

Those Victorian Hypocrites?

It's nearly a century since a book called 'Eminent Victorians' was published. It describes the lives of respected Victorian figures, like Florence Nightingale. The author, Lytton Strachey, tried to show that his famous Victorian subjects were self-righteous hypocrites. It is a view of the Victorians that survives today.

Yet when Victoria came to the throne in 1819: Parliament acted as the legal arm of the Church of England; so that dissenters, Catholics and Jews were discriminated against in education and the ownership of property; and any alternative to swearing by Almighty God in court was not allowed. Then, by the end of Victoria's reign, all these restrictions had been removed. Even the slow progress in womens' rights had at least got to protecting married womens' property rights.

So if Victoria's reign ended with a more liberal and enlightened society than when she was crowned, why are the Victorians still often seen as hypocrites? I think that the answer is that we love to draw attention to the faults of others as a distraction from our own. By condemning those Victorians, we try to disguise the fact that we are more like them than we dare to think. Let's make some comparisons.

Victorian society made much of the Christian family. Meanwhile, some of the husbands of those families fuelled the prostitution that flourished on their city streets. Today, our politicians also promote 'the Family' in their propaganda; yet their legislation frequently discriminates, financially and morally, against those who seek to practise traditional family values.

The Victorians invaded other countries for political or economic reasons, whilst claiming to be acting in the interests of superior moral values. Are we so different?

Then there was the the way that the Victorians manipulated language to cover up things that they didn't like. In Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream there is a character called Bottom. Whoops! That was considered such a rude word, that when Victorian school children consulted their Shakespeare, they might find him named 'Top'. Do I need to spell out examples of the way that today's political establishment manipulates language to propagate its own values? Even great authors, like Joseph Conrad and Mark Twain, have been subject to such censorship.

Before judging other generations and societies, maybe we should look more at our own: as in Matthew 7:1-3?

Father Michael Harry
www.orthodoxlouth.co.uk
www.orthodoxgrimsby.co.uk