

R. H. HUTTON AND THE VICTORIAN LAY SERMON

E. D. MACKERNESS

"The Journalists are now the true Kings and Clergy."

When the first number of the *Nineteenth Century* appeared in March, 1877, it contained an article by J. Baldwin Brown entitled "Is the Pulpit losing its power?" This essay was part of a controversy which occupied the attention of numerous critics, both clerical and lay, during the closing decades of the last century. There were those, for instance, who were firmly convinced that, in spite of impending changes in the spiritual life of England, the sermon would hold its own and remain an authoritative voice in the world of religion and general culture. On the other hand, there were many who believed that the conventional pulpit address was too tame for the present age, and would inevitably be superseded by more up-to-date methods of verbal communication. The Rev. Eubule Evans, in a "Discourse on Sermons" (*Macmillan's Magazine*, November, 1887), expressed doubts which were shared by people of all denominations: "Now (so it is said) the universal spread of education and the multiplication of popular religious books enable every one who desires it to get a better sermon at home than in his parish church. Thus. . . their necessity is at an end. It may be so." Evans was reluctant to admit that the *life* inherent in the spoken word was about to be stifled in the interests of cold print. He did not attempt to deny, however, that the parochiality of the average sermon (however admirable it might be in other ways) could not hope to equal in attractiveness the mental worlds to which inexpensive books and journals gave access.

It would, of course, be foolish to suggest that the English pulpit was suddenly rendered ineffective simply because periodicals were becoming more numerous than ever before. Church and chapel-goers still clamoured for sermons, as social surveys of the time make plain. The biggest incidence of demand, however, was not among the most discriminating sections of the public, and it is clear that, as time went on, the "standard vehicle of serious truth"—to borrow G. M. Young's phrase—was being out-moded by the moral and theological discussions published in the "intellectual" weeklies and monthlies. The

religious press itself may have been partly to blame for the recession of interest in sermons among educated people, since the various church organizations all had their own representative journals. But John Morley was perhaps justified when, on retiring from his editorship of the *Fortnightly* in 1882, he proudly proclaimed that "the clergy no longer [had] the pulpit to themselves, for the new Reviews [had become] more powerful pulpits, in which heretics were at least as welcome as orthodox."¹ Twenty years before this, in *Macmillan's Magazine*, Canon Robinson had castigated the smart and sarcastic journals for insinuating that only "elderly ladies and substantial shopkeepers with puritanical leanings" seriously patronized the sermon at this time of day. But now that all sections of the community were spending less time generally in the practice of religion, pulpit utterances ceased to carry the weight that attached to them earlier in the century. In the recent past, sermons had been an essential part of the English sabbath, but the public that had been trained to reverence great preachers and to reflect at length on their printed works now had at its disposal such magazines as the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Contemporary Review*, the *Saturday Review*, and other periodicals intended to make a high-level appeal. These "new reviews" drew on the services of writers whose stylistic skill enabled them to secure an intimacy of connection with the reader that no author of sermons could aspire to. Moreover, they were able to keep abreast of the times to a much greater extent than did the old-established quarterlies, with their erudite main articles and occasionally ponderous methods of argument.

For reasons that will presently appear, a peculiar significance attaches to the *Spectator* in the late Victorian era. Founded in 1828 as an organ of "educated radicalism," the *Spectator* enjoyed a considerable prosperity in the forties and fifties. It was "re-created" in 1861, when it passed into the hands of Meredith Townsend; and in its subsequent career it was distinguished by the fact that for many years one of its major contributors from the editorial side was a man who fought valiantly to uphold Anglican orthodoxy against the assaults to which it was then subjected. It would not be claiming too much, indeed, to state that Richard Holt Hutton was one of the great preachers of the nineteenth century, and he is all the more symbolic in that he did not occupy a pulpit but delivered

1 John Morley, "Valedictory," in *Studies in Literature* (1890), p. 341.

his "sermons" in print to the readers of the *Spectator* week by week. The supplement to the *Dictionary of National Biography* does, in fact, refer to Hutton as a preacher; and Julia Wedgwood, in a tribute published in the *Contemporary Review* (October, 1897), speaks of him in similar terms.

The son of a Unitarian minister, R. H. Hutton was born in 1826. He had a distinguished career at the University College, London, and at the University of Bonn; later he went to the Manchester New College to train for the Unitarian ministry. We learn from a colleague of his, the Rev. A. J. Church, that Hutton did have some experience as a preacher but that "the work could not have been much to his taste. He had no liking for rhetoric. . . . Nor did he possess the personal gifts of the preacher."² Subsequently Hutton was co-editor of the *Inquirer*, the organ of Young Unitarianism, and also a contributor to the *Prospective Review*. In time he came under the influence of F. D. Maurice and adopted views which were at variance with the stricter Unitarian principles. Eventually he became a member of the Anglican communion.

To Hutton, theology assumed the status of a "science," and his labours were directed to maintaining a proper respect for it amid the welter of conflicting doctrines which had gained currency during his lifetime. In the course of his work for the *Spectator* (of which he became co-editor with Townsend) he wrote on topics of all kinds; he was, in fact, a man of countless interests and not a rigid specialist. As Sir William Beach Thomas says in his *Story of the 'Spectator'* (1928), "it would have been an impiety for Hutton to have kept his religion and his journalism in watertight compartments." Miss Edith Batho and Professor Bonamy Dobrée have described Hutton as "almost a type of the best Victorian reviewer: a man of strong and independent judgement, deeply affected by the great problems of his day, and expressing his convictions with gravity and a sense of responsibility."³ It is true that Hutton's book on Sir Walter Scott is not the most distinguished of the "English Men of Letters" series, but many of his incidental essays contain fine critical writing. One might mention, for instance, the essays on Longfellow and on Leslie Stephen's *Dr. Johnson* that are reprinted in Hutton's *Criticisms of Contemporary Thought and Thinkers*. No matter what subject he takes up, Hutton's work is always marked by an ability to correlate relevant pieces of evidence in the process of working towards

2 A. J. Church, *Memories of Men and Books* (1908), p. 205.

3 Batho and Dobrée, *The Victorians and After, 1830-1914* (1938), pp. 333-6.

his own kind of "argument from design." Many of his metaphysical disquisitions are worthy of a professional philosopher. However, his heart was in theology. As he wrote to Professor Nichol in 1862, "to find any interest taken in Theology is rare now, at least amongst men who have entered life, and *not* entered the clerical profession. To me it is, and always has been, a real study, and one of the profoundest interest; and I am almost amazed at the indifference of men in general to it."⁴ The exaggeration here is what one would expect to find in a personal letter, but it reveals something about Hutton's qualifications for entering the pulpit held open for him when he became a partner in the *Spectator* enterprise.

In her *Contemporary Review* article, Julia Wedgwood praises the readiness with which Hutton understood the mental condition of his age. "For the first time in history since Christianity existed," she writes, "it was possible to ignore Christianity. Nay, it was even possible, in turning from it, to carry off much that was supposed its inalienable property. The wreck of orthodoxy, it was discovered, had not overwhelmed its treasures, and they who fled the quaking walls carried with them no contemptible portion of the hoarded wealth." She notes Hutton's "double vision" of the seeming reasonableness and unreasonableness of the Agnostic position. Whereas others saw only what (as they thought) had been gained by jettisoning the "taste for chimeras," Hutton dwelt on the loss thereby sustained; to him any surrender to rationalistic habits of mind was as serious as the atrophy of a human faculty. Hence his concern at the disappearance of what he called "religious genius" from our midst. Reviewing a volume of sermons by J. B. Mozley, he observes that talent of the kind one associates with the name of Newman, Maurice, or James Martineau is no longer conspicuously evident in the sphere of religion. Science, art, literature, and politics all seem to be capable of producing figures of outstanding originality, "but for many years back, religion has hardly been able to boast of any real genius specially appropriate to its own sphere." Charles Kingsley, to take one example of a clerical celebrity, was a man of genius, but the special province of his genius was assuredly not religious, however much he may have been in demand as a pulpit orator. Hutton contends that:

⁴ W. A. Knight, *Memoir of John Nichol* (Glasgow, 1896), p. 216.

Sermons are by no means the dreary things they are called. One is always meeting with good sermons, thoughtful, earnest, even wise. But what one hardly ever meets with are sermons wherein it is clear that an original mind is working under the influence of that specially congenial atmosphere which breathes a new life into its powers. For some time back, it has seemed as if original genius of a specially appropriate kind were developed by almost every kind of strong influence except religion.⁵

Hutton considers that the sermons of Mozley reveal a mind of the calibre necessary for strenuous theological teaching, but when he turns to examine some of the strong influences at work in other quarters he is less happy at the prospect before him.

In a review of *The Clothes of Religion: A Reply to Popular Positivism* by Wilfrid Ward, the *Spectator* critic wrote:

These phantom creeds will never take the place of real creeds, whether the real creeds hold their ground or not. The most these phantom creeds can do is to signal, as it were, impressively to mankind even when the substance of theology is wanting, that the yearnings of men will create in its place some simulacrum of a creed to witness to the still unsatisfied want. (July 24, 1886).

Of Professor W. K. Clifford's "cosmic emotion" theory, Hutton remarks:

The defect of these cosmic emotions, as substitutes for religious emotions, seems to be that so far from straightening us and subduing us for our duty here, they dissipate us in a world so vague and so unintelligible, that we are left weaker than before.⁶

Secularism and even atheism may, on occasion, be consistent with loftiness of mind and nobility of personal character; but the chances are that in the majority of cases they will lead to improvident hedonism and a palpable deterioration of life. Hence the fallacy of the "altruistic" dogmas associated with Positivism:

Not working for God, but for man, [the conscious altruist] cannot see beyond the bitter disappointments which work for man too certainly involves; he cannot escape the pessimism, the cynicism, the despondency, the exhaustion which fruitless work for a finite creature who seldom understands, and hardly ever repays it, almost invariably produces.⁷

5 *Contemporary Thought and Thinkers*, Vol. I., pp. 319-320.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 269.

7 *Aspects of Religious and Scientific Thought*, p. 220.

In 1892 Hutton went so far as to say that "there is surely a sense in which sympathy with men, far from leading directly to sympathy with God, renders this sympathy difficult, and in some cases all but impossible."⁸ Now it would not be true to say that Hutton was antagonistic to the spirit of modern science; indeed, he believed that "the development of science and philosophy is a part of the divine purpose for man, not less truly, though in a more subordinate sense, than the development of his religious life."⁹ But cerebral efficiency is not to be taken as the *ultima ratio rerum*; and in the conduct and development of human affairs there is a Good which ranks higher even than that of satisfactory social relationships. Hutton regarded the display of "pity for man as man, which is a very different thing indeed from the pity for man as a creature of God," as a "much more serious diversion of energy from the religious life than even the rapid growth of intellectual and physical science."¹⁰ For it can (paradoxical though this may seem) militate against spiritual integrity.

On this point, of course, Hutton stands in great danger of being sadly misunderstood by present-day readers. He was not concerned to belittle the philanthropic ventures of his age; he merely took to a logical conclusion certain theories advanced by thinkers whose confidence in positivistic formulæ rendered them blind to the possibilities of Christian reaffirmation. In this connection he commends the Rev. J. M. Wilson's lectures in *The Theory of Inspiration* (S.P.C.K., 1883) because they

do not rationalise and explain away Revelation into a mere human evolution, but are well calculated to vindicate the faith in a divine power in almost the only way in which in our day it can. . . be triumphantly vindicated, as a faith justified and even required by the study of history. . . a power especially reflected in the history of the Jewish people, and receiving at last its perfect embodiment in the life of Christ.¹¹

Shifting his attention to another department of knowledge, Hutton makes the following declaration:

For my own part, I think that no aspect of Christianity has more claim on the present generation than its declaration, in the very face of the new physical theory, that the true bond between men is

8 *Ibid.*, p. 367.

9 *Contemporary Thought and Thinkers*, Vol. II, p. 237.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Aspects of Religious and Scientific Thought*, pp. 209-210.

at once inward and divine, that it comes from the world above us, — and so far as it does come from the world beneath us at all, only because all that is beneath us is ultimately derived from what is above us, and that it penetrates into the secrets of human motive; that the Creator, instead of merely welding us together by the cohesion of our eternal interests, and using the multitude as the lavish and wasteful machinery of nature for producing a few wise men, or as the hot-bed out of which the rare flower of scientific genius is elaborated, estimates the greater gifts of the few and learned entirely as talents meant to be expended in the service of the many, the ignorant and the wretched — that is, as *means* for raising the millions, not as the final cause of the existence of those millions themselves.¹²

From proclamations such as this it is not difficult to appreciate why the one-time Unitarian came to venerate so consistently the sacramental side of Anglican worship.

Enough has now been said, perhaps, to suggest that the characteristic *élan* with which Hutton tackles theological subjects is eloquent of the pulpit. His prose style, however, is not one that belongs there. His writing would lose rather than gain in effectiveness if it were spoken aloud—declamation, indeed, would tend to disable the faculties which are needed for its comprehension. Sir William Beach Thomas has described Hutton's prose as deplorable "from an aesthetic point of view," and he quotes Virginia Woolf's description of it¹³ as unfair, "if only because it judges Hutton by standards not his own. The ideas at which Hutton clutched seem vague to Mrs. Woolf; but to Hutton and his readers they were quite definite."¹⁴ From the passages quoted (and especially the last one), some idea can be gained of Hutton's addiction to the devices of qualification, parenthesis, and recapitulation by means of indirect allusions. These all belong essentially to the kind of prose that is meant to be read and understood in silence. The nature of Hutton's writing, it need hardly be said, is such that the reader must discipline himself fairly thoroughly in order to relish it: the carefully wrought periods make few concessions to mental indolence. Yet the success of the new reviews as a whole was largely due to the skill with which contributors such as Hutton were able to secure the confidence of their regular readers. Except on rare occasions, the *tone* of

12 *Theological Essays* (4th edition, 1902), p. xxxii.

13 "A voice which is as a plague of locusts—the voice of a man stumbling drowsily among loose words, clutching aimlessly at vague ideas."

14 *The Story of the 'Spectator'*, p. 70.

the *Spectator* and the *Nineteenth Century* is that of enlightened gentlemen addressing one another on the major issues of life. The topics kept under discussion cover a wide range of subject-matter—politics, international relations, public welfare, and intellectual affairs in general. Religion takes its place among these, and it is treated with earnestness and sincerity, though without embarrassing unction. In their day, Hutton's lay sermons in the *Spectator* performed an important function: they conveyed a "message" that was taken seriously by a generation which would earlier have shown a deeper veneration for bound volumes of sermons than for the weekly supply of "Sunday reading" disseminated through secular channels.

It might perhaps be argued that the number of sermons reviewed in the pages of the *Spectator* itself rather goes against some of the points made above, and that, in any case, Hutton's term of office on the paper coincided with the period when great preachers such as Henry Parry Liddon and Bishop Magee were still active in the pulpit. But it must be remembered that the indications of future changes are often present some time before the changes themselves are due to be brought about. A glance at various numbers of the *Spectator* during 1886 is of relevance here. From the issue of January 30, 1886, for instance, we gain some idea of the numerous religious articles appearing in secular journals other than those mentioned above. And on May 22, 1886, Liddon's *Easter Sermons* drew the following remarks from the reviewer: "The common complaint against sermons, the common reason given for bestowing but little attention upon them, is their monotony; they do not cover a sufficiently varied field of human thought and experience." The criticism is significant. The weeklies and monthlies, as long as they remained under responsible management, were able to "integrate" religion with other aspects of life in a way which appealed to thousands of people to whom a spoken sermon—the pressure of contemporary conditions being what it was—seemed merely a tedious exposition of sententious uplift.

It is, one must admit, always dangerous to speak dogmatically on questions which concern shifts in public taste, but by the time of Hutton's death in 1897 there were indications that the "standard vehicle of serious truth" had lost a great deal of its former power. Richard Holt Hutton was only one of many late nineteenth-century journalists who made the

editorial column perform the office of a secular pulpit. Many of the leading articles in the *Times* were shorter lay sermons; and this particular *genre* had been used by several famous writers, notable Coleridge, F. D. Maurice, and T. H. Huxley. R. H. Hutton's work has been studied here because Hutton addressed himself to a consideration of theological problems in a manner which would have done credit to great preachers such as Newman, Keble, Liddon, and Jowett. Yet his position as a wholly secular intermediary is symbolic of radical changes in the state of public intelligence which were only partly foreseen by the disputants in the Pulpit-or-Press controversy.