

Reading the texts or, rather, misreading them, one can easily conclude that the flesh is bad, that family doesn't matter and that it's the next life, not this one, that does. And many purportedly good Christians have done just this, sometimes to justify the most appalling behaviour towards others, including fellow Christians.

E.P.Thompson went to some lengths to point this out in his now classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*, though this is much in need of revision not least because of his own prejudices – indeed, reading him, reminds me often of Richard Dawkins at both his best and his worst. Edward Palmer Thompson was a literary critic as well as an historian and a son of Methodist missionaries and there the problem begins for, in his reaction to his parents' faith, he became an atheist and something of a Marxist, but, as with Richard Dawkins and so many 'heresies', there's truth to be found in some of what is said. The devil, one might say, is in the detail, with today's readings in mind. To cut to the chase, Thompson takes some delight in pointing out that many of the owners of the mills and factories which exploited human labour in the early nineteenth century and, of course, later – and one might add, today – were staunch upholders of Christian values and virtues but used them to keep their workforce compliant and willing to be subject to machines. Here we have it in the words of Dr. Andrew Ure's *Philosophy of Manufacturers* (1835)

*The main difficulty of the factory system was not so much technological but..., above all, in training human beings to renounce their desultory habits of work, and to identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton.*

This should send shivers down your spine with the advent of robots today and of such firms as Amazon. And the solution, in order to keep the poor, poor – and yet willing to work:

*can only be by inculcating the first and great lesson...that man must accept his chief happiness, not in the present, but in the future state. Work must be undertaken as a pure act of virtue....inspired by the love of a transcendent being, operating...on our will and affections.*

He then goes on to extol the virtue of obedience which leads Christ to the Cross and will lead the women, children and young men (the older men are too expensive) to the factory gates.

Now, the point of this diatribe is to highlight the ease with which we can adapt God's will to our own and that this is to sin against the spirit of God which is within every single human being. The gospel is not about lessening the value of the body, or of the family, or of this life, but of enhancing them by giving them their true value, already made in heaven, and capable, in Christ, of bearing God's love. We are part, then, not of a smaller, but of a much greater family than we realise; and this life matters, and this body, more not less, because of it. It was this that lead Jesus to the Cross. He goes to the Cross because he eats with the 'poor'.

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