
A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

REVIEWS

The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics 1870-1914 by D. W. Bebbington. Allen & Unwin 1982. pp.193. £10.00.

Dr Bebbington's interesting book fills a serious gap in the study of recent church history. The Nonconformist Conscience has often been invoked, briefly examined, employed for the sake of argument, and then dismissed; no one has examined the label very closely, and not much has been written about Chapel and Politics in this period, apart from Robert Moore's *Pitmen, Preacher and Politics* (1974), a brilliant work on Methodism in a Durham mining community, and Stephen Yeo's *Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis* (1976), which concentrates, still more narrowly, on the town of Reading between 1890 and 1914. Both Moore and Yeo concern themselves with small local groups involved in local politics; Moore, by extending his book into the 1920s, was able to show the disintegration of the pre-1914 Nonconformist pattern.

Dr Bebbington, however, looks at Chapel and Politics largely in national terms. His principal themes are the Nonconformist quest for civil and religious equality; the social gospel movement, which is often what people mean when they talk about the "Conscience"; the growth of the Free Church Council, which seemed very important about 1906 and then collapsed as a serious political and religious institution; Nonconformist attitudes to Ireland, then as now England's unsolved problem of conscience; international policy; and, of course, education, the area in which Nonconformity sadly over-estimated its strength. He has worked hard at the sources, but he would no doubt echo his most relevant predecessor at the national level, Stephen Koss, who lamented in his not very illuminating *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics* (1975), that in case after case the private papers of leading Nonconformist political ministers no longer seemed to exist. Dr Bebbington has made good use of many printed sources, especially the *British Weekly* and the *Christian World*, and offers much useful information on Nonconformist political activities. He observes, correctly, the rapid decline of distinctively Nonconformist politics after 1914, and explains this partly in terms of the rise of the Labour Party, and partly in terms of a Nonconformist recognition that political campaigning was secularising the chapels without producing much political result. His book will do good if it finally convinces an older generation that Nonconformist political involvement, whether one attributes it to the "Nonconformist Conscience" or not, achieved little outside the peculiar sphere of Dissenting disabilities, where wider social opinion conceded that the Chapels had a good case.

That brings us back, however, to the "Conscience" itself. Dr Bebbington has his own definition. The "Conscience" he says had three convictions. First, that religion should have political implications; second, that politicians should be men of high moral tone; and third, that legislation could improve the character of the nation. The themes are well-taken, though I do not quite see why Dr Bebbington finds it puzzling that in the later 19th century Nonconformists should have turned to the State for a remedy against social evils, when in the earlier part of the century they had put so much moral capital into voluntary effort. Both

the scale and the goal of social programmes changed as the century progressed, to the point where greater state action became widely accepted, and Dr Bebbington perhaps exaggerates the extent to which Nonconformists were still able to choose voluntaryism by 1900.

At this point I think that one might part company with Dr Bebbington. He says that in recent years the Nonconformist Conscience has been interpreted as a consequence of the broadening of the intellectual horizons of the chapels, or as a quest for increased political power to match rising social aspirations. He does not accept these suggestions, but answers that "it would be wrong to suggest that Nonconformity was lured into deserting its Evangelical tradition for the sake of new ideas or new social status in the years before the First World War. The politics of the chapels were primarily determined by the Evangelicalism that still gave them their reasons for existence, their message, their energy". This leaves him in the slightly unsatisfactory position of wanting to attribute the "Conscience" to residual Evangelicalism (and I would not want to deny it a role) while saying that the Chapels abandoned political campaigning because it was secularising the Nonconformist community.

As one of those who takes a more "sociological" view of the Conscience, I would not want to say that Nonconformists deserted Evangelicalism for the sake of new social status. I would argue instead that it was their steady acquisition of new social, political and economic status from about the middle of the 19th century which led to a temporary explosion of what I have called "social aggression" by the Nonconformist middle-class groups, especially after the success in the 1880s of the struggle to abolish the Contagious Diseases Acts. Some Nonconformists promoted their own social choices to the level of moral judgements and then tried to impose the resulting way of life on both the working-classes and the aristocracy. This willingness to impose a way of life partly explains the shift to state action which Dr Bebbington finds surprising: it was hardly probable that public-houses could be shut on Sundays with working-class consent. This social aggression deprived the Nonconformists of the working class support which they might have found otherwise, and helped the rise of the Labour Party, which had a different set of moral values, traceable to the Enlightenment rather than to Christianity. The success of the campaign against the Dissenting Disabilities dissolved the vital cement of Nonconformity, loyalty to a persecuted minority. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that by 1914 the Conscience, which itself ran wider than Dissent as such, was running short of Nonconformist support.

Dr Bebbington is to be congratulated on this contribution to modern church history, which one hopes will stimulate further research into the history of modern British Nonconformity.

JOHN KENT

Bishop Fell and Nonconformity: Visitation Documents from the Oxford Diocese, 1682-83. Edited by Mary Clapinson. Oxfordshire Record Society Volume 52, 1980. pp.xli, 93.

This volume contains three sets of documents: (1) Letters to Bishop Fell from Oxfordshire Incumbents in the year 1682 (2) Fell's Queries to his clergy and his Archdeacon's replies for the same year and (3) The Archdeacon's List of Dissenters for the following year. These are published with copious scholarly annotations together with a 30 page introduction, and reprinting of the Conventicle Returns of 1669 for the County and Diocese of Oxford and indices of person, place and subject. Of Fell, Burnet recorded that he was "a little too much heated in the matter of our disputes with the dissenters", as he dealt with both the legacy of the evangelism of Cromwell's soldiers as well as of a large number of ejections in 1662. Although Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions records do not survive before 1687, there are records from nonconformists themselves of harassment from the officers of the established church including Josiah Diston of Chipping Norton's manuscript account of Baptist sufferings of 1707 used by Crosby in the writing of his history (II, p.258). The records now published by the Oxfordshire Record Society supplement that source by giving fairly precise statistical information about dissenting and Baptist congregations in Oxfordshire which is most welcome.

Fell, for his part, saw the need, positively to complement penal action by attracting able men to occupy the strategic pulpits of his diocese. In the context of the growth of the exclusion party in the early 1680s, Fell renewed his attempts not only to discover the extent of dissent but if possible to win moderate men back to the established church. Fell's charge for 1682, although not surviving, is echoed by Henry Gregory, rector of Middleton Stoney, in his reply, which speaks of conferring and discoursing with dissenters about the nature of their dissent and "to endeavour by whatsoever powerfull arguments to persuade and reduce them to a conformity with the set lawes". In response to this enquiry 35 letters survive; at the same time the bishop began his "Diocese Book" (MS Oxf. Dioc. d708) which amidst other information included a list of dissenters, recusants and absentees.

Though a limited number of incumbents were hopeful of wooing dissenters back to the church, attitudes on both sides were becoming increasingly entrenched. On the other hand the fear that conventicles were the seed beds of political revolution proved unfounded and a new generation of clergy became more concerned about "neglecters" than dissenters - whilst that self-made neglect made its impact on dissent as well as on the established church.

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