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Sidelights upon the Eighteenth Century Clergy.

MANY and interesting have been the attempts made of late to gauge the value and depth of eighteenth-century religion. The subject is a fascinating one; not only because all Church history is fascinating, but also because this particular century is especially full of problems which allure the student to further research.

The eighteenth century, by general acknowledgment, was one of deep spiritual lethargy; yet from it sprang, in the power of the Spirit, such men as John Wesley and the leaders of the Evangelical Revival. It was confessedly an age of place-hunting and administrative scandals; yet from it sprang such unselfish saints as Bishop Wilson of the Isle of Man, William Law, and Hannah Fry. It was confessedly an age of sloth; yet it produced such intellectual workmen as George Berkeley and Joseph Butler, and it saw such movements as the founding of Sunday and weekday schools and the development of missionary societies.

The obvious truth is that the century was an epoch in which irreligion, vice, and ignorance were rampant, and were condoned and encouraged by sloth and lack of spirituality in the Church's leaders; and that yet, in spite of all this, God left Himself not without witness that His Spirit still dwelt within His spiritual household, to keep alive the inner flame until it should be kindled to a steady fire.

All this—both the lethargy of the Church and its inner power of survival and recuperation—might be amply proved from the abundant literature of that literary age. Not one volume, but many, might be filled with interesting and vivid extracts to show that the Spirit was not wholly quenched in an era of place-hunting, pluralism, unspirituality, and decay. From the great literary output of the time—the letters, pamphlets, poems, histories, and philosophies, of its greater and lesser writers alike—a flood of light is poured upon this page of Church history.

My own humble purpose in this paper is to ask you, reader, to stroll with me through my poor library, and, from what few books of the time rest upon its shelves, notice a few sidelights upon one phase only of eighteenth century religion—namely, the religious condition of the clergy. We will not be rash enough to build up any important assumption upon the very partial evidence which my scanty shelves afford. Even if the volumes were far more numerous than they are, it would be unfair to judge the religion of any age from contemporary books. (One would be very sorry, for instance, that in a future age the work of the Church to-day should be judged from allusions made to it in passing literature!)

But though we cannot from a hasty visit to a meagre library draw a fancy picture of the religion of the times, we shall find enough evidence to cast a sidelight, so to speak, upon those two main ideas which are acknowledged on all hands—namely, the unspirituality of the Church of the time and—in contrast—its reserve of spiritual power.

Let us begin by looking at the darker side of the picture. It is not far to find.

First of all, we get glimpses of the lack of spirituality in clergy of all ranks. This was doubtless less marked in the early years of the century, but it became more prominent under the Georges, when preferment was due to political influence and to success in place-hunting rather than to pastoral efficiency or spiritual work. Under the Hanoverian Bishops (themselves neglectful, for the most part, of their pastoral office) the priests who maintained a high standard were not the men who attained dignity and preferment.

In a little apology for episcopacy and definite Church principles which is entitled "The Scourge," and bears the date of 1717, the notorious Bishop Hoadley comes in for frequent "scourging"! This typical prelate combined the broadest latitudinarian views with the most negligent practices, being Bishop of Bangor for six years, during which time he seems

not once to have visited his diocese! This divine had fully developed the eighteenth-century fear of "enthusiasm," and had taught that "prayer is an address calm and undisturbed, without any Heat, or Flame, or Vehemence, or Importunity." Accordingly, "The Scourge" (which appealed for more reality in religion, and probably would represent the feelings of many devout Churchmen) has a skit upon the kind of prayers which Churchmen of the time (under such episcopal guidance) might be expected to offer!

A FORM TO BE SAID OVER A DISH OF TEA OR PLAYING WITH A LAP-DOG.

Be in a Good Humour.
Hang your Head Carelessly on one side.
Rub one eye;

Then the other.
Yawn.
Stretch.
Call for your Shoes and the Tea-Kettle.

Tye your Garters.

O give me Grace, it is Grace I want; Grant me a City House and a Country House. May I always live Absolutely and Properly, in such a Manner, and to such a Degree. May my Lot fall in the Southernly Parts of Great-Britain where the Air is moderate; and may I never be forced (God bless his Royal Highness) into the Principality of North Wales. I confess I am unworthy of these Blessings, and so I have always been. Let me always escape my deserts, and give me what I do not deserve, for the sake of my self, my Wife and Children. Amen.

The writer concludes with a special prayer "For the Bishops, to be said going to Bed, about Midnight," during which it is (somewhat unkindly) suggested that they should "doze and nodd" and "have a care of falling upon their knees." I need not comment upon the good taste, or otherwise, of such a skit as this, for my readers will know how much taste in these matters has altered in two hundred years; but it is surely significant that such a criticism should be penned, not upon the political views of a Bishop or upon his innovations in organization, but upon his lack of spirituality. If the Bishops were confessedly men who disparaged fervour in prayer, is it likely that parish priests would teach their people to pray?

Turning to more classical writers, it is probably in Cowper's Poems that we find the most mordant criticism of clerical worldliness. It is true that the Evangelical poet sometimes

finds worldliness where we should find none, and that we must make allowance for the natural exaggeration of satire. But, even so, he draws very unpleasant pictures of clerical foibles and characteristics. Here, for instance, we have his condemnation of the hunting parson:

> "Oh, laugh and mourn with me the rueful jest,
> A cassock'd huntsman and a fiddling priest!
> He from Italian songsters takes his cue:
> Set Paul to music, he shall quote him too.
> He takes the field. The master of the pack
> Cries, 'Well done, saint!' and claps him on the back.
> Is this the path to sanctity? Is this
> To stand a way-mark in the road to bliss?
> Himself a wanderer from the narrow way,
> His silly sheep, what wonder if they stray?
> Go, cast your orders at your bishop's feet,
> Send your dishonour'd gown to Monmouth-street!
> The sacred function in your hands is made—
> Sad—sacrilege!—no function, but a trade!"

And here the "fiddling" priest is condemned:

> "Occiduus is a pastor of renown,
> When he has pray'd and preach'd the Sabbath down,
> With wire and catgut he concludes the day,
> Quav'ring and semiquav'ring care away.
> The full concerto swells upon your ear;
> All elbows shake. Look in, and you would swear
> The Babylonian tyrant with a nod
> Had summon'd them to serve his golden god.
> So well that thought th' employment seems to suit,
> Psalt'ry and sackbut, dulcimer and flute.
> O fie! 'tis evangelical and pure!
> Observe each face, how sober and demure!
> Ecstasy sets her stamp on every mien;
> Chins fall'n, and not an eyeball to be seen.
> Still I insist, though music heretofore
> Has charm'd me much (not e'en Occiduus more),
> Love, joy, and peace, make harmony more meet
> For Sabbath ev'nings, and perhaps more sweet.
> Will not the sickliest sheep of ev'ry flock
> Resort to this example as a rock;
> There stand, and justify the fair abuse
> Of Sabbath hours with plausible excuse?
> If apostolic gravity be free
> To play the fool on Sundays, why not we?

If he the tinkling harpsichord regards
As inoffensive, what offence in cards?
Strike up the fiddles, let us all be gay!
Laymen have leave to dance, if parsons play."

In still sterner language Cowper rebukes the frivolous priest:

"Loose in morals, and in manners vain,
In conversation frivolous, in dress
Extreme, at once rapacious and profuse;
Frequent in park with lady at his side,
Ambling and prattling scandal as he goes;
But rare at home, and never at his books,
Or with his pen, save when he scrawls a card;
Constant at routs, familiar with a round
Of ladyships, a stranger to the poor;
Ambitious of preferment for its gold,
And well prepared, by ignorance and sloth,
By infidelity and love of world,
To make God's work a sinecure; a slave
To his own pleasures and his patron's pride.
From such apostles, oh ye mitred heads,
Preserve the Church! and lay not careless hands
On souls that cannot teach and will not learn."

Probably sloth, rather than actual vice, was the cause of such degeneration. A dull atmosphere of sloth seems, like some pestilential miasma, to have settled down upon the Church, and paralyzed the spiritual functions of the priesthood:

"The plump convivial parson often bears
The magisterial sword in vain, and lays
His reverence and his worship both to rest
On the same cushion of habitual sloth."

Bishop Burnet, delivering in his seventieth year his last thoughts on the pastoral office, describes the Ember weeks as his "burthen and grief," because "the much greater part of those who come to be ordained are ignorant of the plainest part of the Scriptures," and "the case is not much better in many who come for institution."

"Clamours of scandal, in any of the clergy, are not frequent, God be thanked for it! But a remiss, unthinking course of life, with little or no application to study, and the bare performing of that which, if not done, would draw censures, when complained of, without ever pursuing the duties

of the pastoral care in any suitable degree, is but too common, as well as too evident."

In one of his letters Cowper gives a truly awful picture of the ruined state of many country churches (contrasting pitiably with the excellent repair of the parsonages) and, worse still, of "the indecency of worship" in the Church services. He draws a vivid picture of the parson in a surplice "as dirty as a farmer's frock," of young people in the congregation making posies in summer and cracking nuts in autumn, of the officiant and congregation waiting for the squire's arrival, of the rivalry of dress in the female portion of the flock, and of a whispering and tittering which rendered the parson "totally unintelligible." Surely—even when we allow for some exaggeration—there could hardly be a more mordant sketch of parochial stagnation born of the sloth of a careless shepherd.

In his "Tirocinium" the same writer draws an equally sad picture of the priest who by toadying to noblemen successfully climbs the ladder to episcopacy. The whole literature of the times takes it for granted that a young man is a fool who "enters the Church" without first securing a patron to advance his interests. George Crabbe is only one of many writers when he tells in his "Tales" of a young man whose intention to take holy orders depended upon his hopes of future preferment. The young man in question is waiting for the "patron's" reply:

> "The same servant, by his lord's command,
> A paper offered to his trembling hand:
> 'No more!' he cried: 'disdains he to afford
> One kind expression, one consoling word?'
> With troubled spirit he began to read
> That 'In the Church my lord could not succeed';
> Who had 'to peers of either kind applied,
> And was with dignity and grace denied;
> While his own livings were by men possessed
> Not likely in their chancels yet to rest;
> And therefore, all things weighed (as he, my lord,
> Had done maturely, and he pledged his word),
> Wisdom it seemed for John to turn his view
> To busier scenes, and bid the Church adieu!'"

Crabbe only breathes the atmosphere of the age when he describes this resolution to abandon entering Holy Orders as "bidding farewell to honour *and to ease*."

The natural result of this worldliness was reflected in the attitude of the laity, who learnt to respect the priest less for his office than for any temporal success which he might have acquired. The "lower" members of the clerical profession were despised, and often insulted. Perhaps those who had to endure most contumely were private chaplains, or "mess-chaplains," as they were called from their duty of saying grace for their patrons before meals. These men were treated often as upper servants. Cowper describes such a one as being questioned by army officers at dinner, but carefully refusing to commit himself to any definite opinion which might give offence :

> "Sir Smug, he cries (for lowest at the board—
> Just made fifth chaplain of his patron lord,
> His shoulders witnessing by many a shrug
> How much his feelings suffer'd—sat Sir Smug),
> Your office is to winnow false from true ;
> Come, prophet, drink, and tell us—What think you ?
> Sighing and smiling as he takes his glass,
> Which they that woo preferment rarely pass,
> Fallible man—the church-bred youth replies—
> Is still found fallible, however wise ;
> And diff'ring judgments serve but to declare
> That truth lies somewhere, if we knew but where.
> Of all it ever was my lot to read,
> Of critics now alive, or long since dead,
> The book of all the world that charm'd me most
> Was—well-a-day, the title page was lost !"

The younger Calamy, in his autobiography, says that Scotch families of distinction treated their chaplains "but indifferently, and the poor Mess-Johns were so kept down in several wealthy families, that they hardly dare venture to say their souls are their own." Addison makes a private chaplain say, "For not offering to rise at the second course, I found my patron and his lady very sullen and out of humour" ; and again, "As I still continued to sit out the last course, I was yesterday informed by the butler that his lordship had no farther occasion for my

service." An Archbishop of Canterbury, at his annual dinner to the Privy Council, expected his chaplain to come in to say grace and to retire immediately, coming in again for the same purpose at the end of the meal! A *Guardian* of 1713 makes a correspondent say:

"I have had the honour many years of being chaplain to a noble family, and of being counted the highest servant in the house, either out of respect to my cloth, or because I lie in the uppermost garret. Now my young Lord is come to the estate, I find I am looked upon as a *censor morum*, and suffered to retire constantly, with 'prosperity to the Church' in my mouth. I have, with much ado, maintained my post hitherto at the dessert, and every day eat tart in the face of my patron; but the servants begin to brush very familiarly by me, and thrust aside my chair when they set the sweetmeats on the table."

Assistant curates were hardly treated better or esteemed more highly. Cowper speaks of the curate enjoying sweet sleep in church while his "tedious rector is drawling o'er his head," though such words are as much a disparagement of the rector as of the curate. In a letter already quoted the same writer says: "It is a difficult matter to decide which is looked upon as the greatest man in a country church, the parson or his clerk. The latter is most certainly held in higher veneration where the former happens to be only a poor curate, who rides post every Sabbath from village to village and mounts and dismounts at the church door."

Side by side with the degradation of the lower clergy was contrasted the splendour and pride of dignitaries, so that the poet could say with irony "humility *may* clothe an English dean"!

A volume of "Swift's Letters" (picked up at a secondhand bookstall for a penny) gives but few glimpses into contemporary clerical life. It is indeed amazing, though doubtless characteristic of the times, how little the good Dean and his correspondents (who include Pope, Gay, and Lord Bolingbroke) are interested in religious questions at all. Swift himself seldom mentions religion, and clergy only when patronage or authorship is afoot. What he does say, however, is characteristic enough:

"P * * * is *fort chancellant* whether he shall turn Parson or no. But all employments here are engaged or in reversion. Cast Wits and cast Beaux have a proper sanctuary in the church; yet we think it a severe judgment that a fine gentleman, and so much the finer for hating Ecclesiastics, should be a humble domestic retainer to an Irish Prelate."

In another letter Swift urges a correspondent to become subscriber to a Mr. Westley's "Commentary on the Book of Job," and to push its sale among the clergy—"Bishops excepted, of whom there is no hope." And in another he writes of a curious person:

"I forgot to tell you that the Scheme of paying Debts by a Tax on Vices is not one Syllable mine, but of a young Clergy-man whom I countenance; he told me it was built upon a passage in Gulliver, where a Projector hath something upon the same Thought. This young Man is the most hopeful we have: a book of his Poems was printed in London; Dr. D—— is one of his Patrons; he is marry'd and has children, and makes up about £100 a year, on which he lives decently."

In this same volume of letters the poet Gay writes wittily, if disrespectfully, of the clerical love of good fare: "You tell us your Wine is bad, and that the Clergy do not frequent your house, which we look upon as tautology. The best advice we can give you is to make them a present of your wine, and come away to better." Pope writes pessimistically of all organized religion:

"The Church of Rome I judge (from many modern symptoms, as well as ancient prophecies) to be in a declining condition; that of England will in a short time be scarce able to maintain her own family: so Churches sink as generally as Banks in Europe, and for the same reason; that Religion and Trade, which at first were open and free, have been reduced into the management of Companies, and the Roguery of Directors."

In a volume of the *Oxford Magazine* for 1770 (a publication for "General Instruction and Amusement") we find that "the full dress of a clergyman consists of his gown, cassock, scarf, beaver-hat, and rose, all of black; his undress is a dark grey frock, and plain linen." In an article upon the religious and moral condition of the time, this journal inveighs bitterly against the clergy for not enforcing the day of rest (though the writer does not say *how* it could be enforced), and goes on:

"The first principle of our government then is evidently relaxed; and can we wonder at the consequences—if the mitred priest, who owes his high

dignity and all his temporal advantages to the supposed necessity of having such an order of men in the state, forgets the very end of his institution, is ungrateful to his God; and instead of endeavouring to reform mankind, and to enforce religious ordinances, is on that very day engaged in all the dirty schemes of court politics, soliciting for places and pensions for himself and friends—aiding to forge letters for his fellow-subjects—or mingling in a revel rout assembled at the house of some lady of quality—shall we wonder that the inferior priesthood follow such examples?"

That there was ground for this complaint is seen from the fact that George III. felt himself obliged to write a severe letter to Archbishop Cornwallis for holding "routs" at Lambeth Palace on Sundays as well as weekdays. The journalist makes an even graver charge, accusing the clergy of condoning the fashionable vice of adultery in an age when almost all leading men of politics and fashion ignored the marriage vow. "Here, again," he says,

"we have reason to complain of the conduct of our priesthood, who are grown so complaisant to this fashionable vice, that the wholesome discipline of the church is totally laid aside; and an avowed adulteress may appear at church and partake of the common rites of our religion with as little ceremony as she may gain readmittance to all the polite circles of gay society, after the towntalk has a little subsided. . . . Our gracious Sovereign, who is an example of piety and chastity, should be intreated by the magistracy, the proper officers of the civil Police, to order the Archbishops and Bishops to exhort their clergy in their several dioceses to set forth in their sermons this heinous offence in its proper light: a pastoral letter and visitation sermons from the Bishops on such subjects would much better become them, than such wretched political declamations as those lately delivered from the pulpit by Dr. Newton, Bishop of Bristol, at the last visitation of his diocese."

After giving details of notorious cases, in which highly placed clergy had connived at divorce and remarriage, he continues:

"Since our upright and conscientious clergy pay no attention to the New Testament in this important particular, how can they expect the people should pay any regard to them, or the gospel—no wonder that the order of the priesthood is more and more despised every day, and gospel truth obliged to give way to deistical opinions."

G. Lacey May.

(*To be concluded.*)