CHAPTER 4

Episcopal Leadership of the Church in Victorian London: A Review of the Visitation Charges delivered to their Clergy by Bishops of London c. 1830–1900

W. M. Jacob

Introduction

A.P. Stanley, Dean of Westminster, one of the giants of the English Victorian religious scene, allegedly claimed: "Next to the bishopric of Rome, the Bishopric of London is the most important in Christendom."1 If this was an exaggeration, the Diocese of London was certainly the premier see in England. Bishop Tait, when offered, during a period of ill-health in 1862, the Archbishopric of York, declined it as a "light duty" compared with London.2 Successive bishops of London reminded their clergy that, as Bishop Blomfield had noted in 1830, the "metropolis should be a model of clerical behaviour and duty."

Religion was intensely important in people’s lives in Victorian London. Heaven and hell were realities, not metaphors. Life expectation was brief for many people of all classes, and the after-life, with the threat of everlasting torment, was long. Most people believed that the welfare of the soul was as important, perhaps more important, as the welfare of the body. Nearly everyone, even in what was regarded as “spiritually destitute” London, was deeply concerned about the right path to heaven. The churches, however, were controversially divided, not just among themselves, but internally, about what was the right way. The Church of England was divided about what accommodation should be made to developments in geology, biology, mathematics, statistics, history, and literary criticism, often by scholarly clergy, and by the understanding of the nature of God in relation to eternal punishment and the means of

3 C.J. Blomfield, A Charge delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of London by Charles James, Lord Bishop of London, at his Primary Visitation (s.l., 1830), p. 23.
salvation. This was happening in England at a time of dramatic economic and social change, producing almost universal literacy, a cheap press, investigative journalism, and maximum publicity for the Church’s critics and competitors. After the publication in 1854 of the results of the 1851 Census of Accommodation and Religious Attendance in Churches and Chapels everyone knew that the Church of England was numerically threatened as the national established Church, in terms of church attendance, by the combined forces of nonconformity. Bishops of London were inevitably in the forefront of these matters.

The Diocese of London and Its Bishops

London was the largest English diocese, in terms of population. Until 1837 it comprised the counties of Middlesex, Essex, and Hertfordshire, as well as the cities of London and Westminster. Essex and Hertfordshire were transferred to the Diocese of Rochester in 1845 and London acquired parishes on the southside of the Thames from the Dioceses of Rochester and Winchester. Mandell Creighton, bishop from 1897 until 1901, pointed out that “London raised questions which were unknown elsewhere.” Issues which troubled the Church nationally frequently emerged first in London, and were also often more acute there. Where the Bishop of London led, others might follow. London diocese was a training ground for bishops. John Jackson noted in his 1884 charge that the Dioceses of Chester, Sydney, Truro, and Ripon had recently received London clergy as their bishops.

London, as the imperial capital of the greatest empire yet known, the largest city in the world, with the most advanced economy and manufacturing industry then known, pioneered modern urbanisation, financial structures, shopping and leisure, suburban life, and numerous new opportunities for sin and ungodliness. Bishops of London had to devise appropriate responses, on behalf of the Church, to this world of dramatic change, aware of their great responsibility, under God, for the care of his people. They were aware that they were under divine judgement, in seeking to win London for Christ, against what

---

4 In 1863, by the London Diocese Act, the Kentish parishes were returned to Rochester.
5 Mandell Creighton, The Church and the Nation: A Charge delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of London at St Paul's Cathedral, February 21 1900, by Mandell Creighton, D.D. Bishop of London, (London, 1900), pp. 3 and 5. For Creighton, see Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton, by his Wife, 2 vols. (London, 1904) and Fallows, Mandell Creighton (see above, n. 1).