THE BIBLE AND BRITISH SOCIETY

Posted on July 15, 2009 by Eddie

Category: Bible Translation

Did having the Bible in English make any difference to British society? In a post about the process and product of Bible translation David Ker wrote:

> *200 years after the King James Bible was published, children were working in coal mines, and slaves were being beaten in the empire where the sun never set. (read more)*

David is writing as a concerned Bible translator, not a historian, so I'll ignore some of the more egregious generalisations in his post (and perhaps make some of my own, instead). However, the implication is that having the Bible in English made very little difference to British society. While it is certainly true to say that British society has always had its fair share of faults, it is unfair to say that the society has not been affected by the Scriptures.

Perhaps the most obvious case in point is the Methodist revival of the 1700s during which a large slice of British society was changed. There was an increase in personal piety, a decrease in drunkeness and societal issues such as prison reform and the abolition of slavery were adressed. It has often been said, perhaps a tad simplistically, the methodist revival saved Britan from a French-style revolution.

Even in the Victorian period which David chooses for special opprobium, there were people like Barnado, Spurgeon and George Mueller who, motivated by the Gospel, worked to transform alleviate the ills of British Society. And while I would not claim that Britain is anything like a Christian country, I would argue that even today we have remnants of a Christian morality that show that the Christian Gospel has transformed our society. The recent MPs expenses scandal is an excellent example. The country has been convulsed for weeks by revelations of MPs getting personal advantage from their work expenses. The British have rightly been troubled by this, but the truth is that in many countries the sort of corruption which has cause outrage here would hardly have been noticed. We have a notion that people in public life should be honest and truthful - in many countries you expect your public officials to be corrupt. We may not live up to our moral values anymore - but we expect people to do so.

Of course the question then is raised, why overt Christian values have to some extent faded from British life over the years. Andrew Walls gives a description, if not an explanation of this process.

> *If you consider the expansion of Islam or Buddhism, the pattern is one of steady expansion. And in general, the lands that have been Islamic have stayed Islamic, and the lands that have been Buddhist have stayed Buddhist. Christian history is quite different. The original center, Jerusalem, is no longer a center of Christianity -- not the kind of center that Mecca is, for example. And if you consider other places that at different times have been centers of Christianity -- such as North Africa, Egypt, Serbia, Asia Minor, Great Britain -- itâ€™s evident that these are no longer centers of the faith. My own country, Scotland, is full of churches that*

> *have been turned into garages or nightclubs.*
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> *What happened in each case was decay in the heartland that appeared to be at the center of the faith. At the same time, through the missionary effort, Christianity moved to or beyond the periphery, and established a new center. When the Jerusalem church was scattered to the winds, Hellenistic Christianity arose as a result of the mission to the gentiles. And when Hellenistic society collapsed, the faith was seized by the barbarians of northern and western Europe. By the time Christianity was receding in Europe, the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America were coming into their own. The movement of Christianity is one of serial, not progressive, expansion. (read more)*

British history has many dark periods. But despite that, it has been touched and transformed by its exposure to the Christian gospel in many ways. This is not to say that all societies which receive the Scriptures will react in the same way or follow the same trajectory - far from it. However, as I showed yesterday, there is ample evidence that an exposure to the Scriptures can bring huge changes to a society.