

NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH BAPTIST ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RELATIONS OF CHURCH AND STATE

DAVID BEBBINGTON

University of Stirling

(d.w.bebbington@stir.ac.uk)

The problem of church and state for British Baptists is well illustrated by an episode at Acadia College, Nova Scotia. Other denominations in the colony received public money for education and so, following the foundation of the college in 1838, it was natural for the new institution to obtain a state grant. In 1844, however, Joseph Belcher arrived from England as minister of Granville Street Baptist Church in Halifax. Almost immediately he questioned the rightness of accepting the grant. It was, he claimed, public, not denominational, money. Baptists should rely on their own fund-raising abilities and have nothing to do with state help for teaching theology. Belcher actually discouraged his friends in England from giving to Acadia College. Leading members of his congregation at Granville Street, formerly an Anglican place of worship that had gone over to the Baptists only in the late 1820s, were incensed by Belcher's sabotaging of their efforts to provide a good education for the sons of their new denomination. They had recently given their political allegiance to the Conservatives partly in order to ensure public financial support for their college. Now their own minister was undermining the whole scheme. They wanted him out of their pulpit. Belcher resisted, but because the leading members were trustees of the building, the minister was forced to leave. There was schism in the church, but Belcher departed for the fairer pastures of Philadelphia.¹

Joseph Belcher was neither wild nor eccentric; he was certainly no angry young man. In fact he was fifty years old in 1844. He had served in England as Baptist minister at Greenwich and from 1832 to 1840 he had acted as secretary of the newly reinvigorated Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland. He was clearly a man who enjoyed the confidence of his fellow ministers. From 1832 he had also edited *The Revivalist*, a periodical that carried news of Charles Finney's evangelistic successes in the United States.² His special hobby-horse was more the effective harvesting of souls than radicalism in public affairs. So Belcher was no political hothead. His views simply reflected his background. It might have been expected that a man upholding a rigorous dichotomy between church and state would be American, and so

¹ R. S. Wilson, "British Influence in the Nineteenth Century," in *Baptists in Canada: Search for Identity amidst Diversity* (ed. J. K. Zeman; Burlington, Ontario: G. R. Welch, 1980), 27-8.

² D. M. Lewis, ed., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography, 1730-1860* (2 vols.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), I, 78-9.

influenced by the wall of separation in the federal constitution. But Belcher did not come from the United States. His strong views on separation were derived from Britain.

Belcher's attitudes were part of the first flush of enthusiasm for what was called Voluntaryism. The belief was growing that religion was a voluntary affair, a matter of free choice and so not a proper field for government involvement. In the year before Belcher arrived in Nova Scotia, 1843, there had been a political crisis in England over the issue. The Conservative government of Sir Robert Peel was keen to promote education. There was a sullen hostility towards government among many of the workers in the growing cities, giving rise to Chartist disturbances. It was hoped that popular schooling would enlighten and civilize them. Because the government was Conservative and so closely related to the established church, it was natural to propose that the new system of education should be controlled by the Church of England. Beside the parish churches there were to be parish schools. Dissenters outside the Church of England, by contrast, would receive no state aid. The result of the proposal was a cry of outrage from Protestant Dissent. Why should the state help one denomination against all the others? Baptists protested; so did Congregationalists, with whom Baptists acted closely on public issues. Even the Wesleyan Methodists, who normally observed a "no politics" rule, were galvanised into strenuous objection. The resistance was so widespread that the government felt it prudent to withdraw its intended legislation. Dissenters had won a notable victory against a dangerous Conservative measure. Education was not to be a fiefdom of the Church of England.³

In the course of the 1843 agitation, however, Dissenters had realised that they could deploy a powerful argument to back their case. It carried some weight to say that it was unfair for government to give exclusive support to a single denomination. The state, Dissenters were contending, should not be guilty of religious discrimination. But it carried far more weight to contend that it was wrong for government to support religious education of any kind. If that argument were accepted, the schools would be securely protected from all state interference. There was a further inducement to take that line. It was axiomatic at the time that any schooling must include religion. All agreed that the Bible was to be the main textbook for learning to read. So if government were to become involved in the funding of schools, it would necessarily be concerned with Christian instruction. Radical Dissenters had already arrived at the Voluntary principle in relation to churches. The government, they believed, should not advance the interests of any religious body, because faith was essentially a personal matter. The state must leave religious institutions entirely alone. During 1843 Dissenters took an additional step, beginning to argue for the first time that the state must also leave educational institutions entirely alone. Voluntaryism was extended to the schools. Belcher arrived in Nova Scotia fresh from this debate, strongly convinced that there must be no contact between government and education. That meant that Acadia must be left to the support of voluntary donations alone. The controversy in Halifax illustrates the set of attitudes to the relations of church and state among British Baptists that had arisen immediately before Belcher's departure for the new world.

³ G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832 to 1868* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 151-60.

The constitutional background needs to be sketched in here. England and Wales possessed in the Church of England an established church. The formal link between church and state was a complex matter at many levels. The crown exercised its royal supremacy over the Church of England, for example, by choosing bishops. Those bishops then sat as “Lords Spiritual” in the House of Lords, exercising equal powers with the Lords Temporal. The House of Commons operated as the governing body of the Church of England. Since there was no separate synod for ecclesiastical affairs, all central decision-making for the church took place in the Commons. A web of interlinking legal rights bound the clergy into the system of government. Scotland was different, for there, since the seventeenth century, Presbyterianism had prevailed and so the national church contained no bishops. Yet there was an established church, for the state recognised the Church of Scotland in many and various ways. Ireland was more similar to England, for an episcopal church was established there. Since the Act of Union between Britain and Ireland of 1801, there was technically a United Church of England and Ireland. Notwithstanding the overwhelming Roman Catholicism of the population, Anglicanism was the constitutionally recognised form of religion. So there were established churches throughout the British Isles.⁴

The Church of England had become notorious for its abuses. By the 1830s considerable efforts were being made to provide remedies, but the problems were still deep-seated. One was pluralism. Members of the clergy held several posts simultaneously to enhance their incomes even though they could perform the duties of only one of them. In 1830 fully one third of incumbents were pluralists.⁵ Those who were non-resident in the parishes they were supposed to serve normally did appoint curates as replacements, but paid them only a pittance. More than half the clergy, furthermore, were chosen by lay patrons, chiefly members of the aristocracy and gentry. They often selected their own relations, commonly sons or nephews. Candidates for preferment from outside the family were sometimes expected to fawn on their potential patrons, as does Mr Collins in the (admittedly fictional) account in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. To radicals the whole system seemed hopelessly corrupt. Patronage appeared to be merely a convenient system for providing financial support for the idle dependants of the landed rich. In the early nineteenth century there were almost as many calls for the reform of the church as for the reform of parliament.

The Protestants outside the Church of England, the Dissenters, functioned in public affairs around 1800 as a single unit. “The Dissenting Interest” embraced, alongside the Baptists, the Congregationalists together with the “Presbyterians,” who were gradually turning into Unitarians. These groups shared a common view of the Church of England. Their basic conviction was that it was wrong to impose ceremonies and creeds on the individual conscience. That, however, was exactly what the state did, commanding uniformity of religion in accordance with the Book of Common Prayer. Some of the practices of the Church of England, according to Dissenters, could not stand the test of Scripture. Other

⁴ S. J. Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland and Scotland, 1801-46* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 1.

⁵ Peter Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence: Ecclesiastical Structure and Problems of Church Reform, 1700-1840* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1989), 102.

liturgical and credal points might in themselves be tolerable, but the fundamental objection was that the secular power was arrogating to itself the right to enforce religion at all. So argued, for example, Joseph Gutteridge, a prosperous London merchant and leading Baptist layman in 1812. Nevertheless he insisted that he was not on that account hostile to the Church of England. He hoped, on the contrary, that its pews would be full.⁶ Nor did his stance affect his political obligation. He felt bound to give his unqualified allegiance to the state. Dissenters such as Gutteridge held views that made them take exception to the current bond between church and state. Yet they did not draw the implication that there should be any major alteration in the relationship. Fundamental change seemed out of the question, for Dissenters were few and the state appeared ineluctably Anglican. Calls for severance between church and state were left to secular radicals such as Tom Paine. The Dissenting attitude was that the conscientious person must separate from the Church of England, not try to amend it. So Dissenters, including Baptists, did not, in the early nineteenth century, agitate for disestablishment. They were merely thankful to be tolerated.

That stance was reinforced by the circumstances of the times. The French Revolution infected Britain with a fear of a similar outbreak of social anarchy at home. In the 1770s and 1780s, Dissenters had been politically active in radical causes, notably in calling for reconciliation with the American colonies.⁷ In the 1790s, by contrast, after the French Revolution, most Dissenters avoided politics. The government of William Pitt was known to be suspicious of Dissenters, who were thought to harbour sympathy for the revolutionaries across the English Channel. It seemed only prudent for Dissenters to keep their heads down. In the wars against the French beginning in 1793 any political radicalism could be stigmatised as unpatriotic. Baptists tried to parade their loyalism. John Rippon, minister of Carter Lane, Southwark, preached to the Volunteers raised to defend the country against French invasion.⁸ Although radical tendencies survived in some quarters, they were inhibited by fear of government repression.

Religious circumstances had a similar effect. The Evangelical Revival was in full flood during the European conflict between the 1790s and the 1810s. It was the era of the foundation of the overseas missionary societies including, as the first, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in 1792. Home missionary activity was even more vigorous. The spread of the gospel, it was thought, must take priority over all other concerns, including political objectives. Some of the evangelism, furthermore, was undertaken in co-operation with other denominations, even including evangelical members of the Church of England. In this atmosphere of “catholic Christianity,” there was no question of criticising the established church. The prevailing attitude was expressed in a letter from Andrew Fuller, Baptist minister at Kettering and secretary of the BMS, to the pioneer missionary William Carey in 1797: “I am more and more of the opinion that political changes are matters from which it becomes good men in general to stand aloof...the political world is a tumultuous ocean; let those who launch deeply into it take heed lest they be drowned in

⁶ Edward Steane, *Memoir of the Life of Joseph Gutteridge, Esq., of Denmark Hill, Surrey* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1850), 65-8.

⁷ J. E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁸ Deryck Lovegrove, “English Evangelical Dissent and the European Conflict, 1789-1815,” in *The Church and War* (ed. W. J. Sheils; vol. 20 of *Studies in Church History*; Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 267.

it...Time is short, Jesus spent His in accomplishing a moral revolution in the hearts of men.”⁹ Efforts should be concentrated on gospel work, not political action, however desirable it might be. An old-fashioned Dissenter, Walter Wilson, writing in 1814, made a similar point from a different perspective. He hankered after the time when Dissenters had been staunch in the cause of civil and religious liberty. Now they had forgotten their principles, he claimed, because of evangelical catholicity. They had imbibed the “unaccountable notion” that “the affairs of government should be left to the wicked.”¹⁰ Political pressure of any kind was not on the Dissenting agenda. There was no question of trying to do anything about the condition of the established church in the opening years of the nineteenth century.

The position was totally transformed by the 1830s for a variety of reasons. For one thing, the number of Dissenters, who were increasingly called Nonconformists, grew enormously. Between 1773 and 1851 the population of England and Wales expanded by 155 per cent. Over the same period the number of Nonconformist congregations mushroomed by 975 per cent. By 1851, the year of the only official census of churchgoing ever taken in Britain, nearly half the worshippers were Nonconformists. The first half of the century was therefore a period when their numbers were swelling. To the Old Dissent from the seventeenth century was added the New Dissent of Methodism, with its vigorous evangelism and enormous growth. Baptists shared in the expansion. In 1773 there were 402 known congregations; by 1851 there were 2,789.¹¹ The Dissenting community, which in the eighteenth century had seemed marginal to national life, started to challenge the Church of England in terms of numbers. The self-confidence of Nonconformity grew, and with it a desire for equal recognition in society at large.

A second reason for a growing willingness to be more assertive was the constitutional revolution of 1828-32. Catholic emancipation came in 1829, but there were two other measures that transformed the political standing of Nonconformists. In 1828 there took place the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Originally passed in the later seventeenth century, the acts had in theory prohibited Dissenters from occupying local offices including seats on borough councils. Although in practice they were widely disregarded, they remained a slur on the political reliability of Dissenters and so were deeply resented. The repeal of 1828 meant that Nonconformists were no longer second-class citizens. Four years later came the Great Reform Act. Parliament had gone unreformed, except on points of detail, since the middle ages. Gross anomalies survived, several boroughs notoriously sending MPs to the Commons but having hardly any voters. The worst abuses were swept away in 1832. The effect was to enfranchise many Nonconformists for the first time so that, as a grouping, they carried far more weight than hitherto. They showed their new sense of power before the year was out. At the first general election for the reformed parliament, Nonconformity as a whole, together with Evangelical Anglicans, mounted a mass campaign against slavery in British territories overseas. Baptists were to the fore. William Knibb, a BMS agent in

⁹ Andrew Fuller to William Carey, 18 January 1797, in E. A. Payne, “Andrew Fuller as Letter Writer,” *Baptist Quarterly* 15 (1953-54): 295.

¹⁰ Ian Sellers, *Nineteenth-Century Nonconformity* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 3.

¹¹ M. R. Watts, *The Dissenters: Volume 2: The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity, 1791-1859* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 24, 27.

Jamaica, travelled the country calling for abolition of the institution and on one occasion dramatically brandishing slave shackles.¹² The result, alongside the carrying of abolition in the first session of parliament, was the mobilisation of Dissent for a political object. Nonconformity showed itself that it was capable of successfully flexing its political muscles.

A third development was the eclipse of the Unitarian leadership of Dissent. Traditionally, Baptists and other Dissenters had followed the guidance of the English Presbyterians in public affairs. The Presbyterians were generally of higher social standing, including several MPs in their ranks, and so their leadership was natural. It continued even while they were becoming Unitarian in theology. Their views were characteristically moderate. Believing in reasonable and respectable behaviour in all spheres, in public affairs they favoured accepting whatever concessions the Whig grandees were disposed to grant them. Such views were embodied in the Dissenting Deputies, the organisation of London laymen that existed to defend the civil rights of Dissenters, and especially its chairman, the Unitarian William Smith. In 1828, immediately after the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, Smith wrote as follows to Lord Holland, the Whig peer:

As for the Conduct prudent to be pursued by the Diss[entin]g Body at the present time, I have publicly advised the most conciliatory Course - declarations of Satisfaction on all proper Occasions, with what has been done, & a constant readiness to meet Members of the Establishm[en]t with open Hearts and friendly dispositions; not fastidiously dwelling on the comparative Trifles of Difference that yet remain. . . . The only Grievance really grievous now remaining is too closely interwoven with the Establishment itself to be as yet seriously attacked - viz. the compelling us to pay rates for Building, endowing &c &c the New Churches....¹³

The letter breathes a spirit of respectful deference and the question of raising the relationship of church and state is clearly beyond bounds. That attitude on the part of Dissent was soon to be swept away. Orthodox Nonconformists became dissatisfied with the passivity of the Unitarian leaders. Furthermore their evangelical theology made them restive in being yoked together with an unorthodox denomination. Eventually, in 1836, the Unitarians, believing that co-operation with the orthodox was no longer practicable, withdrew from the Dissenting Deputies. Already, four years earlier, Smith had been replaced as their chairman by the Baptist Henry Weymouth.¹⁴ The changes were indications that Evangelical Dissent was becoming more willing to press its own interests.

These circumstances precipitated an upsurge of Dissenting agitation over church-state relations in the years 1833-34. Towns held public meetings, petitions to parliament were drawn up, memorials of Dissenting views were issued. Baptists participated fully in this break with traditional attitudes. In the bewildering variety of statements published at this time, three broad positions can be distinguished. First,

¹² E. A. Payne, *Freedom in Jamaica: Some Chapters in the Story of the Baptist Missionary Society* (London: Carey Press, 1946), 41.

¹³ William Smith to Lord Holland, n. d. [after 28 April 1828], Holland House Papers, British Library.

¹⁴ B. L. Manning, *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 69-80, 481.

there was the bare assertion of grievances. Many Nonconformists simply demanded the removal of their practical disabilities. In a sense, what they wanted was the completion of toleration, a full end to civil penalties for religious belief. Several issues were canvassed. There were calls for a public system for the registration of births, marriages and deaths. The existing arrangements consisted merely of the parish registers maintained by the clergy. The only way in which the arrival of infants could be recorded was by entries for their christenings and so Baptists were necessarily excluded. Serious problems could arise in consequence: a clergyman might decline to conduct a burial service for someone without a baptismal record; or he might refuse to marry a Baptist who, in his view, lacked a Christian name.¹⁵ Another disability was associated with marriage itself. Since 1753, the only legal marriages, except for those of Jews and Quakers, had to take place in Anglican churches. Most Dissenters could not have their wedding in their own places of worship. They did have the right to burial in the parish churchyards, but not according to their own form of worship. Funerals had to include a ceremony performed by the parson, not by the Dissenting minister. The cost of the upkeep of the parish churches, furthermore, was levied on propertied parishioners whether or not they attended. Hence Dissenters who had their own meeting houses to maintain were compelled to pay church rates for buildings that were not their own as well. And degrees were not available at the ancient English universities—a deprivation of less concern to Baptists since they produced few who might have been eligible for higher education. The list of disabilities, however, amounted to a substantial catalogue overall. Many Dissenters' meetings in 1833-34 simply called for remedies for these grievances without considering the basic question of church and state. That was commonly the case at more out-of-the-way places such as Devonport and Abergavenny.¹⁶ Some Nonconformists would have been content if the established church merely ceased to infringe their liberties.

Others, however, went beyond practical disabilities to the theoretical issue of establishment. Thus at Newcastle, F. A. Cox, Baptist minister at Mare Street, Hackney, was one of the speakers. "But suppose [he remarked] all these grievances redressed, would their ground of complaint be then entirely removed? By no means. The great grievance still remained - viz., the alliance between the Church and State."¹⁷ Yet this position was often a relatively moderate one. Its advocates might ideally wish for the separation of church and state, but they often rejected political action as the way to achieve it. Joseph Jarrom, for example, the tutor of the General Baptist academy at Wisbech, argued that as the nation became enlightened, all connection between church and state would be dissolved. "Let not Dissenters," he declared, "become agitators, and imitate some of the worst men in the Kingdom."¹⁸ No doubt the disciples of Tom Paine were in his mind. A combination of theoretical disestablishmentarianism with very

¹⁵ *Baptist Magazine* (May 1833): 229. Minutes, Vol. 2 (22 June 1835) Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty Records, Dr Williams's Library, London.

¹⁶ *Patriot* (25 December 1833): 429; *ibid.*, (1 January 1834): 6.

¹⁷ *Patriot* (8 January 1834): 11.

¹⁸ Joseph Jarrom to editor, *Patriot* (18 December 1833): 423.

limited proposals for action was characteristic of London Dissenters.¹⁹ They were more respectable, often more educated, perhaps more worldly-wise. Voluntaryism as a political philosophy, together with inhibitions about actual pressure as tainted with a suspect radicalism, was a formula well fitted to metropolitan tastes.

The truly radical position was that church and state must be torn apart. At a public meeting in Birmingham, where the Baptist minister Thomas Swan presided, there was agreement on a memorial claiming that grievances could not be fully remedied until the separation of church and state. At Manchester the attenders of a similar gathering announced that all establishments are wrong and declared their intention of exerting themselves to end them.²⁰ From Nottingham a delegation of two was sent to the Prime Minister, Lord Grey. One was the General Baptist minister Hugh Hunter, the other the Quaker William Howitt. At their interview Lord Grey expressed the wish that their memorial had confined itself to practical grievances. "Did they," he asked rhetorically, "want to do away with all establishments of religion?" "Precisely!" replied Howitt, and Grey was horrified.²¹ The programme of disestablishment was usually adopted not in obscure places and not in the capital but in towns like Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham—the great provincial cities that were rising to prominence in an industrial age. Here was the Nonconformist policy of the future.

This radical approach made headway among Baptists during the 1830s and 1840s.²² There were several reasons for its increasing popularity. Evangelical Nonconformists saw the alliance of church and state as a handicap for the gospel. A public meeting of the Baptist Union resolved unanimously in 1839 that the establishment was "the most formidable obstacle in the land to the diffusion of true piety."²³ The Anglican system encouraged unconverted younger sons of the gentry to enter the ministry for the sake of a regular income. They did not preach the gospel, and so hungry flocks went unfed. Disestablishment, with its corollary of disendowment, would end the attractions of the church for such men. The strong element of anti-clericalism in this critique was reinforced from the late 1830s by the rise of the Oxford Movement. Now clergy seemed to be introducing Roman Catholic doctrine into the Church of England, and so the powerful anti-Catholicism of the chapels was roused against the established church. If the Church of England taught a message contrary to Scripture, it constituted a threat to souls, a spiritual danger, something intrinsically wrong. When evangelicals decided that anything was wrong—whether slavery or an establishment—they mobilised against it.

Secular attitudes exerted a similar effect. There was a growing feeling that to accord special privilege to one denomination was unfair. There should be equitable treatment of all denominations under the watchword of "religious equality." The Church of England, furthermore, contravened the basic principles

¹⁹ David Bebbington, "The Dissenting Political Upsurge of 1833-34," in *Modern Christianity and Cultural Aspirations* (ed. David Bebbington and Timothy Larsen; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) 232-3.

²⁰ *Patriot* (19 February 1834): 57.

²¹ *Patriot* (29 January 1834): 39.

²² The attitudes of Dissenters from the 1840s to the 1860s are set out in Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in the Mid-Victorian England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1999).

²³ Minutes of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1833-1842 (1 May 1839), Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford, 181.

of political economy, which was growingly accepted in this period. It was a “church monopoly.” In the economic sphere, it was generally agreed, there should be no regulations giving one party the advantage over another. Why should the same principle not apply to the religious sphere? Good quality Christian merchandise would drive bad out of the market so long as the bad was not artificially favoured. The government, according to Francis Clowes, a tutor at the Baptist Horton Academy near Bradford, in 1843, had no right to interfere in trade or in religion.²⁴ Voluntaryism seemed the natural counterpart of economic liberalism. Disestablishment was bound up with the rising tide of liberal thought that marked the early Victorian period.

Two examples from outside England and Wales encouraged the disestablishers. In Scotland, the Seceders from the established church were active during the 1830s in pressing for the removal of all Dissenting disabilities in the name of Voluntaryism. In 1834, a Voluntary Church Society was established in England in imitation of the Scottish pioneers, drawing Baptists including Charles Stovel into its ranks.²⁵ America provided an even more attractive example, because there its establishments had already been abolished and yet evangelical religion flourished. “All things,” wrote Stovel in 1834, “relating to religion in America are perfectly free.”²⁶ In 1851 John Howard Hinton, a secretary of the Baptist Union, wrote a book entitled *The Test of Experience: or, The Voluntary Principle in the United States*.²⁷ To many the American experience seemed to vindicate efforts to overthrow establishments in Britain.

Early successes in exerting political pressure also fostered the belief that Dissenting aims could be achieved. Calls for relief brought results because the Whig governments of the 1830s were distinctly sympathetic. In 1836 civil registration was introduced. In 1837 there was legislation allowing Dissenters to be married in their own chapels. Already in 1834 there had been an unsuccessful bill to open Oxford and Cambridge degrees to Nonconformists. Although it failed, the measure was another symptom of a willingness to redress grievances. No progress was made at a national level to deal with church rates, but in several local cases they were terminated by Nonconformist votes in the vestries that set them.²⁸ At Scarborough, for instance, the doughty Baptist minister Benjamin Evans successfully resisted attempts to levy a church rate there three times during the 1830s.²⁹ Inexorably progress was being made towards Dissenting political objectives. Disestablishment seemed a reasonable ultimate target.

The education controversies of the period inevitably raised the church/state question in an acute form. Before 1833, there was no state involvement in education in England and Wales whatsoever. In that year for the first time the reforming government gave grants to promote schooling to the Anglican National Society and the undenominational British Society, which enjoyed much Dissenting support. There were several attempts over the next twenty years to expand and regularise the flow of public money to education. Each time Baptists were roused to express their point of view, most decisively, as we have

²⁴ Francis Clowes to editor, *Baptist Magazine* (May 1843): 272.

²⁵ *Patriot* (10 May 1834): 163.

²⁶ *Baptist Magazine*, Supplement (1834): 539.

²⁷ J. H. Hinton, *The Test of Experience: or, The Voluntary Principle in the United States* (London: A. Cockshaw, 1851).

²⁸ W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1972), 178-89.

²⁹ Christine Paine, “Benjamin Evans of Scarborough, 1803-1871,” *Baptist Quarterly* 21 (1965-66): 174.

seen, in 1843. Hinton was one of those who in that year declared that Nonconformists could not accept the right of the state to interfere in religious education at all.³⁰ Thus the Voluntary principle was extended to education. Hinton went later on to identify with the Voluntary School Society that tried to raise money for schooling entirely independent of government.³¹ Not all Nonconformists embraced educational Voluntaryism, but that principle became general among Baptists. In 1847 the Baptist Union revoked a previous endorsement of the British Society because it continued to receive a public grant.³² Schooling, which necessarily touched the lives of many Baptists, stirred them to back the radical programme for church/state relations put forward by Voluntaries.

An organisation was soon set up to channel the newly released energies of Dissent towards separation of church and state. In 1844 the Anti-State Church Association was formed by the Congregational minister Edward Miall, who already published the militant newspaper *The Nonconformist*. The association acted as the focus of the disestablishment movement for the rest of the century, taking the name of the Liberation Society in 1853. It gathered extensive Baptist support, the Baptist Union being the only denominational body to be officially represented at its foundation conference. Baptists played a prominent part in the society. Of the first set of officers, the treasurer was Thomas Price, the Baptist editor of *The Eclectic Review*, and one of the two secretaries alongside Miall was F. A. Cox of Hackney. C. J. Foster, Professor of Jurisprudence at University College, London, was the dynamic organiser of the society's Parliamentary Committee from 1856 to 1863.³³ The society's well publicised efforts to champion the Nonconformist cause did much to further a rigorous disestablishmentarianism.

For these reasons, the urgent need for the separation of church and state became a normal Baptist attitude in the later nineteenth century. The main monthly denominational periodicals were committed to the cause: *The Baptist Magazine* that lasted the whole century, the shorter-lived *The Church* (1844-65), and *The Baptist Examiner* (1844-45). Crucially, the denominational weekly begun in 1855, *The Freeman*, took the same line. Its original editors were Benjamin Evans and Francis Clowes, two of the most ardent disestablishers. Successive issues were interpreted in the light of the imperative to free the Church of England from its alliance with the state. In 1861, for instance, there was published *Essays and Reviews*, a volume that created worries because its Anglican authors espoused several of the assumptions of German higher critics of the Bible. The controversy that ensued was plainly theological, not political. Yet the Baptist Union resolution, after deprecating the book's teaching, continued as follows: "That these efforts are more deeply to be deplored, because their force is greatly augmented through the alliance of the Church of England with the civil power, by virtue of which alliance the teachers of error are supported out of national property, and from the taxation of English citizens, multitudes of whom abhor the error,

³⁰ *Baptist Magazine* (October 1843): 523.

³¹ *Baptist Magazine* (June 1854): 354-5.

³² *Baptist Magazine* (August 1847): 512.

³³ W. H. Mackintosh, *Disestablishment and Liberation: The Movement for the Separation of the Anglican Church from State Control* (London: Epworth Press, 1972), 28, 58-9.

and yet are thus compelled to uphold and maintain it.”³⁴ The controversy was an excuse for scoring another point against the church establishment. Even Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great preacher of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, was drawn in. He was one of the platform speakers, for example, at the 1868 Triennial Conference of the Liberation Society.³⁵ The disestablishment principle was part of the creed of a normal Victorian Baptist.

Several qualifications, however, have to be made to this generalisation. Wholehearted endorsement of the Liberationist cause was not universal for a number of reasons. In some quarters, for one thing, there was opposition to political activity aiming for disestablishment. Public affairs seemed too worldly to some. In Scotland, the influential James Haldane published in 1839 a pamphlet entitled *The Voluntary Question Political not Religious*. Campaigning for Voluntarism, he contended, was to be eschewed by the true Christian.³⁶ Ten years later James Lister of Liverpool said much the same about politics in general: “I cannot reconcile this warm part in all political matters which is taken and openly defended, with the spirit of Christ's kingdom, which is not of this world, nor with the true position of Christians as strangers and pilgrims on earth. Nor have I ever seen one example in which devotedness to politics did not injure the spirituality and piety of the individual.”³⁷ Others, though content with participation in public affairs, were averse to Voluntarism. Thus Hugh Stowell Brown of Liverpool remained unpersuaded of the disestablishment cause.³⁸ Consequently the separation of church and state enjoyed less unanimous support among Baptists than their periodicals might lead one to suppose.

There were specific reservations about the Liberation Society. Edward Miall, the moving force of the society, could be intemperate in his denunciations of the Church of England. That is partly why, as Thomas Price noted in 1846, distinguished Baptists were standing aloof from the association. They accepted the Voluntary principle, he said, but they did not believe in organised action.³⁹ Reservations over agitation clearly persisted. Even John Howard Hinton, who had thrown himself into the organisation's early work, withdrew after 1855 because he found it too militant for his liking.⁴⁰ Later in the century, as it became necessary to convince secular-minded MPs of the validity of its case, the Liberation Society dwelt far less on the religious reasons for disestablishment and encouraged freethinkers to join. In 1891 Spurgeon left the society in a burst of publicity because he did not wish to be yoked by it to unbelievers.⁴¹ So the organisation that did most to rally supporters to the cause could also alienate them.

Another factor weakening the campaign was the gradual disappearance of grievances. Partly because attention was drawn to Dissenting disabilities by the Liberation Society, the Liberal party of the later part of the century took them up and provided remedies. In 1868 W. E. Gladstone ended

³⁴ *Baptist Magazine* (March 1863): 175.

³⁵ *Baptist Magazine* (June 1868): 377.

³⁶ J. A. Haldane, *The Voluntary Question Political not Religious: A Letter to the Rev. Dr. John Brown* (Edinburgh: William Whyte and Co., 1839).

³⁷ *Baptist Magazine* (January 1849): 7.

³⁸ W. S. Caine, ed., *Hugh Stowell Brown* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1887), 63.

³⁹ *Baptist Magazine* (December 1846): 778-81.

⁴⁰ Lewis, ed., *Biographical Dictionary*, I, 557.

⁴¹ D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870-1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 28.

compulsory church rates; in 1871 university tests for most degrees at the ancient universities were abolished; and in 1880 Dissenters were granted the right to use their own form of burial ceremony in parish graveyards. Although minor grievances survived into the twentieth century, the sense of harsh treatment by the laws of the land decayed. In 1869 disestablishment was actually enacted for Ireland. It was thought at first that the English establishment would soon be ended, but in fact the removal of the most anomalous established church tended to reduce the pressure on the others. Only in Wales, where disestablishment turned into a national cause, was the campaign finally successful, in 1920. In England and Scotland the bond between church and state, though in very different forms, survives to this day. So the steady erosion of pressure points had the effect of weakening support for the main ultimate aim.

There were also problems in applying Voluntary theory to the issues of the day. How far should the principle of the non-interference of government in religion be taken? The fast days during the Crimean War raised the question in an acute form. Baptists approved of times of national humiliation to pray for victory, but should they accept that the state had the authority to proclaim a fast day? Compliance would imply the acceptance of secular powers in the religious sphere; but non-compliance might suggest indifference to a Christian duty. The Baptist Union was reduced in 1855 to the rather weak compromise of requesting an alteration in the language of the proclamation so that the observance became voluntary.⁴² More persistent was the problem of Sunday. Was the state's enforcement of sabbath legislation to be endorsed? As evangelicals, Baptists cared deeply about the hallowing of the Lord's day; but as Dissenters they had qualms about legislation compelling people to perform a religious obligation. Consistent Voluntaries such as James Acworth, the principal of Horton Academy, rejected sabbath enforcement by the civil power.⁴³ Most Baptists, however, like other Nonconformists persuaded themselves that there were social, rather than religious, grounds that justified, for example, the prohibition of Sunday trading.⁴⁴ But the effect of these differences of opinion was to lay bare the problematic nature of Voluntaryism. It was hard to turn it into a wholly coherent political philosophy, and so its persuasive power was diminished. Baptists were not as entrenched in their Voluntarist perspective as might at first appear.

The issue became most pressing over education. The question of the relations between church, state and schools would not go away. By the late 1860s it had become clear that the mass of the population would receive no formal education at all unless the state moved in. Hence the 1870 Education Act set up publicly funded elementary schools wherever there were no existing places of instruction. For Nonconformists the measure raised a central point of Voluntary theory. They had generally held that the state must sponsor no religious education. Now they could simply abandon that position, arguing that government help was essential, and some took this course. The Bible, they held, should continue to be taught in the schools as it always had been. Others, however, pursued the logic of their earlier Voluntary position. Since religion and the state must be kept apart and the state was now providing schools, there must be no religious teaching in the national system of education at all.

⁴² *Baptist Magazine* (June 1855): 358.

⁴³ David Milner, "J. P. Chown, 1821-1886," *Baptist Quarterly* 25 (1973-74): 17.

⁴⁴ John Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 99-101.

The Bible must be excluded from the schools; the churches must assume sole responsibility for the religious instruction of the young. At first the Baptist Union accepted this so-called secular solution.⁴⁵ It proved, however, unpopular in the chapel pews. Why, asked ordinary Nonconformists, should the Bible be banished from the schools? The Education Act itself was a compromise measure. Religion was to be taught, but it was not to be distinctive of one denomination. The instruction could be biblical, but it must be undenominational. As Nonconformists became accustomed to this policy in operation, they began to regard it as theirs. In 1887 the Baptist leader Charles Williams declared that in theory the members of his denomination wanted a secular education system. In practice, however, he explained that they generally accepted the unsectarian Bible teaching given in the publicly-provided schools.⁴⁶ By the end of the century few Baptists extended their Voluntarism to education. They had come to accept that the state might have a role in encouraging the common faith of the community.

These factors sapped the strength of radical disestablishmentarianism. By the last years of the century the movement for the separation of church and state was clearly in decay. The Liberation Society was not covering its costs and there were few new recruits. Some younger men, in fact, were willing to challenge traditional shibboleths. In 1894, for example, E. J. Poole-Connor, the twenty-two-year-old Baptist minister in the garrison town of Aldershot, expressed a willingness to take a state stipend as a military chaplain.⁴⁷ In the twentieth century disestablishment was to be a fading cause among Baptists. Ernest Payne, the general secretary of the Baptist Union, was actually to be responsible for the eventual closing down of the Liberation Society in the 1950s.⁴⁸

What, then, was the significance of the issue of church and state among nineteenth-century Baptists? It illustrates the perennial tension for the Christian between political passivity and political activity. Evangelical Christians such as the Baptists take the transmission of the gospel as a supreme value. Many in the early nineteenth century thought spiritual work of this kind so transcendently important as to demand the avoidance of questioning church/state relationships. Concentration on the cause of the gospel, together with co-operation with any others who would join in its propagation, formed the overriding priority. Later in the century some such as Haldane and Lister continued to hold this view. The gospel for the individual was so crucial that all effort must go into it. Politics was no more than a worldly diversion. Such Baptists opted for passivity.

Others, however, saw politics in a different light. When there was a righteous cause, it could legitimately be pursued. The interests of the gospel might actually compel action. If the Church of England's establishment constituted an obstacle to the gospel, it must be swept away. Furthermore, according to those who thought like Edward Miall, the rule of Christ should not be limited to the private sphere of the individual. The Lord must rule over public life as well as in the believer's heart. This stance

⁴⁵ *Baptist Magazine* (November 1869): 698.

⁴⁶ Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 132.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁸ Information from the late Dr E. A. Payne.

pointed towards the social gospel resolution of the issue that prevailed in the thought of John Clifford at the end of the century and into the twentieth.⁴⁹ Many Baptists went into politics with this motive. At least a quarter of Baptists who entered the ministry between 1810 and 1849 were active in politics, and almost all would have taken up the disestablishment question.⁵⁰ It was felt to be the cause of Christ himself and therefore a vocation suitable for a minister of the gospel.

The differences of opinion over the relations of church and state therefore reflected contrasting strategies of mission. Should the gospel be promoted solely by evangelism? Or might it also be advanced by political action? The tension would not go away. Perhaps it was a result of being in the world, and so bound up with public life, and yet not of it, and so concerned with the gospel of eternal life. Consequently it is not surprising that some Baptists desired to escape political entanglements altogether; that others wanted no more than the removal of the disabilities imposed on them by the state; that others believed in the separation of church and state, but stopped short of agitation; that others again tried to press the Voluntary cause with all their powers; and that still others insisted that Voluntaryism must be applied rigorously to every sphere including education. Joseph Belcher was among the last group, the most militant of all. That is why, in 1844, he fell foul of the Nova Scotia Baptists over the funding of Acadia College.⁵¹

⁴⁹ David Thompson, "John Clifford's Social Gospel," *Baptist Quarterly* 31 (1985-86):199-217.

⁵⁰ K. D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales, 1800-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 209.

⁵¹ I am grateful to Acadia Divinity College, Nova Scotia, for the invitation to deliver this paper as one of the Hayward Lectures in 1998.