

SOCIAL CONSCIENCE AND POLITICAL POWER AMONG NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH BAPTISTS

ABSTRACT

During the nineteenth century, the forces of industrialization and rapid population growth greatly transformed England, and the Baptist denomination in that country experienced extraordinary changes as well. As the denomination increased rapidly in size and as political enfranchisement was extended to include men of the middle and working classes, Baptists were transformed from a disadvantaged outsider minority into a significant political faction within national political life. As they surveyed the increasingly desperate conditions of urban poverty from their new-found position of influence, Baptists became increasingly concerned for the material as well as spiritual well-being of the poor. Most Baptists came to believe that education and temperance were two of the most important and effective mechanisms for improving the condition of the poor in England. The dominant force behind the Baptist decision to emphasize these social causes was the principle of self-improvement. But if self-improvement was the guiding principle behind the development of the Baptist social conscience, that of church/state separation shaped their attitude towards legislation aimed at social problems. Ironically, this commitment to keeping the state from meddling with the church or infringing upon individuals' freedom of conscience caused Baptists in the 1870s to oppose the Liberal government's attempts to confront the social problems that had become such a concern of English Baptists.

Introduction

Baptists in England experienced a drastic and fundamental transformation during the nineteenth century in terms of their role in and relationship to society. Like other religious dissenters, Baptists began the century as both religious and political outsiders, relegated to the sidelines of politics and society as a penalty for their desire to follow their religious conscience. By the end of the century, however, Baptists and their fellow nonconformists had long since left the periphery and constituted a significant segment of English society and a powerful political force. The Baptist ranks swelled with new members, new

Baptist chapels multiplied rapidly, political reform gave Baptists unprecedented political enfranchisement, and Baptists found a new home as a valued constituency within the Liberal Party. The numerical expansion enjoyed by Baptists did not happen in a vacuum, though. Industrialization and urbanization reshaped and reorganized English society almost beyond recognition during the years between 1800 and 1900. Situated primarily in industrial areas, Baptists saw the urban poverty that was a by-product of this rapidly changing society and recognized the need to assist those it mired. Over the course of the nineteenth century Baptists developed a stronger sense of social conscience, embracing causes such as education and temperance as the key means for improving the lot of the poor around them.

Thus by the end of the century two major alterations had occurred in Baptist life: one in terms of political clout and the other in terms of social concern. In addition to surveying these changes in Baptist life and thought, this essay hopes to resolve two main questions. First, what forces influenced the Baptist social conscience to develop in the way that it did during the nineteenth century? That is, why did Baptists embrace causes such as temperance and education as the best means to alleviate the social problems of industrialization? Second, how did Baptists act on their social conscience once they had achieved greater numerical strength and political influence? How did they react when their social conscience was wedded to their newly-gained political power? An examination of Baptist activities during the decade of the 1870s will shed light upon the interplay of social conscience and political power among nineteenth-century Baptists and reveal how one of the earliest Baptist principles—separation of church and state—controlled much of this interaction.

Politics

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, most English Baptists were content just to be ‘tolerated’ by their country’s government. From their humble beginnings, Baptists had been on bad terms with the Crown. The first congregation of English Baptists formed not in England at all, but in Amsterdam. This is a significant fact, as it points to the estrangement from their native government that English Baptists would feel for almost two and a half centuries. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, two separatist ministers who had fled to Amsterdam for safety, formed a congregation there in 1609, based upon beliefs that the only true baptism was adult believer’s baptism and that a true church is one made up of converted believers in Christ. Helwys led the group back to England a few years later, and they were immediately subjected to

persecution and hardships that would persist throughout the seventeenth century and beyond.¹

Baptists particularly earned the disdain of the Crown through their indefatigable commitment to the separation of the state from religion. The principle of church/state separation has deep roots in Baptist life, going all the way back to Thomas Helwys. Upon his return from Amsterdam with the first congregation of English Baptists, Helwys published a book entitled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. In this work, Helwys argued that the King of England was merely an ‘earthly king’, and that religion is a private matter between God and an individual. Helwys’ revolutionary plea went beyond demanding religious equality merely for Christian dissenters; he also argued for toleration of all religions. ‘Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever’, he wrote, ‘it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure’.² Though James I was not swayed by Helwys’ appeal, and Helwys spent the few remaining years of his life in prison, the principles laid out in his bold work became a cornerstone of Baptist conviction for the generations that followed him. Like Helwys, subsequent Baptists suffered persecution from the government for their dedication to religious freedom. All nonconformists, not just Baptists, experienced especially harsh oppression following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. It was not until the Toleration Act of 1689 that nonconformists finally advanced from a state of being persecuted to that of merely being oppressed and discriminated against.³

By the early 18th century Baptists could follow their conscience peaceably, though as second-class citizens. The laws that barred them from public office and muffled their political voice were never repealed in the eighteenth century. Baptists still lacked political enfranchisement and representation. Thus at the dawn of the nineteenth century Baptists occupied the marginal position in society to which they had grown accustomed in the eighteenth century. Baptists tended towards political quietism during this period, rarely speaking out on secular political issues. As George Machin puts it, Baptists had developed a ‘judicious

¹ Barrington R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 27-9.

² Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. by Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 34, 53.

³ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 102-4; John Coffey, “From Helwys to Leland: Baptists and Religious Tolerance in England and America, 1612-1791,” in *The Gospel in the World: International Baptist Studies*, vol. 1, ed. by David W. Bebbington (Carlisle, England: Paternoster Press, 2002), 14-5.

resignation to adverse political circumstances'.⁴ Between 1800 and 1832 only one Baptist served as a Member of Parliament.⁵ Nonconformist political leadership during this period generally came from the Unitarians. As the century wore on, however, the Baptists' principled objection to political involvement would soften as they began to view government less as a threat and more as an aid to the spread of Christianity.

In 1800 the population of England was around nine million. At that time Baptists numbered only about 24,000—or about one fourth of one percent of the total population. During the first half of the century, however, the effects of the evangelical revival were felt as Baptists and other nonconformist denominations grew at a rate that greatly outpaced the population growth of England. Though the nation as a whole doubled in population between 1800 and 1850, membership in nonconformist chapels during that time grew by 500 percent.⁶ Baptists benefited equally from this growth, quadrupling in size during the first half of the century.⁷ By 1850 there were between 100,000 and 150,000 Baptists in England and Wales, and on Census Sunday in 1851 Baptist churches attracted over half a million worshippers.⁸ Baptist growth was particularly astounding in relation to the size of the Church of England. Though Anglicans held a three to one majority over nonconformists in England in 1800, by 1840 the number of nonconformist chapels had surpassed that of Anglican churches.⁹ In 1851 nonconformists outnumbered Anglicans in almost every large industrial city in England. The growth experienced by Baptists, like that of the nation as a whole, took place primarily in the midland counties, which experienced the greatest amount of industrialization and urbanization.¹⁰

⁴ G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832 to 1868* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 14.

⁵ David W. Bebbington, 'The Baptist Conscience in the Nineteenth Century,' *Baptist Quarterly* 34 (January 1991): 13.

⁶ Richard J. Helmstadter, 'Orthodox Nonconformity', in *Nineteenth-Century English Religious Traditions: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. by D. G. Paz. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 69.

⁷ John D. Gay, *The Geography of Religion in England* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1971), 121.

⁸ J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 264.

⁹ Helmstadter, 'Orthodox Nonconformity', 69.

¹⁰ Helmstadter, 'Orthodox Nonconformity', 69. Bebbington notes that on Census Sunday 'nonconformist attendance exceeded Anglican attendance in twenty-one of the twenty-nine towns designated the chief manufacturing

Baptists' rapid growth during the first half of the century, coupled with their dense distribution in the industrial towns of the Midlands, put them in a position to benefit immensely from political reforms taking place in this period. Political enfranchisement first came to the Baptists in 1828 with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, which opened up public offices to nonconformists on both the local and national level. It was the Reform Act of 1832, however, that finally made Baptists legitimate players in the political system. This Act affected both the distribution of Parliamentary seats and the voting eligibility requirements in ways that, albeit unintentionally, were extremely favorable to Baptists and increased their political power. Parliamentary representation was redistributed from the sparsely-populated southern counties to the urbanized northern counties and, consequently, to areas of Baptist strength. The Act also doubled the number of citizens who could vote - from ten percent of the male population to about twenty percent - by allowing any man who owned property worth at least ten pounds per year in rent to vote. Thus artisans and other working-class and middle-class citizens now made up much of the voting population.¹¹

Some Baptists continued to debate whether or not Christians should be involved in politics, but many soon embraced this newly-afforded opportunity to effect political change. Baptist ministers, too, became increasingly political. At least twenty-five percent of Baptist ministers between the years 1810 and 1850 were actively involved in politics.¹² It was during the decades following the 1832 Reform Act that Baptists ceased to be political outsiders and, along with Congregationalists, replaced the Unitarians as the political leaders of English nonconformity.¹³ The political causes that Baptists rallied behind during these years centered on disestablishment of the state church. They used their new political voice to attack the favored status of the Church of England and to rectify the disadvantages they faced as a result of what they saw as 'penal codes' written into English law in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A desire to see the Church of England disestablished and disendowed led a group of Baptists, Congregationalists, and a few other nonconformists in 1844 to form the Anti-State Church Association, later

districts.' David W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870-1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 2.

¹¹ R. A. Rees, *Britain 1815-1851* (Harlow: Longman, 1990), 25.

¹² Kenneth D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales, 1800-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 209.

¹³ Helmstadter, 'Orthodox Nonconformity', 57.

to be called the Liberation Society. As they had been since Helwys' day, Baptists were very much in the vanguard of the movement to separate the state from religion as they now pushed for disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of England. The Baptist Union, the national denominational body with whom most Baptist churches in England and Wales affiliated, immediately endorsed the Anti-State Church Association.¹⁴ The Union noted that Baptists were 'deeply convinced of the unscriptural character of national establishments of religion' and believed that such establishments functioned 'to sanction aggressions such as are continually made upon the peace and property of dissenters'.¹⁵

Baptists tended to view the state's support of the Church of England as the root of all political and civil injustice in England, towards dissenters as well as non-Christians. When the House of Lords rejected a bill in 1851 that would have allowed Jews to serve in Parliament, the editors of *The Baptist Magazine* denounced such exclusion as 'the barbarous relic of a barbarous age'.¹⁶ Baptist minister J. H. Hinton argued that a state church, even one tolerant of other sects, creates an unjust social inequality, a 'system of bribery and oppression', and 'a feeling hostile to social improvement'.¹⁷ Baptists felt that the disendowment of the state church was the key to bringing about religious, political, and legal equality in England, and they used their new political voice to push for such reform. By the 1840s the Baptist Union had dedicating itself to 'the disenthralment of Christianity from the secular associations into which it has been forced'.¹⁸

Their commitment to disestablishment and to separation of the state from religion made Baptists ideological soulmates with the Liberal Party in the mid-nineteenth century. As David Bebbington has pointed out, Baptists wanted to end the privileges of the state church just as the Liberal Party wanted to end the 'feudal' privileges of the upper class. Likewise, just as the nonconformists wished the state not to interfere with religion, so the Liberals wished for the government to take a *laissez-*

¹⁴ William H. Mackintosh, *Disestablishment and Liberation: The Movement for the Separation of the Anglican Church from State Control* (London: Epworth Press, 1972), 28.

¹⁵ *The Baptist Magazine*, June 1844, 294.

¹⁶ *The Baptist Magazine*, September 1851, 586.

¹⁷ John Howard Hinton, 'The Social Influence of a State Church', in *The Theological Works of the Rev. John Howard Hinton*, vol. 7 (London: Houlston & Wright, 1865), 159.

¹⁸ *The Baptist Magazine*, June 1842, 292.

faire attitude and allow free trade to flourish.¹⁹ Like the Liberals, Baptists embraced the principles of free trade, an unobtrusive government, and lower taxes.²⁰ Baptists believed it natural to extend this *laissez-faire* attitude to cover not only trade and commerce but also religion. Just as the government should not interfere in trade, they argued, it should also stay out of religious matters. In a tract on 'Free Trade and Church Establishment', J. H. Hinton linked the two by arguing that 'government bakeries and government churches are founded on the same principles, and productive of similar mischiefs, and they ought to stand or fall together'.²¹ Such commitments to the principle of government non-intervention helped wed Baptists to the Liberal Party during the second half of the nineteenth century. It was a marriage that was mutually beneficial. The Liberals provided a national political body that championed causes dear to Baptists; Baptists and other nonconformist voters were likewise vital to the party's success during the mid-Victorian years.²²

Baptists received another major boost to their political strength with the Reform Act of 1867. Though this reform did not significantly redistribute Parliamentary seats, as had the 1832 Act, it did expand the franchise to encompass almost all middle- and working-class men in towns.²³ Again the number of Baptist voters increased significantly. Baptists were now a legitimate and significant political force. Unified almost totally behind the Liberal Party, they played a significant role in sweeping William Gladstone into power in the 1868 election.²⁴ Baptist partisanship was so strong that after the election a Baptist association in Monmouthshire passed a resolution reprimanding any Baptists who had not supported Gladstone and the Liberals during the 1868 election, calling them traitors who had 'spat in the face of nonconformity'.²⁵ By the end of the 1860s membership in Baptist churches exceeded 200,000, Baptists were comfortable with the notion that a Christian could serve as a politician, and the denomination was a significant voting bloc within

¹⁹ Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 9.

²⁰ David W. Bebbington, *Victorian Nonconformity* (Bangor: Headstart History, 1992), 62.

²¹ John Howard Hinton, 'Free-Trade and Church Establishments', in *The Theological Works of the Rev. John Howard Hinton*, vol. 7 (London: Houlston & Wright, 1865), 172.

²² Alan Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism 1776-1988* (London: Longman, 1997), 53.

²³ Mackintosh, *Disestablishment and Liberation*, 117.

²⁴ Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1958), 103.

²⁵ Quoted in Bebbington, 'The Baptist Conscience', 19.

the ruling political party. During the decades that followed, Baptists would exercise their new-found political sway on a number of issues and, for the first time in their history, have an audible voice in the political process.²⁶ A closer examination of this political activity is warranted, but first one must consider another major development that had been taking place within Baptist life during the first seventy years of the nineteenth century: that of a distinct social conscience.

Social Conscience

During the first half of the eighteenth century, spiritual and numerical decline greatly weakened Baptists in England. While hyper-Calvinism and antinomianism took its toll on Particular Baptists (the Calvinistic wing of English Baptists) socinianism sent its Arminian wing, the General Baptists, into a spiritual malaise. During the second half of the century, however, the fires of evangelical revival spread throughout Baptist churches, bringing new life and vitality to the denomination. Dan Taylor, a General Baptist, and Andrew Fuller, a Particular Baptist, led revivals that infused renewed evangelical fervor into their respective denominations.²⁷ As the nineteenth century approached, Baptists were more committed than ever to spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth, making evangelism and foreign missions the primary emphases of the denomination.²⁸ Consequently, evangelism became the defining characteristic of Baptists in the early nineteenth century. Their vision of proselytizing was not limited to evangelical preaching. It also incorporated charitable activities on behalf of those in need, such as widows, orphans, out-of-work labourers, and famine victims in Ireland.²⁹

One social issue that captivated the conscience of Baptists and other nonconformists early on was the lack of educational opportunity for working-class children. The Sunday School movement had begun in 1780 and served as the first significant instrument for the education of the masses. It gave children from the labouring class an opportunity to learn to read and write on their one day off from work. The movement quickly spread throughout the nation and continued to grow through the nineteenth century. By 1851 some 2,400,000 children were enrolled in

²⁶ Briggs, *English Baptists*, 254; Bebbington, 'The Baptist Conscience', 18.

²⁷ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 154-61, 172-4, 181-3.

²⁸ Ernest A. Payne, *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1944), 99-101.

²⁹ Bebbington, 'The Baptist Conscience', 18.

Sunday Schools.³⁰ Baptists were early supporters of this movement. In 1785 William Fox, a Baptist deacon in London, formed the Sunday School Society to sponsor Sunday Schools in the city.³¹ In 1803 another Baptist, William Brodie Gurney, founded the Sunday School Union, which did much to spur the growth of Sunday Schools in various denominations throughout the country.³² In the nineteenth century Baptists and others concerned with the educational needs of the poor desired to have schools not only on Sunday but also throughout the week. Many Baptist ministers started their own academies: day schools that usually met in the minister's home. Baptists and other dissenters also founded the British and Foreign School Society, which made affordable education available to lower-class children. Many Anglicans opposed such initiatives to educate the masses, but felt that if the poor were to be educated, it should at least be done by the clergy of the established church. The Baptists therefore spent much of the middle decades of the nineteenth century quarrelling with the Church of England over who should educate the poor and how such education should be funded.³³

The Church of England came to dominate elementary education in England, which led Baptists to be wary of education acts passed by Parliament. As early as 1833, the government established policies to support church-run schools, and other education bills followed in the 1840s and 1850s. Baptists resisted government offers to provide funding for denominational schools because of their disdain for government entanglement in the affairs of churches. Because the vast majority of such funding would go to Anglican schools, they feared that this involvement would further entrench the favored status of the Church of England. Baptists clung increasingly to the principle of voluntarism in education. Just as Baptist theology held that the local church should be a voluntary organization of individuals, neither supported by nor interfered with by the state, so schools—an extension of the church—

³⁰ Raymond G. Cowherd, *The Politics of English Dissent: The Religious Aspects of Liberal and Humanitarian Reform Movements from 1815 to 1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 37.

³¹ Thomas Walter Laquer, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture 1780-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 33. The Society's formal name was The Society for the Support and Encouragement of Sunday Schools.

³² R. Philip Roberts, *Continuity and Change: London Calvinistic Baptists and the Evangelical Revival 1760-1820* (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1989), 236-7.

³³ Raymond G. Cowherd, *The Politics of English Dissent: The Religious Aspects of Liberal and Humanitarian Reform Movements from 1815 to 1848* (London: Epworth Press, 1959), 38-45.

should be neither funded nor overseen by the national government. When a group of Baptist churches in Manchester resolved in 1851 to start schools for the city's poor, the editors of *The Baptist Magazine* lauded them for recognizing that 'the education of the people is a social duty' of the church. The churches are to carry out this duty, they continued, 'apart from any legislative interference whatsoever'.³⁴

This sentiment encapsulates three main characteristics of the Baptist attitude towards education during the early and middle years of the nineteenth century. First, education of the masses was viewed as the responsibility of the churches, not the government. Secondly, churches were to fulfill this charge without receiving aid from the state, lest the separation between the two be compromised. Finally, the task of education was seen as a 'social duty', a means of helping the poor by equipping them to succeed in life. By the end of the 1860s, Baptists would modify the first of these three beliefs about education, conceding the necessity of government involvement if children of all social classes were to be educated. The other two beliefs would continue to undergird the Baptist desire to see a nationwide system of free elementary education established. They would continue to insist that the state not subsidize religious education and to view education as a means of improving the conditions of the poor. Education was for Baptists a means of helping the poor to help themselves, much like another social cause dear to Baptists in the nineteenth century: temperance.

During the middle third of the century, Baptists and other nonconformists began to embrace temperance reform. The temperance movement began to gather steam in the early 1830s, with some individual Baptists pioneering in the movement. In the 1830s, the Baptist church pastored by Jabez Burns was one of only two pulpits in London open to temperance speakers.³⁵ Baptist minister George Smith is considered to have written the country's first temperance tract. Another Baptist pastor, Benjamin Godwin, was a key supporter of the first temperance society in Britain. Still another Baptist minister, Francis Beardsall, produced the first temperance hymnbook and edited an early temperance magazine.³⁶ By the late 1860s, temperance was the leading

³⁴ *The Baptist Magazine*, November 1851, 719.

³⁵ Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England 1815-1872* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 179.

³⁶ While many Baptists viewed temperance as the most pressing social issue of the day, the denomination as a whole was slow to act as a body against drinking. 'The widespread identification of Baptists with teetotalism', says one historian, 'was relatively late and more conspicuously an urban phenomenon, as the impact of drink in the lives of the industrial poor became more and more

social concern of Baptists in England.

J. Briggs argues that 'it was intrinsically a social conscience rather than a moralistic peccadillo that aroused' Baptist concerns over intemperance. 'The movement represented a genuine attempt in a drink-sodden society to help the poor', he contends, 'not a conspiratorial attempt to impose middle-class manners on a reluctant working class'.³⁷ Though Briggs does not offer any primary evidence supporting his claim, there are sources that suggest his analysis is on the mark. *The Baptist Magazine* called temperance 'by far the most important of social questions' and expressed its conviction that it was 'intimately bound up with the interests and progress of Christianity'.³⁸ Likewise, delegates to the Baptist Union's meeting in 1871 passed a resolution noting their dismay at 'the degraded condition of our population', which they believed was 'largely the result of intemperance'.³⁹ Baptists recognized a direct causal link between alcohol and poverty, and thus viewed their temperance efforts as an attempt to change not only the immoral behavior of the drunkard but also the economic circumstances of his family.⁴⁰

When addressing the subject of temperance, Baptists usually emphasized not the fact that drinking was immoral, but rather that it was a social crisis that adversely affected both the body and soul of the poor. Drinking destroyed family life and caused individuals to waste money that should be spent on food and clothing. Charles Spurgeon, Victorian England's most prominent Baptist minister, warned of alcohol's dangers in his works *John Ploughman's Talk* and *John Ploughman's Pictures*. These tracts celebrated the benefits which hard work and clean living offered to both the body and the soul. He cautioned his readers that 'the ale-jug robs the cupboard and the table, starves the wife and strips the

apparent.' So while many Baptists were already actively involved in the temperance movement in the early 1830s, it took the entire middle third of the century before the denomination fully embraced the cause. Briggs, *English Baptists*, 329-32.

³⁷ Briggs, *English Baptists*, 330.

³⁸ *The Baptist Magazine*, June 1874, 359 (as quoted by Bebbington, 'Baptist Conscience', 19).

³⁹ *The Baptist Handbook for 1872*, 42.

⁴⁰ Richard J. Helmstadter, 'The Nonconformist Conscience', in *Religion in Victorian England: Volume IV, Interpretations*, ed. by Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 81, agrees that temperance was 'the most characteristic nonconformist effort at social reform in the early and mid-Victorian periods.'

children'.⁴¹ Spurgeon also quoted some verses intended to draw attention to the dangers that alcohol poses to both the family and future of the drinker and to mock those who would criticize temperance reformers:

What! Rob a poor man of his beer,
And give him good victuals instead!
Your heart's very hard, sir, I fear,
Or at least you are soft in the head.

What! Rob a poor man of his ale
And prevent him from beating his wife,
From being locked up in jail,
With penal employment for life!⁴²

For Spurgeon and his fellow Baptists, temperance was a key means of bettering the condition of those mired in poverty. Drinking was viewed not simply as a moral failing, but also as an obstacle standing between the drunkard and prosperity.⁴³

Having looked at the development of the Baptist social conscience and the issues that moved them to action in the nineteenth century, one can begin to find answers to one of the questions this article seeks to resolve: what forces influenced the Baptist social conscience to develop as it did? In his study of 'The Baptist Conscience in the Nineteenth Century', David Bebbington argues that 'two fundamental features of their existence shaped' Baptist attitudes towards society: they were dissenters—and therefore excluded from full citizenship—and they were evangelicals. He believes this second element of the Baptist nature is the key to why Baptists emphasized the social issues that they did. 'Evangelicalism', Bebbington says, 'was the factor most responsible for moulding the Baptist conscience in the nineteenth century'. He maintains that Baptists' commitment to causes such as temperance simply reflects their 'evangelical imperative to eliminate sin'.⁴⁴ While evangelicalism was undeniably a powerful part of the Baptist character, it seems that Bebbington may be oversimplifying the matter by isolating it as the singular factor shaping the Baptist attitude towards social

⁴¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *John Ploughman's Pictures: More of his Talk* (London: Lakeland, 1970), 47.

⁴² Spurgeon, *John Ploughman's Pictures*, 47.

⁴³ J. M. Gordon, 'The Later Nineteenth Century', in *The Baptists in Scotland: A History*, ed. by David W. Bebbington (Glasgow: The Baptist Union of Scotland, 1988), 53.

⁴⁴ Bebbington, 'The Baptist Conscience', 13, 16, 22.

problems. An important force that contributed to the Baptists' social conscience taking the form that it did was their commitment to the potential for human self-improvement. A significant theological shift within nineteenth-century Baptist life allowed many Baptists to overcome their traditional objections to the idea that humans were capable of bettering themselves by any means other than accepting Christ.

The fact that temperance and education were the two main issues that piqued the social conscience of Baptists reflects this increased emphasis upon individual self-improvement. Issues related to the negative results of industrialization—such as poor working conditions, low wages, long hours, or substandard housing—rarely elicited a strong response among Baptists in the nineteenth century. They focused instead on social problems that could be mended by reforming the individual rather than ones that would require systemic changes in industrial society. Baptists were not, as Bebbington implies, simply trying to eliminate sin and reshape the morals of others. They wanted to improve people's lot in life by removing the barriers that kept them down, such as illiteracy and drinking. Like other nonconformists, Baptists believed that the primary cause of poverty was not industrial society, but 'the individual moral weakness of each poor person'.⁴⁵ They believed that individual sin, not industrial society, kept people mired in poverty. Acceptance of the gospel and moral self-improvement promised to bring not only spiritual salvation but material salvation as well. For the nineteenth-century Baptists, then, issues such as temperance and education were just as much social issues as they were moral or religious ones.⁴⁶

The 1870s

Given the increased political enfranchisement that Baptists came to enjoy and the social issues that they came to embrace, the interesting question is, what happened when these two converged? The decade of the 1870s is a particularly enlightening and significant period in this

⁴⁵ Helmstadter, 'Nonconformist Conscience', 80.

⁴⁶ Baptist concern about Sunday opening laws reflects a similar understanding of the interconnectedness of religious and social issues. As with temperance, it was an issue that appeared on the surface to be purely religious in nature but that was often couched in terms of social concern. Baptists viewed attempts to force people to work on Sundays as not only a violation of the Fourth Commandment—which mandated keeping the Sabbath holy—but also as an unfair additional burden upon the working class.

respect. Following the Reform Act of 1867 and the Liberal victory in 1868, the Baptist denomination had finally ‘obtained its due political weight in the country’, according to *The Baptist Magazine*.⁴⁷ Additionally, Baptists could now shift their political focus somewhat, having accomplished much of their agenda of overturning the ‘penal codes’. Baptist historian E. A. Payne has called the 1870 repeal of laws denying dissenters access to Oxford and Cambridge ‘the last major battle’ in the Baptist struggle for full civil and religious equality.⁴⁸ As a consequence, the 1870s opened as a decade in which the Baptists could focus their attention on broader political issues facing the nation. Furthermore, during the 1870s education and temperance, the two social concerns dearest to the Baptists, were more prominent than ever on the national scene. Though they would enjoy continued growth and political clout until the end of the century, it was during the 1870s that Baptists first had the opportunity to utilize their political influence to satisfy their social conscience. Ironically, they soon found that the old Baptist commitment to church/state separation made it difficult for them to use the power of the state to address the social issues that most concerned them.

Education came to the fore of national politics in 1870 with the passage of the Elementary Education Act by Parliament. The Act insured that the state would make elementary education available throughout England, a goal the Baptists had sought to accomplish for years. Nevertheless, Baptists and other nonconformists were deeply disappointed with the Act, concerned that it failed to create a system of education that was nonsectarian. They were particularly angered by Clause 25 of the Act, which allowed for the use of tax money to pay the tuition of poor children attending sectarian schools.⁴⁹ This clause ‘became a symbol of discrimination against nonconformists’ because the bulk of the state’s aid would go to support Anglican-run schools.⁵⁰ Baptists strongly opposed the Act not only because it favored the established church over nonconformists, but also because it allowed for religious instruction of any kind in a state-supported school. The Baptist Union registered its disapproval of the 1870 Education Act—especially Clause 25—at its meeting in September of 1871. The delegates passed a

⁴⁷ *The Baptist Magazine*, July 1868, 455 (as quoted in Bebbington, ‘Baptist Conscience’, 18).

⁴⁸ Ernest A. Payne, *Free Churchmen, Unrepentant and Repentant, and Other Papers* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1965), 59.

⁴⁹ Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism*, 77.

⁵⁰ David W. Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 151.

resolution stating that the Union ‘repeats its protest against those clauses of the Elementary Education Act which empower school boards to give religious instruction in rate-supported schools, and emphatically protests against the 25th clause of the Act’. In this resolution they opposed not merely the fact that the state’s support of Church of England clergy would be strengthened by the Act, but also the idea of using tax money to support any sectarian schools, including their own.

Baptists had come reluctantly to accept the fact that the government must be involved in the education of the masses, but they continued to draw the line when it came to state support of religious education. Most Baptists believed that ideally, education would be the task of the family in conjunction with the church. They recognized that the work of educating the labouring class of the entire nation, however, was too large for the churches alone. At the 1872 Baptist Union meeting, national education was the subject of the inaugural address. In it the speaker lamented that ‘now we must, unhappily, accept government influence [in education] as an accomplished fact’. But he and most other Baptists believed firmly that the education provided by the government must be purely secular in nature. The speaker went on to urge Baptists that ‘no effort should be spared to free religion from its [the government’s] unhallowed influence’. ‘Let us endeavor to compel our legislators to withdraw their hands from the ark of God’, he continued, ‘and to confine themselves to their secular work’.⁵¹ Commitment to the principle of church/state separation meant that Baptists would not be satisfied with any state-sponsored educational system so long as it contained any religious or moral instruction.⁵²

It was not long before the Conservative government passed an education bill of its own, and the Baptists were again outraged. The Elementary Education Act of 1876 continued the policy of using tax dollars to support religious schools and elicited ‘a chorus of nonconformist denunciation’.⁵³ The Baptist Union passed a resolution in opposition to the Act, claiming that it discriminated against nonconformists and extended the authority of the Established Church.

⁵¹ Payne, *Baptist Union*, 40-1, 103.

⁵² The controversy surrounding the Elementary Education Act of 1870 caused an ‘evangelical revolt’ within the Liberal Party that deeply divided Baptists and other nonconformists from the Party for several years. Baptists felt deeply betrayed by Gladstone, who shared their evangelical principles but was ultimately loyal to the established church. See Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone*, 152.

⁵³ G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1869 to 1921* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 102.

‘The Elementary Education Act of 1876 is unjust to nonconformists’, they resolved, ‘inasmuch as it shows great favor to denominational schools, which are almost wholly in the hands and under the control of the clergy of the Established Church’. The government’s desire to continue supporting all denominational schools angered Baptists, who recognized that because Anglican schools would receive the bulk of such aid, their status as the established church would become increasingly entrenched. The delegates feared that the new Act would lead to ‘continual recurrences of oppression towards nonconformists’ and reiterated the argument that any education provided by the state should be purely secular.⁵⁴ The objections raised by Baptists against the 1876 Act were basically the same as those which they had raised against the 1870 Act: religious education must be provided by the churches and it must be provided with absolutely no financial support from the state, and any education provided by the government must be purely secular.

Even though education had been a major social concern of Baptists since the late eighteenth century—one they considered it crucial to the material and spiritual well being of society—they resisted efforts to establish a national system of state-supported schools. Part of this opposition stemmed from their continued antagonism towards the state church and their belief that the national education acts served to strengthen the Anglican connection to the state. Like other nonconformists, Baptists had exerted much of their political energy during the middle third of the century struggling to disestablish the Church of England, meeting with considerably success. They certainly did not want to take any chances in the 1870s of the state church regaining any of its lost hegemony. More importantly, though, the Baptist attitude towards national education legislation reflected a continued commitment to the separation of the state from religion, and vice versa. Despite the desire of Baptists to see the children of all social classes provided with an education, the state’s support of any religious group—or even its support of all religions equally—violated the Baptist conscience and compelled them to oppose the Education Acts.

The desire to keep the state separate from religion also dominated Baptists during the 1870s as they confronted legislation addressing another social issue that deeply concerned them: temperance. Given the fact that Baptists were so firmly convinced that intemperance was the major social problem facing England at that time, and given the fact that they now held enough political sway to influence changes in English law, it seems somewhat natural to assume that they might push for legal

⁵⁴ *The Baptist Handbook for 1877* (London: Yates & Alexander, 1877), 91.

prohibition of alcohol. Indeed, numerous nonconformist and evangelical groups who shared the Baptists' concern about the evils of drink had by now thrown their support behind prohibition. The Baptist response, however, was not necessarily the same as these other groups with whom they are often lumped together by historians.⁵⁵ Temperance reform was often a topic of discussion at Baptist Union meetings in the 1870s, and by looking at some of the discussions and resolutions about temperance one can begin to see the distinctiveness of the Baptist position.

At their 1870 meeting, the Baptist Union passed a resolution expressing that while they 'deeply lament[ed] the terrible evils resulting from intemperance', the delegates felt that the best means for ending this evil was not legal prohibition. Rather, the resolution argued that 'the chief agencies for securing the much-needed reformation must be found in the spread of education, in moral suasion, and in the growing influence of Christian truth'.⁵⁶ Baptists believed that temperance reform should be the work of the churches and individual Christians. They refused, however, to use the power of the state to impose temperance upon the nation. Likewise no mention of prohibition occurred in 1874 when the Baptist Union finally established its own denominational temperance society, the Baptist Total Abstinence Association. While Baptists were convinced of the importance of temperance for the well-being of both individuals and society, they did not think the state had the right to impose such moral discipline on its citizenry.

Baptists also resisted pressure from other nonconformist groups that wanted them to support prohibition. At its October 1876 meeting the Baptist Union received two 'memorials' from temperance organizations urging them to take a stand in support of current prohibition legislation. The United Kingdom Alliance urged the Union to throw its support behind a current bill in Parliament that would restrict the sale of alcohol. The memorial noted that 'the leading minds in religion, philanthropy, and science' have endorsed the plan, and that

⁵⁵ As Timothy Larsen has observed, many scholars have erroneously assumed that because Baptists 'embraced and preached rigid standards for personal behaviour, they inevitably must have wished to impose those same standards on their neighbours through legislation.' In reality, however, their 'commitment to religious equality and state non-interference in matters of religion, along with other influences, made many nonconformists wary of projects for moral reform that involved government action.' Timothy Larsen, *Contested Christianity: The Political and Social Contexts of Victorian Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 152-4.

⁵⁶ *The Baptist Handbook for 1871*, 62.

Methodists, Presbyterians, evangelicals within the Church of England, and numerous other denominational bodies and temperance societies had endorsed the bill as well. The Baptists, it seemed, were the lone holdouts within British nonconformity. The memorial urged the Baptists to take up the issue and pass a resolution in support of the bill. The Baptist Union, however, declined to give any such official endorsement of this prohibition bill. Rather, they passed a resolution reasserting their conviction that intemperance was 'a great and widespread evil, ruinous alike to the bodies and souls of men', but left it as 'the solemn duty of its members to do all in their power' to suppress intemperance.⁵⁷ They did not voice the denominational support for prohibition for which the United Kingdom Alliance had wished.⁵⁸

The way that Baptists dealt with both education and temperance in the 1870s indicates that they were reluctant to use their new political strength to force their moral or social agenda upon society. The result was what appears to be a contradiction between what Baptists said they wanted and what they actually supported politically. Baptists advocated free, national education for children of all classes for decades, but then opposed major education reform acts in the 1870s. Likewise Baptists were in the vanguard of the temperance reform movement, yet they refused to join other temperance advocates in supporting prohibition legislation in the 1870s. One explanation is that Baptists were not as sincerely committed to social causes such as temperance and education as they had claimed to be throughout the mid-nineteenth century. More plausible, however, is that something overrode the 'evangelical imperative to eliminate sin', which Bebbington views as so influential among nineteenth-century Baptists. It appears that what guided Baptists more than anything as they dealt with legislation aimed at alleviating social problems was their long-standing aversion to state involvement in religion.

Even in the 1870s, despite all the changes Baptists had experienced in the centuries since Thomas Helwys' *Mystery of Iniquity*, the Baptist principle of church/state separation guided how Baptists in England responded when given an opportunity to effect social change

⁵⁷ *The Baptist Handbook for 1871*, 92-4.

⁵⁸ When Baptists did express some desire to see the liquor traffic restricted through legal means, it usually dealt with strengthening the licensing laws. In 1870 the Union had urged the government to reform and strengthen the existing licensing system for pubs. A year later the Union passed another resolution calling for stricter licensing regulations and restrictions on the sale of alcohol on Sundays. *The Baptist Handbook for 1871*, 62; *The Baptist Handbook for 1872*, 42.

through the power of the state. This is important to realize, as there seems to be a general consensus among many historians that as Baptists gained political enfranchisement and numerical strength they became more comfortable with Christian involvement in politics and, consequently, less wary of government involvement in religion. By the latter third of the nineteenth century, most Baptists had certainly abandoned their belief that Christians ought not be involved in politics. This does not mean, however, that they had learned to accept government interference in religious issues. It is important to note that within the mainstream of Baptist life, the principles inherited from Helwys of church/state separation and freedom of conscience lived on. That their disdain of church/state entanglements continued to be a guiding force for English Baptists in the 1870s is significant. No longer were Baptists a whining minority who knew that championing the principle of church/state separation could only benefit them and hurt their Anglican adversaries. Now they were a significant force in society and politics. Upholding the principle of separation meant denying themselves the opportunity to use the power of the state to alter and uplift public morality. By refusing to support legislation that would provide religious education or that would prohibit the sale of alcohol, English Baptists resisted the temptation to impose their morals upon society by legislative fiat.

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