The work and thought of Shaftesbury

An outline and evaluation of the work of the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, with particular attention to its theological basis.

A brief history

Born in 1801, Ashley Cooper was educated at Harrow, gained First Class honours at Oxford, and was elected a Tory MP by the age of twenty-five. He became the Earl of Shaftesbury in 1851. After several bouts of illness, he died in 1885.

Hennell comments that faith and family were his priorities.[1] In 1830, he married Lady Emily Cowper whom he loved deeply. Emily’s mother was mistress and then second wife to Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister from 1855 to 1865.[2] The Cooper’s had ten children, whom Shaftesbury apparently did not neglect, despite his work.[3] Shaftesbury was adamant that his Christian life began at the age of seven under the influence of his nurse.[4] Furthermore, he was also clear that his philanthropic fire was lit when he was fourteen: Witnessing a group of drunken men carrying a coffin, he watched as they dropped it, swearing. Shocked at the indignity of this, he immediately committed himself to “pleading the cause of the poor and friendless.”[5]

Ecclesiastical reformer

Shaftesbury is often misrepresented as only a social reformer, yet his activism showed itself perhaps equally in a concern for ecclesiastical reform, expressed in three particular ways. First, holding fervently to orthodox evangelical doctrine, Shaftesbury lamented the decline in doctrinal depth and clarity amongst evangelical clergy.[6] To remedy this he founded the Church Pastoral Aid Society (CPAS) with the aim of increasing the amount of clergy to minister to the nation and appointing lay-workers for them.[7] Being step-son-in-law to the Prime Minister offered a second avenue for reform: Palmerston consulted Shaftesbury on all appointments of bishops and deans, concerned only that they were “good and proper” men.[8] Third, Shaftesbury confronted heresy: Battiscombe observes that “there was hardly a day when,
whether by lip or by pen, Lord Shaftesbury was not protesting against attacks on the orthodox faith.”[9] She even describes the intensity of his opposition to the Oxford movement as “slightly but definitely unbalanced.”[10] Shaftesbury was however, prepared to unite with his cousin Pusey against the common enemy of liberalism. He responded to its challenges to biblical authority (as also the rising challenge of science) with a somewhat pietistic prioritizing of the heart over the head in religion.[11] Nevertheless, he knew his mind; seeing ‘Essays and Reviews’ as introducing “a new Gospel,”[12] and describing ‘Ecce Homo’ as “the most pestilent book ever vomited from the jaws of Hell.”[13]

Social reformer

In terms of social reform, a hierarchy of concerns is evident, from the general to the specific. Generally, Shaftesbury acted on behalf of all the oppressed. Such a breadth of care is reflected in the many societies that he founded or oversaw in some way. Thirty-three remain today, ranging from missionary societies, to those for the disabled, to those protecting animals against cruelty.[14] More specifically, Shaftesbury sought better conditions for the mentally ill. However his greatest concern was for children: He oversaw a number of Factory Acts and the Mines and Collieries Act, which limited both the age of employment and the working hours for women and children. He also saw the Chimney Sweeps Act ban the sending of boys up chimneys. Furthermore, he famously established the ‘Ragged Schools,’ which saved thousands of homeless children from the slums, educating and setting them up with employment through emigration schemes and training ships.[15] Hennell writes: “As Wilberforce became the champion of the slave, Shaftesbury became the champion of the child. He loved and fought for unloved, unwanted, defenseless children wherever he found them...”[16]

Here it needs to be noted that religious - and therefore evangelistic - education was Shaftesbury’s top priority. His diaries are full of musings on how “the vast mass of the juvenile population” might be brought “within the ‘reading of the bible.”’[17] For this reason, Shaftesbury was firmly opposed to any scheme of state education,[18] and saw the employment acts as particularly important in freeing up time for instruction – a concern linked to his avid Sabbatarianism.[19] Theological considerations

It is clear that Shaftesbury saw his social reforms as well as his ecclesiastical ones as driven by particularly evangelical convictions. In reminding his biographer of the centrality
of his religious views, he said:

"I am essentially and from deep-rooted conviction, an Evangelical of the Evangelicals. I have worked with them constantly, and I am satisfied that most of the great philanthropic movements of the century have sprung from them. I stand by the teachings held by that party."[20]

In the remainder of this essay, we will consider the theological motivations and justifications that lay behind Shaftesbury's social action in particular, before briefly evaluating their validity, and so establishing whether all evangelicals are indeed, theologically duty-bound to hold those same concerns. To this end, Shaftesbury's views can only be gleaned from his considerable diaries and speeches. Nevertheless, a certain consistency can be found, for as Hodder writes: "From youth to old age "his theological views knew neither variableness nor shadow of turning."[21]

Motivations

Most simply, Shaftesbury's philanthropy was motivated by his obedient faith in God's word:

"My invariable and invaluable guide was this, never to go in action or belief where the Scriptures would not guide me."[22]

Yet in seeking to live by the truths of that word, his motivations were more diverse.

The governing principle of his faith was its holistic pragmatism. He regarded Christianity as "absolutely and essential practical,"[23] stating that:

"A man's religion, if it is worth anything, should enter into every sphere of life and rule his conduct in every relation."[24]

Furthermore, he saw providence as equipping the Christian for service:

"Every one chooses a career, and it is well if he chooses that which is best suited to his talents. I have taken political life because I have, by God's blessing, many advantages of birth and situation which, although of trifling value if unsupported, are yet very powerful aids if joined to zeal and honesty. It is here, therefore, that I have the chief way of being useful to my generation."[25]

The Christian is therefore duty-bound to use the means God has given them to serve the good of others. Shaftesbury saw James 4:17 and Matthew 25 as teaching that failure to do so was a sin of omission for which the mass of humanity will be condemned at the judgment.

[26] Similarly, the Christian...
...must render an account of privileges misused, of means perverted, of opportunities thrown away.”[27]

It is in this context that Shaftesbury’s fascination with the second coming needs to be understood. He was a Pre-millenialist, believing that after various world events had taken place, including the mass conversion of the Jews, Christ was going to return and establish his reign on earth for a fixed period. Urging clergy to teach this doctrine, Shaftesbury remarked:

“Belief in it has been a moving principle in my life; for I see every thing going on in the world subordinate to this one great event.”[28]

This doctrine seems to have motivated Shaftesbury in three ways.[29] First, a constant reflection on Christ’s return built a desire to be found ready and faithful on that day. Second, it also highlighted the importance of the world being ready. Shaftesbury was clear about his priorities. Commenting on the need of “national and individual education,” he wrote of “the affairs of this world as subservient to those of the next,” and of the “object” being “the preparation of man’s heart for Christ’s Second Coming.”[30] Indeed, in terms of social transformation, Shaftesbury saw little lasting hope apart from Christ’s return.[31] Third, Shaftesbury also regarded his efforts as a means by which he might speed this return, praying for:

“fresh openings for the advance of the Gospel; of enlarged missionary operations; of increased opportunity to promote and invite the Second Advent.”[32]

Noting the strategic positioning of Britain in the world, it is likely that Shaftesbury meant this not simply in terms of his own evangelistic work, but his political work too; a larger and more stable Empire certainly provided benefited British mission abroad. In this regard, Shaftesbury held a particular concern for evangelism to the Jews, setting up the first Bishopric in Jerusalem.

As these quotes make clear, Shaftesbury saw evangelism as of the utmost importance: His social concern certainly motivated his evangelistic concern. Shaftesbury spoke repeatedly of seeking people’s “temporal, through their eternal welfare,”[33] emphasizing that regeneration was the true key to moral and temperamental change.[34] Nevertheless, more significant was the way his evangelistic concern motivated his social concern:

“This has been my priority from the beginning, to persuade the working man to reverence the religion which prompts toil, anxiety, endurance, and self-denial on the part of
Thus above all, Shaftesbury was perhaps most motivated by a concern that God's name be honoured:

'I pray the Heavenly Father to give me the will to discharge my duty, and the strength to perform it; to found all in His glory, and by seeking the welfare of mankind to render my public and my private thoughts a means of furthering the love of His religion.'[36]

Justifications

Three justifications for why the Christian should be involved in social action in particular are apparent within Shaftesbury's motivations: As a duty laid upon those with the resources to help, as the specific requirement of Matthew 25, and as a means of commending the gospel. Yet further justifications are also evident elsewhere.

Shaftesbury mentions God's concern for human happiness on a number of occasions as a governing principle:

'God possessing all happiness Himself, has shown by his creation that it consists in the communication of happiness to others.'[37]

It is the attributes of love, justice and mercy, patterned on God's own character that then provide the framework for any action:

The Lord "teachest us that love towards the race of man is the bond of perfectness, and the imitation of Thy blessed self" who is "Father of the forsaken, the help of the weak, the supplier of the needy" [38]

This love is certainly evident in Shaftesbury's diaries, where, having spent some time in reflection, he declares: "On my soul I believe I desire the welfare of mankind!"[39]

However, Shaftesbury saw justice as the defining mark of government, and therefore the driving force for his particular responsibilities as a politician:

'I have a great mind to found a policy upon the Bible; in public life observing the strictest justice, and not only cold justice, but active benevolence...But justice - raw justice - is the Shekinah of governments.'[40]

Unafraid of reminding politicians of their accountability to God in this area too, he concluded one speech to the House of Lords with his prayerful concern under God that they act justly.[41] He even wrote to his friend Robert Peel, when Prime Minister, declaring that his bad policies were "destined to hasten the evil day which, in God's just anger, has long impended over us, and yet might have
In addressing the social services, Shaftesbury also outlined how the doctrine of creation relates to helping the poor:

"When people say we should think more of the soul and less of the body, my answer is that the same God who made the soul made the body also...I maintain that God is worshipped not only by the spiritual but by the material creation. Our bodies, the temples of the Holy Ghost, ought not to be corrupted by preventable disease, degraded by avoidable filth, and disabled for his service by unnecessary suffering."

It is clear that Shaftesbury did not consider all Christendom Christian, and so this last point may have been a generalization.

Related to this is a concern for the dignity and equality of human beings. Shaftesbury regarded the factory children as:

"beings created, as ourselves, by the same Maker, redeemed by the same Savior, and destined to the same immortality."

He challenged the House to "admit that there at least is equality" Furthermore, he repeatedly pointed out the hypocrisy of a society that treated many 'as swine when children, and later expected them to walk with the dignity of Christians."

The validity of Shaftesbury's theology

In overview, it might be said that the general contours of Shaftesbury's thought were correct, although they are not generally grounded in the most convincing scriptural data, and at times rested on questionable exegesis.

Holistic social involvement and the doctrine of creation

His pragmatism reflects James' thesis that "faith apart from works is dead," and its extent, the responsibilities given man in creation. Relating the Great Commission to the Creation Mandate, Macaulay links Christ's resurrection to the re-creation of Christians with two implications: First, that all regenerate human experience is therefore spiritual, whilst remaining social, reflecting Trinitarian relationships. Thus "Christian compassion and creativity have to be expressed publicly as well as privately – in politics, education, commerce, recreation and so on." Second, involvement in such areas is also required because believers are restored to a position from which they are to exercise their created responsibilities as stewards of..."
So Christians are indeed called to a holistic faith, in which more formal social engagement such as politics is intrinsically related to and subsumed under matters of godliness; the righteous ruling of oneself and the world one lives within as citizens of the Christ’s kingdom. Conceptually there is therefore little difference between privately ensuring one doesn’t ignore those who beg from you,[50] and publicly ensuring one doesn’t ignore the plight of the poor when one can act to alleviate it. It would seems then that Shaftesbury’s use of James 4:17 is appropriate.

It is this theological framework that validates four more of Shaftesbury’s points too. With respect to the simple link between God’s character and our action, it suggests that just as God showers his common grace upon the righteous and unrighteous, so those re-created in the image of his Son and who remain his vice-regents, should do likewise.[51] Furthermore, it warrants the care of another’s body at least as much as it does the care of the environment, for both are God’s creations. Yet how much more the human being, who also bears God’s image,[52] and whose body is seen as fit to be the Spirit’s temple when sanctified,[53] It is in these respects also that the dignity and equality of human beings is grounded. Indeed, love holds no favorites, whether poor or rich.[54] Finally, the creation mandate is the foundation for all human government, which, whether Christian or not, is accountable to God as Shaftesbury saw, particularly for its exercise of justice.[55]

**The relationship between social action and evangelism**

Interestingly, the above framework also subverts the debate over whether evangelism or social action should take priority. If the latter is an expression of righteousness, then such a hierarchy must be resisted, as neither godliness or gospel-work should take second place to the other. Nevertheless, Shaftesbury rightly expresses the “particular missiological concern” of the new covenant church, and also grasps its relationship to social action. First, evangelism is the means of God’s ultimate fulfillment of the creation mandate as a society of people are redeemed to eventually, and not yet, inherit and rule over the earth. Yet until that purpose is completed the inaugurated nature of New Testament eschatology suggests that that inheritance and rule should start to find some expression now.[56] Second, evangelism is motivated by the same love as social action. Thus, in Shaftesbury’s words, to care for someone’s eternal needs should entail caring for their...
temporal needs also. Not to, suggests another fall into an unbiblical secular/spiritual dichotomy. Third, the theme of a holy nation within biblical theology consistently relates the godliness of God’s people to his making his name known.[57] 1 Peter 2 picks up this theme, echoing Shaftesbury’s desire to commend the Christian religion: Christians are to declare God’s acts whilst leading such good lives within society that their opponents are brought to “glorify God.” Peterson even writes that in the context of Matthew, the Great Commission itself “cannot simply mean proclaiming the bare fact of the kingdom…but must include living out the teaching they call others to observe in Christ’s name.”[58]

Themes within Matthew 24-25

In addition to the letter to James, one wonders whether these two chapters were particular favorites for Shaftesbury, with their emphasis on being ready for Christ’s return, using ones talents wisely, and being found a sheep rather than a goat at the judgment. This essay doesn’t afford enough space to discuss the validity of Shaftesbury’s view of the millennium per se. Nevertheless, if Christian’s are duty-bound to the kind of social involvement outlined above, then any meditation on the imminence of Christ’s return, should guard them against being caught sleeping.[59] The parable of the talents certainly applies more widely than “Christian leaders or Jews who fail to recognize their Messiah.”[60] However, the strength of Shaftesbury’s assertion regarding the usage of one’s talents may be unhelpful. The Christian’s material resource can validly be enjoyed to personal benefit. Furthermore, it should be used for others “not reluctantly or under compulsion” but cheerfully.[61] Shaftesbury’s use of the sheep and the goats is certainly unjustified, for unless it refers to a works gospel that contradicts that presented in the rest of the New Testament, it must be referring to the obedient faith of believers, not the “mass of humanity.” Moreover the focus of Christian love here is specifically other believers. As France notes: “Brothers” is a term Jesus uses “specifically for his disciples, not for men in general.”[62]

Happiness

The most novel element of Shaftesbury’s theology is his governing assumption that the key purpose to the creation is in the communication of happiness. This may be true in terms of God’s desire that none would perish. However, at a glance, it fails to account for his ultimate concern for his own glory, seen in electing only some to eternal life,[63] and we must presume, in dispensing his common grace as unevenly as he does. Yet Shaftesbury’s point may simply have been that the blessings of creation suggest the realization...
the blessings of creation suggest that bringing its blessings to others is a requirement on humankind even though God’s higher purposes hold ultimate control. If so, then it is indeed a valid way of arguing that through the allocation of resources as well as loving care, Christians should seek the temporal as well as the eternal good of others.

Conclusion

Chadwick comments that Shaftesbury “spoke for evangelical religion in an age when evangelical religion seemed suddenly to be the most potent religious and moral force in England.”[64] Arguably, his evangelicalism posited the importance of social justice within politics in anticipation of the welfare state. Some even credit him with saving England from revolution.[65] However, it is difficult to measure how much his philanthropy actually warmed the poor to Christianity. The dissenters rather than Shaftesbury’s Church of England, certainly experienced an influx during the same period.

The validity, scope, and parameters of co-ordinated Christian social action through societies are topics for further thought. Nevertheless, today, the influence of Shaftesbury’s many societies continues, although the degree to which they have maintained his theological priorities and convictions differs. Elements of contemporary evangelicalism seem polarized between those who have lost his evangelistic vision, and those who because of this are nervous of his social concern. It would seem then that Shaftesbury’s voice needs to be heard afresh. He was the lay-man par excellence, one who saw the ecclesiastical and social needs of his day and addressed them without losing a scriptural and evangelistic perspective. In this he was therefore truly evangelical. Battiscombe, an often critical biographer of Shaftesbury writes: “No man has in fact ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery or to add to the sum total of human happiness.”[66] Considering how social action aids evangelism, it would certainly prove productive if this could be said of twenty-first century evangelicalism.

Bibliography:

5. Chadwick, Owen. The Victorian Church.
7. France R T. Matthew, (Leicester, IVP, 1985)

[2] Ibid, p.57
[3] Ibid, pp.52-53 Nevertheless, Shaftesbury's relationship with his father and eldest son was more difficult. The 6th earl disapproved of his marriage and gave him only an insufficient allowance. His eldest son was hedonistic and apparently an unbeliever. Ibid, p.53
[6] Ibid III:4
[8] Hennell, Op Cit, p.57
[9] Battiscombe, Op Cit, p.266
[10] Ibid, p.105
[11] Ibid, pp.270-273 Although he very much affirmed science, being convinced that it would in the end vindicate the bible. Ibid, p.273
[14] See the appendix to Pollock, John. Shaftesbury: The reformer, (Eastbourne,
Shaftesbury: The reformer, (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 2000)

[16] Ibid, pp.50-51
[17] Hodder, Op Cit, II:114
[18] Ibid, III:265
[21] Ibid, III:2
[22] Ibid, III:6
[23] YMCA address, quoted Beady, Op Cit, p.30
[24] Hodder, Op Cit, i:iix
[25] Ibid, I:105
[26] Ibid, III:14
[27] Beady, Op Cit, p.29
[28] Hodder, Op Cit, III:10-11 The centrality of this event in Shaftesbury's thinking is further demonstrated by the fact that he had his two prayers – "Even so come Lord Jesus" and "O pray for the peace of Jerusalem" - stamped in Greek and Hebrew respectively, on all his envelopes. Battiscombe, Op Cit, p.101
[29] Interestingly, Woodhouse notes that belief in Pre-Millenianism has usual accompanied a decline in social action. Thus, Shaftesbury must have been motivated by his regular reflection on the second advent, rather than the nature of it per se. Woodhouse, John. "Evangelism and social responsibility" in Christians in society: Explorations 3, ed. B G Webb, (Homebush West, Lancer Books, 1988), p.7
[31] Ibid, I:442
[32] Ibid, III:55
[33] Ibid, I:455 cf. III:13, 449, 490
[34] Ibid, I:324
[35] Ibid, II:76
[36] Ibid, I:80
[37] Ibid, I:54, cf. p.55, 79
[38] Ibid, II:169 cf. His call to parliament to act on the basis of justice and mercy, I:26-27
[39] Ibid, I:106
[40] Ibid, II:54
[41] Ibid, II:26-27
[42] Ibid, II:55


[45] Beady, Op Cit, p.30
[46] Ibid, p.35

[47] James 2:26


[50] Matthew 5:42


[52] James 3:9

[53] 1 Corinthians 6:19

[54] James 2:1ff

[55] Romans 13:1-4


[57] Deut 4:5-8, Ezek 36, cf. Tit 2:7-8, 9-10, 1 Pet 3:1

[58] Ibid, p.85 This question is a huge one, and together with the question over the degree to which the church should be involved in co-coordinated social action, cannot be answered here.

[59] Matthew 24:44

Some notable contemporaries thought highly of Locke. Mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton cherished his company. Locke helped Quaker William Penn restore his good name when he was a political fugitive, as Penn had arranged a pardon for Locke when he had been a political fugitive. Locke was described by the famous English physician Dr. Thomas Sydenham as “a man whom, in the acuteness of his intellect, in the steadiness of his judgement, that is, in the excellence of his manners, I confidently declare to have, amongst the men of our time, few equals and no superiors.”

Family Background. Locke worked in his bookshelf-lined room at Shaftesbury’s Exeter House, drawing on his experience with political action. He wrote one treatise which attacked Filmer’s doctrine. Present work (including its title), Shaftesbury uses the word mainly in our present sense. Imposition: Willful and fraudulent deception. Luxury: This meant something like: extreme or inordinate indulgence in sensual pleasures. Yet everyone thinks himself well-mannered; and the most dry and rigid pedant imagines that he can rally with a good grace and humour. I have known cases where an author has been criticised for defending the use of raillery by some of those grave gentlemen who at the same time have constantly used that weapon themselves, though they liked it for it. The village of Shaftesbury, Dorset was once a fortified settlement. In the late 9th century Alfred the Great created a network of fortified towns across his kingdom. In the event of a Danish attack all the men in area would gather in the built to fight them. Shaftesbury was one such built. It was a natural place because it lies on a promontory of land protected on three sides by steep slopes. A rampart of earth protected the fourth side with a wooden palisade on top. The first part of the name Shaft...