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Religious Conditions in England¹

By E. GEORGE PEARCE

PLEASING ASPECTS OF BRITISH PROTESTANTISM

Ever since the days of the Reformation the group of islands lying off the northwest coast of the European continent have been a stronghold of the Protestant faith and a city of refuge for suppressed minorities from every part of Europe. True, there were days when the fanatical views of Queen Mary or the despotism of the Stuart kings reversed the process and drove thousands of nonconformist Englishmen into exile in Holland and America. Generally speaking, however, once the half-hearted politico-religious reformation of Henry VIII was over and the Protestant faith had imbedded itself in British hearts during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, England flung wide her doors to hard-pressed refugees whenever persecution drove them from their own lands. French Huguenots, fleeing from the vicious Counter Reformation under Louis XIV, were received with open arms in Great Britain. Fifty years later thousands of Lutherans from Salzburg, repudiating the forced conversion of the Roman Catholic archbishop, fled,

¹ Bibliography: *Towards the Conversion of England*. Report of a Commission on Evangelism appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. Published 1945 by The Press and Publications Board.—*Our Day of Opportunity*. Visitation Charge of John W. C. Wand, Bishop of London. Published by SPCK, 1948.—*Puzzled People*. Study by Mass-Observation. Published by Victor Gollanz, 1948.—*Fascism in the English Church*. By a London Journalist. Published by Henry Walter, 1938.—*Continental Protestantism and the English Reformation*. By Frederick J. Smithen. Published by John Clarke & Co., 1927.—*News Review* (Oct. 23 and 30, Nov. 13, 1947).—*Lutheran World Almanac* (1934—1937). Published by the National Lutheran Council.

some to Lithuania and some to England, where arrangements were made for their emigration to British colonies in America. Today England has once more become a shelter of safety. Even now, after the tremendous impact of two fearful wars in which, for a time, Britain bore the whole brunt of the attack, she has not failed to resume her traditional role; once again she has thrown open the doors of her cities and villages to scores of thousands of exiled people who cherish freedom even at the cost of great sacrifice.

We Lutherans regret that the English Reformers, after no little indecision, elected to go the way of Calvin rather than that of Luther. Nevertheless, from the more general view of Protestantism as a whole, we have always looked upon British Christianity with a feeling closely akin to admiration. People whose sphere of activity in Europe has brought them closer to the British Church may be more aware of this unconscious esteem than we who have worked in the detached, frankly independent air of America or Canada. This is neither the place nor the time to discuss the all-important doctrinal implications, but, viewing the whole matter in its outward aspects, Britain has always appeared as a bulwark of Protestant faith and, further than that, a political State shot through with Christian ideals. Indications that the ethos of the nation is still professedly Christian are not wanting even today. Every session of the British Parliament is opened with prayer; religious service is provided by law and maintained by public funds in all State institutions and in the Armed Services; the B. B. C. has a fully accredited religious affairs department; at a public service opening the annual conference of the Labor Party at Scarborough recently, the Scripture Lessons were read by the Prime Minister and Lord Chancellor of the realm, respectively; a few months ago, in a world-wide broadcast of the wedding of our future sovereign, Princess Elizabeth, the voice of the Primate of the English Church was heard speaking to the royal couple in much the same way as any Christian pastor would address a young couple facing a future together.

Another sterling feature of the English scene is the complete religious freedom which obtains there. From the American point of view, with its principle of complete separation of Church and State, this liberty of conscience is taken for

granted. But it must be remembered that England has a State Church, an official religion recognized by Parliament and established by law. That means, in theory, that every citizen who has not declared his membership in another body is regarded as a member of the Established Church. Or, as the Bishop of London said in his Visitation Charge recently: "There is not a single citizen in the whole country for whom some parish priest is not responsible."² This can, and often does, mean difficulties for small unrecognized groups. In England, however, this "Established Church" concept has not resulted in any way in the domination of religious minorities or even prejudice against them by either the government or the National Church. I think here of a Lutheran church which for the past 280 years has held German services every Sunday in the heart of London, even during that trying time when the *Luftwaffe* was battering the face of old London.

DECAY OF CHRISTIANITY IN ENGLAND

All these factors combined have made England rightly stand forth as one of the stoutest bulwarks in the edifice of Protestant Christendom or, to change the metaphor, a haven of real strength especially in the eyes of Protestant minorities in pre-war Eastern Europe. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals much that is disturbing. The foundations of English Christianity have been weakened tremendously. "Seen from a distance," an official report of the Church of England says, "Britain is the country which seems most nearly to approach the ideal of a Christian community. But," it goes on, "behind this façade the situation presents a more ominous appearance."³ This is the studied appraisal of a committee appointed by the Established Church to look into the religious life of the people. Such a survey of modern England lays bare a distressing situation: the Christian Church as a spiritual and even moral force has fallen into moldering decay, just as it has in so many other parts of the world. The result? Christian England needs missionaries again. The vast majority of English people need to be converted to Christianity. There are more unconverted men and women in Britain in 1948

² *Our Day of Opportunity*, SPCK, 1948, p. 59.

³ *Towards the Conversion of England*, 1945, Press and Publications Board, p. 2.

than when St. Augustine landed with his forty monks in the seventh century to convert the Anglo-Saxons.

As a comparative newcomer and stranger to the English scene (having been here less than two years), I would, indeed, be highly uncharitable and grossly presumptuous in making this startling statement unless I had decisive and demonstrable grounds to support it. I draw upon the following sources as authorities: 1) the report of the Commission on Evangelism appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, with the unexpected title: *Towards the Conversion of England*; 2) the *News Review* national poll by the Bishop of London as "ably devised and competently compiled"; 3) a similar study (1948) of English public opinion conducted by an internationally recognized fact-finding body known as "Mass-Observation"; 4) my own personal observations and impressions. I shall lean heavily upon the first three, but very lightly upon the last.

There are, I think, three things that indicate unmistakably the alarming decadence in spiritual life in England. Each of them reflects in its own way the depressing religious apathy into which the average Englishman has fallen, but all of them cry with one united voice for decisive, Spirit-motivated action on the part of the Church. They are: 1) empty churches; 2) skepticism and unbelief of the masses; 3) breakdown of Christian morality.

EMPTY CHURCHES

England is a land of numerous and beautiful churches, but reliable polls of public opinion show that an amazingly small proportion of the people make use of them for public worship. Realizing that there is still a certain prestige value in *saying* one goes to church, even though one has not been for many years, the conductors of the two national surveys mentioned above admitted that churchgoing is an activity which is most difficult to measure. They therefore took every precaution against padded figures. The findings published in 1947 were agreed that *only ten to fifteen per cent of English people attend church regularly*, while 49 per cent do not attend at all. I have heard also this percentage mentioned in public utterances of leading churchmen. The drift away from the churches seems most pronounced in urban communities, especially in the London area, where one fifth of the total population of

the country lives, while provincial areas in the North show up best. If desire for public worship is a valid index of a nation's Christianity, England's empty churches are a solemn warning.

WIDESPREAD SKEPTICISM

The idle dreams of a few agnostic intellectuals some decades ago have become the religion of the streets today. Skepticism has descended to the masses, an indication, perhaps, of puzzled, confused ideas in religion, or, worse still, an easily adopted expression of apathy—the “what does it matter?” spirit. Investigations show that there is a great confusion of thought and, especially among the younger, outright unbelief regarding such fundamental issues as the after-life, the existence of God, the divinity of Christ. The evacuation of children during the war brought to light such widespread unbelief that, as the report of the Commission on Evangelism says: “the whole country was shocked at the amount of the sheer pagan ignorance”⁴ among children of primary and secondary schools. In the poll conducted by Mass-Observation, people were asked: “Do you believe there is a God?” One person in four expressed definite doubt, while one in twenty was an uncompromising disbeliever in a deity. Even among churchgoers there is a wide rift between what people believe and what the Bible teaches. For long centuries the Church has justly regarded belief in the doctrines of the virgin birth and the divinity of Christ as a rough test of orthodoxy. According to the Mass-Observation study one quarter of Church of England churchgoers fail to pass this test of orthodoxy. Our Lord's question: “Who do men say that I am?”⁵ would today receive the dismal answer: more than a third of England's people deny that “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”⁶

COLLAPSE OF CHRISTIAN MORALITY

From a national point of view the most frightening indication of the country-wide desertion from the Christian faith is the increasing moral decay. Hand in hand with disbelief in a just and living God goes the loss of a sense of personal re-

⁴ *Towards the Conversion of England*, p. 11.

⁵ Matt. 16:13.

⁶ Matt. 16:16.

sponsibility. With that gone, our generation has well been dubbed the "Age Without Standards." Sexual laxity, juvenile crimes, decline in personal honesty, a quickly spiraling upgrade in divorce cases, and a feverish appetite for gambling are all indications of a rapidly ebbing Christian way of life.

Such, then, is the England of today—a population in whose life and thought the appeal of the Gospel of Jesus is largely irrelevant. Before I go on to the remedies proposed to bridge the ever-widening rift between people and Church, just a word or two to bring the whole thing into proper perspective. Comparisons sometimes do more harm than good, but they do help toward a balanced appraisal. For example, even though the divorce rate in Great Britain has multiplied twentyfold since the beginning of the century, it is still less than one sixth of the divorce rate in that other great English-speaking country, the United States of America. It is not unlikely that other phases of national life will bear a similar relation. It must be understood that we are dealing in this survey with the righteousness that comes of faith in Jesus Christ and not with what has been termed "civic righteousness." The former is basically spiritual, the latter entirely outward. We realize, of course, that the regenerated lives of the believing Christians do much to elevate the corporate life of a nation, as a leaven lightens the whole lump. Of the strength of civic righteousness of the English people there can be no doubt. The dark days during the Battle of Britain testified decisively to the spirit of sacrifice for others, the cheerful endurance and kindly decency the people displayed when their island stood alone as a garrison of liberty.

REMEDIES OFFERED

We proceed now to an examination of the efforts proposed in British churches to meet this problem. A basic condition for the cure of any disease is the realization of its existence. The clergy of English denominations, Established as well as Free Churches, are aware that all is not well in the religious life of their country. In common with Christian bodies throughout the world the British churches are devoting time and effort in an attempt to turn the masses to Christ. The war, though it has accelerated the descent of Christian morality, has also opened the eyes of the Church to the gravity of the

situation. The evacuation of large sections of the population and the direction of labor brought about an interchange of views that contributed in no small manner to the over-all appreciation of the problem. Decided Christians, laity as well as clergy, were thus brought face to face with the gigantic responsibility they would have to shoulder. The Archbishops' Committee reported: "It would be fatal to minimize the problem that confronts the Church. We are called to a far harder task than to evangelize the heathen who do worship (however ignorantly) a Power higher than themselves. In England the Church has to present the Christian Gospel to multitudes in every section of society *who believe in nothing*; who have lost a whole dimension (the spiritual dimension) of life; and for whom life has no ultimate meaning."⁷

In the 1943 Summer Session of the assembly of representatives from both provinces of the Church of England, a commission of fifty was appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to "survey the whole problem of modern evangelism with special reference to the spiritual needs and prevailing intellectual outlook of the non-worshipping members of the community."⁸ About two years later this commission published its findings under a title already referred to in this essay: *Towards the Conversion of England*. This plain-spoken document is a remarkable piece of work. It conceives of the Church's pressing responsibility as being nothing less than the conversion of England. "We cannot expect to get far with Evangelism until three facts are faced. First, the vast majority of English people need to be converted to Christianity. Secondly, a large number of Church people also require to be converted, in the sense of their possessing that personal knowledge of Christ which can be ours only by the dedication of the whole self, whatever the cost. Thirdly, such personal knowledge of Christ is the only satisfactory basis for testimony to others."⁹ The Commission declares that there is only one weapon with which the Church may meet the situation: the eternal Gospel, "the good news that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself."¹⁰

⁷ *Towards Conversion of England*, p. 16.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. vi.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹⁰ 2 Cor. 5:19.

Realizing that England suffers an acute postwar shortage of clergy (one pastor to 1,200 in England as compared with one to 600 in America), the report urges the mobilization of the whole body of the laity for the work of evangelism, which is then to become a *normal* Christian duty. It envisages the home, strengthened by family prayer and Bible reading, as the starting place for evangelism; then branching out to the workshop and desk; and finally utilizing the peculiar literary and professional talents of certain vocations—the teaching profession to reach the children, the doctors and nurses to bring their witness to suffering patients, officers in the Armed Services, welfare workers, trade union leaders, etc. It commends for evangelistic use all the modern agencies of propaganda: cinema, radio, television, press, publicity agencies. Where the Anglican liturgy is unfamiliar to the people, certain carefully planned simplifications may be permitted, though not to the extent that the “traditional forms of public worship [are] scrapped in favor of an unrestricted medley of popular services.” A few days ago, 9,000 clergy and laity representing the “shock troops” of the Bishop of London’s campaign gathered at the Royal Albert Hall to prepare for the opening salvo in London in May, 1949.

STIFFENING OF STANDARDS

Among the Anglican clergy another device employed to halt the migration away from the Church is a certain stiffening of standards. This has not, as far as I know, the blessing of any official body, but I have often encountered it in isolated cases in reading and by personal acquaintance. It is felt that promiscuous administration of the Sacrament or church rites without regard to the personal faith of those that have requested such ministrations has contributed to some extent to the popular view that the Church rites exist only to baptize, marry, and bury, and hence has implicitly encouraged the drift from the real life of the Church. In one deanery in London, for example, all parish priests have determined to withhold the Sacrament of Baptism unless there is a good evidence that the parents obviously intend to bring up the child in the Christian faith. In some cases a child is even turned away because other children in the family were not attending Sunday school. One parish priest intimated to me that it would not be long before the same principles would be applied to

the marriage ceremony. In this connection I might make mention of another measure hinted at by the Bishop of London recently: "Presence at Mass each Sunday is understood to be a strict rule for Roman Catholics. . . . The Church of England has no such fixed rule. . . . I think myself that the time has come for reform in this matter. We shall have to lay down some rule for attendance at public worship at least once each Lord's Day. But it is hoped that we shall not press this so far as to unchurch those who do not obey."¹¹

EVANGELISTIC RALLIES

The third concerted effort to reach the unchurched masses of England I would mention is that made up of such movements as "Christian Commando" and "Youth for Christ" rallies. These are interdenominational and are largely under the sponsorship of the Free Churches of Britain, although individual Anglican clergy have taken leading roles. Deeply influenced by similar activities in America and placing their strongest emphasis upon the emotional decision for Christ after a carefully planned program of fiery witness and appropriate music, these huge rallies are held periodically in the large centers of Britain with great success. They attract vast crowds and bring the name of Christ to thousands, but somehow, one feels, after all the noise has died down, very little permanent result remains. The theology proclaimed is, of course, watered down, as all "interdenominational" teaching must be.

In thus trying to gauge the remedies proposed and applied for the re-conversion of England, I make no claim to being comprehensive. Obviously the awful responsibility of unconverted souls lies most heavily on every consecrated pastor in England. He cannot escape it, and therefore he must devise his own plans to meet the situation in his own parish or locality. Those all-important individual efforts are not easily evaluated, certainly not in an essay such as this. That the state of religious life in England cries urgently for resolute action, that Christian leaders are acutely aware that this means nothing less than the conversion of England, and that, pressed by this conviction, they are contemplating extraordinary measures to meet an extraordinary situation — that has been the burden of this essay thus far.

¹¹ *News Review*, October 3, 1947, p. 21.

WHAT CAN LUTHERANISM OFFER?

RELATIVELY UNKNOWN

My last question may appear pertinent or impertinent, depending upon the point of view: Can Lutheranism offer anything towards the solution of this problem? As a Lutheran pastor serving two mission-minded congregations in London, I feel that this question is highly pertinent, though admittedly within a greatly restricted sphere; but I am just as certain that my Anglican and Free Church friends would regard the question as highly impertinent. If the mere mention of the name "Lutheran" in connection with the task of reconverting England seems to border on the presumptuous, I am reminded of a strange phenomenon in English history: the Church that provided much of the new theological background of two Archbishops of Canterbury and several bishops, the Church that gave Protestant England one of her first martyrs, Robert Barnes, chaplain to Henry VIII, the Church whose sections of whose confessional writings are incorporated into the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, the Church that from the reign of George I to that of Edward VII—almost 250 years—was the third official religion of the British Court—that Church is today almost unknown in England. That is the first factor to be considered in estimating the impact that the Lutheran Church might have upon the English scene. I am amazed repeatedly in encountering, sometimes even among the clergy, this astonishing ignorance regarding the "Luthérian" Church. Added to that, where it has become known, Lutheranism is popularly identified with Germanism. An Anglo-Catholic priest, after a long discussion in which I had gone to some length in explaining to him that our churches in London had no interest in perpetuating German culture or anything else German, protested with an air of finality: "But Martin Luther was a German, wasn't he?" So was Karl Marx, and Calvin was a Frenchman! The events of the last seventy-five years have given this identification a certain subtle propaganda value for the Western world. Cardinal Griffin, Primate of English Roman Catholics, in illustrating the "catholicity" of the Roman Church, said recently: "When you mention the name of any Christian sect, you imply at once a national allegiance. A member of the Church of England is almost

certain to be English . . . a Presbyterian a Scot or of Scottish ancestry, an Episcopalian an American, a Lutheran a German." One often wonders whether this is a strategy emanating from the City of the Seven Hills. At any rate, calculated or not, the association of Lutheranism with Germanism has resulted in a transfer of prejudice that is a real obstacle to the popular reception of our faith in postwar England.

ITS RESTRICTED SPHERE

Remember, too, that the Lutheran Church in England is an extremely small body. I question the estimate of the *Lutheran World Almanac* which placed the Lutheran population at 250,000 in 1937; I doubt whether there were more than 5,000 with Lutheran Church connections in that year. True, most larger port cities have Lutheran churches, but they have been established in the main only to serve as away-from-home centers for sailors, commercial travelers, and other occasional visitors from Lutheran homelands. Of the score or so of Lutheran churches in London, for example, only the two affiliated with the Missouri Synod have in the past made any positive attempt to step out of this "foreign" background and become indigenous. They are, therefore, often styled "the *English* Lutheran Churches" by other Lutheran clergymen in England, though among the local population the less helpful name, "the German Church," still persists. All the others, with the possible exception of certain German congregations in London, regard themselves as no more than extensions on British soil of their own national churches, using only the language of their country and drawing all their financial support from their diocese abroad. In certain periods of their history in England some of these congregations degenerated into mere national clubs, and rabid ones at that. Indeed, even today it is the practice of some of these groups to disfranchise a member the moment he becomes British by naturalization or birth. Grown children who desire ministrations in the English language are encouraged to join the Church of England or some other British denomination. Thus the second generation has inevitably been lost. For this reason, although Lutheran services have been held in Great Britain Sunday after Sunday for hundreds of years, no impression whatever has been made on the general population. For all practical purposes, then, Lutheran evangelism in Eng-

land means the limited efforts of two small congregations who have felt and accepted the challenge of the time. Now, one would need to be more of an idealist than an optimist to entertain the hope that with so small a leaven so large a lump could be leavened, thinking, of course, in terms of twentieth-century mission activity which lacks the extraordinary gifts of the first Pentecost.

ITS POSITIVE MESSAGE

There is, however, another side to the picture. We Lutherans believe passionately that to us in a superlative degree has been entrusted the original weapon placed into the hands of the twelve men that used it to turn the world upside down a long time ago. That eternal Gospel has not spent its force through the ages; it is still "the power of God unto salvation,"¹² "sharper than any two-edged sword."¹³ That Gospel, pure and untrimmed, is the positive message the Lutheran Church has to offer to a people whose trust in the myth of human progress has been shattered by the brutal logic of two world wars. With its clear-cut distinction between Law and Gospel it knows when to utilize the dawning sense of guilt and frustration in modern man and when to appeal to the dimly, but universally, felt need of a Deliverer from sin and of a Justifier of the ungodly. The "whole counsel of God" is the only seed for ground broken up and made fallow by the just judgments that have fallen upon the world. Humbly conscious of our own shortcomings, we Lutherans cannot but see in the present situation the noxious harvest sown by the hand of Rationalism. Is it surprising that one person in four in the Church of England does not believe in the virgin birth of our Lord when a leading Anglican clergyman, the Bishop of Birmingham, rejects the theory of the virgin birth as a "crude, semipagan story"?¹⁴ Modernism, true to form, has sapped the strength of the churches. And that is being realized now: "We believe," the Commission on Evangelism reports, "that the tendency to preach another Gospel or a partial Gospel, has been the weakness (not to say the sin) of the church in our generation . . . and accounts very largely for its failure in evangelism."¹⁵ An Anglican layman protests:

¹² Rom. 1:16.

¹³ Heb. 4:12.

¹⁴ *Rise of Christianity.*

¹⁵ *Towards the Conversion of England*, p. 17.

"Modernism has robbed Christian theology of its foundation and authority."¹⁶ There is a tremendous need in England today for the revelation once delivered to the saints, the pure Gospel untampered by the clumsy hands of man. Only that can fill the vacuum left by Modernism and Rationalism.

Side by side with its authoritative message, Lutheranism has an ancient and dignified order of service to offer to a people who have come to associate liturgical forms with public worship. The English character is, in proverb and in reality, staid, slow to embrace what is new. Our liturgy provides a splendid point of contact. The compilers of the Book of Common Prayer, an Anglican divine agrees, "borrowed freely from Lutheran liturgies";¹⁷ the resultant similarity which the Lutheran ritual bears to the Anglican can be of value to the mission-minded Lutheran in England.

INFLUX OF LUTHERAN EXILES

It was stated before that the extremely small proportion of Lutherans necessarily limits Lutheran influence in England. A very recent development, however, which may have far-reaching effects upon the future history of the Lutheran Church in England is the present influx of tens of thousands of refugees into the United Kingdom. Partly as an effort to meet an acute shortage of labor and partly from humanitarian motives, the British government has provided temporary homes and employment for homeless people from all over Europe. A large proportion of these are Lutherans. With generous material help from Lutherans in America, efforts are now being made to provide for and co-ordinate spiritual administration among these European Volunteer Workers. While it is realized that the great majority of these will not remain permanently in England, but will either return to their homelands if political circumstances alter or will emigrate to other lands, nevertheless, remnants will remain and may well become, in the future, nuclei of Lutheran communities all over England. A congregation made up of pre-war refugees from Hitler's Germany, for example, was established in Oxford as early as during the war.

¹⁶ *Fascism in the English Church*, p. 107.

¹⁷ *Continental Protestantism and the English Reformation*, p. 245.

CHANGING CONCEPTION OF LUTHERANISM

In the meantime, however, the influx can be of great value in bringing about a wider knowledge and a new conception of the Lutheran faith. In almost every larger town and city in England today Lutheran services are being held, with attendances ranging as high as five hundred per service. This is a pleasing sight for many of the English clergymen who unfailingly permit the use of their churches. Then, again, since the greater part of these refugees is of other than German origin, this may encourage the English mind to disassociate the Lutheran faith, where it is known, from German nationalism. Granted, even then "Lutheran" would still mean something "foreign," but it would be a long step closer to the goal — the liberation of our faith from all nationalistic fetters, a new understanding of Lutheranism as an affair of the soul and not of the passport. Another agency which is already doing stellar service in bringing the Lutheran Church before the eyes of the English public is the broadcast of the International Lutheran Hour over Radio Luxembourg. I am not speaking now of the message it sends forth — thousands of letters have testified to the enthusiasm with which this pure Gospel preaching has been received in the United Kingdom; I refer rather to the invaluable and widespread publicity given to our faith. Literature publishing the Lutheran conviction and bearing the Lutheran name is being read by Englishmen in every district from Lands End to John o' Groats. Taken together, these two recent developments, the large-scale entry of Lutheran exiles and the Lutheran Hour broadcast, may become important factors in determining the future of Lutheranism in England.

EDITORIAL NOTE: Rev. E. George Pearce is pastor of Luther-Tyndale Memorial Church and Holy Trinity Church in London, which hold membership in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.

