

## The Problem of Pleasure: Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion

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David Bebbington

The competition between religion and recreation in the Victorian period was pointed out by Brian Harrison as long ago as 1967, and at one level this book by Dominic Erdozain, Lecturer in the History of Christianity at King's College, London, is an exploration of how the churches came to terms with their powerful rival. But it is far more: it is a major contribution to the ongoing debate about secularisation in Britain. The author engages explicitly with, on the one hand, the advocates of the secularisation thesis such as Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce who believe that there has been a steady move from the religious to the secular over the past 300 years and, on the other, its critics such as Grace Davie and the authors of a 2007 symposium on *Redefining Christian Britain* (1) who hold that religion has been remarkably persistent over that period. Erdozain contends that, although the classic secularisation thesis does not stand up to scrutiny, those who attack it are usually guilty of conflating the thesis with the reality of the process of secularisation, a 'real departure from historical reasoning' (p. 199). While not endorsing the thesis, Erdozain insists on the authenticity of secularisation, a process he proceeds to dissect.

The introduction sets out the debate, covering far more authors than have been mentioned here, and states the case to be argued. 'The thesis is that a practical, this-worldly theology of salvation-by-recreation quietly occluded the classical and explicit soteriology of the "parent" institutions' (p. 38). That is to say, the idea that physical exercise brought spiritual benefits obscured the central Christian convictions about salvation. There was a turn from proclaiming the need for a supernatural relationship with God to providing facilities for the natural fulfilment of humanity – and that was secularising. The author contends in chapter one that the evangelicals of the 18th century originally taught that sin was part of the human condition, but that in the

first half of the 19th century they came to identify sin with particular activities such as excessive drinking or sabbath-breaking. Pleasure became a problem, so that, for example, William Wilberforce led a campaign against misspent leisure time. Reacting against the evangelical ethos, according to chapter two, the advocates of muscular Christianity such as Charles Kingsley urged that sport could be a means of character building. The evangelical communities did not at first follow Kingsley, chapter three explains, but created agencies such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) that concentrated on the spiritual and the mental, not the physical. Gradually, however, a sense grew up that the physical was a legitimate field of Christian interest, and so leisure turned into an opportunity rather than a problem. Chapter four shows how, during the 1880s and 1890s, evangelical organisations entered the field of recreation, some seeing it as an evangelistic tool but others beginning to discern definite spiritual and moral values in exercise. The YMCA built its first gymnasium in 1876; by 1910 it had 133 of them, and most young men joined the Association in order to use the facilities for physical activities. The churches followed suit, chapter five demonstrates, as they shifted the focus of their attention from the perils of infidelity to the challenges of urban mission. 'For every doubt that assails the mind', ran a comment of 1888, 'a hundred snares allure the flesh' (p. 205). Chapter six documents resistance from people such as Archibald Brown, a London Baptist minister, whose book *The Devil's Mission of Amusement* created a stir in the following year. The opponents of recreation on church premises claimed, and Erdozain is inclined to agree with them, that religion was being redefined on ethical lines. The conclusion follows: there was such a drastic reformulation of mission that it amounted to a secularisation of Christianity from within.

It has to be said that the book is not flawless. A good deal of the earlier part of the material, for example, is derived from secondary sources. Notwithstanding the remarkably independent line taken by the author, chapters one and two are heavily reliant on the work of previous historians. The extent to which they are quoted is unusual for a work of history (it would be commoner among sociologists) and not all the quotations are very telling. Quotations from primary works, which are much more welcome, are on several occasions repeated later in the book without justification. Among primary sources, while the author has drawn on the panorama of church life in Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1903), he has not taken advantage of the notebooks accumulated for this project that are preserved at the London School of Economics. A few points are mistaken. Teetotalism was not rare after the Victorians (p. 23); William Law was not a writer of the 17th century (pp. 44–5), one of the Caroline divines (p. 72); Primitive Methodists were formed to continue not itinerant revivalism but camp meetings (p. 70); and there were no 'Exclusive' Baptists, only Exclusive Brethren (p. 157). But these slips are trivial, and are utterly eclipsed by the strengths of this volume.

In the first place, it treats ideas with great respect. It is sensitive to theory, quoting a succession of significant thinkers – Rousseau, Kant, Schiller, Marx and Mill – and adding theologians such as Karl Barth and Abraham Kuyper for good measure. Further, the theology of the period under consideration is carefully examined in a manner more reminiscent of the traditions of American historiography than of its British counterpart. There are fascinating suggestions, for example, about the genealogy of Romantic ideas among broader-minded theologians of the mid-century. Twice Erdozain defends himself against the expected charge that he is unduly Hegelian. On the first occasion he points out that he is merely recognising that religion is influenced by concepts (p. 19). On the second he claims that he is studying the provision of religious facilities rather than the demand for them, which might call for different methods (p. 279). The author is too hard on himself in saying that he relies on opinion and comments rather than on statistics, because in chapter four and five he deploys some very telling figures. In reality the book welds together quotations and numbers, the intellectual and the social, in a highly persuasive manner.

There is much to appreciate, secondly, in other aspects of the approach taken here. The long sweep of history, from the 18th century down to the 20th, allows a bold thesis to be worked out in its totality. The prominence of evangelicalism, a feature this volume shares with Callum Brown's *Death of Christian Britain* (2), is also an analytical strength. Erdozain argues, with considerable cogency, that the evangelical movement was a novel force of the 18th century that gathered force in the 19th, imparting something of its dynamic to other Protestant traditions before dissipating its energies from the late Victorian years onwards.

That account of its trajectory seems well justified by the evidence – and more convincing than Brown’s contention that its hegemony survived until the 1960s. And this study treats religious figures as active in determining the destiny of their churches and organisations. The gain of much late 20th-century historiography in this field, from E. R. Wickham’s *Church and People in an Industrial City* (3) onwards, was to point out the conditioning factors on religious practice. What some of it neglected was the importance of strategic decisions by church people, but that is what Erdozain highlights. Like other 21st-century historians, he is keen to restore agency where it is deserved.

A third welcome aspect of this book is its style. Erdozain has an ear for telling phrases, whether in the past or the present. The contrast between the annual report of the Manchester YMCA for 1880, which spoke of ‘personal union with the Lord Jesus’, and the winter programme of the same branch for 1920, which claimed ‘to enlarge the possibilities of men’s lives’, manages to encapsulate the whole case of the book (p. 222). The author is extraordinarily creative in his own verbal coinings such as ‘the bonfire of positivist vanities’ (p. 30) and ‘Clintonesque ambiguity’ (p. 176). Of evangelicals it is said that, ‘like a venerable Wall Street institution diversifying into hedge funds, they gambled cautiously’ (p. 115). The injection of contemporary reference into these passages is typical, making for a rich reading experience. The downside is that the web of allusions may not be wholly grasped by the reader, and especially the student reader, but the main lines of argument are nevertheless clear. This is lively, even sparkling, prose.

Fourthly, the findings are highly instructive. The ‘transition from a God-centred vision to a more humanistic moralism’ (p. 10) is a phenomenon that is undoubtedly present in the sources for the period but has never previously been expounded. We must be careful to state Erdozain’s case accurately. He is not claiming that he has discovered the sole explanation for the secularisation of Britain. He readily admits that the demand side, the desire of the population to identify with religion, was adversely affected by factors he does not discuss such as the growth of welfare facilities once provided by the churches but in the 20th century increasingly supplied by the state. What he is claiming, however, is that the shift in pastoral theology towards catering for the body as well as the soul had damaging effects on the life of the churches. It is an intellectually bracing case that advocates of different interpretations of secularisation will find it hard to deny.

It may be suggested that the thesis could be extended in a couple of ways. One is into more dimensions of social history. ‘Recreation’, Erdozain writes, ‘was part of the wider inventory of ecclesiastical duties that sapped the spirituality of the late-Victorian churches’ (p. 273). This wider inventory could be explored. It would contain some of the items mentioned in this book but not pursued. One is music: the last years of the 19th century gave birth to the choral tradition in Wales, Cornwall, Yorkshire and wherever Methodism flourished. Another is fiction: this was the period when the religious novel, typified by those of the Hocking brothers, took off. Both music and fiction were attempts to Christianise by art, but they exercised a similar effect to recreation, secularising by adopting less distinctively religious methods. Further aspects are social engagement and public affairs. The temperance movement, the core of so much social concern in the period, and a phenomenon which again receives brief notice here, had a powerful effect in the same direction. The counter-attractions to the public house channelled social energy away from religion in other directions. So did political participation. Religious causes led Evangelicals, Anglican as well as Nonconformist, into a political partisanship that diverted them from more spiritual activities. Prayer meetings were cancelled in favour of electioneering during the 1906 general election. So the case made out by Erdozain could be broadened to encompass other fields. The result would surely be the one that has emerged from his study of recreation: that secularisation was promoted from within the churches.

The other potential expansion of the thesis is more a matter of intellectual history. The shift towards a favourable appreciation of the powers of the body is recognised here to have been part of the legacy of the Romantic revolution to religion. Romanticism, however, also impinged on other attitudes. It had effects, for example, on understandings of holiness. It generated new approaches, notably that of the Keswick movement that came to dominate Anglican evangelicalism by the end of the century. Holiness, according to Keswick, was attained by faith alone. That teaching led to the belief that Christians must shun worldliness

and so gave rise to wariness of some of the trends towards amusements that Erdozain chronicles. The inclusion of this strand of holiness teaching would reinforce the section of the current book on the critics of taking recreation into the life of the church. Even more centrally, romantic influences transformed the idea of God during the 19th century. At its opening he was generally conceived as a judge; at its end, at least in more progressive circles, he was understood as a father. The implications were enormous. Church, for example, could be conceived in altogether more domestic terms; nurture rather than conversion was the avenue to faith for the growing child. Hence the human and the moral made advances at the expense of the supernatural and the spiritual. The effects, that is to say, were exactly what Erdozain portrays here. There was indeed a tendency for the churches of the late Victorian period to move, under specific intellectual influences, in a more secular direction.

## Notes

1. *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives*, ed. Jane Garnett *et al.* (Norwich, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Callum Brown, *Death of Christian Britain* (2nd ed., London, 2009). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, 1957). [Back to \(3\)](#)

### Other reviews:

Books and Culture: A Christian Review

<http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/webexclusives/2010/april/larson040809.html> [2]

Church Times

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp> [3]

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