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EVANGELICALS, THE ECONOMY AND POVERTY

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Introduction

Christians are united in their recognition that poverty dishonours the image of God in humanity. However, there is disagreement amongst Christians regarding both the *source* of poverty and the *solutions*. This variety in opinion occurs both *within* and *between* Christian traditions and denominations.

Roman Catholicism, mainly through its tradition of natural law, has generally held a positive view of human activity in the economic realm. However, that is not to say this has been uncontested territory. Michael Novak, in his 1991 book, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism,* wrote the following:

> 'Of all the systems of political economy which have shaped our history, none has so revolutionized ordinary expectations of human life – lengthened the life span, made the elimination of poverty and famine thinkable, enlarged the range of human choice – as democratic capitalism.'[1]

A clear *apologia* for the market economy. However, with the election of Pope Francis in 2013 and his explicitly declared intent to be a 'pope for the poor,' any debate on economics or commerce must engage with its practical consequences for the well-being of the world's poorest and indeed be seen to be for the common good rather than self-interest, even enlightened self-interest. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium,* published in November 2013, Pope Francis was highly critical of certain aspects of the market economy. He argued that those who trust in economic growth and the 'trickle-down' theory express 'a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system.'[2]

The Protestant tradition has thought less about economic affairs. This is true even in North America where the tradition is characterised, one the one side, by an uncritical adoption of the free market, and on the other, by a naïve acceptance of the apparent benefits of socialism. Discipleship at work and self-help courses proliferate on the one side and an anti-consumption communitarianism on the other. In the United Kingdom, the prevailing thought is that of the Left. Although both Calvin and Luther had concern for the relief of poverty and Calvinism has led to the grand (but greatly over-stated) meta-narrative of Protestant individualism leading to the famous 'work-ethic,' there

[1] Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism,* 1991 revised edition, page 13
[2] *Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraph 54

has been much less thought given to economic systems and their role in God's economy.

Evangelicalism, which is a particular expression of Protestantism, has its roots in the Reformation but refers in particular to the development of forms of piety and doctrine that grew out from revival in the English speaking lands of America, Great Britain and parts of northern Europe in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Evangelicalism tends to be characterised by an emphasis upon the bible and its authority, the means of salvation through faith alone, and a passion for the spread of the gospel. There is a renewed urgency about the gospel and an expectancy of God's action. No Christian tradition has developed in isolation from its cultural setting (despite claims to the contrary). Both Catholicism and Protestantism, including its evangelical expression, have shaped and been shaped by the cultures in which they have been set or emerged.[3]

Much Protestant thinking on the economy has been dominated by the same critique as offered in *Evangelii Gaudium.* There have been regular calls for less consumption, criticism of economic growth, demands for redistribution of income and for systems of international taxation. The analysis has often been weak – both theologically and economically - and few of the faithful persuaded.

Unfortunately for its proponents zero, or insignificant, economic growth undermines the very basis of their own analysis of world need. A lack of growth will mean falling incomes, falling employment and indeed, even for the most dedicated socialist, a falling tax base. If redistributive taxation leads to wasteful and excessive government expenditure, or does not in fact enhance fairness and opportunity, but stifles the very innovation and enterprise which can lead to growth, employment and increased national income, then perhaps there is a better moral case for a campaign against excessive and ineffective taxation rather than in favour of it? The point is how the redistributive tradition makes assumptions about its superiority which are open to serious challenge. That is not to say, of course, that there is no debate to be had.

So, many of the themes in both Catholic and Protestant traditions resound in the same way.

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[3] For a description of evangelicalism and its influence, see Richard Turnbull, *Anglican and Evangelical?,* Bloomsbury-Continuum, 2007, (reprinted 2010), David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain,* new edition, Routledge, 1988, Richard Turnbull, *Reviving the Heart,* Lion Hudson, 2012 and Richard Turnbull, *A Passionate Faith,* Monarch, 2012.

Is it possible to reconcile a belief in an enterprise-based market economy to an equal concern for justice and the reduction of poverty without high government spending, excessive taxation and restrictive economic policies?

In this paper we will look in particular at how, historically, the evangelical tradition handled questions of economics, commerce and poverty. In essence we will see that there was some correspondence between 'natural theology' and the 'market-economy,' akin to the natural law tradition within Catholicism, but due to the evangelical emphasis upon sin there were dissenting voices especially in popular preaching. The consequence of this was, rather than a natural law meta-narrative, an emphasis on spirituality and discipleship within the economic and commercial activities of humanity.

In respect of the response to poverty there were a variety of responses ranging from a *laissez faire* approach to more interventionist stances. However, the principle policy prescription was that of the essential role of an intermediary organisation – the voluntary society. It was primarily through these societies that evangelical Christians in nineteenth century Britain sought to relieve poverty. They recognised that government did have a role to play in ensuring the protection of the most vulnerable, but they adopted this 'voluntary principle' as a way of bringing together philanthropy and need on a more personal basis. The 'projects' harnessed in support of reducing poverty ranged from savings banks to microfinance initiatives.

The prime example of an exponent of this approach is an English aristocrat, born in 1801, elected to Parliament in 1826, and serving, almost continuously, in either the lower or the upper house of the British Parliament. His name was Anthony Ashley Cooper and he became the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury upon his father's death in 1851. He is commemorated today by a statue in Piccadilly Circus in central London; in the mid nineteenth century that same area housed one of the most extensive slums in London. Crime, alcohol abuse, criminality, prostitution and appalling housing conditions were the hallmark of the area.[4]

This paper brings all of these emphases together in order to reflect historically on evangelicals, economics and poverty in order to help Christians of all denominations understand more fully the role which we are to play in the commercial world.

[4] For the most recent biography of Shaftesbury, see Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury, the great reformer,* Lion Hudson, 2010. This is available through the office of the UNIAPAC Foundation for €10 including postage.

Evangelicals and the 'invisible hand'

The history of economics and commerce is as complex as that of theology. There is, however, a link which historically was explicit. In order to understand it, at least from the point of view of the evangelical tradition we need to enlist the help of both Adam Smith[5] and John Calvin[6].

The publication in 1776 by Adam Smith of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* marked the origin of the modern investigation of the science of economics. The work has been described as 'the fountainhead of classical economics."'[7] Smith's model was basic; essentially an agrarian economy based on corn. However, through this he defined the essential concepts of a market economic model - value, price, cost and exchange. His model was also essentially one of growth. Importantly, due to the operation of the market Smith also advocated a minimalist approach to government intervention in the workings of the market.[8] It is easy to see the origins of free economic thought and indeed the potential debates over the implications for policy, though the full-working out of these ideas lay some way ahead. Two ideas lay at the heart of *Wealth of Nations.*

The first of these was the division of labour. In essence, Smith built a model for growth in a corn-based economy upon the idea of the productivity of a specialised labour force.[9] He also divided labour into two further categories. Productive labour was deployed in the production and manufacture of goods. Unproductive labour included

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[5] Adam Smith (1723-1790) was a Scottish moral philosopher and economist who developed the early theoretical foundations of modern economic thought. His religious views are contested, although he most easily fits into the model of many Enlightenment thinkers as a deist – that is, a believer in some overarching divine force rather than a personal deity.

[6] John Calvin (1509 – 1564) was the leading thinker of the second generation of Protestant Reformers. He was based in Geneva for most of his life and his great work, which went through several editions, was *The Institutes of the Christian Religion.*

[7] B.A. Corry, *Money, Saving and Investment in English Economics 1800-1850,* London, 1962, page 1

[8] E.L. Paul, *Moral Revolution and Economic Science,* Westport, Connecticut, 1979, page 5

[9] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,* 3rd edition, London, 1812, page 19

not only the clergy (for which there was, regrettably, more than ample evidence) but also, more significantly, the government.

The second idea was the paradox of the free, competitive market. The market assumed that individuals would make decisions based upon their own self-interest. Indeed, individuals were essentially selfish (rationality and selfishness are not incompatible). The strange thing was that this self-centredness resulted in an overall greater public good. How was this possible?

Smith's economic thought, as expressed in the *Wealth of Nations,* actually built upon his philosophical views set out in his earlier work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). According to Smith man was composed of three sets of motives, self-love and sympathy, freedom and propriety and labour and exchange. In applying these ideas to economic activity, he assumed a natural propensity to barter together with an essential selfishness in humanity. This then led on to the paradox already mentioned that the effect of this economic mechanism is to bring about, not only the satisfaction of others, but indeed the welfare of all, by each serving their own interests. In this way a greater public good is achieved.

It does not take much insight to realise that this economic model contains both great richness as well as both economic and moral peril. The concept builds upon man's natural instincts, both positive and negative. The idea that these characteristics combined to efficiently allocate resources and achieve a public good came to be seen as providential; this invisible hand was that of God.

However, what were the consequences of the model as wealth was created and resources efficiently allocated? What about not only those whose economic wants were not satisfied, but whose welfare and needs were not even provided for? According to Smith, principles of natural compassion are implanted in man, 'which interest him in the welfare of others and make their happiness necessary to him.'[10] Although this view is essentially optimistic, Smith was more than aware of the negative impact of greed. The economic system represents a self-regulating mechanism; interference should be resisted.

To summarise:

> 'Smithian man, then, is roughly equal by natural abilities and equipped with a propensity to exchange; he is also motivated principally by self-interest in his economic dealings, and he is provided by nature, slowly and spontaneously, with a system which

[10] Paul, *Moral Revolution,* page 11

perfectly suits him and one which naturally makes his inherent self-seeking fit him for society. And from this desire of every man to seek his own advantage and to improve his condition arises all public and private wealth.'[11]

Adam Smith's world view shaped his economic model. This view was essentially deist. The iron laws of Newtonian mechanics were translated into equally rigid laws of economics. This 'natural law' view of the world emphasised that nature was ordered and harmonious. In the classical economic model this harmonious order was reflected in the principles of equilibrium. Theologically, this suggested that a God of order meant an ordered economic system which functioned for the common good through its mechanism.

The paradox in the classical model between the pursuit of self-interest on the part of individuals and the overall achievement of the public good could only be explained by the providential design of those laws of economics which brought this about. This 'natural theology' links evangelicals and the market. Natural theology refers to those natural laws or provisions in creation which determine the workings of the created world. Amongst evangelicals there has been more dependency on this approach than is sometimes acknowledged, although, of course, evangelicals have always been particularly concerned about the disruption to the model caused by sin, to which we will return.

The way in which this theology of order has influenced evangelicalism is best appreciated though the insights of the Geneva Reformer, the Frenchman, John Calvin. Although there is an extensive scholarly debate over the extent to which Calvin allowed for a natural theology,[12] Calvin's influence on later developments means it is crucial to consider his theology.

Calvin was clear that God had planted clear marks in the universe. Hence no-one can plead ignorance. God, 'daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.'[13] Calvin used both astronomy and the human body as evidence of God's glory manifest in both the order and variety of the universe. However, Calvin did not stop there. For him, sin and the fall, disguised the wonderful ordering of God from the eye.

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[11] Paul, *Moral Revolution*, page 20

[12] See, for example, the exchange between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth in E. Brunner, *Nature and Grace* and K. Barth, *No!*, contained in P. Fraenkel (trans), *Natural Theology,* London 1946

[13] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1

Hence man can now only discern God as redeemer. This is in line with David Bebbington's view of the link between the Enlightenment and evangelicalism,[14] though others, especially Anthony Waterman, have noted that the problem with the natural theology approach and its essential optimism was 'a widespread reluctance at that time to grasp the nettle of original sin.'[15] In a sense this summarises the evangelical approach to the market; it is part of God's ordered universe, but participants in the market are infected by original sin. It is not the market which is the problem but the sinful behaviour of individuals. Hence the need for ethics and values.
The link between economic thought and Christian theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was both strong and significant. One important example is Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847). He was an evangelical minister of the Church of Scotland and then, after 1843, the Free Church of Scotland, who adopted political economy as a set of theoretical principles and sought to put them into practice in a parish context. Chalmers worldview was that of natural theology but with a personal deity. He was closely linked to Thomas Malthus[16] and like him viewed poverty as inevitable and redistribution as powerless.

In the second volume of his *Natural Theology*, Chalmers considered in detail how the natural order affected both the economic and political well-being of society. There was, he asserted, a natural law of property. In addition to that he appealed to the law of self-preservation (individuals acting in their own interests), which led to both industry and what he termed, the law of relative affection. In other words we are back to the paradox of self-interest leading to the common good. The law of relative affection followed Smith's theory of moral sentiments in maintaining that a natural seed was implanted in humanity that gave the individual compassion for the distress and destitution of others. So, Chalmers argued that 'the philosophy of free trade is grounded on the principle, that society is most enriched or best served, when

[14] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain,* London, 1989, page 50ff
[15] A.M.C. Waterman, *The Ideological Alliance of Political Economy and Christian Theology, 1798-1833,* Journal of Ecclesiastical History, volume 34, number 2, 1983, page 232
[16] Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) was a prominent early economist who viewed poverty as inevitability due to the exponential growth of population. Attempts to interfere with this natural (divine) order through enforced redistribution would not succeed. The scenario and mechanism for self-correction were severe but Malthus supported all moves to increase production and remove unnecessary drains on resources in order to increase productive capacity as much as was possible.

commerce is left to its own spontaneous evolutions,' and that the 'greatest economic good – or, in other words, a more prosperous result is obtained by the spontaneous play and busy competition of a thousand wills, each bent on the prosecution of its own selfishness,' it, 'is when each man is left to seek with concentrated and exclusive aim, his own individual benefit – it is then, that markets are best supplied.'[17] This was not just theory for Chalmers, but for evangelicals reflected also their understanding of the Scriptural material on, inter alia, enterprise and creativity (Ex 35:30-35), work (2 Thess 3:10), property (Ex 20:15, Prov 19:14), trade (Acts 16:14) and responsibility in giving (2 Cor 9:7).

This has very strong resonances of Adam Smith and the 'invisible hand,' a hand which, in the view of Chalmers, was, indeed, clearly that of the Almighty Himself. As Chalmers said, this 'strongly bespeaks a higher agent, by whose transcendental wisdom it is that all is made to conspire so harmoniously and to terminate so beneficially.'[18]

Two particular problems arose from the classical model and its adoption by evangelicals; namely, the impact of sin and the possibility of inequality. Sin, as we have noted, distorted the market, through the sinful acts of the market's participants. In economic terms this led to disequilibrium; in Christian terms to poverty and suffering. The classic evangelical view saw life on earth as a probation or test for the life to come. Hence the market functioned as a field in which to exercise, a school of discipleship, to bring values into the functioning of the market. Only by participating in the market can the redeemed individual bring values and behaviours to bear in a transformative way; ultimately this is how to deal with poverty and suffering.

The voluntary principle

Central to the debate concerning political economy, enterprise and poverty is a moral question concerning government. The advocates of redistribution through the tax system make an assumption concerning the efficacy of government expenditure. This supposition makes both a moral and an economic claim which is frequently regarded as a given but which needs to be exposed to debate before valid conclusions can be drawn about appropriate responses to poverty.
The moral assumption is that a pound (the author is British!), or a euro or a dollar of government spending will do more to relieve need and poverty than an extra pound spent on the family or invested in either the real economy or a philanthropic

[17] Chalmers, *Natural Theology,* volume 2.4.4.6, in *Works*, volume 2, pages 136-137

enterprise. However, money spent by government may be spent inefficiently or ineffectively or on other matters which may or may not carry the same moral weight. Morally and spiritually there is a strong argument that money retained by individuals – at least, one might say by individuals who accept their spiritual responsibilities – better achieves its purposes in the relief of poverty through the support of family life and by personal giving and investment. A similar argument could be advanced in support of a low-tax regime on corporations. Retained earnings will, in the long run, lead to increased employment and investment, both of which are likely to be far more effective in poverty reduction than government intervention and spending. The point is that this moral assumption is rarely debated.

The economic assumption is that government spending will have a direct and positive impact on investment and growth. This makes a further assumption concerning the relative effectiveness of a pound (or euro or dollar) spent in the public sector rather than the private sector. At a very basic level the economic system is concerned with the rationing of scarce resources amongst unlimited wants. The private sector, through pricing signals, competition and responsiveness to consumer wants is the most efficient way of achieving the best allocation of resources. This is amply demonstrated by comparing rates of economic growth with the proportion of Gross Domestic Product absorbed by the public sector. The relationship is an inverse one as shown in a recent study by Jeffrey Dorfman at Forbes.[19]

None of this is to suggest there is no role for government or responsibility for government to protect the most vulnerable. However, it is a contemporary illustration of the basis for the historic approach amongst the early evangelical Protestant Christians for a particular approach to poverty through what is known as the voluntary principle.

The voluntary principle involves the acceptance of the classic economic model of Adam Smith – which we have already outlined - alongside the development of voluntary organisations for the exercise of philanthropy and the relief of poverty. The voluntary organisation is characterised by individual Christians coming together, often across denominations, in order to act, usually locally, for what we might describe as 'the common good.' This is accompanied by a healthy scepticism towards the role of the state in economic and social matters.

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[18] Ibid., page 137

[19] http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffreydorfman/2013/12/10/more-government-equals-less-growth-the-facts-are-in/

In essence most evangelical Christians have adopted, historically, the market plus the voluntary principle. In more recent decades there has been a shift in the direction of a more redistributive approach with an elevated role for the state.

The ideas which underlie the voluntary principle have been shaped within the world of economic and theological thought from the time of Adam Smith. These basic premises are important. The crucial argument is that excessive government intervention usurps the Creator from His rightful position. This is an argument about the nature of God's action in the world. Since God has created the 'market,' as a mark of his beneficence towards his creation, it is not for man to intervene. Evangelicals will tend to point towards the problem of sin disrupting this framework, but this is solved through the voluntary principle rather than through government.

A second basic principle is, as we have seen, that God has placed in the hearts of his people, moral sentiment, compassion and love. These are characteristics that can only find their true expression through the voluntary action of the self-will. Compassion, which is the root of the response to poverty, cannot be legislated for. These 'sentiments' belong truly in the heart. So, Thomas Chalmers, whom we have already met, argued that, 'we cannot translate beneficence into the statute-book of law, without expunging it from the statute-book of the heart.'[20] Compulsion would lead to the 'extinction of goodwill in the hearts of the affluent and of gratitude in the hearts of the poor.'[21] Chalmers shows great Christian insight at this point. He understood that the nature of the human person is not as a depository of 'rights' but as an individual with a will, a conscience, indeed, a moral personality. The intervention of the state had led to duties being replaced by rights, to dependency rather than freedom. Edward Copleston (1776 – 1849) went on to suggest, articulating the voluntary principle in his own words, that 'an action to be virtuous must be voluntary.'[22]

This strikes at the heart of the principle. Whatever the role of government, it cannot replace, or perhaps even replicate, heart-felt compassion. Indeed government may even stifle the moral sentiments of the heart. This can happen either through redistributive economic policies or through the state replacing previously provided voluntary provision. As we will see subsequently this is what happened, at least to an extent, with education in England in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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[20] Chalmers, *Natural Theology,* volume 2.4.4.6, in *Works,* page 128

[21] Ibid., page 130

[22] A.M.C. Waterman, *The Ideological Alliance of Political Economy and Christian Theology, 1798-1833,* Journal of Ecclesiastical History, vol 34, number 2, April 1983

Professor Roger Scruton has also made the point that the voluntary principle is inextricably linked with political freedom.

> 'The first act of totalitarian governments is to abolish the charities through which people help themselves, and which are the main obstacle to creating the total dependence of the citizen on the State.'[23]

So, the voluntary society is essential an intermediary body. It is not an individual but neither is it the monolithic state. As such it was, and is, a power for good in society.

In the changing industrial landscape of nineteenth-century Britain a wide spectrum of voluntary societies developed. These ranged from visiting societies, savings clubs, loan societies (an early example of micro-finance) and poor relief societies to schools and both social and evangelistic missionary societies. These organisations were neither new nor exclusive to the nineteenth century but there was then a significant expansion. In accordance with the voluntary principle we have been discussing these societies were characterised by *local* control and *independence* from state aid. Later critics often viewed these societies as having more to do with an elite middle-class identity and being a place for working out guilt about poverty,[24] rather than a genuine response to poverty and social welfare. As well as being unfair, this criticism underplays the significance of these voluntary societies. These societies were the main means of responding to need at a local level. Certainly among the many evangelical societies these were also places for 'voluntary work for God.' Women were especially prominent among the volunteers. They were not perfect, sometimes left gaps in provision (but filled other gaps), but were of infinite more importance than what is implied by the suggestion that these bodies were simply middle-class guilt societies.

The attraction of the voluntary society for the advocates of political economy ('the market') was that it enabled the proper provision of social welfare to be kept separate from state intervention. It also allowed a distinction to be drawn between deserving and undeserving poverty. The voluntary visitor operating in a local area was quickly able to ascertain the degree to which applicants themselves were at fault. For both Shaftesbury and Chalmers the essentially local nature of voluntary societies was crucial because it allowed for the relationships between families, donors, recipients and so on to be maintained. This more easily enabled relief to be temporary rather than becoming enshrined as a legal right; state aid depersonalised poverty relief. The

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[23] Professor Roger Scruton, Charity, Conservative Home Thinkers Corner, 11th February 2012

[24] R.J. Morris, 'Voluntary Societies and British Urban Elites, 1780-1850,' Historical Journal, 26.1, 1983, page 95

increase in the power of the state in Victorian Britain was partly due to the fragmentation of the voluntary attempts to relieve poverty. There is persuasive evidence that there was a remarkable increase in the voluntary charity sector after 1850. Evangelical societies were central to this picture. Indeed 'as many as three-quarters of the total number of voluntary charitable organisations in the second half of the nineteenth century can be regarded as Evangelical in character and control.'[25] The critics viewed the voluntary society as a place of social control and power but these societies provided an important contribution to the genuine search for solutions to poverty in accordance with the theological and economic worldview of most evangelical practitioners.

Chalmers' experiments in Glasgow

Chalmers, partially due to his opposition to compulsory welfare relief for the poor ('the Poor Laws'), was a pioneer of urban mission activity through his social experiments in his Glasgow parish of St John's in the period 1819-1823. Chalmers denounced all forms of 'legalized charity' (i.e. government instituted) in articles in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1817 and 1818. He set out to show that even the poorest of communities could achieve self-help without government compulsion. He advocated the linking of rural and industrial parishes and teams of clerical and lay workers in each area. Crucially the foundation of such care lay in the family and the home. This, combined with a degree of self-restraint, ensured that voluntary care and relief was provided; there was no need for the state to intervene. He set out his views in his *Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns (1821).*

Chalmers became the minister of St John's parish in September 1819. There were some 2,000 families, many of whom had no connection with the Christian church. Chalmers was determined to establish a system of pastoral care and social welfare which reflected biblical principles. He began by establishing schools, but the heart of his pastoral system lay in his division of his parish into manageable portions for social care. The parish was divided into 25 districts, each with somewhere between 60 and 100 families. It was over this group that his team established oversight, each district having an elder responsible for spiritual matters and a deacon concerned for social welfare. Chalmers not only oversaw the entire system but was himself closely and personally involved, visiting families as well as holding evening meetings. Chalmers was determined to demonstrate that voluntary relief was more effective than compulsory assessment and that this was possible in large cities. The system was based on personal relationships and self-help – all founded upon the principles set out in Scripture. The

[25] K. J. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action*, 1962, page 8

deacon spent an hour each week with their families which meant that they knew them individually and was thus better placed to support them, encourage them but also to properly asses any request for assistance. This was the first major large-scale attempt to put the voluntary principle into action in a local area. We now turn to the broader and wider advocacy of the voluntary principle.

Lord Shaftesbury

English aristocracy is often as mysterious to the English as to others. To some the aristocracy has made unwarranted claims to power and control without any accountability. Yet, at the same time, this privileged group has often understood its role not in terms of power, but of responsibility. This has not always been popular but has often stood in contradiction to the assertion of 'rights' whether the assertion of the rights of organised labour or of industrial might.

The seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, as he was to later become, was born as Anthony Ashley-Cooper in 1801. Until he succeeded his father in the Earldom in 1851 he carried the courtesy title of Lord Ashley. He died in 1885 after more than sixty years of near continuous service in the British Parliament. He became perhaps the premier social reformers in England, responsible for numerous Acts of Parliament to improve the social conditions and welfare of the people, together with a passion for the role of voluntary societies in achieving social change, all driven by an explicit Christian commitment. He is a key example of a conservative minded individual who combined faith and a deep concern for social justice with the voluntary principle whilst retaining an appropriate, but limited role for government. This is the story of how it played out.

Background

Shaftesbury was born on 28th April 1801 into an English aristocratic family with landed estate in Dorset, in the south of Enland. His family life was difficult and his relationship with his parents less than congenial. He claimed his mother was guilty of dereliction of duty towards the children and of lack of kindness and he remained at loggerheads with his father for most of the latter's life. All of this was in contrast with his own later happy marriage to Emily Cowper, known as Minny, related by her mother's second marriage to Viscount Palmerston, later the Whig Prime Minister. At Harrow Shaftesbury recalled seeing the drunken funeral of a pauper which shocked him and began in him, so he said, the first stirrings of compassion for the poor. After a first in classics at Oxford he entered Parliament in 1826 as a Tory in the pocket borough of Woodstock.

There was nothing unusual in this career path for an aristocratic Englishman in the early nineteenth century. The Tories were the party of land, peace, tradition, the constitution and paternalism. They were later to include principles of free trade. The Whigs, by contrast, were the party of the new manufacturing interest, some radical free-thinkers and campaigners for rights. Both were fluid coalitions. Most social reformers sat in the Tory party. Now Shaftesbury was an aristocrat. It was the responsibility of the aristocracy to govern; however, with responsibility came duty and the duty of the ruling classes was to care for the people. This paternalism was widely held and sometimes practiced. Shaftesbury, however, commented that the ruling classes were in frequent neglect of their duties.

A considerable influence on Shaftesbury as a boy was the family housekeeper, Maria Millis. Shaftesbury recalled the special care of Maria, who was an affectionate and pious woman, teaching the young aristocrat to pray and reading to him from the Bible. Looking back in 1865 this is what he said:

> 'Anna Maria Millis, the old Housekeeper, to whom, under God, I owe the first thoughts of Piety and the first actions of Prayer.'[26]

Shaftesbury had a darker side and he struggled with depression, self-doubt and anxiety throughout his life. Florence Nightingale, famous as a nursing pioneer in the Crimea, commented that had Shaftesbury not been devoted to the reform of the asylum, he would have been in one. However, he was also a man of great intellect and principle. In 1845 he resigned his safe seat (then Dorset) because he had changed his mind on the issue of protectionism (he was previously a protectionist but became convinced of the need to reduce tariffs; cheap bread for the poor was more important than the protection of the agricultural incomes of the landed interest!). He lost his re-election bid but less than 2 years later was back in Parliament representing Bath – the only gap in a Parliamentary career lasting from 1826 to 1885. He used the intervening period to tour the factory districts – those areas of England (mainly in the north) which had experienced extraordinary growth and industrialisation. The movements of peoples, the change in the nature of employment relationships and the advent of mass production methods, often without the accompanying educational or social infrastructure had led to a significant amount of poverty. Many of the factory districts were in fact Tory but he also found himself with some strange bedfellows – once sharing a platform with the founder of trade unionism, Robert Owen. He was repeatedly offered cabinet office throughout his long political life by Prime Ministers

of both parties – in 1866 he turned down three great offices of state. He refused high office because it would have required him to surrender his life's Christian work. He considered his commitment to social welfare and the improvement of humanity to be his calling under God. In October 1825, Ashley, looking to the forthcoming election, wrote in his diary, 'I have a great mind to found a policy upon the Bible.'[27] He was influenced by Philip Doddridge, a noted nonconformist writer of the previous century, and also by the evangelical Thomas Scott's renowned Commentary on the Bible. All of this came together in the clear call of God on Lord Ashley's life, an essential prerequisite to a life of Christian service. In 1827 he wrote in his diary, 'I desire to be useful in my generation, and die in the knowledge of having advanced happiness by having advanced true religion.'[28] He had earlier declared, 'I want nothing but usefulness to God and my country.'[29] Of course, some of this was affected by a rather over-developed romanticism, but we should not underestimate the power of vocation and call.

Theological convictions and motives

The precise motivations which underlay Shaftesbury's work are of course complicated. However, it is impossible to conclude other than that faith was central to his purpose. He believed he was called by God to his work and the bible was central to his purposes. He believed in Christians of all denominations coming together to achieve both spiritual and social good. He believed in the unity of body and soul. This principle led logically to the Christian having as much concern for the physical, social, temporal and material welfare of an individual as for their spiritual well-being, their final destiny, the ultimate status before God. Shaftesbury always sought to hold these elements together in his understanding of mission. He viewed concern for body and soul as equally the work of the gospel. Earthly matters could not be separated from heavenly.

For Shaftesbury, despite the advancement of Enlightenment rationality, the power of the state and even the secular narrative, Christian theology should be applied to society not submerged beneath it. His theological motives had three main strands; first, the principle of the Bible and its teaching; second, the voluntary worker principle expressed across denominational boundaries; third, the implications of the end times

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[26] Shaftesbury Manuscripts.
[27] Lord Ashley, Diaries, 13th Oct 1825, Turnbull, *Shaftesbury,* p21
[28] Lord Ashley, Diaries, 22nd April 1827, Turnbull, *Shaftesbury,* p24
[29] Lord Ashley, Diaries, 22nd Feb 1827, Turnbull, *Shaftesbury,* p24

(eschatology). Perhaps these principles seem rather quaint today and no doubt we would phrase some of the formulations somewhat differently. However, in the context of the times, and for an evangelical Protestant, they provided a powerful dynamic.

Shaftesbury's starting point with the Bible could not have been clearer. He told the annual meeting of the Church Pastoral Aid Society in 1862:

> 'There is no security whatever except in standing upon the faith of our fathers, and saying with them that the blessed old Book is "God's Word written," from the very first syllable down to the very last, and from the last back to the first.'[30]

Scripture should be read and digested privately and devotionally, guiding the whole of life and was equally applicable in both private and public domains. He argued that Second Chronicles should be studied, prayed over and weighed by every person in public life. The Bible was its own missionary, accessible to the ordinary person. He told the Bible Society in 1860:

> 'Tens of thousands have thrown off their corrupt and ignorant faith, not in consequence of the efforts of preachers, or teachers, or lecturers, but simply and solely from reading the Word of God, pure and unadulterated, without note or comment, without any teaching except the blessed teaching of God's Holy Spirit.'[31]

The lesson for today is not the detail of the precise understanding of Scripture, but the powerful motivating force that it provided and the unashamed recognition that the Bible and faith did indeed have a central part to play in public life.

Shaftesbury's commitment to both inter-denominational unity and the voluntary worker principal (the use of lay people – lay agents - in the Lord's work) was central to his vision. He described the Bible Society as 'a solemn league and covenant of all those who "love the Lord Jesus Christ with sincerity."' This is what he told the annual meeting of the London City Mission in 1863:

> 'put all that aside, and let all establishments and all distinctive churches sink into the ground, compared with the one great effort to preach the

[30] Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p213

[31] Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p214

> doctrine of Christ crucified to every creature on the earth, to every creature that can be reached on this habitable globe.'[32]

The voluntary Christian society was the great place where all Christians could come together for service. He saw this particularly with his work with the London City Mission and with Ragged Schools (see later for more information on these two organisations). He told the Ragged School Union, 'all who care for the advancement of Christ's kingdom, to whatever church they belong, must join together, heart and soul, for the purpose of bringing to completion this great, this mighty undertaking.'[33] Shaftesbury was driven by the Christian vision of the unfinished task, of bringing the gospel to the unevangelized, especially the poor and marginalised, and its transforming power to bear upon a society that claimed to be Christian. The lay agency principle was the most effective way of the gospel penetrating even into the darkest depths of London's slums. Shaftesbury was scathing about the English Victorian passion for building churches – 'we want men, not churches.'[34] In his view, the lay workers employed in the voluntary societies, whether paid missionaries, volunteer teachers, Scripture Readers or parish visitors were in by far the best position to assess social need. The advance of the state rather led to the collapse of the voluntary principle as so many social functions were taken over by government.

The third important aspect of Shaftesbury's theological concern was eschatology – that is, the theology of the end times.[35] Certainly in Protestant thought, these doctrines have led many astray in search of the unfindable, the unattainable and the unpalatable. Shaftesbury avoided this minefield. Rather what he emphasised was the concept of faithful discipleship in the light of the second Advent of Christ – His ultimate return. This position turned on its head evangelical obsessions with chronology and timing and replaced them with a call to discipleship. He urged constant attention to the responsibilities of the present and the dynamic of living in constant, yet unknown, expectation of the second coming. He set it out clearly:

> 'I am now looking, not to the great end, but to the interval. I know, my friends, how great and glorious that end will be; but while I find so many persons looking to no end, and others rejoicing in that great end, and

[32] Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p216
[33] Ibid.
[34] Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p217

> thinking nothing about the interval, I confess that my own sympathies and fears dwell much with what must take place before that great consummation.'[36]

The Christian view of the end of time was an unhealthy occupation of too many in the nineteenth century as it is sometimes even today. Shaftsbury was clear in his belief that Christian theology hung together, creation, fall, incarnation, redemption and then ultimately the return of Christ. Of the latter, rather than a preoccupation with minute details, his simple question was, when the Lord returns, what will he find you doing?

> 'The time is coming when matters will not be measured by the talent, or the ability, or by fine clothes, or by power to speak, or by being on platforms, or by listening to those upon platforms; but the time is coming when matters will be measured by those who have the truest faith, the deepest love, and the most sincere acts of obedience to their Lord and Saviour, and most devoted and strong imitation of his blessed example.'[37]

Shaftesbury and Parliament

Let us now take a moment to reflect on Shaftesbury's work as a legislator. He viewed Parliament as having a responsibility for the care of the vulnerable. This was part of the dynamic attraction of Shaftesbury's vision. Parliament's role was real, but was not to eclipse Christian social action on the ground. Shaftesbury made hundreds of speeches to Parliament, both in the House of Commons and later in the House of Lords – some 243 speeches from 1836-1884. He sponsored legislation, promoted bills and reforms and at all times invested his work with his evangelical Christian faith. His speeches covered areas as diverse as factory and industrial reform, education, mental health and church affairs – the last of these occasionally proving a distraction.

Let me give three brief examples, mental health, factory reform and climbing boys. Those that care for and seek to provide for the sick in mind rarely receive public accolade. Potentially though Shaftesbury's work in connection with the afflicted in mind – to which he devoted himself longer than any other cause – could rank as his noblest achievement. In February 1828 mental health was the subject of his first major speech to Parliament. From 1829 Shaftesbury acted as the Chairman of the

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[35] See Turnbull, *Shaftesbury,* for full analysis

[36] Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, pp222-223

[37] RSU Magazine.

Metropolitan Lunacy Commission (please excuse the Victorian language), extended in 1845 to cover the whole nation with Shaftesbury as its permanent chairman. He remained so until his death. By the 1830s many counties had built asylums to house the most seriously afflicted of the mentally ill. However, there was no provision for the inspection and monitoring of the asylums and the conditions for the poor patients was wretched in both state and private institutions. As Shaftesbury noted wryly; families sometimes had vested interests in keeping relatives in the asylum, and asylum owners have the same vested interest. The job of the lunacy commissioners was to visit, inspect and licence; visiting without notice, day and night. Shaftesbury was a most active commissioner, his diaries are full of his visits to different institutions, and many of the scenes he witnessed were harrowing, but through his determination and hard work he gradually brought about an improvement in conditions. It was Shaftesbury who introduced legislation in 1845 to establish a permanent commission to oversee provision in mental health. In his speech he used the evidence he had gathered as a Commissioner visiting the asylums, one visit he noted lasting from 11pm to 7am. The Home Secretary at the time, Sir James Graham praised Shaftesbury's commitment.

Now Factory Reform. The industrialisation of England led to significantly increased competition and desire for profit among manufacturers. Hence shift working was introduced and the demand for child labour increased – cheap, available and controllable. Until the Factory Act of 1836 there was no restriction on the hours that children could work. The main proponent of factory legislation was the Tory MP for Leeds, Michael Thomas Sadler, an active evangelical Christian. When he lost his seat in the 1832 election he approached Shaftesbury to take on the mantel. The Act of 1836 introduced by Shaftesbury brought in a number of reforms and requirements including a restriction on working hours for children under 13 to 9 hours (Shaftesbury had wanted 10 hours for women and children under 18). Employers got round the system by way of 'relays' (two sets of children, one set of beds in the factory, the minimum gap between shifts) and it was not until 1844 that working time restrictions for women and children finally prevailed with a limit on both daily and weekly work in the factory. Shaftesbury was also concerned with a wide-range of industrial reform, needlewomen, print workers and miners – in his speech on the employment of girls in coal mining he said:

> '..some of the evils of so hideous a nature, they will not admit of delay – they must be instantly removed – evils that are both disgusting and

intolerable – disgusting they would be in a heathen country, and perfectly intolerable they are in one that professes to call itself Christian.'

Modern critics have suggested the concern was only because women were topless down the pit. The reality went much deeper.

Another area of industrial concern was that of chimney sweeps. Prior to mechanisation in the later part of the century, sweeps employed children as young as 5 or 6 years old to climb the narrow flues to clean them. In fact, the younger, the better. Poor families sold their children into bondage. Many died. Some became stuck in the chimneys, others died from inhalation of fumes or the effects of toxic gases from the hearths and the fires. Shaftesbury introduced legislation to Parliament to ban the employment of children as sweeps in 1840, 1853-56, 1864 and in 1875 when the practice was finally outlawed. He presented evidence of children being stolen and forced into the sweeps' employment, that pins forced into their feet and lighted fires had been used to force the children up the chimneys. The children suffered sores, bruises, deformities and burns. He described the practice as Satanic. The rich he says prefer not to ask how their chimneys are cleaned. The country could never claim to be Christian while such practices continued and the earlier laws continued to be broken. A boy of eight died in Gateshead in 1872, and three years later an older boy in Cambridge. Shaftesbury wrote to the Times, 'It is simply a disgrace to England.' The Times editorial demanded action, the government declined an inquiry and so Shaftesbury moved legislation in the Lords which eventually reached the statute book.

Shaftesbury and the voluntary societies

So we have seen how Shaftesbury was willing to use legislation to achieve social ends. However, he also viewed the role of government as limited, remote and lacking in personal care. Hence his commitment to multifarious local societies and clubs built on the principle of local people, motivated by faith, discharging their responsibility to God working closely with people in need from the local areas they knew well.

The London City Mission

By way of example, let's consider Shaftesbury and the London City Mission. The City Mission was formed on 16th May 1835 on the principle of taking the Christian faith to the urban poor of London primarily through home visitation. The work grew into reaching out to particular employment groups (such as flower girls and cab drivers) and many missionaries were also involved in founding schools. What was the relationship between taking out a message of faith and dealing with social need? The

City Missionaries were supposed to be concerned only with faith, but met poverty on a daily basis and were often the only people who could penetrate a London slum containing perhaps 20,000 people living in cramped, damp and dangerous conditions. There was an early row over whether the missionaries should be involved in soup kitchens (emergency food provision) – one missionary in Bethnal Green commented that 'he dared not to direct her to the Saviour as the bread of life, until he had first saved her from starving, by furnishing her with the bread that perisheth.' The City Missionary was in a unique position to watch for and counteract the rise and progress of evil, whether physical or spiritual.

The use of lay people as missionaries, Shaftesbury said, was essential to gain access to the dens and alleys of London. Not only were these representatives of the mission, 'living agents,' but many of them were drawn from the very ranks of those they were enlisted to serve – essentially the principle of incarnation.

> 'If you wish to win working men, you must enlist for that service a vast body of the working men themselves.'[38]

Shaftesbury recorded his debt to the City Missionaries:

> 'My experience of their value dates back over half a century. In all the operations in which I have been engaged, these men were my companions and fellow-labourers, and I derived unbounded assistance from them in the matter of Ragged Schools, Common Lodging-Houses, Special Services, and in every effort for the improvement of Society…..In all difficulties of research, our first resource was to the City Missionaries, because we knew that their inquiry would be zealous and immediate, and their report ample and trustworthy.'[39]

Hence, we see that personal relationships, personal responsibility and localism through voluntary societies lay at the heart of this vision. By way of illustration there is the most remarkable story of Shaftesbury (Lord Ashley, as he then was), encountering some of the hardest criminals of London. Crucial to Shaftesbury's approach was the combination of self-help, social provision and spiritual salvation. In 1848, he was invited by a London City Missionary called Thomas Jackson to accompany him to a meeting of London's convicted felons. It must have been a quite

[38] CPAS, Abstract, 1873
[39] Shaftesbury, Introduction to *Our Veterans* by J.M. Weylland, London 1881

extraordinary scene for this English aristocratic gentleman to accompany Jackson into the heart of one of London's most notorious slums. In fact three meetings were held altogether and a total of 394 convicts attended. Shaftesbury had two aims; to preach the gospel and to assist these individuals in finding a new life. Shaftesbury was a supporter of various schemes of emigration, designed to help those who had perhaps fallen into criminal ways and to enable them to make a new start. Standing next to Jackson, he preached the faith to his hearers and then sought to persuade them to help themselves and to lift themselves out of the quagmire in which they found themselves.

The Ragged Schools

Now let's turn to the Ragged Schools. The name seems rather quaint and old fashioned. The title 'ragged' would be an unlikely choice in the contemporary age. However, this should not distract us from the impact of this movement in Victorian England. Shaftesbury was associated with the ragged school movement for over forty years and it represented one of the main ways in which he expressed his commitment to Christian social welfare on the ground.

In the period up to 1870 there was spasmodic provision of schooling by various charitable societies. Often, due to appearance, general condition and clothing the poorest children were excluded from the charity schools. Many of the early ragged schools came into existence through the offices and efforts of individual City Missionaries. The umbrella body 'The Ragged School Union' ("RSU") came into being on 5th July 1844. Shaftesbury, as Lord Ashley, became the President. The basic aim was the education of the poor. Naturally this was partially so as to enable them to read the Bible, an essential prerequisite of course to salvation, but the Union also had wider educational and social objectives.

Crucial to the purposes of the RSU was the idea of reaching those excluded from the other educational provisions of society. The second annual report referred to the aim of 'removing every ragged, destitute child from our streets, and to the placing of that child in the path of industry and virtue.'[40] These aims found their outworking in the establishment of schools of industry attached to the ragged schools – a model for trades schools. Similarly the ragged school movement led directly to the founding of the Shoeblacks Brigade to provide direct employment. At Old Pye Street school in

[40] RSU, Second Annual Report, 1846, page 35

Westminster the RSU financed a tailor and a shoemaker as teachers of their trades – an apprenticeship model.

The extent and influence of the movement upon the poor grew rapidly. The first annual report, in 1845, noted 20 schools, 2,000 children and 200 teachers. The twenty-fourth report, in 1868, reported 257 schools with 31,357 scholars. The various annual reports commented on RSU activities covering industrial classes, Shoe-Black Brigades, Refuges, placing scholars in employment, emigration, mothers' meetings, libraries, Penny Banks, Clothing Funds, meals societies, sanitary associations, libraries, flower shows, rag collecting, Shoe Clubs, Coal Clubs, Provident Clubs, Barrow Clubs and Emily Loan Funds.

A few quick examples. We see here, as mentioned earlier, microfinance in action through Barrow and Donkey Clubs. These Clubs enabled entrepreneurial working people to take small loans for the purchase of a barrow from which to sell vegetables or a donkey to pull the barrow. The capital was provided through philanthropy. The Emily Loan Funds were similar. They were established in memory of Shaftesbury's wife, who died in 1872. They were aimed especially at flower sellers who could not operate in winter. The Emily Fund would loan an amount to enable these women to purchase stocks of goods suitable for sale in winter or else the hire of a potato oven. There was a simple repayment scheme and this enabled the poorest of the poor to bridge the gap until the flower or watercress season thus keeping them off the 'poor rates.' We also see banking at work amongst the poor, pertinent today in our debates about Credit Unions and banking diversity. Penny Banks and Provident Societies were effectively savings banks, taking small deposits on a weekly basis. By 1872 the RSU reported 83 banks and nearly 20,000 depositors, rising by 50% over the next few years. The impact of the RSU on the poor and as part of the Christian response to urban poverty and deprivation should not be underestimated.

Ragged Schools were not glamorous. They often met in crowded and inadequate conditions, perhaps a room fifteen feet square accommodating fifty to sixty children and eight to ten teachers, occasionally paid, but mostly volunteers. Shaftesbury's own description of one particular ragged school revealed the extent of the problems. There was an average Sunday evening attendance of 260, aged from five to twenty. This number included, forty-two who had no parents, seven children of convicts, twenty-seven who had been imprisoned, thirty-six had run away from home, nineteen slept in

lodging houses, forty-one lived by begging, twenty-nine never slept on beds and seventeen had no shoes or stockings.[41]

Another area which grew out of the ragged school movement was that of the Shoeblack Brigades, founded in 1851 under Shaftesbury's patronage. The purpose was the combined aims of providing employment and encouraging disciplined lives. The boys' earnings were split three ways. A third was banked for the future, a third went to the mission to cover costs and a third was retained by the boys themselves. One year after foundation there were 36 boys employed and 150,000 pairs of boots and shoes had been cleaned.[42] By 1856 the number of boys had increased to 108. The Shoeblack Brigades were criticised for providing no long-term employment but Shaftesbury was as much concerned with personal formation, discipline and preparing youngsters for life and work, rather than just cleaning shoes. He always linked such schemes to others, especially emigration proposals (a new life elsewhere) or training ships. Perhaps there was too much of the romantic in Shaftesbury but his aim was to enable those less fortunate than others to be lifted out of the social quagmire they found themselves in. Learning, discipline and thrift would equip them for a better life; a life he always hoped would be dependant in a personal way upon God. For Shaftesbury and others like him, however, the voluntary society was essentially local and relational, neither of which could be said of government interventions.

[41] Lord Ashley, RSU Second Annual Report, 1846, page 6f
[42] RSU, Eighth Annual Report, 1852.

Conclusions

The evangelical response to poverty depends upon a dynamic understanding of God's providential provision of the market together with the practical application of the moral sentiments to compassion implanted in the heart. The need for compassion and care is a result of sin which leads to behaviour which distorts the market. So evangelicalism's embrace of the 'invisible hand' is neither an unthinking nor an unlimited adoption of the free market. Rather it is an acceptance of the nature of divine provision with the application of Christian moral values. The voluntary principle lies at the heart of the thesis because without it government becomes all powerful, the opportunity for Christian morality and discipleship in the market place is lost.

Through the agency of the voluntary society innovation flourishes, philanthropy is encouraged, compassion is exercised and the gospel maintained. The fact that this was recognised by the Earl of Shaftesbury so comprehensively some 150 years ago, simply illustrates that he was a most remarkable man.

Shaftesbury was not perfect. He campaigned on some incredibly wonderful and important matters and on other matters displayed an uncompromising rigidity. But God is rather good at using the flawed. Shaftesbury's independence of mind, integrity, passion and his public faith all contributed to his impact which we see today both on the statute book and in the numerous voluntary societies and their successors. I think the concluding principles are these:

- The market is an essential part of God's *provision* for humanity
- The market needs participants with *spiritual compassion*
- A bringing together of the *legislative* and *voluntary* principles
- A belief in *locality*
- Seeing *personal relationships* at the heart of exercising responsibility
- Empowerment and paternalism are not incompatible
- The relief of poverty cannot simply be left to government
- Christian faith motivates many to social welfare

At Shaftesbury's funeral at Westminster Abbey, thousands of people lined the streets, holding aloft banners with bible verses, bands playing, representatives of more than 200 voluntary societies and over thousands inside and outside the Abbey singing Charles Wesley's hymn, 'Come, let us join our friends above.' What an extraordinary man, whose story deserves to be better known.

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