Evangelicals and Poverty: the voluntary principle in action

Piccadilly Circus, in central London, is surrounded by neon lights, high end hotels, exclusive shops, theatres and the trappings of tourism. Around 150 years ago it was also a short distance away from one of the most extensive slums in London, some 30,000 people living in appalling conditions of poverty with open sewers, gin shops and prostitution. Criminality was rife. Today in Piccadilly Circus there is a fountain with a statue, usually referred to, erroneously, as Eros, the Greek god of love. The figure is actually that of Anteros, the Angel of Christian Charity. The name of the fountain, the Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain, and the nearby street, Shaftesbury Avenue, are the clues.

“I want nothing but usefulness to God and my country.”

A year after the veteran anti-slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce, left Parliament in 1825, the future leader of Evangelicalism in England entered the House of Commons. Anthony Ashley Cooper, known as Lord Ashley until his succession as the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury upon his father’s death in 1851, was a very different character from Wilberforce. Although less well known he is, potentially, of greater importance. Shaftesbury’s evangelical Christian vision of society was remarkable. He faced up to the challenge of poverty with a passion and with a Christian vision built upon Scripture and the voluntary principle. He understood the role of government but also that it was limited. He believed in both the conversion of the soul and the transformation of society. He viewed trade unionism and socialism as threats to freedom and indeed to the very fabric of society itself. Socialism was anathema to him. For Shaftesbury the appropriate response to poverty was achieved primarily though the adoption of the voluntary principle, Christians working together in voluntary societies. This was at the heart of his vision for both economy and society. He was driven by a sense of deep call from God, though he also suffered from introspection that bordered on the depressive. Yet he was offered cabinet office by both political parties of the day – three times in 1866 alone – and he declined on each occasion (though not without some anguish). Thousands of people lined the streets of London for his funeral. He was associated with hundreds of Christian voluntary societies. His motivations were profoundly theological. With an acute sense of the duties implied by a belief in the Second Advent of Christ, Shaftesbury successfully negotiated his way through the minefield of eschatology to produce a rounded, dynamic and biblical understanding of Christian responsibility in a free society. His vision is one we would do well to recover.

In Matthew 26:10 Jesus told the disciples, “the poor you will always have with you.” This statement produces differing responses amongst evangelical Christians. Some Christians have responded to this statement with complacency in the face of social evil. Jesus’s point is taken at face value; his words

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1 Richard Turnbull, Shaftesbury, the great reformer, Lion Hudson, 2010, page 24
2 The title Lord Ashley will be used for reference to the period prior to 1851, Shaftesbury for the post 1851 years. Shaftesbury will also be used for generic description and assessment.
3 Turnbull, Shaftesbury, pages 83, 226
4 All biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version
5 The issue of what constitutes an evangelical Christian is beyond the scope of this particular chapter. For a succinct review see Richard Turnbull, Anglican and Evangelical?, Continuum (2007, reprinted 2010), especially chapter 2
should not be contradicted and serve as reassurance, a reminder that Christians cannot fully eliminate poverty. This has left the field open for a very different approach from some evangelicals. This group does not take the words of Jesus in a literal sense but instead grounds its claims in the trajectory of Scripture that sheds light on divine love for the poor, but which, in this approach, is interpreted as a ‘bias’ or ‘preferential option’ for the poor. Indeed, an entire methodological approach has emerged from this perspective, which might be described as the evangelical ‘redistributive tradition.’ This outlook makes certain assumptions about the perceived benefits of (high) taxation, an enhanced role for the state and a negative view of the market and competition.

The contrast between these two approaches (the voluntary principle and the redistributive tradition) could not be starker. Historically, evangelicals have, generally, held a positive view of wealth creation and enterprise and then adopted the voluntary principle in how they have sought to deal with poverty and disadvantage. Market principles and virtuous compassion have defined this approach. Indeed because the market is part of God’s provision, behaviour, compassion and responsibility are crucial components of a Christian vision for society. The evangelical thus views the market not simply as a system of resource allocation, but also as a place where discipleship is exercised or even learned. When the creativity, innovation and dynamism of the market are combined with the voluntary principle the result is a radical conservative approach to the challenges of poverty. This position is characterised by enterprise (Ex 35:30-32, “See, the L ORD has chosen Bezalel..... and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts”), compassion (Zechariah 7:10, “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor “) and cheerful giving (2 Cor 9:7, “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”). We need to explore this vision and to assess what has happened to it in the face of the critique of the evangelical redistributive tradition.

As well as the Earl of Shaftesbury, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), was another representative of the voluntary tradition. As we will see, whereas Shaftesbury operated on the national stage, Chalmers put the principles into action in his local parish in Glasgow.

The building blocks

The history of economics and commerce is as complex as that of theology. To understand the link between the evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the market economy we need to reflect upon both Adam Smith and John Calvin.

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6 Adam Smith (1723-1790) was a Scottish moral philosopher and economist who developed the early theoretical foundations of modern economic thought. His religious views are contested, although he most easily fits into the model of many Enlightenment thinkers as a deist—that is, a believer in some overarching divine force rather than a personal deity.
7 John Calvin (1509 – 1564) was the leading thinker of the second generation of Protestant Reformers. He was based in Geneva for most of his life and his great work, which went through several editions, was The Institutes of the Christian Religion.
The publication in 1776 by Adam Smith of An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations marked the origin of the modern investigation of the science of economics. The work has been described as “the fountainhead of classical economics.” Smith not only defined the essential concepts of a market economic model - value, price, cost and exchange – but also advocated a minimalist approach to government intervention in the workings of the market. Smith’s basic aim was to produce a model for economic growth. The idea of the division of labour, leading to greater productivity, was at the heart of his approach. Smith, though, went further. He also divided labour into two further categories. Productive labour was deployed in the production and manufacture of goods. Unproductive labour included not only the clergy (for which there was, regrettably, more than ample evidence) but also, more significantly, the government.

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

These ideas in the economic world actually built upon Smith’s philosophical views set out in his earlier work, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759). According to Smith man was composed of three sets of motives, self-love and sympathy, freedom and propriety and labour and exchange. He applied these couplets to man’s economic activity. He assumed a natural propensity to barter together with an essential selfishness in humanity. Crucially the effect of the economic mechanism is to bring about, not only the satisfaction of others, but indeed the welfare of all, by each serving their own interests. In this way a greater public good is achieved. In addition, principles of natural compassion are implanted in man, “which interest him in the welfare of others and make their happiness necessary to him.”

Although this view is essentially optimistic, Smith was more than aware of the negative impact of greed. The economic system represents a self-regulating mechanism; interference should be resisted. To summarise:

“Smithian man, then, is roughly equal by natural abilities and equipped with a propensity to exchange; he is also motivated principally by self-interest in his economic dealings, and he is provided by nature, slowly and spontaneously, with a system which perfectly suits him and one which naturally makes his inherent self-seeking fit him for society. And from this desire of every man to seek his own advantage and to improve his condition arises all public and private wealth.”

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8 B.A. Corry, Money, Saving and Investment in English Economics 1800-1850, London, 1962, page 1
11 Paul, Moral Revolution, page 11
12 Paul, Moral Revolution, page 20
The paradox in the classical model between the pursuit of self-interest on the part of individuals and the overall achievement of the public good could only be explained by the providential design of those laws of economics which brought this about. This ‘natural theology’ links evangelicals and the market. Natural theology refers to those natural laws or provisions in creation which determine the workings of the created world. Amongst evangelicals there has been more dependency on this approach than is sometimes acknowledged, although, of course, evangelicals have always been particularly concerned about the disruption to the model caused by sin, to which we will return.

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

Calvin was clear that God had planted clear marks in the universe. Hence no-one can plead ignorance. God, “daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.” Calvin used both astronomy and the human body as evidence of God’s glory manifest in both the order and variety of the universe. However, Calvin did not stop there. For him, sin and the fall, disguised the wonderful ordering of God from the eye. Hence man can now only discern God as redeemer. This is in line with David Bebbington’s view of the link between the Enlightenment and evangelicalism, though others, especially Anthony Waterman, have noted that the problem with the natural theology approach and its essential optimism was “a widespread reluctance at that time to grasp the nettle of original sin.” In a sense this summarises the evangelical approach to the market; it is part of God’s ordered universe, but participants in the market are infected by original sin. It is not the market which is the problem but the sinful behaviour of individuals. Hence the need for ethics and values. Several Christian theologians had significant influence on economic thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including William Paley, John Bird Sumner, Richard Whateley and Edward Copleston. Thomas Chalmers is the example par excellence. Chalmers stands out as the prime example of an evangelical who adopted political economy as a set of theoretical principles and sought to put them into practice in a parish context – to which example we will shortly return. Chalmers worldview was that of natural theology but with a personal deity. He was closely linked to Malthus and like him viewed poverty as inevitable and redistribution as powerless.

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13 See, for example, the exchange between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth in E. Brunner, Nature and Grace and K. Barth, Nol, contained in P. Fraenkel (trans), Natural Theology, London 1946
14 Calvin, Institutes, 1.5.1
15 David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, London, 1989, page 50ff
17 Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) was a prominent early economist who viewed poverty as inevitability due to the exponential growth of population. Attempts to interfere with this natural (divine) order through enforced redistribution would not succeed. The scenario and mechanism for self-correction were severe but Malthus supported all moves to increase production and remove unnecessary drains on resources in order to increase productive capacity as much as was possible.
In the second volume of his *Natural Theology*, Chalmers considered in detail how the natural order affected both the economic and political well-being of society. There was, he asserted, a natural law of property. In addition to that he appealed to the law of self-preservation (individuals acting in their own interests), which led to both industry and what he termed, the law of relative affection. In other words we are back to the paradox of self-interest leading to the common good. The law of relative affection followed Smith’s theory of moral sentiments in maintaining that a natural seed was implanted in humanity that gave the individual compassion for the distress and destitution of others. So, Chalmers argued that “the philosophy of free trade is grounded on the principle, that society is most enriched or best served, when commerce is left to its own spontaneous evolutions,” and that the “greatest economic good – or, in other words, a more prosperous result is obtained by the spontaneous play and busy competition of a thousand wills, each bent on the prosecution of its own selfishness,“ it, “is when each man is left to seek with concentrated and exclusive aim, his own individual benefit – it is then, that markets are best supplied.”18 This was not just theory for Chalmers, but for evangelicals reflected also their understanding of the Scriptural material on, inter alia, enterprise and creativity (Ex 35:30-35), work (2 Thess 3:10), property (Ex 20:15, Prov 19:14), trade (Acts 16:14) and responsibility in giving (2 Cor 9:7).

This has very strong resonances of Adam Smith and the ‘invisible hand,’ a hand which, in the view of Chalmers, was clearly that of the Almighty Himself. As Chalmers said, this “strongly bespeaks a higher agent, by whose transcendental wisdom it is that all is made to conspire so harmoniously and to terminate so beneficially.”19

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

**The voluntary principle**

How then did these early evangelicals respond to poverty?

The answer lies in the acceptance of the classic economic model alongside the voluntary principle, which involved both the rejection of state intervention and the development of voluntary organisations, which in turn provided an appropriate setting for the exercise of philanthropy - the market plus the voluntary principle. What subsequently changed was an elevated role for the state, which most evangelicals viewed as disastrous but which became formative for the ‘redistributive tradition.’

18 Chalmers, *Natural Theology*, volume 2.4.4.6, in *Works*, volume 2, pages 136-137
19 Ibid., page 137
The voluntary principle means the rejection of a determinative role for the state in economic intervention in favour of the voluntary action of Christian people, both individually and acting together, reminding us once again of the biblical principles of enterprise, work and cheerful giving.

For Chalmers government intervention was not only unnecessary but also arrogant as it sought to usurp the Creator from his rightful position. In addition any extensive role for the state had the effect of taking over those things which truly belonged in the heart – the moral sentiments. Chalmers’ appeal to property, industry and compassion for others was the beginning of an evangelical economic ethic. As he put it, “we cannot translate beneficence into the statute-book of law, without expunging it from the statute-book of the heart.”\textsuperscript{20} Compulsion would lead to the “extinction of goodwill in the hearts of the affluent and of gratitude in the hearts of the poor.”\textsuperscript{21} Chalmers shows great Christian insight at this point. He understood that the nature of the human person not as a depository of ‘rights’ but as an individual with a will, a conscience, indeed, a moral personality. The intervention of the state had led to duties being replaced by rights, to dependency rather than freedom. Edward Copleston went on to suggest, articulating the voluntary principle in his own words, that “an action to be virtuous must be voluntary.”\textsuperscript{22}

In the changing industrial landscape of nineteenth-century Britain a wide spectrum of voluntary societies developed, ranging from visiting societies, savings clubs, loan societies (an early example of micro-finance) and poor relief societies to schools and both social and evangelistic missionary societies. These organisations were neither new nor exclusive to the nineteenth century but there was then a significant expansion. They were characterised by local control and independence from state aid – important characteristics for our discussion. Later critics often viewed these societies as having more to do with an elite middle-class identity and being a place for working out guilt about poverty,\textsuperscript{23} rather than a genuine response to poverty and social welfare. As well as being unfair, this criticism underplays the significance of these voluntary societies. These societies were the main means of responding to need at a local level. Certainly among the many evangelical societies these were places for ‘voluntary work for God.’ Women were especially prominent among the volunteers.

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

\textsuperscript{20} Chalmers, Natural Theology, volume 2.4.4.6, in Works, page 128
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., page 130
\textsuperscript{22} A.M.C. Waterman, The Ideological Alliance of Political Economy and Christian Theology, 1798-1833, Journal of Ecclesiastical History, vol 34, number 2, April 1983
evidence that there was a remarkable increase in the voluntary charity sector after 1850. Evangelical societies were central to this picture. Indeed “as many as three-quarters of the total number of voluntary charitable organisations in the second half of the nineteenth century can be regarded as Evangelical in character and control.” \(^{24}\) The critics viewed the voluntary society as a place of social control and power but these societies provided an important contribution to the genuine search for solutions to poverty in accordance with the theological and economic worldview of most evangelical practitioners.

**Chalmers and Glasgow**

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

Chalmers became the minister of St John’s parish in September 1819. There were some 2,000 families, many of whom had no connection with the Christian church. Chalmers was determined to establish a system of pastoral care and social welfare which reflected biblical principles. He began by establishing schools, but the heart of his pastoral system lay in his division of his parish into manageable portions for social care. The parish was divided into 25 districts, each with somewhere between 60 and 100 families. It was over this group that his team established oversight, each district having an elder responsible for spiritual matters and a deacon concerned for social welfare. Chalmers not only oversaw the entire system but was himself closely and personally involved, visiting families as well as holding evening meetings. Chalmers was determined to demonstrate that voluntary relief was more effective than compulsory assessment and that this was possible in large cities. The system was based on personal relationships and self-help – all founded upon the principles set out in Scripture. The deacon spent an hour each week with their families which meant that they knew them individually and was thus better placed to support them, encourage them but also to properly assess any request for assistance. This was the first major large-scale attempt to put the voluntary principle into action in a local area. We now turn to the broader and wider advocacy of the voluntary principle.

**Shaftesbury**

*Birth and upbringing*

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\(^{24}\) K. J. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action*, 1962, page 8
Anthony Ashley Cooper was born on 28 April 1801. The family were English aristocrats with landed estates, which he would in due course inherit. The family’s politics were Tory. Ashley’s childhood was less than congenial and he was often at loggerheads with his parents. The key influence in his early years was the family housekeeper, Maria Millis. She showed him the love which his parents lacked towards him, but also, as a committed Christian, introduced the young aristocrat to evangelical devotion. The effect was to be long lasting. Maria prayed with Ashley and read him the Bible. Shaftesbury later recalled that it was to Maria that he owed his first memories of prayer and piety. Ashley hated school but eventually emerged with a first class honours degree in Classics from Oxford.

The natural course for Ashley was to enter politics. He was duly elected the Tory Member of Parliament for Woodstock, near Oxford, in the general election of 1826. In October 1825, Ashley, looking to the forthcoming election, wrote in his diary, “I have a great mind to found a policy upon the Bible.” He was influenced by Philip Doddridge, a noted nonconformist writer of the previous century, and also by the evangelical Thomas Scott’s renowned Commentary on the Bible. All of this came together in the clear call of God on Lord Ashley’s life, an essential prerequisite to a life of Christian service. In 1827 he wrote in his diary “I desire to be useful in my generation, and die in the knowledge of having advanced happiness by having advanced true religion.” He had earlier declared, “I want nothing but usefulness to God and my country.”

Theological convictions

Shaftesbury’s application of classic Evangelical and Protestant doctrine was powerful and dynamic. In the context of the advancement of Enlightenment rationality, the power of the state and even the secular narrative, Shaftesbury stood firm. Christian theology was to be applied to society not submerged beneath it. Evangelical belief, according to Shaftesbury, provided a template for the life of discipleship. His theological motives had three strands; first, the principle of the Bible and its teaching; second, the voluntary worker principle expressed across denominational boundaries; third, the implications of the end times.

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

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

25 The Tories were generally the party of land and property, constitutional rights, duty, localism and a small state. The Whigs were the party of reform, rights, manufacturing and free trade. There was some crossover in the area of economics especially as the nineteenth century progressed.
26 Turnbull, Shaftesbury, p16
27 Lord Ashley, Diaries, 13th Oct 1825, Turnbull, Shaftesbury, p21
28 Lord Ashley, Diaries, 22nd April 1827, Turnbull, Shaftesbury, p24
29 Lord Ashley, Diaries, 22nd Feb 1827, Turnbull, Shaftesbury, p24
30 Turnbull, Shaftesbury, p213
Scripture should be read and digested privately and devotionally, guiding the whole of life and was equally applicable in both private and public domains. He argued that Second Chronicles should be studied, prayed over and weighed by every person in public life. The Bible was its own missionary, accessible to the ordinary person. He told the Bible Society in 1860:

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

Shaftesbury’s commitment to both inter-denominational unity and the voluntary worker principal (the use of lay people – lay agents - in the Lord’s work) was central to his vision. He described the Bible Society as “a solemn league and covenant of all those who “love the Lord Jesus Christ with sincerity.”

This is what he told the annual meeting of the London City Mission in 1863:

“put all that aside, and let all establishments and all distinctive churches sink into the ground, compared with the one great effort to preach the doctrine of Christ crucified to every creature on the earth, to every creature that can be reached on this habitable globe.”

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

The third important aspect of Shaftesbury’s theological concern was eschatology. For the present purpose it is sufficient to note that he gave a priority to faithful discipleship in the light of the second Advent of Christ. This position turned on its head evangelical obsessions with chronology and timing and replaced them with a call to discipleship. He urged constant attention to the responsibilities of the

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31 Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p214
32 Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p216
33 Ibid.
34 Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p217
35 See Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, for full analysis
present and the dynamic of living in constant, yet unknown, expectation of the second coming. He set it out clearly:

“I am now looking, not to the great end, but to the interval. I know, my friends, how great and glorious that end will be; but while I find so many persons looking to no end, and others rejoicing in that great end, and thinking nothing about the interval, I confess that my own sympathies and fears dwell much with what must take place before that great consummation.”

**Shaftesbury and the voluntary societies**

Shaftesbury illustrates how moral values can be brought to the market. Shaftesbury believed that it was entirely appropriate for government to legislate for the protection of the vulnerable. So he campaigned in Parliament for the protection from exploitation of young people in particular, from danger in factories and mines, seeking to hold the owners to their responsibilities. He campaigned against prostitution, poor housing and in support of those who suffered the ravages of mental health breakdown. However, he never viewed the state as the solution. Rather he saw the role of government as extremely limited and potentially damaging to the wider Christian and social cause. This was the reason why the Christian voluntary society came to play such a significant role in his thinking and why he lamented, particularly around 1870, government taking over functions previously undertaken by such Christian societies.

**The London City Mission**

The London City Mission was formed on 16th May 1835. The City Mission was founded on the principle of taking the gospel to the urban poor of London primarily through home visitation. The work grew into reaching out to particular employment groups (such as flower girls and cab drivers) and many missionaries were also involved in founding schools. The City Missionaries met poverty on a daily basis and were often the only people who could penetrate a London slum containing perhaps 20,000 people living in cramped, damp and dangerous conditions. Shaftesbury walked the streets of London with the City Missionaries, gathering evidence for his Parliamentary campaigns, encouraging the Christian workers and preaching the gospel. Hence, we see that personal relationships, personal responsibility and localism through voluntary societies lay at the heart of this vision.

Shaftesbury strongly advocated the City Mission’s programme of systematic home visiting and allocating missionaries to special interest groups such as the cabmen. The force of home visiting was that it was an individual encounter, “carrying the Gospel to men’s hearts from house to house, from heart to heart, from man to man, from soul to soul, from individual to individual.” The use of lay agents, Shaftesbury said, was essential to gain access to the dens and alleys of London. Not only were these representatives of the mission, ‘living agents,’ but many of them were drawn from the very ranks of those they were enlisted to serve – essentially the principle of incarnation. The City Missionary was in a unique position to watch for and counteract the rise and progress of evil, whether physical or spiritual. A significant

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36 Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, pp222-223
37 Shaftesbury at the Mansion House, *LCM Magazine*, April 1881, vol 46, page 65
amount of the evidence gathered by Lord Shaftesbury for use in his campaigns for social reform was gathered in co-operation with the City Missionaries.

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

By way of illustration there is the most remarkable story of Lord Ashley, as he then was, encountering some of the hardest criminals of London. Crucial to Ashley’s approach, as with Chalmers, was the combination of self-help, social provision and spiritual salvation. In 1848, Ashley was invited by a London City Missionary called Thomas Jackson to accompany him to a meeting of London’s convicted felons. It must have been a quite extraordinary scene for this English aristocratic gentleman to accompany Jackson into the heart of one of London’s most notorious slums. In fact three meetings were held altogether and a total of 394 convicts attended. Ashley had two aims; to preach the gospel and to assist these individuals in finding a new life. Ashley was a supporter of various schemes of emigration, designed to help those who had perhaps fallen into criminal ways and to enable them to make a new start. Standing next to Jackson, Ashley preached the gospel of eternal salvation to his hearers and then sought to persuade them to help themselves and to lift themselves out of the quagmire in which they found themselves.

The Ragged Schools

The name seems rather quaint and old fashioned. The title ‘ragged’ would be an unlikely choice in the contemporary age. However, this should not distract us from the impact of this movement in Victorian England. Shaftesbury was associated with the ragged school movement for over forty years and it represented one of the main ways in which he expressed his commitment to Christian social welfare on the ground. The rapid decline, even collapse, of ragged schools following the Education Act of 1870 (which introduced compulsory state education) was a real blow to Shaftesbury. Indeed that particular piece of legislation was a significant milestone in seeking to understand the loss of an Evangelical vision for society after that date.

In the period up to 1870 there was spasmodic provision of schooling by various charitable societies. Often, due to appearance, general condition and clothing the poorest children were excluded from the charity schools. Many of the early ragged schools came into existence through the offices and efforts of individual City Missionaries. The umbrella body ‘The Ragged School Union’ came into being on 5th July 1844. Lord Ashley became the President. The basic aim was the education of the poor so as to enable

38 Shaftesbury, Introduction to Our Veterans by J.M. Weylland, London 1881
them to read the Bible, an essential prerequisite of course to salvation. The Ragged School Union, however, also had wider educational and social objectives.

Crucial to the purposes of the RSU was the idea of reaching those excluded from the other educational provisions of society. The second annual report referred to the aim of “removing every ragged, destitute child from our streets, and to the placing of that child in the path of industry and virtue.” These aims found their outworking in the establishment of schools of industry attached to the ragged schools. Similarly the ragged school movement led directly to the founding of the Shoeblacks Brigade to provide direct employment. At Old Pye Street school in Westminster a Juvenile Refuge and School of Industry was established with the RSU financing a tailor and a shoemaker as teachers of their trades – an apprenticeship model.

The extent and influence of the movement upon the poor grew rapidly. The first annual report noted twenty schools, 2,000 children and 200 teachers. The twenty-fourth report, in 1868, reported 257 schools with 31,357 scholars. The tenth report in 1854 reported on RSU activities covering industrial classes, Shoe-Black Brigades, Refuges, placing scholars in employment, emigration, mothers’ meetings, libraries, Penny Banks and Clothing Funds. By 1870 the list had expanded to cover meals societies, sanitary associations, libraries, flower shows, rag collecting, Shoe Clubs, Coal Clubs, Provident Clubs and Barrow Clubs. The last of these was a form of micro-finance, with individuals contributing to the Club, which then enabled loans to be made for barrows (or perhaps a potato oven) thus empowering individuals to make a living from selling vegetables. The impact of the RSU on the poor and as part of the evangelical Christian response to urban poverty and deprivation should not be underestimated.

Lord Ashley occupied the chair for the first annual meeting of the RSU in 1845 and did so every year up to 1884. Shaftesbury’s links and connections with the myriad of organisations which arose out of the activities of the RSU were extensive. He had a particular concern for the well-being of the costermongers. These were a proud, close-knit group of barrow holders (selling vegetables) and flower girls who were always struggling to make ends meet. He was committed to giving every possible aid and assistance in his power to helping the poorest in London. Shaftesbury not only chaired national meetings but also frequently gatherings of individual schools. Ragged Schools were not glamorous. They often met in crowded and inadequate conditions, perhaps a room fifteen feet square accommodating fifty to sixty children and eight to ten teachers. Ashley’s own description of one particular ragged school revealed the extent of the problems. There was an average Sunday evening attendance of 260, aged from five to twenty. This number included, forty-two who had no parents, seven children of convicts, twenty-seven who had been imprisoned, thirty-six had run away from home, nineteen slept in lodging houses, forty-one lived by begging, twenty-nine never slept on beds and seventeen had no shoes or stockings. He was also closely involved with the refuge movement, often associated with ragged schools. He became President of The Reformatory and Refuge Union, involved as well in their connected work of ‘training ships.’

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39 RSU, Second Annual Report, 1846, page 35
40 Lord Ashley, RSU Second Annual Report, 1846, page 6f
Another area which grew out of the ragged school movement was that of the Shoeblack Brigades, founded in 1851 under Shaftesbury’s patronage. The purpose was the combined aims of providing employment and encouraging disciplined lives. The boys’ earnings were split three ways. A third was banked for the future, a third went to the mission to cover costs and a third was retained by the boys themselves. One year after foundation there were thirty-six boys employed and 150,000 pairs of boots and shoes had been cleaned.\(^{41}\) By 1856 the number of boys had increased to 108. The Shoeblack Brigades were criticised for providing no long-term employment but Shaftesbury was more concerned with personal formation rather than cleaning shoes as such. He always linked such schemes to others, especially emigration proposals (a new life elsewhere). Perhaps there was too much of the romantic in Shaftesbury but his aim was to enable those less fortunate than others to be lifted out of the social quagmire they found themselves in. Learning, discipline and thrift would equip them for a better life; a life he always hoped would be dependant in a personal way upon God.

Shaftesbury viewed his work with voluntary Christian schools with especial care and favour. They became places where education was shaped by the Bible. Food, even lodging, was often provided for those in need, but faith and education were not seen as separate. He believed the movement was for nothing less than the glory of God. This helps explain Shaftesbury’s utter despair at the increased role for government in education from 1870 onwards, when compulsory state education was introduced. Quoting his diary entry on the matter at length illustrates both his passion and his commitment to the Christian voluntary society. He viewed the prospects of state intervention as disastrous.

> “The godless, non-Bible system is at hand; and the Ragged Schools, with all their divine polity, with all their burning and fruitful love for the poor, with all their prayers and harvests for the temporal and eternal welfare of the forsaken, heathenish, destitute, sorrowful, and yet innocent children, must perish under this all-conquering march of intellectual power. Our nature is nothing, the heart is nothing, in the estimation of these zealots of secular knowledge. Everything for the flesh, and nothing for the soul; everything for time, and nothing for eternity.”\(^{42}\)

He noted with regret the inevitable fact of the sinking of the ragged schools, though his heart could still be lifted by the atmosphere at the annual ragged school prize giving. Shaftesbury had great foresight – in the following quarter of a century the number of voluntary Christian societies fell substantially. For Shaftesbury and others like him, however, the voluntary society was essentially local and relational, neither of which could be said of government interventions.

**Evangelicals and the redistributive tradition**

So what happened to this vision and how did the redistributive tradition gain the upper hand amongst evangelicals?

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\(^{41}\) RSU, Eighth Annual Report, 1852.

\(^{42}\) Shaftesbury, Diaries, 16\(^{th}\) March 1870, Turnbull, *Shaftesbury*, p151
Essentially there are two reasons. First, evangelicals, weakened in their vision for society with the onset of the power of the state and retreated into a private view of the faith. The conversion of the individual and the transformation of society through those individuals became separated. Welfare was abandoned to the state. The consequence was not only the loss of the impact of faith in the public square but the loss of freedom itself. Second, an intellectual Christian socialism (sic) gained the upper hand.

The name of R.H. Tawney is inextricably linked with the development of this ‘redistributive tradition’. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* originated in the lectures given in 1922 in memory of the prominent Christian socialist, Henry Scott Holland (1847-1917). Holland and Charles Gore (1853-1932), who wrote the book’s forward, founded the Christian Social Union in 1889 to investigate the social disorder of society. In the 1920s, perhaps in the aftermath of war, explanatory meta-narratives seemed to be the order of the day, with Tawney’s work and Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* both appearing in these early decades of the twentieth century. Essentially Tawney drew socialist conclusions. He criticised the “naive and uncritical worship of economic power.” The interests of the individual must be “submitted to the control of some larger body of interests.”

Weber saw the modern spirit of capitalism as embodied in the idea that the acquisitive spirit was now ”the ultimate purpose of life.” The source of this spirit he traced primarily to Calvinism. Due to Calvin’s doctrine of predestination the elect were certain of their salvation. The natural inclination to ‘good works’ therefore had to be worked out elsewhere - for example, in the market. The consequence was what we now know as the Protestant work ethic.

These two sociological meta-narratives of Tawney and Weber have been deeply influential. What is more remarkable is the extent to which these broad worldviews exerted such influence on evangelical opinion. The means by which this occurred was through the observation that one strand of radical Protestantism – the Anabaptists and Mennonites – displayed the work ethic and yet rejected capitalism. This teaching, with its unspoken undergirding in Christian socialism has been embraced by wider sections of the evangelical community in a relatively unthinking manner.

The main proponents of this view are generally associated with the Mennonite tradition. John Howard Yoder (1927-1997) represented this outlook at a more academic level in his book *The Politics of Jesus* first published in 1972. Early in his book Yoder states, ”Jesus is according to the biblical witness, a model of radical political action.” This understanding takes the form of a social ethic, of challenge to the political authorities and, as Yoder puts it, ”the beginning of a new set of social alternatives.” Yoder goes on to claim that Jesus accepted voluntary poverty for the sake of the kingdom and instructed his disciples to redistribute capital. This ignores, amongst other things, not far short of twenty years business enterprise in Jesus’s earthly father’s carpentry business not only making the usual products of the business but also the necessary profits to sustain it.

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44 Ibid, page 284
45 M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*
47 Ibid., page 39
This sort of approach was popularised through Ronald J. Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, first published in 1977. This work takes the shared Tawney and Weber thesis that the objective of economic affluence has taken center stage, combines that world view with Yoder’s politicisation of Jesus and builds an economic and social ethic that has deeply influenced evangelical thinking on both sides of the Atlantic. Sider was an early critic of a growth based economy. The objective he argued was not just a simpler life style but “to reduce total expenditures...to the point where you enjoy a standard of living which all persons in the world could share.”48 This argument has been reappearing in the light of the most recent financial crisis.

“...strategies of growth...have reached a point of diminishing returns...[the] backstop provided by government spending and central bank debt acquisition is the only thing keeping the system from hurtling into a deflationary spiral...The picture is bleak; rising poverty, disappearing social services, and general strikes and protests.”49

Unfortunately for its proponents no, or insignificant, economic growth undermines the very basis of their own analysis of world need. A lack of growth will mean falling incomes, falling employment and indeed, even for the most dedicated socialist, a falling tax base. It is remarkable that so many evangelicals fell for the plot.

Sider’s starting theme in his biblical analysis is unsurprisingly that of liberation followed by incarnation, the classic themes of Christian socialism. Sider’s prescription included the redistribution of capital, the denunciation of sinful structures on trade - consumption and profits - the rejection of consumption and the hint of a subsistence life style - living in community. This lifestyle would in fact bring more poverty. Sider acknowledges, “eating less beef or becoming a vegetarian will not necessarily feed one starving child. If millions of Americans and Europeans reduce their beef consumption, but do not act politically to change public policy, the result will not necessarily be less starvation in the Third World.”50 Hence, the demand must be for socio-political and structural change.

The same theme was struck in another later work from the same tradition, Donald Kraybill’s *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. In describing the kingdom of God as upside-down economically in “stark contrast to the prevailing western economic philosophy,”51 Kraybill produces the familiar prescriptions of the redistributive tradition. He says we “can begin by consuming less,” adding that this is, “the beginning of responsible stewardship of the God-owned non-renewable resources.”52 This, however, is a category confusion where acquisitive materialism is conflated with economic growth.

This perspective arrived in Britain through two channels; a hugely popular pietistic work, *Celebration of Discipline*, written by Richard Foster and Bishop David Sheppard’s *Bias to the Poor*, the authors both being prominent evangelicals. The former, reflecting Mennonite teaching, advocated lifestyle issues and

50 Sider, *Rich Christians*, page 178
52 Ibid. page 155
the latter dealt with the so-called divine bias to the poor. The consequence has been a long-term loss of perspective in Britain on economic matters amongst Christians in general and evangelicals in particular.

David Sheppard’s book *Bias to the Poor* was published in 1983. Sheppard was a prominent evangelical and Bishop of Liverpool, a city that had suffered significant economic depression (as well as a long tradition, at least post second world war of left-wing political representation). Sheppard wrote from experience and in an engaging and sympathetic manner. He attacked the voluntary principle under the guise of power.

"...both charity and paternalism are concepts which are rightly criticised; both offer help, but frequently retain control in the fatherly or charitable hands of someone else, and therefore may then be said to strengthen rather than weaken dependence."\(^5^3\)

The replacement of the voluntary principle by the state principle (Sheppard made no mention of dependency on the state and the power of the state) has been one of the key reasons why evangelical approaches to poverty and economics has become so confused and why so many have, perhaps unwittingly, embraced socialistic solutions. Sheppard’s writing is extremely appealing and winsome. It does, however, lack serious depth in both economics and theology. A re-read of the book is a reminder of how many were taken in by it. Christians, he argues,

"should take a lead in a public campaign to change the assumption that everyone pays their taxes grudgingly and unwillingly. Taxation is a proper way by which wealth is distributed more fairly and by which the poor and the whole of society are given better opportunities. A scheme of international taxation is needed, if the enormous gap between rich and poor nations is to be lessened."\(^5^4\)

But if those taxes lead to wasteful and excessive government expenditure, or in fact do not enhance fairness and opportunity, but stifle innovation and enterprise which can lead to growth and employment and increased national income, then perhaps there is a better moral case for a campaign against excessive and ineffective taxation rather than in favour of it? The point is how the redistributive tradition makes assumptions about its superiority which are open to serious challenge.

The impact of *Celebration of Discipline* was more subtle. This was a book of discipleship which embraced the pietistic approach of much of the earlier Mennonite teaching we have mentioned. Hence themes of sacrifice, community, simplicity and lifestyle come to the fore. It is the combination of this personal piety alongside the more redistributive tradition that led to evangelicals embracing this methodology.

To summarise we can say that the redistributive tradition is characterized by a distinctive analysis and by a particular prescription. The common observations are these:

\(^5^3\) D. Sheppard, *Bias to the Poor*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1983  
\(^5^4\) Ibid., pages 133-134
• Theological assumptions that build on the themes of Christian socialism
• An analysis that displays a simplistic approach to economics especially in matters of growth and enterprise
• An interpretation that sees redistribution as the central theme
• Policy prescriptions that assume a prime role for government, the morality of high taxation and an uncritical commitment to inter-governmental international aid

All Christians will share a concern about the reduction of poverty. The unforeseen consequences of the redistributive tradition, however, are that wealth creation is ignored, growth denied, philanthropy strangled and the voluntary principle lost.

**Conclusions**

The evangelical response to poverty depends upon a dynamic understanding of God’s providential provision of the market together with the practical application of the moral sentiments to compassion implanted in the heart. The need for compassion and care is a result of sin which leads to behaviour which distorts the market. So evangelicalism’s embrace of the ‘invisible hand’ is neither an unthinking nor an unlimited adoption of the free market. Rather it is an acceptance of the nature of divine provision with the application of Christian moral values. The voluntary principle lies at the heart of the thesis because without it government becomes all powerful, the opportunity for Christian morality and discipleship in the market place is lost and, hence, God’s good and gracious provision is denied. What is more, government fails on account of locality and relationships, both of which evangelicals have viewed as essential. Indeed government may induce poverty and increase dependency rather than reduce it; hence self-help is also an evangelical principle. In addition to that, government, or perhaps we should say, excessive government and centralisation are in fact dangerous not only to economic freedom but also to the very Christian voluntary societies which lie at the heart of the response to poverty. This has been well articulated by Professor Roger Scruton:

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

Thus, the threat is not only to economic and religious freedom, but in essence to freedom itself. The redistributive tradition which has taken in so many evangelicals lacks a moral, theological and religious basis from an *evangelical* standpoint. The threat of socialism and socialist solutions is a real one and the attraction is illusory. So, for the evangelical, there will be a real emphasis on the market, on self-help, and on incentives to work; but alongside that lies compassion on the ground through the voluntary principle. In this way innovation flourishes, philanthropy is encouraged, compassion is exercised and the gospel maintained. The fact that this was recognised by the Earl of Shaftesbury so comprehensively some 150 years ago, simply illustrates that he was a most remarkable man.

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55 Professor Roger Scruton, Charity, Conservative Home Thinkers Corner, 11th February 2012
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