

William Gladstone: Providence and the People, 1838-1865

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Abstract

The career of William Gladstone was one of the most dramatic journeys in nineteenth-century British politics. Indeed, few politicians in recent history have been at the forefront of politics for so long, or so profoundly transformed by that experience. In his review of William Gladstone's *The State in its relations with the Church* (1838), the whig writer and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay described the young Gladstone as 'the rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories.' Macaulay's review was aimed at an MP who had opposed full civil rights for all non-Anglicans and who upheld above all other principles the ideal of a theological state allied and subjected to a politically active established Church. Yet thirty years later in 1868, the same William Gladstone rode upon a wave of radical popular support into Downing Street, christened by the *Daily Telegraph* as 'the People's William', crying 'Justice for Ireland!', promising to disestablish the Irish Anglican Church, and commanding the loyalty of a Liberal Party majority in parliament. Faced with such a transformation, how is the historian supposed to explain the existence of what appear to be two very different politicians within the same person and the same political life?¹

To understand Gladstone's transformation, one must inhabit the very mind of Gladstone. In pursuit of this challenging task, a political history alone will not suffice – it requires a thorough examination of his intellectual and religious thought situated within a 19th-century context in

which the man himself and his contemporaries experienced highly disorientating change and transformations.² Unsurprisingly, therefore, precisely what caused Gladstone to abandon the Toryism castigated by Thomas Babington Macaulay in the *Edinburgh Review* and to embrace the populism of the 1860s is a matter of great contention amongst historians. Indeed, Gladstone's contemporaries themselves drew starkly different conclusions about his apparently Lazarean resurrection in the 1850s and 1860s as the torchbearer of liberal financial reform and a champion of 'the people'. The Liberal politician, writer, and friend of Gladstone, John Morley, in 1902 biography, believed that his subject had remained throughout his career a 'pilgrim' who sought, and eventually found the expression of his innate liberality in the Liberalism of his older age. Walter Bagehot, however, in a famous 1860 reflection upon Gladstone's career up to that point, was more skeptical: his 'adaptive mind' was converted to the ideas of the age along with the average intellect, as had been the case with his mentor, Sir Robert Peel: 'Mr Gladstone is essentially a man who cannot impose his creed *on* his time, but must learn his creed *of* his time.'³

The questions surrounding Gladstone's political journey have increased ever since: was his remodelling one forged from the germ of his High Tory thought?⁴ Was his 'journey' from High Church pariah to Liberal demagogue in fact undertaken 'along the High Anglican Road'?⁵ Neither Perry Butler nor H.C.G. Matthew, for example, have denied that Gladstone's ideas underwent profound changes in the 1840s, but the emphasis in both of their accounts is clearly

1 I would like to acknowledge my debt to Professor Boyd Hilton of Trinity College Cambridge for having introduced me to this area of historiographical debate while I was a first year undergraduate under his supervision. This paper has grown out of a supervision essay which he first set me in November 2015, entitled *Trace the process by which 'the rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories' became 'the People's William'*. His advice with reading materials and discussions of Gladstone's personal religion and political career have been tremendously valuable in helping me turn my original short essay into this longer paper. His work *The Age of Atonement*, has also been an invaluable guide in understanding the religious temper of the age, and is accordingly used at several key points of this essay.

2 This is the approach of David Bebbington in *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer and Politics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). A different approach to understanding the mind of Gladstone has also been made rather crudely by Travis L. Crosby's *The Two Gladstones: A Study in Psychology and History* within a psychoanalytic approach of his private and public conduct.

3 Morley and Bagehot are cited in Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: Peel's Inheritor, 1809-1865* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1999), 168.

4 See H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809-1874* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

5 Perry Butler, *Gladstone: Church, State and Tractarianism: A study of his religious ideas and attitudes, 1809-1859*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 151.

upon a consistency in at least some of his thought across his career. Richard Shannon, on the other hand, has placed greater emphasis upon a sharp change in direction taking place during the political discourse of the 1840s. This did not involve a subtle reweaving of old religious thought to match new contexts, Shannon argues, but rather the cutting of an ideological ‘Gordian Knot’, which both legitimated Gladstone’s ‘new vocation’ as a liberal politician and enabled him to become ‘Peel’s inheritor.’⁶

However, despite the clear importance of the 1840s, it has rightly been pointed out that it is essential to extend any analysis into the domestic and fiscal discourses of the 1850s and early 1860s.⁷ It was in the 1850s that a Gladstonian approach to finance, founded upon Peelite principles, was first put into legislative action while Gladstone cut his teeth as Palmerston’s Chancellor of the Exchequer. It was in the 1860s that Gladstone would turn from a sole reliance upon the legislative mode of action and cultivate extra-parliamentary support through moving his rhetoric to the people. Moreover, while keeping sight of both of these crucial shifts, the precise influence of foreign affairs, particularly Gladstone’s attachment to Italian unification, must not be neglected as a cause of the realisation of the later popular politician, as D.M. Schreuder highlighted many decades ago.⁸ Accordingly, in this essay I do not dispute the value of these dimensions to any account which reflects the complexity of Gladstone’s mind, but rather urge none of them can be understood fully in isolation from one another. In this respect, the crucial factor underpinning these developments and Gladstone’s wider transformation was his changing understanding of providence, how it operated within the natural world, and *through whom* it exercised its agency.

The self-governing energy of the nation made objective’

In order to establish precisely how Gladstone changed between the years 1838 and 1865, it is necessary to begin before his process of intellectual reimagining by placing the young politician in cultural and political context. The Repeal

of the Test and Corporations Acts in 1828 which, since the seventeenth century had forced Dissenting Protestants to swear the Oath of Supremacy to the Anglican Church and British Crown in order to serve in Civil Office had startled the old order. The passage of Catholic Emancipation in quick succession in 1829, also by the Duke of Wellington’s Ministry, had rocked it at its foundations. For many in Parliament and the country, these epoch-making reforms, combined with the reform to the franchise and distribution of seats in Parliament itself in 1832, marked a serious threat to the liberties and principles of the British Constitution itself. Lord Eldon had protested against Lord Russell’s 1828 Act in the House of Lords upon the grounds that that ‘the Church of England combined with the State, formed together the constitution of Great Britain, and...the Test and Corporation Acts were necessary to the preservation of the constitution’⁹ Lord Holland, a great country Whig who would serve in the Grey and Melbourne governments, highlighted the significance of Catholic Emancipation highlighted that ‘Catholic Emancipation...in principle’ would be the most powerful and transformative of all reforms, because ‘it explodes the real Tory doctrine that Church & State are indivisible.’¹⁰

Yet while historians such as J.C.D Clark have undoubtedly been correct in highlighting the significance of such measures, it is erroneous to highlight this moment as the end of *ancien régime* culture in British politics.¹¹ Indeed, as Boyd Hilton and Peter Mandler have shown, the 1830s-1840s were in fact a time in which the crisis of the old order stimulated a powerful renaissance in romantic, conservative, and establishment thought.¹² For elites this renaissance consisted of a cultural pivot towards the past, characterised by a yearning nostalgia for a pre-industrial, medieval idyll, the most striking expression of which is arguably Sir Charles Barry’s neo-Gothic Palace of Westminster, built after the old Houses of Parliament were destroyed by fire in 1834. This cultural pivot can also be found in literary form in Southey’s *Colloquies on Society* (1830), and on canvas in Daniel Maclise’s *The Chivalric Vow of the Ladies and the Peacock* (1835).¹³ It

6 Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: God and Politics*. (London: Continuum, 2007), especially at chapters 2, 3 and 4.
 7 For the case for Peel’s influence see Shannon, *Peel’s Inheritor*, op cit., p166: ‘There is good case to be made for Peel as the progenitor of Gladstonian Liberalism; there is certainly a convincing case to be made for Peel as progenitor of Gladstone’s Liberalism.’ For the case for the 1850s, see K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
 8 This is the argument of D.M. Schreuder, *Gladstone and Italian Unification, 1848-70: the making of a Liberal?* English Historical Review (1970): 475-501.

9 Cited in J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 396.
 10 Quoted in Clark op cit. p 397.
 11 Clark, *English Society*, op cit.
 12 See Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24-30; and see an excellent overview of the 1830s and the phenomenon of popular romanticism in English cultural history in Peter Mandler, *The Rise and Fall of the Stately Home* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1999), ch.1, ‘The Stately Home and England’.
 13 See Philip Connell *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of ‘Culture’*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 258-265 for the example of Southey’s *Colloquies*; Mandler, *op cit.*, for Maclise.

was also in such a cultural milieu that a young Benjamin Disraeli came to be associated with a group of young Tories called Young England, consisting chiefly of George Smythe, Lord John Manners, H.T. Hope and Alexander Baillie-Cochrane. Their program consisted of a return to a de-industrialised communitarianism allied with Burkean organic change in which a patriarchal Toryism might provide a Coleridgian remedy to the ills of early industrial society and the increasing power of centralized bureaucracy.¹⁴ At a time when many artists, architects, politicians, and writers were seeking a response to the fallout of early industrialism and religious-constitutional crisis, neither Gladstone nor Disraeli were outside this wider cultural trend.

The profusion of cultural responses to the crisis of 1828-32 was mirrored in the establishment of political and religious movements of different hues who sought to provide solutions to the new status quo. Two of the most important of these movements were Oxford Tractarianism and what has been called 'Liberal Anglicanism.'¹⁵ The Tractarians were a part of a tradition which, as Peter Nockles has highlighted, stretched back into the 18th century High Anglican counter-Enlightenment and anti-rationalism advanced by Bishop Joseph Butler and William Law.¹⁶ Known as the 'Oxford Movement' because of their more immediate origination in Oriel College, Oxford, the Tractarians sought to reform the Anglican Church so as to revive what they believed to be its original ecclesiological form and liturgical practices immediately after the 16th century Reformation. The movement's foremost writers, including J.H. Newman, E.B. Pusey, and Henry Manning, utilising key concepts drawn from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Bishop Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed*, sought by active reform within the Church to bring about an authentic and distinctive Anglican ethos, and in doing so restore its integrity.¹⁷ If need be, they would advocate the wholesale

disestablishment of the Anglican Church from the State rather than accept the compromising of Anglican orthodox doctrine by secular ministers, as John Keble made clear in his July 1833 Sermon delivered at St Mary's Church in Oxford, *Of National Apostasy*. On the other hand, buoyed by the recent successes of reform, a broad-Church, latitudinarian, and Erastian Anglicanism came to be ever more vigorously espoused by Whigs such as Lords Morpeth and Russell, the seminal text of which was Thomas Arnold's *Principles of Church Reform* (1833). According to this ethic, as Russell declared in a speech in the commons on the Irish Tithe Act in 1836, 'the duty' of the State was 'not to choose and select that doctrine which the Legislature or the supreme authority may consider to be founded in truth, but to endeavour to secure the means by which they can inculcate religion and morality among the great body of the people'¹⁸ This predominantly Whig Liberal Anglicanism was the *bête noir* of Tractarianism: it considered itself as a part of a peculiarly English tradition of moderate but moralistic improving enlightenment, utilising the traditional institution of the Anglican Church as a subordinate arm of the State to forge a harmonious, tolerant, and moral society.

It is in this context of charged cultural and political crisis, conflict and challenge, that Gladstone's 'stern and unbending' Toryism must be placed: Gladstone had been raised in an evangelical Anglican household, learning and embracing from his earliest years the evangelical focus upon the doctrine of Atonement and the dialectical clash between good and evil, virtue and vice, sin and salvation.¹⁹ While at University at Oxford during the apex of the crisis of 1828-32, however, Gladstone had turned his back upon what he had perceived to be the increasingly extreme nature of the evangelical emphasis upon private judgment and contrition for sin propagated by the St Ebbes set under Henry Bulteel.²⁰ Evangelicalism, infected by pentecostalists and prophesiers, was becoming too individualizing, too subversive of the institutional Anglican Church, and too spiritually severe at a time of constitutional and cultural instability.²¹ He turned instead to a belief in High Church Anglicanism, ostensibly the opposite of Anglican evangelicalism. Yet, as Hilton has highlighted, he nonetheless retained some of his original evangelical principles in the transition, notably the centrality of atonement, salvation, sin, and conscience.²² The chief significance of his move, however, was that Gladstone, like

14 See Boyd Hilton, 'Disraeli, English culture, and the decline of the industrial spirit', ch.3, in L.W. Brockliss and David Eastwood eds., *A Union of Multiple Identities: The British Isles c.1750-c.1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); and see Jonathan Parry, 'Disraeli and England', *The Historical Journal*, 43, 3 (2000), 699-728.

15 Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion, and Reform, 1830-41* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987).

16 See Peter Nockles, *The Oxford Movement & The Legacy of Anglican Evangelicalism: Religious Reform in the Early 19th Century Church of England*. Published independently on Academia.edu. (2010), p. 9; and see J. Pereiro, 'Ethos' and the Oxford Movement: At the Heart of Tractarianism (Oxford, 2008), 79-80.

17 Nockles *ibid.* and P.B. Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship in Britain 1760-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

18 *Hansard*, HC Deb 01 June 1836 vol. 33 cc1238-332.

19 Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought 1785-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 340-341.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

the Tractarians, sought refuge against the corruption of the distinctive liturgy, doctrine, and exclusivity of the Church of England through a reification of the historic corporation as an institution which was a residuum of theological truth, spiritual authority, and the keys to salvation.

Gladstone's first book *The State in its Relations with the Church* (1838)²³, that which earned him the ire of Macaulay, was initially written in response to his bitter disappointment with Robert Chalmers, but it was part of a wider vision of an Anglican theocratic state in response to the reforms of 1827-32. The latter, a moralistic High Churchman whom Gladstone had admired, provided a series of lectures in London in 1838 in which he had failed, in Gladstone's opinion, to provide an impassioned, principled defence of the Establishment, Visible Church, and Apostolic Succession, grounded in natural law.²⁴ The work combined a manipulation of Aristotelian concepts of an organic natural hierarchy with a denunciation of Lockean individualism in a fusion of Burkean and Coleridgian natural conservatism with Puseyan apostolicism: the State was an 'organic body' in which persons existed 'not as individuals, but only as constituents of the active power of that life...the state is the self-governing energy of the nation made objective'.²⁵ There was 'a national conscience...formed upon a pure and comprehensive idea of right and wrong' requiring an established 'religion' deigned by providence as 'directly necessary to the right employment of the state as a state' and to 'instruct the young as they grow into consciousness and responsibility'.²⁶ All ethics and spiritual power were derived from the state, from which the individual could not be separated, and from which they received their very life and moral being.

Such thought does not at first sight appear to provide promising foundations for the development of liberal principles, and liberal whigs and broad-Churchmen such as Macaulay accordingly found the work impossible to swallow without offering rebuke. Even more importantly, however, his grand and doctrinaire statement of High Church principles

23 The statement of its original and extended title rather than the abbreviated 'Church and State' by Macaulay and other critics fails to give an indication of the emphasis of Gladstone's title being upon the State as much as the Church, as Matthew has argued in *Gladstone 1809-74*, op. cit.

24 Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 341.

25 See Butler, *Gladstone*, at ch.2, 'Politics, Theology and Friends: 1833-1838'; William Ewart Gladstone, *The State in its Relations with the Church*. (1838; 4th rev. edn. 1841). i, 296-7, cited in Hilton B, *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People?*, 485, and *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic 1795-1865*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 341.

26 *Ibid.*, i, 190, cited in Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People?*, 485.

also frightened Anglicans committed to the visible Church. While sharing characteristics of the Tractarian agenda, it was nonetheless a controversial thesis for Gladstone's friends and allies within the Oxford Movement. As Hilton has written, John Keble, in his review in *The British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review* in 1839, believed Gladstone's vision to be hopelessly unrealistic: 'the long-term consequence would be the secularization of the clergy, not the spiritualisation of the state.'²⁷ Gladstone's plan, Keble believed, would lead to the doctrine that the Church would be corrupted by an unholy Trinity of meddling ministers, liberal bureaucrats, and latitudinarian principles, rather than inaugurating a state infused with an Anglican ethos.

Yet Gladstone was never quite as uncompromising or assured in his Tory principles as the headlines might suggest: beneath the veneer of stern and unbending principles there resided much doubt and anxiety. Indeed, it can be argued, as Matthew has done, that within his High Church Toryism there lay the germ of Gladstone's later changes.²⁸ The work contained a number of internal tensions, as Gladstone's opponents and allies pointed out, and many of which he attempted to work out in his *Church Principles Considered in Their Results* published two years later in 1840. It is amongst these tensions that it is possible to see fertile soil for Gladstone's later apotheosis as the 'People's William'. At the heart of the *State in its Relations with the Church* lay a paradox: Gladstone's High Anglican Churchmanship lay behind his belief that in Anglican doctrine 'we have the final consummation of all human destinies'. But such conviction belied more revivalist elements to his Churchmanship, features he shared with the Tractarian movement, which brought a more active, reformist impulse. Rather than being always 'stern and unbending', he possessed a conception of the Church which was in reality moderately Burkean: a vision of a visible institution which must be malleable, adaptive, and progressive, in order for it to survive.²⁹ This Gladstone was perhaps derived from his early evangelicalism and his association with the Oxford Movement, as well as his own schooling at Christ Church, Oxford, in the works of Aristotle. Peter Nockles has highlighted that, similarly to Gladstone, many High Churchmen of the Tractarian movement were motivated by a theology of 'reform' as well as 'revival', an impulse aided by the fact that many of the

27 For John Keble's critique see 'Gladstone – the State in its relations with the Church', *The British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review*, 26 (1839), 396, cited in Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 349. For other reviews of Keble's critique see Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, 76-83; Butler, *Gladstone*, 87-88.

28 This is the view of Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-74*, op. cit.

29 *Church Principles*, quoted in Matthew op cit. p40; also, see Peter Nockles, *The Legacy of Anglican Evangelicalism*, 30-32.

'adherents and followers of the Oxford Movement had come from evangelical households or had had an early Evangelical career.'³⁰ It appears that even while it was ostensibly 'stern and unbending' to someone such as Macaulay who was an outsider to Gladstone's cultural and ideological tradition, his Toryism was really far more nuanced, and infected with hopes of activism and revivalism.

When writing about the Church and the State, Gladstone invoked Aristotle's image in *The Politics* of 'the oak' which 'unfolds the life it has carried seminally within it from the acorn', consequently an image he would later use in his support for the Italian cause in his 1859 essay, *The War in Italy*.³¹ In the same works in which he espoused necessity of Anglican doctrinal hegemony over the State, Gladstone had also conceded the fallibility of Anglican doctrine: 'What political or relative doctrine is there, which does not become an absurdity when pushed to its extremes?'³² In his speech on the Irish Temporalities Bill in 1835 he had described his doctrine rather soberly as merely 'that form of belief which it conceives to contain the largest portion of the elements of truth with the smallest admixture of error.'³³ Crucially, in August 1841, even *before* entering office under Peel, and perhaps under the influence of Keble's critique, Gladstone was already conceiving of the change in his attitudes to a confessional state: 'I can digest the crippled religious action of the State'.³⁴

Furthermore, Gladstone's High Church supremacism could clash, as well as harmonise, with his vision of an organically changing society and Church derived from natural law. In areas, Gladstone's arguments from abstract natural law became too strained, and his shaky philosophical edifice instead had to rely upon more pragmatic and unwittingly utilitarian territory than he had intended, most notably when he came to handle the awkward status of Dissenters.³⁵ He simply struggled to reconcile liberty of conscience under the natural law with his elevated claims for the secular and

theological authority of the Church.³⁶ Consequently he argued in a philosophical tradition that he despised when he declared that the common good of society meant that 'the individual man, in virtue of his rational understanding and free agency, is entitled and bound in the sight of God to be in the last resort the arbiter of his religious creed, subject to his won full responsibility for employing the means most calculated to put him in possession of the truth.'³⁷ In light of such an argument, Gladstone's later conversion to a belief in universal religious liberty and 'religious nationality', epitomised by his cry of 'Justice for Ireland!', appears less surprising.³⁸ His works may indeed have contained high principles, but they were hesitantly held and heavily qualified.³⁹ After all, he had himself confessed to François Rio, the French liberal Catholic, while writing *Church Principles* that '*the straight lines of abstract speculation do not fit into the tortuous course of modern politics.*'⁴⁰ It was because of the qualifications beneath the grand claims that Macaulay, while chastising Gladstone's work in a brilliant display of wit and rhetoric in the *Edinburgh Review*, privately admitted that although he despised its principles, he did not disagree with *all* of Gladstone's remarks. He even confessed to Sir Charles Napier in one candid conversation that 'I wish that I could see my way to a good counter theory; but I catch only glimpses here and there of what I take to be the truth.'⁴¹

Turning away from the two books, it is also possible to glean from Gladstone's other writings and remarks glimpses of conservative thought with the possibility of fitting itself to later liberal contexts.

Gladstone's private conclusion in 1835 that 'the most singular argument' he had found in his Aristotelian studies was the view that 'the clubbed intellects of the multitude may render them fitter to govern than the few' seems to offer another temptation to draw a line between his early Toryism and his later populism.⁴² This conclusion from Aristotle ultimately appears to adumbrate a principle that would later mature into one central to his popular appeal in the 1860s: Gladstone was not opposed, even in the 1830s, to reform of the franchise *per se*, only that the benefits of any reform should be accorded to 'intellects'. This has a remarkable

30 Nockles, *The Legacy of Anglican Evangelicalism*, 4.

31 *Church Principles*, cited in Matthew, *Gladstone*, 42. He wrote of the need for Piedmont to unify Italy 'by the strictest respect for every political and legal right...by the slow growth of the oak.' 'The War in Italy', *Quarterly Review*, April 1859, cited in Schreuder, *Gladstone and Italian Unification*, 486.

32 *The State in its Relations to the Church*, i, vii., cited in Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, 82

33 Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-74*, 41.

34 Gladstone's *Diaries*, quoted in Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, 112. Boyd Hilton suggests that Keble's critique of his works might have caused Gladstone to reconsider his positions on the Church and the State even before he took office under Peel in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 349.

35 Butler, *Gladstone*, 83-84.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-74*, 63.

38 'Justice for Ireland!' was of course Gladstone's 1868 Election Campaign slogan in which he avowed to disestablish the Anglican Church of Ireland.

39 Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, at ch.9, 'Gladstonian Liberalism: the Last Days of Atonement', 340-373.

40 Cited in Butler, *Gladstone*, 96 – my italics.

41 Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, 82

42 Notes on Aristotle, 1835, Add MS 44723, f. 120. Cited in Matthew, *Gladstone 1808-74*, 46.

similarity to the argument which he would later make in his 1864 speech upon Baines' Borough Suffrage Bill in the House of Commons: there he urged the necessity of bringing working men who had advanced in both 'property and intelligence' within 'the pale of the constitution', a conviction which would also underpin his 1866 Reform Bill. In foreign affairs, too, the later pacific faith in international justice can be seen in the aversion of the young Tory to an unjust use of force during the Opium War in China between 1839-42. This episode seems to illustrate greater continuity between the Gladstones of the 1830 and of the 1860s than has perhaps been suggested – his outrage certainly rhymes with the moral indignation that caused him to resign from Palmerston's cabinet over the continuation of the conflict in the Crimea, and which would later propel his charges against what he perceived as Disraeli's immoral support for the Turks in their suppression of the Balkan peoples from 1875.

Of course, it is paramount to avoid a teleological downplaying of the discontinuities in Gladstone's development into the People's William of the 1860s by reference to a selection of extracts authored by his younger self. There were fundamental and necessary discontinuities in Gladstone's ideas, whatever consistency he would later claim existed between his early career and his later politics. At the same time, however, the existence of continuities cannot be ignored. While being careful to stress that becoming a Liberal 'was...an ultimate outcome undreamed of by Gladstone in 1839 and 1840' it would be wrong to divide Gladstone into two lives, incongruent with one another and wholly lacking in intellectual and political equivalence.⁴³ Yet it remains true that upon the eve of joining Peel's cabinet at the end of 1839, Gladstone still opposed relief beyond tolerance for Dissenters and Jews, and he still opposed the endowment of Roman Catholicism in Ireland. Above all, he continued to believe in the operation of providence through a confessional state bound in alliance with a doctrinally pure High Anglican Church. In 1840, he could still write with regret that Church principles had been 'grievously lowered and relaxed.'⁴⁴ What eventually led Gladstone to change his mind upon these questions involved more than a measured reimagining, recasting and reapplication of his initial principles: it was a disorientating dislocation in which he would emerge with a new formulation of his purpose in politics and the role of providence, and it is therefore to the 1840s to which we shall now turn.

'Lowering the religious tone of the State'

43 For the case for a stark separation between the earlier and later Gladstones, see Shannon, *God and Politics*, 86

44 *Church Principles*, cited in Butler, *Gladstone*, 65.

It was arguably the 1840s and the tutelage of Peel that proved the seminal decade in a process of transition from archconservative to Peelite Conservative that would provide the essential bridgehead to the populism of the 1860s⁴⁵. Indeed, Matthew has argued that 'the decade of 1841-51 is the crucial period of his political development.'⁴⁶ This was the decade in which he shed his theocratic approach to the State and began the economic education that would allow him to emerge as the architect of mid-Victorian public finance. For example, whereas 1840 had witnessed the publication of *Church Principles*, as early as 1844 he voted heartily in favour of the Dissenters Chapel Bill, a measure involving the statutory recognition of the right of non-conformist Protestants to own buildings and charitable funds originally owned by orthodox Protestants.⁴⁷ The crucial gauge of just how much Gladstone had altered his religious politics came in 1845, when he, after initial hesitation, backed Peel's Bill to establish seminaries for the training of Catholic priests from the pocket of the British taxpayer in the form of the Maynooth Grant.

What had happened? In part Gladstone had come to accept the logic of Keble's argument, but this is not the whole story, because there was now emerging in Gladstone's rhetoric a heightened belief in religious liberty as a great force of the age, and one which it was imperative to advance in order to be on the right side of history. That 1844 and 1845 were not isolated occurrences, but indicators of a very real shift in Gladstone's approach, is illustrated by his remarks in support of a Bill of 1847, introduced under Lord John Russell's Whig Ministry, which permitted Jews to take a different Parliamentary oath to Christians, and thus become MPs: 'the application of the immutable principles of justice to the shifting relations of society must', he declared, match 'the political temper of the age.'⁴⁸ Indeed, in one particularly spectacular *renversement*, Gladstone even took Russell's Ministry to task over religious liberty during the commons debates on the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill on 25th March 1851:

'We cannot change the profound and restless

45 Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, 121 and 166-7.

46 Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-74*, 81.

47 See Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?*, 530

48 Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-74*, 73; However, Shannon argues that Gladstone's motives by this stage were perhaps not as charitable and progressive as such rhetoric would suggest: see *Peel's Inheritor*, 225-6, where Shannon argues that Gladstone was hoping that this limited concession would enable the concentration upon the defence of the established Church in other areas of policy which really mattered. However, it appears to nonetheless be a significant change in tack. The younger Gladstone wouldn't have voted for such a measure.

tendencies of the age towards religious liberty. It is our business to guide and to control their application, do this you may, but to endeavour to turn them backwards is the sport of children, done by the hands of men, and every effort you make in that direction will recoil upon you in disaster and disgrace.⁴⁹

It was in this spirit in 1852-4 that Gladstone not only supported the Whigs' University Reform Bill, he himself drew it up and piloted it through the Commons. He thus contributed to a measure abolishing the religious tests that had for so long prevented non-Anglicans from matriculating from Oxford and taking degrees at Cambridge.⁵⁰ If one were ignorant of any context, one might be forgiven for supposing here that it was Gladstone who was the broad-Churchman, and Russell the Tory. Gladstone's actions flatly contradicted the ideals which he had passionately upheld just years earlier – the very reason he had entered politics in 1833-34 was to save the religious establishment by guarding its privileges. In 1841, he had spoken against a bill to allow Jews to hold office in municipal corporations, arguing that no broad or clear line could be drawn between their eligibility for that and their eligibility to sit in parliament. Such examples provide in themselves evidence of a real shift away from High Tory politics and towards the politics of the later 'People's William..

Gladstone was therefore clearly now beholden by the mid-1840s, by the standards of his earlier career, to a conception of the state whose religious character was significantly 'lowered'. The obvious corollary of this muting of the religious state and the advocacy of religious liberty was a profound dislocation and reconfiguration of religious principles, a phenomenon which can be traced in Gladstone's private correspondence. In two letters of 5th and 19th April 1846 in particular, he wrote to his friend and confidant, the Tractarian Henry Manning, that he was now overseeing a 'process of lowering the religious tone of the State, letting it down, demoralising it – i.e. stripping it of its ethical character, and assisting its transition into one which is *mechanical*.'⁵¹ This 'essential change', Gladstone held, meant that 'the state never can come back to the Catholic means of agency within itself...'⁵² What he meant by 'the Catholic means of agency

within itself' was that the state could no longer be considered, as his earlier principles had held, as a force breathing energy, spirituality, and being into the lives of its subjects. Of course, in *The State in its Relations with the Church*, Gladstone had already envisaged a 'stripping' down of the State's religiosity being necessary if the State, guided by Erastian ministers such as Lord Russell, were to encroach upon the doctrinal purity of the Anglican Church. The crucial difference was that Gladstone now also rationalised an aethical, or post-ethical, state not only out of expediency, but because it was also the only morally sustainable possibility. A state with no ethical character, and therefore not beholden to an established Church, was the only one which could ever be sustained because, he now wrote to Newman in 1845, 'the State cannot be said now to have a conscience...inasmuch as I think it acts...as no conscience – that is no personal conscience (*which is the only real form of one*) can endure.'⁵³ Agency, morality, and conscience did not reside in the central state giving its people their spiritual lives but *vice versa*: the only conscience which existed was not collective, but individual, and accordingly it was the aggregation of moral consciences which must give character, or rather an *absence* of character, to the state.

This chief importance of this change in the locus of morality, ethical agency and conscience towards the people and away from the state was firstly that it signifies a fundamental transformation in the way Gladstone envisioned the operation of providence. His belief in an ethical Anglican state had accompanied his faith in the conclusive and superior nature of the Anglican interpretation of revelation. Gladstone's belief in the fundamental veracity of the Anglican interpretation of revelation did not change, but it was relegated in importance to his increasing belief in natural providence which was to be discerned not in scripture, but in natural second causes. Confronted by a succession of controversial religious questions in Parliament under which the lofty principles asserted in the 1830s came under severe strain, Gladstone had sought answers from a work encountered at Oxford while an undergraduate which now took on a far greater significance: the natural theology of the 18th century divine, Bishop Joseph Butler.⁵⁴ Indeed, his obsession with Butler became such that in 1860, Gladstone, and he was not even exaggerating, wrote to his son that 'I never take a step in life without thinking how Butler would have advised me.'⁵⁵ During the aftermath of Maynooth in

Press, 2013).

49 Cited in Butler, *Gladstone*, 144 – my italics.

50 Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, op cit. p 289-90.

51 Gladstone to Henry Manning, 19 Apr. 1846 in *Correspondence on Church and Religion of William Ewart Gladstone*, ed. D.C. Lathbury (1910), ii. 272 *italics added*, cited in Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 340-72, and *A Mad Bad and Dangerous People?*, 486.

52 Gladstone to Henry Manning, 5 Apr. 1846, printed in *The Correspondence of Henry Edward Manning and William Ewart Gladstone, 1844-1853*, ed. P.C. Erb (Oxford: Oxford University

53 Gladstone to Newman, 19 Apr. 1845, in *Correspondence on Church and Religion of Gladstone*, i. 72 *italics added*, cited in Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People?*, 486.

54 Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 342.

55 Cited in *ibid*.

June and July 1845, Gladstone had turned to Butler's anti-deistic *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1736) to provide him with counsel, but he drew rather different conclusions than his Tractarian friends from this 18th century sage. From this work, he derived the philosophically weak but nonetheless influential argument that every human being had an individual 'superintending faculty' (i.e. a conscience) placed within them by God.⁵⁶ This was not a mere alteration of earlier principles: it was a new formulation of the operation of providence and the place of the spiritual individual within it. With this realisation Gladstone had renounced his anti-individualist thought of the 1830s and embraced a fully blown theory of individual conscience unbreakably bound with the right to individual religious liberty. For Gladstone, the agency of providence was no longer conceptualised as working to bestow morality through the actions of the central institutions of the State; it was invested within laws of natural providence with which the private ethical consciousness of individuals interacted in the scheme of human salvation. The mode of providence was not, as he had previously believed, the revelation of infallible doctrine to Man but *nature* and could only operate through the mechanisms of natural theology.⁵⁷

Because providence primarily worked not through the dark glass of revelation, but in the much more clearly discernible, even '*legible*', operations of nature and its interactions with individual conscience, any religious revival would have to come '*to States through the individuals that compose them, and not to the individuals through States*'.⁵⁸ To do otherwise and attempt to 're-establish national religion by enacting it' through legislation which, Gladstone now believed, was not only *practically* futile, it was also *ethically* bankrupt. The theocracy he had advocated earlier in his career, he accepted, fundamentally offended the Christian duty to God of social justice because it enshrined an 'inequality of dealing' amongst confessions.⁵⁹ This inequality was made worse by the existence of a quorum in parliament of Churchmen and anti-Catholic dissenters in Parliament against the Maynooth grant whose sole motive in maintaining the privilege of the Anglican Church was not to lead society towards salvation, but to discriminate against Catholics. In this quorum Gladstone saw an unholy alliance whose anti-Popery bigotry was ironically undermining the illusory State consciousness they were claiming to defend: such action, Gladstone argued, only 'repudiates the religious character of the State' by 'pretending to maintain a conscience in the

State and yet systematically contravening it.'⁶⁰ According to Gladstone's re-formulated conception of a mechanical, post-ethical, state within a natural providential order, individuals were to seek out religion amongst competing confessions in their own personal quest for ethical sustenance and spiritual salvation, a quest in which they were to be freed from obstruction.

The providential scheme thus envisioned was to provide the only hope for the spiritual mission of the Anglican Church in its own quest to convert and save souls. Contrary to the conclusion of Richard Shannon, that Gladstone had repudiated and reformed his political mission along with his previous religious beliefs, Gladstone's mission remained constant. He was still the political guardian of the Anglican Church, but his mode of defence had now shifted from a positive maintenance of statist constitutional safeguards to the negative anti-statist defence of the doctrinal purity and independence of the Church itself. The Church, Gladstone declared to Manning, 'has a very high mission before her', but nonetheless 'must descend into the ranks of the *people* and find strength there...'⁶¹

Thus, Gladstone responded to the religious contestations of the 1840s with a new theory of providence more akin with an individualising evangelical soteriology than his High Church ecclesiology; and thus did he make a crucial formulation from which he emerged as the proponent and active champion of religious liberty. It was this combination of personal piety with the espousal of public religious liberty that would prove so intoxicating to radical and nonconformist supporters in the 1860s. Indeed, in his *Autobiographica*, Gladstone himself looked upon this transition as the moment that he was awoken to '*the great fact that liberty is a great and precious gift of God* and that human excellence cannot grow up in a nation without it.'⁶² Yet it must be noted that this was not a religious liberty in the tradition of broad-Church whigs: Gladstone had no truck with notions of non-doctrinal latitudinarianism or hubristic whiggish conceptions of improvement, and he despised the whigs' desire to use the established Church as an instrument of non-dogmatic moralism. For Gladstone, the very *essence* of religious faith was that it *was* dogmatic, and that the adherents to different dogmas should be liberated to concentrate their efforts upon whatever dogmatic creed satisfied their conscience in the

56 Ibid., 342 and also see Shannon, *God and Politics*, 83.

57 Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 350.

58 Gladstone to Newman, 3 Sept. 1844, cited in Butler, *Gladstone*, 127.

59 Ibid., footnote 43.

60 19 June 1845, BL Add. MSS 44735, f. 41 cited in Butler, *Gladstone*, 120.

61 Gladstone to Manning, March 15 1847 and March 10 1846, ed. Erb - my italics.

62 *Autobiographica*, 12 July 1892, 37, cited in H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-98* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25-6 - my italics.

pursuit of salvation. This, and not the dilution of doctrine, was the Anglican Church's only hope and means by which it could come to pursue its spiritual mission freed from the interference of secular power. Mutual respect and doctrinal integrity for Gladstone were better ways to ensure the harmony of society than diluting the very principles upon which integrity was based, and were the driving forces of his religious liberalism.⁶³ His was a High Anglican road to Liberalism, justified through the moral elevation of the 'lower principles' of government to serve the grandest designs of Providence.⁶⁴

But what were the designs of providence? At this stage Gladstone was already convinced that providential designs could be unleashed by a 'Providential Government' ensuring the harmony in society, of which religious toleration under a neutral was one crucial pre-requisite. Gladstone's reading of Butler had accordingly solved only half of the problem: it had assured him that it was indeed possible to have a political career founded upon 'sound principles applicable to the mode of Providential government'.⁶⁵ However, now that he had rejected the Church-State nexus which he had entered politics to defend, he required a new outlet by which it was possible not only to serve the Anglican Church from the vantage point of the State, but also to assist an even higher divine mission by deconstructing the obstacles to the advance of providence's directing of the progress of society and humanity more generally.⁶⁶

In this context, it is significant that just as Gladstone found his religious principles in crisis, he discovered a new outlet for his moral crusading, and one that harmonised with his new conceptions of the relationship between personal consciousness and a mechanical providence in nature. Despite Perry Butler's justifiable scepticism that Gladstone's personal religion influenced his advocacy of political economy, Boyd Hilton is closer to the mark when he asserts that 'Gladstone's gradual rediscovery of "individual conscience" went *pari passu* with his emergence as a Peelite'.⁶⁷ It was in Peel's Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade Gladstone oversaw the swingeing reductions of the 1844 budget. In this capacity,

he was so inspired by Peelite finance that in 1843 he wrote a piece in the new *Foreign and Colonial Quarterly Review* praising the government's 'Course of Commercial Policy at Home and Abroad', advocating the 'stimulus of competition' although not yet 'repeal' with regard to the Corn Laws. What is significant in this text is the elevation Peelite economics upon the high plain of religious morality: 'moral elements, resolution, energy, skill, perseverance, and good faith' as well as 'religion and Christian virtue, like the faculty of taste and the perception of beauty, have their place, aye and that the first place, in political economy, as the means of creating and preserving wealth'.⁶⁸ As Hilton has remarked, Gladstone's conception of political economy and commerce, like his vision of providence, were above all defined by movement and action: the right political economy, advanced by 'Providential Government' could, accordingly, provide the forum in which the laws of providence could operate, and, through their operation, act upon society and conscience.

The development of Gladstone's free trading sentiments was undoubtedly solidified by his support for Corn Law Repeal in 1846 and his seizing of the Peelite mantle thereafter under the guidance of Lord Aberdeen. Indeed, Gladstone's changing personal convictions upon the Corn Question nicely illustrate how his shifts towards natural theology and *laissez-faire* rhymed with one another. Before the crisis of 1845-6, Gladstone had not seen Repeal as a pressing moral issue, writing to his father that Protection was 'to be dealt with as tenderly and cautiously as might be according to circumstances, always running in the direction of Free Trade'.⁶⁹ Yet the crisis had folded into Gladstone's own personal reformulations of providence and by 1845-6 he saw the issue afresh within the evangelical dialectic of salvation and sin, writing that the Famine in Ireland was 'the minister of God's retribution upon' the 'cruel and inveterate and but half-atoned injustice' of Corn Protection.⁷⁰ He avowed in another letter to his father that those advocating the 'maintenance of a corn law and protective system' must clash with the forces of free trade in 'a great struggle'.⁷¹ For Gladstone political economy had a captivating appeal as a mode by which to express and enact policies in harmony with natural laws of providence, which in turn reflected his transition from a faith based upon revelation to one which

63 For example, see his later writing in his 'Memorandum on the Athanasian creed, 8 June 1873', cited in J.P. Parry, *Religion and the Collapse of Gladstone's First Government, 1870-1874*. The Historical Journal, Vol. 25, Issue 01, March 1982, 71-101: here he wrote that to 'uphold the integrity of Christian dogma' was 'perhaps the noblest of all tasks' and 'the guardianship of the great fountain of human hope, happiness and virtue.'

64 I.e. what Perry Butler describes as 'the high road to Liberalism'

65 Gladstone to Maud Stanley, 27 Jan. 1856, Lathbury, *Correspondence on Church and Religion*, ii. 30, cited in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 347.

66 Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 343.

67 Ibid, 341

68 Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, 123-4.

69 Gladstone to his father, 30 June 1849, Foot and Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries*, iii. xxxviii-xxxix cited in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 351.

70 Gladstone to his wife, 12 Oct. 1845, *ibid.*, ii. 266, cited in *Ibid.*, 351-2.

71 Gladstone to his father, 30 June 1849, Foot and Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries*, iii. xxxviii-xxxix cited in *Ibid.*, 350.

invested confidence in nature.⁷²

Around this time also, another crucial series of events occurred in parallel with Gladstone's rejection of the religious state and his discovery of a passion for liberal political economy. Slowly throughout the 1840s some of Gladstone's closest friends from the Oxford Movement: Newman, Hope, Manning and all the Wilberforces save Samuel, joined the Roman Catholic Church. This was a profoundly disorientating experience for Gladstone and the common flaw in Matthew and Shannon's very different accounts is to underestimate the pain and personal distress involved in Gladstone's changing religious thought during the decade: he described the year 1841 as 'a year of heart burnings and heart bleedings, a chastening and a humble year.'⁷³ Upon hearing that Manning and Hope had received the communion of the Roman Catholic Church on 6th April 1851, he recorded in his Diary 'A day of pain! Manning and Hope!' Later in the year, in December, he recorded that 'It has been a sad year... the rending and sapping of the Church, the loss of its gems, the darkening of its prospects.'⁷⁴ This crisis of friendship combined with the unexpected death of his four-year-old daughter Jessy of cerebral meningitis in 1850 and the bankruptcy of his wife's family in a sense established a perfect personal, familial, religious and political storm inside the young politician.⁷⁵ The pain of these years not only brought Gladstone suffering, it also forced much sombre and inward reflection upon his own religiosity and his place within public life; it must not be underestimated as a cause of Gladstone's re-evaluation of his own self, and therefore his search for a new medium by which to exercise his personal mission.

The aggregate result was a complete reworking of Gladstone's political framework, combining the fiery and explosive nature of his old religious intensity behind a new approach informed by religious liberty and personal consciousness. It was a crucial shift in strategy and intellectual justification towards achieving the benevolent order of a religious society through means which harmonised with liberal rather than illiberal sentiments in Parliament. This would later enable Gladstone to forge a new political identity not only as a politician of popular causes but also one of popular appeal. The stripping back of the religious character of the state would be allied with the stripping back of its fiscal restrictions to remove the impediments to the workings of providence. It was in many ways *under* as well as *'from'* Peel, 'as of from a mighty alchemist of state, that Gladstone first

learned the sublime art of turning the base metals of politics into gold.'⁷⁶

'The moral check which it has pleased the Almighty to impose'

Yet it would take more than an aptitude for political alchemy for the 'People's William' to be forged. If the 1840s were a formative period in the process by which Gladstone laid the groundwork for the 1860s, it is equally necessary to stress the importance of his successive Chancellorships of the Exchequer from 1853 in this process. It was as Chancellor that Gladstone was able to become the architect, or at least the *perceived* architect, of mid-Victorian financial policy and establish his credentials as a competent guardian of the public purse in the mode of Peel, boost his public image, and satisfy popular calls for retrenchment.⁷⁷ This all brought him into fiscal confluence with the body of opinion in the House of Commons that would later be able to facilitate his populist demagoguery – the Whig-Liberal Party. For example, in demolishing Disraeli's December 1852 Budget, Gladstone secured the defeat of the Derby Ministry, the collapse of the government and his own chance to set the fiscal agenda. Both H.C.G. Matthew and Martin Daunton have demonstrated the great significance of this moment not only in the career of Gladstone, but in shaping a new minimalist financial consensus which would characterise the dominant discourse on the nature of the state for most of the remainder of the 19th century.⁷⁸

Gladstone's 1853 budget laid waste to indirect taxation upon consumption in the budgets of 1853-5 and 1861-5 to the extent that by 1865 indirect taxation stood at the lowest level up to that point in the century – 64.9% with a net decrease of 4.9% from 1846-50 – and a corresponding net increase in relative percentage revenue from direct taxation of 4.9% over the same period.⁷⁹ The budget of 1853 secured the maintenance of the income tax at the level of £100, with

72 Ibid.

73 Gladstone to Hook, 16 Dec. 1841, BL Add. MS 44213, f. 29, cited in Butler, *Gladstone*, 105.

74 *Diary*, iv, 7 Apr. 1851 and 31 Dec. 1851, cited in Ibid., 222-223.

75 Shannon, *God and Politics*, 64.

76 Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, 121.

77 Ibid., 260 and Matthew, *Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Politics of Mid-Victorian Budgets*, *The Historical Journal*, 22 (1979): 615-43; Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, 152.

78 Matthew, *Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Politics of Mid-Victorian Budgets*, *ibid.*, and Martin Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1799-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p7-103.

79 Matthew, *Mid-Victorian Budgets*, 152: while there was a relative in the percentage of revenue from direct taxation relative to indirect, Gladstone was able to bring down the total charge of the income tax itself from 10d. on incomes over £150 in 1861 to just 4d. by 1865; see also Theodore Hoppen K, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, 214.

a fall from the exemption limit from £150, the absorption of a 92% increase in persons paying in Schedule D for the first time. The great achievement here was the maintenance of the principle of the income tax as 'the corner stone of our whole financial plan', both 'permanent and unreconstructed' behind the smokescreen of a sliding scale in 'one of the great conjuring tricks of the century.'⁸⁰

Gladstone, through his taxation and fiscal policies, had not only settled the question of the income tax, he had also directly satisfied many of the calls which pacific and utopian free traders from popular urban constituencies of the likes of Manchester, such as Richard Cobden and John Bright, had been demanding since the 1830s. Gladstone's policies of debt conversion and reduced military spending,⁸¹ combined with the repeals of the stamp and paper duties in 1855 and 1861 (the 'taxes on knowledge') and the Cobden-Chevalier free trade treaty of 1860 with Napoleon III's France to further cement this image: Radicals such as George Howell praised Gladstone as the first Chancellor 'to discover how to increase the receipts by reducing the burthens.'⁸² These all represented policies which were not only fulfilling 'Sir Robert Peel's principles of commercial reform' but which were also tremendously popular.⁸³ This can be seen in the reaction of the Financial Reform Authority, a radical weathervane, to such provisions as relayed by Robertson Gladstone: 'They say it is the best Budget that has ever appeared: some excellent points: Legacy Duty on Real Estate, Income Tax to Ireland, Duty off Soap & they are determined to stand by it. The Financial Reform Association came to this determination today...our business letters from Glasgow and Manchester mention just the same sentiments.'⁸⁴

Nonetheless, as Martin Daunton has argued, what was truly remarkable about the clamour with which radical received Gladstone's budget was the way in which he made opposition to a *differentiated* income tax into an orthodox position for the next forty years.⁸⁵ How he achieved this provides not only an indication of how Gladstone had become able of capturing radical opinion – it further illustrates, as we shall see, how his new conceptions of providence operated in political context. One of the great

debates surrounding the income tax in the early 1850s before Gladstone's budget was whether it should be instituted upon the principles of *graduation* or *differentiation*. Many in the Select Committees of 1851 and 1852, in which radical such as J.G. Hubbard and Joseph Hume as well as Conservatives such as Benjamin Disraeli had sat, had generally come to the conclusion that differentiating different levels of taxation for incomes *earned* by industrial and commercial means, and those more passive sources of income inherited in 'permanent property' and the land.⁸⁶ In the words of J.G. Hubbard: differentiation was required in order to fulfil the 'fundamental principle', that 'all property should pay in proportion to its value', and accordingly 'industrial earnings' should be taxed more lightly as an active contributor to the generation of wealth. Furthermore, Hubbard believed that the opposite, a graduated income tax which taxed larger incomes higher than lower ones, 'arraigns the dispositions of Providence, subverts individual rights, and shows itself to be in principle but a step towards Socialism'.⁸⁷ Differentiation accordingly also formed a crucial part of Disraeli's 1852 budget, which Gladstone had passionately denounced.

Yet in his own budget Gladstone managed to balance the fiscal system without recourse to differentiation, a concept which he feared would lead to a violation of the principle that all forms of property should be taxed at an equal rate. He believed that equality of taxation should apply both to the *level* as well as the *type* of income.⁸⁸ Yet Gladstone, despite also having concerns that graduation was 'generally destructive in its operation to the whole principle of property, and to the principle of accumulation' and the enemy of 'all social peace' introduced an income tax which equally taxed both industrial and agricultural incomes with the £100 exemption limit, but added an additional, moderate, graduation between those earning £100-150.⁸⁹ Because of the way in which Gladstone justified the measure he was able to present it in such a way that opposition to graduation became a genuinely radical position. Gladstone made two claims: the first was that the income tax was a temporary expedient which should be constructed in such a way as to make its abolition dependent upon financial responsibility elsewhere in the abolition of military expenditure; and that the income tax was a permanent source of revenue for future fiscal emergencies, and so its it was 'of vital importance, whether you keep this tax or whether you part with it that you should either keep it, or should leave it in a state in which it will be

80 Matthew, *Mid-Victorian Budgets*, 631.

81 In the case of military spending Gladstone partially succeeded by reducing the debt charges as a % of gross government expenditure by 12.5% from 1846-50 to 1861-5 *despite* the Crimean War – see Matthew, *Mid-Victorian Budgets*, op. cit. and Theodore Hoppen op. cit.

82 Cited in Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, 215.

83 Gladstone's, cited in Shannon, *Peel's Inheritor*, 261.

84 Cited in Matthew, *Mid-Victorian Budgets*, at 631-632.

85 Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan*, 97.

86 *Ibid.*, 77-90.

87 PP 1861 VII, Select Committee on Income and Property Tax, draft report, p. II, written by the chairman, J.G. Hubbard, cited in *ibid.*, 84-5.

88 Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan*, 98.

89 Matthew, *Mid-Victorian Budgets*, 627-30

fit for service on an emergency, and that will be impossible to do if you break up the basis of your income tax.⁹⁰ In other words, Gladstone was repackaging the income tax as a means of constraining the state, 'by creating a degree of resistance to tax increases' and incentivising its own abolition through 'fiscal responsibility'.⁹¹ This, along with some concessions to differentiation, such as the introduction of tax relief on premiums on life insurance annuities, converted radicals such as Hume, Hubbard, and the Financial Reform Association, to a new radical consensus which saw the undifferentiated tax as the enemy of fiscal probity.⁹²

The entire thrust of Gladstonian finance in the 1850s and 1860s thus formed the final rejection with a vengeance of what has been called the 'fiscal-military state'. This was a system whereby military conflict conducted by the state (the military dimension) was funded by public credit and long periods of public borrowing (the fiscal dimension) which had emerged after extended periods of war in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Yet it was first in the aftermath of conflict against the colonial revolutionaries North America from 1776-1782, and then globally against the French from 1793-1815, that it came to be characterised with the taint of corruption and immorality. The vast expansion of the public debt, alongside military expenditure and the perception that the administration handling this expansion was bloated and sinfully wasteful with the money of the public solidified in the rhetorical accusation levelled at the government in the form of 'Old Corruption'.⁹³ It was to nullify once and for all the perceived sins of the state, with its high expenditures on poor relief, sinecures, and worthless government posts for incompetent lackeys that ministers from the Marquess of Rockingham in 1782 and William Pitt the younger in 1783 to Lord Liverpool in the early 19th century had pledged allegiance to a program of 'Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform!'

It was in this respect that Gladstone was acting as the successor not only of his mentor Sir Robert Peel, but walking in the footsteps of Whigs such as Lord Althorp, Nassau Senior, and E.J. Littleton. All of these individuals had desired to rid the state of the charge that it was sinfully wasteful and governed by a caste of despotic aristocrats with Venetian

venalities. But where Althorp, Peels, and others had governed during a period in which the central government was held in deep mistrust by the people, the Chartist Movement being the apex of this enmity, Gladstone was perceived by many to have succeeded finally where previous Chancellors had failed. It was under his Chancellorships in the 1850s that what Jonathan Parry has identified as a tradition of financial reform originating with the 'Liberal Toryism' of the 1820s began to pay dividends, and consequently Gladstone became its main beneficiary.⁹⁴ By becoming the champion of popular yet responsible public finance, Gladstone established and galvanised a reputation amongst the radical and Liberal opinion of the nation whose support would accumulate to a crescendo to be cultivated in the 1860s, thus making the 'People's William' a possibility.⁹⁵ This period fundamentally 'marked Gladstone's transformation after 1859, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, from an executive Peelite politician into a charismatic tribune.'⁹⁶ In dealing the death blow to old corruption, Gladstone marked his re-birth as a politician with a popular constituency.

How does all of this related to Gladstone's continually developing understandings of natural providence? Martin Daunton's excellent work on the debates surrounding the income tax and Gladstone's budget of 1853 highlights many important justifications which Gladstone himself provided for his reformation of income tax as the central part of a new fiscal constitution. Yet in other ways Daunton, understandably in a work which aims to use trust and taxation theory rather than examining intellectual history, falls short of identifying the full significance of Gladstone's words and actions upon this matter. The income tax which Gladstone installed also fulfilled several important functions of 'Providential Government'. Firstly, because it acted as an incentive to reduce military spending and tariffs in commercial policy, it could help facilitate what he would come to call the 'Divine Governing Power' which was actively 'standing in certain relations to us' and 'carrying on a moral government of the world' through prescribing and favouring 'what is right' while forbidding and disregarding 'with displeasure what is wrong'.⁹⁷ The income tax, by incentivising

90 Arguments, and quotation from Gladstone during the Parliamentary debates of 1853 over the income tax, cited in Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan*, 99.

91 *Ibid.*, 99

92 *Ibid.*, 100-101

93 See John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990) and also Philip Harling and Peter Mandler, *From "Fiscal-Military" State to Laissez-Faire State, 1760-1850*. *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 31, No 1, (Jan., 1993): 44-70.

94 Jonathan Parry, 'The decline of institutional reform in nineteenth century Britain', ch. 7 in David Feldman and John Lawrence eds., *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

95 Matthew, *Mid-Victorian Budgets*, 603.

96 Angus Hawkins, *British Party Politics, 1852-1886*. (London: Macmillan Publishing Ltd., 1998), 86; Angus Hawkins, *Parliamentary Government and Victorian Political Parties, c.1830-1880*. *English Historical Review* (1989): 638-669.

97 Gladstone in the House of Commons, 26 April 1883, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, cc.xxxviii. 1193, and W.E.

low government spending, the reduction of import and excise on trade, and state interference, thus encouraged individual action in relation to providential laws: if an individual or company went bankrupt due to a lack of state protection or because of the cheaper price of foreign imports, the onus was on them to accept the chastisement of providence and reform their personal situation, and in so doing to make acts of personal atonement. This very metaphysical worldview was why, in his personal financial crisis in the 1849, he had written to Henry Manning that he 'had never seen the working of the prudential and moral laws of God's providence more signally exhibited.'⁹⁸ Secondly, because the income tax imposed a burden in emergency situations such as conflict, it also acted as a providential punishment for the sins of war and militarism. This was why, when Gladstone was forced to raise the level of the income tax in the Commons in March 1854 in response to the demands of the Crimean War, he remarked that it was virtuous that 'the expenses of the war' were being paid for in such a way: it was 'the moral check which it has pleased the Almighty to impose upon the ambition and the lust for conquest that are inherent in so many nations.'⁹⁹

There was also in Gladstone's desire to bring social harmony through the use of the budget another dimension of the income tax which extended into his providentialist theology. Daunton is undoubtedly right in remarking that 'the success of Gladstone' resides in 'his use of the budget to recreate an organic, balanced, society' with trust and harmony between different classes.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, as he points out, Gladstone had himself opposed the radical reconstruction of the income tax based upon differentiation because 'That is not the way in which the relations of the classes brought into the nicest competition with one another under a scheme of direct competition are to be treated'.¹⁰¹ Yet Daunton is wide of the mark when he argues that Gladstone from the 1840s still envisioned 'the state' as 'more than a collection of individuals' and that he simply 'moved to a new position' in which 'free trade and fiscal probity became the new morality' by 'providing the basis for a moral, organic, state in which all classes could co-operate'.¹⁰² As we have seen, the transition was not so straightforward, and not only was Gladstone's state no longer 'moral', it was no longer 'organic'

either. The state was not moral because, as he had written in 1845, it had no conscience; it could not be organic, because it was 'mechanical', and its duty was to act mechanically in order to ensure that it enforced the laws of providence upon individual consciences so that providence could fashion an organic society. In this regard, free trade was not so much the key to a moral state, as an *amoral* state, a *post*-moral state stripped of its ethical character. In such a vision of the State, a mechanism without a conscience, it was even more important that income taxation was equitable and fair, for otherwise the state would be failing to sustain its neutrality, in which case the mechanism would then be corrupted, meaning that it would not be functioning amorally, and would be presenting obstacles to the operation of providence.

Moreover, the fact that he considered so many of his political successes as failures or as unfinished work can only be understood in relation to his personal religion, and his vision of how providence operated in practical political affairs and everyday life. It was also these perceived failures which contributed most profoundly in forging his reputation as the 'People's William'.¹⁰³ For any politician, objectively speaking, the achievements of Gladstone in 1853-55 would indeed have been considered as a success, as Daunton is right to highlight. But Gladstone wasn't just any politician, and by his elevated standards, his mission would never be completed until he had permanently abolished the income tax and vanquished military spending to an absolute minimum. The Crimean War, the Orsini Affair and the Palmerstonian enthusiasm for defence spending forced Gladstone to get the Treasury to offer £6m of Exchequer Bonds for sale, which, though technically repayable in 1858-60, were later added to the funded debt.¹⁰⁴ By 1855, the army and navy had more than doubled in size and cumulative war expenditure had reached something around £70m, of which just under half was eventually met by additions to net public borrowing.¹⁰⁵ By 1856, Britain's spending had skyrocketed to £46.7m or 50.2% of total central government expenditure on its military machine.¹⁰⁶ In such a context, the reduction in gross central government expenditure on debt merely hid the net increase in compound *total* debt due to the meteoric rise in defence expenditure. Overall, across 1856-60, defence expenditure constituted an average of 39.9% of gross central government expenditure, the highest in peacetime of the century, and not matched again until 1900-03.¹⁰⁷

For an obsessive man, rectifying these impingements upon his providentialist policies became one of the greatest

Gladstone, 'On the influence of authority in matters of opinion', *The Nineteenth Century*, 1 (1877), 10, both cited in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 346.

98 Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 346.

99 Hansard, cxxxii. 376 (6 Mar. 1854), cited in Theodore Hoppen, 152.

100 Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan*, 101-3

101 *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser. 125, 18 Apr. 1853, cols. 1383-4, cited in Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan*, 99.

102 Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan*, 75.

103 Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, 214

104 *Ibid.*, 153.

105 *Ibid.*, 180.

106 *Ibid.*

107 Matthew, *Mid-Victorian Budgets*, 633.

and most atavistic preoccupations of his career, and one which would haunt him until the end. Gladstone became the populist of the 1860s because these perceived failures provided the rationale for an essential ingredient in his reimagined, popular politics: that an appeal over the heads of the government and ‘the declining efficiency of Parliament’ to the consciousness of the people, and the enfranchisement of those with ‘property and intelligence’ could provide an irresistible momentum to drive down state expenditure.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, it is no coincidence that the years 1862-4 witnessed both some of the highest spending receipts on defence of the Victorian period, and Gladstone’s emergence as a fully fledged popular *extra-parliamentary* politician. These were the years of his tours of Tyneside and Lancashire, urging the bringing within ‘the pale of the constitution’ those he thought likely to demand retrenchment as well as his christening as ‘The People’s William’ by *The Daily Telegraph*.

Gladstone’s recourse to popular forces in the 1860s can perhaps best be understood in terms of his evaluation of the political landscape as formulated in his anonymous 1859 article for the *Quarterly Review*, ‘The declining Efficiency of Parliament’: his experience of administration in the 1850s had solidified a realisation that ‘the youth and prolific vigour of the country had brought new ideas, new relations, new spheres of life into existence, and no provision, religious, moral, political or municipal, social or physical, had been made for them’. This was due to the decline of a Commons defined by horizontal clashes between two parties into an indecisive parliamentary government of compromise and coalition rather than polarised ideological drive.¹⁰⁹ For Gladstone it had become ‘plain that a public opinion has for many years been forming itself both broad and deep – broader in some respects than the limits of party organisation. This public opinion is considerably adverse to speculation or constitutional changes, but is disposed to view with great favour all *active and efficient government*.’ The key, therefore, to harnessing this public opinion and focussing it upon the quest for minimalist and moral government along the Peelite model was to choose the correct ‘one of the two great parties’ to ‘acquire predominance in Parliament and *in the country*’ by succeeding ‘in *impressing the public mind* with the

belief that it is most deeply and earnestly impressed with the right...of the people to what is called good government’.¹¹⁰ Gladstone’s vision then, as early as 1856, was clearly one of a popular party led by a popular politician capable of mastering the tides of the growing phenomenon of ‘public opinion’. It was a powerful statement of the inadequacy of the era of ‘parliamentary government’ and a call for a return to an old form of politics whereby sharply polarised party groupings would seek legitimation from an electorate of the politically and economically literate.

This was a call which originated in the moral and economic frustrations of government in the 1850s. It is significant that when Gladstone realised this call for action in person during his 1879 Midlothian campaign, one of the crucial exhortations of his audience was that they employ their ‘right to claim everything that the Legislature can do for you...in procuring for you some of those provisions of necessary *liberation from restraint*’.¹¹¹ The people, in Gladstone’s mind, clearly took on a crucial significance in British politics as agents which could, if properly directed, act as the driving force behind parliamentary measures to liberate the individual, and thus free their conscience to act in relation to providence. Going to the people would thus become a vital part of his providentialist politics. It would perhaps be a mistake to designate the 1856 article as the moment in which Gladstone became a populist: he was surely not yet certain himself how far he would take this new approach to the political landscape. Nonetheless, it could be seen as a crucial intellectual precondition to the demagogic activism that would be a feature of Gladstonian politics, and Gladstonian Liberalism in the era of the ‘People’s William’. Above all his realisations in this work forced Gladstone to choose a side, and that side for him had to now be the Liberal Party.

While the role played by domestic politics upon Gladstone’s thinking and politics was clearly significant, it must not be viewed in a parochial vacuum; to ignore the role of a growing interest and involvement in foreign affairs, particularly in Italy, in the formation of the ‘People’s William’ as Professor Shannon and Dr Vincent have done would be unsound.¹¹² In fact there is, as D.M. Schreuder has wisely

108 William Ewart Gladstone, *The declining Efficiency of Parliament*. The *Quarterly Review*. (Albermarle Street: John Murray, June & Sept. 1856, Vol. 99). Gladstone kept his identity anonymous upon the first publication.

109 Gladstone, *The declining efficiency of Parliament*, 524. Two rough parties of opinion that is: Gladstone’s remarks should not be read as an indication of a fully-fledged two party system of the post-1867 model; for context upon this point see Hawkins ‘Parliamentary Government’ and Victorian Political Parties, c.1830-1880’, *English Historical Review* (1989): 638-669

110 Gladstone, *The declining efficiency of Parliament*, 567 – my italics.

111 Cited in Bentley, M., *The Climax of Liberal Politics, 1868-1916: British Liberalism in Theory and Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1987), 68.

112 Richard Shannon’s analysis of Gladstone’s support for Italian unification dismisses its influence upon his thought process without exploration or elaboration upon why this is the case. John Vincent’s *The Formation of the Liberal Party: 1857-1868*. (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1966), similarly dismisses the significance of Italian unification and indeed most other factors, especially on pages 211-215. In Vincent’s view, ‘If

highlighted, a significant body of evidence to illustrate that the Italian Question played no trivial part in the emergence of Gladstone as the popular politician of the 1860s.¹¹³ For example, it is clear that Gladstone's attachment to the cause of Italian unity brought forward his messianic zeal for the principles of legality and freedom from tyrannical government, however conservative in conception, that would be a later hallmark of his popular Liberalism. It also forced his movement into the Liberal Party, a body capable of facilitating such popular ideals in the 1860s. The barbed denunciation of the Neapolitan government as 'E la negazione di Dio eretta a sistema di governo'¹¹⁴ in his July 1851 *Letters to Lord Aberdeen* and his riposte to that same government in his 1852 *Examination of the Official Reply of the Neapolitan Government*, both published in *Gleanings*, alienated Gladstone from his conservative-minded colleagues such as Aberdeen. Taking the side of the Neapolitan government Aberdeen denounced Gladstone for aiding 'the promoters of revolution throughout Europe' while, on the other side of the house, his efforts earned him the praise of Liberals such as Lord Palmerston.¹¹⁵ Yet despite this it must be remembered that Gladstone actually defended Derby's government on the crucial vote of confidence on Italy after the Willis' Tea Rooms Meeting of June 1859, a meeting in which Gladstone was absent. Nonetheless, his continued support for Italian unity added a further ideological wedge between himself and the protectionist-legitimist Conservative party. Italy may have made Gladstone a 'Liberal' by bringing him into a political harmony with liberal opinion in parliament and the country on the Italian Question, but it did not automatically make him a member of Palmerston's Liberal government.

More significantly, there is a very real sense in which the Italian Question from 1852 provided a focal point for all of the factors which had been developing up to that date: providence, progress, the power of the legislator, and the importance of the people in producing an organic, harmonious society. The experience of the Italian Question profoundly influenced Gladstonian finance and 'the social contract' of Victorian *laissez faire*, and both were in turn influenced by his conceptions of the operations of providence.¹¹⁶ It was in his *Examination* he declared that 'we

have entered upon a new career: that of free and unrestricted commerce', and it was in his *Letters* he emphasised the importance of economic development linked with social stability in creating a basis for justice in a modern society.¹¹⁷ Yet what was perhaps most important in this experience for establishing Gladstone as the popular firebrand of his later career was the resplendent and vigorous rhetoric, infused with the power and resonance of Homeric tones and the zeal of providentially-inspired religious moralism, with which he defended the cause of Piedmontese extension, and then fully-fledged national unity after 1859. Gladstone forcefully urged in the *Quarterly Review* that 'our task should be...*moral*...to urge on this side and that the claims of *reason* and *justice*...'¹¹⁸ and in his *Examination*, he wrote of the need:

'To harmonise the old with the new conditions of society, and to mitigate the increasing stress of time and change upon what remains of the ancient and venerable fabric of the traditional civilisations of Europe...The principle of conservation and the principle of progress...have ever existed and must ever exist together...freedom and authority (must) sustain and strengthen one another.'¹¹⁹

This was the language and fire of Gladstonian Liberalism and the People's William emerging in substance, even if Gladstone remained adamant about the underlying 'conservatism' of his approach. It was the force of providentialist morality combined with the emphases upon justice, freedom and the establishment of a harmony between the forces of change and continuity, order *and* liberty, that would underscore the vast popular appeal of Gladstone's Irish Church Disestablishment campaign of 1868-9 and his Midlothian crusade against the Bulgarian horrors in the 1870s. Italy thus became one of the first of Gladstone's endless 'practical experiments in truth': a series of evolving strategies, policies, postures, enthusiasms, missions...¹²⁰ Immanuel Kant once described the French Revolution as a moment in which he became convinced that there was a 'special moral quality in the human race', one confirming a lifelong faith in his theories of metaphysics, nature, and

University Press, 1992), 103-4, but tying these arguments to his understandings of providence is my own addition.

117 *An examination of the official reply of the Neapolitan Government in 1852* in *Gleanings of past years* (1879), IV, 134, cited in Schreuder, *Gladstone and Italian Unification*, 625; Matthew makes the link between Gladstone's political economy and his desire for a stable political order in Europe in *Mid-Victorian Budgets*, 625; also see Schreuder, *Gladstone and Italian Unification*, 482-3.

118 Cited in Schreuder, *Gladstone and Italian Unification*, 489 – *italics added*.

119 Cited in *Ibid*.

120 D.M. Schreuder, 'Gladstone and the conscience of the state', 85, cited in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 347.

he was a Liberal, it was because he was a landowner...'

113 Schreuder, *Gladstone and Italian Unification*, 501

114 'This is the negation of God erected into a system of government.' From *The Letters to Lord Aberdeen*, cited in *Ibid.*, 479.

115 Aberdeen to Gladstone, 9 Oct. 1851 – 44088, fo. 116, cited in *Ibid.*, 481.

116 This is the argument of Dr Matthew; for the phrase 'the social contract' of mid-Victorian *laissez faire* see Biagini, E.F., *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*. (Cambridge: Cambridge

history. The Italian Question provided a similar moment for Gladstone, and it was crucial to his eventual populist destination by not only bringing him further into harmony with Liberal and radical opinion, but for providing him with weight, force, and conviction in his mission – that of harmonising of property and popular opinion in an ordered civil society facilitated by the integrative framework of minimalist fiscal policy. What European despots failed to do by force of arms, Gladstone would succeed in doing by liberality, radical demagoguery and the power of providence.

‘System and fixity in nature’

We can see, therefore, that even before he had come across Charles Darwin’s work or the malleable and much-abused concept of ‘evolution’, William Gladstone had already largely developed an understanding of providence as a force capable of bringing about progressive stages by which society and civilisation could move towards linear improvement. Indeed in later life he was convinced that ‘the idea of evolution is without doubt deeply ingrained in Butler.’¹²¹ This confirms the trend of much recent work on 19th century intellectual history in ‘de-centring Darwin’, and which, like the work of Margaret Schabas or J.W. Burrow, tends now to stress the importance of the ways in which contemporaries appropriated Darwin’s concepts to furnish theories which they had already developed over the previous decades.¹²² Nonetheless, evolutionary ideas further impacted upon Gladstone’s own understandings of providence and galvanised his thoughts upon the mode of minimalist political economy. Spencerist evolutionary concepts underpinned his own ever-evolving conceptualisations of the individual conscience operating within a mechanical-providential natural order.

Here, the crucial ingredient in his intellectual shift came with an enhanced, hyperform notion of progressive and evolutionary temporality, possibly imbibed from works as various as William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1803), Robert Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), the whig geologist Charles Lyell’s *Geological Evidence of the Antiquity of Man* (1863) and appropriated from Spencer’s

Social Statics (1851) or Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859).¹²³ For Gladstone, the aggregate importance of such ideas was manifest in a further elaboration of his view of providence operating according to laws, and the conviction that it was the role of the human politician to liberate their operation. For it was the case, he wrote to William Stanley Jevons, that ‘the doctrine of Evolution, if it be true, enhances in my judgment the proper idea of the greatness of God, for it makes every stage of creation a legible prophecy of all those which are to follow it.’¹²⁴ In other words, it had galvanised his earlier beliefs in progressive temporality, convincing him that Britain was now moving ‘from a stationary into a progressive period’ when the ‘movement’ of society would advance ‘through successive stages.’¹²⁵

This heightened temporality further advanced the crucial shift from a belief in God’s revelation tied with the state authority that Gladstone had adhered to in his youth, towards the natural religion of the older Gladstone. This was a natural religion that combined the Butlerite individual conscience and evangelical soteriology with a dynamic and constantly evolving truth (in contrast to Butler and Paley’s static truth). Nowhere is this triangulation more evident than in the *Studies Subsidiary to Butler* (1896), in which he wrote with fascination that ‘the more we have of system and fixity in nature, the better. For, in the method of natural second causes, God as it were takes the map of his own counsels out of the recesses of His own idea, and graciously lays it near our own view.’¹²⁶ The topographies of time in the ‘natural second causes’, to use Gladstone’s metaphor, were everywhere in nature and constantly changing. Therefore, it was because God’s providential plan possessed a pattern that operated according to progressive and evolutionary stages of development, that His meaning could only be understood by a stripping back of the state. This was to enable the workings of private consciousness within the providential laws of nature, and thus to enable these laws to *evolve*.¹²⁷ Few western thinkers after Immanuel Kant had as powerful a faith in

121 Gladstone to Argyll, 9 Dec. 1895, cited in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 344.

122 See J.W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), at ch. 4, ‘The Laws of Nature and the Diversity of Mankind’; see also Margaret Schabas, *The Natural Origins of Economics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 142-150; also, see Hilton’s assessment of the early impact of Darwinism in *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People?*, 441-454 and 636.

123 See Hilton, *op cit.*, 441-454 and 636, and Burrow, *op cit.*

124 *Correspondence on Church and Religion of William Ewart Gladstone*, ed. D.C. Lathbury (1910), ii. 101, cited in *Ibid.*, 636.

125 The first citation is W.E. Gladstone, *A Chapter of Autobiography* (10th edn, 1868), 1, reprinted in Gladstone, *Gleanings of Past Years*, vii. 101-2. The second citation is Gladstone, *Studies Subsidiary to Butler*, 305, both of which are cited in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 343-344.

126 Gladstone, *Studies Subsidiary to Butler*, 306-9 quoted in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 344.

127 I must give my thanks to Professor Boyd Hilton for a very valuable discussion on the topic of the influence of evolutionary thought upon Gladstone’s conceptions of political economy, time and natural religion.

nature, providence, and destiny as did William Gladstone.

The continuing development of Gladstone's liberal providentialism and its vision of a mechanical-natural order also provides a fascinating point of departure in the context of changing economic thought in the mid-19th century, a field which has been brilliantly examined by Margaret Schabas.¹²⁸ Schabas highlights that this period witnessed a point in time in which the proponents of economic thought such as John Stuart Mill, in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), John Elliott Cairnes, and William Stanley Jevons as well as others were developing a discourse which increasingly led to the 'denaturalisation of the economic order'.¹²⁹ Adam Smith and other 'classical economists' had envisioned a natural order in which commerce took place, and upon which all economic activity was ultimately founded. However, Schabas demonstrates, these individuals developed an early form of 'neoclassical' economics which saw *the* economy as an all-encompassing phenomenon increasingly detached from the natural world, and originating in the faculties of the human mind. For example, one of Mill's contemporaries, Richard Jennings, moving economic theory hand-in-glove with the growing Victorian fascination with psychology, drew a line in his *Natural Elements of Political Economy* (1855) between the 'province of human nature' and the 'external world', determining that 'All the phenomena of Political-economy are of two kinds, caused severally by the action of matter on man, and of man on matter.' Accordingly, the sphere of economics was an area of human activity relating to the action of man on matter, and which was powerfully determined by the force of the human mind to create production, industry, and change, independently of the natural world.¹³⁰

Where does Gladstone fit into such a context? Gladstone seems to have been at once a part of this intellectual trend and outside of it: on the one hand his faith in the capacity of individuals, each with their consciences, to act as moralistic economic agents in a mechanical providential order perhaps testifies to his adherence to early visions of political economy centred upon the power of the human mind. It might be suggested that whereas Jevons and co. believed in the omniscient nature of *the* economy, Gladstone had a religiously evangelical equivalent in the all-encompassing presence of providence. Yet at the same time, an individual whose thought placed such a strong faith in the powers of a providence which operated *in nature* could not conceivably detach economic discourse from the natural

world: in fact, his whole conception of political economy was a crucial part of his *natural religion* 'of system and fixity in nature'. Gladstone was extremely sceptical about the capacity of individuals to control economic forces through the force of intellect and policies, and whenever he spoke about political economy it was not as an omnipotent force produced from the genius of the human mind for the direction of society; his recommendations in political economy were conceptualised in terms of several loosely connected strategies, including free trade, which were amenable to leaving the world to the capable work and genius of God. In his *Studies Subsidiary to Butler* (1896), for example, Gladstone praised God's providential 'counterpoises, both physical and social, fore the advantages of his creatures', and cited as an example 'the wonderful monetary system of civilized countries, which exhibits the balance of forces in a manner curious and striking than any mere physical (i.e. human) can do it.'¹³¹ A mind as obsessed with the designs of God's will as Gladstone's could only have room for one omnipotent agent, not two. His all-consuming notion of providence operating in the world, and thus in the developments of the market, has more in common with Smithian thought as an evangelically coloured version of the famous 'invisible hand' than with Jennings's belief in the dynamics of the 'action of man on matter.'

Becoming the People's William

Whatever the importance of the first three decades of Gladstone's career, his eventual popular image was an immediate product of his cultivation of extra-parliamentary politics of the 1860s and the mastery parliamentary forces beyond his control.¹³² In the words of Eugenio Biagini: 'in the early 1860s something unusual began to happen.

'While Bright remained the last representative of the dynasty of great "demagogues" – the dynasty of "Orator Hunt" – Gladstone was becoming the first 'People's Chancellor' and indeed the first prospective "Premier of the working classes": a "demagogue-statesman", Sir Robert Peel and Feargus O'Connor rolled into one – an explosive combination.'¹³³

Quite, for it was Gladstone's ability to provide stunning feats of oratory in the early 1860s which ultimately contributed to his reputation as the 'People's William'. For example, in October 1862, Gladstone undertook his first provincial tour in Tyneside to celebrate 'of what I

128 Margaret Schabas, *The Natural Origins of Economics*, op cit.

129 See Schabas, *The Natural Origins of Economics*, and in particular ch. 1, 'Before "the Economy"', ch. 7, 'Mill and the Early Neoclassical Economists', and ch. 8, 'Denaturalizing the Economic Order'.

130 Schabas, op cit., 134-5.

131 Cited in Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 351.

132 John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party: 1857-1868*. (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1966).

133 Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone (1860-1880)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 380.

did, or prevented from being done, in 1859-61...¹³⁴ and to propound the virtues of economy and reform with tremendous success: his diaries record 'the great multitude of people' attending his six speeches.¹³⁵ There was also the great tour of Yorkshire and Lancashire which, despite the fact that Gladstone made comparatively few speeches compared to Palmerston, had an electrifying effect. One contemporary, recording Gladstone's visit to Tyneside in 1865, is worth quoting at length to give an indication of just how much of a sensation a fifty-six-year-old High Churchman with thinning hair provided for so many:

When Mr. Gladstone visited the North...twenty miles of banks (of the River Tyne) were lined with people who came to greet him. Men stood in the blaze of chimneys; the roofs of factories were crowded; colliers came up from the mines, women held up their children on the banks....Every man who could ply an oar pulled up to give Mr. Gladstone a cheer...he heard cheers that no other English minister ever heard...the people were grateful to him, and rough pitmen who never approached a public man before, pressed round his carriage by thousands...and thousands of arms were stretched out at one, to shake hands with Mr. Gladstone as one of themselves.¹³⁶

Another contemporary would write of the explosive atmosphere present in 1868 at 'a great meeting at Preston' where 'the mere mention of Mr Gladstone's name is received with great applause – not so I think Bright – they catch at Gladstone like light at gun powder.'¹³⁷ But the greatest *coup de theatre*, truly signalling the arrival of the People's William in the public sphere, was his 11th May 1864 speech in the House of Commons, a performance with extra-parliamentary resonance. Responding to Baines' Borough Suffrage Bill, he counselled that 'every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal unfitness or of political danger is morally entitled to come within the pale of the Constitution...a limited portion of the working class...a select portion.'¹³⁸ While this dramatic emergence of Gladstone not only as a Parliamentary but a national politician was in many ways underscored by a myriad

intellectual and political preconditions, it is nonetheless important to stress that Gladstone's extra-parliamentary tack of the early 1860s was the crucial ingredient for his arrival at the destination of Gracchan *Tribunus Plebis*.

However, it is also important to highlight the structural changes in British politics which enabled the final shift of Gladstone from popular Parliamentarian to populist tribune to take place. While not underplaying the role of Gladstonian oratory, John Vincent suggests the importance of understanding the influence of 'the new cheap Press', militant dissent, and organised labour in establishing a situation in which a popular politician could and would emerge.¹³⁹ Too much can be made of labour at this early stage, but an exploration of the press and dissent are illuminating. For instance, the vast expansion in a popular press enabled by the 'taxes on knowledge' in 1855 and 1861 meant that by 1864 the annual circulation of press publications in United Kingdom stood at 546,000,000 copies, of which 340,000,000 copies were provincial journals.¹⁴⁰ The Liberal *Daily Telegraph*, buoyed by its merger with the Peelite *Morning Chronicle* in 1862, was a chief beneficiary, increased its sales to a mass circulation of 190,000 by the early 1870s.¹⁴¹ The fact of such a vast increase in the circulation of news undoubtedly helped to shape a vastly expanded public sphere, and with it a vastly inflated Gladstone to reach the dissenting and working class heartlands of Liberal radicalism.

Indeed, as G.I.T. Machin has highlighted, the proliferation of the press dove-tailed with Gladstone's capturing of the moral tone of religious sincerity and liberty beloved of non-conformists, many of whom now swelled the ranks of the Gladstonian crowds, and joined the readership of his journal publications.¹⁴² Henry Allon, the nonconformist editor of the *British Quarterly Review*, captured 'the impression of spiritual earnestness which Gladstone left on Dissenters' when he wrote to him on 6 July 1866 that:

(Dissenters) have...confidence in the deep feeling of religiousness which appears to imbue your public life and make it a great and sacred responsibility. They feel...that they are safer with a true & earnest man... than with a man of inferior moral tone...I do not think that any public man of late years, has inspired any thing like the confidence & ...enthusiasm among Nonconformists that you now command.¹⁴³

134 Gladstone to A.H. Gordon, n.d. 1864: B.M. Add. Mss. 44,320, f. 44, cited in *Ibid.*, 229.

135 Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, 244.

136 Holyoake, cited in Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment, Reform*, 380.

137 E. Howard to G. Glyn, 22 September 1868 B.M. Add. Mss. 44,347, f. 181, cited in Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party*, 233.

138 Hansard, clxxv. 324-5 (11 May 1864), cited in Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, 245.

139 Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party*, 257.

140 *Ibid.*, 59.

141 Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, 216.

142 See G. I. T. Machin, 'Gladstone and Nonconformity in the 1860s: The Formation of an Alliance', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Jun., 1974), 347-364.

143 Cited in Machin, 'Gladstone and Nonconformity in the

In this way, Gladstone's shift from state-centred patriarchal religion to a providentially focussed natural religion began to bear real political fruit in the 1860s, as Gladstone's language and politics captured the popular charge of religious liberty and fiscal probity. In this context, Edward Miall's British Anti-State Church Association, re-founded in 1853 as the Liberation Society, became a powerful campaigning force whose support for Gladstone was premised upon a shared belief in the rhetoric of religious pluralism and voluntarism married with state minimalism which Gladstone now espoused. This was also where the importance of Peel's immediately posthumous reputation fed into Gladstone's representation as the perceived architect of financial probity and rectitude; but this reputation was all the more powerful because tied to the sincerity of a man of faith, capable of capturing the languages of dissenting radicalism.

This was an image in which Gladstone was himself partly implicit: indeed, it was the *Daily Telegraph* of all papers which christened him the 'People's William' during this period and Gladstone had cultivated close relations with Thornton Hunt, one of the *Telegraph's* senior reporters. In the case of his alliance with religious dissent, it was Gladstone's meetings with the celebrated 19th century Nonconformist divine, Reverend Christopher Newman Hall, at the latter's own home in 1865-66 which opened up avenues to influential dissenting circles. It was from this connection that he was introduced to Edward Baines, R.W. Dale, and Samuel Morley, highly significant figures in the dissenting political community. It was also through these connections that he was asked by nonconformist acquaintances such as Henry Allon to write political articles for the *British Quarterly Review*. No doubt Gladstone's ego was flattered by the attention, his religiosity stimulated by the discussion, and his conscience soothed by allowing himself to be the prophet of providence's liberty.¹⁴⁴

However, it does not follow that Gladstone was hoping to inspire the support in terms of the sheer magnitude of adoration that his person, reported in the press and witnessed directly at his speeches, was to invoke in the public at large. He had in fact privately written rather reticently after his tour to Lancashire in October 1864 that 'so ended in peace the exhausting, flattering, I hope not intoxicating circuit. God knows I have not courted them. I hope I do not rest on them...It is, however, impossible not to love people from whom such manifestations come.'¹⁴⁵ It is clear that the final

stage in the process by which Gladstone became 'The People's William' was not one that was fashioned purely by himself alone. It was a dialogue and, as with all other important shifts experience by Gladstone upon his journey to c.1865, it is important to note his conservative rationales and hesitancy. Yet, the importance of the proliferation of cheap news and its enthusiastic reception by increasingly politicised working and dissenting groups undoubtedly combined with Gladstone's cautious but nonetheless electrifying speechmaking, religiously charged language and his political platform to elevate him to the position of a political Olympian.

Belief in Liberty

On taking leave of Gladstone at his christening as the 'People's William' in the mid-1860s it is perhaps possible to provide an overarching view of the process by which he had been transformed from the rising High Tory of Macaulay's chastisement in the *Edinburgh Review*. It is essential in the first place not to make the younger Gladstone out to be an unthinking High Tory: much of his early thought contained principles which, even if in hindsight only, were capable of being reworked to fit new political contexts. The necessity for institutions to hold within them the capacity for organic evolution and progression, the belief, however uncertain, of a measure of religious toleration and the belief in the agency of 'intellects' all established a tension within his High Tory thought. Yet this can be overestimated, and for Gladstone to change his politics it was first necessary for his beliefs about the relationship between the Church and State to unravel and leave such tensions exposed. It ultimately took the succession of religious questions which arose in the 1840s, the breakdown of the Oxford movement and intimacy with the practical work of government under Peel to break apart Gladstone's old framework of religious thought and recast it into a new one.

The blatant inadequacy of the State as an ethical institution with a conscience forced Gladstone to re-evaluate the philosophical premises of his High Churchmanship and emerge with a Butlerite belief in individual conscience as 'the only real form of one' that can exist. The result was a shift in the locus of providential agency from within the institutions of state suffused with religious truth towards the mechanical laws of the natural world interacting with and through individual moral agents. This changed understanding of providence underpinned the rest of his political career: it was what informed his substitution of the providential power of political economy and private consciousness for the providential mission of the ethical state which no longer seemed viable or indeed justifiable. By throwing his weight behind the defence of religious liberty beneath a state whose religious character had been 'lowered' Gladstone was

1860s', 358.

144 Machin, 'Gladstone and Nonconformity in the 1860s', 358.

145 Diary entry, 14 October 1864 in Matthew, Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 6, 307, cited in Ibid, at 242-246, subtitled 'Public Image and Press'.

able to shed his High Toryism whilst gaining a renewed religious intensity and belief in the moral rectitude of his political action. It was this combination of unshakeable moral righteousness and its articulation through Peelite fiscal policy, support for the freedom of Italy, and religious liberty that enabled Gladstone to become the popular Parliamentarian and architect of the Victorian minimalist state. This popular, radical approach to the finances and the synergy of his own conviction with Liberal and radical opinion brought him towards a Liberalism that was *popular*, but not yet *populist*. Ultimately it was the frustrations of the 1850s which combined with the proliferation of a cheaper press and methods of popular political mobilisation in the 1860s that brought his retrenching finance, magnificent oratory and moralistic conviction to the masses. If Gladstone's changing thought and politics were necessary conditions for his potential emergence as 'the People's William', it was in the new atmosphere of the 1860s that this image was actually born.

Thus, the trajectory of Gladstone's career can be understood in terms of *both* continuity and discontinuity: what changed between 1838 and 1864 was not Gladstone's mission, to defend the Church, but the intellectual conceptualisation of how to fulfil that mission. He came to a position whereby the mission of the Anglican Church, the conversion of souls, could only be possible if a higher, providentialist politics was now pursued: it was only by descending into the people and competing with other confessions that the Church could cultivate individual consciences, and lead them to salvation. This was facilitated shift from a positive safeguard of the privileges of the established Church to a negative defence of its doctrinal integrity. Yet, in fulfilling this mission, Gladstone came to transcend the defence of the Anglican Church alone: from the mid-1840s he pursued what he believed to be the wider duty of removing all obstructions to the operation of providential laws in faith and society, providing both a forum and the social harmony within which providence could act upon society, and make it legibly divine by leading it through phases of progress.

Religious toleration and minimalist political economy were two facets of this providential politics which had as its aim to liberate private conscience and agency, so that they could interact with the laws of providence without artificial obstructions. Religious toleration and voluntarism removed obstructions to the interaction of private conscience with the scheme of providential salvation; minimalist political economy removed the interference of the state with the providential scheme of social reward and retribution through which civilisations progressed. Gladstone's politics were therefore both providentialist and 'progressive', but they were only the latter in the sense that they held fast to a profoundly

linear conception of change as a result of the operations envisaged by the former. Gladstone, despite what popular memory will make of him, was not a progressive liberal by any stretch of the 20th or 21st century imagination: he was an unorthodox evangelical who arrived at an unorthodox liberalism. He was a religious dogmatist whose belief in the purity of doctrine and powerful sense of destiny led him to embrace politics which aligned him with liberals who derived their Liberalism from more orthodox utilitarian, whig, and radical traditions.

That he made this paradox possible says much about the time in which he lived – he became a great Liberal statesman because his policies, whatever their motivation, in the later 19th century came to enjoy a populist appeal: religious freedom and financial minimalism were two facets of highly charged contemporary discourses of liberty, and for Gladstone they both formed a part of what he described as the 'liberation from restraint.' If Gladstone became the People's William, then the people themselves became, in his eyes, the vehicles of providence and his providentialist politics. That Gladstone became the embodiment of a cultish populism was not the inevitable conclusion of his political and intellectual journey, still less one that he would have anticipated until it actually happened. It was the result of a recasting of his moral convictions within a new framework of the operations of providence that allowed him to work with the grain of political, socio-economic and intellectual change rather than against it. As he once told Morley in old age,

'I was brought up to dislike and distrust liberty;
I learned to believe in it. That is the key to all my
changes.'¹⁴⁶

It was by this mastery of the politics of change that Gladstone came both to justify his own obsession with politics and to define the politics of the mid-Victorian age.

146 *Morley*, iii. 474-5 cited in Butler, *Gladstone*, 152.