

[Lecture 4]
Charity, a Degrading Influence of the 18th Century,
[18th Century]

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I cannot quite picture to you the condition in which England found herself in the 18th century. It is not at all surprising to find an intense reaction from the extremes of the Puritan movement under full sway as we enter the movements of life in the opening of the eighteenth century to which we now turn our attention.

You will remember how we traced the development of the Puritan movement from its first faint beginnings through the long centuries to its final dramatic struggle with the King and his followers; how under the materful power of Cromwell, and his magnificent army who rested upon the teaching of the Bible for their authority and guidance, the issue over what constituted the right to govern was fought out upon the battlefields of Naseby and Marston Moor.¹ It was a period of tremendous political and religious excitement in which we accommodated all the deepest as well as the most brutal feelings of man's nature. But the reaction came. The Puritan fever, so tremendous and {??} in its rage, and not entirely without its periods of delierium, had passed the crisis, and the way to health was now opened up.

In the early years of the 18th century we find England in a peculiar situation. It is easy enough in dealing with this period to make a picture as black as one ever painted. It is a period [of] extreme reaction against the excitements of a struggle in which we involved the deepest moral and religious interests. Just as the individual, who has been through a long period of intense work and activity, likes to take a vacation, to forget what he has

¹ The battles of Naseby, June 14, 1645, and Marston Moor, July 2, 1644 were two of the important Royalist defeats in the English Civil War.

been working over, and give himself up to a less exacting, and less strenuous period in preparation of new duties, so the nation as a whole does the same thing. As we come upon England in the opening years of the 18th century for the purpose of noting some of the social, moral and religious conditions of the time, we find her in a kind of vacation condition. While it may be discouraging to investigate at this point, it is necessary to do so, but we must judge the conditions in light of this fact, that it is a period of relaxation, and indifference, an attempt to throw off the duties and cares of serious living, and join in a general pleasure-seeking vacation.

We are trying to look at things from the point of the prosperous classes, and especially in their relation to the people as a whole. To one who has read Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*,² the general atmosphere of the period is fairly familiar. Its general character is coarse and vulgar. One has only to read the literary products of the period to see this very clearly. Smollet's Fielding's, Swift's³ writings, if one has the patience to read them, mirror the conditions under which they were written.

As to the kind of pleasures that these people of the upper classes were interested in, such customs as bull-baiting and bear-baiting were common among the greatest lords and ladies. To witness such a spectacle was one of the common methods of killing time among the better sort of folks, "In Queen Anne's time it was performed twice a week at Hockley Hole in London. ... Among the entertainments advertised in London in 1729 and 1730," says Lecky,
we find a mad bull to be dressed up with fireworks and turned loose in the game place, a dog to be dressed up with fireworks over him, a bear to be let loose at the same time, and a cat to be tied to a bull's tail, a mad bull dressed

² William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), *The History of Henry Esmond*, 1852.

³ Tobias Smollett (1721-1771); Henry Fielding (1707-1754); Jonathan Swift (1667-1745).

up with fireworks to be baited (i.e., tortured).
(Lecky, England in the 18th Cen. Vol I P. 599.)⁴

Cock-fighting was also common, in schools and among all classes of people. In 1705 its merits and advantages were set forth in "An Essay on the Innocent and Royal Recreation and Art of Cocking."⁵ The essayist hoped that this great form of sport might become a popular local and very common—it being so innocent—past-time. Sometimes, it is said, the church bells were rung in honor of a victory in the inter-county cock-fights. Of course hunting in various forms served as the country gentleman's great method of satisfying his passion for excitement. Gambling was very common, both among men and women. It is not quite clear whether the mania for gambling is the cause, the result or simply an attendant circumstance to the mildest kind of speculations which men and women rushed headlong, in their mad desire for money. The South Sea Bubble was only one of many that led the get rich quick people to the great panic when the bubbles exploded. Lotteries were regarded as a legitimate method of performing charitable duties. One peculiar witness of this is Hollis Hall at Harvard⁶ which was built from the proceeds of a lottery.

Not only was the coarseness and vulgarity of the times exhibited here, but also in the condition of the stage. Not in high art, not in literary interest, but simply the power of the stage to produce vulgar obscene entertainments was its influenced best. But perhaps the greatest reproach is that all this stage vulgarity was permitted for obscenities sake. It was not lightened even by the slightest sense of delicacy and refined feelings.

But this brings us to a point where we come in contact with what was really the heart and core of the trouble. There was no place for art, except of that sort which

⁴ William E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteen Century*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1878. Vol 1, pp. 552-3. Different page numbers likely come from different editions.

⁵ Likely, William Machrie, *An Essay Upon the Royal Recreation and Art of Cocking*, Edinburgh: James Watson, 1705.

⁶ Hollis Hall, Harvard University, 13 Harvard Yard, Cambridge, MA, built 1763.

seemed to satisfy the desire for ostentation and display. Portrait painting flourished, and lived upon the vanity of shallowness. Art in other forms went begging. The struggle of Handel the great composer of music is well known. It became "one of the signs of good taste among fashionable people to ridicule his music," says Lecky.⁷

While the list of writers which appear during this period is considerable and their work is important, the interesting thing is that their interests somewhat reflect the commonplaceness of the life about them. There is little or no place of what we call the finer sentiments, and deeper thoughts. To deal with superficial things in a superficial way, and if led by chance to touch upon some topic of a finer quality, it was with the hand of blasé, indifference and irony. The truth seems to be that the finer sentiments of life had been crushed.

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Perhaps this is illustrated by the attitude of the people toward religion. To revert to the subject of morality and religion, the subject which had been the sole topic of vital interest during the Puritan movement, seemed utterly impossible, to this Englishman of the early 18th century, "In higher circles, everyone laughs, if one talks of religion," said Montesquieu on his visit to England.⁸ The clergy had lost their standing, and were about on a par socially with the serving maid. They read prayers which no one attended.

They hung around the heels of their lords, and as one has said, their only duty seemed to be to be able to carry their lord to bed after he had become so drunk that he could no longer stand or walk. Recall the Parson of *Henry Esmond*. Even the most apologetic of church writers have to pass over this period with their eyes closed or else declare that the curate was a disgrace to the church while the Bishop and other higher dignitaries regarded their positions only as an easy means of getting money. One Bishop is said never to have visited his diocese. The fact

⁷ W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteen Century*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1878. Vol 1,, p. 535

⁸ Quoted in John Richard Green, *A Short History of the English People*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1875, p. 717

is they were on about the same plane as their drunken pleasure-seeking lords, with this exception that in general they were not quite so bold, and above board in acknowledging their sins. In the midst of the coarseness and vulgarity, which they should have demurred, they became helpless puppets who fawned and whined in the midst of it all. Among the more prominent people, Christianity had become merely a theme for scorn and was regarded as a mere fiction and superstition.

Of course the clergy lost their political influence, and the restraint which at times had been given to political life by the influence of the church was now withdrawn. In fact the world of politics shared the same fate as all the rest of society. It was corrupt venal. Bribery and graft were common. In fact the only method of accomplishing results either for the benefit or the injury of the nation was by the purchase of influence. Walpole's influence at this point is illustrative.⁹

That is a dark and gloomy picture, you say. Well, so be it. But we must now pass over the great middle class, and take up one or two points which show the relation of this brutal period upon the poor. I called this lecture, "Charity, a Degrading Influence in the 18th Century." You are wondering how there could be any such thing as charity in such an age. As a matter of fact there wasn't any such thing. Charity had become alms giving. The lavish, and ostentatious display, the reckless expenditure of money had produced its effect. An illustration is seen in the manner of paying servants. The custom which we call tipping had become so common that houses no longer paid their servants wages, but simply gave them board and a place to stop while the servant depended upon tips from the guests, and when a dinner party filed from the dining-room, it was compelled to run the gauntlet of the out-stretched hands of the butlers. Trouble and dissatisfaction with household servants was such in those days as to afford many a woman with a topic of conversation for all eternity.

⁹ Robert Walpole (1676-1745), de facto first Prime Minister of Great Britain, 1721-1742.

In 1704 the evils which this pernicious extravagance leads to came to the first in an attempt to extend the system of poor-law relief. Defoe, who writes with keenness and wisdom, issued a tract, "Giving Alms, No Charity."¹⁰ He maintains that the pauperism of the country is not due to want of employment, but to habits of vagrancy, drunkenness, and extravagance. "I affirm," he says,

of my own knowledge, that when I wanted a man for laboring work, and offered 9 s. per week to strolling fellows at my door, they have frequently told me to my face that they could get more a-begging....¹¹

[T]here is nothing more frequent than for an Englishman to work till he has got his pockets full of money, and then go and be idle, or perhaps drunk, till it is all gone, and perhaps himself in debt: and ask him in his cups what he intends, he'll tell you honestly that he'll drink as long as it lasts, and then go to work for more. ...

I make no difficulty to promise on a short summons, to produce above a thousand families in England, within my particular knowledge, who go in rags, and their children wanting bread, whose fathers can earn their 15 to 25 s. per week, but will not work. ... The reason why so many pretend to want work is that, as they can live so well on the pretense of wanting work, they would be mad to have it and work in earnest.¹²

So you see the vulgarity, the extravagance of the nobility is perfectly mirrored in the lives of the paupers. Who copies who, you cannot say. But the cursed alms giving, which often passes for charity, had seemed to transform whole armies of people into professional beggars. Charity had become a profession, as devoid of sentiment and

¹⁰ Daniel Defoe, *Giving Alms, No Charity*. London: Booksellers of London and Westminster, 1704.

¹¹ Daniel Defoe, *Giving Alms, No Charity*. London: Booksellers of London and Westminster, 1704, p. 12.

¹² Daniel Defoe, *Giving Alms, No Charity*. London: Booksellers of London and Westminster, 1704, p.27.

healthiness, and human interest, as were the lives from which it emanated.

This is a gloomy and discouraging situation that we find England in after the fever of Puritanism had run its course. But it is really not so discouraging as it seems. As we have seen before, the Puritan movement was not positive in its work, but negative. It had but one great object in view, namely of establishing the truth that the so-called authority which the Catholic Church and English Church exercised, basing its claims upon a power which did not exist, was a fiction. That was accomplished. The natural reaction was such as we have seen. The real positive, active, aggressive work of building a new structure on the site of the old had as yet hardly begun. The moral power and vigor of Calvinistic Puritanism was still working its way to the surface among the middle classes. Its work was yet of a hidden, and even crude nature, but the power and vitality still existed in this vacation period of English history.

Already in the thick underbrush of the early years of the 18th century evidences of the new power were coming to the surface. Defoe was writing. Addison was dealing out morsels of literary merit in the *Spectator*. These found their way to many a breakfast table. Steele was helping.¹³ There was a revival of Shakespeare's plays, which was as a breath of fresh air blowing across the foul atmosphere of the stage. Even the appearance of Handel was of no small moment. The coffee houses, where men of taste and interest came for conversation, were becoming popular, a tremendous improvement over the ale houses, and gin shops. Meantime, also manufacturing was increasing, and upon the basis of commercial and industrial prosperity this great extravagance and luxuriousness rested. That same Defoe who spoke with such acumen on the problem of begging, also describes in his "Tour Through Great Britain" (made in 1724-6)¹⁴ the condition of industry. Speaking of the small manufacturers near Halifax in Yorkshire he says,

¹³ Joseph Addison (1672-1719); Richard Steele (1672-1729).

¹⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Six volumes, 1724-26.

The land was divided into small enclosures, from two acres to six or seven each, seldom more. Every three of our pieces of land having a house belonging to it. ...¹⁵

[H]ardly a house standing out of speaking distance from another. ... we could see at every house a tenter, and on almost every tenter a piece of cloth or kersie, or shalloon, ... At every considerable house there was a manufactory...¹⁶

Every clothier keeps one horse at least to carry his manufactures to the market; ... and every one generally keeps a cow or two more for his family. ... By the means the small pieces of enclosed land about each house for they scarce sow corn enough to feed their cocks and hens. ...¹⁷

The houses are full of lusty fellows, some at the dye vat, some at the looms, others dressing the clothes; the women and children carding and spinning; being all employed from the youngest to the oldest, ...¹⁸

and not a beggar to be seen or and idle person... (Tour, III, p. 146.)¹⁹

This gives us a much more cheerful conception of England, for it is true that among these obscure people, things of real value were happening. Geo. Eliot's *Adam Bede*²⁰ is interesting as showing the emergence from the people who were doing the real work, a new set of thoughts and ideas. Upon said such as this, soil which still remained essentially ready for cultivation, after the purification

¹⁵ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Volume 3, 1724-26, p. 97.

¹⁶ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Volume 3, 1724-26, p. 99.

¹⁷ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Volume 3, 1724-26, p. 100.

¹⁸ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Volume 3, 1724-26, p. 101.

¹⁹ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Volume 3, 1724-26, p. 98. This whole quotation varies somewhat from the edition—and pagination—I have available.

²⁰ *Adam Bede*, the first novel by George Eliot, was published in 1859.

at the hands of the Puritan fever, upon this soil fell the words of Whitefield, and the Wesleys. Already they were growing into manhood, and were tracing in their minds the workings of thoughts and ideas which had been almost obliterated from England for three generation. For the time being we leave this as it is. Next Sunday evening we shall consider the great Methodist movement, and note from the Wesleys lay the foundation of modern religious conceptions.

