

# Religion and the Great Exhibition of 1851

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## Introduction

We all know—or at least think we know—about the Great Exhibition of 1851. Standing symbolically at the very middle of the nineteenth century, it connotes the optimism of the Victorian period and the ineluctable progress in science, technology, and manufacturing that has come to characterize today's world. Many of the well-known illustrations of the Exhibition draw attention to such exhibits as the steam engine, the combine harvester, and the mechanical loom—the very technologies that formed the basis of the increasingly industrialized society in which we live. Paxton's light and airy Crystal Palace likewise evokes modernity in its architecture and is reminiscent of the buildings that occupy today's cityscapes. It was also the precursor of many subsequent exhibitions, such as the 1893 World Fair in Chicago and the 1951 Festival of Britain. From all these perspectives the Great Exhibition looks comfortingly modern so that we can readily relate to it. It takes no great leap of the imagination to envisage ourselves wandering through the Crystal Palace and staring with admiration at Osler's crystal fountain and the rows upon rows of luxurious goods on display.

Yet historians rightly insist that we should be critical of reconstructions that portray past events simply as antecedents to the present. Such readings often lead to anachronistic interpretations of the past; on closer inspection the past usually looks increasingly unfamiliar and subject to its own contemporary concerns, not ours. One recent book stands out from the extensive historical literature on the Great Exhibition as particularly sophisticated in its approach and wide-ranging in its scope. In his *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* Jeffrey Auerbach is careful not to restrict the Exhibition's historical meaning by imposing a teleological perspective of the kind suggested above but instead recognizes that it 'was throughout a protean event, its meaning diffuse and subjective'.<sup>1</sup> Every social group—indeed, each individual—forged its own narratives in comprehending, describing, and assessing that most

<sup>1</sup> Auerbach, *Great Exhibition*, 56. Auerbach has developed this theme in his 'Introduction' to Auerbach and Hoffenberg, *Britain, the Empire, and the World*. See also Purbrick, *Great Exhibition*, 1–19.

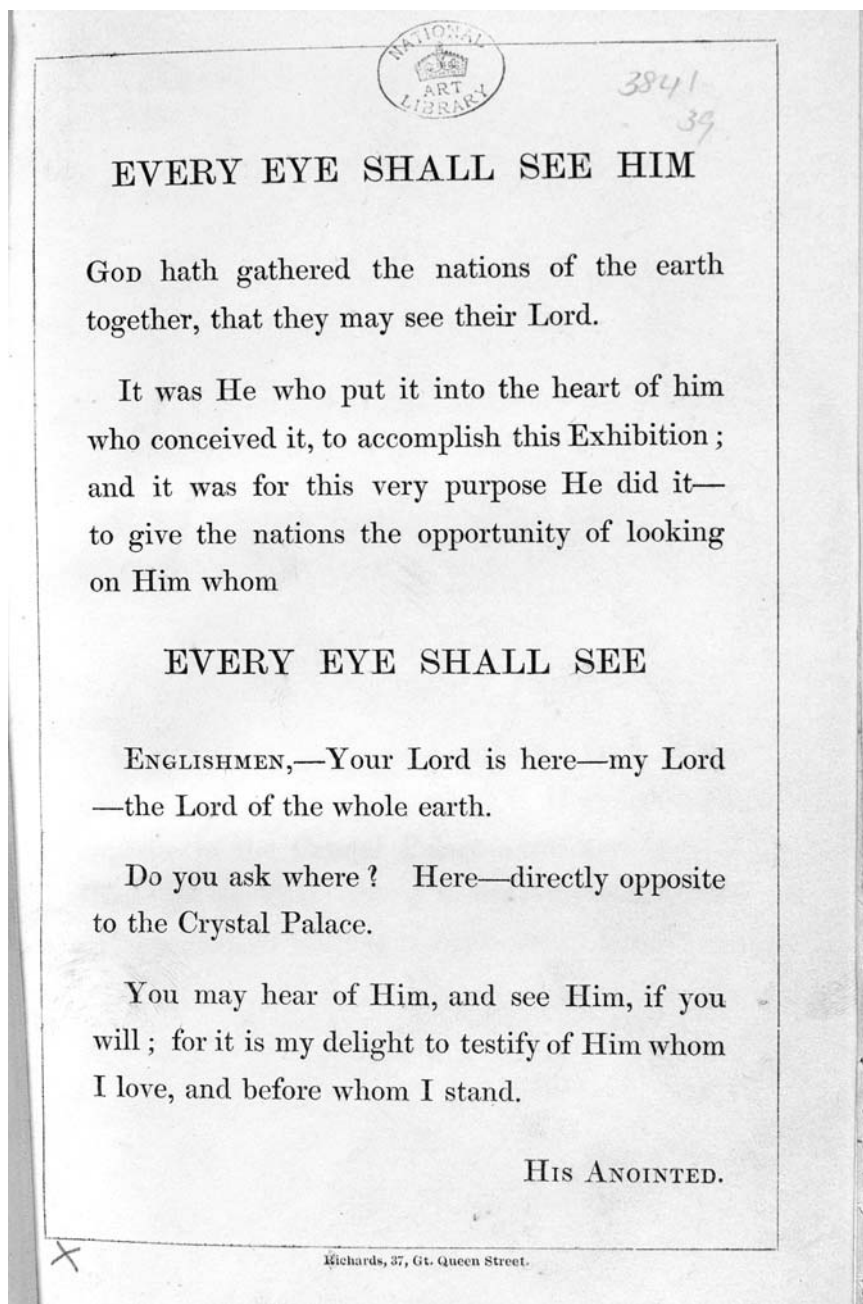
public and pivotal event in mid-nineteenth-century British—if not world—history. Yet despite an extensive secondary literature on the Exhibition historians have paid scant attention to the perceptions and reactions of some of the most important and influential communities of the period—religious communities.<sup>2</sup> Given the centrality of religion in the lives of Victorians, in the art and literature of the period, and in the machinery of state, it would be surprising if religion did not play a significant role in the history of the Exhibition. What, then, *were* the religious responses to the massive glass and iron structure erected in Hyde Park, the thousands of exhibits garnered from the four corners of the earth, and the large numbers of foreign visitors—including many ‘heathens’—who flocked to London and clogged its streets? In seeking to answer these questions the present study offers a reassessment of the historical significance of the Great Exhibition by interpreting it as a religious event or, more precisely, an event possessing many diverse religious dimensions.

At first sight this may seem an unlikely topic since, according to Prince Albert and other prominent proponents, the Exhibition was ostensibly concerned with exhibiting material artefacts and was clearly intended to advance trade and industry, not religion. It was, after all, the Exhibition of the *Works of Industry* of All Nations. What could be more secular than Joseph Paxton’s immense iconic building of glass and iron? The exhibits were likewise material objects—principally the products of manual labour, ranging from steam-powered looms to fine embroidery and from kitchen stoves to carefully sculpted statues—including a wide variety of raw materials. Although most accounts of the Exhibition mention that the Archbishop of Canterbury intoned a dedicatory prayer at the opening ceremony, this is generally viewed simply as an example of the Victorian predilection for involving the Church in state pageantry. However, the Archbishop’s prayer, which was applauded by some sections of the religious press and utterly condemned by others, was only

<sup>2</sup> Four collections of essays have recently been published on the Exhibition, but none of their chapters addresses directly religious responses to the Exhibition: See Auerbach and Hoffenberg, *Britain, the Empire and the World*; Bennett, Brockmann, and Filmer-Sankey, *Die Weltausstellung*; Buzard, Childers, and Gillooly, *Victorian Prism*; Purbrick, *Great Exhibition*. The only exceptions are Nick Fisher’s paper ‘Who Really Needed the Idea of Progress?’, John P. Burris’s *Exhibiting Religion*, and Paul Young’s *Globalization and the Great Exhibition*. Burris’s main thesis is that in the period 1851–93 international exhibitions provided an important meeting point for different cultures and a focus for an emerging concern with the comparative study of religion. His chapter on the 1851 Exhibition (23–62, esp. 49–59) engages some of the issues discussed in the present study. Young seeks to show that the Exhibition was an exemplar of globalization, involving the ‘integration of all global communities into a supposedly free-and-open world economy’ powered by industrial capitalism (4). Although he briefly discusses (47–53) a few of the religious commentators examined in the following chapters and recognizes that some of them supported ‘globalization’ with religious arguments, he does not appreciate the religious lines of reasoning underpinning their views or the deep historical divisions within mid-nineteenth-century Christianity. He also misidentifies William Forster, the Congregationalist minister, as a ‘Quaker minister’ (155).

the most visible instance of the extensive religious engagement with the Exhibition beginning in the autumn of 1849 and extending at least until its close in mid-October 1851. Like the Archbishop, Albert embedded his own vision of the Exhibition within a religious framework—as we shall see Albert’s brief allusions to the Exhibition’s religious significance were enthusiastically welcomed by most religious commentators. Moreover, for vast numbers of its contemporaries, the Exhibition was not to be understood solely in terms of material exhibits or its purported objective of boosting manufacturing industries through international cooperation; instead this celebration of the material world was viewed through a religious lens and it was often perceived in relation to the life of the spirit and the prospect of life hereafter—at least for those who sought salvation. The putative religious significance of the Exhibition became a pressing and recurrent topic in sermons and pamphlets as clergymen and others struggled to make religious sense of this unique event in their midst.

The sheer volume of primary source material available on this topic indicates the prominence of religious issues among contemporary reactions to the Exhibition. Hundreds of sermons were delivered in pulpits throughout Britain, especially on 4 May 1851, the Sunday following the magnificent opening ceremony, and more than fifty of these sermons were subsequently published. Special guides to London were produced to enable visitors to the Exhibition to appreciate the religious life of the metropolis and, if away from home on the Sabbath, to select an appropriate church or chapel in which to worship. Numerous religious books, pamphlets, and handbills were also produced to coincide with the Exhibition (for example the handbill shown in Figure 1), including tracts issued by religious publishing organizations, such as the Religious Tract Society (RTS), the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). Many of these publications advised British Christians how to respond to the Exhibition, while others were addressed to visitors, both Christian and otherwise, informing them that Britain is a Protestant country where the Bible is revered and the holiness of the Sabbath is respected. Faced with the prospect of large numbers of visitors residing in London, several evangelical and missionary societies expended significant amounts of money and considerable effort in trying to save their souls. For some evangelicals the Exhibition appeared divinely ordained with the intention of bringing numerous visitors to London for the purpose of conversion. Moreover, the exhibits were not limited to those gross material objects that would appeal to the physical senses but also included Bibles for spiritual nourishment. The BFBS and RTS even succeeded in mounting stands inside the Crystal Palace itself and were thus included among the authorized exhibitors listed in the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*.



**Figure 1** This handbill distributed to visitors was also published in Danish, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, and three Arabic languages. A private address appears at the foot of one of the English copies, suggesting that the handbill was produced by an individual, rather than by a religious society.

The burgeoning religious periodical press, which by mid-century had become a major sector of the publishing industry, carried extensive commentary on the Exhibition. The combination of improved technology and a reduction in the stamp tax levied on newspapers had resulted in a proliferation of newspaper and periodical titles during the late 1830s and the 1840s. An estimated 149 religious periodicals were published in London alone during the years 1841 to 1851, and these constituted 17.6% of the metropolis's periodical publications.<sup>3</sup> Thus by 1851 most religious denominations, sects, and factions possessed or were closely associated with specific periodical publications.<sup>4</sup> Although a few religious periodicals were determined to ignore it—which, in itself, is a noteworthy reaction—most addressed some aspects of the Great Exhibition and in many cases carried significant numbers of articles, including editorials and other commentary, on this most prominent contemporary event. As a contributor to the *Baptist Magazine* noted, one 'can scarcely take up a newspaper, read a periodical, listen to an address, or hold conversation with a friend, but he finds reference is made to the well known building—the Crystal Palace'. Likewise, the author of a tract opposing the Exhibition reported that it 'heads every new periodical and shows itself on every lucifer match box'.<sup>5</sup> The religious press carried articles that not only reported on the construction of the Crystal Palace, its manifold contents, and the magnificent opening ceremony, but also frequently assessed the religious significance of the Exhibition and advised members of the respective denominations or sects how they should comprehend the happenings in Hyde Park. The correspondence and diaries of religious contemporaries, such as the Earls of Shaftesbury and of Sheffield, are also useful sources for ascertaining their personal views on the Exhibition and its significance for religion. Indeed, the ubiquity of the Exhibition compelled writers from across the religious spectrum to reflect on its meaning.

Religious reactions to the Exhibition addressed a number of issues, including the problem of finding language appropriate for describing contemporaries' experiences when visiting this singular event. 'The character of this Exhibition', wrote one Independent minister, 'is altogether peculiar, not to say unique'. '[W]e behold a new thing in the earth.' Even the *Free Church Magazine*, which was not given to hyperbole, struggled to describe the

<sup>3</sup> Altholz, *Religious Press in Britain*, 1–13, esp. 2. This figure does not include the many periodicals that may not have been primarily religious but were strongly oriented to a religious viewpoint, such as the Tory, High Church *Quarterly Review*.

<sup>4</sup> In his 1853 review of contemporary 'Church Parties' in the *Edinburgh Review* (p. 334), William Daniel Conybeare pointed out that the Broad Church was not an organized church party and was 'even destitute of that instrument, which every factional subdivision of the smallest sects possesses, an organ in the periodical press'.

<sup>5</sup> Standen Pearce, 'The Crystal Palace', *Baptist Magazine* 43 (1851), 545–51, on 545; Anon., *England's Doom*, 3.



building and concluded its account by claiming that ‘it is more like a dream or enchanted vision. The seven ancient “wonders of the world,” if brought together, would have cut a poor figure beside the Great Exhibition.’ Most visitors, like this twenty-three-year-old Scottish woman, struggled to find an appropriate vocabulary: ‘All attempt at description would be vain; it is beyond anything I had anticipated—a wonder of the world! . . . For a long time I was quite dazzled.’<sup>6</sup> She fought for words, but the Exhibition far transcended the repertoire she had gleaned from her past experience. Likewise, reflecting on the contemporary periodical press, the literary historian Isobel Armstrong has noted that in their ‘reporting on the Crystal Palace [journalists and other writers] write as if the unprecedented scopic experience has reorganized the senses and exempted the building from ordinary rules of perception and judgement’.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, in seeking to make sense of the Exhibition, Christians often invoked certain passages from the Bible that illuminated its significance in the context of biblical history. For example, some students of prophecy conceived a strong similarity between Belshazzar’s Feast, as related in the Book of Daniel, and the godless celebration of material wealth being held in Hyde Park. Not surprisingly, they considered that the Crystal Palace would suffer a fate similar to Belshazzar’s Babylon. For more moderate evangelicals, however, the most appropriate biblical passages were to be found in the Book of Revelation, which predicted that, like the Crystal Palace, the heavenly city would be constructed of ‘pure gold, like unto clear glass’ (Rev. 21:18). From this perspective the Crystal Palace could be located within an existing prophetic framework in which it could be interpreted as an earthly prototype of the new heavenly Jerusalem. These two examples aptly illustrate how the Exhibition could be rendered within a biblical framework and also the very different biblical images it evoked for those maintaining dissimilar religious stances.

The very materiality of the Crystal Palace and its extensive display of material artefacts—the largest ever seen—also raised some significant issues for those of spiritual sensibility. Although some Christians condemned the Exhibition as a prime example of rank materialism, many clergymen struggled to identify the spiritual meanings underlying what otherwise appeared to be a temple dedicated to matter and to Mammon. A second, and related, concern was that the Exhibition, as a celebration of humankind’s mastery over nature, encouraged overweening pride in human achievement. The Exhibition was therefore a source of sin. While some religious writers were repelled by these

<sup>6</sup> Clayton, *Great Exhibition*, 4 and 14; ‘The Great Exhibition’, *Free Church Magazine* 8 (1851), 202–5, on 203; Story, *Early Reminiscences*, 161. See also Flower, *Great Exhibition* 3; ‘A Glance at the Exhibition’, *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal* 15 (1851), 337–40, on 337; Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 150–1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 142.

facets of the Exhibition, others sought to address these issues using a variety of intellectual resources in order to make the Exhibition acceptable to Christians. Indeed, for many, the Great Exhibition was a timely celebration of God's providence and an undoubted boon to Christianity.

But the religious parameters of the Great Exhibition were not confined to the building and its contents. Large numbers of foreigners flocked to London to accompany their exhibits or merely to visit the Exhibition. Many were not members of Protestant Churches, but included Jews, Muslims, Catholics, and 'heathens', so-called. Their presence in London raised several issues. Did these foreigners pose a threat to English Protestantism or was their convergence on London an unrivalled opportunity to facilitate mass conversions? Also, what did it mean in prophetic terms to gather the nations, especially in the light of such texts as Genesis 11:1–9, which describes a not dissimilar gathering at Babel? Far more subtle and personal questions also surfaced. For example, members of the congregation at St Margaret's Church, Westminster, were asked by Charles Kingsley in his 4 May 1851 sermon whether the Exhibition seemed 'anything but a matter of personal gain or curiosity, for national aggrandisement, insular self-glorification, and selfish—had almost said, treacherous—rivalry with the very foreigners whom we invited as our guests?'<sup>8</sup> As Kingsley made clear, it behoved Christians to subject their own responses to the Exhibition to rigorous spiritual examination.

The wide range of religious issues that the Exhibition engendered drove many clergymen to advise their congregations of the appropriate response to this extraordinary event. For example, preaching in Westminster Abbey, Canon Christopher Wordsworth indicated that the 'magnificent Spectacle' in Hyde Park would be either a great blessing or a great curse. What mattered, he insisted, was how individuals engaged the Exhibition. It could be viewed as merely a transient event—an 'Emporium of Trade' or a 'gorgeous pageant'—or its meaning could be savoured and its implications for religion appreciated; if the latter, the Exhibition could become 'to you like a Christian Church, and preach to you divine truths'. While Wordsworth opted for this latter possibility, he nevertheless acknowledged that the Exhibition was subject to a diversity of religious interpretations.<sup>9</sup> As he indicated, there was indeed no consensus over the Exhibition's religious meaning; instead we hear a cacophony of voices reflecting a wide range of religious positions. The following section will therefore explore the religious landscape at the mid-century in order to identify the main denominations and divisions within contemporary Christianity.

As Boyd Hilton, David Bebbington, and other historians of religion have rightly insisted, religion at the mid-century should not be understood in isolation since it was intimately bound up with a wide range of contemporary

<sup>8</sup> Kingsley, 'Fount of Science', 112.

<sup>9</sup> Wordsworth, *On the Great Exhibition*, 3–4 and 13.

social issues, including philanthropy and economics, but especially politics.<sup>10</sup> As a recent work on nineteenth-century history has noted, ‘it is hard to find political issues that were *not* overlaid and influenced by religious debate, and nobody could be in any doubt that religious conformism or dissent carried as their corollaries strong voting dispositions’.<sup>11</sup> Thus not only was there a strong alignment between, say, the High Church and Tory party, but attitudes to the contentious issue of Free Trade usually divided along both religious and political lines. To take two more specific examples of relevance to the present study: In the mid-nineteenth century Dissenters generally supported the voluntary principle—the principle that enterprises like the Great Exhibition should be funded by voluntary subscription and not by the government. Secondly, Quakers possessed a strong social conscience and were mostly pacifists and also vociferously opposed the slave trade. Thus, religious commentary on the Exhibition was not confined to theological matters but frequently addressed such diverse issues as the threats posed by Roman Catholicism, arguments over economic protectionism, and reactions to working-class radicalism.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, religious commentators often expressed their views on the increasing prominence of science and technology. The focus on religious responses to the Great Exhibition thus inevitably addresses how religious communities engaged a range of other pertinent issues and illuminates many parts of the larger canvas of mid-nineteenth-century history.

In adopting a religious perspective on the Exhibition this study not only confronts the view that it was simply a secular event but also challenges the historiographical assumptions that underpin such secular interpretations. It is certainly tempting to subsume the Exhibition within a framework of emerging modernity since the Exhibition can be seen as a crucial moment in the development of the modern world, perhaps even the beginning of modernity. Thus the editors of a recent volume on the Exhibition portray it as ‘an undeniably crucial point of orientation in the mapping of modernity’.<sup>13</sup> Yet there are many ways to map modernity. For example, in her book *Consuming Passions*, Judith Flanders portrays the Exhibition as initiating the now commonplace phenomenon of mass consumerism (whereas previously material luxuries had been accessible to only a few). In rather more colourful language Thomas Richards proclaimed the Exhibition as ‘the first outburst of the

<sup>10</sup> For example, Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*; Hilton, *Age of Atonement*; Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality*.

<sup>11</sup> Snell and Ell, *Rival Jerusalems*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Fisher (op. cit.) has argued that Congregationalists generally portrayed the Exhibition as a sign of social, moral and economic progress. My thanks to Nick Fisher for providing me with a copy of his paper. I discuss Quaker and Anglo-Jewish responses to the Great Exhibition in my *Quakers, Jews, and Science*, 147–58.

<sup>13</sup> Buzard, Childers, and Gillooly, *Victorian Prism*, 2; Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition*.

phantasmagoria of commodity culture . . . [It] fashioned a mythology of consumerism that has endured to this day.<sup>14</sup> Several historians have recently focused on the related phenomenon of spectacle and display and have explored the ways in which shows, exhibitions, museums, and other public displays presented science and technology to the wider Victorian public.<sup>15</sup> There is also an older historiography that depicts the Exhibition as a crucial event in the development of science and technology and as the most prominent display in history of ‘industrialisation and the values that went with it’.<sup>16</sup> Prince Albert and the other main proponents of the Exhibition would have happily endorsed this view, since one of the principal rationales of the Exhibition was to stimulate innovation and trade. However, as a number of historians have argued, the Exhibition’s history cannot simply be viewed as an endorsement of its official ideology, since it served a variety of functions, some of which were highly subversive to the views not only of Albert but also of such staunch supporters as Henry Cole (who held a paid position on the Executive Committee) and were propagated through such statements as the introductory essay included in the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, although the Exhibition can be located in the histories of science, technology, design, consumerism, and industrialization, its historical significance is greater than any or all of these perspectives and its meaning should not be limited to these or any other topics. Most importantly, to interpret the Exhibition solely from the Whiggish perspective of teleological progress towards our present-day technologies (or indeed developments in any other field) is to impose our own values and preoccupations uncritically on the early Victorians.<sup>18</sup>

Popular narratives of progress and modernity either ignore religion or portray it as sidelined by the emergence of modern consciousness. Indeed, for many present-day commentators in both Europe and America, one of the defining features of the past century and a half has been the decline of religion; progress in science and technology has often been linked to the declining influence of religion over people’s lives and its increasing marginalization in

<sup>14</sup> Flanders, *Consuming Passions*, 3–41; Richards, *Commodity Culture*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Carroll, *Science and Eccentricity*; Kriegel, *Grand Designs*; O’Connor, *Earth on Show*.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, *Great Exhibition*, quotation on 211–16; Fay, *Palace of Industry*. Similarly, in *Globalization and the Great Exhibition* Young emphasizes the Exhibition as the paradigm for global capitalism.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Bellon, ‘Science at the Crystal Focus of the World’; Buzard, ‘Conflicting Cartographies’; Fisher, ‘“Nothing Can Be More Successful”’; Gurney, ‘Appropriate Space’; Pearson, ‘Thackeray and *Punch*’; Young, ‘Mission Impossible’; but especially Hoffenberg, ‘Equipoise and its Discontents’.

<sup>18</sup> Historians—and their interpretations of the past—are of course affected by contemporary interests and values. Thus Auerbach (‘Introduction’ to Auerbach and Hoffenberg, *Britain, the Empire, and the World*) has identified some of the ways in which interpretations of the Exhibition have been influenced by the values maintained by historians.

Western culture.<sup>19</sup> Although many religious commentators at the time of the Great Exhibition viewed it as a significant symbol of human progress, we should appreciate that their understanding of progress was not secular but was centred on progress in religion and morality, rather than impose our modern highly secularized version of progress. More generally, however, undue attention to notions of progress and modernity can cloud our appreciation of the religious commitments of the period. Instead, this study pays close attention to contemporary religious views, to the divisions between the different religious communities, and to those religious events that intersected with the Exhibition. For example, in 1851 probably the most contentious religious issue under public discussion arose from the then recent re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales, which many Protestants perceived as a dire act of ‘papal aggression’. A close connection was sometimes adduced between this ‘aggression’ and the Exhibition, which included examples of Catholic ecclesiastical art in the Medieval Court (containing a number of exhibits by Augustus Pugin) and on the stands of Spain and other Catholic countries. Some Protestants therefore perceived popery to have invaded London under the cloak of the Exhibition. However, the Catholic press viewed the Exhibition as a stunt by the Protestant establishment to show its superiority over Catholicism while simultaneously crushing the Catholics in Ireland. Thus religious controversy found an appropriate outlet through the medium of the Exhibition itself and in the display of specific exhibits. Likewise, as we shall see in Chapter 6, the Exhibition intersected with the contemporary arguments over the political emancipation of the Jews. Indeed, given the high profile of the Exhibition, both visually and culturally, it would be surprising if it was not perceived to have a bearing—sometimes a profound bearing—on many aspects of contemporary religion.

## THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE IN 1851

The religious map of mid-nineteenth-century Britain offers a complex picture with many denominations, sects, parties, and individuals who were divided over doctrinal, social, and political issues. Each such position possessed its own history, usually involving schism and controversy. In this section the reader will find a very brief overview of the main Christian groupings that will be encountered in later chapters.

At the outset we need to appreciate that the power of religion was highly visible in many aspects of society and that the Church of England exerted

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Numbers (*‘Epilogue’*) reminds us that we in the West should not take our experience as typical. As religion is thriving in most other parts of the world, it is perhaps the West that is atypical.

considerable leverage within the state. Thus, for example, not only was the Queen Supreme Governor of the Church, but the twenty-six bishops sitting in the House of Lords influenced legislation. The activities of non-Anglicans were circumscribed by a number of legal disabilities, including non-access to many schools and non-bestowal of degrees from the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford. But a rather different appreciation of the contemporary importance of religion can be gained from the size of the religious constituency. The Religious Census carried out a month before the start of the Exhibition is difficult to interpret but showed that a significant proportion of the adult population of England and Wales attended church service on the chosen Sunday, 30 March 1851. Seven and a quarter million attendances were logged in the census. Although the total population numbered about eighteen million, it is not possible to infer from this the number of individual worshippers or the proportion of that population who attended services on that date, since an indeterminate number attended more than one service.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, attendance at a place of worship is at best a very crude indicator of religious belief—itsself a problematic term.<sup>21</sup> Yet taken with other overwhelming evidence, and notwithstanding the rising influence of free-thinking and secularism, it is clear that a significant proportion of the population had some commitment to religion and many of those took their religion seriously. At least some—perhaps many—of those who attended church or chapel during the summer of 1851 listened to sermons that engaged some aspects of the Exhibition.

Despite the millions who were counted by the enumerators on that Sunday, when the Religious Census was published in 1852 some contemporaries were horrified to discover that the attendance figures were far smaller than they had expected and that the lower echelons of the labouring classes were particularly remiss in attending church. Skilled artisans represented another group that contemporaries often identified as likely to reject Christianity and the Anglican Church in particular. They were also thought to be in danger from the seductive influence of radical political and anti-religious ideas, such as the atheism preached in George Jacob Holyoake's controversial weekly *the Reasoner and Theological Examiner*. One clergyman specified that among those artisans who were likely to forsake Christianity were 'the men who make our steam-engines and railway carriages, our presses and telegraphs, the furniture of our houses and the clothing of our persons'—the very constituency whose output was displayed at the Exhibition.<sup>22</sup> Hence leading secularists, such as Robert Owen, saw the Exhibition as a natural recruiting ground for their cause.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> As Snell and Ell (*Rival Jerusalems*, 37) have stressed, the Religious Census can be used to determine the relative strengths of denominations, not the absolute numbers of worshippers.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Williams, *Religious Belief*, 1–23.

<sup>22</sup> [Conybeare], 'Church Parties', 300–1.

<sup>23</sup> Secularist responses to the Exhibition will be discussed below, pp. 151–7.

The divisions within contemporary Protestantism are highly relevant to understanding religious reactions to the Exhibition. Leaving aside Jews—the only substantial non-Christian religious community—and Catholics (both of whom will be discussed in Chapter 6), the Protestant churches in England and Wales can be divided between the Established Church and a variety of dissenting bodies. At the mid-century the Church was still powerful but was losing its previous domination over people's lives, especially in the rapidly expanding industrial cities, not only to the rising tide of irreligion but also to Dissent.<sup>24</sup> Yet the Church was itself racked by controversy—such as the Gorham case, which raised the question whether spiritual regeneration was conferred on children at baptism—and by deep internal divisions, such as those engendered by the Tractarian Movement. It is usual to divide the Church of England clergy into three factions—High Church, Low Church, and Broad Church. One of the most helpful contemporary maps of the Established Church is provided by an anonymous article entitled 'Church Parties' that appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1853.<sup>25</sup> Its author, William John Conybeare, the vicar of Axminster, accepted this tripartite division but he also argued that within each party there existed a wide range of views that necessitated further subclassifications. Thus, he suggested, both the High Church and the Low Church parties included not only those clergymen who were dogmatic enthusiasts and overstated the uniqueness of their own position, but also traditionalists who were unreceptive to change, and also those of more moderate inclination who allowed for a natural development of religious principles. A moderate Broad Churchman himself, Conybeare was highly critical of both the extremists and the traditionalists within the High and Low Church factions. Yet, despite his analysis attracting criticism both from contemporaries and from modern historians, his characterization of these positions accords fairly well with the work of recent historians and will prove helpful in the ensuing chapters.<sup>26</sup> It is also clear from Conybeare's article that on many issues there was a fair range of cross-party agreement and that, although certain clergymen were paradigm examples of one faction or another, many individuals cannot easily be pigeonholed.

The term 'High Church' is usually applied to that section of the Church of England that emphasizes the tradition, liturgy, and rituals specific to Anglicanism. In particular, it places much value on the authority wielded by the religious hierarchy and sets the clergyman apart from the laity. Its liturgical practice is based on the Book of Common Prayer and on such rituals as baptism. Throughout the nineteenth century the High Church was aligned

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed analysis of the geographical distribution of attendance, etc., at the Established and Dissenting churches in 1851, see Snell and Ell, *Rival Jerusalems*.

<sup>25</sup> [Conybeare], 'Church Parties'.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Burns ('W. J. Conybeare') offers a useful and balanced assessment of Conybeare's analysis and also reviews its critics, both contemporary and modern.

with the political establishment and tended to support the Tories. Its main following was in rural areas where it was supported by both the squirarchy and the labouring poor. The term 'High and Dry' has been applied to the substantial number of High Churchmen who, basking in tradition, enjoyed their comfortable livings, but avoided injecting much fervour into their preaching, declined to engage contemporary theological issues, and took a modicum of paternal interest in the poor of the parish. Partly in reaction to this inactivity within High Anglicanism and partly owing to the growing influence of evangelicalism, a major rift had occurred in the 1830s with the rise of Tractarianism or the Oxford Movement; one contemporary likened the situation to a 'civil war . . . furiously raging in the Anglican Church'.<sup>27</sup> Under the guidance of John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey, John Keble, and others, this movement sought to address the theological laxity of the Anglican Church by reasserting the Church's strong Catholic traditions exemplified by medieval Christianity. They also objected to the Church having become a weak hostage of the political establishment. Instead they insisted that it should exert power, authority, and discipline over people's lives by being a strong and steadfast episcopal institution that was rooted in tradition and could offer a source for serious religious reflection. By 1851 a number of the leading Tractarians had abandoned the Church of England and defected to Rome. In turn, many of the High Anglicans who remained within the Church were vehement critics of Catholicism and of those clergy who had converted to Catholicism.

By the early eighteenth century the term 'Low Church' was applied to those clergy who rejected the authority of the High Church, with its emphasis on episcopacy and on the sacraments. Instead some of them sought greater latitude in both discipline and faith, an approach often characterized as latitudinarian. Thus latitudinarianism offered Christians a fair degree of freedom to employ their reasoning powers in framing their religious views. Latitudinarians also often applied their Christian principles in supporting progressive social issues. Although the relationship between the Low Church and evangelicalism is complex, by the mid-century this older latitudinarian tradition had been largely displaced by the evangelical insistence on religion being a personal commitment to justification by faith. For Low Church evangelicals the focus had become the individual's belief in Gospel Christianity and the need to save the souls of others. Thus Anglican evangelicals were prominent in missionary and conversion societies.

The 'Broad Church' is the most difficult to characterize as it needs to be located at the mid-century in relation to both the evangelical drift within the Low Church and the conflicts over Tractarianism within High Anglicanism. In some respects it carried the mantle of the Latitudinarians of the previous

<sup>27</sup> *Christian Reformer* n.s. 7 (1840), 382, cited in Turner, *John Henry Newman*, 2.



century. 'Its distinctive character is the desire of comprehension. Its watch-words are Charity and Toleration', wrote Conybeare. Like High Anglicans, Broad Churchmen accepted the role of the Church as 'divinely instituted for the purpose of manifesting God's presence, and bearing witness to his attributes, by their reflection in its ordinances and in its members'. But they also emphasized intellectual freedom and the duty of moral and intellectual improvement. Thus, as Conybeare noted, Broad Churchmen not only valued education and were involved in educational projects but a number of them were prominent intellectuals, including several eminent scientists.<sup>28</sup>

Towards the end of his 1853 article Conybeare offered a rough estimate of the number of clergymen in each party and subgroup.<sup>29</sup> One of the methods he used was based on the current edition of the published *Clergy List*, which covered clergymen in England and Wales. Out of the 18,000 clergy listed he identified 500 whose party allegiances he knew. In order to infer the total population from his sample, he scaled up his results by a factor of 36. In percentage terms he estimated that roughly 40% were High Church, 40% were Low Church, and 20% Broad Church, and he also provided figures for the subgroups within each party. These figures are of course very approximate and his estimate for the latitudinarian Broad Church is probably far too high. Conybeare's estimates are also of limited assistance in determining the religious views of the population at large, since some groups, such as moderate evangelicals, sought to attract members and engaged extensively in missionary and philanthropic endeavours, while others (especially the ultra-evangelicals) did not mobilize much support from among the laity.

Although nearly 3.8 million attendances at Church of England services were logged by the 1851 Religious Census, it also showed that the Protestant Dissenting sects attracted almost as many—nearly 3.2 million attendances. The Established Church therefore appears barely representative of the religious population of the country as a whole, but was indeed unrepresentative in the larger industrial cities where Dissent was particularly strong. But religious Dissent was itself divided among many different factions, each with its own vision of Christianity and with its unique history: Baptists, Congregationalists (Independents), Quakers, Unitarians, the several varieties of Methodists, and many smaller sects. Since the Exhibition featured prominently in the periodicals and other publications associated with many of these dissenting groups, they likewise feature prominently in the following chapters. For reasons that will be discussed in Chapter 8, several dissenting groups, but particularly Congregationalists, were highly enthusiastic about the Exhibition and understood it in the context of their own views of prophetic history.

<sup>28</sup> [Conybeare], 'Church Parties', 330–7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 337–8. See also Burns, 'W. J. Conybeare'.

In many contexts it is helpful for the historian to contrast the Church of England with Dissent, and church with chapel. However, one crucially important religious orientation crosses this divide—evangelicalism. Significant sections of both the Established Church and Dissent, including Methodists, Baptists, Independents, and even members of the Society of Friends, shared not dissimilar evangelical outlooks. Evangelicals, especially moderate evangelicals, from across this broad denominational spectrum could put aside their sometimes not inconsiderable theological differences and work together to propagate the Gospels in such interdenominational organizations as the Evangelical Alliance, the BFBS, and also various missionary societies.

David Bebbington has identified four primary and recurrent features of evangelicalism, although, as he notes, different emphases have been placed on these characteristics not only by different individuals but also at different times. The first is the call to conversion; given humankind's fallen, sinful nature, evangelicals are committed to saving souls by inculcating the need to repent and to forsake evil by adopting Christ's message. The gathering of putative sinners in London for the 1851 Exhibition thus provided evangelicals with an unrivalled opportunity for performing conversions. Bebbington's second characteristic is their activism. Those who had seen the light were bound to exert themselves tirelessly in order to bring others to Christ. For the mid-century generation, aspects of this activism included seeking out visitors to the Exhibition, providing them with religious services and with tracts and copies of the Gospels in various languages. The third characteristic is their commitment to the Bible, as the Word of God. While accepting that it contains inerrant truth and that it should be the compass for directing their lives, evangelicals generally employ fairly literal interpretations of the text and reject more critical readings of the Bible. Fourthly, evangelicals focus on the Gospels and thereby internalize the doctrine of the Cross. To quote Gladstone, evangelicals 'aimed at bringing back, and by an aggressive movement, the Cross, and all that the Cross essentially implies'. Thus, especially in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, they encompassed the doctrine of atonement as central to their Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

Evangelicals constituted a powerful and numerically significant grouping at the mid-century and one that was strongly represented in the contemporary periodical press. One historian has estimated that Anglican evangelicals numbered between two and three million within an adult population of eighteen million. Evangelicals from dissenting groups would account for a similar if not higher figure. Moreover, as Boyd Hilton has argued, we should not confine our discussion to those who belonged to the Evangelical party within the Established Church since evangelicalism encompassed 'an amorphous set of ideas and attitudes,

<sup>30</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 2–17. Gladstone quotation on p. 14.

capable of seeping into minds that were sometimes formally hostile to the type of churchmanship they represented'.<sup>31</sup> Evangelicalism, then, was widely diffused through a significant section of the religious population. Although evangelicalism was to lose much of its intellectual drive and some of its popular following during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, it was highly prevalent at the mid-century. Given this large constituency of committed followers, evangelical writers were prominent in responding to the Great Exhibition.

Boyd Hilton has argued that within the broad compass of Anglican evangelicalism a distinction needs to be drawn between its moderate and more radical forms. Attributing the roots of the moderate evangelicalism to the Wesleyan revival, he portrays this tradition as subsequently including many Anglicans, Scottish Presbyterians, and the members of the Clapham Sect. Although recognizing that God would subject believers to many torments and punishments in this life, moderates were, in Hilton's words, 'generally able to take a more cheerful view of private and even national misfortunes'. Such misfortunes they considered were part of God's plan to persuade people to free themselves from the power of sin. While these moderate evangelicals looked to the future life beyond the grave, they nevertheless placed great emphasis on living in the present by serving God and by striving for moral self-improvement. Likewise, they were strongly committed to social improvement and supported many philanthropic schemes, such as the temperance movement and the abolition of the slave trade. Believing that providence operates through the laws of cause and effect, they were generally supportive of rational argument and encouraged the pursuit of science.<sup>32</sup>

Although moderate evangelicalism attracted many followers throughout the first half of the century, by the mid-1820s it was facing a challenge from a darker and more dogmatic form of evangelicalism that arose first in Scotland, soon permeated Britain, and was exported to America. These more radical evangelicals strongly criticized what they perceived as the prevailing laxity in religious belief, insisting by contrast that justification could only be attained by unswerving faith. With the biblical text at the centre of their religion, these ultra-evangelicals adopted a narrow and literal interpretation of God's Word that stressed its apocalyptic and other-worldly aspects. Preoccupied with the biblical prophecy of the coming millennium and firmly committed to the belief that the world will descend into chaos before Christ's return, these pre-millennialists looked for signs of the impending Apocalypse in recent history and in contemporary events, including the construction of the Great Exhibition. National misfortunes, which moderates perceived as aids for religious instruction, were deemed to be indications of worldly decay and signs of God's

<sup>31</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 30.

<sup>32</sup> On the moderates' engagement with science see Livingstone, Hart, and Noll (eds), *Evangelicals and Science*, esp. Bebbington, 'Science and Evangelical Theology'.

wrath. A major source for exploring ultra-evangelical responses to contemporary events is the twice-weekly *Record*, founded in 1828 and greatly influenced by Alexander Haldane, its principal proprietor. So strong was the alignment between the ultra-evangelicals and the *Record* that they were often called Recordites. As the pages of the *Record* indicate, radical evangelicals paid little attention to science and were particularly opposed to the secular and speculative scientific theories gaining increasing support from the scientific community around the mid-century. Thus when the best-known ultra-evangelical naturalist, Philip Gosse, published his *Omphalos* (1857)—his most explicit attempt to bring Scripture to the aid of geology—this work was widely criticized by fellow scientists as inadequate and outmoded. Not surprisingly, Gosse, a member of the Plymouth Brethren, rejected Darwin's theory of evolution.<sup>33</sup> As will be discussed in the next chapter one of the sternest critics of the Exhibition was also a member of that sect.

In the following chapters an attempt will be made to indicate the denominational allegiance of each writer and periodical discussed. In many cases this is fairly straightforward; for example, when discussing an editorial in a periodical with a clear religious orientation or when the writer of a pamphlet is named and sufficient biographical evidence exists to determine his position. However, there are a number of anonymous works and also works by less well-known authors where it has proved difficult or impossible to determine the author's denomination. In such problematic cases I have sometimes resorted to making an educated guess. However, some individuals have proved impossible to classify as they do not fit neatly into any one party but appear to hold views that cut across party lines. Moreover, it is important to note that the religious views of some individuals underwent significant shifts over their lifetimes. For example, David Bebbington has charted William Gladstone's move from his youthful evangelicalism 'to a personal form of Orthodox High Churchmanship before moving on again into Tractarianism. Subsequently, without repudiating his High Churchmanship, he continued his pilgrimage in a Broad Church direction.' Likewise, John Henry Newman's religious odyssey began with evangelicalism and ended in Roman Catholicism.<sup>34</sup> These examples, like many others, suggest that individuals often should not be aligned with any single party. Thus while acknowledging that labels like 'High Anglican', 'ultra-evangelical', and 'Baptist' help to locate writers within the broader patterns of religious history, I have refrained from assigning individuals to parties where the evidence is uncertain or confused.

<sup>33</sup> Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 7–26; Turner, *John Henry Newman*, 39–64; Gosse, *Father and Son*, 105. For Conybeare's characterization of the 'old' (i.e. moderate) and radical versions of evangelicalism see his 'Church Parties', 276–300.

<sup>34</sup> Bebbington, *Mind of Gladstone*, 12; Turner, *John Henry Newman*.

The many religious organizations that fulfilled benevolent, charitable, political, or educational functions constitute a further facet of the religious landscape that will be encountered in the following chapters. These ranged from the Evangelical Alliance—a powerful coalition of evangelicals drawn both from the Established Church and from Dissent—to the many missionary societies, such as the London Missionary Society and the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews. They also included many religiously based philanthropic institutions; for example, the Ragged School Union, the Church Pastoral Aid Society, the Society for Promoting the Due Observance of the Lord's Day, and the Female Aid Society.<sup>35</sup> Two functions of these organizations are pertinent to the present study. They generated much religious commentary on the Exhibition, through the tracts, periodicals, and other literature that they published, and also through their proceedings, which were reported in the religious periodical press and sometimes in separate publications. For example, detailed accounts of the annual meetings were carried in such periodicals as the *Missionary Register* and the ultra-evangelical *Record*. Moreover, several religiously based organizations were prominent publishers, including the RTS and the BFBS. Secondly, a large number of religious organizations held their annual (May) meetings in London in the period between late April and late May, with Exeter Hall on the Strand (shown in Figure 14) being the preferred venue for evangelicals. Before the opening of the Exhibition, some commentators had feared that the Exhibition would disrupt these key events in the religious calendar. However, the May 1851 anniversary meetings proved very successful, one contemporary noting that they 'have been better attended than usual, and an admirable spirit has pervaded them'.<sup>36</sup> It seems likely that the presence of the Exhibition attracted a greater number of participants (and even possibly promoted the 'admirable spirit' of the proceedings), since religious visitors to London often combined attendance at the annual meeting of a religious organization with a visit to the Great Exhibition.<sup>37</sup> Thus not only did this important period in the religious calendar coincide with the first few weeks when the Exhibition was open, but the attractions at Exeter Hall conspired with the attractions at the Crystal Palace to bring people of firm religious persuasion to London.

<sup>35</sup> Low, *Charities of London*.

<sup>36</sup> *Record*, 7 May 1851, 4.

<sup>37</sup> For example, the Quaker Edward Pease combined the Yearly Meeting with a visit to the Exhibition. See Pease, *Diaries of Edward Pease*, 295.