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Pilgrims, Seekers, Samaritans and Saviours

Christianity was integral to the ideal and the work of countless reformers, from Florence Nightingale or Sister Dora or Josephine Butler or Dora Greenwell to Quintin Hogg and Samuel Barnett and W. E. Gladstone. We cannot of course tell how far they were Christians because they were good men and how far they were good men because they were Christians. But certainly it was in part the second of these.1

Understanding our time in Christian terms is partly to discern these new paths, opened by pioneers who have discovered a way through the particular labyrinthine landscape we live in, its thickets and trackless wastes, to God.2

This chapter investigates and explores the enduring Christian-inspired narrative of the motivated pilgrim and seeker. This particular narrative is also viewed alongside the quasi-related phenomenon of the Samaritan and the story that has sustained this latter ideal. Both originated in biblical idioms but both became substantially effective and important narratives that shaped the course of both modern religion and the developmental history of moral altruistic feelings.3 Both of these narratives draw obviously from biblical precedent but the former owes its power within British culture to John Bunyan and the repeated popularised versions of the pilgrim narrative.

Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress has been a staple of Christian devotional reading, while his Grace Abounding (a similarly narrative work) likewise embodied the search for truth in the figure of the pilgrim. Exploration of the pilgrim narrative indicates its resonance through different areas of twentieth-century life as it became invested and reinvested with both religious and secular meaning.4 None of these produced either ‘residues’ or irrevocable changes linked to secularisation. The desire to seek for knowledge, enlightenment and the ‘truth’ motivated missionaries, social investigators and moral campaigners.
These impulses were manifested in a range of writings, actions and responses that this chapter seeks to evaluate and analyse. Yet it would be a mistake to consider the pilgrim-related narrative only to have inspired ‘religious’ behaviour and responses. Very obviously scientists, inventors, social commentators and philosophers saw themselves embarking on a pilgrimage in search of some species of truth or revelation. Working-class radicals from the early nineteenth century onwards were also often self-consciously engaged upon a journey that involved degrees of struggle, while this principle shaped the lives of autodidacts for several generations. The capacity of some of these groups in turn to draw upon what had been a central Christian story is examined in this chapter to create personal narratives about struggle, bravery and constancy.

In discovering how, and why, basic forms of narrative persisted our example is provided by the numerous ways in which members of British society and their local communities embraced the morality and ideals of the ‘Good Samaritan’ story. While the motivations of individuals demonstrates the longevity of such behaviour in the community at large, this section of the chapter also focuses upon the appearance of this ideal in formal/informal institutions and wider public life. This manifestation of morality and altruism in action also, in part, provides the ‘supply side’ analysis for the earlier ‘Pilgrims’ section of the chapter. This is the behaviour that inspired others to undertake actions and pursue goals which produced sustained degrees of fulfilment for them. It becomes increasingly obvious that there is overlap between these two idioms, not least where instances of the ‘saved’ becoming ‘saviour’ are evident. This section also considers motives for the growth of an ethic of ‘selfless’ devotion to good works. Likewise there is also a focus upon the role of moral/religious narratives in the growth and development of the modern caring professions. These are phenomena where secularisation, in its earlier and cruder forms, saw the eclipse of religion and its importance precisely in the development of such professions. Thus the individual motivations of professions and professionals are considered alongside the changing nature and expectations of religious ministry. This is achieved through examining the ideals of entrants and practitioners, as well as influences upon the training and creation of vocation over the period.

I ‘He who would true valour see’ – pilgrim stories

It is indisputable that the pilgrim narrative has been important to British culture and has almost acquired a vibrant life of its own. Although Chaucer’s pilgrims told didactic tales for the most part, the pilgrimage of his characters did not resonate in the manner of later works with a more obviously devotional message. It was John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress that became a central text that shaped this preoccupation of English culture. Both historical and literary investigations have satisfactorily demonstrated this persuasive