

Introduction: Gladstone and Religious Discourse

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William E. Gladstone is an historical figure of such richness and depth that he has inspired – and continues to inspire – an enormous amount of scholarly debate and research, all of considerable originality (as illustrated by the contributions that follow). After the publication of H.C.G. Matthew's monumental edition of the *Diaries*,¹ it has proved difficult for historians to revisit in a fruitful way the statesman's achievements and place in the context of Victorian politics, although a number of scholars have produced more or less imposing and controversial reappraisals of how he ought to be judged by posterity. In particular, there has been a tendency to dismiss Gladstone's "conviction" politics and his religious language as interconnected features of a deluded mind. Thus Gladstone was driven by "a supreme self-confidence born of the conviction that the logic of his own mind was but the embodiment of the logic of the mind of God. Fired by this certainty, he carried the Liberal party to its greatest nineteenth century achievements – only to wreck it as the irrepressible force of his own ego drove the party up against and beyond the prosaic limits set by a vision of politics rooted in the 'art of the possible.'"² This is a comment on Gladstone's campaign for Irish Home Rule, and sounds plausible, almost to the point of making us forget that there was a real issue out there in Ireland, a pretty urgent one indeed, whose reverberations continued to beset successive British governments for the next century, and which was only recently solved precisely by adopting policies similar to those that Gladstone championed in 1886-1893. The logic of a statesman with such an insight may not have been "the logic of the mind of God," but, to say the least, it must have been the logic of someone who knew what the times demanded.

However, much new work has been done on the link between his actions and his ideas, his "mind," its development over time, what he read, and how he wrote. Apart from Matthew himself, three scholars stand out for the contribution they have offered to the subject, particularly in terms of reconceptualizing Gladstone. On the one hand, we have Boyd Hilton and Jon Parry, who have explored the way in which theology informed other spheres of political action, for example economic and fiscal reform and foreign policy.³ On the other, we have David Bebbington, who has unpacked the mind of Gladstone more effectively and perceptively than most.⁴ His emphasis on Gladstone's continuous development and change and "updating" over his long and incredibly busy intellectual life is the central feature one must bear in mind in order to understand how the statesman could retain his place in the national imagination for so long, so successfully.

If Gladstone could be "all things to all men," as John Vincent noted in 1966, it was partly because he had experienced, if not "all," certainly a good number of different theological, literary, and political ideas. That this was not to the detriment of his public profile and perceived coherence was due to the complexity of the position from which he had started, and his ability to read extensively, absorb – like a sponge – the manifold intellectual and political suggestions produced by one of the most dynamic centuries in British history, a century in which he lived in the fullness of human potential. In an age that was deeply shaped by ideas of "progress" and "evolution," Gladstone was not only "a progress in politics" (as Peter Stansky described him),⁵ but also in intellectual life. He exemplified how orthodox Christian England was able to come to terms with new ways to conceptualize both the natural world and the world of political change.

What stands out in his strategy is, in the first instance, a resolve to achieve orthodox, even conservative goals by harnessing – rather than opposing – the forces unleashed by nineteenth-century changes in science, literature, political ideas, and popular attitudes. In fiscal and financial terms, this had involved empowering the working men, once he realized that "de-

mocracy” (the extension of the Parliamentary vote) was actually compatible with both free trade and balanced budgets.

In his attitudes to Irish separatism within the United Kingdom, he felt that the best way forward was to grant Home Rule – a very limited form of self-government, which would have turned nationalists such as C.S. Parnell from “poachers” into “gamekeepers,” in the same way in which a limited extension of the franchise had turned the allegedly revolutionary working men into stalwarts of Liberal (if not Conservative) values.

In foreign policy he used similarly populist rhetoric in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to consolidate a Christian system of international relations, a liberal version of the Vienna Congress system of “collective security” by means of the Concert of Europe. By injecting a massive dose of politicized humanitarianism into the Liberal creed, Gladstone extended the latter’s scope and meaning. His vision had three features that secured its long-term viability: first, it was compatible with market capitalism and yet provided a strategy for bypassing *laissez-faire*. Second, its internationalism was consistent with the aspirations of the democratic left and yet was articulated as a philosophy of *government* rather than the creed of the permanent *opposition* (as other radical humanitarians – including John Bright and Richard Cobden – had done in the past). And third, it proposed both a rhetoric and a vision that were sufficiently rich and ambiguous to withstand the test of time.

He was fully aware of the public relevance of religion as a “discourse” that defined the accepted parameters of public debate and moral choices, as well as predicating the moral responsibility of agents. A serious reader and listener of sermons – as David Bebbington reminds us in his contribution – Gladstone was aware of the power of preaching. His populist-style rhetoric was originally influenced by the religious modes of agitation typical of the Reformed tradition (the learned and expository sermon) and Protestant revivalism (the powerful spoken word that electrifies the audience and mesmerizes the heart of

the most hardened sinner). At the time this was natural enough, not only because Christianity was embedded in the British constitution as much as in culture and the language of the masses, but also because the Evangelicals and the Nonconformists had long established the effectiveness of preaching as a means of mobilizing the masses. Moreover, as Joseph Meisel has shown, at the time sermons, speeches, and orations were a highly popular literary genre anyway.⁶ After he stepped down temporarily from the leadership of the party in 1875, his influence depended chiefly on the popular support he was able to muster through his political "sermons" and the newspaper press. In this respect, his position was comparable to that of the Dissenting preachers of the contemporary Moody and Sankey revival. And, for Gladstone as much as for the Nonconformist worthies, charisma depended largely on the message that he preached.

Finally, in his continuous engagement with theology he strove to identify and interpret for his contemporaries the continuing relevance, indeed the centrality, of the traditional Christian message. In so doing, he used a strategy similar to the one he had employed in the other spheres mentioned above: not a frontal attack, but a flexible resistance, using the energy and resources of the would-be enemy to reassert and consolidate orthodoxy. A good example is provided by his *Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture* (published in 1890), a book which is worth reading even today not only as an illustration of the breadth and depth of Gladstone's engagement with the most controversial sciences of his day – geology and biology in particular – but also as a thoughtful and sophisticated piece of Christian apologetics. Evolution was not a threat to revelation, but a further illustration of the wonderful ways in which God worked out his plans and revealed them to his creature through science.

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Notes

¹ H.C.G. Matthew and M.R.D. Foot, eds., *The Gladstone Diaries* 14 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968-1994); H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-74* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) and *Gladstone, 1875-98* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

² I. St. John, *Gladstone and the Logic of Victorian Politics* (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 404; cf. R. Shannon, *Gladstone. Heroic Minister, 1865-1898* (London, 1999).

³ J.P.P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party* (Cambridge UP, 1986); Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (Oxford UP, 1988).

⁴ D.W. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone* (Oxford UP, 2004).

⁵ Peter Stansky, *Gladstone: A Progress in Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).

⁶ Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (Columbia UP, 2001).

