

THE BAPTIST CONSCIENCE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Baptists of nineteenth-century England and Wales formed part of a broader movement that embraced several other religious denominations. They were Evangelical Dissenters. Like the Methodists, Congregationalists and Unitarians and many lesser bodies, unorthodox as well as orthodox, the Baptists dissented from the Church of England. Like the Methodists, Congregationalists, and several smaller groupings, they were Evangelicals dedicated to the spread of the gospel. These two fundamental features of their existence shaped their attitudes to society and politics. On the one hand they were conscious of exclusion from the privileges enjoyed by members of the established church. On the other they felt bound to evangelise at home and abroad. Others subject to the same pressures adopted a similar outlook on the world. Baptists were most like Congregationalists, for, although Methodists shared the social circumstances of Baptists, the majority of them were discouraged by their leaders for most of the century from taking part in public affairs. Since Congregationalists shared with the Baptists a locally directed form of church government, the two bodies coincided closely in their socio-political views. Congregationalists were often more prominent in public life than Baptists because on average their social standing was higher. Yet churches of similar social standing in the two denominations generated worldviews that were virtually indistinguishable. Baptists were the more prepared to express their convictions because they knew they did not stand alone.

The attitudes of Baptists to public questions can be divided into three broad periods corresponding to different phases in the electoral system. Up to the first Reform Act of 1832, they tended to quietism, generally playing only a minor role in affairs outside the meeting house. Between 1832 and the second Reform Act of 1867, there was a period of mobilisation in which the politics of Nonconformity sprang to life. After the second Reform Act, in the final third of the century, Baptists held an assured place in the life of the nation, chiefly through the agency of W. E. Gladstone's Liberal Party.

During much of the first third of the century, Baptists were as marginal in national life as they had been in the eighteenth century. Their numbers were small. In 1800, when the population of England and Wales was about nine million, there were only some 24,000 Baptist church members.¹ The Test and Corporation Acts of the later seventeenth century were still on the statute book, in theory prohibiting Dissenters from sitting on municipal councils. Although annual indemnity acts gave a measure of protection and although in practice Dissenters were often chosen as councillors, they sometimes faced legal challenge. In 1820, for instance, a writ was issued under the acts against a Baptist mayor of Nottingham.² So Dissenters were branded as inferior. Within the Dissenting community, furthermore, Baptists were rarely to the fore. Nottingham was exceptional in having some 10% of its corporation drawn from the denomination at the beginning of the nineteenth century.³ Only one Baptist, Benjamin Shaw, seems to have sat in the Commons between 1800 and 1832.⁴ Unitarians generally possessed the wealth, education and social standing to secure them the leadership of the Dissenting interest. It was the Unitarians who headed the pressure for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1827-28. Nevertheless, the Baptist ministers, F. A. Cox and William Newman, and the layman, Henry Waymouth, deputy chairman of the Dissenting Deputies pressure group, were prominent in the campaign, and Baptists as a whole joined in the exhilaration of victory in 1828.⁵ A century and a half of civic discrimination was over.

A second explanation of the detachment of Baptists from public affairs in the early years of the nineteenth century lies in the changed tone of the denomination.

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In the later eighteenth century the knot of rational Dissenters, of whom Robert Robinson had been the chief example in the Baptist ranks, had urged enlightened reform. The most eminent Baptist spokesmen of the next generation, while usually whiggishly inclined, were far less active politically.⁶ William Steadman of Bradford observed in 1807 that in previous years politics had harmed ministers and people 'by employing too much of their time and thoughts'.⁷ Public issues were now seen as a diversion from the grand priority of preaching the gospel. The Evangelical Revival had swept over the denomination, energising Baptists for mission at home and abroad. There was no time to spare for the trifling affairs of this world. During the epoch of the French wars up to 1815, furthermore, criticism of government seemed out of place. Patriotism was the central theme of published sermons by the Baptists, Joseph Hughes, Robert Hall and John Rippon, in 1803.⁸ Conspicuous loyalty was the more important when government suspected Dissent of Francophile sedition. The same motive operated in the popular unrest that followed Waterloo. 'It is not the province of Christians to debate and discuss politics', wrote Christmas Evans and eight other Anglesey Baptist ministers to a magistrate in 1817, 'but to behave humbly to our superiors.'⁹ The risk that the authorities would try to limit the preaching of the gospel became a reality in 1811. Lord Sidmouth as Home Secretary introduced a parliamentary bill to restrict itinerant evangelism. Only mass petitioning and the timely intervention of William Wilberforce averted the danger.¹⁰ An obstacle to the gospel again provoked a flurry of rank-and-file Baptist activity two years later when the East India Company's Charter was revised. A clause was inserted permitting the propagation of Christianity in India, a cause dear to supporters of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS).¹¹ The spread of the gospel was becoming the touchstone of Baptist socio-political attitudes. Even in the early years of the century it occasionally dictated the mobilisation of the denomination. Normally in this period, however, it encouraged political passivity.

Yet the mission of the church was not narrowly conceived. Evangelism was one dimension of what was called 'benevolent effort'.¹² Christians were also expected to care for those in any kind of need. In the early nineteenth century, traditional poor funds collected at communion services blossomed into contributory schemes of insurance against sickness (Great Yarmouth, 1811) and provident societies for ministers, their widows and orphans (Northamptonshire, 1813).¹³ Baptists were also to be found chairing meetings summoned to relieve working men during trade depressions or raising funds to assist the starving peasants of Ireland.¹⁴ Popular education was another field in which Baptists took the initiative to help those outside their doors. Sunday schools, agencies often created by Evangelical zeal, were primarily designed in the early nineteenth century to combat illiteracy and so encourage Bible reading. They were not confined to children. Baptists at Castle Donington, Leicestershire, provided classes for apprentices, servants and married people.¹⁵ The Baptist contribution to Sunday schools could sometimes be disproportionately large in relation to their numbers.¹⁶ In a widely read essay of 1820 John Foster, a distinguished Baptist *littérateur*, pointed to 'the evils of popular ignorance'. It was a significant text in the crystallisation of national opinion in favour of mass elementary education.¹⁷ Baptists were frequently supporters of the day schools sponsored by the British and Foreign School Society founded in 1814. Their attention to poverty and illiteracy went hand-in-hand with their dedication to the gospel.

Parliamentary reform in 1832 opened a new era. Baptists had favoured the change¹⁸ and many were enfranchised by it. Immediately they flexed their Evangelical muscles in the cause of anti-slavery. There had been Baptist hostility to the slave trade in the 1780s,¹⁹ but since its abolition in 1807 the potential threat to

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the work of missionaries who questioned the system, together with the denomination's ingrained aversion to political action, had ensured public silence on the institution of slavery. By 1830 a few, including Benjamin Godwin of Bradford, had come to identify slavery as intrinsically wrong and so were committed to immediate abolition. 'Gradual abolition', wrote Godwin, 'will never put an end to the crying sin of Britain and the planters.'²⁰ The continuation of outright wickedness was intolerable to the Evangelical conscience: sin, after all, was what the gospel was designed to put away. Only during 1832 did Baptists in general begin to adopt this estimate of slavery. Up to 1831 the missionaries to Jamaica, following the instructions of the BMS committee, avoided any attack on slavery, but in that year a slave insurrection persuaded the slave-owners that the missionaries had to be hounded from the island as fomentors of rebellion. William Knibb returned to Britain in 1832, overwhelmed the committee with his conviction that slavery must be opposed and stumped the country rousing enormous enthusiasm for emancipation among the new voters.²¹ In the following year, the first reformed parliament duly passed legislation to end slavery in British dominions. Anti-slavery became an enduring component of Baptist attitudes. During the American Civil War, for example, even their leaders in Lancashire, where the disruption of cotton supplies from the southern states caused immense hardship, were advocates of the northern cause.²² The recognition of slavery as a sin to be fought in public life created a precedent that later campaigns were to follow.

At the 1832 general election the Yorkshire Baptists, in announcing their chief concerns, coupled with the abolition of slavery the redress of religious grievances.²³ Members of the denomination suffered from particular disabilities. They could not register their children after birth because the only legal method was the recording of infant baptism; and, although the Anglican burial service was compulsory in parish graveyards, the clergy were able to refuse it to those dying without baptism. Baptists shared the other grievances of Dissenters in general. Marriages had to take place in parish churches; the renewal of trust deeds was expensive; in many places there were vexatious ecclesiastical payments such as Easter dues; and, above all, rates for the upkeep of parish churches could be levied annually on all inhabitants.²⁴ Quakers had taken the lead in resisting church rates, but from the 1830s Baptists were active in local efforts, often successful, to reject their imposition.²⁵ By 1861, with national abolition still unachieved despite mass petitions and several bills, the Northamptonshire Association deemed it 'an urgent necessity for Nonconformists to offer a passive resistance to the impost, by individual refusals to pay the rate'.²⁶ Only in 1868 were compulsory church rates abolished.²⁷ Already the registration and essential marriage grievances had been remedied (1836 and 1837). University tests were to be ended for undergraduates in 1871 and Nonconformist burials permitted in parish graveyards from 1880. Only relatively minor disabilities survived. During the half-century from 1830 onwards, however, such issues had a powerful effect in mobilising political Dissent. Agitation against the grievances was not primarily a matter of money. 'It is really', explained the *Baptist Magazine*, 'a question of caste and domination.'²⁸ Like other Dissenters, Baptists felt themselves to be the victims of discrimination. 'The talent, the wealth, the knowledge which reside among them', declared J. P. Mursell of Leicester, 'can no longer be safely despised . . .'²⁹ Status was at issue.

As the political temperature of the denomination rose in the early 1830s, attention turned to the principle underlying the disabilities: the union of church and state. Baptists had long harboured the opinion that an established church was undesirable. Robert Hall, for instance, compiled a formidable indictment, but only on the grounds of the inutility of an establishment to true religion.³⁰ There was no sense of obligation to call for disestablishment. That changed in the wake of reform.

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In November 1832, the Baptist Board of London ministers resolved that it was unjust for the conscientious Dissenter to be forced to support an established religion.³¹ Provincial feeling among Baptists and Congregationalists ran even higher, culminating in a conference in 1844 that launched the British Anti-State Church Association, known from 1853 as the Liberation Society. The Baptist Union determined to send delegates to the conference by 50 votes to 22.³² Certain Baptists of mid-century, such as Hugh Stowell Brown, remained unpersuaded by the appeal to principle of the disestablishment movement,³³ but most were swept along by its tide. Voluntaryism, the conviction that religion should be independent of the state, was extended to education from 1843 onwards.³⁴ Leading ministers, such as J. H. Hinton, urged the transfer of support from the British and Foreign School Society, which accepted state aid, to the Voluntary School Association, which repudiated it.³⁵ Even when in the late 1860s it became plain that voluntary effort would never provide adequate elementary education, many Baptists remained wary of state involvement. Some went into revolt against the Liberal Party over a clause in the Education Act of 1870 that permitted the use of public money for Anglican teaching to the children of the poor.³⁶ Why did separation of church and state become so passionate an issue? It was because, as a Baptist Union resolution put it in 1838, church establishments seemed 'a violation of the law of Christ and the rights of conscience'.³⁷ Most mid-century Baptist leaders became convinced that, as in the case of slavery, the union of church and state was wrong in itself. The Evangelical imperative to eliminate sin came into play.

Baptists extended their radicalism to other issues. They were divided over the New Poor Law of 1834, some thinking it benevolent and others condemning it as unmerciful, especially in its separation of man and wife in the workhouse.³⁸ The Chartist movement that sprang from resistance to the New Poor Law also elicited an ambiguous response. In 1837 the Welsh denominational newspaper, *Seren Gomer*, went so far as to acclaim the six points of the Charter, but drew back when two years later the working-class Chartists marched on Newport.³⁹ Yorkshire Dissenters' sympathy for Chartists stopped short of the use of force or universal suffrage, and in Nottinghamshire, though a Hucknall deacon was a Chartist, a Basford man was excluded for identifying with a Chartist Church.⁴⁰ There was greater Baptist support for the Complete Suffrage Union of the Quaker, Joseph Sturge, which made a brief attempt in 1841-2 to achieve parliamentary reform through middle-class co-operation with moderate Chartists.⁴¹ The editor of *Seren Gomer* spoke of 'Sturgising the denomination'.⁴² More effective was the Anti-Corn Law League, whose programme was endorsed in 1843 by the Baptist Union.⁴³ The aim of removing state interference in commerce meshed readily with growing Baptist ambitions of removing state interference in religion. When a Baptist minister, Hugh Hunter, condemned 'the iniquitous restrictions on trade', he meant precisely that the corn laws were as sinful as slavery or an established church.⁴⁴ Political Dissenters were reaching the conclusion that the state must have only a minimal role in society. Government, according to an extract in the *Baptist Magazine* for 1847, is 'SWORD-BEARER, and all that such an office properly implies - nothing more, and nothing less'.⁴⁵ Hence it is not surprising that Sir Morton Peto, the only Baptist in the parliament of 1859, was an advocate of drastic reductions in taxation, or that the *General Baptist Repository* for 1855 believed the civil service to be 'clogged by incompetency and bungling, and rusting in senile decay'.⁴⁶ Baptists were emerging as radical, if temperate, reformers.

Suspicion of the state could sometimes hold in check more basic Evangelical impulses. Although voices were occasionally heard arguing that the sabbath was part of the Old Testament ceremonial law that had been swept away for the Christian,⁴⁷

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in general Baptists were sabbatarians. They preferred to trade with shops that closed on Sunday and regretted the Post Office decision in 1849 to handle mail on that day.⁴⁸ Yet leading spokesmen for the denomination often argued against legal enforcement of sabbath observance on the ground that 'there is no point at which the civil power is authorized to interpose for the punishment of men on account of their irreligion'.⁴⁹ In other fields, however, the desire to reduce state power reinforced Evangelical attitudes. Baptists repeatedly called for an end to government aid for the Hindu religious practices they classified as idolatry.⁵⁰ Likewise the denomination's anti-Catholicism was unleashed in 1845 against government proposals to make a permanent and enlarged endowment for the training of priests at Maynooth College in Ireland.⁵¹ Fear of popery was a prominent Baptist trait. It surfaced powerfully during the 1850s in the wake of the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy,⁵² but continued to shape public attitudes thereafter. It could be directed against advanced High Churchmen as well as the Church of Rome. So powerful was his hostility to ritualism that in 1874 J. J. Colman, the Baptist mustard manufacturer of Norwich, was prepared to support a Conservative bill designed to halt its progress.⁵³ In instances such as this, the reluctance to invoke state power was overridden by an eagerness to put down the foes of the gospel. In the last resort the Evangelical imperative was stronger than Voluntaryist logic.

Reluctance to enlarge the province of the state nevertheless had a further effect. Unlike paternalist Evangelical Anglicans, Baptists were not in the van of efforts to legislate against the ills of industrial society. Nevertheless Baptists did give evidence in favour of restricting factory work for women and children. Study of their own textile mills suggests that they provided rather better than average conditions.⁵⁴ Yet self-help was the normal prescription for the problems of society. The *Freeman*, founded as a Baptist weekly in 1855, was announced as 'the strenuous advocate of progressional measures, though it will look for social remedies, not so much to any external interference, as to the gradual development of the intellectual, the moral and the industrial capabilities of the people'.⁵⁵ This faith in human potential underlay the temperance movement. For that reason there were some Baptist reservations about the original anti-spirits campaign in the 1830s. Although the Baptist Board endorsed the British and Foreign Temperance Society in 1833, there were worries that self-reformation was replacing reliance on divine grace.⁵⁶ Consequently in Wales Baptists were less ardent than other denominations in the early years of the movement.⁵⁷ By 1859 only one-seventh of Baptist ministers were total abstainers.⁵⁸ Yet several of them were early apostles of the movement: Francis Beardsall, a General Baptist, launched the agitation in favour of unfermented wine at communion; and in 1847 Jabez Tunnicliff, another General Baptist, founded the Band of Hope to promote temperance among children.⁵⁹ The General Baptists seem to have been drawn earlier towards the movement than their Particular Baptist brethren, no doubt because they had fewer theological inhibitions. Temperance supporters often contended that strong drink was the greatest obstacle to the gospel. In 1853 the zealots took a further step. In that year the United Kingdom Alliance was founded to demand prohibition. Baptists formed 15% of an Alliance ministerial conference in 1857.⁶⁰ Once more a number in the denomination were willing to put the elimination of a national sin before their wariness of the state.

In foreign affairs a similar inclination to minimise the role of government was tempered by Evangelical enthusiasms. Baptists were attracted by the conviction of Richard Cobden and John Bright that inter-state diplomacy led to conflicts of interest whereas commercial contacts promoted international harmony. Thus, J. J. Colman wanted statesmen to show 'less disposition to interfere in foreign affairs' and the *Baptist Magazine* declared its aversion to the sabre-rattling policy of Lord

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Palmerston.⁶¹ Yet there was no lack of patriotism in the denomination, Baptists felt a thrill at the success of British arms, and the extension of the empire was valued on account of missionary opportunities. The resulting ambiguities are evident in the comment of the *General Baptist Repository* on the annexation of Oudh in 1856. Although Lord Dalhousie had disobeyed his orders not to add to 'our overgrown Indian territories', the 'wretched, careless, debauched king' did not deserve his throne. 'The Providence of God puts these nations under British rule for their emancipation, enlightenment, and salvation. May England prove herself worthy by her acts of high responsibility!'⁶² The burden of government abroad was justified as a divine trust. Such attitudes were reinforced by the Indian Mutiny of the following year. Baptists delighted in the victories of Henry Havelock, a Christian hero and one of their own number.⁶³ On certain overseas issues, however, the preference for non-interference coincided with an Evangelical passion for righteousness. Baptists knew that the opium trade from India to China, for instance, brought the British and their missions into disrepute. Consequently the China war of 1857, fought in defence of the trade, was condemned outright.⁶⁴ Baptists favoured a foreign policy dictated by the interests of the gospel.

The underlying question of whether Christians should be involved in politics was much canvassed in the middle years of the century. James Lister of Liverpool was one who thought political activity harmed spirituality,⁶⁵ but Francis Clowes, secretary of the West Riding Association, urged others to follow its example of appointing a committee on civil issues. 'Let it not be objected that we shall make our churches too political', he wrote in 1843. 'Political duties is only a Greek phrase for citizen duties . . . and what member of a baptist church will contend that we ought not to attend earnestly to our citizen duties?'⁶⁶ When, at the 1847 general election, the militants of the West Riding Association called on Dissenters to abstain unless there was a Voluntarist candidate, it was a ploy to show Whig leaders that Dissent was not to be counted on automatically.⁶⁷ Colman was typical of his generation when he declared to a Liberation Society meeting in 1864 that 'Political and Religious questions blend and *ought* to do so.'⁶⁸ Public life was a sphere to be moralised, for example by the elimination of bribery.⁶⁹ A powerful inducement to take part in political affairs was the widespread postmillennial eschatology of the times. If the present age was to merge imperceptibly into a millennium of peace and justice, then there were good grounds for expecting the triumph of causes like anti-slavery and temperance.⁷⁰ When premillennialism began to touch the fringe of the denomination, the legitimacy of politics was called into question. Christians, it was argued, must wait for the imminent advent of Christ, who would himself put the world to rights.⁷¹ The prevailing opinion in the denomination by the second Reform Act of 1867, however, was that Christians could be politicians. 'If politics are proper for sovereigns, statesmen, and senators', declared an article in the *Baptist Magazine* in the following year, 'it necessarily follows that they are not improper for the *mass of the people*.'⁷² The ministry was no disqualification. Of those who became Baptist ministers in the mid-century decades, nearly one-quarter are known to have played a significant part in political life.⁷³ The denomination was effectively mobilised for the era when all urban householders could cast a vote.

The Dissenting body, observed the *Baptist Magazine in 1868*, had 'for the first time obtained its due political weight in the country.'⁷⁴ The weight was placed on the Liberal pan of the scales. The more militant Baptists had long been prepared to call themselves Liberals. Mursell had helped found the Leicester Liberal Union as early as 1831.⁷⁵ Central denominational opinion, as reflected in the *Baptist Magazine*, had been more cautious, but by 1857 was siding with 'the friends of progress'.⁷⁶ From 1868 partisanship reached new heights. A Monmouthshire Association

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resolution of 1869 deplored the 'unworthy behaviour' of Baptists who had voted against the Liberals in the previous year. 'Anyone who did this', went on the resolution, 'is either a betrayer or is totally ignorant of baptist principles, or is totally unfaithful to his Christian profession - for he has spat in the face of nonconformity.'⁷⁷ C. H. Spurgeon was only slightly less explicit at the 1880 general election. 'Vote for those whose principles denounce endless war', he wrote in his church magazine, 'and whose watchword is justice at home and abroad. For temperance, thrift, religious equality and social progress let the Christian vote be one and indivisible.'⁷⁸ From the late 1870s associations habitually passed annual motions in favour of the Liberal cause. The Monmouthshire Association was again specific in its advice to new voters in 1883. Remember, it urged, 'your accountability to the Lord by voting for Liberal candidates.'⁷⁹ The nexus between denomination and party was strained by the proposal of Home Rule for Ireland in 1886. Spurgeon denounced the measure, and (to take a typical instance) a resolution was put before the Shropshire Association condemning Home Rule as imperilling the Protestants of Ireland, but was withdrawn without a vote for lack of support.⁸⁰ Devotion to Gladstone was the supreme determinant of Baptist loyalties in the crisis.⁸¹ The great bulk of the denomination remained dedicated Liberals to the end of the century and beyond.

The Liberation Society, the religious equality pressure group, had reached its peak in about 1868. That year's election revolved around Irish disestablishment, which was carried in 1869. The Baptists of Wales became increasingly attached to the cause of disestablishment for the principality as a national question, and the measure was eventually to be passed in 1914.⁸² In England, however, the issue waned. By the 1880s the remaining grievances of Nonconformists were insufficient to rouse acute resentment. Colman, while retaining his Dissenting convictions, had withdrawn from the Liberation Society activities after 1875 because the organisation sometimes rocked the boat of the Liberal Party.⁸³ Baptists were becoming more Liberal than Liberationist. Furthermore, the society had turned from an Evangelical crusade into a pressure group in which freethinkers were prominent. Spurgeon resigned from the organisation on this ground in 1891.⁸⁴ No longer did it rouse popular enthusiasm. In 1882 it was left to the eccentric Baptist barrister and antiquarian, William Willis, to move a Commons resolution for excluding bishops from the House of Lords.⁸⁵ Only the educational dimension of Nonconformist disabilities continued to be widely felt. In many rural areas there was no choice but to send the child of Baptist parents to a church school. In towns there was the risk that if the Anglicans and Roman Catholics dominated the school board there would be undue favour to denominational schools. Baptists threw themselves with gusto into the three-yearly school board elections between 1870 and 1902. Each local contest was a dress rehearsal for the sustained campaign against the Education Act of 1902 that infringed Nonconformist principles by putting - as John Clifford rousingly phrased it - 'Rome on the rates'.⁸⁶ Alarm at the 'sacerdotal' teaching in the schools could still touch the Baptist conscience. It seemed, after all, an affront to the gospel. Baptist commitment to religious equality, however, had been eclipsed by other concerns.

Temperance was to the fore. The progress of government licensing legislation, watched carefully during 1872, helped root temperance activity more firmly in Baptist life. '17,000 persons perished in 1872 by violent or sudden deaths', noted J. P. Chown of Bradford in his 1873 annual review. 'Strong drink was the cause of many.'⁸⁷ Temperance, according to the *Baptist Magazine* a year later, was 'by far the most important of social questions, intimately bound up with the interests and progress of Christianity . . .'⁸⁸ In 1874 the Baptist Total Abstinence Society was founded, soon gaining branches in many larger chapels. Although five years later the

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central body had only 1,000 members and an income of £28, it gathered momentum in later years under the presidency of the Baptist M.P., W. S. Caine.⁸⁹ Baptists often backed demands for legislation to restrict the sale of alcohol, but were also to be found establishing counter-attractions to drink outlets such as coffee houses.⁹⁰ A second area of widespread concern was sexual morality. There had been efforts to rescue prostitutes earlier in the century,⁹¹ but legislation once more did a great deal to focus attention on the subject. In the 1860s Contagious Diseases Acts were passed to regulate prostitutes in or near garrison towns. The conscience of a few was outraged that the state should formally tolerate sexual immorality. Among the Baptists, C. M. Birrell of Liverpool, cousin of the leading anti-Contagious Diseases Acts agitator, Josephine Butler, first prodded the Baptist Union into condemning the legislation in 1871. There was some sympathy for the acts in the denomination, but very little.⁹² After the repeal of the acts in 1885, the cause of social purity was firmly on the Baptist agenda. That was why, for instance, Colman could report to Gladstone in 1890 that the adultery of C. S. Parnell made him an unacceptable leader for the Irish M.P.s in alliance with the Liberals.⁹³ A third area, gambling, had long aroused Baptist disapproval,⁹⁴ but became the target of a sustained crusade only in the last decade of the century. Monmouthshire churches were requested in 1893, for instance, to read out from the pulpit a condemnation of gaming clubs.⁹⁵ Temperance, social purity and anti-gambling became dimensions of the Baptist social witness that endured long into the twentieth century.

Issues thrown up by industrialisation, on the other hand, did not preoccupy most Baptists for long. Overcrowded housing was briefly a widespread worry when, in 1883, it was revealed that incest was the consequence. Discovery of an outright wrong mobilised opinion against the conditions that induced it.⁹⁶ In general, however, housing questions were taken up only by individual specialists such as John Willis, a deacon of St Mary's Baptist Church in Norwich, who was an early advocate of council houses.⁹⁷ Likewise industrial relations were normally left to the employers themselves. In an age when large factories were still run by families, a form of urban-industrial paternalism was far more widespread than used to be recognised.⁹⁸ Typical of the breed of firm but kindly industrialists among Baptists were Sir John Barran, a Leeds manufacturer of ready-made clothing, and Sir George White, a Norwich shoe manufacturer.⁹⁹ Another Baptist layman, Alfred Illingworth, a Bradford worsted spinner, seemed less attentive to the welfare of his employees. He was criticised in 1894 for provoking his mill-girls into a strike by requiring extra work for the same pay. Illingworth believed, according to the militant *Labour Leader*, in 'the sacrificial worship of Supply and Demand'.¹⁰⁰ White was censured in the same newspaper three years later for leading resistance to a minimum wage in the shoe trade.¹⁰¹ Yet it is known that White ensured that trade union strike pay reached the families of his workers.¹⁰² There were Baptists, furthermore, who endorsed strikes in the name of justice. T. D. Matthias, minister of Bethel, Merthyr Tydfil, supported industrial action by miners in the early 1870s.¹⁰³ Chapels gave their premises for trade union meetings and even split through resolute opposition to efforts by employers to exert undue influence.¹⁰⁴ Although ministers received hardly any training in the problems of industrial society,¹⁰⁵ Baptist laymen were frequently champions of their fellow-workers. Four of them, all miners, went as far as the House of Commons in the years up to 1914, and more followed afterwards.¹⁰⁶

The *Labour Leader* taunted the Baptist Union, when it considered the state of the poor in 1894, with ignoring socialism. The chairman called for higher consecration. 'A little starvation', commented the newspaper, 'might cure him of the "higher consecration" idea'.¹⁰⁷ There were, however, Baptists of whom the *Labour Leader* approved: Charles Aked, minister of Pembroke Chapel, Liverpool, was

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commended for declining to stand for parliament as a rival to a Labour candidate; and F. B. Meyer, minister of Regent's Park Chapel, London, was praised for supporting an Independent Labour candidate for the London County Council.¹⁰⁸ Aked was from the liberal wing of the denomination and Meyer from the conservative side, but both were exponents of the social gospel.¹⁰⁹ Most eminent among Baptist social gossellers, however, was John Clifford. It has recently been pointed out that Clifford's commitment to saving bodies as well as souls can be traced back to his earliest days in London in 1859. His social commitment, which showed signs of kinship with the civic gospel of the Congregationalist, R. W. Dale, was theologically rooted.¹¹⁰ Clifford did not cease to be an Evangelical. Material boons for the poor man, he declared in 1872, would not suffice. 'Give him the gospel of Christ with "your material boons"; and every minister knows the marvellous effect you may expect on character, personal influence, on soul and body, on life and home.'¹¹¹ Collectivist policies by the state, he confirmed in the 1890s, would not extirpate the moral disease of sin.¹¹² Yet Clifford's social theories did change over time. In 1872 he argued that the remedy for pauperism lay not in state action but in self-help and discriminating charity.¹¹³ By the 1890s, now a Fabian Socialist, he endorsed the collectivist state as an advance in evolutionary progress.¹¹⁴ Clifford participated in the process by which later nineteenth-century Nonconformists slowly shed their inherited suspicions of government action. The state, many now came to believe, was indeed capable of promoting righteousness in domestic affairs.

The same principle was applied to foreign affairs, a field in which there were fewer inhibitions to overcome. It is true that aggressive wars were normally deprecated, especially when launched by the Conservatives. Thus the war of 1879 against the Zulus was condemned.¹¹⁵ The 'rule of Lord Beaconsfield', the *Baptist Magazine* had declared in the previous year, 'is working unspeakable mischief, by lowering the tone of public morality . . . It is worse than humiliation to have it instilled into the public mind that nothing but a selfish regard for "British interests" should regulate our intercourse with other nations.'¹¹⁶ Baptists rejoiced when Gladstone was swept back to power in 1880 in reaction against Beaconsfield's overseas adventurism. Under a Liberal administration Baptists were more cautious, but did urge withdrawal from the Sudan in 1885.¹¹⁷ Yet the growth of empire was often justified on the grounds of the blessings inherent in British rule. When Fiji was annexed in 1874 the *Baptist Magazine* was delighted, even though the decision was taken by the Conservatives. Five reasons were cited. The increase of European influence in Polynesia was desirable; the new government would curb marauding settlers from Australia; annexation would 'foster the progress of Christianity'; the slave trade would be suppressed; and there would be colonisation, together with progress in cultivation and industry.¹¹⁸ Baptists could clearly persuade themselves that the benefits, spiritual as well as material, were sufficient compensation for a territory's loss of freedom. A moralised imperialism increasingly attracted their support.

The underlying principle of mass political activity by Baptists during the nineteenth century was voiced in 1845 by William Knibb. 'I am one of those individuals,' affirmed Knibb, 'who believe that it is my duty by every means in my power to protect the injured man, let him be found wherever he may, or whatever be the circumstances in which he is placed. And we are not to be frightened from the performance of our duty by the supposition that we may now and then be political. The fact is this, that politics have entwined themselves round our dearest rights. We cannot touch anything that is inhuman, we cannot redress any wrong, we cannot sustain anything that is right, if we are to be terrified by this bugbear which men of the world have set up. But, respected friends, we are made of sterner stuff.

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We have been long accustomed, in the different scenes through which Providence has caused us to pass, to denounce wrong as wrong - to denounce sin as sin - and to denounce unrighteousness as unrighteousness . . . Politics did not daunt Baptists in a struggle against what they had decided was inherently wicked. Everybody, Knibb argued, is 'accountable to God for every wrong his country labours under' and so is obliged if he possibly can, to 'get rid of that wrong.'¹¹⁹ There was little reason for engaging in public life unless some outright evil had been identified, but once discovered it had to be eliminated. A powerful sense of responsibility drove Baptists into the political fray. Their crusading style was shaped by Evangelical assumptions. In the first third of the century their faith discouraged political activity. Quietism seemed best calculated to give free course to the gospel. Baptists were in any case too marginal to achieve great things in the public arena. In the middle third of the century, with greater electoral power at their disposal, Baptists mobilised on a variety of issues - whenever, in fact, they were convinced that sin could be put down. Opinion varied over whether the state should be invoked to enforce Evangelical principles or whether the limitation of state power was itself an Evangelical imperative. In the final third of the century, lingering suspicions of government action were eroded. The Liberal Party became a vehicle for the politics of righteousness. If a sense of exclusion from centres of power represented the Dissenting component in their psychology, then the distinctiveness of Baptists as Dissenters declined as the century wore on. If a desire to combat sin was the Evangelical component, it remained the chief determinant of attitudes to public affairs in the denomination. Evangelicalism was the factor most responsible for moulding the Baptist conscience in the nineteenth century.

NOTES

1. Robert Currie et. al., *Churches and Churchgoers: patterns of church growth in the British Isles since 1700*, Oxford 1977, p.151.
2. F. M. W. Harrison, 'Nonconformity and the Corporation of Nottingham', BQ 21, 1966, p.367.
3. F. M. W. Harrison, 'The Nottinghamshire Baptists: the political scene', BQ 27, 1978, p.267. Even after the reform of municipal corporations in 1835, of between seventeen and nineteen Dissenting councillors at Leeds and Hull there were two, one or even no Baptists in certain sample years. R. W. Ram, 'Dissent in Urban Yorkshire, 1800-1859', BQ 22, 1967, p.19.
4. F. K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: the age of Wilberforce*, Cambridge 1961, p.352. Shaw, M.P. for Westbury, Wiltshire, 1813-18, was a director of the Union Insurance Company and probably a member of Mare Street, Hackney. Hence Baptists were not absent from the Commons between 1784 and 1847, pace D. W. Bebbington, 'Baptist M.P.s in the Nineteenth Century', BQ 29, 1981, p.5. I am grateful for this reference to Mr J. H. Y. Briggs.
5. T. W. Davis, ed., *Committee for Repeal of the Test and Corporation Act: minutes, 1786-90 and 1827-28*, 1978, pp.111-13.
6. Andrew Fuller, 'Thoughts on Civil Polity' [1808], in A. G. Fuller, ed., *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller, 1832*, vol.5, pp.531-6. Olinthus Gregory, ed., *The Works of Robert Hall, A.M.*, 1843, vol.6, pp.264-5.
7. William Steadman, *The Christian Minister's Duty and Reward*, Gateshead 1807, pp.21-2, quoted by Deryck Lovegrove, 'English Evangelical Dissent and the European Conflict, 1789-1815', in W. J. Sheils, ed., *The Church and War*, (Studies in Church History, vol.20), Oxford 1983, p.266.
8. Lovegrove, op.cit., pp.271-4.
9. *North Wales Gazette*, 27 March 1817, quoted by T. M. Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists*, Swansea 1977, pp.131-2.
10. W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850*, 1972, pp.54-62. D. W. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People: itinerancy and the transformation of English Dissent, 1780-1830*, Cambridge 1988, pp.135-7.
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12. *Baptist Magazine* (hereafter *Bap.Mag.*), January 1831, p.14.
13. C. B. Jewson, *The Baptists in Norfolk*, 1957, p.70. T. S. H. Elwyn, *The Northamptonshire Baptist Association*, 1964, p.27.
14. F. M. W. Harrison, 'The Nottinghamshire Baptists and Social Conditions', BQ 27, 1978, p.222. Harrison, 'Nottinghamshire Baptists: the political scene', p.178.
15. *The History of Castle Donington Baptist Sunday School*, cited by P. B. Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England, 1780-1980*, Nutfield, Redhill, 1986, p.98.

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16. In Nottingham in 1833-34 Sunday school attendance as a proportion of congregational attendance was: Church of England 30%, Congregationalists 36%, Methodists 40%, Baptists 58%. S. D. Chapman, 'The Evangelical Revival and Education in Nottingham', *Transactions of the the Thoroton Society of Nottinghamshire*, 86, 1962, p.44.
17. John Foster, *An Essay on the Evils of Popular Ignorance*, 1820.
18. For example, Bassett, *Welsh Baptists*, p.138; Arthur Mursell, *James Philippo Mursell: his life and work*, 1886, pp.38,40; Harrison, 'Nottinghamshire Baptists: the political scene', pp.272-3.
19. Among them were Robert Robinson, the General Baptist leader Dan Taylor, and the Northamptonshire Association. G. W. Hughes, *With Freedom Fired: the story of Robert Robinson, Cambridge Nonconformist*, 1955, pp.48-9. P. F. Dixon, 'The Politics of Emancipation: the movement for the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, 1807-33', Oxford D. Phil. dissertation, 1971, p.95. Elwyn, *op.cit.*, p.20.
20. Benjamin Godwin to Thomas Clarkson, 1 February 1830, Clarkson Papers, St John's College, Cambridge, quoted by Dixon, 'Politics of Emancipation', p.218.
21. J. H. Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb, Missionary in Jamaica*, 1847, chap.10.
22. C. M. Birrell and Charles Williams. William Graham et. al., *In Memoriam: Charles M. Birrell*, Liverpool 1881, p.28. J. H. Lea, 'Charles Williams of Accrington, 1827-1907', *BQ* 23, 1969, p.187. For complications caused by anti-slavery in the 1830s, see K. R. M. Short, 'English Baptists and American Slavery', *BQ* 20, 1964.
23. *Bap.Mag.*, 1832, p.581, cited by R. G. Cowherd, *The Politics of Religious Dissent*, 1959, p.84.
24. Baptist Board petition to Parliament, 18 April 1833, *Bap.Mag.*, May 1833, p.229. The omission of the university tests that prevented matriculation by Dissenters at Oxford and their graduation at Cambridge, a standard grievance, is a significant feature of this Baptist petition. As yet the denomination had few potential candidates for the ancient universities in its ranks.
25. Christine Paine, 'Benjamin Evans of Scarborough, 1803-1871', *BQ* 21, 1965, p.174. Bassett, *op.cit.*, p.148. *General Baptist Repository*, June 1854, pp.279-80.
26. Elwyn, *op.cit.*, p.57.
27. *Bap.Mag.*, February 1868, pp.105-6. Cf. Olive Anderson, 'Gladstone's Abolition of Compulsory Church Rates: a minor political myth and its historiographical career', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 25, 1974.
28. *Bap.Mag.*, April 1865, p.239.
29. Mursell, *op.cit.*, p.104.
30. J. W. Morris, *Biographical Reflections of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M.*, 1833, p.120.
31. Resolution of 6 November 1832, *Bap.Mag.*, December 1832, p.536.
32. *Bap.Mag.*, June 1844, p.294. Cf. W. H. Mackintosh, *Disestablishment and Liberation: the movement for the separation of the Anglican Church from state control*, 1972.
33. W. S. Caine, ed., *Hugh Stowell Brown*, 1887, p.63.
34. *Bap.Mag.*, July 1843, p.380; October 1843, pp.520-6.
35. *Bap.Mag.*, August 1847, p.512; June 1854, pp.354-5.
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37. Minutes of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1833-42, p.147 (3 May 1838).
38. Nexus and a Chairman of a Board of Guardians to editor, *Bap.Mag.*, June 1836, pp.225-30. An Advocate for Poor-Law Reform on Christian Principles to editor, *Bap.Mag.*, August 1836, pp.341-3. Harrison, 'Nottinghamshire Baptists: the political scene', pp.270-1. Bassett, *op.cit.*, p.140.
39. Bassett, *op.cit.*, pp.140-2.
40. Ram, 'Dissent in Urban Yorkshire', pp.14-16. Harrison, 'Nottinghamshire Baptists: the political scene', p.274. H. U. Faulkner, *Chartism and the Churches: a study in democracy* [1916], 1970, pp.100-2, overestimates Baptist involvement in Chartism.
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43. *Bap.Mag.*, June 1843, p.313.
44. Harrison, 'Nottinghamshire Baptists: the political scene', p.275. Cf. K. R. M. Short, 'English Baptists and the Corn Laws', *BQ* 21, 1966, pp.311-15.
45. Extract from the *Nonconformist* in *Bap.Mag.*, October 1847, p.633.
46. *Bap.Mag.*, April 1863, pp.241-2. *General Baptist Repository*, July 1855, p.327.
47. *Bap.Mag.*, October 1858, pp.620-5; November 1858, p.704.
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