

The Church of England in Industrialising Society. The Lancashire Parish of Whalley in the Eighteenth Century

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In the essentially voluntary world of religious practice that was brought into being by the Toleration Act of 1689, the Church of England was compelled to compete for the allegiance of its members. The situation that prevailed in the parish of Whalley at the beginning of the nineteenth century suggests that the eighteenth century Church of England lacked both the competence and the resources to rise to this challenge in the industrialising areas of Northern England (p. 198).

Thus concludes this fascinating survey of Anglican life in the north-east Lancashire parish of Whalley. Such a conclusion fixes Dr Snape's work firmly in the context of the debate between 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' historians of the eighteenth-century Church of England that was characteristic of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The persistence of the preoccupation with issues of success and failure measured against essentially Victorian benchmarks has recently been criticised by Mark Goldie as leaving the study of the Hanoverian church 'overcast by what must be the longest shadow in modern historiography'.⁽¹⁾ If this is the case with Michael Snape's study of Whalley, it is important to recognise that this is not entirely the responsibility of the author. The book is based on a Birmingham University PhD thesis completed in 1994, when the questions it raises were fresh ones; and had the author not been the victim of lengthy delays with an earlier publisher, it would have constituted a timely and provocative contribution to a very live debate. Moreover, belated though its appearance may have been, there is still much to be gained from a careful reading of this text.

As befits a contribution to a hard-fought debate, *The Church of England in Industrialising Society* is overtly polemical in intention. Snape suggests that 'optimistic' historians of the Hanoverian church 'have followed the lead of nineteenth-century sociologists and of contemporary churchmen who were reluctant to look too hard at the underlying causes of their own pastoral problems' (p 198). In a thoroughgoing attempt to refurbish the 'pessimistic' case, he instead chooses to highlight the critique offered by later Hanoverian Evangelicals from both inside and outside the church. Here Snape has the advantage of possessing, in the work of the Evangelical topographer and vicar of Whalley, Thomas Dunham Whitaker, a locally focused example of such a critique. Indeed, much of the book might be considered as a commentary on parts of Whitaker's great work, *An History of the Original Parish of Whalley and Honor of Clitheroe* (Blackburn, 1801), and, in particular, on Whitaker's criticism of earlier generations of clergy 'too often contemptible for their poverty among the rich, their ignorance among the refined, and their bad morals among the devout; so that for the want of a well-informed, respectable and respected ministry, a country antecedently superstitious and stupid has never been thoroughly evangelised to the present day' (p. 136).⁽²⁾

An introduction sets the scene by sketching in both the terms of debate and the social, economic and demographic context in which the church had to work. Whalley, probably the largest parish in England, contained at the start of the eighteenth century 71 distinct townships under the care of a mother church and 17 chapels. Stimulated by the growth of textile manufactures, Snape estimates that the population doubled between 1720 and 1778, and had more than trebled by 1801. This presented a considerable challenge to the church, which was reflected in the growth, after the middle of the century, of alternatives to the establishment – especially Baptists and Methodists.

The first chapter examines the issue of popular attachment to the church, arguing that patterns of practice and the services provided by the clergy were powerfully shaped by the preferences of the laity. This was bad news for practices like the teaching of catechism and public baptism in church which were not well supported. A range of other indicators of popular adherence to Anglicanism is considered. These include parish feasts, rush bearings, bell-ringing, and Church and King riots, all of which were flourishing in the mid century, but most of which were in decline or becoming detached from the church by its end. The difficulty of raising Church Rates is noted, and the resort to private subscriptions for schemes to increase seating is analysed, concluding that the primary motive was the provision of seats for the well-to-do rather than an altruistic desire to increase accommodation for the poor. Popular attachment to the church was on the wane by the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the remainder of the book sets out to discover why. It is refreshing that Snape's first resort on this quest is not an investigation of ecclesiastical structures but of the relationship between the church and folk Christianity. The people of Whalley, he argues, inhabited a universe rich in invocations of the supernatural, which the clergy tended to regard as superstitious but which the people saw as entirely compatible with their Christian allegiance. This 'discrepancy between the tenets of Anglican orthodoxy and the needs and aspirations of ordinary Anglicans' tended to put the church at a disadvantage in competition with rivals, especially Methodists and Roman Catholics, who were more prepared to confront popular supernaturalism on its own terms. This is an important conclusion which confirms an existing body of work on folk religion.⁽³⁾ It is also suggestive of the potential difficulties that

the spread of certain kinds of Enlightenment rationalism may have introduced into the relationship between clergy and people.

The determination to analyse the church from the point of view of its parishioners, which is one of the most valuable features of Snape's work, also shapes the two central chapters of the book. These consider the church's role in philanthropy and education and in the regulation of morality. In relation to the former, Snape charts a gradual change, in line with general trends in eighteenth-century philanthropy, away from short-term relief to benefactions aimed at longer-term improvement. Older charities declined over the century as a consequence of inflation and poor management, while the vagaries of charitable endowment left some chapelries much less well off than others. The tendency to appropriate charitable endowments to supplement poor relief further alienated the poor. All of these were damaging developments for a church previously seen as the guarantor of communal charity. The area did see an expansion, backed by the church, in charity school provision – especially in the second half of the century. However, a combination of expense and curricular conservatism limited the impact of charity schools, while the resources poured into them probably hampered the introduction of Sunday schools. These, in contrast to the general pattern in the region as a whole, did not begin to take off in Whalley until towards the end of the eighteenth century. The analysis of the role of the church in regulating morality, especially via the church courts, also reveals a story of decline. The courts' functions were gradually narrowed by the intrusion of Statute Law, their sanctions fell into disrepute, and changing popular attitudes to sexual mores eroded the moral consensus which made ecclesiastical justice operable. This was not a linear process and either national crises, like the American Revolution, or dynamic episcopal leadership, like that offered by Samuel Peploe, might have produced a revival. The process was inexorable, nonetheless, and the withdrawal of lay support ultimately spelled the end for a system which had given the institutional church a central role in the life of the community.

The final two chapters begin to shift the focus a little away from the point of view of the parishioners (though this remains a vital consideration) and on to an analysis of the capacity of the clergy to respond to the situation with which they were faced. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, most of the livings within the parish were of small value but nevertheless maintained a mainly resident clergy. The rest of the century saw an improvement in the value of the livings via the mechanisms created by Queen Anne's Bounty, but this had two disadvantages. First, the augmentation of the livings occurred via a scheme that resulted in much of the patronage of the rectory falling into private hands, and second, the better paid incumbents of the second half of the century had a greater tendency to non-residence. Neither arrangement proved to be satisfactory. In the earlier period, Whalley's curates were largely local and undistinguished. Although this had advantages in reducing the social distance between clergy and people, the participation of clergy in a common recreational culture centred on the alehouse, for example, created many opportunities for delinquency. At the same time, their marginal social position left them open to the pressure and even malice of their neighbours. Of the 96 clergy who served in the parish of Whalley between 1689 and 1789 at least 11 or 11.5 per cent were the subject of serious complaint or prosecution – most of these cases occurring before 1750. This cannot have helped the cause of the church, and while the more respectable clergy of the second half of the century may have been less vulnerable in this respect, their greater degree of non-residence and seduction by polite culture tended to make them less than ideal pastors for a parish like Whalley. A brief conclusion introduces material from an episcopal visitation of 1804 to demonstrate a further deterioration in popular adherence to Anglicanism as represented in church attendance and attempts to assess the significance of the findings presented in the book as a whole. These, Snape argues, are significant in two respects: they qualify the optimistic revisionist literature on the eighteenth-century church and, by introducing the consideration of new issues little touched upon by optimists, they call for a much more gloomy verdict on the performance of the church as a whole.

Snape certainly deserves a good deal of credit for addressing a range of new issues in a novel and often engaging manner. However, a few reservations remain about both the methodology and the conclusions of the work. First, the author has an occasional tendency to give a rather minimalist account of alternative views. For example, in describing on his final page a more optimistic account of eighteenth century Anglicanism in northern England, he suggests that its 'claims' rest 'on a limited range of evidence, which

comprises the regularity of religious services, the popularity of some of the local clergy and a high incidence of church-building work.' In fact, in the case of the example cited, the conclusions rest not just on the regularity of religious services, but their development in the face of demographic expansion, not just on the popularity of local clergy but on evidence of high rates of residence and devoted pastoral care, not just on a high rate of church-building work but on the nature of its financing and its effect on the accommodation of the poor. They rest too on examples of pastoral innovation in areas such as catechising and the introduction of Sunday schools and also on sustained and active popular involvement with the church via, for example, the provision of music. (This latter issue is surprisingly absent from Snape's work given the appearance especially of southern parts of the parish in other published work on the subject.)(4) Such an approach is understandable given the demands of space and a desire to point up the novelty of one's own conclusions, but the construction of straw men is unlikely to advance the debate.

Second, there is sometimes an apparent tendency to reductionism – perhaps especially when assessing the attitudes of the middle-class and gentry supporters of the church. Snape is surely right, for example, to draw our attention to the potentially self-interested dimension of schemes for re-pewing churches, which could be an expression of a desire on the part of the local middling-sort to see their social status properly reflected in church. However, even if we were to conclude this was the primary motivation, it does not follow that it was the only one. In 1788, Thomas Whitaker, acting in the character of a local gentleman, entirely rebuilt the dilapidated chapel at Holme, with the aid of some subscribers and at a personal cost of £470. Since he had previously acquired the advowson and was to present himself to the curacy when it became vacant in 1797 (5), it is possible that Whitaker's motives, like those of other subscribers to church-building and seating schemes in the parish, were mixed, but it is implausible to suggest that a desire to improve church accommodation for the inhabitants of his chapel did not form part of the mixture.

A similar problem arises from the extensive use made of material relating to legal disputes and court cases. This material is certainly well deployed and adds substantially to the novelty of the work, as well as giving a certain picaresque quality to the narrative. However, the reader is not always clear that the author has fully allowed for the fact that such material generally reflects the pathology of parochial life rather than its normal condition. That some parishioners were prepared to go to law to assert proprietorial rights over pews, for example, is predictable given the complex of eighteenth-century attitudes to property and social status. Such incidents do not, however, provide a *straightforward* indication of general attitudes to the use of pews, especially when their owners were absent. Similarly, it is certainly appropriate to discuss in detail the 11.5 per cent of Whalley clergy who were the subject of serious complaint by their parishioners, but we discover comparatively little about the 88.5 per cent who were not. Again, this is entirely understandable, given the nature of the available source material on these clergy, but it will influence the weight attached to the conclusions drawn.

Both these methodological problems are compounded by a further one – that in this work at least, Snape tends largely to steer clear of a systematic presentation of potentially quantifiable evidence which might have allowed a more rigorous assessment of the significance of the illustrative material which he includes. To take the issue of seating as an example again, it would have greatly assisted an evaluation of the ‘progress’ of the church in eighteenth-century Whalley, had the author been able to make an estimate of the extent to which church accommodation increased over the period, what the balance between free and appropriated seating might have been and whether and at what level rents were charged for appropriated seats. We know from studies elsewhere that neither appropriation nor seat rents *necessarily* excluded the poor (6) and, clearly, disputes over proprietorial rights would be more or less significant according to the adequacy of seating provision elsewhere in church. It is entirely possible that the absence of this material simply indicates a lack of evidence, but it would have been useful to have had the author’s reflections on this point. A second example is the issue of the deployment of the clergy. As noted above, the issue of clerical residence is important to Snape’s argument especially in relation to the state of the church after 1750. However, the lack of a systematic presentation of the changing deployment of Whalley’s resident clergy *and* the arrangements made to cover cases of non-residence over the whole period makes it difficult to evaluate the significance of the examples he provides (p. 145).

Finally, the overall argument of the work is somewhat vitiated by the rather slender evidence for any substantial disaffection to the church in the eighteenth century. The main evidence cited for such disaffection comes from replies to bishop Porteus’s visitation queries of 1778 concerning church attendance. Snape twice notes that these indicate a *significant* number of non-attenders in the parish (pp. 24, 194) and he refers to five visitation returns to support this conclusion. Four of these are quoted, three make reference to the size of the problem, two use descriptive terminology:

‘a few of ye lowest order’ and ‘few in number’, one makes an estimate of the actual number of non-attenders: ‘may be about twelve’. This last example is from the small chapelry of Downham whose population is given by Snape as 428 in 1778. If, on this basis, one conservatively estimated the eligible Anglican churchgoing population of the chapelry at, say, 240, that would give a figure for regular non-attendance of 5 per cent. It is rather difficult to see why it should be more *significant* that the glass was 5 per cent empty than that it was 95 per cent full at Downham. Moreover, Snape’s attempt to use this material as evidence for decline is unsustainable given that there are no comparable figures for the beginning of the century – they might be evidence of a growth in attendance for all the reader can tell. When we move into the early nineteenth century and compare the 1778 returns with similar estimates made in 1804, the results are patchy but there does seem to be evidence of a worsened, though stabilised, situation in some chapelries. That, however, might appear to fit better with the picture of an adequate or even ‘successful’ establishment, overwhelmed late in the century by a series of large-scale changes, especially in demography, which is familiar from other studies, rather than Snape’s picture of a church suffering from a progressive disease whose major symptoms should have become visible rather earlier than this chronology allows.

Despite these reservations, this remains an extremely valuable work which, if we extract it from the framework of the debate over success and failure, is richly suggestive of interpretative possibilities. We might, for example, see the long eighteenth century not so much in terms of progress or decline but of transformation. On the one hand, as Snape himself notes, we see the gradual working out of the consequences of the Toleration Act as the church was transformed from being at least partially a coercive structure into almost entirely a pastoral one. On the other, we see the gradual evolution and the complex interplay at parochial level and of at least three different models of Anglicanism. One was incarnated by the clergy – evolving over the century from a condition that was, at least potentially, stronger on affection than respect into one characterised by rising wealth and respectability, with all the potential dangers inherent in such a position. The idiosyncrasy of the Whalley clergy is particularly suggestive of the value of investigating and comparing *local* clerical cultures. A second was a popular model of the church combining a minimalist understanding of the activity incumbent on a loyal supporter of the establishment with a robust supernaturalism that sometimes clashed with the more secularised attitudes of the clergy. It might even be worth exploring the possibility that the more widespread neglect of churchgoing detected by the clergy in the

early nineteenth century was, at least in part, a further development of this popular minimalism. Other studies have certainly demonstrated that by the nineteenth century there was a considerable body of opinion that saw no necessary connection between regular churchgoing and being a good Christian. Finally, there was the most potentially disruptive model of all – that represented by the Methodists. The arrival and steady growth of Methodism may have threatened the easy-going relationship between popular and clerical Anglicanism in the middle of the century. It certainly represented a critique of low expectations and standards and a disruption of communal norms that could provoke a violent response. It was a particularly vital form of lay Anglicanism, nonetheless, and to regard its growth in the eighteenth century as an indicator of Anglican weakness would be perverse. There was no stable equilibrium in the relationship of these three models. Most obviously, in the 1790s the Methodists began the long process of disengagement from the establishment, which, though far from complete in 1804, may account for some of the panic expressed by clergy responding to the bishop's visitation. Ironically, this change was taking place at just the time that evangelicalism was assuming a position from which it might have an impact on the clerical model of Anglicanism with the arrival of Whitaker as curate of Holme in 1797 and then as vicar of Whalley in 1809. That, however, would be another story – taking us beyond the chronological scope of this thought-provoking study.

Notes

1. M. Goldie, 'Voluntary Anglicans', *Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), 977–990, at. p. 988.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Thomas Dunham Whitaker, *An History of the Original Parish of Whalley and Honor of Clitheroe* (1801; 4th edn., 2 vols., 1872–6), i. 207.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See S. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c.1880–1939* (1999); and M. Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society* (1994) pp. 262–8.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See, for example, R. Elbourne, *Music and Tradition in Early Industrial Lancashire 1780–1840* (Woodbridge, 1980).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Whitaker, i. xiv.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See, for example, Smith, pp. 34–40.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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