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## RELIGION AND POLITICS IN MODERN BRITAIN

**Popular politics and British anti-slavery: the mobilisation of public opinion against the slave trade 1787–1807.** By J. R. Oldfield. London: Frank Cass, 1998. Pp. ix+216. ISBN 0–7146–4462–5.

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**Female lives, moral states: women, religion and public life in Britain, 1800–1930.** By Anne Summers. Newbury: Threshold, 2000. Pp. ix+182. ISBN 1–903152–03–8. £17.50.

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**Divine feminine: theosophy and feminism in England.** By Joy Dixon. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. Pp. xix+293. ISBN 0–8018–6499–2. \$54.95.

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The appearance of J. R. Oldfield's study, *Popular politics and British anti-slavery*, first published by Manchester University Press in 1995, now in paperback and therefore available for a student market, is much to be welcomed. The book is already well established in its field. As James Walvin writes in his preface, 'Oldfield's research serves to clinch a simple but critical issue, namely that in the attack on the slave trade, popular revulsion was crucial' (p. vi). Building on the work of earlier scholars, notably Seymour Drescher, Hugh Honour and Clare Midgley, Oldfield has demonstrated the ways in which the abolition movement turned to mobilizing public opinion after 1787 against the slave trade. At the centre of his investigation are the petition campaigns of 1788 and 1792. In analysing anti-slavery sentiment he successfully brings together approaches which focus on the eighteenth century as a period of expansion in commercial society and popular forms of politics with the agenda of historians of the slave trade and slavery. The abolition movement, he argues, provided the prototype for modern reforming organizations. It was peopled by practical middle-class men who understood the importance of the expansion of the market and consumer choice. It succeeded in capturing the imagination of those, predominantly middle-class men and women, who were increasingly interested in engaging in forms of public debate and who had the resources, both in terms of time and money, to do so. His book, he argues, is a piece of 'thick description' which offers 'fresh insights into the increasingly powerful role of the middle classes in influencing Parliamentary politics from outside the confines of Westminster' (p. 5).

London, he suggests, was at the heart of this campaigning movement which aimed to create a constituency for anti-slavery through a range of products and activities: from books, pamphlets, prints, and artefacts to lectures, meetings, and petitioning campaigns. A network of local and regional connections was built up, crucially through the agency of Thomas Clarkson. Clarkson gave his life to the cause and became a professional reformer. His devotion to the collection of material and the propagation of information was prodigious. He became the public face of abolition, the expert on the procurement of men and

women by the slave traders, the horrors of the Middle Passage, the methods of sale in the British West Indies. He was able to challenge the received wisdom of the pro-slavery lobby that this was a benevolent system. His travels across Britain brought him into contact with innumerable people involved in different ways with the trade and opposition to it. He was an organizer, an author, a speaker, and activist par excellence: a 'moral Steam-Engine', as Coleridge so eloquently described him (p. 77).

The preparation of petitions, Oldfield argues, was the central work of the movement, aiming to put sufficient pressure on parliament to force through abolition. These petitions came from many sources: from the counties, the towns and boroughs, and the special interest groups – presbyteries, synods, guilds, and universities. The petitions of tradesmen such as butchers and brokers caused considerable consternation: could these provincial men really dictate what went on in the 'mother of parliaments'? The petitions give us a profile of the rank and file – predominantly white and middle class, a considerable number of women, a powerful presence for dissent: hardly an unexpected picture but one which needed to be confirmed through research of this kind. Most of the petitions addressed the slave trade as a religious issue. They argued for a more humane system, saw the slave trade as a national disgrace, and sought, through its abolition, a reaffirmation of Britain's commitment to liberty. Their anti-slavery sentiments were articulated through the books and pamphlets, prints and medals, tea sets and cameos which were so effectively produced and marketed by abolitionists. Abolition, argues Oldfield, 'became a commodity to be purchased and possessed' (p. 161).

Oldfield has much to say on the organization of the campaigns, the people who were involved, the things they did, the objects they bought in support of their cause, the places from which they came, the ways in which this movement prefigured later reforming movements. He is much less concerned with what these people thought. Take Clarkson, the key figure in mobilizing a national movement. Clarkson was not only vital organizationally: he was also central to the articulation of a particular vision of anti-slavery which was to dominate abolitionist discourse well into the nineteenth century. He did much to set the pattern for the debates over the character of 'the African'. It was he who understood the potential of the *Description of a slave ship*, which came to be the best-known of the abolitionist engravings. First published in 1789 and taken up by the London Committee of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, it was posted up in streets, produced in broadside and pamphlet form, and widely disseminated in Britain, France and the US. The *Description* represented in cross-section the manner in which the enslaved could legally be packed on to the Liverpool slaver, the *Brookes*. This image, as Marcus Wood has argued, supported a particular abolitionist view which constructed the enslaved as passive and helpless victims.<sup>1</sup> In response to the representations of the pro-slavery lobby of Africans as feckless, mendacious, and dangerous, abolitionists stressed the docility of these hapless men and women, locked in their stricken rows, faceless and nameless, waiting for salvation. And it was English/British men and women who were to save them, rescue them from the degenerate plantocracy, men who had lost their grip on proper English values and were staining the national conscience.

While Oldfield's focus is on bringing together popular politics and a consuming society, Timothy Larsen's *Friends of religious equality* is dedicated to elaborating an understanding

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Wood, *Blind memory: visual representations of slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 16–40.

of nonconformist politics in the mid-nineteenth century primarily in terms of theological beliefs. Both have middle-class dissenters at the centre of their investigation. Larsen argues that the popular stereotype of evangelical nonconformists as Puritans who wanted to promote their own religion and impose its values on others through legislation is substantially mistaken. Central to nonconformist belief, he argues, was a vision of religious equality – a vision which has provided a long-lasting legacy. His study centres on the two decades from 1847 to 1867 and on the Congregationalists and Baptists. By 1847, he suggests, nonconformists were increasingly dissatisfied with depending on Whig support and wanted their own representatives in parliament. This coincided with the development of a distinctive political position, best described as voluntarism, in line with their religious beliefs. While R. L. Helmstadter has emphasized the importance of individual conversion and salvation to this group, Larsen sees the Congregational notion of the gathered church as the key to their beliefs and practices: ‘people who freely chose to join in fellowship with one another’ (p. 88). While a national church was based on the territorial notion that all who lived within its sphere were its members, the gathered church refused any notion of compulsion and any intervention of the state. Mid-nineteenth century nonconformists proudly espoused the view that all men and women should have equal rights freely to practise their religious beliefs: a notion of religious equality that was anathema to many Anglicans and Wesleyans.

Larsen explores the dimensions of this belief in religious equality across a number of strands. There was the challenge mounted to the forms of discrimination suffered by nonconformists. These were ‘the practical grievances’, associated with their enforced dependence on the Anglican church for the rites of birth, marriage, and death, the limitations on access to education and the question of church rates. By the 1860s most of these had been removed. The ‘great grievance’ was the existence of the state church and the campaign to abolish it was the movement which, for many nonconformists, dominated the mid-Victorian years. Miall’s Liberation Society was central to this: its goal ‘the removal of all state endorsement of and preference for particular religious bodies and their members’ (p. 84), its crusade a religious one, driven by piety. The initial aim of the Society had been to disseminate militant ideas within Dissent through the questions of ‘practical grievances’. By the 1860s, Larsen argues, ‘the radicals and their institutions became the accepted leaders of Dissent in political matters’ (p. 71). The days of moderates such as John Angell James and Josiah Conder were now over: Miall had captured the generation who replaced them, men such as R. W. Dale and J. R. Rogers. Yet the united strength of Dissent did not succeed and hopes for disestablishment in England and Wales were dashed, though Ireland provided some consolation. While campaigning activities focused on grievances the nonconformist belief in religious equality meant that there was strong support for Jewish claims to equal treatment by the state. The question as to whether Jews should be given the right to be MPs without taking the oath raised terrifying spectres for some. As the Evangelical Ashley put it in the parliamentary debate of Dec. 1847, little knowing how prescient his words were: ‘Some years ago they stood out for a Protestant Parliament. They were perfectly right in doing so, but they were beaten. They now stood out for a Christian Parliament. They would next have to stand out for a white Parliament; and perhaps they would have a final struggle for a male Parliament’ (p. 127). But notions of religious equality had clear limits. While the most radical of nonconformists, predominantly amongst the Baptists, were prepared to support the rights of Hindus and Muslims in the wake of 1857, their stand was unusual. Larsen’s focus on equality under the law allows him

to tell an impressive story of belief in toleration. A focus on mission literature, however, would have produced a rather different picture as to the ways in which those of other faiths were represented. An emphasis on racial difference and its relation to religious beliefs and practices delivers rather different interpretations of the meanings of equality for nineteenth-century nonconformists as Susan Thorne's ambitious study, *Congregational missions and the making of an imperial culture in nineteenth-century England*, powerfully demonstrates.

The missions of the Congregationalists both at home and abroad are at the centre of this work providing an interesting counterpoint to *Friends of religious equality*. While Larsen focuses on questions of religious equality at home, Thorne is concerned with the intersections between nonconformity, race, and empire. Her concern is to elaborate the impact of missionary/imperial thinking on the shape of the nation. Her focus is on the Congregationalists, the third largest denomination by the second half of the nineteenth century, and their missionary society, the London Missionary Society. Through an examination of the language and practices of the men and women attached to the congregational cause across the century, she aims to explicate the importance of empire to metropolitan life and thought. The empire, argues Thorne, 'enjoyed a much broader social catchment than is often assumed, one that encompassed the influential fraction of the provincial middle class as well as a substantial minority within the working-class population' (pp. 3–4). Mission institutions depended on 'sinners and the saved living in geographically separate worlds, whose connections missionaries could be sent out to effect' (p. 33). They were a product of the shift in imperial thinking at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, associated with the loss of the American colonies. The new focus on governing indigenous peoples, especially in India, had its counterpart in missionary initiatives. The notion of 'the heathen' at home came to be increasingly associated with the poor, and home missions were a response to this. As the Rev. Joseph Greatbatch put it in the early years of the home mission movement, speaking of a village in west Lancashire: 'I had little thought there was a station for me at home which so much resembled the ideas I had formed of an uncivilised heathen land' (p. 1). Missions, argues Thorne, established to counter heathenism both at home and abroad, increasingly provided a language through which middle-class and working-class men and women could imagine themselves in relation to their nation and its empire.

This linking of the heathen at home and abroad, and the associated (and shifting) ideas about the class belonging and racial formation of those varied 'heathens' across both Britain and its empire, is at the heart of Thorne's inquiry. Missions, she suggests, played a part in the construction of languages of popular politics, class formation, the birth of feminism, and the rise and decline of liberalism. Critically utilizing close reading as one of her methodological tools, Thorne situates her mission texts in the local and the everyday and argues that the colonial encounter was a primary referent for the discursive constitution of class. Imperial identifications, she argues, rather than marking a retreat from class, were a precondition for class identities. 'The ideas about class that British colonizers brought with them to the Empire were already raced', she argues, 'having been constructed on the basis of a social nomenclature whose primary referent was the colonial encounter' (p. 15). Imperial identities 'were the medium through which domestic identities of class as well as gender were forged' (p. 21).

Thorne's mapping of the shifts in mission/imperial thinking across the century extends our understanding of the politics of nonconformity. Larsen offers a possible mapping for

Britain: while in the early years toleration was the key issue, religious equality dominated the mid-Victorian years. In these decades nonconformists were learning to speak not only to their own constituency but also to a wider public. By the late Victorian period, as David Bebbington has demonstrated, the idea of 'the nonconformist conscience' had earned a powerful place on the national political agenda. Thorne's chronology elaborates this picture. In their founding phase, at the intersection of the evangelical revival, middle-class formation, and the transition from the first to the second Empire, missions were implicitly oppositional to the official colonial project: so, for example, the opposition to slavery in the Caribbean. By mid-century the evangelical middle class had emerged as a significant force and race and class, she argues, had converged in that making, the poor at home increasingly associated with heathen paupers. The dissenting middle class had moved from the margins to the centre of English society and culture, and the missions had significantly contributed to this process, she suggests, by associating their respectable membership with the nation. By the late nineteenth century missionary philanthropy was becoming heavily feminized. Women became more involved with the public face of mission work, while men took on new positions in the civic and political worlds. Congregations, whether liberal or socialist, predominantly middle class or working class, were encouraged to identify with the empire. The convergence of race and class was now reversed. The deepening of the racial divide in the colonies had its counterpart in the racial unification of British society across classes: race functioned as an important marker of and means by which working-class men were incorporated into a more inclusive nation. Rich and poor Congregationalists, Thorne suggests, 'combined to form a national community on the basis of a shared capacity to bestow the gift of foreign missions' (p. 169). White men at home became citizens, while the brown and black men of the empire remained subjects. The nonconformist conscience was now differentiating more clearly between the souls inside different skins.

The female philanthropists who found individual fulfilment and a measure of social influence in mission work were intimately connected with the world explored by Anne Summers. Her collection of essays on the public and religious lives of women, *Female lives, moral states: women, religion and public life in Britain, 1800–1930*, happily in paperback, contributes significantly to our understanding of the tradition of female social action which played such an important part in nineteenth-century life and left a significant legacy well into the twentieth century. Her opening essay is a careful assessment of the debates over 'separate spheres' and her thinking on this in the light of twenty plus years of work as a feminist historian. 'Separate spheres', she argues, is an essential analytic tool in our attempt to comprehend modernity. It is 'a concept which leapt from the pages of nineteenth-century writers themselves' (p. 6), which emerged from the disjunctures and disruptions of early nineteenth-century society and which spoke to the differentiated expectations and opportunities of men and women. In her account of the making of the demarcations between men and women, processes of professionalization were critical. Forms of institutionalization, formalization, and specialization were introduced which excluded women. 'Doors were closed', she argues, 'and once closed, those doors proved remarkably hard to re-open' (p. 12). Women like Elizabeth Fry, despite their public presence, were able to exercise 'at best influence, not power or political agency' (p. 14).

Fry and Butler are central to her analysis of the moral and spiritual heart of female social action. Fry's goal, like that of both the critics of the slave trade and the nonconformists concerned with religious equality, was the Christianization of society. All individuals were in a state of sin: redemption was through Christ. Prisons must become reformatories, with

religious instruction as a key activity. It was a constant struggle to gain access for lady visitors to prisons. Arguments about women's provision for other women, in their own and distinctive sphere, provided the main successful route. Fry assumed the capacity of ladies to 'improve' the lower orders: a legacy which presented no problems to Florence Nightingale. By the 1830s Fry's notion of a reforming Christian strategy, achieving its goals through individual conversion, was already in decline (just as abolitionist beliefs in the possibility of black men and women to become full equals of their white brothers and sisters was beginning to lose its dominance). A new vocabulary of secular strategies for deterrence was gaining ground. Josephine Butler's vision, developed from the 1870s, was much more explicitly political, though always driven by religious and spiritual imperatives. The body politic, she believed, needed to be re-balanced for the exclusion of women had resulted in a state of disease, marked by prostitution. 'English women will be found ready again and again to agitate', she wrote in 1871, in her powerful work, *The constitution violated*, 'to give men no repose, to turn the world upside down if need be, until impurity and injustice are expelled from our laws' (p. 57). For Butler the process of identification, of one woman with another, was central to her thinking. Building on the legacy of her sister abolitionists, she envisaged that the threatened woman, in this instance the prostitute, would rise up in self-defence, 'the slave now speaks', she proclaimed, 'the enslaved women have found a voice in one of themselves' (p. 59). It was women's task, Butler insisted, 'to do nothing less than transform by their revolt the political institutions and moral character of the British state' (p. 65). Her campaigns, Summers argues, were rooted in the physical experience of the female body and an assertion of the validity of that experience. This was a very different political voice from that of the men of her generation.

How, then, does Summers assess the impact of these voices, and those of the women who took it upon themselves to reform nursing, the third arena which she explores? There was, she argues, a specifically female tradition of social action, rooted in a religious formation, a pastoral imperative, a sense of duty to fellow-creatures, especially those who were less fortunate, a predominance of obligations over rights, the sense that government action was a necessary evil. This was a different kind of political formation from that of the men – whether the liberal intelligentsia or the leaders of Dissent – but nevertheless it has provided a lineage she suggests, with tendrils reaching into the inter-war years. While the line from Fry to Butler is relatively clear, Nightingale was less preoccupied with the saving of souls and more focused on sanitary and public health reform. But she too pursued reforms with an ultimately religious end, though the preservation of class privilege was always central to her and her experience of the management of domestic servants provided the paradigm for her training of nurses. These women, Summers concludes, remained at the level of 'deputies and lieutenants', moving into the arenas which men left. As men became more engaged in secular ventures, the women took their places, defined as the carriers of moral values, the custodians of a virtuous public life. Even after enfranchisement, she suggests, 'there were no spaces which women could fill on equal terms with men, and men ... would continue to set the political agenda' (p. 140). But perhaps this somewhat pessimistic judgement gives too little emphasis to the ways in which the spheres of social action themselves changed over this period, transformed in part through the practices of those engaged in them. As Summers herself recognizes, women's initiation of district visiting was taken up not only by philanthropic organizers, but by the political parties. This was part of the transformation of the political agenda associated with the extensions of the franchise and the need to win electoral support. While Summers's scepticism as to a Whig

reading of the irresistible rise of women's place in public life is welcome, attention to the development of the different forms of politics which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries perhaps gives us another lens.

Here, Joy Dixon's work provides another counterpoint. Dixon, like Summers (and indeed Thorne), takes religion seriously. Indeed, they are concerned to emphasize the centrality of religion to the history of women's public lives and feminism, and to regret the extent to which it has been neglected. For Summers and Thorne, religion gave women a voice through which they could make claims, in an analogous but different way from the ways in which it empowered Larsen's male nonconformists, or Oldfield's abolitionists. All four of these authors are concerned with mainstream religious beliefs and their relation to politics. For Dixon, the object of her investigation is esoteric religion and the ways in which it provided a crucial space for the articulation of an often unorthodox vision. Her *Divine feminine: theosophy and feminism in England* is an impressive first book, meticulously researched and carefully written.

Religious spirituality, Dixon insists, is central to modern political life. *Divine feminine* is centrally concerned with the place of spirituality, and more specifically theosophy, in feminist culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This difficult topic – the esoteric, the occult, the spiritual – is respectfully placed in its context. The first part of the book explores the ways in which gendered understandings of eastern spirituality were shaped by the contingencies of the historical moments in which they emerged. This is a key theme: the process through which the meanings of spirituality and its place in political cultures were constantly negotiated and redefined. More specifically this involves the discussion of a number of attempts to domesticate or tame the occult. One strategy was to locate it in the home or make it the peculiar province of women, and here the figures of Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant are crucial. Another was to render it respectable through associating it with the manly and rational club life of late Victorian men, and distancing it from scandal. This was particularly essential given a number of difficult cases related to the abuse of young boys.

The second part of the book is concerned with the role of new visions of spirituality in feminist political culture. A unifying theme for a large number of women critical of the society in which they lived was a commitment to a new order in which the spiritual and the material would co-exist. The liberal vision of the state as an association of autonomous individuals was challenged. In its place was a view of the world which refused the distinction between the sacred and the secular, blurred the boundaries between the individual and the community, and had a holistic understanding of the relations between astral, mental, and spiritual planes. Feminists and theosophists proposed new understandings of the body and the links between male/female, secular/spiritual, east/west are crucial here. Theosophists claimed to speak on behalf of forms of knowledge which had been devalued: the bodily, the spiritual, the feminine, and the eastern. But feminist thinking and its relation to forms of spirituality was always a site of debate. While some women reinterpreted Christianity as a privileged site for a New Age, others thought more could be learned from the ancient religions of the East. Dixon reinterprets familiar figures from the suffrage movement through this lens. Charlotte Despard, Eva Gore-Booth, and Dora Marsden are all re-evaluated, with spirituality placed at the centre of their preoccupations. 'Many feminist writings', she argues, 'are best read as a kind of political theology, in which women's oppression was construed as a symbol and symptom of a larger problem, one of cosmic dimensions: the subjection of the spiritual to the material in Edwardian culture'



(p. 179). Here are echoes of Josephine Butler indeed and a corrective to contemporary understandings of politics as a secular sphere. Indeed, the ways in which spiritualists envisaged the political realm as a sacred space gives food for thought in relation to twenty-first-century Islamic beliefs.

Dixon emphasizes the centrality of connections between England and India across this history. For many theosophists the East provided a repository of the sacred and the ancient wisdom of India was seen as offering a possible blueprint as to how to achieve modernity without secularization. But the ways in which East and West were synthesized varied widely, as they were translated into different political practices, in different temporalities and places. In England, for example, the bringing together of ancient Indian wisdom with notions of modern motherhood tended to take feminists into eugenics, or an emphasis on the significance of motherhood in the process of individual spiritual development. In India, on the other hand, in the 1920s, the rhetoric of World Mother was utilized to claim a political role, especially for elite women, in the Indian nationalist movement. Terms such as 'womanhood', 'the east' and 'spirituality', as Dixon demonstrates, were never stable or fixed: rather, they were subject to constant negotiation and contestation. In this process the intimate connections between metropolitan and colonial thinking, and the mutual constitution of colonizer and colonized, were enacted in a particular form of the 'colonial syncretic'.

These five books show us how different religious traditions gave both men and women, predominantly from the middle classes, different spaces through which to articulate widely varying political claims. While all believed in the central importance of a more religious society, late eighteenth-century abolitionists were intent on creating a sphere of popular politics and influencing parliament; mid-nineteenth-century nonconformists were focused on their relation to the liberal state and to Britain's expanding empire; nineteenth-century women were seeking a sphere of action for themselves; while theosophists and occultists were imagining a new and more harmonious society. The questions which these historians are asking are intimately connected in some respects, extremely diverse in others. Their frames of thinking are varied, their objects of study distinct. While Oldfield is drawing on the historiographies of eighteenth-century England and slavery and abolition, Larsen is inside a tradition of religious history which seeks to demonstrate its significance to a rather narrowly defined notion of a wider historical context. Thorne is writing through both an imperial lens, and a deep familiarity with social history and gender history. Summers is rooted in the English tradition of feminist history, while Dixon has connected her feminist analysis to post-colonial questions. What unites them is the understanding that religion provided a language, for the men and women represented in these books, through which to make sense of and try and improve the worlds in which they lived. Each book tells its own story. Put together they illustrate the centrality of religion to an understanding of modern Britain and its troubled relation with its empire.