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Church and Society in Britain: A Mid-Nineteenth-Century Analysis

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In so far as Edward Miall is remembered today he is likely to be identified as a controversialist and a political activist. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* contains no entry on Miall while the *Dictionary of National Biography* describes him simply as 'politician'.¹

That Miall should be categorized in this manner is not altogether surprising: he was twice elected to the House of Commons and spent ten years of his life as an MP representing first Rochdale and then Bradford; he was devoted to the cause of disestablishment, which in the middle of the nineteenth century involved fierce political controversy; and he was not unhappy to be known as a 'strolling agitator'. Moreover, the passion with which Miall argued against the State's patronage of religion sometimes led him to express himself in language which, taken on its own, could lend support to the view that he was a bitter and bigoted ranter. For example, in 1842 we find him urging Non-conformists to adopt a militant stance toward the Establishment, to brace up their energies as 'men who are aiming at the overthrow of antichrist'. Upon all national churches, he says, there is stamped, 'in deep and indelible characters, the mark of the beast'.²

The truth is, however, we would do a very grave injustice to Edward Miall if we treat him merely as a political figure or a controversialist. On the one hand, his politics were embedded within, and flowed from, his religious commitment, while, on the other hand, his analysis and critique of the institutional forms of

¹ *D.N.B.*; XIII, 324-326.

² See *Victorian Nonconformity*, eds. J. Briggs and I. Sellars (1973), 126-127.

religion in his day are of quite exceptional value and importance. In this paper I am going to focus on Miall's critique of mid-nineteenth-century British religion as this finds expression in his *The British Churches In Relation To The British People* of 1849. But, first, let us note the details of his life.

I. The Life and Times of Edward Miall.

Miall was born in Portsmouth in 1809. His father, Moses Miall, was a merchant who later became a schoolmaster in north London. The family struggled on the edge of poverty throughout Edward's childhood and, when he was sixteen, the home was broken up and he was sent to act as an usher at a school in Essex. On 8 May, 1827, in his eighteenth year, Miall experienced conversion and recorded his act of consecration thus: 'By the blessing of God and under his divine assistance, I, Edward Miall, solemnly dedicate myself, soul and body, unto the Lord . . .'. Sometime later we read of him 'wrestling' with God in prayer and devoting 'every leisure moment to the hearty pursuit of God . . .'.³ Clyde Binfield says that Miall's conversion was the very core of his life and that, however worldly may have been the Nonconformity with which he was associated, 'his own passion was religious first and last'.⁴ This opinion is confirmed, as we shall see, by his writings; but it is supported too by the impression which Miall made upon his contemporaries. Younger ministers hero-worshipped him and R.W. Dale, on whom he had enormous influence, said of him in a memorial sermon: 'with most men God descends to dwell with them; in Miall's case human thought and life were lifted up to loftier realms—"he lived where God lived"'.⁵

Following training at Wymondley Theological College, where his reading is known to have included Gibbon, Locke, Dugald Stewart, Adam Smith, Butler and Jonathan Edwards, he entered the Independent ministry at Ware in 1831, before being called to Leicester three years later. It was here that Miall became involved in the *cause célèbre* concerning William Baines and twenty-six other members of his congregation, imprisoned for refusing to pay church rates. Miall publicly supported Baines' stand and, soon after this, resigned his pastorate to become, as Binfield puts it, 'a missionary in the cause of religious freedom'.⁶ He founded

³ Clyde Binfield, *So Down to Prayers* (London: J. M. Dent, 1977), 108.

⁴ *Ibid*, 123.

⁵ A. W. W. Dale, *Life of R. W. Dale* (London: Hodder, 1898), 368.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, 108.

the *Nonconformist*, the first issue appearing in April, 1841, and in 1844 the Anti-State Church Association, popularly known as the Liberation Society, came into being.

It is important to emphasize here that, although Miall's paper carried the name of the *Nonconformist* it was far from being merely a vehicle for the expression of the social and political aspirations of the middle-class members of Independent chapels. To the contrary, if Edward Miall can be said to have the interests of any class of people in British society at heart it is the working-class. The growing alienation of the poor and oppressed from *all* forms of institutional religion was very evidently a burden on the soul of the editor of the *Nonconformist*. Of course, he argued the injustice of the disabilities suffered by Dissenters; his reply to Matthew Arnold's sneering comments on the cultural deficiencies of Nonconformists is worth quoting:

If Nonconformists are narrow and inadequate in their ideal of human perfection—if they do not attach sufficient importance to culture and poetry—it ill becomes an Oxford Professor, lecturing at Oxford, to tax them with their deficiency. For two hundred years they have been shut out from that University by the exclusive and jealous spirit of the Establishment, and from whatever sweetness and light it is supposed to diffuse. Why select the victims of its meanness and intolerance as an illustration of one-sidedness when the cruel monopolist to whose injustice it should be attributed is suffered to escape?⁷

Nonetheless, Miall's antipathy toward Established Churches is most certainly not based upon a concern for the narrow self-interest of the class to which he happened to belong; rather, he wished to free the 'religion of Christ secularized' because he believed that the State patronage of particular churches had disastrous consequences for religion in general, including the ecclesiastical bodies which, outwardly at least, appeared to benefit from it. In his parliamentary speeches in favour of disestablishment, Miall repeatedly stressed that his motion was as much in the interests of Anglicanism as it was of Nonconformity and that his hostility was not directed toward the Church of England as such, but to what he viewed as the 'fatal incubus of state patronage'.⁸ In his most famous speech on the subject, delivered in the House of Commons on May 9th, 1871, Miall disclaimed all feelings of hostility toward particular churches and based his case on the evil consequences of an Establishment of

⁷ Quoted by Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against—Dissent In The Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 21.

⁸ *DNB*; XIII, 325.

religion experienced by the whole nation. It is the country as a whole, Miall argued, that is the loser as the result of the legal division of the British people into two great sections—the one privileged, the other tolerated.⁹ This same speech reveals very clearly Miall's deep concern for the 'working men of England and Scotland': it is not only Dissenters who suffer an enormous injustice as the result of the State's patronage of particular religious institutions, but the still larger class of people which Miall aptly denominates as *Absenters*—the masses of people who have no share whatever in 'the proceeds of that large estate which has been appropriated to the religious teaching they decline'.¹⁰

Miall's concern for the working-classes and his identification with the goals of the Chartist movement require comment. As we have seen, his own family history pre-disposed him to a sympathetic understanding of those whose lives were lived on the edge of absolute poverty: the teenage experience of witnessing the break-up of the family home undoubtedly left its mark on Miall and from the beginning of his ministry in Leicester he took a deep interest in the plight of the poor. Miall's ministry, and the book with which we are especially concerned here, must be seen against the background of the Chartist struggles of 1838–1842. Eileen Yeo has argued that the Chartist campaigns of these years are misinterpreted if they are understood as the struggles of a secular radicalism against a religious conservatism; on the contrary, Christianity must be reckoned, not as the possession of one social group, but 'as contested territory'.¹¹ This is nowhere more evident than in the Church demonstrations between July and September of 1839 when working men marched en bloc to Parish churches in at least thirty-one localities throughout England and Wales. The Chartists entered the churches in an attempt to challenge from within what they perceived to be the perversion of Christianity by the ruling, and rising, classes. Their determination to attend worship wearing working clothes and their occupation of pews set aside for the prosperous, involved the assertion of the value of labour in the sight of God and the absurdity of exclusion on the basis of dress or poverty. Viewed from the other side, working aprons and clogs were an affront to

⁹ An excerpt from this speech can be found in David M. Thompson, ed., *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth-Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 187–192.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹¹ Eileen Yeo, 'Christianity In Chartist Struggle 1838–1842', *Past and Present*, 91 (1981), 109.

the respectability which had become equated with godliness, while the occupation of pews was 'a gesture of menace to private property and the disruption of a carefully contrived display of social hierarchy'.¹² Commenting on the reaction of the clergy (many of whom were Evangelicals, including the formidable Francis Close of Cheltenham who thundered against socialism as 'rebellion against God' and Chartism as 'rebellion against man'), Yeo says:

The clergy could not have played their parts better had they set out to prove the Chartist case that they were wolves in sheep's clothing who legitimized oppression while pretending to speak the word of God. The setting of public confrontation was not one in which the clergy could be expected to extend an olive branch: but they went extravagantly to the opposite extreme, heaping fulsome praise on the existing social order, allowing the Chartists no shred of dignity or vestige of a case.¹³

The events of 1839 massively increased class perceptions and divisions and accelerated the alienation of working people from religious institutions which had given, or so it seemed, clear evidence of their departure from the message and example of Jesus. And it is here that Edward Miall is important: he recognized the justice of the Chartist case and understood the damage done to the cause of Christianity among working people by the reactionary behaviour of conservative churchmen. The resignation of his pastorate in the year following the great Chartist demonstrations seems to have been prompted not just by a desire to right the wrongs done to Dissenters, but by a deep concern about the growing alienation from *all* churches, Nonconformist as well as Anglican, of the *Absenters*. Miall knew perfectly well that had the Chartists chosen to enter the chapels of his own denomination, rather than the Parish churches, their reception would, in very many cases, have been little different. Congregationalism's chronic identification with the middle-class is well documented and later in the 1840s the denomination's *Year Book* can be found urging the repudiation of the barn-like meeting houses of the past and the building of churches with 'taste and

¹² *Ibid*, 132.

¹³ *Ibid*, 134. On Francis Close of Cheltenham see Nigel Scotland, 'Francis Close: "Cheltenham's Protestant Patriarch"' in *Essays in Religious Studies For Andrew Walls*, James Thrower, ed. (Aberdeen: Dept of Religious Studies, Aberdeen University, 1986), 129. Whether Close held 'the mob' spellbound (as Scotland rather disparagingly calls the Chartists) is open to doubt.

judgement' so as 'to attract, rather than repel persons of intelligence and respectability'.¹⁴ Against this background, Edward Miall's attempts, together with Sturge, Bright and others, to enter into dialogue with the leaders of Chartism in a series of conferences in Birmingham in 1842, are remarkable. It is against the same background that we can appreciate why Miall's analysis of the state of the British churches, far from being a one-sided polemic against the Establishment, involves an even-handed critique of all Evangelical religion, not least as it was manifested within his own denomination.

II. Miall's Analysis of the State of British Religion.

The British Churches in Relation To The British People grew out of a series of lectures. Miall had hoped to deliver these in the Exeter Hall in London but when the committee there caught sight of the prospectus, they took fright and refused the use of the building for this purpose. There is, Miall asserts, a general and pervasive malaise within all the churches which results, in the first place, from the thoroughly anthropocentric character of contemporary religion. Beneath all the external activity and earnestness, Miall detects motivation which is essentially pragmatic and utilitarian, rather than genuinely religious. 'I apprehend', he writes, 'that, in our reading of God's message, *man* occupies the first place in our attention, *God* a subordinate one'.¹⁵ Those who crowd the churches seem less concerned with God than with the social and practical benefits which flow from their regular appearance in his house; their concept of salvation is summed up in the phrase, 'the greatest possible happiness'. This man-centred religion was deficient not only in its lack of spiritual depth, but in its lack of moral earnestness and its failure to relate worship and belief to the whole of life. Godliness, Miall writes, is not so much a life, as a specific part of it—'a sort of inclosure railed off from the entire surface of existence . . .'.¹⁶ In modern terminology, religion was becoming *privatized* as the result of its exclusion from the concerns of daily life. Moreover, two years in advance of the 1851 Census and contrary to the widespread belief that Britain remained a profoundly religious nation, Miall warns that the churches are losing ground:

¹⁴ *The Congregational Year Book* for 1847, cited in Binfield, *op. cit.*, 165.

¹⁵ Edward Miall, *The British Churches In Relation To The British People* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, 1849), 132. Cited hereafter as *BCBP*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

Man's relation to the substantial verities of divine revelation is not changed . . . but . . . in this country at least, his susceptibility of impression by that aspect of the gospel which is . . . presented to him from the pulpit and the press is slowly but steadily lessening.¹⁷

That is to say, the churches are failing to communicate the gospel faithfully or effectively; their truncated gospel, which appeals to human self-interest rather than to the moral sympathies of men, is perceived to be irrelevant to the lives of the masses with the result, Miall says, that conversions from the world are very few. In the second half of the book Miall provides a detailed and very radical analysis of the ethical and moral failures of mid-century religion but before turning to that, I should like to notice very briefly his critique of the *theological* deficiencies of the churches. In a clear reference to the Evangelical tradition, he says that, had the paramount idea in preaching been that of 'the transcendently glorious character of God, as imaged in Jesus Christ, instead of the benefit accruing to man from the Mediatorial work', the impact on the masses would have been considerable and the present situation, in which the atmosphere was one of increasing indifference to Evangelical religion, would have been avoided.¹⁸ In addition, the churches appear to have substituted law for love as the spirit of the gospel; the Christian life has become a matter of adherence to a code of regulations and the churches are terrified of the freedom of the Gospel. In this atmosphere, zeal is a rare commodity; there is 'no exuberance of life' and prudence is elevated 'to the throne of the virtues'.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, sabbatarianism comes in for searching criticism: 'The British Churches, but especially those of Scotland, evince a strong disposition, to attack irreligion in its external manifestations, and that with weapons which do not so much as touch and therefore cannot destroy, the internal causes of it . . .'²⁰ Miall's opposition to sabbatarianism is based, not just upon his advocacy of the voluntarist principle in religion, but on the view that an enforced Sabbath involves a total misunderstanding of the nature of Christianity. The total legal enforcement of the Sabbath, he says, would do nothing to increase the amount of real religion in the country; it would be no more than 'an imposing show without any corresponding reality'. Miall's acquaintance with the realities of working-class life and his knowledge of the long hours of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

labour which millions of people were required to endure in pursuit of a bare subsistence, led him to sympathize with those who used Sunday for physical and mental relaxation. Elsewhere he says, 'Where the body is wronged by overmuch employment through the week, depend on it, it will strive to right itself on Sunday.'²¹

Perhaps Miall's most important theological critique concerns the inadequacy of the view that religion is a matter of the acceptance of certain logical propositions. He does not deny that sound theological views are important for those who find 'delight in the manifested God', but, he says, 'an eye for the divine is of greater value than an accurate perception of form or letter'. Miall's own deeply mystical experience is evident when he says that contemporary religion had grossly overvalued the *objective* side of Christianity, while disregarding its *subjective* character. Just before the dawning of an era of unprecedented religious doubt, in which the standard Evangelical apologetic was to prove woefully inadequate, Miall was already sounding a warning note and suggesting an alternative approach: '... overweening concern for what men shall believe has produced a carelessness as to the cause and character of their faith.'²²

The final chapter of *The British Churches In Relation To The British People* is concerned with 'Remedial Suggestions' and here Miall shows that his radicalism extends to the practice of evangelism. Church buildings, which, as we have seen, were assuming such enormous importance in the thinking and planning of Miall's contemporaries, were, he notes, irrelevant to the advance of primitive Christianity. We never find the founders of the Church 'at a standstill for want of chapel building'. Indeed, Miall very clearly implies that church buildings as conceived and used in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, were an *obstacle* to the Christian mission: 'We might get rid of pews—we might get rid of pulpits . . . and we might turn to useful account during the week, the edifice in which we assemble for devotion and instruction on the Lord's Day'. The suggestion that the pulpit might be dispensed with was the corollary of Miall's conviction that, in the attempt to communicate with those who were hostile to the Christian faith, it would be necessary to adopt an approach of 'a much freer character than a set of religious services implies'. He advocates open discussions with unbelievers in which all present would

²¹ *Ibid*, 356.

²² *Ibid*, 172.

have 'full liberty to ask questions, to start objections, or to speak in opposition'. This dialogical approach to evangelism would form a bridge across the gulf dividing religious people from the Absenters and it would benefit both sides by bringing Christ's disciples into closer contact with his foes.²³ We might ask whether Christians have even yet learned the importance of these issues raised by Edward Miall well over a century ago?

I come now to the central section of Miall's analysis in which he focusses attention of four features of the religion of his times which were matters of grave concern: they are the 'Aristocratic Sentiment', the 'Professional Sentiment', the 'Trade Spirit' and 'Political Religionism'.

1. *The Aristocratic Sentiment.*

Miall defines this in terms of 'value attached to a man according to the circumstances of his worldly lot'. In a striking sentence he says that a title of nobility acts like a concave mirror, 'giving back to all spectators a wonderfully magnified reflection of the most diminutive forms of wisdom, virtue or piety'. Conversely, poverty is both a calamity and a disgrace which totally eclipses the virtues and spiritual qualities of its victims in the eyes of society. Thus, rank, status, external appearance assume enormous importance in British society and the crimes which are condemned with self-righteous vehemence when found among the poor, 'lose a shade or two of their moral turpitude in exact correspondence with the elevation of the social sphere in which they become manifest'.²⁴ That such cultural snobbery is in irreconcilable conflict with the spirit of the New Testament Miall takes for granted: the sentiment which would lead us to place a high estimate on social distinctions of this kind runs directly counter to 'the beneficent purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ'. And yet, the British Churches are riddled with expressions of the aristocratic spirit to such an extent that there is little visible difference between the Church and the world in this regard.

Miall cites three lines of evidence in support of his accusation: *First*, the sympathies of the Churches are directed toward the well-to-do:

Religion, as embodied in the written word of God, and in that more emphatic living Word which 'was made flesh and dwelt among us',

²³ *Ibid.*, 422-430.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 185-186.

uniformly champions . . . the cause of the weak, the friendless, the oppressed—religion, embodied in modern organizations, preaches up the rights of the powerful, and dwells mainly upon the obligations of the powerless . . . Once her favourite occupation was to move as an angel of love and mercy among outcasts . . . and when . . . among the great, her theme of discourse was the vanity of perishable honours and possessions . . . In our day . . . she is more at home with the comfortable, than with the wretched.²⁵

Second, the enterprises of the British Churches reveal their class prejudice. It is at this point that we discover, perhaps, the reason why the doors of the Exeter Hall remained closed to Edward Miall. By mid-century the missionary movement was under attack for the apparent selectivity of its compassionate labours. In 1844, for example, *Punch* had launched a fierce assault on the 'worthy people of Exeter Hall' for whom 'distance is essential for love'. Those who crowded the Hall at the annual May Meetings, said the writer, 'require distance to see the miseries of human nature' and have 'no taste for the destitution of the alley that abuts upon their dwelling place.' With some people, *Punch* claimed, 'sympathy, like Madeira, is all the better for a sea voyage'.²⁶ While the committee of Exeter Hall could cope with criticism from this source, the following passage from Edward Miall was another matter altogether:

. . . many a man who yearns for the conversion of the heathen at the antipodes, and subscribes liberally to send the gospel among them, evinces little or no compassion for the scarcely less degraded heathen at home. Foreign missions have passed through the stage of contempt and have even reached that of fashionable patronage.²⁷

Third, the practices of the British Churches in relation to worship and teaching reflect, at every point, the influence of the aristocratic sentiment. Class distinctions are carried into the House of God and, by means of seating arrangements, qualifications for office, and the premium placed upon respectability, millions of people are alienated from insitutional religion. Again, the Exeter Hall faithful were not likely to be impressed by Miall's deliberate puncturing of their sense of pride in the part played by Evangelicals in the abolition of slavery when he comments that, while the absence of prejudice against colour meant that there were no negro pews in British Churches, '. . . we have distinct

²⁵ *Ibid*, 203–204.

²⁶ 'Exeter Hall Pets', *Punch* (1844), VI; 210.

²⁷ *BCBP*, 206–207.

places for the penniless, for we have a morbid horror of poverty'.²⁸ The consequences of this alignment between Christianity and aristocratic culture, Miall warns, are absolutely catastrophic: the poor have concluded that Christianity is simply a tool employed to keep them in subjection and degradation, with the result that the churches are as little cared for or trusted by working people as if they had no existence. Two years later Horace Mann was to confirm Miall's view on the basis of hard empirical evidence.

2. *The Professional Sentiment*

Miall repeatedly attacks ideas concerning the importance and dignity of the ministerial office which were current at this time. It is, he says, a matter of amazement that men should have come to lay such enormous stress upon 'clerical agency' when the scriptural basis for the entire system by which the clergy and laity are distinguished from each other 'is so strikingly narrow'.²⁹ He is, as we might expect, particularly severe in his criticisms of the clergy of the Church of England, three-quarters of whom, he says, are practically ignorant of the great truths of the Gospel. Oxford and Cambridge are 'schools of corruption' which year after year send forth 'legally authorised expositors of Christianity . . . imbued to the core with worldliness'.³⁰ However, Miall's strictures on the evils of clerical professionalism are very far from being partisan by nature; his own resignation from pastoral ministry was the act of a man convinced by his reading of the New Testament that the idea of the omniscient pastor was thoroughly unbiblical, and equally sure, on the basis of his knowledge of working-class attitudes toward the churches, that the general perception of ministers of religion, Congregationalist as well as Anglican, actually hardened the alienation of the poor from Christianity. In her study of the Chartist Church demonstrations of 1839, Eileen Yeo found only one instance of an incumbent being heckled; it occurred in St. Stephens Church, Norwich, when the vicar, having announced the text 'I have learned, in whatever station of life, therewith to be content', was interrupted by a number of Chartists shouting, 'You get £200 a year—Come and weave bombazines . . .'³¹ Edward Miall was a man with his

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 367.

³¹ Yeo, *Op. cit.*, 124.

ear to the ground, so that, quite apart from objections to what was called the 'sacred order of the Christian ministry' on biblical and theological grounds, he could warn clergymen that, contrary to their own estimate of their status and significance within society, they were regarded by many people as 'in the rear of the advancing age', and by others as men who prostituted religion for the sake of a secure income. It is on such grounds that Miall calls for a radical reformation of the Christian ministry and, in so doing, anticipates by over a century, emphases which we have come to take for granted concerning the proper function of the teaching ministry within the church.

3. *The Trade Spirit*

This brings us to what is the core of Miall's analysis. He says quite unequivocally that he believes the 'Trade Spirit' to be 'the greatest and most pernicious practical error of the present day'. Miall is not opposed to what would be called today 'wealth creation'; a Christian may pursue a calling in the sphere of trade when such a profession is 'ancillary to spiritual life' and 'subordinate to a dominant spiritual purpose'. By contrast, Miall claims that his Christian contemporaries enter the commercial sphere as one in which 'they are to serve themselves mainly, and their Divine Master incidentally . . .' That is to say, they have become possessed by the Trade Spirit of the age which drives people to 'pursue trade with an exclusive . . . view to the worldly advantage to be got by it—*making it its own end . . .*'³² In a nutshell, Miall's charge against the churches of his day, a charge which he repeats on page after page, is that they have allowed economic theory and practice to develop according to its own laws, *divorced from subjection to the Lordship of Christ*. Indeed, not only do the churches no longer attempt to delineate the moral principles by which economic life in general should be governed, they have also abandoned their responsibility to provide clear ethical principles for their own members engaged in commercial activities. Thus, Miall complains that in the conduct of business there is absolutely no difference between the Christian and the non-Christian; both alike conduct their affairs on the basis of principles and ideas that are the absolute antithesis of the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the business world the churches have capitulated to a thoroughly non-Christian set of principles with the result that the 'lust of speculation' is as rife among believers as among those who make no such

³² *BCBP*, 299–300. Italics added.

profession of faith. Miall deplures the fact that, as he puts it, Christians 'lay aside Christ's code of morals in their trade transactions . . .'.³³

The application of the Christian ethic to the commercial and economic realms will mean that, on the one hand, legitimate Christian callings will be pursued in conformity with the teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while, on the other hand, certain career opportunities will be ruled out-of-bounds to the believer. Money-making is not evil *per se*, but there are some ways of obtaining an income which involve inevitable disobedience to the revelation of God in Christ. Miall cites the making of armaments as an example: 'To prepare agencies the sole use of which is to scatter death, cannot be a congenial occupation to one whose fealty is pledged to the Lord of peace and life'.³⁴ Even more disastrous to the spiritual life of Christians, he says, are those methods of making money which can be described under the term 'speculation'. I should like to quote Miall at some length here, both because this appears to me to be the heart of his critique of the religion of his day, and because, as will be evident, his words are not without relevance to the debates concerning social ethics which are very much in evidence among Evangelical Christians today:

Trade is generally supposed to be a sphere in which benevolence is not to be expected . . . in theory and, to a great extent, in practice, business plans, it is contended, must be laid down and executed without taking into account what may be their probable result on the position and prospects of other parties . . . (There are) individuals who figure, perhaps, in the world's eye, as men of active benevolence, but who, in the more private walks of commercial enterprise, push their projects of money-making into any available corner, never stopping . . . to reflect that they are snatching hard-earned bread out of other people's mouths, and, perhaps, draining into their own well-filled reservoir, little streams which have been the only ones within reach of brethren who toil as hard, and deserve as well, as they do themselves.

Many a bleeding, pining, broken heart—many a shattered family circle . . . has borne witness before the merciful Ruler of all, against the desolation which has swept their hopes and prospects in consequence of the inconsiderate cupidity of the disciples of Jesus, and their exclusion of his gentleness of spirit, and kindliness of disposition, from all their transactions in secular business.³⁵

³³ *Ibid.*, 308.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 310.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 321–324.

When Miall goes on quite specifically to indict 'many men who take the lead in our religious insitutions, who give princely sums to evangelical societies' of acting, in their money-getting pursuits, upon the 'hard, inflexible, inexorable maxims of commercial economy', we understand why the fathers and brethren who kept the keys to the Exeter Hall ensured that the doors remained locked against him and his lectures.

As is evident from the passage just quoted, the evils resulting from the usurpation of the Spirit of Christ by the Trade Spirit are manifold. The attempt to combine the worship of Christ with the worship of Mammon is, as Jesus warned, the high-road to apostasy, while so public a compromise of the ethics of the Gospel creates insurmountable barriers for evangelism. Finally, there is, Miall believes, a causal conection between the acquisitiveness of unbridled capitalism and the deep poverty of those who are trapped at the bottom end of the social scale. Miall's description of these tragic people who live 'in an atmosphere of poison', anticipates the later writings of Andrew Mearns and William Booth and, like them, he warns the churches that men 'in this frightful abyss are, as a class, as much below immediate reach of the gospel, as the better tended cattle that are driven to the shambles'.³⁶

4. *Political Religionism.*

This is defined as follows:

Christianity taken under superintendence by men who . . . neither bow to its claims, nor appreciate its spirit, nor entertain even a passing care for its ends . . . the religion of love upheld by the sword . . . It is heavenly truth turned to earthly account . . . the forms, institutions, and influence of Christ's gospel, made to mount guard over crowns, coronets, titles of distinction, exclusive privileges and sources of temporal wealth.³⁷

Here we finally meet with the Miall with whom historians appear to be familiar; the founder of the Liberation Society, and the crusader in the sacred cause of disestablishment. But, although his antipathy toward 'Political Religionism' is undoubtedly very deep, even here his basic motivation is genuinely and profoundly *religious* in character. The Absenters are never far from Miall's thoughts and it is the reaction of the masses to the alliance

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 364-365.

between Christianity and elitist culture which worries him most of all. State-enforced religion creates the illusion of a Christian nation and hides the terrible realities of the situation from those who continue to enjoy the dream. In truth, Miall says, spiritual destitution is concealed 'behind the screen of baptized nominalism'. People fail to recognize the terrible shallowness of the religious life which does exist within the churches and (even more seriously) they appear to be utterly ignorant of the extent to which working people are alienated from the churches. Of the working classes, Miall says that, identifying Christianity with the nationally authorized exhibition of it, 'and taught to regard the Church Establishment as sanctioning and abetting the oppression which crushes them to the earth, their natural distaste for the solemnities of religion is irritated into a malignant hatred.'³⁸ Thus, even at this point in the analysis when he is attacking Established religion, Miall is no mere Dissenting partisan; his basic motivation is unmistakably pastoral and missiological. His most serious charge against 'political religionism' is not that it disadvantages middle-class Nonconformists but that, by misrepresenting the essential characteristics of Christ's kingdom among men, it has 'diffused throughout the country' a deep hostility toward Christianity which makes the task of home mission all but impossible.

The mention of 'home mission' leads me, finally, to note Miall's approach to the masses whose absence from the churches was soon to cause Horace Mann so much anxiety. Miall has no patience with those who 'are so perpetually urging the churches to confine all their attempts to the preaching of the gospel . . .' He describes this as a 'childish error' and insists that 'any act, whether it be prayer to God, or street-cleansing for men . . . done from a religious motive . . . is as much an offering of affectionate and faithful homage to the Saviour, as if it had taken the most spiritual form . . .'³⁹ His concept of mission is clearly *holistic*; he believes that, on the one hand, this is what is demanded of him by the Bible, while, on the other hand, he recognises that the terrible social problems in the industrialized, urban society of mid-nineteenth-century Britain were never going to be solved by the preaching of a gospel of individual salvation alone. He warns those Evangelicals who believe that a programme of chapel building and the extension of the city mission movement is the

³⁸ *Ibid*, 381.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 399.

answer to working-class irreligion, that they have not begun to appreciate the true nature of the problem. Miall realizes the part played by environmental factors and by hereditary inheritance in the so-called 'infidelity' of the poor and oppressed and he warns the churches that 'people huddled promiscuously together, and crowded . . . into filthy domiciles . . . cannot be made religious'. And he concludes,

Physical obstacles must be overcome by physical means—political obstacles by political means . . . The hindrances in the way . . . are irremovable by . . . direct religious agency as if they were geographical. We must, therefore, set ourselves to attack, in their case, not depravity by a promulgation of the gospel, but crowded dwelling houses, filthy habits . . . we must carry on our first warfare against all that unnecessarily augments the toil and penury of working men . . . and annihilate political religionism by getting rid of State establishments of religion.⁴⁰

III. Lessons From Edward Miall For Today

The conclusions to be drawn from this study are many; here I limit myself to the brief mention of four:

First, Edward Miall is a reminder of the existence of a tradition which might be called 'Radical Evangelicalism' which can be identified and traced in various ways throughout the nineteenth-century. The impression is sometimes given, not least by Evangelicals themselves, that the Evangelical movement was a unified, homogeneous tradition. Sometimes it is argued that the term itself should be confined to 'those members of the Anglican Church who assented to a group of doctrines . . . commonly denominated evangelical'.⁴¹ Such narrow definitions appear to obscure the fact of the varieties of Evangelical religion; just as Methodism was split by the emergence of class divisions into competing groups, all claiming to be the inheritors of the true Wesleyan tradition, so also we can speak of a variety of *evangelicalisms* in nineteenth-century Britain. Edward Miall stands at the opposite end of the Evangelical spectrum from the tradition associated with the names of Simeon and Wilberforce. Yet for him, as for them, the experience of conversion and the recognition that the true locus of religion is in the heart of man,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁴¹ Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart—Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 16–17.

was absolutely fundamental. Yet Miall reminds us that the consequences of Evangelical conversion can be manifested in very different ways and that not all nineteenth-century Evangelicals saw their religion as providing the social cement which would hold together a hierarchical state.

Second, Miall's analysis of the condition of the British churches at the mid-point in the century has a bearing on our understanding of the process of *secularization*. This is a notoriously difficult concept, yet if Miall is to be believed in his pessimistic account of the real state of religion at this time, then he casts serious doubt on those descriptions of secularization which chart a linear progression from a pervasively religious culture to one in which religion ceases to have any real significance. For example, Alan Gilbert's *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* purports to be, as its title suggests, a history of the secularization of modern society. Relying upon classic secularization theorists like Bryan Wilson, Gilbert's is very much a before-and-after story; once society was religious, now it is secular. In the course of his argument Gilbert claims that the decline of sabbatarianism in the late Victorian period 'both signified and hastened an erosion of religious commitment in the society'.⁴² *But did it?* Not if Miall's strictures on Sabbatarianism are to be accepted; the importance placed upon the special observance of Sunday as a Sabbath Day, far from being evidence of a profoundly religious society, was, on this reading, a mere screen which concealed the secularization of Victorian religion. For Miall very much of the religion of his day came under the description of 'the religion of Christ secularized'; judged by the standard of primitive Christianity, he believed that institutionalized religion was responsible for the most radical perversion of the Gospel of Christ. If we accept Miall's verdict, then we simply cannot construct a simple theory of secularization which sees in the collapse of Victorian religiosity evidence that modernization spells the decline and death of religious life.

Third, Miall's profound insights into the causes of the general malaise afflicting the churches in his time are not without relevance to some of the debates occurring within the modern Evangelical constituency. In particular, at a time when a resurgent Evangelicalism is being woed by those who, recognizing the ideological crisis confronting capitalism, seek for a *religious* justification of the market economy, Miall's description

⁴² Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making Of Post-Christian Britain* (London/New York: Longmans, 1980), 95.

of the consequences of the churches' surrender to the 'Trade Spirit' should give us pause for thought. Were Evangelicals to accept uncritically the view, recently expressed by Brian Griffiths, that they must prise capitalism away from the secular ideology which gave it birth and provide it with 'a distinctively Christian ideology', they would surely be demonstrating the fact that history has taught them nothing at all.⁴³

Fourthly, this study suggests that the time has come for a re-evaluation of the position of Edward Miall within the history of nineteenth-century British religion. In 1966 Iain Murray gave us *The Forgotten Spurgeon*; we need, I suggest, a similar title devoted to Miall. I hope that this paper has at least made it clear that Edward Miall deserves to be remembered as something more than a mere 'politician'.

⁴³ Brian Griffiths, *The Creation of Wealth* (London: Hodder, 1984), 112.