

**'THE BETTER HOUR IS NEAR':  
WILBERFORCE AND TRANSFORMATIVE RELIGION**

*Sonnet to William Wilberforce, Esq*

Thy country, Wilberforce, with just disdain,  
Hears thee, by cruel men and impious, call'd  
Fanatic, for thy zeal to loose th'enthralled  
From exile, public sale, and slav'ry's chain.  
Friend of the poor, the wrong'd, the fetter-gall'd,  
Fear not lest labour such as thine be vain!  
Thou hast achiev'd a part; hast gain'd the ear  
Of Britain's senate to thy glorious cause;  
Hope smiles, joy springs, and tho' cold caution pause  
And weave delay, the better hour is near,  
That shall remunerate thy toils severe  
By peace for Afric, fenc'd with British laws.  
Enjoy what thou hast won, esteem and love  
From all the just on earth, and all the blest above!

William Cowper (1731-1800)

The focus of this poem and this paper is William Wilberforce (1759-1833), Member of Parliament for Yorkshire, orator *par excellence*, sickly yet robust advocate for the abolition of the slave-trade and subsequent emancipation of slaves, organiser of local initiatives to renew the moral fabric of the nation, recently converted evangelical believer. Wilberforce's ministry has regularly been interpreted as an extraordinary example of Christian witness despite deep opposition, and a shining light of compassion amidst social decay and global rupture. It is my view nonetheless that the model of transformation which he represents does not provide sufficient theological stability or social portability to justify easy imitation. While we rightly praise his character, we must also appraise his context and convictions. The problem of too highly exalting our heroes of the faith is that we disqualify ourselves from taking their lead.

This paper seeks to give a window into the *dynamics of second generation evangelical leadership* in England, which was working to bring order and consistency to the labile character of eighteenth century Methodism, after first generation leaders like John Wesley (1703-1791), George Whitefield (1714-1770), Selina Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791), Samuel Walker (1714-1761), and William Romaine (1714-1795) had died. Notable is the achievement of the Clapham Sect as second generation leaders, who through their *lay network* introduced reforms in the spheres of banking, commerce, politics, and education, motivated by evangelical convictions.<sup>1</sup> Their cumulative contribution towards the abolition of the slave trade is frequently recognised. Parallel to their achievement

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<sup>1</sup> Names intimately linked with the Clapham Circle are Thomas Babington, Edward Eliot, Thomas Gisborne, Charles Grant, Zachary Macaulay, James Stephen, Henry Thornton and John Venn, not to mention Hannah More and William Wilberforce.

(and often seen as their brains-trust) was the *preaching and training ministry of Charles Simeon* of Cambridge (1759-1836), who as a moderate Calvinist clergyman worked tirelessly within the structures of the Church of England for its reform, encouraging many aspirants towards ordained ministry.<sup>2</sup> Any interpretation of the achievements of the Clapham Sect must also consider the impact of the American (1776) and French (1789) Revolutions, which reflexively shaped the *eschatology of British evangelicals and expectations of British imperial expansion*. Political upheaval amongst neighbours far and near, coupled with rapid social and industrial change at home, created a profound desire for stability in the British body politic.

### **‘Call’d Fanatic’: Wilberforce’s Vital Piety and Personal Transformation**

It was no foregone conclusion that Wilberforce would exercise moral suasion in the nation as an evangelical believer. William Cowper’s poem on slavery, from which the quotations in each section heading derive, highlights here the horror of evangelical conversion in the eyes of the establishment, from which Wilberforce emerged. He was introduced to the pesky enthusiasm of Methodism when boarding in 1769 with extended family in Wimbledon, a polite suburb of London. His mother quickly brought him home to Hull in Yorkshire to be rid of such dangerous influence. As a student at Cambridge (from 1776) he preferred life on the hog to earnest piety, though one tutor in particular, Isaac Milner (1750-1820), impressed him greatly. He wasn’t to know that Milner was himself a convert to the movement dedicated to promoting vital piety (subsequently known as evangelicalism), until they travelled together on two Grand Tours of the continent, during which time they read and discussed Phillip Doddridge’s *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. It was a gradual process, but Wilberforce eventually found himself persuaded of the claims of evangelical faith, that sin was more serious and atonement more reassuring than latitudinarian Anglicans allowed. Evangelicals were consistently more pessimistic about human nature than any of the Enlightened alternatives.<sup>3</sup>

Wilberforce continued nonetheless to mix with the élite of the land, attended their clubs and spoke their language, and in the end, having taken advice

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<sup>2</sup> Contrasted with Anglican Evangelicalism of which he was the most notable representative, we recognise the existence of a more extreme variety of evangelicalism which advocated ‘pentecostal, pre-millenarian, Adventist, and revivalist’ views. See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 10. His moderation was significant, for Calvinism had come to be associated in England with unstable models of social transformation, given the experience of the Civil Wars and Interregnum of the seventeenth century. See David W. Smith, *Transforming the World?: The Social Impact of British Evangelicalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 3. This of course is balanced by the post-millennialism of his day, which allowed for progress in the social and material realms, given the progress and success of evangelistic enterprise.

from John Newton in a most weighty instance of vocational guidance counselling, decided that he wanted to count the cost, both financial and social, of being an evangelical Christian by *remaining* in public service rather than pursuing ordained ministry. He said prospectively of his life's work in 1787: 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.'<sup>4</sup> Displaying his passion as apologist and evangelist for the sake of public theology, Wilberforce wrote *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*, which was published in 1797 and to the surprise of the publishers had sold 7,500 copies within six months. In this repetitive but seminally important work, sometimes known as *A Practical View* and sometimes as *Real Christianity*, he makes his own theological convictions clear and sets an agenda for public life. He makes an appeal to the ruling class of England to reject its nominal Christian faith:

Their standard of right and wrong is not the standard of the Gospel ... If we would know the truth, their opinions on the subject of religion are not formed from the perusal of the Word of God. The Bible lies on a shelf unopened. And they would be wholly ignorant of its contents, except for what they hear occasionally in church. Or perhaps they retain vague traces of the truth in their memories from the lessons of childhood.<sup>5</sup>

Instead he wants the leaders of the land to pursue true heart religion, which consisted of repentance of *sin*, acceptance of free *salvation*, with the expectation of *sanctification* by the Spirit.<sup>6</sup> A sharp and personal challenge is given:

Far different is the humiliating language of true Christianity. From it we learn that man is an apostate creature. He has fallen from his high, original state. He is degraded in his nature, and depraved in his faculties. He is indisposed towards the good, and disposed towards evil. Prone to vice, it is natural and easy for him to sin. Disinclined toward virtue, it is difficult and arduous to seek it. He is tainted with sin, not slightly and superficially, but radically, and to the very core of his being. Even though it may be humiliating to acknowledge these things, still this is the biblical account of man.<sup>7</sup>

Each of us – for himself – needs to solemnly ask the question: Have *I* fled for refuge to the appointed hope? ... Let us labor, then, to affect our hearts with a deep conviction of our need for the Redeemer, and of the value of His offer to mediate. Let us fall down humbly before the throne of God, pleading pity and pardon in the name of the Son of His love. Let us beseech Him to give us a true spirit of repentance, and of hearty, undivided faith in the Lord Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It should be remembered that the reformation of manners meant something more substantial than table etiquette, but rather the moral education of the nation which would result in fewer transgressions of the law and convictions of crimes, enabling security of family and town life.

<sup>5</sup> William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity: Contrasted with the Prevailing Religious System* (Portland: Multnomah, 1982), 3.

<sup>6</sup> These three are expressly listed: Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 40.

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This is the cardinal point on which the whole of Christianity turns ... The nature of that holiness which the true Christian seeks to possess is none other than the restoration of the image of God in his soul. Obtaining it depends entirely on the operation of God's Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

The work is highly practical, not surprising for a leader without formal theological training,<sup>10</sup> and the theological argument is set within a highly individualistic framework with next to no mention of ecclesiology<sup>11</sup> or eschatology, apart from warning readers to flee to Christ in this world to avoid punishment in the next.<sup>12</sup> The moralising tone urges readers to demonstrate Christian love as the climax of a concatenation of virtues, and occasionally parallels the vocabulary of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and other moral philosophers to place the affections at the centre of human nature, although Wilberforce admits that he has never read Edwards on original sin.<sup>13</sup>

As for any sense of reality being dynamic, Wilberforce is hesitant. The language of Kingdom is conspicuous by its absence (although very occasionally it is used to describe the sphere of life to which individual conversion leads). Apocalyptic vocabulary is applied to the moment of conversion, when we are dramatically liberated from sin by a Saviour, but the return of Christ is at best a medium term prospect. Mindful of external revolutionary threats and domestic challenges to social order or religious propriety, Wilberforce is careful not to suggest that evangelical faith is levelling or destabilising: the political elite maintained an almost feudal attitude of *noblesse oblige* in their hierarchical care for the nation long after industrial and social reality had pointed to new contingencies.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he is more likely to point out the more modest sins of

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<sup>9</sup> Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> Derek J. Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals? Tracing the Roots of the Modern Movements* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 37.

<sup>11</sup> John Wolffe cites Wilberforce's High Church contemporary, Charles Daubeny, who criticised its 'inadequate doctrine of the church.' See John Wolffe, 'William Wilberforce's *Practical View* (1797) and Its Reception', in *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History: Papers Read at the 2006 Summer Meeting and the 2007 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Studies in Church History 44; eds. K. Cooper and J. Gregory; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 181.

<sup>12</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Wolffe, 'William Wilberforce's *Practical View*,' 176. Wilberforce writes for example: 'This notion that the emotions are out of place in true religion is commonly held, for people regard emotions as the stronghold of enthusiasm. Yet men are likely to be dupes of misapplied terms. And so we have assumed religion should be rather "rational" than be considered warm and affectionate. Do not admit this claim too hastily. For indeed we shall see that it is really, if I mistake not, a gross and harmful error.' Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Harvie and H. C. G. Matthew, *Nineteenth-Century Britain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 1. Atkins summarises the challenges as 'structural instability (the rise of the middle classes), changing social morality (prompted by the moral panic attending the loss of the American colonies) and economic or demographic change (industrialization).' See Gareth Atkins, 'Reformation, Revival, and Rebirth in Anglican Evangelical Thought, c.1780-1830', in *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History: Papers Read at the 2006 Summer Meeting and the 2007 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Studies in Church History 44; eds. K. Cooper and J. Gregory; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 166.

the ruling élite than their scandals or egregious failures.<sup>15</sup> Like many of his class, he had a profound sense of duty.<sup>16</sup> While contemporary religious scholars of the modern period are inclined to highlight the *health* of Christianity in eighteenth century England, and to downplay the significance or the impact of Methodism and revivals, this position is not one which Wilberforce endorses: he sees formalism and nominalism among the middle and upper classes as the cause of great moral stagnation in the life of the country, which was detrimental to the Christian leadership of England and the Empire in the world, already under threat with the loss of America in 1783.<sup>17</sup>

However, like other post-millennialists, he subscribes to a theology of hope because of the power of grace to reorient and reform,<sup>18</sup> even if the chief application of this related primarily to individuals. He speaks frequently in *Real Christianity* of the journey that we are on as pilgrims, and presents this world as probationary: 'Dangers beset the Christian's path ... The Christian is but a traveller ... Life is a state of probation.'<sup>19</sup> Human beings must bear patiently the trials and sufferings of this world, in order that they might develop in sanctification now, and be readied to reach their final state of glory.<sup>20</sup> Though painful, personal progress is assured, and the intentions of providence are comprehensible. Life is best described using the language of gradual transformation and growth, and the goals of reform best achieved through ameliorationist strategies.<sup>21</sup> The great evils being meted out in revolutionary France ('manners corrupted, morals depraved, pleasure-seeking predominant, and above all religion discredited'<sup>22</sup>) and the sufferings generated by the American Wars of Independence raised serious concerns in Britain about the relationship between human suffering, moral exertion and divine blessing, for which

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Smith, 'William Wilberforce (1759-1833)', in *The Heart of Faith: Following Christ in the Church of England* (ed. A. Atherstone; Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2008), 73. See Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 54-56, for examples of 'sober sensualists.'

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *William Wilberforce: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 221. Such feelings of 'reciprocal duties and obligations' were in contrast with 'a liberal political economy organized around individual rights and liberties. See Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 57.

<sup>17</sup> *Real Christianity* contains very little on the issues of slavery, though Wilberforce later wrote *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*, published in 1823.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Transforming the World?* 10.

<sup>19</sup> Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 80, 83, 118.

<sup>20</sup> Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 33. See also Brown, *Moral Capital*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 104.

Wilberforce's individual eschatology provided at least a provisional answer.<sup>23</sup> The image of a machine (an otherwise common Enlightenment trope), which makes predictable movements, and defines revolutions by means of wheels returning to their point of origin, is a useful visual representation of Wilberforce's understanding of providence, where rising up against suffering is unwarranted (for it is purgative) and therefore interventions by government are unnecessary (for it is passing).

Alongside the more famous attempts in the Parliament between 1789 and 1807 to introduce bills for abolition of the slave trade, Wilberforce was also prominent in promoting voluntary organisations named prosaically the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, the Society for the Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts, the Society for the Reformation of Prison Discipline, the Society for the Education of Africans, the Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, not to mention the extraordinarily generous financial contribution he made to such groups and other individuals besides. When he died, he had no home of his own but had been living *ad seriatim* with his children. Though Wilberforce embodies the uncomfortable combination of static social expectations *and* a theology of hope, he becomes an advocate for social transformation when the transformations are incremental, and especially if they can be achieved without government sponsorship. He takes up the idea if not the vocabulary of Edmund Burke (1729-1797), who argued that society needs to cultivate the love of 'little platoons,' civic organisations acting for the common good, to obviate the need of governments and law to intrude upon the lives of citizens. Optimally, society was viewed as organic and not contractual.<sup>24</sup> Such a position was fully consonant with Wilberforce's own deferential view of politics and society.

On a bigger scale, evangelicalism in the eighteenth century often functioned as an anti-assimilationist movement, providing resources and identity to marginalised social or economic groupings, and encouraging resistance to hegemonic powers.<sup>25</sup> Such was the function of the evangelical cause amongst the Clapham Saints as well: the promotion of vital piety amongst the ruling class in England would encourage their resistance to the godless aspirations of the French revolutionaries, while at the same time leading to the amelioration of hardships

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<sup>23</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 249.

<sup>25</sup> This thesis is foundational to the book: W. Reginald Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992).

amongst the industrial poor, securing at least temporarily social stability and national resilience without substantial social modification. As Smith argues, ‘The upper classes needed to be convinced that Evangelical religion, far from presenting a threat to hierarchical society, could actually secure the continuance of it.’<sup>26</sup> This ‘Clapham moment’ in evangelical history is often given an exalted status, for it is interpreted as integrating evangelism and social justice, standing in contrast with ‘the great reversal’ of the twentieth century when the two pathways of obedience were divorced. Care must be taken not to presume too quickly: the Saints had at best a modest agenda for social justice, and an attenuated framework for conceiving evangelism. Even abolition of the slave trade needs to be understood within the contextual pressures of economics and empire.

### **‘Thy glorious cause’: Motivations, Contexts, and Strategies for Abolition**

Wilberforce and his circle were socially cautious, but theologically radical. They did not invent the cause of abolition – that had been espoused and promoted for a generation at least by American then English Quakers, some traditional believers like Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), and some Methodist leaders: John Wesley summarised a long-standing position when he called for an end to ‘that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England and of human nature’ in 1791. Distinctively, the Saints organised abolitionist sentiment, successfully prosecuted abolitionist strategies, and even developed their own identity around the great moral cause of their day. Though the trade was abolished in 1807, it took another twenty-six years before slave ownership was outlawed in 1833, just a couple of days before Wilberforce died. While postmillennial eschatology ultimately funded their activity, supporting their commitment to the involvement of human agency in social transformation because their expectation was of the return of the Lord in the middle distance,<sup>27</sup> their primary argument for abolition was a simple appeal to Genesis 1-2 and the equality of all human beings, with due acknowledgement of the model of the Exodus and its validation of redemption. Hannah More (1745-1833) draws her epic poem entitled ‘Slavery’ to an end with appeal to these doctrines:

And thou! Great source of Nature and of Grace,  
Who of one blood didst form the human race,  
Look down in mercy in thy chosen time,  
With equal eye on Afric’s suffering clime:

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<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Transforming the World?* 17.

<sup>27</sup> See D. N. Hempton, ‘Evangelicalism and Eschatology’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31/2 (1980): 179-194, and Mark Hutchinson and John Wolffe, *A Short History of Global Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: University Press, 2012), 65.

Disperse her shades of intellectual night,  
Repeat thy high behest – Let there be light!  
Bring each benighted soul, great God, to Thee,  
And with thy wide Salvation make them free!

The universalising theology of *imago dei* also motivated Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) when he created ceramics in 1787 with an image of a shackled slave and the text ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’ Ethics which made backward-looking appeal to the stories of beginnings rather than ethics which called in eschatological models of the Kingdom undergirded the movement. As Gareth Atkins states: ‘[I]t should be emphasized that mainstream Evangelical thought found its roots more in appeal to the past than in prophetic conjecture regarding the future.’<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, whether articulated or not, some of the primary motivation for abolitionist zeal emerged out of Britain’s imperial context. Having lost the American colonies, Britain looked to carve out a new rationale for imperial expansion, one which was built on lofty virtue, not just military might. Her place in the world would be sanctioned as she ruled the seas to bring English rule of law and personal liberty to otherwise politically ‘impoverished’ peoples. As an example, the revision in 1813 of the Charter of the East India Company, which allowed for the inclusion of missionaries as part of the enterprise, now coupled Christianity with commerce as basic to imperial expansion, and supported the goal of liberation for the religiously and economically enslaved Hindu race.<sup>29</sup> In the eyes of many, the American republican experiment had been compromised by agreement to maintain slavery in the southern states, which Britain now drew attention to in her own superior quest to liberate. It wasn’t necessarily a utopian vision but ‘accord and security within the empire at a moment of threatened dissolution’ which sustained the cause of emancipation.<sup>30</sup>

Most surprisingly of all, however, for leaders steeped in a quasi-feudal paternalism, the abolitionists wanted to promote Free Trade as the core value of Empire, as a consequence of which the reach of government or any other arbitrary authority ought to be restricted and the labour of slaves released. In their eyes, the existence of chattel slavery attested eloquently to distortions in the dynamics of the market. Against those monopolist landowners in the Caribbean who protested that British rights to (human) property were foundational to the English constitution,<sup>31</sup> the abolitionists and eventually the Parliament built the

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<sup>28</sup> Atkins, ‘Reformation, Revival, and Rebirth,’ , 173.

<sup>29</sup> Tomkins, *William Wilberforce*, 187-188.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 234.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 13.



case that the economy of the Empire and therefore the Empire itself would be strongest when each human being had the opportunity to participate unfettered in the market. They *were not* actually paternalistic in their economic thought, and held back from interventionist policies in order to secure free trade based on free will.<sup>32</sup> While their success in challenging the slave-trade and ultimately slave-holding was stellar, this ought not to blind us to their more foundational anti-interventionist beliefs, which resulted in further development of capitalist economy but less ongoing success in social transformation motivated by more thorough-going eschatological concerns.

Innovative were also the practical means used in Britain to achieve the cultural shift required for abolition to succeed. Just as William Carey's *Inquiry* (1792) felt modern by virtue of the use of research, statistics, and tables, so the Saints spent much effort in researching their cause. James Stephen (1758-1832) provided first-hand accounts to leaders in England of the deprivations of slavery in the Caribbean where he himself practised at the bar and was horrified at the brutality he witnessed. John Clarkson (1794-1828) and Zachary Macaulay (1768-1838), as governors of Sierra Leone, were cognisant of the cost of slavery and worked to ameliorate its consequences. The growth in missionary societies at home and the number of missionaries in the field overseas provided additional evidence of evils perpetrated, who argued furthermore that abolition and emancipation would enable better access to the Christian Gospel for Africans who otherwise were denied contact with missionaries by landowners.<sup>33</sup> Home societies drew individuals together to hear stories, raise money, write petitions concerning grievances (an ancient English liberty), and lobby politicians. It was the coincidence of means of mass persuasion, imperial contingencies, and evangelical commitments which together produced not just a spark but a flame.

The byword 'Clapham' needs to be investigated as well. Under the supervision of Henry Venn, curate of Clapham, a village just a few miles south of London, lay leaders in the Church of England bought houses next to each other, sometimes even sharing the same building or grounds, and created an enclave for discussion of social reform, with the extension and coordination of their work facilitated to some degree by the national clerical network which they could access. In an earlier period, abolitionists had gathered at Barham Court in the village of Teston not far south-east of Clapham, creating a similar evangelical

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<sup>32</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 98.

<sup>33</sup> Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals?* 178.

community of commitment, debating and sharpening their positions. Now, closer to the metropolitan centre of power, the Claphamites formed an alternative Eden-like community which functioned not unlike a lay monastery: retreating from the world in suburban seclusion with like-minded believers in order better to infiltrate and impact society for Christ. The country estate of Count Zinzendorf (1700-1760), the German Pietist leader, had functioned similarly as a lay refuge in Saxony. James Davison Hunter in his innovative analysis of late modern sociology uses the Clapham Sect as an example of the importance of networking which has an impact bigger than any individual.<sup>34</sup> He is hesitant to baptise the 'big man theory of history,' in which significant individuals seem single-handedly to change the course of events without acknowledging collaboration or context. They successfully took faith into the public sphere when individuals in one realm were able to find support, encouragement and mutual openings in another. The fact that this circle was drawn around an Anglican parish church attests the fact that it was not merely the Methodist parachurch movement which was entering a new stage at the turn of the nineteenth century. The Saints had distinct models and motives in this semi-rural idyll.<sup>35</sup> Rather than defending the potency of evangelical faith alone to transform the world, the model emerging from these reflections suggests instead that broad kinds of social, political, religious and economic mutuality, sometimes intentional, sometimes not, sharpened by persevering faith, were the catalysts which brought substantial resources to shape culture and bring healing.

### **'Thou hast achieved a part': The muted legacy of the Clapham Circle**

The Saints were the fathers and mothers of Victorian religion, which was dominated by the evangelical cause until the middle of the nineteenth century. Though now viewed prejudiciously as moralistic and sectarian, the Clapham Sect and its immediate followers had great and early success, infiltrating the highest levels of government (Spencer Perceval was the first evangelical Prime Minister from 1809 to 1812) and the church (John Bird Sumner was the first evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury between 1848 and 1862). The Saints' Sabbatarian commitment may appear quaint at best or at worst heavy-handed paternalism, but in its day was both an opportunity to provide time off for industrial workers and to maintain Christian convictions in the light of France's abolition of the

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<sup>34</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 73-74.

<sup>35</sup> Of note is the conversion of Charles Simeon which also had little to do with Methodist forms of faith. Simeon was in Cambridge (not Oxford), was confronted not with an itinerant preacher but the liturgical requirement to participate in the Lord's Supper, and read Anglican not Methodist divines to secure personal assurance of sins forgiven through a crucified messiah. See Smith, *Transforming the World?* 14.

Christian calendar in 1793 during the iconoclastic period of the Terror.<sup>36</sup> Other significant achievements were the appointment of Richard Johnson as naval chaplain to the First Fleet and Botany Bay penal settlement through the instrumentality of the Eclectic Society, and their work later provided inspiration for the final abolition of transportation of convicts to Australia in 1868.

More circumspectly, it has recently been argued that support by the Clapham Sect for conservative governments who suppressed industrial and social reforms in England in the early nineteenth century made for an equivalence between the Gospel and the ruling class, creating a 'religious ideology' when framed in later Marxist terms.<sup>37</sup> The French sociologist Halévy had earlier made this case in relation to Methodism: England was apparently spared the anarchy of revolution in the eighteenth century because evangelical revivals had worked to improve the condition of working-class families, thereby securing the power of industrial and mercantile interests. As Smith provocatively suggests:

[I]n its Wilberforcean form Evangelicalism may have achieved the success it sought in renewing the Establishment, but a high price was paid for this if, by identifying the Gospel with an élite culture and a deeply conservative approach to domestic politics, it alienated the growing numbers of people who were now challenging the patriarchal structures of British society and calling for radical social reforms. Without intending it, the movement associated with the Clapham Sect may have been a significant factor in the long-term decline of religion in the United Kingdom.<sup>38</sup>

It appeared that the leaders of the second generation of evangelicals failed not only to pass on their own religious priorities to other social classes and to the rapidly increasing percentage of the nation under 24 years of age<sup>39</sup>, but their biological children frequently gave up the convictions amongst which they had been nurtured as well. Perhaps, as is often suggested, boarding house life for the scions of the nobility was already difficult enough without adding the challenge of evangelical lifestyle, leading to their assimilation into broad church traditions (for example Samuel Wilberforce who became Bishop of Oxford).<sup>40</sup> For some evangelicals later in the century, the frightening prospect of Catholic emancipation in England and Ireland, revocation of the protectionist Corn Laws of 1815, and outbreaks of cholera together betokened the end of the world,

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<sup>36</sup> Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Transforming the World?* 19.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Transforming the World?* 19. More recently, the Halévy Thesis has been scrutinised and found wanting. Though there was little social upheaval in England in the eighteenth century compared with France, this may have been connected to the existence of spaces in the Empire outside of Britain to which conflicts with an origin in Britain had been exported. Britain outsourced the consequences of social tensions!

<sup>39</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (The New Oxford History of England; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals?* , 228.

displacing post-millennial with pre-millennial faith and generating a new kind of paternalistic outlook on morality (if not material life) now to fit *interventionist views* of providence.<sup>41</sup> There was loss of a bigger vision for social transformation amongst evangelicals. The worldview of the Saints had been static at worst, cyclical at best, yet either way they proved themselves not up to the task of sustaining their own best efforts. Their power today resides especially in their moral courage rather than their model of Christian social ethics.

Paul's letter to Philemon bears some reflection in relation to these conclusions. With a modest proposal for the renegotiation of master-servant relationships considering the impact of Christian conversion, Paul advances his expectation that his heart would be refreshed if Philemon were to welcome home Onesimus his runaway slave. Paul doesn't appeal to a renovated world to substantiate his cause, but rather grounds his request in free deference to his authority and in the possibility offering substitutionary repayment for Philemon's loss. Paul neither barks commands nor dreamily inspires, but makes concrete responsibilities in genuine relationships the load-bearing structure of social renewal. Such transformation must begin with faith and love, though hope might yet emerge to secure their longevity together in a larger home.

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<sup>41</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 16-17.

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