

Victorian Christianity

The Victorian era is often considered religious and serious, but whilst this is true to an extent, it was also an age of social change and intellectual questioning. There were challenges to faith from science, philosophy and Biblical criticism. The theory of evolution was propounded through Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in 1859; alternative world views were put forward by philosophers, including Nietzsche who is famous for the statement 'God is dead'; and some scholars questioned Biblical accounts. But new light was also shed on the Bible as ancient manuscripts were discovered and deciphered, the original languages were better understood and historical and archaeological finds were made.

The 18th century evangelical revival had had a significant effect on morality, especially among the working classes, and this spread to other sections of society during the early 19th century, partly through the influence of William Wilberforce. Evangelical Christianity continued to gain ground in the Anglican church as well as in non-conformist denominations. By the time Victoria came to the throne in 1837 there was a trend towards religious respectability, though it is difficult to assess accurately the extent of church attendance.

The industrial masses were not well catered for by the Church of England, and although the non-conformist churches had more impact in urban areas they were still dominated by the middle classes and many people remained unreached. However, many city churches did develop satellite missions in poorer areas, meeting social as well as spiritual needs, and a revival in 1859 and later visits by American evangelists such as Moody and Sankey helped to maintain church growth.

Baptist churches grew throughout the century, a notable figure being Charles Spurgeon, who preached to thousands in the open air as well as in churches and was also a prolific writer. The Metropolitan Tabernacle in London was built to accommodate his regular congregation, which grew to over 6,000. Brethren assemblies were also established, and in the second half of the century the Salvation Army was founded by William Booth, who began as a Methodist minister but then pursued an itinerant ministry reaching out to the poor, largely unwelcomed by mainstream churches. Booth's primary concern was for people's salvation, but he also addressed their practical and social needs and later sought to influence government policy on employment and social issues.

The Roman Catholic church also grew in cities and universities. In the Anglican church some sought to strengthen tradition, liturgy and ceremony, and what became known as the Oxford Movement was born. Some of its adherents left the Church of England to become Catholics, including John Henry Newman who was later appointed a cardinal.

The century saw an explosion of hymn writing, with about 400,000 new and translated hymns printed, and hymn singing became part of Anglican and Catholic as well as non-conformist church services. An emphasis on tunes which were easy to learn and sing with others, and new means of communication, helped to disseminate the hymns, and these were supplemented by lively gospel songs imported from America when evangelists from there visited Britain in the 1870s.

The century also witnessed a burgeoning of mission, both at home and overseas. To begin with, overseas missionaries were largely enthusiastic untrained people, although later this changed and there was a significant contingent from Cambridge University in particular. The first missions were often opposed by the authorities as detrimental to British interests abroad, but were gradually accepted. Later they became caught up in imperialism and commerce, an alliance which turned sour as interests clashed again. Notable names are David Livingstone in Africa, Hudson Taylor in China, and early in the century, William Carey in India. All these sought to reach new people groups with the gospel and to identify with native populations, learning local languages, and also worked to improve their social and economic conditions.

By the time Queen Victoria died in 1901 Britain had changed radically and the church would face new challenges in a new century – but that is another story for another time.