

*William Ewart Gladstone,
(1809-1898)
Statesman and Believer*

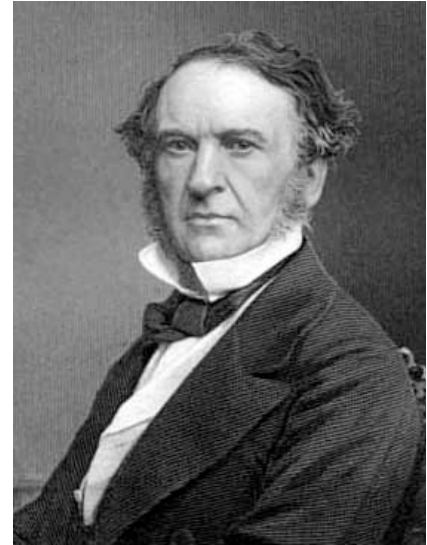
William Ewart Gladstone was born in Liverpool, England, attended Eton and Christ Church, Oxford. He entered politics while still at Oxford. He was appointed prime minister four times: 1868-74, 1880-85, February to July 1886 and 1892-1894. He served in other government posts as well.

Political Life

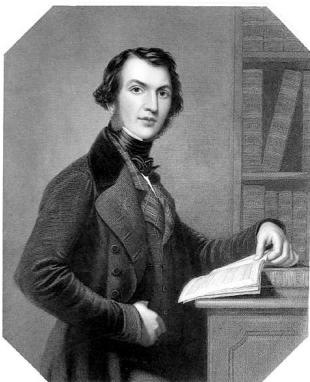
“He will be remembered not so much for the causes in which he was engaged or the political projects which he favored, but as a great example of a great Christian man.”
(Lord Salisbury’s Eulogy of Gladstone)

Limitations of space make it necessary to concentrate on some Church-related bills proposed, carried or supported by Gladstone. Abolition of Church Rates (1868) This bill abolished the property tax used to support parish churches and was paid whether or not the owners attended those churches. Parishes were now self-supporting. Passage made Gladstone popular among the Non-Conformists who hoped in vain that he would back the disestablishment of the Church of England.

Disestablishment of the Irish Church (1869) As prime minister Gladstone fought for the disestablishment of the Irish Church because it served only a small minority of the predominately Roman Catholic population. It remained in communion with the Church of England.



“I am convinced that the welfare of mankind does not now depend on the State or the world of politics: the real battle is being fought in the world of thought, where a deadly attack is being made . . . against the greatest treasures of mankind, the belief in God and in the Gospel of Christ.”
W. E. Gladstone, 1844



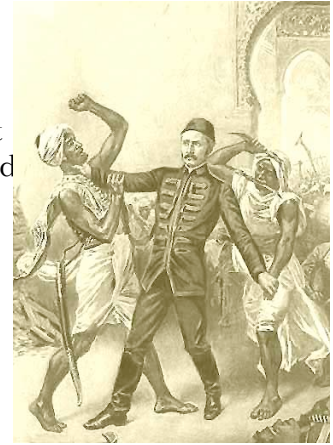
Abolition of Religious Tests (1871) Gladstone carried a bill to abolish all religious tests at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. This ended the monopoly of the Church of England in higher education. David Bebbington wrote: “it was the saving of the universities.”

Public Worship Act (1874) Gladstone spoke in favor of “Liberty as variety” in public worship and although he was a moderate High Churchman and not a ritualist this gave him an opportunity to pay “a warm tribute” to the Oxford movement.

Left: Young Gladstone (1830)

Khartoum

A political crisis that Gladstone suffered and survived was the murder of General Charles Gordon at Khartoum, Sudan in 1883. Egypt was an uprising of Sudanese rebels under the Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad prompted Britain to order the Egyptians to evacuate the Sudan of thousand of soldiers, civilian employees and their families. General George Gordon, a popular folk hero, was sent to oversee the evacuation. Most were removed, but Gordon stubbornly refused the order to leave and remained with a small force. Gordon became an Evangelical Christian in 1854, and he was determined to capture and convert the Mahdi.



Gladstone who said two years earlier, “While we are opposed to imperialism, we are devoted to empire,” believed that Britain was already too deeply involved in Egypt, having occupied the land in 1882. While Gladstone was slow to act in sending the relief force that arrived two days after the massacre, it is possible that the Mahdi’s intelligence capability would have warned him of the coming force and he would have attacked anyway, only earlier. Gladstone was labeled a villain and Gordon, who had disobeyed orders, was hailed as a hero.

Popular image of General Gordon at Khartoum. Charlton Heston played General Gordon in the movie “Khartoum.” Britain was in Egypt until 1952.



Gladstone and Queen Victoria

For his entire political life Gladstone served only one monarch, the long-lived Queen Victoria. They did not get on well. The “Widow of Windsor” demanded that everyone suffer with her the loss of her beloved husband Prince Albert. Gladstone, the no-nonsense politician, was incapable of sharing her grief and could not give her the sympathy she required. She was angry that he tried in every possible way to make her visible to her people. Her self-imposed, self-obsessed seclusion encouraged anti-monarchical sentiments and between 1840 and 1882 there were eight attempts on the Queen’s life.



Above: “The Widow of Windsor.” *Below:* A cartoon of Disraeli offering the Queen the crown of India.

One incident that especially turned her against Gladstone occurred at her summer residence, Balmoral, Scotland. When at Balmoral the Queen attended nearby Presbyterian Crathie Kirk. Gladstone went instead to the Anglican parish some distance away and, unfortunately, in one of the Queen’s carriages. Benjamin Disraeli, 1st Earl of Beaconsfield, Victoria’s most adept flatterer, and Gladstone’s Conservative opponent, referred to him as “God’s only mistake.”

In 1885 the Queen offered Gladstone an earldom, which he refused.

The Eucharist in Gladstone's Life

"The chief support of the Church comes from the communion service," Gladstone insisted. Regular prayer at his home included family and servants and he prepared his own sermons. The first sermon he preached in 1834 (?) was on the Lord's Supper. In a sermon entitled "the Vision of God" he speaks of how the believer sees God in Holy Communion. A regular communicant himself he believed that: "He that neglects the Eucharist neglects the Savior, and he that rejects the Eucharist rejects the Savior." He even composed a series of devotions for communicants.



Left: Rev. Dr. Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger (1799-1890)

Below: Charles Haddon Spurgeon in the pulpit of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London. (CHI Archives.)



Gladstone and Religion

"If I have in my soul any consolation to keep it is this, that the thought of God's presence and judgment is very dear to me."

Gladstone was a moderate High Churchman, but not a ritualist, although he supported their rights. He wanted "to Catholicize the members of the Church of England, but without 'unprotestantizing them.'"

Roman Catholicism. Gladstone was a vigorous opponent of the international character of the papacy. He thought that all nations should preserve their religion without the oversight of any outside authority. The conversion of his daughter Helen to Roman Catholicism was a great tragedy in Gladstone's life

Other Churches. His deep religious beliefs went hand in hand with toleration of other religions. He understood the positions of the Scotch Presbyterians and the Methodists. He even attended (1872) an evening service at London's Metropolitan Tabernacle to hear the famous Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

Church Unity and the Orthodox. Gladstone believed that the Church of England could be a rallying point for church unity and that Eastern Orthodoxy was the "most natural partner" for the cause. He made contacts with Orthodox clergy and laity and read widely about the faith.

A major block to church unity for the Orthodox was the West's addition of the phrase "and from the Son" to the credal statement: "And in the Holy Ghost who proceeds from the Father." The *Filioque* controversy had raged for centuries. Church unity depended upon a resolution of the controversy, so Gladstone was delighted when his friend Dr. Johann Joseph Döllinger, the German priest and theologian, produced two possible compromise solutions to the problem. The Roman Catholic Church excommunicated Döllinger in 1871 because of his continuing refusal to accept the dogma of papal infallibility promulgated by Pope Pius IX in 1854. Gladstone was pleased when Döllinger presided over East-West reunion conferences at Bonn in 1874 and 1875. Unfortunately the talks could not continue because of the unrest in the Balkans.

Social Service, Charitable Works and Home Life

Gladstone believed in “the equality of the sexes under Christian law” and although opposed to divorce on religious grounds, he nevertheless believed that if the bill of 1857 to ease the divorce laws passed, women should be given an equal right to file. He deplored the victimization of women and in 1848 he formed “The Church Penitential Association” as a rescue operation for prostitutes. Much has been made of his nightly note-taking walks. It was a dangerous mission effort for which Gladstone needed all the support his religion could provide. While it is true that he frequently flew too close to the flame, especially during his thirty-three year friendship with the former courtesan and lay preacher Mrs. Laura Thistlethwayte¹, he was well aware of the rumors and left a signed (1896) *Declaration* for his son to open after his death in which he wrote that at no time had he been unfaithful to his wife. This statement appears never to have been seriously challenged, although subjected to doubt by some in today’s permissive society.

Gladstone’s wife of fifty-nine years, Catherine, supported her husband’s social work and, while raising their eight children and being a foster mother to her late sister’s twelve children, she found time to open orphanages at Clapton in London and at Hawarden. She also opened “Mrs. Gladstone’s Free Convalescent home for the Poor” at Woodford in Essex. Catherine was proud of her husband and loved to sit in the gallery at the House of Commons to hear him speak. She provided much-needed light-heartedness at their home, which has been described as a happy one.



Hawarden Castle, North Wales, the home of the Gladstones. Painting from 1881.

¹ West, Jenny, *Gladstone and Laura Thistlethwayte, 1865–75, Historical Research*, Volume 80, Issue 209, pages 368–392, August 2007

Recommended Reading: Bebbington, David W., *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain*, 1993



Catherine Glynne Gladstone, (1812-1900), daughter of Sir Stephen Glynne, 8th Baronet of Hawarden Castle, North Wales.

A Sampling of Gladstone’s Writings

The State in its Relations with the Church (1839)

Church Principles Considered in Their Results (1840)

Gleanings of Past Years (Seven Volumes from 1843–1879)

Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age (1869)

Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East (1876)

Homeric Synchronism (1876)

Homer (1878)

Plant Life: popular papers on the phenomena of botany (1881)

Handbook on Home Rule (1887)

Landmarks of Homeric Study (1890)

The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture (1890)

On Books and the Housing of Them (1898)