Religion, Utility and Politics: Bentham versus Paley

James E Crimmins
Religion, Secularization and Political Thought

The increasing secularization of political thought between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries has often been noted, but rarely described in detail. The contributors to this volume consider the significance of the relationship between religious beliefs, dogma and secular ideas in British political philosophy from Thomas Hobbes to J.S. Mill.

During this period, Britain experienced the advance of natural science, the spread of education and other social improvements, and reforms in the political realm. These changes forced religion to account for itself and to justify its existence, both as a social institution and as a collection of fundamental articles of belief about the world and its operations. The intellectual endeavours that fuelled this predicament, and the consequent maelstrom of disputation, engaged some of the most influential figures in the British political tradition. The essays in this collection highlight a selection of these writers, and examine their ideas with reference to other writers of the age. The volume as a whole conveys the crucial importance of the association between religion, secularization and political thought.

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It is commonly assumed that 'radicalism' and the doctrine of utility are natural allies in the British political tradition, a view largely due to the
fact that Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the ideologue-in-chief of
post-French Revolution British radicalism, is also revered as the
founding father of British utilitarianism.1 But the progress of utility as
the cornerstone of a new secular philosophy in the eighteenth and early
part of the nineteenth centuries was neither inexorable nor compre-
hensive in its reach. Indeed, it is still little appreciated that, for the most
part, it was the religious version of the doctrine of utility which
dominated English moral thought in the age before Bentham. Exponents
of this theological variant, influenced by Locke's ethics with its
deference to revelation, included George Berkeley, John Gay, John
Brown, Abraham Tucker, and Edmund Law, among others. Even into
the early decades of the nineteenth century it was the Cambridge Divine
William Paley (1743-1805) who was most often toasted as the
standard-bearer of the general doctrine, not Bentham. I have discussed
elsewhere the Anglican advocates of an ethics based on utility in
eighteenth-century England.2 It is my purpose here to take the analysis
a step further: to contrast the religious and the secular versions of the
doctrine of utility set forth by their most well-known proponents, Paley
and Bentham, by demonstrating the implicit relationship that exists
between the theological and metaphysical presuppositions upon which
their respective systems were constructed and the political positions
they embraced. For both men remained committed to the end creatures of their
intellectual formation. Even so, what emerges is a paradox. If there
appears to be a distinct correlation between Paley's theological
orthodoxy and political conservatism, and between Bentham's atheistic,
materialist philosophy and political radicalism, out of the juxtaposition
of their respective brands of the doctrine of utility surfaces a more
profound contrast which muddies the picture emphatically. It becomes
apparent that while Paley's Christian ethics depended absolutely on
individual autonomy, Bentham developed a secular legislative science

which sought to circumscribe that autonomy and to give 'enlightened'
direction to the activities of individuals. The issue, in other words, takes
on a subtle twist: the 'paternalist' Bentham versus the 'liberal' Paley —
a very different contrast from the one to which the body of this essay is
devoted. Before proceeding, however, I might be forgiven a few general
observations on the nature of the relationship between the thought of
Paley and Bentham and how this came to be perceived later on. They
were, after all, near contemporaries, who in some respects vied with
each other for the ear of the public, and this rivalry adds piquancy to the
comparison I wish to present.

Competing exponents of utility
A few years before Bentham published his now famous Introduction to
the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789) Paley had published his
Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy (1785), for John Maynard
Keynes 'an immortal book'.3 Bentham's work had in fact been completed
and printed in 1780 and when Paley's Principles appeared
Bentham's friends, fearing that he would not receive the accolades they
believed to be his due, urged that he quickly circulate his own rendition
of the doctrine of utility.4 In response, Bentham initially affected
indifference to Paley's success and held back the Introduction for
another three years.5 Nevertheless, thus introduced to Paley's work so
early in his career, he subsequently had several occasions to refer to the
thought of his religious counterpart, at times to enlist him as an ally in
the cause of utility but most often to attack aspects of his philosophy that
on Bentham's account of the doctrine should be swept away. Paley was
thus an ally, because in a hostile world Bentham perpetually felt in
need of supporters (of whatever stripe) when arguing for the virtues
of utility as the criterion of action and social policy; and an enemy,
because he was 'a false brother', an apostate for the status quo, a
founder member (along with William Blackstone) of the 'everything-
as-it-should-be-school'.6

Bentham's criticisms greatly outweigh the praise he has for Paley
and fairly reflect the basic differences between their systems. For
example, Paley is consistently lauded as a fellow advocate of utility in
Supply Without Burthen (1795), in the marginals for A Table of the
Springs of Action (1817), and again in a letter to Etienne Dumont (6
September 1822).7 On the other hand, he is criticized by Bentham for his
non-utilitarian defence of the death penalty in a collection of manuscripts of 1809,8 for his favourable remarks on juries in a further
collection of manuscripts c.1791 and again in 1809, for his vindication
of England's episcopal hierarchy in manuscripts on the 'Church' in
1812, and for his equivocal position on subscriptions to articles of faith
in Church-of-Englandism and its Catechism Examined (1818). In *An Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind* (1822), Bentham confronts Paley’s argument from design, and in his polemical piece entitled *Not Paul, but Jesus* (1823) Paley’s eulogistic version of the life and miracles of St Paul is subjected to an insipid examination.14

Despite these differences, however, in the literature on utilitarianism, Paley is commonly cited as a precursor of Bentham, albeit one whose thinking barely approached the rigour and precision of the latter’s calculative and scientific doctrine.15 Bentham himself occasionally thought of “pure Paley” in these terms: as a moralist who had fashioned the fundamental motivating factors of human nature but had failed to associate pleasures and pains correctly with the quest for general happiness, and who had confused the analysis of human action by postulating a religious dimension which, by the strict standards of utility, could not be justified.16 Nevertheless, the tendency to see the doctrine of utility as all of a piece, with a general progress within the tradition from crude or primitive Christian versions to Bentham’s final, secularized mature doctrine, is misleading.

One more point needs to be aired before moving on. Bentham’s utilitarianism is often acknowledged to be in some sense “secular”, but what is meant by this is rarely thought necessary to explain. It goes without saying that in the course of the eighteenth century ethical and social thought had undergone a large measure of secularization. But the term, as Jacob Viner and others have noted, is liable to deceive. In Viner’s view it represents “a loosening of the influence . . . of ecclesiastical authority and traditional church creeds, and a shifting of weight from dogma and revelation and other-worldliness to reason and sentiment and considerations of temporal welfare.”17 From this perspective the issue of secularization is one of degree: how far were ethical and social thinkers prepared to go in their secularism? Bentham’s penchant for the scientific (as Douglas Long has explained), his rejection of superstition, idealism and abstraction in favour of the strictly perceptible, verifiable and useful, places him at one extreme pole on this secular spectrum. Yet we might pause to consider that Paley’s philosophy was also in some sense secular. Within the ranks of the clergymen, Paley typified the eighteenth-century effort of the church to make its religion more accessible to its congregation. There is indeed in Paley’s thought a shifting of weight from revelation and other-worldliness to reason and considerations of temporal welfare. However, the shift here is one of emphasis merely: it is the basically theological constructs of Paley’s ethics which remain dominant, and which provide me with the substance of the contrast I want to draw between his version of the doctrine of utility and that advanced by Jeremy Bentham.

The religious version of the doctrine of utility

It is only recently that Bentham’s early philosophical radicalism of the 1770s, influenced by his reading of Locke and the continental philosophers, has been given the attention it deserves.18 The essentials of this social science can be briefly stated: it rests on the assumption of a universe in which all “real” entities are either discrete physical objects or else ultimately reducible to other “real” entities, and which, via the medium of descriptive language, can be made intelligible free from the verbal foibles, mysticisms and fictions which commonly pose obstacles in the path of human understanding. These presuppositions, together with Bentham’s studious commitment to the “dichotomous” mode of classification and analysis, provide and shape the information (the empirical data) — whether it be in the field of law, economics, politics, or theology — upon which utility, the greatest happiness principle, is then applied as the one, true test of social value.19 This is an important development: understanding the philosophical tenets of Bentham’s science of society is crucial to an appreciation of the many and varied features of his efforts on behalf of social (economic, legal, juridical, penal and educational) improvement.

In contrast, Paley expounded an ethics which — though it gives prominence to utility as the criterion of moral judgement — depended as much on orthodox Christian teaching as Bentham was to depend on empiricism, reason, and an abhorrence for traditional metaphysics.20 But if utility is so central to Paley’s analysis (as he argued), and therefore fundamental to explaining his attitude toward public institutions, then we must be careful what is meant by “utility” in this context. What do we mean when we describe Paley as an exponent of utility?

First, Paley adhered to the hedonist psychology that sees man as a creature motivated by considerations of pleasure and pain, and he was a consequentialist who defined right conduct in terms of the benefits that accrue from it to the individual and to society. Necessarily, therefore, he was concerned with the problem of moral choice and with the best means to ensure the moral end of happiness. Second, he recognized the potential for conflict between or among interests in social and political life. It was the religious solution he offered to such potential conflict which distinguished his version of the doctrine of utility. He defined virtue as “the doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness”.21 In this way, religion provided the solution to the puzzle of how a person can will something that apparently conflicts with his own personal interest, but that is for the good or benefit of others. The assumptions or beliefs involved are that
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(i) it is the will of God that all men be happy;
(ii) all men at all times ought to contribute to the best of their ability to the fulfillment of God's purpose (the good to be sought);
(iii) all men have the means of knowing what enhances the happiness of others;
(iv) all men possess an immortal soul; and
(v) there will be a future day of reckoning at which time goodness will be rewarded and evil punished.

On this view of the matter, the harmony between the private interests of the individual and those with whom he associates is based on the necessity that each man take into account in all his thoughts and deeds his own eternal happiness. And the teachings of Christ dictate that each individual is responsible not only for his own spiritual well-being, but (toward this end) also for the temporal well-being of those about him. To 'be good' means that we actively pursue the happiness of others whenever it is within our power, for only by so doing can we secure our own happiness in the most encompassing sense of this term: eternal happiness.

The notion of a life after death, the cornerstone of Paley's moral thought in the Principles, is a recurring theme in his work; in the Evidences of Christianity (1794) he claimed that the assurance of a future life was the primary object of revelation. In the Natural Theology (1802) he wrote of life on earth as a state of probation, preparatory to another world, and several of his sermons focused on related questions. Although he admitted that the belief in an after-life was strictly a matter of faith, it provided his ethics with a powerful moral sanction readily apprehended by his fellow men. Its deployment convinced him that he had bridged the gap between self-interest and social interest, thereby solving one of the pivotal problems of eighteenth-century ethics.

Paley's conservatism

For long the common view of Paley—beginning with his first biographer George Wilson Meadow—was that of a proto-liberal, a reformer, sometimes cautious but always with his heart in the right place. Elie Haldvy echoes this view in The Growth of Philodoxie Radicalism. Ernest Barker followed suit, describing Paley as 'half a Benham and half a Blackstone', a man whose liberal elements, particularly his enlightened views of religious toleration and religious institutions 'prove that, for his age, he belonged if not to the Left, at any rate to the Left of Centre'. The anachronism of applying twentieth-century ideological categories to eighteenth-century thought need not be belaboured. More to the point, Paley's reputation as a 'liberal' no longer carries the lustre (perhaps one should say stigma) it once did. Based on his arguments for reforming the practice of imposing subscriptions to the Thirty-nine Articles, abolishing slavery, and giving relief to the Irish Catholics, this view of the liberal or 'Whigish' Paley was always the product of a highly selective reading of the evidence. Against these reforming efforts—invariably hedged about with qualifications and words of caution to those who would move too quickly—one must weigh Paley's general defence of England's religious and political establishments and the accepted traditions upon which they were founded.

There is not the space here to give a comprehensive rendering of Paley's theology. A. M. C. Waterman has recently traced a development in Paley's thought from an early disposition to maintain communication with the reformers within the church in the 1760s and 1770s (especially the Cambridge circle that formed around John Jebb), to the period following the collapse of the Feather Tavern petition of 1772, when leading Anglicans (Paley included) were obliged to make up their minds about subscription and, to a significant degree, Trinitarian orthodoxy. From this point on, Waterman argues, Paley is properly situated in the ranks of the orthodox. It is with this period of 'orthodoxy' that I am concerned, since it was in the years after the subscription controversy had died down that Paley wrote the major works upon which a credible assessment of his system must be based.

One might have expected a man like Paley, who believed that expediency was the measure of the value of social institutions, to have found a good deal in contemporary Britain that could be improved. In fact his attitude toward established institutions as it developed in later life was in essence that of a thoroughgoing conservative. To be sure, he did not regard the constitution as sacrosanct, but he found little about either its ecclesiastical or secular wings bad enough to require reform. In sermons, in pamphlets, and in his major work on ethics and politics, the Principles, he vigorously supported a host of established practices and institutions on the grounds of utility. In 'A Distinction of Orders in the Church, Defended upon Principles of Public Utility' (1783), for example, Paley defended the English ecclesiastical establishment and particularly the role of the clergy. Here he stated the difference between Christianity in its vital principles, on the one hand, and in its external forms, on the other. He candidly admitted that the Christian religion could exist under any form of church government, but defended the English ecclesiastical establishment as congenial to the character and habits of the various orders of the community and best calculated to enhance the efficacy of the clergy in their ministrations.
When he published the *Principles* in 1785 Paley likely disappointed contemporary reformers not only by his lukewarm views on proposals to reform the practice of subscription, but also by his apology for the existing electoral system and for various other incongruities of the constitution. In his discussion of the role played by reform in shaping the British constitution the essentially conservative character of his politics is revealed:

Political innovations commonly produce many effects beside those that are intended. The direct consequence is often the least important, incidental, remote, and unthought-of evil or advantages, frequently exceed the good that is designed, or the mischief that is foreseen. It is from the silent and unobserved operation, from the obscure progress of causes set at work for different purposes, that the greatest revolutions take their rise.

English history, Paley held, was replete with examples to support this theory of unintended consequences: for example, when Queen Elizabeth helped enact laws that encouraged commerce and trade she had unconsciously contributed to the growth of a strong, oligarchical House of Commons. More importantly, it was this doctrine, together with the Burkean sentiment that Parliament should represent only the landed and moneyminded interests (those who counted in English society), which formed the theoretical thrust of Paley’s opposition to electoral reform, which he feared would lead to the unintended consequence of mob rule. Every innovation, he argued, diminishes the stability of government, and some absurdities are to be retained and many small inconveniences endured in every country, so that established usage will not be violated, nor the course of public affairs diverted from their old and smooth channel. On these grounds Paley defended the rights of property and contract as then stipulated by law; the right of bishops to sit in the House of Lords; the need for oaths of allegiance and subscription to articles of faith; and the need to reinforce the duty of submission to civil government (invoking Scripture here to support his arguments from utility).

Finally, in the pamphlet *Reasons for Contentment* – summoneth forth by the revolutionary events in France and published in 1792 as ariposte to Thomas Paine – Paley warned England’s labouring masses against radical reform, since it ‘is not only to venture out to sea in a storm, but to venture for nothing’. The poor have much to be thankful for, and should count their blessings. The only change to be desired is gradual change.

that progressive improvement of our circumstances, which is the natural fruit of successful industry... This may be looked forward to, and is practicable, by great numbers in a state of public order and quiet; it is absolutely impossible in any other.

Coleridge’s judgement on this tract was succinctly put: ‘Themes to debase Boys’ minds on the miseries of rich men & comforts of poverty.’

Utility was vital to Paley’s support for the political establishment, and it was no less influential on his views of the role of religion. Prescribing spiritual perfection and happiness as the indispensable criteria of the good life in this world and in the world to come, the principle of utility needed comfortably in the proselytizing arms of the Anglican church during this period. For Paley utility, as he understood it, added substance to the claim that for the sake of the well-being of the community the privileged position of the clergy as the guardian of the nation’s morals should be protected by the state. Just as hecules theology tended to foster political radicalism, so theological orthodoxy was the seed-bed of political conservatism.

The authority of the established church, proclaimed Paley, is ‘founded in its utility’, in its usefulness in inculcating the principles of Christianity and in the support it gives to secular government. The abstract theory of a hypothetical alliance (popularised earlier in the century by Bishop Warburton) had no role in this justification.

Church and state were simply aspects of the same society. The moral role of the state was defined by the fact of its Christianity, and the sanctions behind its claim to obedience were rooted in Scripture and in the doctrines of the established church. In other words, the limits to the claims of the state are prescribed by the law of God as interpreted by the national church. And what was meant by ‘national’ demanded not only official recognition by secular government of the status of the church, but also its active support in maintaining both the position and privileges that the church and its ministers enjoyed.

The connection between Paley’s theology and his attitude to society and politics is unequivocal: his defence of the church and its role in civil society necessarily involved him in the defence of the established political order of which it formed an integral and indispensable part. To this end Paley advocated, in their mutual interest, a strengthening of the ties between church and state. The underlying assumption is that the constitution is the best that man can conceive. Reforms are to be introduced for purposes of conservation not transformation. And throughout the exposition of these Burkean sentiments the essential interdependence of church and state is primary.

Whatever desire for moderation and balance, and whatever liberal
principles one discerns in Paley's work, therefore, they were never those of a political or parliamentary reformer. Of course, there was always room for improvements, but in general terms the existing institutions and electoral arrangements provided all the security society required.

A secular utilitarian society

Bentham recognized the attraction of the religious version of the doctrine of utility to his Christian contemporaries. He opposed it both on metaphysical and on moral grounds. Materialism and nominalism dictated that the ideas of the soul, of a future state, and of an all-seeing omnipotent God were fictions irreducible to 'real' entities; Bentham's descriptive theory of language, with its attendant classificatory and paraphrastic techniques, revealed that these ideas, lacking physical referents, could not be made intelligible to the human understanding. But even assuming the metaphysical credibility of such notions, Bentham was surely correct to doubt the validity of the claim that conflicting social and political interests could be overcome in the manner Paley suggests. Adherence to Christian dogma may well serve the interests of the individual soul, but to what extent could this be said to elicit socially beneficial actions? Added to this, the invocation of benevolence in the name of eternal happiness could hardly be expected to be persuasive to those who doubted or simply denied the existence of an immortal soul.

More importantly, it was to the belief in futurity and in Divine benevolence that Bentham traced the complacency that lay behind Paley's conservative attitude toward public institutions. Even if we grant, says Bentham, that the world was created by a designing intelligence, we are still not justified on this account of the matter in ascribing any intentions to its creator other than what are actually realized in the visible constitution of things. In so far as nature and history testify to a certain degree of justice and beneficence in the distribution of pleasure and pain, the author of nature can be credited with justice and benevolence; but if on examination we perceive inequalities of fortune in the world irremediable with our notions of morality, we have no grounds for inferring that God's intentions have been thwarted in the execution.

If religion could not supply the sanction to ensure public happiness, what could? The answer is adumbrated at length in Bentham's writings of the 1770s and 1780s legislation. At one point he described the superiority of his own ethical system over that of the 'religionists' in these terms:

The laws of perfection derived from religion, have more for their object the goodness of the man who observes them, than that of the society in which they are observed. Civil laws on the contrary have more for their object the moral goodness of men in general than that of individuals.

There is a curious tension here between Bentham's nominalism with its regard for discrete entities and the emphasis he places on the abstract and collective notion of 'men in general'. But the shift in focus indicated clearly distinguishes the central aim of his work from that of the religious exponents of utility. Moreover, in thus aligning utility with law Bentham announced - albeit prematurely - the imminent demise of the religious version of the doctrine of utility as a persuasive theory of morals. Accordingly, in the course of the attempt to prove the worth to society of a rational system of jurisprudence, founded on materialism and a nominalist logic, he took great pains to discredit religion as a necessary motivational factor in effecting the occurrence of actions conducive to general happiness. The prospect of the deficiencies of religion as an agency of social welfare in the Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation was integral to the endeavour (influenced by Helvétius and Beccaria) to establish the primacy of legislative science as a means to advance the happiness of the greatest number.

Bentham's opposition to the religious trappings of the moral thought expounded by Paley and others was complemented by his explicit opposition to the political philosophy it nourished. To appeal, as Paley did, to a questionable revelation weakened the utilitarian system, but the use he made of his philosophy to justify current rules of conduct, rather than to press for improvement, made his deviation doubly reprehensible. Paley had tried to show that the worth of the church, and of the political constitution of which it formed an integral part, could be established on the grounds of his religious version of utility. Bentham sought to establish the deleterious effects of the church and other public institutions by testing them against his own secular form of the doctrine. The relationships between the various aspects of Bentham's system have still to be satisfactorily worked out. It is generally accepted today that his political radicalism, defined in terms of the advocacy of democratic institutions, came much later than either his philosophic or his religious radicalism. It was only in 1829 or thereafter, we are told, that Bentham, frustrated by the repeated failure of his efforts to instigate reform in other areas (and encouraged by James Mill), came to accept that the institutionalization of democracy was the only way to resolve the impasse between the movement for social improvement and the barricades thrown up by reactionary 'sinister' interest. By comparison,
the essential groundwork for philosophic and religious radicalism had been laid in the 1770s, though Bentham wisely deemed it expedient not to publicize his views in these areas until long after. Around 1815 he set about elaborating systematically the materialist, nominalist and linguistic principles that had informed his social science from the outset of his philosophic career, and these appeared posthumously in the Bowring edition of the Works. On the religious front, however, Bentham’s critique took on a far more urgent character. During the decade or so following his democratic conversion, i.e. between the years 1809 and 1823, he conducted not only an attack on England’s political constitution but also a much ignored but exhaustive examination of religion with the declared aim of extirpating religious beliefs, even the idea of religion itself, from the minds of men. Applying the utilitarian test at every turn — first in Swear Not at All (1817) and Church-of-Englandism, then in An Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion and Not Paul, but Jesus — his analysis was squarely focused on the supposed perniciousness of man’s reverence for other-worldly beings, for the authority of ‘holy books’ and the sanctity of churches and their clerical offices.

The critique of the Anglican establishment was always the strong arm of Bentham’s offensive against religion during this period. His attack on the redundancies and immorality of requiring subscriptions to articles of faith and on the imposition of compulsory oaths in Swear Not at All, on penal laws against religious dissent, and on the Common Law crime of ‘blasphemy’, and his defence of the non-sectarian Lancasterian schools, were all undertaken against a church determined to resist the movement to a more tolerant (and, admittedly, secular) society. Even his discussion in Church-of-Englandism of the political motives of the bishops in opposing seemingly rational proposals for reform was, while fanciful in part, not entirely grounded in experience. Had not the lack of public spirit on the part of the ecclesiastical establishment served to quash Bentham’s hopes for his cherished Panopticon: a circular prison in which ‘no grudges were honest’? Were not the bishops the ones who watered down the Unitarian Toleration Bill in 1813, who helped to delay the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and who threw their weight behind the government of the day whenever the tide of sedition, libellous, or blasphemous literature seemed to threaten the traditional order of society?

Church-of-Englandism in its final form became a general exposé of the corruption and corrupting effect of the ecclesiastical establishment in England. In the Plan of Parliamentary Reform (1817), which Bentham started to write in 1809, he had given a sketch of the ‘temporal’ nature of the constitution and expounded the democratic causes of annual parliaments, secret and universal male suffrage. In Church-of-
control exercised over the minds of the masses by the doctrines and institutions of religion. Only then could significant reforms be achieved and progress made toward the utilitarian utopia. In these terms, the established institutions of England—legal, political, ecclesiastical—were viewed by Bentham as all of a piece, an interdependent and mutually supporting network of influence designed to keep the Many subject to the Few.

In the *Constitutional Code* (parts edited by Richard Doane and published in 1831) Bentham provides us with his most extensive and detailed plans regarding the institutional make-up of his ideal state. In this vast text (662 double-columned small-print pages in the ill-fashioned and incomplete version in the Bowring edition of the *Works*) he mentions religion hardly at all, and when he does it is to say why it is to be absent from the utilitarian utopia.10 It is plain that Bentham's attitude to religion was much the same as his attitude to political and legal institutions: it was a public establishment that, because of the vested interest of its functionaries in sustaining it in a corrupt condition, was in need of a complete overhaul. What made Bentham's treatment of religion unique, however, was that whereas reformed political and legal institutions would remain essential features of the utilitarian society, Bentham came to believe that even if disestablished, religion would still be an enemy to human happiness, due to the doctrines and beliefs it expounded. It was not sufficient merely to blunt the harmful political effects of religion; so long as religious beliefs constituted an active spring of human action, the temporal pursuit of self-interest would be thwarted.

The secularization envisaged by Bentham thus involved more than the disentanglement of the religious and political spheres of social life, more than the usual separation of church and state characteristic of the modern secularized liberal society. Certainly the policy of disestablishment set out in *Church-of-Englandism* was designed to achieve this end. Ultimately, however, secularization meant for Bentham the elimination of religious beliefs as influential psychological factors operating on the human mind, and this was to be the task of the legislator. Thus, in the *Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion and in Not Paul, but Jesus*, he attempted to argue religious beliefs out of existence by concentrating on their "illitory" nature. Nevertheless, Bentham well knew that the most effective way of proceeding along these lines was through education.

In the *Christomathia* (1816-17), Bentham's treatise on utilitarian education, religion is banned entirely from the curriculum. There are no concessions to the use of the Bible as in the Lancasterian schools.11 To these afraid that instruction repugnant to religion would be given in the

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Christomathia Schools Bentham solemnly vowed that "no instruction . . . disrespectful to Religion in general, to the Christian Religion in particular, or to any one form of it, shall ever be administered." While he was so heartily involved in his critique of the established church and its doctrines, however, such avowals could hardly be taken seriously. On the other hand, what was to be taught in the Christomathia Schools was a syllabus containing a large dose of the natural sciences, and Bentham was in no doubt as to the consequences for religion of a thorough-going education of this kind. His perception of the relation between human error and religion, and of the solvent provided by physical science, received remarkable expression in the pages of the *Christomathia*: "In knowledge in general, and in knowledge belonging to the physical department in particular, will the vast mass of mischief, of which perverted religion is the source, find its preventive remedy." The reference to 'perverted' religion is a sop to the more sensitive of Bentham's readers. Ultimately, the remedy for all the mischiefs perpetrated by religion was to be found in physical science. Though prone to error, man need not accept anything that cannot be supported by experiment and observation. For Bentham 'blind faith' could never provide an adequate substitute for 'hard' empirical facts. Far from being the sceptic who holds that we must tolerate because we can never be certain of anything, his position in politics, philosophy, jurisprudence and theology alike, was that whatsoever is known must be based on reasoned argument from a solid scientific foundation of acceptable evidence. Hence, if Bentham was an advocate of the voice of reason, it was only in so far as this meant confidence in the authority of science.

A paradoxical conclusion

Bentham's secular version of the doctrine of utility stands in conspicuous contrast to that of his religious counterpart. Paley's religious version of the doctrine demands that we give priority to future possibilities in a life to come, rather than expend valuable time on fleeting and inconsequential temporal objectives. Surveying the legal and political institutions of his day, he saw little reason to embark on reform; whether it was the constitution with its unique system of checks and balances, or the legal code with its inconsistent enforcement of the death penalty, he spoke highly of their splendid and damned the reformers who would meddle with such exquisite mechanisms. By comparison, Bentham's secularized, materialistic version of the doctrine focuses the attention squarely on the temporal. Christianity stands condemned as a diversion from the benefits that men can actually experience in this life, and in so far as religion and other institutions
prevent the maximization of temporal happiness they are legitimate targets for reform. If Paley's world can be described as conservative and theocentric, then Bentham's was the universe of radical secularization. The language of utility, pleasure, happiness, and interest is common to both positions but, given Bentham's metaphysical nominalism and descriptive theory of language, the meaning of such terms is decidedly different in each case. How Paley and Bentham understood 'utility' and its related terms was largely dependent upon the metaphysical and moral presuppositions they held. And it was the very different nature of these presuppositions which led them to give voice to contrasting social and political philosophies.

The assumption, therefore, that in the era in question the 'greatest happiness' principle was necessarily an axiom of radical change is manifestly mistaken. As an organizing principle of moral and political philosophy it does not possess an inflexible logic; its status is that of a dependent variable. It is, therefore, the contingent nature of its relationship with other beliefs and principles which dictates the kind of politics that follow. But perhaps we can say more.

Paley's emphasis on the moral judgement and the good of the individual differentiates his doctrine, perhaps surprisingly it may seem, from the general legislative character of Bentham's social science. So much so that it may not be trivial to suggest that for Bentham, though not for Paley, the science of morality is largely irrelevant to the legislator's task of maximizing happiness. Indeed, it could be argued that Bentham's social science does not provide a moral theory at all, but really a legislative science built on a psychology of human behaviour.

The art of the legislator, he once remarked,

teaches how a multitude of men, composing a community, may be disposed to pursue that course which upon the whole is the most conducive to the happiness of the whole community, by means of motives to be applied by the legislator.26

Bentham seems to have imbibed and harnessed to practice the aphorism found in Helvetius' De L'Esprit, that 'the science of morality is nothing more than the science of the legislature [sic].'27 Certainly Bentham did not think that this is what he was doing; he believed that his was a bona fide theory of moral conduct. The truth of the matter, however, is that while he began with the maxim that the individual is the 'best' judge of personal interest,28 he never subscribed to the tenet that each person is the 'sole' judge of what is in his or her interest.29 As he wrote on one occasion in the context of political economy:

That the uncerced and unlightened propensities and powers of individuals are not adequate to the end of happiness without the control and guidance of the legislator is a matter of fact of which the evidence of history, the nature of man, and the existence of political society are so many proofs.30

In Bentham's legislative science the element of choice (individuals judging for themselves) is diminished. For the most part it is the legislator who decides what is for the good of the individual and of the society at large, and he has at his disposal the means, direct and indirect (coercion, education and the manipulation of public approbation and disapprobation), to determine what individuals will in fact do. Right-thinking utilitarian calculators can be left alone to 'judge' for themselves, for their choices conform to the official calculus. But all others are subject to 'control and guidance'. Individual autonomy is eroded. Rousseau's dictum is thus given a new twist: individuals are not forced to be free but (in ways prescribed by the legislator) forced to be happy.31

Naturally, this cuts across the grain of the position taken by those who view Bentham as a 'liberal'.32 And it suggests that there is much more to the contrast between religious and secular modes of utilitarian thought than at first meets the eye. The Oxford-educated Bentham betrays a marked tendency toward paternalism while, paradoxically, it is the Cambridge-educated Paley who more comfortably fits the libertarian tradition after all. Despite his efforts to be theologically and politically conservative, Paley's doctrine preserves the element of individual autonomy, without which moral choices are rendered nugatory. Here there are sanctions (fear of Hell and hope of Heaven) which will no doubt influence us to 'be good', as Paley says, but there is no necessary relationship between these sanctions and the actions of individuals. We are placed in this world to prove our worth in the sight of God, but this would be meaningless without moral agency. Each of us is to fathom God's will (the general good of mankind) and fulfill it whenever we can; in this manner we aspire to true happiness. But this, the Anglican Divine Thomas Gisborne argued, is precisely the flaw in Paley's reasoning. Paley stresses the ability of individuals to discover what is best judged to maximize the happiness of others, yet their faculties are simply inadequate for the task. So much so, in fact, that Paley's doctrine is just as likely to provide a sanction for conduct contrary to Christian teaching as it is to promote God's will. It is for this reason, Gisborne admonished his fellow theologian, that revelation should not be relegated from its position as the cardinal dictate in settling questions of morality; men need a safer guide to conduct than utility.33 Within the camp of the faithful, however, Gisborne's was one of few dissenting voices.
Indeed, in an age when religion had not yet vacated its seat at the centre of social and political life, the emerging secular form of moral thought, despite the Herculean efforts of Bentham, would find it difficult to displace Paley’s individualistic, providential and prudential ethics. Even when Bentham finally brought himself to publish his *Introduction* in 1789, its very restricted circulation attracted little attention. Indeed, it was well into the nineteenth century before the truly radical character of Bentham’s thought was appreciated outside the tight band of disciples that gathered about him. Only from the middle of the 1830s onward was Paley no longer considered the central figure in philosophical discussions of utilitarianism. Thomas Brown in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1820) denounced the ‘Paleyans’ not the ‘Benthamites’. And when Coleridge flung out his anti-utilitarian barbs it was Paley rather than Bentham who was uppermost in his mind. Paley’s doctrine he found ‘neither tenable in reason nor safe in practice’. Even those Unitarian dissenters most closely associated with the radicals in the movement for social and political reforms saw Paley and not Bentham as the perpetrator of the utilitarian doctrine. The moral thought of Thomas Belsham, William Jevons, and W. J. Fox represents a deliberate effort by the dissenters within the ranks of the radicals to retain the Christian dimension of utilitarian theory. It is also notable that the deeply religious John Austin, commonly supposed to be a devoted disciple of Bentham, evidently drew inspiration in the philosophical part of his law lectures (of 1828) — reproduced in *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (1832) — from Paley’s *Principles* rather than from Bentham’s *Introduction*. Yet it is indicative of an influential but frustrating misunderstanding of the history of the development of utilitarian thought that Leslie Stephen should claim that Austin’s utilitarianism was of the ‘most rigid [Benthamite] orthodoxy’. Only if Paley were also allowed into the ranks of the ‘orthodox’ could this be true. Finally, the ‘religion of humanity’ developed (under the influence of Auguste Comte) by John Stuart Mill, Bentham’s self-styled spiritual grandchild, stands as a remarkable testimony to the perceived need to synthesize utilitarian principles and religious ideals. But this, in part at least, is the subject of Professor Vermon’s essay and I have no wish to poach in territory where I know little of the terrain.

Acknowledgement

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Notes


6 Bentham MSS, ‘Law versus arbitrary power, or a hatchet for Paley’s Nest’, 1809, University College London Library, Bentham MSS, UC 10/214; and ‘Jury analysed — analysis necessary, Paley’, 1809, UC 35/309.


11 See, for example, W. Whewell, *‘Bentham*, from *Lectures on the History of
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12 See Bentham, Article on Utilitarianism, in Deontology, p. 328.


14 Halsey’s explication of the term ‘philosophic radicalism’ does not go nearly far enough toward explicating the philosophical character of Bentham’s utilitarianism. This is done far better in R. Hartman, Bentham, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.


18 Paley, Principles, bk. 1, ch. VI, p. 54.


21 Even in his own day the reputation Paley acquired as a critic of contemporary social arrangements rested in part on a misleading of his infamous parable of the pigeons, Paley, Principles, bk. III, part I, ch. 5, p. 74. Of this one contemporary remarked: ‘we defy any man to produce a passage from the works of either Paine or Thelwall, more truly mischievous’, The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine (April 1803), p. 529. But what appears to be the basis for an argument reminiscent of Rousseau’s Discourse on Inequality, is merely employed by Paley prefatory to a justification for the inequality of property. ibid., ch. II, pp. 75-7.
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38 Two articles should, however, be mentioned as providing a starting point: J. H. Burns, 'Jeremy Bentham: from radical enlightenment to philosophical radicalism', The Bentham Newsletter, 1984, no. 8, pp. 4–14; and D. G. Long, 'Censorial jurisprudence and political radicalism: a reconsideration of the early Bentham', The Bentham Newsletter, 1985, no. 12, pp. 4–23.


41 Bentham's essays on etymology, language and logic are contained in Works, vol. 8.

42 As part of his radical attack on the English political establishment in 1809, Bentham embarked on a study of the 'Church', Bentham MSS, UC 2832, gradually expanding its scope over the next five years, UC 601–209, 594–316, 154/123–250, and 711–160.


45 Bentham, Church-of-Englandism, Preface on Publication.


48 Bentham, Church-of-Englandism, Preface on Publication.


50 Ibid., p. 99.

51 Ibid., Appendix IV, pp. 193 f.

52 The opening sentence of bk. I, ch. XIV states Bentham's position: 'No power of government ought to be employed in the endeavour to establish any system or article of belief on the subject of religion', Constitutional Code, in Works, vol. 9, p. 92. See also ibid., pp. 93, 452–3. In Rosen and Burns's new definitive edition of the first (so far the only) volume of the Code, religion is mentioned only once and then in an inconsequential fashion: there is no obligation for ministers to furnish information regarding their personal opinions on religion, J. Bentham, Constitutional Code, ed. F. Rosen and I. H. Burns, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983, p. 392.

53 In the Chrestomathia, Bentham writes: 'if instruction in relation to controverted points of Divinity, were admitted, whatsoever were the tenets taught, a parent to whose notions those tenets were, to a certain degree repugnant, would not send his child to a school, which numbered among its object and its promises, the impregnating with those tenets the minds of its scholars', Works, vol. 8, p. 40.

54 Ibid., p. 42.

55 Ibid., p. 13.


59 I am indebted to the late James Stevenage for this interpretation, 'Languages and politics: Bentham on religion', The Bentham Newsletter, 1980, no. 4, p. 11.


64 No notice in periodical publications of the day have come to light. Bentham had this to say: 'the edition was very small, and half of that destroyed by the rats', Bentham to Lord Wycombe (1 March 1789), The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, vol. 4, ed. A. T. Milic, London, Athlone Press, 1981, p. 34.


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Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 16 vols., London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971-81, vol. 4, sect. 1, essay XIV, p. 314. Coleridge rarely mentioned Bentham and did not show a close acquaintance with his work. There is, however, a copy of Bentham's Not Pauli, but Jesus in the library at University College London with copious annotations (which have neither been transcribed nor analysed) believed to be in the hand of Coleridge.


Chapter seven

From God to man? F. D. Maurice and changing ideas of God and man

T. R. Sansom

The second half of the nineteenth century in England saw a tremendous increase in the concern of the middle class about the condition of the lower classes. This gave rise to an increase in individual philanthropic activity, the organization of innumerable philanthropic societies, and considerable successful agitation for government action through 'collectivist' legislation. According to DICK, collectivism replaced individualism as the dominant force behind legislation.1

In her autobiography, My Apprenticeship, Beatrice Webb attributes some of these changes to changing beliefs about religion and science. She argues that, along with the growing belief that science would be able to solve all problems, there arose the consciousness of a new motive; the transference of the emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man.2 She reiterates this more forcefully a few pages later: 'I suggest it was during the middle decades of the nineteenth century that, in England, the impulse of self-subordinating service was transferred, consciously and overtly, from God to man.'3 Comte's religion of humanity and Owen's 'worship of the supremely good principle in human nature' gave man a new religion, one without God.4 Christianity was dead, drowned in the rising tide of secular humanism. It is this, for Mrs Webb, that accounts for much of the effort towards the amelioration of the conditions of the lower classes.

This judgement, however, has a distorted view of religious belief in the nineteenth century and its impact on social reform. It is true that some middle-class intellectuals, influenced by developments in science and historical criticism, abandoned Christianity not only completely but belief in a supreme being as well. They were by no means a majority.

Furthermore, as Webb herself notes, many of those who gave up Christianity retained a belief in some kind of God. 'Practically we are all positivists; we all make the service of man the leading doctrine of our lives. But in order to serve humanity we need inspiration from a superhuman force towards which we are constantly striving.'5

A great many people (probably a majority of the middle class)