of the nineteenth-century and on into the twentieth.

### **5. Lessons for Today**

It remains to consider what are some of the lessons which we can learn from the life of Wilberforce. I shall mention four.

1. We need to share Wilberforce's passion to see the nation's morals reflecting the law and the glory of God. Like him, we need to be convinced of the indispensability of the gospel to our national health. He warned of a coming day when Christianity would be openly disowned. He dreaded such a prospect. We live at a time when his warning has been fulfilled, and when biblical ethics are flouted in the land, and we can easily become insensible to the

tragedy and evil of the situation. We must pray that God will inject into us the same moral passion which was in Wilberforce, and which came to mark the middle years of the nineteenth-century.

As in his day, large parts of the Church have renounced biblical truth. Like Wilberforce we must be unashamed to challenge the contemporary forms of counterfeit religion, and to fight again for the dominance of Evangelicalism in the Church.

2. We must remember that holiness cannot be created by legislation. This is a relevant observation today, when many of us are concerned about such issues as Sunday trading and abortion. To try to legislate for morality may in fact lead to hypocrisy, and eventually to reaction. We need also to be careful lest a moral code of our own creation be put across as biblical, as happened in the nineteenth-century temperance movement.

Like Wilberforce we need to be convinced of the primacy of conversion: until men and women are made new by the Holy Spirit, there will never be a genuine external reformation.

What this means as of first importance is that we must pray that God will again revive his work. Along with that, we, like Wilberforce, need to be fearless in confronting the sins of our time, especially the sin of self-confidence in material prosperity.

3. We must learn patience. Wilberforce did not live to see the profound moral change for which he had worked. We must not be put off by the lack of immediate results for our spiritual and moral endeavours, but must develop a long-term view, and, like Wilberforce, keep plugging away and never give up.

4. Finally, and personally, we need to examine our own lives. We live in a leisured and pleasure-loving age; material things still, as in Wilberforce's day, loom too large to our minds, and affluence threatens all the time to deaden us to the sense of the eternal. We must constantly remind ourselves of our accountability to God, of the fact that this life is a training ground for the next.

As Wilberforce learned in his own conversion, there is more to real Christianity than mere intellectual assent to evangelical truth. We must heed his injunction to examine our own hearts and ask 'Have I fled for refuge to the only sure ground of hope?', and then to live every moment, to perform every activity, in the light of eternity and for the glory of God.

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