FAITH, BELIEFS, & SUPERSTITIONS

Upton Abbey: An Improvised Comedy of English Manors

In the 1910s, magician William S. Marriott demonstrates how he could make a table appear to levitate with his foot. (From the Mary Evans Picture Library/Harry Price)

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INTRODUCTION

“When I told the people of Northern Ireland that I was an atheist, a woman in the audience stood up and said, ‘Yes, but is it the God of the Catholics or the God of the Protestants in whom you don't believe?’”
- Quentin Crisp (1908-1999)

Unsurprisingly, religion played an integral part in the lives of British citizens in post-Edwardian England. The Anglican Church of England was struggling to regain the strength it held at its prime in the Victorian era, spiritualism began its resurgence thanks to the horrific number of casualties suffered in the Great War, and the English Roman Catholic Church was slowly but steadily increasing its influence despite harsh prejudices. Even though the Anglican church retained its position as the national religion of England, all three of these belief systems played important roles in the cultural shift of the new millennium.

THE CHURCH(ES) OF ENGLAND

KEEPING UP WITH THE TIMES

- A (very brief) history of the Church
  - Founded officially in the 1530s by King Henry VIII
    - He split with the Pope over his views on divorce (annulment)
      1. His wife wasn’t bearing him sons, and he wanted to leave her
      2. Yet even still, divorce was frowned upon by Anglicans for centuries afterwards
    - He announced himself as head of the new Church of England and “Defender of the Faith”
      1. This role is still held by the Crown today
- Hierarchy of the clergy (lowest to highest)
  - Rectors/Vicars, Deans, Archdeacons, Bishops (43 total, each with a diocese), Archbishop of York, Archbishop of Canterbury, King George V
    - “There are 43 dioceses in England covering the two provinces of Canterbury and York, plus the Diocese in Europe, with chaplaincies from the Arctic Circle to the Canaries. Each diocese has a bishop and usually at least one suffragan or assistant bishop."
Each diocese is split into archdeaconries run by archdeacons. They are responsible for the administration of that part of the diocese. Each archdeaconry is split up into deaneries, which is a collection of parishes. The parish is the heart of the Church of England. Each parish is overseen by a parish priest, usually called a vicar or rector.” (BBC)

- Higher members of the church were usually wealthy and/or related to landed gentry, while smaller parishioners were from the middle and lower classes
  - “On one hand Christianity was at least passively accepted by a great majority of the British people, shaping their worldview, forming the basis for the society’s accepted moral principles, and giving the rites used by the vast majority of the population. However, involvement in the Church was often limited by class factors and what one author calls an ‘inability of English Protestantism to seize the imagination of the poor.’” (Fielden 12-13)
  - “We have invented a class priesthood with a money qualification” (Wilkinson 65)

THE CHURCH AT WAR

- The Boer War created conflict/division amongst Anglicans, but the Great War received much more uniform support from the Church
  - “Whereas a respected minority, both inside and outside the Churches, had opposed the Boer War, few voiced any opposition to the Great War once it had broken out” (Wilkinson 30)
    - This isn’t to say that there were no anti-war Anglicans--they were just silenced by the clergy
    - This lead to later unrest in the Church, with more Anglicans becoming disillusioned as the war dragged on
- The Church (alongside the government) actively recruited soldiers
  - “The war was a solemn duty laid upon the nation by God; it was a divine punishment for a variety of national sins” (Wilkinson 9)
  - Anglican conscientious objectors were highly unusual
- Special days of prayer were held locally throughout Anglican parishes for men at the front
- The English Roman Catholic Church also fervently supported the war
- Army Chaplains
“The war brought clergy into a closer relationship with the people, both through the work of chaplains at the front, and through the sharing of privations, bereavement and a common cause, though clergy were sometimes sneered at for not being combatants” (Wilkinson 66)

Yet, chaplains were not all bad

- “The chaplain was also in charge of burial services, registration of graves, writing letters of condolence, and even writing personal letters home for soldiers who were illiterate” (Fielden 51-52).

**A NEW CENTURY**

- “As an organ of the government of the United Kingdom, the Church of England for obvious reasons tended towards social conservatism, regardless of the political climate” (Fielden 26)
- “As things fell to pieces in Europe during the late summer of 1914, many turned to the Church of England as one of the traditional sources of comfort during this time of upheaval” (Fielden 11)
- “In Britain, refugees and colonial labourers increased the numbers of those practicing the Catholic, Jewish and Islamic faiths [during the war]” (Shaw)
  - Their generally-lower socioeconomic status also contributed partially to the prejudices held against them by the Anglicans
- “It is interesting to note that those who held out long term against the war were small in number and drawn from ‘an important cluster of socialists, Liberals, [and] philosophical pacifists, unflinchingly committed against the war’ and virtually a total lack of public resistance to the war by any pastor of the Church of England” (Fielden 30)
- Traditional views of women were being challenged at the time
  - The church was cautiously supportive of women’s rights (including suffrage), specifically through the non-militant movements
  - However, there was internal conflict regarding the potential role of women in the clergy
- Beliefs about marriage and promiscuity were also drastically affected by wartime
  - “By the end of the war, contraceptives were much more freely available. Between 1910 and 1920 there was nearly a threefold increase in divorces” (Wilkinson 105)
    - Many divorcees were not allowed to remarry in the church, and instead had to use a registry
Female sexual education improved out of necessity (but only slightly)

- Temperance was encouraged and then mandated by the church and the King after complaints that “treating” men to drinks at the front was becoming excessive (Wilkinson 102)
  - Teetotalism (complete abstinence from drinking) also found support in the more conservative parts of the Church
  - The Defense of the Realm Act (DORA) in 1914 regulated the hours of public houses (pubs) and required beer to be watered down, but there were still plenty of opportunities to drink if one so desired (Kitching 39)
  - “While there were undoubtedly those within the Church who still preached against drink, the horror and loss of the war effort caused intemperance to pale in importance” (Fielden 32)

**CLASS CONFLICT**

- Despite its resurgence in wartime, church attendance was down from the 19th century
  - “Attendance declined for reasons including class distinctions between pastors and parishioners, urbanization, an apparent lack of concern for the working poor, and questions of an intellectual or scientific nature concerning the truth presented by the Bible and the Church” (Fielden 11)
    - Darwinism and the theory of evolution presented a unique challenge to Church doctrine
  - “Those who claimed membership (nominal members) were far greater than those who actually attended and received communion” (Fielden 18)
- The Church did not appeal to the vast majority of the working class (servants)
  - “Clerical opinions and prejudices reflected those of the upper and middle classes, not those of the wage-earners” (Wilkinson 5)
  - Rather, just the principles of “tolerance, kindliness, sympathy [and] civilization” (without any supernatural element) shaped the servants’ beliefs (Wilkinson 6)
  - “Apparently ‘religious observance had no deeper roots than social convention or escapism. At home such factors as the break-up of the family, the introduction of Sunday labour and the abandonment of accepted standards of behavior depleted the church congregations’” (Fielden 48)
- Sunday school attendance waned much more slowly than general church attendance, due to its somewhat more secular educational benefits
FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL

● Most large-scale Anglican events would have needed to be presided over by a bishop, unless one was unavailable
  ○ This includes confirmations, weddings, and funerals

● Confirmations
  ○ An extension of the baptism that was received shortly after birth
  ○ A commitment to living a good and spiritual life, and a renouncement of acts of evil
  ○ No required age, but typically in the early teens

● Weddings
  ○ Higher status weddings should have been performed by a bishop
  ○ Lower status weddings could be done through a registry or licensing office
  ○ However, these websites have a lot of valuable information on traditions and customs that are too long to be quoted neatly:
    ■ http://www.edwardianpromenade.com/love/the-wedding/

● Funerals
  ○ Full Victorian mourning practices (deep mourning, second mourning, half mourning, etc.) became obsolete in wartime due to changing fashions and the high volume of deaths in the war
    ■ However, those in mourning for a dear friend or relative (including servants) often still wore thin black armbands for a period after their death
      1. The length of this time period was variable and mostly influenced by closeness of relation
  ○ Unction (or last rites) was not required by the Anglican church, but was considered necessary by the English Roman Catholic Church
    ■ This meant a Catholic priest or chaplain should have been present at any death possible
  ○ Cremation was just beginning to rise in popularity (Wilkinson 173)
    ■ However, many were uncomfortable with the thought
    ■ Scattering ashes remained uncommon for much longer--most mourners liked having somewhere specific to visit
SPIRITUALISM & THE OCCULT

FACT AND FICTION

- Definitions/Distinctions
  - Few people understood the differences between spiritualism and the occult and used the terms interchangeably
  - "Plebians used spiritualism to support their anti-Christian beliefs and radical social programmes, bourgeois Victorians exploited their séance experiences to bolster their Christian faith and to raise their socio-economic positions, women cultivated mediumistic skills as a way of turning the feminine ideal of spirituality into the basis of an independent career, and scientific and medical practitioners investigated spiritualistic phenomena to develop their studies of physical and mental powers" (Noakes 434).

- Spiritualism faced opposition from medicine and the Church
  - Anything not strictly Church of England was taboo
    - Catholicism was more accepted than spiritualism
  - "Medical men... caricatured spiritualists as crazy women and feminized men engaged in superstitious, popular, and fraudulent practices" (Walkowitz 5)
  - Demonic Possession
    - "Throughout the Victorian and Edwardian eras, demon possession and spirit obedience remained a very real problem for a number of British families" (Hayward 5)
    - Used as an explanation by "Fundamentalist doctors and medical men" in the late 1800s for insanity (Hayward 20)
      - “I think the experience of all skilled men directly connected with mental diseases proves conclusively, that here and there one comes across a case that is evidently "possessed" by some evil spirit.” (Hayward 38).
      - Medical practices may have improved by 1918, but prejudice and superstition remained

- Stonehenge
  - In Wiltshire, easily within a day’s drive of the estate
  - A site for Neo-druidism ceremonies
Ancient Order of Druid induction ceremony in 1905 was the first large-scale religious ceremony held at Stonehenge in modern history

**Often ridiculed by the townspeople**
- Strange costumes/hats, etc.
  - Nearby land was also used to train the Royal Flying Corps for the Great War
  - No. 1 School of Aerial Navigation and Bomb Dropping founded

**COUNTERCULTURE**

- Spiritualists were the “hippies” of the Edwardian era
  - Often associated with promiscuity/nudity/sexuality in women, but this was not always true
- “Mediumship enfranchised those on the periphery of society, being the gift of marginalized individuals who apparently lacked strong character or self-control” (Hayward 14)

**SUPERSTITIONS, ETC.**

**VICTORIAN REMAINS**
- Most Victorian superstitions were related to death
- Preventing death (“Victorian Superstitions”)
  - Seeing your reflection in a room where someone has recently died predicts your death soon after
  - If you hear **three consecutive knocks** when nobody is there, a death is soon to follow
  - If a picture falls off a wall, somebody you know will die
  - If you smell **roses** when none are around, someone is about to die
  - If you see yourself in a **dream**, your death will follow
  - If you **dream** about a birth, someone you know will die
  - **Speaking ill of the dead is unlucky** (not to mention, they might come back to haunt you)
- Responding to death (WordPress & History.co.uk)
  - Eyes of the deceased were immediately closed, and pennies were placed upon the eyelids both to seal them shut and to ‘give to St. Peter’ (likely an adaptation of the Greek tradition to put a coin in the mouth of the dead to pay for passage across the River Styx)
- Mirrors were covered with black cloth, a tradition dating back to the 16th century to prevent souls from being trapped
- Wearing anything new to a funeral (especially shoes) was taboo

REFERENCES