

The English Bible in Public Life*

PHILIP WHITWELL WILSON

Special correspondent, New York Times

IT IS four hundred years since a Tudor England received the first complete printed Bible.

This fourth centenary suggests two questions: first, what attention did the English pay to their Bible when it was handed to them? Secondly, what difference did the Bible make to the life of the English-speaking commonwealths?

The great translator of the Bible into English was William Tyndale. "If God spare my life," said Tyndale to a learned scholar, "ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost." A noble boast that was abundantly justified.

The historian John Richard Green declared that "England became the people of a book, and that book was the Bible." Nor does his testimony stand alone. As a historian, Professor Macaulay Trevelyan holds the Order of Merit, and he tells us that "a new generation" of Elizabethans grew up "under the influence of the Bible, the Prayer Book, and loyalty to the Queen." Among the influences of a formative period, the Bible came first.

The reading of the Bible has been an accepted habit of the British Commonwealth of nations.

The Prime Ministers of Great Britain, one after the other, have been men of the Bible. The entire thinking of Gladstone was based upon what he called "the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture." Lord Salisbury was a devout churchman, and so with Asquith, the Congregationalist; Balfour, MacDonald, and Bonar Law, the Presbyterians; Lloyd George, the Baptist; and Stanley Baldwin, the Anglican of Methodist ancestry, who, in outspoken fashion, confesses that without the Bible, he would be hard pressed by the weight of his responsibilities.

John Bright, the British Quaker statesman, lifted the oratory of the House of Commons and of the political platform into the

* Issued by the National Commemoration Committee, Four Hundred Years of the Printed English Bible, and printed by permission.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

realm of prophecy by his devotion to the Bible. Joseph Chamberlain, like Theodore Roosevelt, taught in a Sunday school.

The world has recently acclaimed King George on his silver jubilee, and the acclaim has been more than a formality. The King promised his mother, Queen Alexandra, that he would read the Bible every day, and he states that he has kept the promise.

What has been the result of the reading of the Bible? Let us appeal again to the historians.

Of the England that received the Book four hundred years ago, John Richard Green writes that "no greater normal change ever passed over a nation." Trevelyan puts it thus: "The effect of the continual domestic study of the Book upon the national character, imagination, and intelligence for nearly three centuries to come, was greater than that of any literary movement in our annals, or any religious movement since the coming of St. Augustine."

That verdict has never been upset. For more than sixty years Queen Victoria reigned over an ever-expanding empire. On one occasion she received certain chieftains in audience. To her navy and her army she did not allude, but she handed them a Bible. "This," she said, "is the secret of England's greatness."

Read the Bible, and does not its influence cease to be a mystery? Here is the Book of Life—the book that reveals how life is lived and might be lived; why life is worth while; why life should be shared with others; the power by which life is redeemed and safeguarded and enriched; the opportunities in life; its responsibilities; the perils that menace life, and the purposes that life fulfills. The entire perspective of the Bible is focussed on the Christ who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. It has been of supreme advantage to the English-speaking world that the leadership in every field should have been brought by the Bible into touch with what is meant by life.

The Bible is full of all sorts and conditions of men and women and children. Reading the Bible, we arrive at the value of the individual or we learn respect for others. Also, we learn respect for ourselves. The Bible thus makes citizens, and in the English-speaking world it prepared the people for the franchise.

The Bible insists on rectitude. Every revival of interest in the

THE ENGLISH BIBLE IN PUBLIC LIFE

Bible was followed in Britain by a movement for political reform. If public life is clean this is the reason.

The Bible denounces oppression and requires that wrongs be righted. In the British Empire there has been a growing sensitiveness to injustices of every kind.

The transformation of Great Britain from an old into a new country was achieved mainly by the men of the Bible. John Howard read that we should visit the prisoners in their affliction, and he flung himself into the task of reforming the jails. Wilberforce on one side of the Atlantic, like Whittier on the other, read that Christ died for all men on the cross. They flung themselves into the crusade against slavery.

The Bible inculcated a reverence for laws justly administered. During the periods of strain and stress there have been scores of revolutions. In the English-speaking countries sovereignty has been unshaken in its stability. These have been the countries where it is safest to live.

The Bible emphasizes sound principles of commercial ethics. Amid the greatest depression in the annals of mankind the financial credit of the English-speaking commonwealth is maintained. There has been grave unemployment as elsewhere, but, on the whole, a much higher standard of living. The material reserves of these countries have been as impressive as their moral reserves.

The Bible asserts liberty of conscience and of culture. At the conclusion of the war not one English-speaking democracy had seriously to abridge freedom of speech or of the press, or to suspend a representative system of government. The suffrage has been extended, and throughout the Orient, from the Philippines to Egypt, it has been the aim of these countries to put an end to the old colonial system, substituting autonomous administration.

The English-speaking democracies have displayed a volume of initiative which, in the aggregate, far surpasses the achievements, however notable they may have been, of countries where the Bible is less known. The railway, the steamship, the automobile, the use of power in industry, postal and telegraph services, electric light, moving pictures, the games most generally and healthily played out of doors—these illustrations of such initiative are unchallengeable. Boy scouts, girl guides, foreign missions, cam-

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

paigns against drugs, drink, and other evils—most of such efforts originated in the English-speaking world.

The Bible contains a gospel of peace, and in their demand for peace the Bible-loving democracies have been conspicuous. Despite militarism elsewhere they terminated conscription after the war, and in the spirit of the prophet Isaiah they have sought steadily to limit armaments.

Here is an inventory of familiar phenomena that anybody can check up for himself. We cannot open a newspaper or enter into conversation without finding that the facts are as stated.

Not that there is any special virtue in a Bible translated into English. Turn to any country and men of the Bible leave names held in peculiar honor. Certainly Norway has her Nansen, a great explorer, statesman, and friend of the friendless. He read the Bible. England had her Ruskin, the apostle of beauty in the city, the church, and the home. He read the Bible. Russia had her Tolstoy, the pioneer of social justice. He read the Bible. China had her Sun Yat-sen, architect of democracy. He read the Bible. India has her Gandhi, champion of the untouchables. He reads the Bible. Germany was uplifted by the character of Hindenburg. This war lord who became a pillar of peace was a man of the Bible.

The Bible is today to be had almost free of cost. But a knowledge of the Bible can only be acquired by a personal investment of time which is worth more than money. That investment has yielded a generous dividend of influence both for the individual and for society.

They who visit London are impressed by the profound reverence with which millions of people observe Armistice Day, crowding into Whitehall, overflowing into Trafalgar Square, and uniting their voices in the great hymn—"Our God, our help in ages past." No less remarkable is the spectacle of enormous crowds at a football game attended by the King and Queen, who, with a band of the Guards, join the people in singing a hymn like "Abide With Me" in order to pass the time. It was the Bible of Wyclif that evoked the spirit of Lollardy which swept over the England of the Middle Ages and inspired the songs of the people. It is the Bible that in the twentieth century, with its dangers and difficulties, fills the land with music.

```
@article{10.2307/41176123,  
  ISSN = {1550574X},  
  URL = {http://www.jstor.org/stable/41176123},  
  author = {PHILIP WHITWELL WILSON},  
  journal = {Christian Education},  
  number = {2},  
  pages = {93--96},  
  publisher = {Penn State University Press},  
  title = {The English Bible in Public Life},  
  volume = {19},  
  year = {1935}  
}
```

WILSON, P. (1935). The English Bible in Public Life. *Christian Education*, *19*(2), 93-96. Retrieved August 18, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41176123>

WILSON, PHILIP WHITWELL. "The English Bible in Public Life." *Christian Education* 19, no. 2 (1935): 93-96. Accessed August 18, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41176123>.

WILSON, PHILIP WHITWELL. "The English Bible in Public Life." *Christian Education*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1935, pp. 93–96. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41176123. Accessed 18 Aug. 2021.

Provider: JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org>
Database: JSTOR
Content: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"

TY - JOUR
AU - WILSON, PHILIP WHITWELL
C1 - Full publication date: DECEMBER, 1935
DB - JSTOR
EP - 96
IS - 2
PB - Penn State University Press
PY - 1935
SN - 1550574X
SP - 93
T2 - Christian Education
TI - The English Bible in Public Life
UR - <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41176123>
VL - 19
Y2 - 2021/08/18/
ER -