

## VIII

### HUGH PRICE HUGHES AND THE NONCONFORMIST CONSCIENCE

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ONE might almost begin by saying that there never was a Nonconformist Conscience, that the nonconformists simply shared the conscience of other people. In the later nineteenth century great Anglican organisations crusaded against such alleged sins as gambling and drinking: at least one archbishop of Canterbury, Frederick Temple, was a teetotaler. Another Anglican, Josephine Butler, stood out as the arch-apostle of Social Purity; it was she who won over Hugh Price Hughes to support her campaign when they met in Dover in 1872. As for the Parnell divorce case, the political results of which have often been described as the greatest victory of the Conscience under review, one may reasonably doubt whether nonconformity's conscience was more than the occasion of the Irishman's downfall. In the group of anti-Parnell politicians who surrounded Gladstone one of the most influential was not, strictly speaking, a dissenter, for Sir William Harcourt reckoned himself a sound Church of England man. The South African War of 1899-1902 divided every camp, but whereas in 1900 the National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches was forced by internal dissensions not to discuss the war at all, the Trades Union Congress passed a resolution condemning the British Government. Nonconformity certainly could not claim a monopoly of conscience about the South African War: one of the patron saints of later Victorian agnosticism, Henry Sidgwick, 'thought that the war was unjustifiable on any

principle of international law, and on the whole indefensible on grounds of policy'.<sup>1</sup> It is true that a Presbyterian, Campbell-Bannerman, led the section of the Liberal Party which opposed the war. The most prominent Wesleyans, however, including Hugh Price Hughes himself, supported both the war, Liberal Imperialism, and that Derby-winning nominal Anglican, Lord Rosebery.

In late Victorian England, in other words, the nonconformists enjoyed no more of a monopoly of moral concern than one would have expected on general grounds, nor were their particular moral campaigns notoriously successful. It is broadly true that it was only when most of the religious societies, Anglican and non-Anglican, could agree to fight together on a moral issue that British society was much impressed; by themselves both Anglicans and nonconformists were more vocal than victorious. What was there, then, to justify the talk, which became common after 1890, about a Nonconformist Conscience?<sup>2</sup> What was distinctive about it? Or was it really the product, even perhaps the instrument, of a social pressure group which shared most of its moral anxieties with a majority of Anglicans, but pursued very different social and political objectives? Was the Conscience of Nonconformity chiefly a way of stating and fighting for social objectives, a form, in fact, of social aggression rather than of outraged morality? The career of Hugh Price Hughes throws some light on the

<sup>1</sup> A. S[idgwick] and E. M. S[idgwick], *Henry Sidgwick. A Memoir* (1906), p. 580.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase itself developed out of hostility to late nineteenth century nonconformity. Dissenting writers tended to avoid it, though frequently insisting on the 'conscientious' nature of their opposition to Church Establishment and its concomitants like church rates. Public sympathy was more readily available to nonconformists when their conscience was aroused over questions of church and state than when it turned increasingly to matters of public morality, as it did after about 1870. In 1896 Hugh Price Hughes still italicised the phrase (in his printed speech to the Free Church Council) as a somewhat alien term. By the early twentieth century it had become an anti-nonconformist war-cry. See, for example, *The Nonconformist Conscience, considered as a Social Evil and a Mischiefmonger, by One Who Has Had It* (1903), or J. Newbold, *The Nonconformist Conscience as a Persecuting Force* (1907).

possible answers to such questions, but it is necessary first of all to get Hughes into perspective.

One way of doing this is to compare his preaching style with that of a slightly earlier generation of Wesleyan preachers. Here is a passage from Morley Punshon's much admired public lecture, *Daniel in Babylon*, which had little to do with Daniel, but much to do with Progress in the nineteenth century:

When I think of the agencies which are ceaselessly at work to make this bad world better, I am thankful that I live. From the eminence of the proud today, as from an Alp of clear and searching vision, I have looked backward on the past and forward on the illimitable future. I look, and that former time seemeth as a huge primeval forest, rioting in a very luxury of vegetation; with trees of great bole, beneath which serpents brood, and whose branches arch overhead so thickly that they keep out the sun. But as I look there is a stir in that forest, for 'the feller has come up against the trees'. All that is prescriptive and all that is venerable combine to protest against the intrusion. Custom shudders at the novelty; Fraud shudders at the sunlight; Sloth shudders at the trouble. . . . Affection, clinging to some cherished association, with broken voice and with imploring hands, says, 'Woodman, spare that tree'. But as I look the woodman hath no pity, and at every stroke he destroys the useless, or dislodges the pestilent. . . .<sup>1</sup>

With this one may compare a typical piece of Hughes, from 'The Deadly Militarism of Lord Wolsely'—the title is self-explanatory:

The most splendid portion of Great Britain is that continent which is now known as the United States of America. Was that great Christian Commonwealth—to which the future of the world belongs—founded or built up by the (British) Army? Every one knows that, on the contrary, it was founded by the God-fearing Puritan Fathers, who crossed the broad Atlantic, not to erect an empire upon bloodshed; but to secure liberty of conscience, which the soldiery of the odious Stuart kings refused them at home. Our soldiers have had nothing whatsoever to do with this, the most splendid of all our colonies, except to deprive us of it. If it had not been for the despotic temper of the military

<sup>1</sup> W. M. Punshon, *Lectures* (1882), pp. 370-1. Punshon was a prominent minister, who had been delivering this and other lectures for years.

party in this country the American colonies would not have revolted; and the United States would have been an integral part of the British Empire today. Lord Wolsely and all his friends will never be able to compensate the British Empire for the gigantic and irreparable loss which their predecessors inflicted on it when they forced the American Colonies to declare themselves independent of the British Empire.<sup>1</sup>

Morley Punshon was wrapping up a trite statement about change in a preposterously overblown language, characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century in Wesleyan circles. Hughes was making a preposterous historical statement in a style which gave a deceptive air of logic to his contention. A Wesleyan Methodism which admired Hughes—and by 1890 most of the younger Wesleyan Methodists did—had clearly gone about on a new tack, one at least superficially closer to the general style of society in the final quarter of the century.

Hughes presented his new outlook for Wesleyanism in four volumes of addresses which he published between 1889 and 1894, when he himself had just entered his forties.<sup>2</sup> Three elements stand out; it also stands out that they did not blend too well together. These themes might be called Evangelical Pietism, Cobdenite Radicalism, and Social Imperialism. They did not cohere because whereas the pietist instinct was to shut oneself away from everything that was non-Christian, and the Cobdenite instinct was to shut oneself off from the non-English (Free Trade, after all, was psychologically an export trade for Lancashire and the Midlands), the Social Imperialists, on the other hand, wanted to expand, to dominate other cultures: the Imperialists also showed less concern about

<sup>1</sup> H. P. Hughes, *The Philanthropy of God* (1890), pp. 70-1. The addresses had been given in London in 1889.

<sup>2</sup> *Social Christianity* (1889); *The Philanthropy of God* (1890); *Ethical Christianity* (1892); *Essential Christianity* (1894). After 1894 Hughes ceased the publication of his sermons. *Essential Christianity*, which took the form of broad interpretations of the Hebrew prophets, was less topical than its predecessors. The *Methodist Times* commenced publication in 1885, and became increasingly the vehicle of Hughes's ideas. See also, however, his speeches as published in the official reports of the Free Church Council of 1896; he also wrote in the course of the education controversy.

individual freedom. The resultant clash of ideas in Hughes's mind reflected the mental and social confusion of late nineteenth century nonconformity. In this confusion lay the explanation of what was more particularly nonconformist in what I would prefer to call the Late Victorian Conscience. All three elements must now be looked at in relation to Hughes.

By Evangelical Pietism I mean the general attitude to religion and society shared by many evangelicals and nonconformists in the nineteenth century. The essential characteristic of this pietism was to set up a barrier of prohibitions and customs, of things done and not done, between the withdrawn religious group and society in general. Pietists liked to think of themselves as a kind of holy hard core. William Watson, perhaps the worst of all our laureates, was quoted with approval at the First Council of the Evangelical Free Churches in 1896, as referring to the sacred remnant of the pietist fold when he wrote:

Still in our midst there dwells a remnant who  
Love not an unclean Art, a Stage no less  
Unclean, a gibing and reviling Press,  
A febrile Muse, and Fiction febrile too . . .<sup>1</sup>

During the nineteenth century there had been added to the older pietist dislike of mixing with general society at theatres, ball-rooms, card-parties and so forth, an absolute disapproval of drinking and gambling, and a renewed anxiety about protecting young Christians from the temptations of sexual promiscuity. Such attitudes were not, as has already been indicated, peculiar to nonconformity but nonconformists widely adopted them. Hughes helped to raise one of them, the crusade for Social Purity, to a new height of public intensity. In 1888, for instance, in an address attacking the administrations of justice in England, he said:

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the First National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches* (1896), p. 194 *et seq.* The speaker was the Rev. C. F. Aked, a well-known Liverpool Baptist minister. His theme was 'The Fight for Social Purity'. See also Ian Sellers, 'Nonconformist Attitudes in Later Nineteenth Century Liverpool', *Trans. Lancs. and Cheshire Historical Society*, vol. 114, 1962.

I realise more and more that it is as absolutely necessary that we should have pure judges on the seat of justice as it is that we should have pure Members of Parliament. I am not bringing any charge against the judges as a class. But it is a notorious fact that there have been some judges, as there have been some Members of Parliament, who were not pure men. A judge died a few years ago in a house of infamy. A lady from a provincial city told me last week she had occasion to go into a house of ill fame in order to save a girl, and she saw there one of the most prominent magistrates of that city. Now whether a man is a judge of assize or the magistrate of a police court he ought to be personally pure. If he is not pure, he is absolutely incapable of administering justice . . .<sup>1</sup>

The story of the judge who died in a brothel enjoyed great popularity in nonconformist circles; it was still being used as evidence for the corruption of the Bench at the National Council of the Free Churches in 1896. The incident seems to have taken place at Nottingham about 1885.

A considerable pressure of social aggression was latent in this at first sight simple moral judgment. The nonconformist type of evangelical pietism had reached a point of self-assurance at which it was prepared to demand that major social institutions should only be officered by the kind of men of which it approved. Thus, in a sermon delivered in June 1888, Hughes declared that gamblers especially ought to be expelled from the House of Commons:

Nothing would do more to impress the public conscience than to make gambling a moral disqualification for a seat in Parliament. Rational Christians can already see that debauchees, drunkards and gamblers are utterly unfit to make the laws of England. We must agitate for the rigid exclusion of such enemies

<sup>1</sup> H. P. Hughes, *Social Christianity, Sermons* (1889), p. 163. The address had been given in January 1888. He ended: 'I know, therefore, no duty that is more noble or more urgent than that of endeavouring, by the help of God, to create such a state of enlightened opinion that we may always have pure judges and Divine Justice on the judgement seat of British Law', *ibid.*, p. 164. The suggestion that the law was administered against nonconformists was often made by dissenters in the 1890s, and without any special reference to dissenting disabilities.

of mankind. . . . When we have cleansed Parliament of their polluting presence the task of cleansing minor public bodies will be comparatively easy . . .<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, Hughes went on to point out that moral suasion would not be enough. The law must be used. He thought that the most effectual weapon against gambling would be a law which prohibited the publication of betting intelligence by any newspaper. Hughes was always willing to translate his conscience into legislation. He supported, for instance, a campaign to introduce into this country a Canadian law which made the publican responsible if a man to whom he had served liquor committed suicide, or died of an accident. The demand for legislation seems much more important than its proposed content; it implied an anxiety to get control of the sources of power in late Victorian society and use them in order to compel everybody to behave as loyal nonconformists were expected to behave.

At this point one is dealing with a pressure group, not a Conscience. How did this come about? Throughout the nineteenth century the Wesleyan Methodists were slowly evolving their own élite, part ministerial and part lay. They were gaining in wealth and social confidence; this was reflected in the foundation of boarding-schools for the sons of the Wesleyan middle-class, and the educational level of these schools rose rapidly after about 1880. The Wesleyans profited from the successful campaign against the dissenting disabilities; at the same time they knew that despite their repeated refusal to join in the demand for the disestablishment of the Church of England they were still regarded in Anglican circles as a mildly eccentric sect of no great importance. As the religious core of their evangelical pietism declined under these social pressures they became less anxious to remain safely outside the main

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266. Social animus came out clearly in this address also. When Hughes demanded the fiercer enforcement of the existing legal limitations on gambling he said: 'There must, however, be distinction between rich and poor. Police raids have often been made upon the betting houses of the poor and foreigners. The notorious haunts of *aristocratic gambling* must no longer be spared', *ibid.*, p. 267. Italics mine.

stream of English culture. They were also, however, less willing to accept a social system in which they were bound to be treated as outsiders as long as they remained Wesleyan Methodists. For a comparatively brief period between about 1870 and 1914 they expressed both their sense of self-confidence and their sense of rejection in an attempt to impose their own social standards on the rest of British society.

This helps to explain why Hughes, for example, made such frequent attacks on what he called 'the aristocracy', a group which was not likely to yield easily to the pressure of a pietist group. In 1891, for instance, Hughes attributed an alleged deep social gulf between the aristocracy and the rest of society to the fact that the Reformation had been in the long run a middle-class movement:

It never reached the aristocracy and it has not reached them yet. Their ideals, their notions of morality, their conceptions of the Christian religion are strangely different from those which saturate every other section of English society. . . . No class of society suffers more from spiritual ignorance and sin . . .<sup>1</sup>

The superlative note was characteristic; so was the assurance with which Hughes arbitrated between the various classes of society and judged their degree of iniquity. The West London Mission Report from which these words are quoted contained another remarkable example of the confidence which marked the nonconformist of the late nineteenth century:

In olden times the Nonconformist Churches were small societies of godly persons, who asked nothing of the public but permission to meet together for worship and edification, and to convert others to their beliefs and usages. They were in spirit essentially private societies; their work and their ideas were individualistic. To do good to the public was to do it by selecting this or that

<sup>1</sup> *Fourth Annual Report of the West London Mission* (1891), pp. 2-3. Hughes went on to quote Matthew Arnold's description of the aristocracy as 'barbarians'; he omitted Arnold's equally unflinching dismissal of the middle-class as philistines. Hughes was also self-conscious about the fact that his Mission stood in the West End of London, whereas most other Missions had been built in the East End. He always wanted to emphasise that the wickedness of the West was even worse than that of the East.



man out of the crowd and directly making a Christian of him. . . . This view of things is not false, but it is inadequate; reflection has brought out the fact that a large part—perhaps the largest part—of the work of a society of Christians . . . is to operate upon the public as a whole. The end to be aimed at—that of making everyone a thorough Christian—is the same; but it is arrived at by the extra method of addressing the whole nation, and preaching the fundamental doctrines of religion as a public matter, and recognising the national duties of godliness, justice and charity. The Anglican Church, being in fact a branch of the public service, has, of course, recognised this public duty of a Church. . . . But the time has at last come for the Methodist and other Churches to accept and undertake these national functions. It is of no use to claim religious equality if there is no forwardness to sustain an equal share of public duties . . .<sup>1</sup>

Here the line of conflict was clearly marked out between the claims of the traditionally private, pietist society, and the new public force which the nonconformists felt themselves at least potentially to be. In effect, their evangelical pietism was still so strong that when they did enter the main stream of national life they did so with caution, determined to make English society conform to their interpretation of pietistic values. It was probably because contemporary critics saw the social and political aggression which was often involved in the nonconformist appeal to the standards of evangelical pietism that they reacted with such sharp hostility. The best-known example of the process, and one in which Hughes was deeply involved, was the aftermath of the Parnell divorce case.

Most accounts of Parnell's fall rather exaggerate the importance of the part which Hughes played. The divorce suit was heard on 15/17 November 1890, when Parnell did not even offer the defence that he might have given: the complaisance of Captain O'Shea in his wife's adultery. On 18 November the *Manchester Guardian* still felt free to say that there was no reason why Parnell should be drummed out of public life. On 19 November, however, when the first Irish reactions had

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7. The writer was the lay treasurer of the Mission, Percy Bunting.

suggested continuing support for Parnell, Joseph Parker, the Congregationalist pastor of the City Temple, and John Clifford, the Baptist hermit of Westbourne Park (as Bernard Shaw called him), launched the nonconformist attack. Clifford said (in the *Pall Mall Gazette*):

I am in a position to affirm that heavy as is the blow which has been dealt to the Home Rule Cause by the verdict against Mr. Parnell, it will be a far greater disaster for him to retain his political place. If the members of the Irish Parliamentary Party do not wish to alienate the sympathy of the Radicals of England and Wales and indefinitely postpone the victory of a policy founded in justice and right, they must insist on Mr. Parnell's immediate retirement. He must go. British politicians are not what they were. Men legally convicted of immorality will not be permitted to lead in the legislature . . .<sup>1</sup>

And Joseph Parker agreed, in a briefer letter, that Parnell was bound to surrender the leadership of the Irish Parliamentary party: 'this much homage must be paid to public morality'. When Hughes summed up his views on the whole affair in the *Methodist Times* for 11 December 1890, he granted that it was Clifford who had given the signal to lay on.

Clifford, moreover, was first into print among the nonconformist leaders with the slogan, 'he must go'; knowledge of the phrase seems to underlie the beginning of Hughes's own leader in the *Methodist Times*<sup>2</sup> on 20 November 1890: 'Of course, Mr. Parnell must go'. There was no question of Hughes's pressure being held back until the week-end, as some accounts suggest. He told the Irish on the Thursday that if they chose as

<sup>1</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 19th Nov. 1890.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes edited the *Methodist Times*, a weekly which represented the reforming party in the Wesleyan Methodist Church; it was not the official paper of the denomination in any sense, and it is probably not without significance that in the first half of 1890 Hughes and the *Methodist Times* had been in constant combat with the Wesleyan leadership in what was known as the Missionary Controversy. At the Annual Conference he had come close to resignation from the Wesleyan Church. It is interesting that in this case his great crime, even in the eyes of his enemies, had been a certain recklessness of judgment. For some years after 1890 some members of the Wesleyan ministerial élite would have liked to force his withdrawal from the denomination.

their representative an adulterer of Parnell's type they would show themselves as incapable of self-government as their enemies said they were. 'So obscene a race as in those circumstances they would prove themselves to be would obviously be unfit for anything except a military despotism.' Parnell was far worse than Dilke. 'A man who sneaks out of his friend's house by a fire-escape and then presents himself at the front door is one who exhibits a combination of evil qualities that absolutely unfits him in these days for any party which does not consist of the dregs of society . . .' Hughes's threats were expressed just as brutally. 'If there is any lewd nonsense on this question' some members of the Liberal Party would not only refuse to support Gladstonian candidates but would actually strongly oppose them. If the Irish clung to an immoral leader 'multitudes of us will be compelled to support Mr. Balfour at the next General Election'. The nonconformists would never allow a political principle like Home Rule to outweigh the moral issue which was at stake. The leading article closed with the announcement that if Parnell had not resigned by the Sunday, Hughes would devote his afternoon lecture to the subject: 'The Public Moral Aspects of the Parnell Case'—'all the friends of Social Purity are strongly urged to be present'.<sup>1</sup>

One should not suppose that such a ruthless combination of moral and political pressure automatically appealed to all nonconformists. The organ of the Primitive Methodists, the *Primitive Methodist World*, while agreeing that Parnell ought to retire quietly from public life, added:

We cannot go the whole length with the *Methodist Times* of last week in saying, 'If they cling to an immoral leader multitudes of us will be compelled to support Balfour at the next General Election'. To support Balfour, even under such circumstances, would be to support oppression. To oppress the Irish people

<sup>1</sup> The address was duly given; it was less trenchant than the preceding leader. Its most remarkable feature was that it quoted Annie Besant with approval, and attacked Bernard Shaw. Cf. *Methodist Times*, 27 Nov. 1890. The leading article on the 27th said that when the Irish party re-elected Parnell as leader on the 25th they 'placed Parnellism outside the pale of Christian civilisation'.

because they make a tactical blunder, or were even criminal, would not be sound in political economics, and could scarcely be held as consistent in teachers of Christian ethics. Besides, to vote for Balfour means to vote against Local Option, Sunday Closing, Free Education, International Arbitration. We regard the refusal of Home Rule to Ireland and the coercive measures now being adopted there as flagrant injustice. To vote for Balfour would therefore inflict injustice on Ireland, perpetuate tyrannies in England, and perhaps permanently imperil many much needed reforms . . .<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, when Hughes commented on the final overthrow of Parnell he claimed the credit for nonconformity. Gladstone, he asserted, would never have written the letter which sealed the Irishman's doom if he had not been certain of the moral support of the most powerful section of his party. Hughes exulted in what he saw as the immense power of nonconformity; as for the Church of England, 'although it was established and profusely endowed for the express purpose of maintaining national righteousness, it had not spoken yet'.<sup>2</sup> There is evidence that this nonconformist attitude forced Gladstone to move against Parnell, though he did so with reluctance. His recent biographer, Sir Philip Magnus, considers that he should have waited until the preaching storm had worn itself out.

From an ethical point of view, the affair showed evangelical pietism at its worst. Hughes and the other leading noncon-

<sup>1</sup> *Primitive Methodist World*, 27 Nov. 1890. The *Methodist Times*, 27 Nov. 1890, published a letter from the Rev. Allan Rees, the Secretary of the Wesleyan Conference Social Purity Committee, who agreed that it was 'impossible for us to associate ourselves with a convicted adulterer and a public liar'. Joshua Rowntree, M.P. for Scarborough, had also written attacking Hughes's leader furiously as 'Old Testament Puritanism'. He compared Hughes's threat of military despotism to the tactics in Ireland of Oliver Cromwell. He contradicted Hughes's description of the Irish as obscene, and said that statistical returns actually implied that the Irish behaved better sexually than the Scottish and the English. Hughes had spoken of the triviality of 'minor issues' compared to the burning question of Parnell's private life; Rowntree said that 'It is not minor issues that make an Englishman ashamed to go across the desolated territory of Lord Clanricarde'.

<sup>2</sup> *Methodist Times*, 11 Dec. 1890.

formist ministers in London obviously set the punishment of Parnell's private immorality above the doing of justice to the Irish people. One may not agree with Conor Cruise O'Brien when he says that when the British nonconformists smashed the alliance between Gladstone and Parnell they probably helped to ruin the last chance that statesmanship had to produce a self-governing, united Ireland on terms of genuine friendship with Britain, but it was tragically evident that Hughes and his friends did not care if this were the outcome.<sup>1</sup> Just as significant a criticism of his claim to represent an outraged conscience was the tone of his language; his manner as well as his matter made any settlement between England and Ireland (where parts of his articles at this time were reprinted in the Irish press) more difficult; nor does the kind of violent and abusive language which Hughes employed suggest the ability to make ethical discriminations with a properly educated sensibility. That one should not be too easily stampeded into supposing that there was a single, solid nonconformist conscience with no qualm about the behaviour of its (to some extent self-appointed) leaders is evident from the reactions of the *Primitive Methodist Leader* and of Joshua Rowntree. Hughes could not make good the claim that he stood for Christian civilisation against Irish barbarism.

Other considerations, besides morality, however, lay behind his assault, and this brings us to the element of Cobdenite radicalism in his make-up. Gladstone's decision to offer liberty to Ireland played havoc with Liberal unity, especially at the higher levels of organisation and leadership. The ideal of liberty appealed to the radicals who had been brought up to hate Napoleon III and to reverence Garibaldi. The surrender of Ireland, however, and to the Irish at that, touched off a deeper emotional resistance, to be found in most of Gladstone's supporters as well as in those who withdrew with Joseph Chamberlain. A growing British nationalism struggled with

<sup>1</sup> C. C. O'Brien, *Parnell and His Party, 1880-90* (1957), pp. 288, 349. It might be said on the other side, however, that O'Brien is only exhibiting a not unusual Irish desire to ensure that the British—this time in the shape of the nonconformists—shall bear the responsibility for all Ireland's troubles; and that Parnell was really a long way from such an achievement.

the generous radical tradition. As a policy Home Rule turned out to be less than an electoral advantage, and so the doubts sank deeper. Parnell's personal tragedy offered the chance for a respectable revenge; the satisfaction of their evangelical pietist standards solaced the wounds made on the radical conscience by the demands of the new imperialism. Nor was this all: the Parnell affair offered a chance to assert that 'the Liberal Party is really a religious party'<sup>1</sup> and so to claim for nonconformity—or at any rate that section of it which agreed with Hughes—final authority in deciding what kind of a party the Liberal Party was to be. Thus in his initial attack he was prepared to say: 'The Irish people must be well aware that it will be impossible for them to secure Home Rule without the hearty co-operation of the religious Nonconformists of England. But there is no subject on which the Free Churches of this country feel so deeply as on Social Purity. And if there is any hesitation now to supersede Mr Parnell the Liberal Party in England will be shattered . . .'<sup>2</sup> It may be argued that the real, if concealed, issue in the Parnell case was political power. Hughes and other nonconformists had resented for years the influence which the Irish had acquired over the Liberal Party's fortunes. Home Rule could not be abandoned in Gladstone's lifetime but at least Parnell must go, and with him yet another obstacle in the way of bringing about the absolute ascendancy of the nonconformists in the Liberal Party itself. Only an emotional involvement of this kind really explains the bitterness with which Hughes denounced the Irish people as well as their leader. This was one of those occasions on which the Late Victorian Conscience did not marshal its full force. The nonconformists acted alone. And if this was the occasion on which they succeeded alone, this was perhaps because the struggle was not so much moral as political. Parnell did not really fall a victim to British puritanism: he fell on the cleaner field of British politics.

The movement away from traditional radicalism in the direction of what is often called Social Imperialism—evident in the attack on Parnell, which certainly revealed that some of

<sup>1</sup> *Methodist Times*, 4 Dec. 1890.      <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 Nov. 1890.

Gladstone's warmest supporters had lost their enthusiasm for Home Rule—became the dominant theme of Hughes's later life and largely explains his reaction to the South African War of 1899. His case illustrated at the same time the strains which the realities of politics put upon the late Victorian claim to a Christian conscience in public affairs. Increasingly, Liberals found themselves trying to reconcile the older Cobden-type ideals of liberty, peace, arbitration and anti-militarism with a new belief in the positive values of an allegedly Christian British Empire.<sup>1</sup> Social Imperialism may be defined as an attempt to draw all the conflicting elements of society together in defence of the nation and empire and to prove to the least well-to-do classes that their interests were inseparable from those of the rest of the nation. One of its Victorian mainsprings was the fear of urban Socialism, a fear often expressed in Hughes's writings and addresses, just as it was a common feature of the early propaganda used in middle-class circles by the Salvation Army.<sup>2</sup> The nonconformist churches were not breaking down the indifference to religion which characterised

<sup>1</sup> Hughes had referred frequently to Cobden's teachings, including in *The Philanthropy of God* a long address on Morley's *Life of Cobden*, praising Cobden's doctrine of non-intervention and his belief in international arbitration in disputes between states. He recalled with pleasure Cobden's indignation at what Hughes deemed 'the appalling popularity of the Duke of Wellington'. Taking up Cobden's anti-militarism and his idea that Britain should mediate peace between warring nations, Hughes had continued: 'if we are to play the Divine part of mediators between the quarrelling nations of the world, our own hands must be clean and our own motives must be above suspicion. . . . Let us repudiate the ferocious and sanguinary foreign policy of the past. Let us adopt a new foreign policy.'

<sup>2</sup> Hughes painted a lurid picture of the West End of London for the Free Church Council of 1897: 'we are' (he said) 'in the very vestibule of Hell in St. James' Hall'—the headquarters of his Mission. He quoted the story of a clergyman who had told a bishop who was visiting London that 'within 500 yards of where we stand every sin that stained the Cities of the Plain is enacted every night; and every element of danger finds a place among the foreign Socialists who have their headquarters there': 'I have now been ten years there and I have received reports from the agents and from the Sisters of the People formed by my wife, and they say that these words are strictly true.' The Socialists were foreign, of course, which helped to explain them; it is not often, however, that one sees them quite on a level with the Cities of the Plain.

the urban working class throughout the century. An observer like Charles Booth, the sociologist, thought that this was as true of a Mission like Hughes's as it was of more traditional types of local church.<sup>1</sup> In their public aspect, at any rate, men like Hughes were above all anxious to justify their work in the eye of the religious middle-class from which most of their financial support came,<sup>2</sup> and with whom they shared a fear of the urban poor and a tendency towards Imperialism.

Hughes's Social Imperialism was not a by-product of the South African War. In her biography of her father, Miss Price Hughes says that in 1899 her father 'nonplussed the general expectation and showed himself an Imperialist'.<sup>3</sup> It would be nearer the truth, however, to say that he nonplussed many of his former supporters and delighted some of his former enemies by a rapid change in his attitude to the British Army. Hughes had been an Imperialist in the ordinary sense of the word for years. He was constantly singing the praises of the British Empire and prophesying a decisive future for the Anglo-Saxon races, but he had protected his residual radicalism by combining this enthusiasm for the Empire with scorn for the military. In an address on John Bright, for instance, delivered on 31 March 1889, he had referred to Lord Palmerston as 'the very embodiment of that foul military Jingoism which is the easily besetting sin of the English race'—words which were to come home to roost in 1899.<sup>4</sup> Hughes chose to believe that not only did the Pax Britannica which he praised not depend upon force, but that the Empire had not been established by the Army. South Africa, for example, we owed to the 'enterprise and energy of travellers, traders, and missionaries', a statement which must have seemed paradoxical in 1889.<sup>5</sup> It was true that in Canada the soldiers had acquired new territory; but this proved Hughes's point, for French Canada had remained a 'perilous and

<sup>1</sup> See C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 3rd series, *Religious Influences* (1902-8), ii, 194-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the West London Mission* (1891).

<sup>3</sup> *Life of H. P. Hughes*, by his daughter (1904), p. 542.

<sup>4</sup> H. P. Hughes, *The Philanthropy of God* (1890), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71: 'The Deadly Militarism of Lord Wolsely'.



disturbing element': 'we have never been able to Anglicise the part we won by the sword'.<sup>1</sup> India was another problem, but India was the classic example of Victorian self-deception, and it would be unfair to criticise Hughes too much. He argued that even in India the Army had played a subordinate part, and that 'our tenure of India would cease tomorrow if it rested only or mainly on the sword. It reposes really upon the justice of our rule, the influence of our missionaries. . . . It is because our Indian Empire is essentially an empire of peace that it is so stable. The only persons who endanger that Empire are the military party.'<sup>2</sup> Again, the statement was sheer paradox in view of the ferocity with which the Indian Mutiny (as the Victorian ruling class called it) had been repressed only thirty years before; but the paradox was inevitable—how else could an evangelical pietist and a Cobdenite radical defend the existence of the Indian Empire except by insisting that it was really an empire of peace resting on the shoulders of the Christian missionaries?

These rather general ideas received a strong fillip when Hughes read Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution*, which was published in 1894.<sup>3</sup> Hughes was fascinated by Kidd's attempt to translate what he believed Darwin to have said into racial terms, and so to interpret history as a struggle for life between races, 'a rivalry of nationalities'. Hughes entirely shared Kidd's comforting conviction that the Anglo-Saxon races were bound to emerge from this racial struggle. Hughes summed up the situation himself:

Neither Asia, nor Africa, nor South America is really ripe for the democratic institutions which exist in this country. And those European races which rejected the Reformation and its higher ethical standard are visibly losing ground in the race and slowly perishing because the morality of the Middle Ages is not sufficiently exalted to fit men for political freedom.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> In the Introduction to *Essential Christianity*, which Hughes published in 1894, he wrote, 'A new and great writer has recently appeared among us. Mr. Benjamin Kidd's work on *Social Evolution* is epoch-making', p. xi.

<sup>4</sup> H. P. Hughes, *Essential Christianity*, pp. 281-2.

When the South African War broke out the tension in Hughes's mind snapped, and he came down completely on the Imperialist side, breaking with the Baptist leader, John Clifford, who put the radical and pietist case against the war as he had put it against Parnell. Yet Hughes had committed himself deeply on the other side. 'National freedom can be permanently won only by painful means. . . . Soldiers are as unfit to build the Temple of Freedom as David was to build the Temple of Peace.'<sup>1</sup> The Boers might have quoted this on their side. One might balance it from the same book of sermons by the passage in which Hughes specifically rejected the Cobdenite plea for 'the pacific disruption of our Empire as soon as the colonies were ripe for absolute separation'.<sup>2</sup> This was a cold and tame policy, Hughes said, and led to the popular opinion that all members of the peace party, with which he still identified himself, were opposed to the maintenance of the British Empire, whereas, he asserted, 'some of the warmest advocates of peace are enthusiastically in favour of Imperial Federation'.<sup>3</sup> And he concluded—this was in 1890—by saying:

Let us only beware of disintegrating militarism, and I do not despair that some day—when Ireland is reconciled—even the United States of America will re-enter the English speaking Brotherhood, will join us in a true League of Peace.<sup>4</sup>

The South African War compelled Hughes to choose between maintaining his rather unreal links with the nineteenth century peace tradition, and continuing his advocacy of the idea of Empire: he chose the latter. Once again the inner contradictions of the Nonconformist Conscience showed themselves.

Hughes's attitude to the South African War was therefore ideological, and it closely resembled that of Lord Milner. In a recent article on *Milnerism* Eric Stokes defined Milner's policy: he wanted unity of South Africa by force under British rule, to hold the country down until planned immigration had produced an Anglo-Saxon majority, after which a democratic

<sup>1</sup> H. P. Hughes, *The Philanthropy of God* (1890), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95: 'The Flattery of the Military Profession'.

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-8.

state would be safely British.<sup>1</sup> Milner's policy failed because the war which he engineered released the forces of jingoism, and this deprived Imperialism of its hold on intellectual opinion. No claim to racial superiority could be sustained in terms of what actually happened. Hughes differed from Milner in thinking more about the future of the Bantus, but during the war he tended to maintain that they were all right as long as they were not ruled by the Afrikaners.

It is worth pointing out this similarity in attitude between Hughes and Milner in order not to be unfair to the Wesleyan tribune; but it would be unfair to Milner not to point out that Hughes helped to release some of the jingoism which ruined any chance of his success. It would be unfair to the idea of the Nonconformist Conscience to suggest that all nonconformist ministers took the vigorously anti-Boer line that Hughes did, but it is all too true that the Conscience was nothing like morally sensitive enough to save the overwhelming majority of them from doing so. The situation was not made less ironic by the fact that at the very first Council of the Evangelical Free Churches in 1896 Hughes, in a sermon meant to strike the key-note of the movement, had defined the Nonconformist Conscience well-nigh officially, and had included in it the nonconformists' duty, 'as the representatives of the Prince of Peace, to promote the substitution of Arbitration for War in the settlement of international disputes'.<sup>2</sup> It should also be said on Hughes's behalf that he reflected the opinion of the leading Wesleyan Methodist members of Parliament, Sir Henry Fowler (often tipped unsuccessfully for the leadership of the Liberal Party), Sir William McArthur (a London businessman), and R. W. Perks, a financier who had close political connexions with Lord Rosebery.<sup>3</sup> Politically, all three remained Liberal

<sup>1</sup> E. Stokes, 'Milnerism', *The Historical Journal*, i, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings of the First National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches* (1896), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> In 1891 Perks gave the West London Mission £250, and Fowler gave it £50. They were always generous to it. Cf. R. R. James, *Rosebery* (1963), but the author is unfortunately not interested in why Rosebery and Perks should have anything in common at all.

Imperialists partly because they saw in the Imperial idea a solution to the problem of working-class discontent and incipient socialism, and partly because they were convinced that the Liberal Party could not win an election on a 'little England' basis. The connexions between these men and Lord Rosebery throw a different light on the usual statement that the Wesleyan Methodists moved in the second half of the nineteenth century from the Toryism of Jabez Bunting to the Liberal camp. In moving from the Conservatism of Sir Robert Peel to the Liberalism of Hughes and R. W. Perks the Wesleyans might almost be said to have stayed where they were, if, indeed, they had not shifted a little to the right. In any case, these political considerations prevailed over any hesitations caused by the nagging of the Conscience, and the South African War, which ought to have been prevented at almost any cost, and which has permanently embittered the South African situation, was warmly welcomed in most nonconformist quarters.

In the *Methodist Times* Hughes illustrated most of the points which have just been made. On 4 October 1899 he wrote:

We do not deny that a Dutchman is justified in preferring a Dutch flag to the Union Jack, but that question is settled. It is too late. History and geography have decided that the British Empire and not the Dutch shall prevail in South Africa in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

The carelessness involved in such a comment becomes evident when one reflects that in fact history and geography had decided nothing of the kind, and that the future of South Africa lay in the hands of the Afrikaners.

In order to buttress his own position Hughes used a variety of arguments. He quoted R. W. Perks's approval of the war, adding that 'it would be simply wicked to say that Mr. Perks is a Jingo'.<sup>2</sup> He drew on a paper issued by the Wesleyan Methodist Society in 1884 which proved, so he said, that the Boers were incapable of treating the natives with justice; he

<sup>1</sup> *Methodist Times*, 4 Oct. 1899.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 Oct. 1899.

then asserted that in British South Africa the natives were well treated and were rapidly advancing in civilisation.<sup>1</sup> Such an argument is bound to fall on sympathetic ears today; and it is as well to remember that the Boer War was never a British crusade on behalf of the oppressed native population. In fact, Hughes's argument chiefly served to embroil him with other nonconformists. The Reverend John Smith had been a Primitive Methodist missionary in South Africa for fourteen years, was an ex-President of the Primitive Methodist Conference, and in 1899 was a connexional missionary official. He attacked Hughes for weeks on this subject, saying, for example:

All over South Africa the separation between the blacks and the British is as deep and wide as it is between the Blacks and the Boers. Black children cannot attend the same schools with white children, black people cannot attend the same churches as white people, and black ministers cannot preach in the white minister's pulpit. The Reverend J. Msikinga delighted the people of this country by his simple preaching, but he has never preached to the white congregation in Aliwal North. They would not go to hear him. It is a question of colour all over the country, and the British are just as bad as the Boers.<sup>2</sup>

Hughes described the early defeat at Ladysmith as 'absolutely inexplicable until the situation was relieved by further telegraphic information to the effect that through the stampede of the ammunition mules our brave soldiers, after exhausting their first supply, had no alternative except to lay down their arms'.<sup>3</sup> At least the disaster proved the fact 'which we were among the first to announce, that President Kruger and his friends had been elaborately preparing for war for fifteen years. They have

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 Oct. 1899.

<sup>2</sup> *Primitive Methodist World*, 12 June 1900. This was the culmination of a long attack. The paper stuck to its anti-war guns very well: in the following issue it reported how a missionary who had been a Boer prisoner but who had now returned to England, had addressed the P.M. Conference, and blamed the war on the ambition of 'Steyer, Kruger and the parasites about them'. The paper commented that the audience did not entirely agree; there had been ambition and blundering on both sides; the platform and pulpit should not be used to work up a bellicose spirit, 28 June 1900.

<sup>3</sup> *Methodist Times*, 2 Nov. 1899.

spent millions of money extorted mainly from Englishmen to whom they denied civil rights, and they have armed themselves to the teeth. There never was a more ridiculous delusion than that the oligarchy in power in the Transvaal are peaceful peasants.<sup>1</sup> The political tenets of the peace party were now set out forcefully:

The people of this country will never believe that a cruel military oligarchy founded upon slavery has any claim upon the sympathy or advocacy of Englishmen. The real question at issue is not Mr. Chamberlain's conduct or character, but, as Lord Rosebery has quite truly said, an attempt on the part of the Boers to put the clock back, to trample Englishmen under foot, and to deprive the natives of Africa of the most sacred rights of human beings. . . . Unless the country is made to understand that the Liberal Party will be loyal to the Empire we shall have such a Conservative victory as we have never witnessed before. The true remedy for Jingoism is to develop that Imperial Liberalism to which we believe with Lord Rosebery the future of the party of Progress belongs . . .<sup>2</sup>

Historical inevitability, the danger of not achieving power, the need to substitute imperial abstractions for serious reforming programmes in domestic politics: for Hughes, such considerations had come to mark the Nonconformist Conscience. He was in line with the Wesleyan Methodist politicians: he could quote Sir William McArthur as saying that 'Imperialism without Liberalism is Jingoism; but Liberalism without Imperialism is Parochialism', and that the Liberal Party, pre-occupied with internal affairs, had been in danger of taking a narrow and grudging view of the claims of Empire.<sup>3</sup>

The extremes of Hughes's reaction to the war naturally came in December 1899, when the military situation almost collapsed. He was twitted by the *Westminster Gazette* on his confidence that the war would soon end in a British victory. His reply sounded desperate:

It yet remains to be seen whether the Boer attack on the British Empire will not collapse after the first real encounter with the

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Nov. 1899.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 Dec. 1899.

British Army. Up to now they have fought with every advantage on their side. Even so, they have never once been able to stand a British charge, and have always fled for their lives the moment our brave men have got near them on anything like equal terms. Man for man the most mature Boer veteran has proved unable to face even our youngest soldiers . . .<sup>1</sup>

This had a certain pathos, as had his efforts to extricate himself from his earlier condemnation of the Jameson Raid. He said that although Jameson had been wrong to interfere from the outside, the Outlanders 'would have been fully justified in throwing off the intolerable yoke of the Boers if they had had power to do so':

Has it come to this, that Englishmen, the representatives of an Imperial race, with noble memories of freedom and justice, ought to submit to political injustice, commercial dishonesty and personal insult from the Boers?<sup>2</sup>

Imperialism is rarely far from racialism, and in the following week's edition of the *Methodist Times* Hughes virtually completed the descent. His St. James's Hall meeting had been attended on the previous Sunday by anti-war hecklers. Hughes claimed that they had attacked him with vulgar personal insults. 'Vociferous bullies are generally cowards', Hughes went on, 'and the prompt personal attendance of the stewards as promptly silenced the principal shouters.' He claimed that six of them were Boers, two 'disloyal Irishmen', and the remainder 'foreigners, unable to speak English properly'. Scarcely a single Englishman had made himself 'vulgarily conspicuous'.<sup>3</sup>

There is no need to follow Hughes any further; in the course of 1900 his health began to decline rapidly, and from March

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 Dec. 1899.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 Dec. 1899.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 Dec. 1899. This was in line with his comment on 14 December that 'no Englishman can defend the Boers without at the same time approving of the honest Irish Fenians'. Or with his suggestion that no one would benefit more from a British victory than the Boers: 'under the British flag they will enjoy such freedom as they have never enjoyed before', 28 Dec. 1899. All this was from an alleged Home Ruler.

1901 he was a dying man. It is still fashionable in some quarters to lament the passing of the Nonconformist Conscience. Those who do so should ask themselves why the Conscience disappeared so rapidly in the twentieth century. Part of the answer lay in the decline of nonconformity itself; part of the answer lay in the impression which the exponents of the Conscience made on their contemporaries. They often gave the impression that they were more concerned about power than about morality. This was the flaw in campaigns like that against Parnell, a flaw which meant that what Hugh Price Hughes interpreted as the greatest of all nonconformist victories was really the beginning of the decline of the famous Conscience. The reaction of the vast majority of Free Church ministers to the South African War—Hughes was only typical—left in the long run the impression that their moral judgments were at the mercy of their political needs. Evangelical pietism had not survived the social development of nonconformity intact; and to a greater extent than most people grasped in the nineteenth century, the Free Church ministry took its tone from the leaders of the nonconformist laity. From about 1870 these laymen became increasingly concerned with the achievement of social and political power through the Liberal Party, which they came to regard as little more than a branch of nonconformity in politics. The more prominent ministers saw the Liberal Party as an instrument through which they might increase the effectiveness of their moral demands. In practice, the struggle for political power coarsened their moral sensibility. It has to be understood that they felt themselves to be involved deeply in the struggle, they were not spectators; and, in the end, the case of the South African War showed that the achievement or retention of power had come to matter more than a concern for moral judgment. As a Nonconformist critic said:

“We do not know”, writes the *British Weekly*, “we do not know what the Liberal Party is, if it is not a Nonconformist party. True, the prizes are captured for the most part by those who are not Nonconformists, or those who were once Nonconformists and have ceased to be so. But to talk of the Liberal



Party without Nonconformists is precisely the same thing as to talk of the Unionist Party without Conservatives." After this, there need be no dispute as to the facts. The Liberal Party and the Nonconformists are one. And the more firmly the fact of the union is established, so much the more does the pity of it press.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Nonconformity and Politics*, by a Nonconformist Minister (1909), pp. III-12.

ESSAYS IN MODERN  
ENGLISH CHURCH HISTORY

IN MEMORY OF  
NORMAN SYKES

EDITED BY  
G. V. BENNETT & J. D. WALSH

ADAM & CHARLES BLACK  
LONDON

1966