Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885)

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The outward course of Anthony Ashley-Cooper's life was a paradigm of the nineteenth-century British aristocracy.[1] He was born in Grosvenor Square in 1801; one grandfather was an earl, the other a duke; he was educated at Harrow School and Christ Church, Oxford, and elected to parliament at the age of twenty-five on the basis of his family connections. His political instincts were, and remained, profoundly conservative. He married Lady Emily ('Minny') Cowper, the daughter of Countess Cowper and, most probably, of the future prime minister Lord Palmerston.[2] On his father's death in 1851 he inherited an earldom and over twenty thousand acres of central southern England.

In other respects, however, Shaftesbury's career and outlook challenged narrow aristocratic stereotypes. Able and well-connected though he was, from his mid-thirties onwards he neither sought nor held government office. Rather his political energies were devoted to the welfare of those less fortunate than himself, notably in securing legislation to control conditions and hours of work in factories and mines and in measures to regulate the treatment of the mentally ill. Above all his fervent and committed Christianity contrasted with the conventional religiosity of his class, and was the spiritual and ideological mainspring of his life and actions.

In contrast to many of the figures discussed in this book Shaftesbury's Christian faith found expression in political and philanthropic action rather than in preaching and publication. His 'heart of faith' is, however, copiously but somewhat treacherously documented by his extensive diaries, kept intermittently from 1825 and systematically for nearly fifty years from the later 1830s until his last illness took hold in 1885. They were (unlike some diaries kept by public figures) never intended for publication and contained intense and spontaneous outpourings, revealing heartfelt Christian convictions, but also agonizing self-doubt, self-pity and hypochondria. There were also hasty judgements

of situations and individuals. While close attention to the diaries is essential in understanding Shaftesbury's inner life, they also need to be used cautiously. In particular, while they do appear to have been a safety valve releasing a darker, even disturbed, side of his nature, they need to be set against the evidence that his public persona was always a tightly controlled, courteous and positive one.

Shaftesbury's Christian convictions developed gradually between his childhood and his mid-thirties. His early spiritual formation owed nothing to his parents, but a lot to a family servant, Maria Milles, who was probably an Anglican evangelical or Methodist convert. She told him Bible stories and taught him to pray his first prayers, words which he continued to repeat throughout his life. By the time she died when the boy was ten she had trained him in a habit of regular prayer and Bible reading.[3] During his teenage years, which he was later to characterize as a period of 'idleness', such spiritual discipline appears to have receded, but he still retained 'Christian instincts'.[4] After graduating from Oxford in 1822, Shaftesbury followed aristocratic convention by taking a Grand Tour of Europe, and in Vienna in late 1824 or early 1825 fell desperately in love with Antoinette van Leykan, the daughter of a diplomat married to an Italian singer, whose musical and theatrical connections were perceived as disreputable in good society. The details of the affair are now unknown, but it ended with Shaftesbury returning disconsolate to England, acknowledging that he had loved 'furiously' and 'imprudently', but that Providence had intervened to save him from an attachment to an 'angel' with 'a halo of hell'. The incident, however, 'commenced a course of self-knowledge for me', and it appears no coincidence that from 1825 onwards he began to keep a diary and to show greater interest in Christianity. Thus he recorded reading a discourse by the leading Scottish evangelical Thomas Chalmers, and in October avowed that he had 'a great mind to found a policy upon the Bible'. In 1826 he read another key evangelical text, Thomas Scott's Bible commentary, and on his twenty-fifth birthday that April 1826 he was able to look back with resignation on his encounter with Antoinette, and to perceive that God had an as yet unrevealed purpose for his own life.[5]

During the next few years there was growing evidence of deep-seated Christian commitment. He became a serious student of the Scriptures: for example on a Sunday in 1829 he read the whole of Revelation at a sitting, observing that this made 'the general scope more easy of comprehension'. He even aspired to learn Hebrew (with a first class degree in Classics he already had excellent Greek) in order to be able to read the whole Bible in the original languages. He believed that the 'precepts and wisdom of the Bible' provided the best possible foundation

for other intellectual activity. He also loved silent prayer 'in solitude and contemplation'.[6] Meanwhile Shaftesbury was seeking a Christian wife, a desire that was fulfilled when he married Minny in June 1830. At first sight her Whiggish family connections and lack of overt godliness made her an unlikely choice for the earnest pious Tory politician, but she clearly possessed or rapidly acquired Christian convictions that, albeit less intense than his own, enabled her to be the soulmate he craved. The marriage was to be a very happy one, with a sense of genuine partnership and shared interests.

The question of whether Shaftesbury had always been an evangelical, or whether rather he became one in his thirties is not easy to resolve. In fact his spiritual development illustrates how the boundaries of earlier nineteenth-century evangelicalism were somewhat permeable. The inspiration of the lives and writings of Hannah More and William Wilberforce had attracted significant but qualified support among the elite. In the 1830s, however, partly due to its own theological development, partly in response to political crisis, and partly in reaction to the Oxford Movement, the dominant mood of Anglican evangelicalism became more dogmatic and partisan. Shaftesbury's own religious development needs to be understood against this background. His biographer perceived a 'growing intensity' in his religious life in the early 1830s and in June 1834 he had written in his diary that he now had 'a deeper sense' of religion than when he left Oxford over a decade before.[7] By the late 1830s he became very publicly associated with the evangelical party in the Church of England, above all through his chairmanship of the Church Pastoral Aid Society (CPAS) from its formation in 1836. Judgements, however, have differed as to when exactly Shaftesbury's evangelicalism became clear-cut, especially as no datable conversion experience is recorded. A case can be made for the later 1820s in view of his growing reverence for the Bible, and increasingly conspicuous piety: as early as April 1829 he was being regarded as a 'Saint', contemporary slang for an evangelical. On the other hand, there is no evidence that at this time he subscribed to characteristic evangelical beliefs on original sin and the atonement, which he only began to articulate a few years later.[8]

Shaftesbury's mature faith was intensely Christocentric, suffused with a sense of the reality of the atonement and the prospect of the Second Advent. Some of his most revealing statements of his personal belief were made at deathbeds and times of bereavement, in attributing to those he loved the essence of his own convictions. In 1849 he counselled his dying second son Francis to 'think of nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified', and as the boy's epitaph he wrote: 'he only sought forgiveness

in the free love and mercy of God through the atonement of a crucified Saviour'. At Lord Palmerston's deathbed in 1865 Shaftesbury 'spoke of sin, of forgiveness, and of sin being washed away only by the blood of our crucified Saviour'. Although devastated when his wife died in 1872, he derived comfort from the recollection that 'She was a sincere, sunny and gentle follower of our Lord; and almost the last words that fell from her lips were "None but Christ"'.[9]

During Shaftesbury's middle and later life, his two closest spiritual confidantes, apart from his wife and his diary, were Edward Bickersteth (1785-1850), a leading evangelical clergyman and popular devotional writer, and Alexander Haldane (1800-1882), a lawyer and the dominant force behind *The Record*, the main Anglican evangelical newspaper. The development of his friendship with Bickersteth in the mid-1830s appears to have been instrumental in the reinforcing of his evangelical convictions, and in particular to his development of premillennial beliefs regarding the Second Advent. While for some premillennialism can lead to fatalism and a sense of the futility of human action, for Shaftesbury, as indeed for Bickersteth, it had the reverse effect in galvanizing vigorous activism in the belief that he must not be found negligent when the Master returned. Moreover for Shaftesbury, Jesus's return was not something to be feared, but to be anticipated with joyful expectation. After Bickersteth's death Shaftesbury recalled him not as a prophet of doom, but for his 'warmth' and 'joy in good'.[10] His friendship with Haldane developed in the late 1840s, and their relations were marked by 'intimacy' from around the early 1860s. His summary of the qualities he most valued in Haldane, written when the latter died in 1882, may also be taken as an expression of his own convictions and manner of life:

> He believed intensely in the Lord Jesus, His power, His office, His work. He intensely loved Him, and ever talked with a holy relish and full desire for the Second Advent. A long life . . .[11] was devoted to the advancement of Christ's Kingdom and to the temporal and eternal welfare of the human race. His sole hope was in the all-atoning blood of our blessed Saviour; any approach to a doctrine of works was his abhorrence. . . .[12]

Haldane has been credited with influencing Shaftesbury towards a more 'harsh and strident' evangelicalism in his later years, and his views certainly appeared more entrenched as he aged. Here too, however, Shaftesbury's position needs to be set against wider changes in the religious climate which meant that attitudes that seemed very much in the evangelical mainstream in the 1840s were beginning to look old-fashioned by the 1870s. Paradoxically, although he came to be perceived

as the lay leader of Anglican evangelicalism in the half century between Wilberforce's death in 1833 and his own in 1885, Shaftesbury always resisted unequivocal church party identification. In 1845, for example, he observed that his language was 'not half fiery enough' for the zealots of Exeter Hall (their main meeting place in the Strand) and confided to his diary, 'What a blessing to me it is that I am [not] held by the strings of a party either indoors [that is, in parliament] or out!'[13]

It is noteworthy that Shaftesbury had already committed himself in 1833 to the cause of factory reform, his best-known political concern, before his evangelical religious convictions were fully developed. Indeed rather uncharacteristically and in contrast to Wilberforce's long-considered commitment to the cause of slave trade abolition, he initially took up the issue without much prior thought in response to an urgent request to replace the movement's previous parliamentary spokesman, Michael Sadler, who had lost his seat in the general election of 1832.[14] While he recalled praying and meditating before giving an affirmative answer, his motivation then derived from Tory paternalism and general Christian benevolence, rather than from any specifically evangelical ideology. As time went on spiritual motives came more to the fore in driving his social concern, as was well demonstrated in the peroration to one of his greatest parliamentary speeches, when in 1843 he moved for the government to give serious consideration to measures for providing moral and religious education for the working classes:

> We owe to the poor of our land a weighty debt. We call them improvident and immoral, and many of them are so; but that improvidence and that immorality are the results, in a great measure of our neglect, and, in not a little, of our example. . . . Only let us declare this night, that we will enter on a novel and better course – that we will seek their temporal through their eternal welfare – and the half of our work will then have been achieved. There are many hearts to be won, many minds to be instructed, and many souls to be saved. . . . [15]

In the meantime Shaftesbury's extra-parliamentary activities, notably the CPAS and his encouragement in the 1850s of special services for the working class in Exeter Hall and London theatres, demonstrated his commitment to directly evangelistic work.

Shaftesbury was a passionately loyal son of the Church of England, and his evangelicalism cannot be separated from his Anglicanism. That loyalty was in part a product of his class and upbringing in the 'high-and-dry' school which, he later recalled, meant that as a child he believed the Bible Society to be 'an evil and revolutionary institution'. He had

also considered it 'a meritorious thing to hate Dissenters'.[16] The latter prejudice, at least, proved difficult entirely to shake off. It was to some extent reawakened in 1843 when nonconformist opposition prevented the government proceeding with his cherished plans for the education of factory children. They had objected to the scheme as unduly favourable to the Church of England while he, in the aftermath of this disappointment, set his face against 'combined education', affirming that the Church must have 'our own schools, our Catechism, our Liturgy, our Articles, our Homilies, our faith, our own teaching of God's Word.'[17] In the mid-1840s, Shaftesbury remained very concerned about the vulnerability of the Church to nonconformist political attacks. A more positive attitude was, however, apparent in his view of the Evangelical Alliance, founded in 1846, and bringing together Protestant Christians of a wide range of denominations from both sides of the Atlantic. Although sceptical as to the movement's capacity to have a significant practical impact, he was still pleased to see that 'a thousand people of various forms of Christian belief, of jarring sects . . . assembled together day after day; joined in fervent prayer; mutually confessed their errors, and sins towards each other' and affirmed the 'leading principles of revealed Religion'.[18] Moreover, when he perceived cooperation with nonconformists as furthering the cause of the gospel he was delighted to support it – in November 1845, after visiting a Ragged School, he wrote, 'Many Dissenters, but it is high time to be thinking where we agree, not where we differ.' He was also a longstanding and prominent supporter of interdenominational organizations, notably the London City Mission and the YMCA. In his later years, in the light of his perception that attacks on Christianity itself were increasing, his attitude to nonconformists mellowed further. This attitude was evident, for example, in his readiness in 1881 to lay the memorial stone at a Baptist Chapel, writing that 'Externals must now be secondary in consideration.'[19]

Shaftesbury's major opportunity to shape the Church of England came in 1855 when Palmerston became Prime Minister, and turned to his step-son-in-law as a key advisor in ecclesiastical matters. Initially the subsequent episcopal appointments showed a preponderance of evangelicals, but no more than were necessary to redress their previous under-representation on the bench. A particular concern was to appoint men who would conciliate nonconformists rather than confront them. During the later years of Palmerston's administration, which continued with a short break until 1865, the strategy was rather to maintain a balance between church parties while avoiding extremes. The fear of Shaftesbury's critics that he would persuade Palmerston to advance more militant evangelicals proved unjustified.[20]

Shaftesbury's attitudes to the two most prominent religious minorities in Victorian Britain – Roman Catholics and Jews – were an important aspect of his own outlook. Initially he lacked animosity to Roman Catholics. His early love, Antoinette van Leykan, was a Roman Catholic. In 1829 he supported the removal of Roman Catholic civil disabilities in the belief that no safeguards for liberty could be effective, except 'the spirit of a nation'. In 1833 he attended High Mass in Milan Cathedral, in the absence of a Protestant place of worship, although he found the ceremony 'tedious and unspiritual'.[21] During the 1830s, however, he became increasingly concerned at the advance of Catholicism in Britain, an attitude which was reinforced by Edward Bickersteth who in early 1836, at the very time Shaftesbury became friendly with him, published a tract entitled *The Progress of Popery*. Bickersteth denounced the system of popery – which he distinguished from individual professing Roman Catholics – especially on the grounds that it upheld human works rather than justification by faith, and that it was condemned in the prophetic writings of Scripture as 'the Mystery of Iniquity, the Man of Sin, the Antichrist, and the Apocalyptic Babylon'.[22] Such convictions appear to have imprinted themselves on Shaftesbury. Subsequent events, notably the enactment in 1845 of permanent government support for the seminary at Maynooth in Ireland, and the restoration in 1850 of the Roman Catholic episcopal hierarchy in England and Wales heightened his anxieties. He viewed the 1848 Revolutions in continental Europe in a strongly eschatological framework, believing them to represent divine judgement on popery.[23] He took a prominent part in the Protestant movements of the early 1850s, the Protestant Defence Committee and the Protestant Alliance. Nevertheless, following Bickersteth, he was careful that his passionate opposition to an impersonal 'popery' did not translate into personal attacks on Roman Catholics. In May 1849 he expressed strong reservations about the 'violent, vituperative and declamatory' language of the resolutions to be put to a public meeting of the recently-formed Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics and was relieved when his son's serious illness gave him an excuse to withdraw from the chair.[24] In March 1851, speaking in the House of Commons on proposed legislation against the new Roman Catholic bishops, he avoided 'violent' language, was careful to distinguish between the priesthood and the laity, and affirmed the loyalty of English Roman Catholics.[25]

Indeed in the wake of the Tractarian Oxford Movement Shaftesbury was, if anything, more deeply concerned by the growth of Anglo-Catholicism within the Church of England than by Roman Catholicism outside it. In April 1850 he wrote that 'The pretexts of the Tractarian

party are in the highest degree, Roman, Popish and autocratical'.[26] Roman Catholics were at least open opponents whereas Tractarians were subverting Protestantism from inside. In a memorable analogy he described popery in 1851 as 'spiritual fornication', but 'Puseyism' as 'spiritual adultery'.[27] His hatred and fear of the Tractarians was later reflected in his advice to Palmerston on patronage: while Shaftesbury was willing to countenance the appointment of the Broad Churchman Archibald Campbell Tait as Bishop of London in 1856, and even the appointment of moderate High Church bishops such as Charles Ellicott and Edward Browne, he consistently warned Palmerston off men who showed 'any approximation to Popery'.[28] In the 1860s and 1870s he strenuously opposed ritualism. In 1851 he had publicly stated that his loyalty to the Church of England was not unconditional: it must 'continue to be scriptural' and if it failed to do so he was prepared to leave it.[29] The vigour of his hostility to Anglo-Catholicism, and to a lesser extent to liberal Anglicanism, stemmed from his anxiety to ensure that he would never in the event feel himself obliged to take such a painful step.

Shaftesbury's conviction that the British parliament should remain exclusively Christian led him to oppose the admission of Jews until in 1858 he decided that further objection would be fruitless.[30] In other respects, however, his attitude to Jews contrasted markedly with his attitude to Catholics, a difference that was rooted in his eschatological beliefs. Whereas he believed 'popery' to be condemned in Scripture and subject to destruction by God in the last times, he believed that the return of the Jews to Palestine and their conversion to Christianity was a necessary preliminary to the Second Coming. Hence he took a leading part in the establishment of a joint Anglican-Lutheran bishopric of Jerusalem in 1841, and was from 1848 President of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews. Nor was his sympathy for the Jews merely a matter of seeking their conversion to Christianity: in the 1850s he urged the government to use its influence with the Turkish government, whom Britain was supporting against Russia in the Crimean War, to persuade them to set up a Jewish homeland. Even in his eighties he showed impressive energy in efforts to ameliorate the situation of Jews escaping Russian persecution.[31]

Shaftesbury's interest in a Jewish homeland was a key strand in a wider global Christian vision. As a young man he had held junior ministerial office as a member of the India Board of Control, and he continued to take a close interest in the affairs of the sub-continent, over which he believed Britain had been given a 'sublime guardianship'.[32] In 1843-4 he strongly criticized the injustice of government action in the dispossession and imprisonment of a family of local rulers, the Ameers

of Scinde. In response to the 'Mutiny' of 1857 he balanced an insistence on meting out retribution to the 'rebels' with the advocacy of schemes to secure the spiritual, moral and material betterment of India. He also took a strong interest in the religious and political condition of continental Europe, for example in relation to the unification of Italy, and the United States. After the publication in 1852 of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he sought to mobilize British opinion against slavery and gave strong public support to the North in the American Civil War.[33]

Shaftesbury died peacefully on a sunny autumn afternoon in 1885.[34] Although eighty-four he had been publicly active almost to the last, but was nevertheless prepared for an event that had no terrors for him. He was buried in the little village church near his ancestral home at Wimborne St Giles in Dorset, with a memorial tablet that, on his own instructions, carried no eulogy, but only his name, dates of birth and death, and three biblical texts he had chosen himself: 'What hast thou that thou didst not receive?' (1 Corinthians 4:7), 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall' (1 Corinthians 10:12) and the last verse in the Bible, 'Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus' (Revelation 22:20). They well sum up central features of his Christian faith: his insistence on the primacy of the words of Scripture; his sense of absolute dependence on God; his consciousness of responsibility as a steward of divine gifts to humanity; his awareness of the pervasiveness of sin and failure; and his assured sense of relationship with Jesus Christ, whose return in glory would be an imminent reality.[35]